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Letting Go, Without Losing Coherence: How Local Agency and Donor Accountability Can Coexist

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March 2026

Acknowledgements

The production of this publication has been funded by UK aid from the UK government. Views expressed are those of the authors alone and do not necessarily reflect the official policies of the UK government, or the views of the Thinking and Working Politically Community of Practice (TWP CoP).

An earlier version of this paper was presented at the Rethinking Aid from the Ground Up: Bottom-Up Approaches to Development Assistance Conference at the Center for Governance and Markets at the University of Pittsburgh on 5 December 5, 2025 (Guerzovich, 2025d). This paper benefited from insights from conference participants, reviews by David Jacobstein, Tom Aston, and Alina Rocha Menocal, conversations with and suggestions from the Accountability Lab's team and fellows as well as numerous weavers and navigators over more than 20 years. Marina Espindola assisted with the research.

Suggested Citation

Guerzovich, F. (2026). *Letting go, without losing coherence: How local agency and donor accountability can coexist.* Thinking and Working Politically Community of Practice, University of Birmingham.

About the Author

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Summary

Despite widespread endorsement of locally led development, donor agencies still struggle to translate local agency into cumulative change. Donor discourse increasingly emphasises localisation and community leadership, yet operational arrangements remain structured around upward compliance. The practical question is how local agency and institutional accountability can work together so that locally generated insights lead the way while portfolio coherence is maintained.

This paper examines a form of connective work that helps make this co-existence possible. Drawing on the author's more than 20 years' experience as a practitioner and evidence from over 150 documented cases across sectors and regions, it focuses on invisible weavers – actors who keep cooperation moving under constraint by connecting fragmented institutions, routing insights across levels, and sustaining continuity when conditions change. These functions are often essential to maintaining cooperation, insights, and continuity across fragmented actors and institutions, yet they remain largely unrecognised in formal programme design, costing, and evaluation. Despite this, donors' informal routines allow them to act on these insights, albeit in ad hoc ways.

The paper addresses three practical questions: how such actors can be recognised, how their effectiveness and resilience can be assessed, and how donors can support this connective work more intentionally without formalising it into compliance. It traces how donor staff and local counterparts use judgement, continuity, and low-overhead practices to carry locally generated insights into organisational decisions. By reframing accountability as portfolio reliability and making these patterns visible, the paper shows that donors can 'let go' of rigid control without losing systemic coherence. It concludes with three practical ways to make these existing 'workarounds' more intentional and fundable, ensuring that local intelligence leads to durable change rather than having to re-set with every project cycle.

1. Introduction

Although many donors now recognise that processes to promote reform need to be locally led and have broadly endorsed the need to localise support as part of that (Ingram, 2024), their systems continue to be built for upwards justification: tight control, auditable outputs, and short project-based cycles (Ramalingam, 2013; Honig, 2018). Clearly, the issue is not whether donors should jettison one in favour of the other, but rather how they can enable both local agency and upward accountability without defaulting to tighter control (cf. Guijt, 2010). This is essential to ensure that locally generated insights can shape decisions while remaining coherent at the donors' portfolio level.

Consider these vignettes:

- After a five-year education initiative led by the Expert-Group in Moldova ended in 2018, it left a lasting legacy in its stead: a loose network of regional ambassadors – individual conveners identified and supported through a World Bank-supported civil-society partnership and who continued to maintain working relationships among parents, teachers, and municipal officials (Costachi et al., 2018; Savva, 2019).
- In Zimbabwe, when a USAID-funded civic-engagement programme began in 2017, many of those who made it workable were the same people who had built credibility with sceptical government authorities and donor staff in a previous project. Project counterparts included Pact as well as community-based members of the Social Accountability Monitoring Community of Practice (SAMCOP), among others. While these individuals might have worked in different organisations, they carried forward trust, informal agreements, and practical know-how that proved instrumental to the design and implementation of the new initiative (Guerzovich & Keevill, 2023; Guerzovich & Aston, 2024a; The Cloudburst Group, 2021).
- In Indonesia, a Ministry of Planning bureaucrat, with support from a World Bank staff member, quietly ensured that field-level health insights from the 'Citizen Voice and Action for Government Accountability and Improved Services: Maternal, Newborn, Infant and Child Health Services' programme (2013–2018) reached the right decision-makers at the right time. While this way of operating – exercising political judgement to maximise opportunities for the use evidence to inform decisions – did not fit models and understandings for how 'policy uptake' was later assessed, this subtle engagement behind the scenes proved essential in influencing policy-making and shaping adaptation (Ball & Westhorp, 2018; Guerzovich & Wadeson, 2024; Mwamba 2025).
- In the Dominican Republic, successive social-accountability initiatives funded by the World Bank and USAID over two decades capitalised on a shared network of community facilitators, civil-society partners – such as World Vision – public officials, as well as global and local staff of donor agencies who maintained institutional memory and continuity across project cycles.

This contributed to system-level sustainability and uptake that few such projects reach on their own (Guerzovich et al., 2020; Guerzovich & Aston, 2024b). These experiences relate to different sectors, different countries, different roles – and yet they also share a recognisable pattern. In each case, key actors were able to maintain cooperation across people and institutions that would have otherwise worked in parallel, and they acted as conduits for ideas when formal channels were too fragmented, too slow, or too blunt.

This paper explores how to make this identified pattern more legible and testable. To do so, it addresses three practical questions that seek to understand the roles and contributions of these actors, or *invisible weavers* (see Box 1), more consistently and systematically across efforts to promote sustainable change:

1. Who are these actors and how can we recognise them?

2. How can we judge whether and when they are effective and resilient?

3. How can donors (including bilateral and multilateral agencies, foundations, and the international organisations and intermediaries they fund) support the work these actors do more intentionally – without formalising it into something that it is not?[1]

Box 1. Key terms

Invisible weavers. These are connective actors who keep cooperation moving under constraint – repurposing what exists so the system doesn't freeze, even when uncertainty is real. They help cooperation, insight, and continuity happen across fragmented actors and institutions. They are 'invisible' not because they are rare, but because this function is often not costed, staffed, or tracked.

Effectiveness. Whether this connective work improves coordination and adaptive problem-solving rather than becoming performative, captured, or exclusionary.

Donor routines. Lightweight roles and practices – often already used informally –that help organisations to notice, interpret, and act on relational signals without turning them into burdensome compliance.

Accountability that protects insight. Accountability designed to maintain coherence and justification at each level while leaving room for local adaptation – rather than tightening control by default or treating all levels as needing the same evidence.

Social accountability. A bottom-up approach that supports communities to be leading agents in their development by improving the quality of goods and services, strengthening oversight and collective action, and reworking the social contract to strengthen local systems (Guerzovich & Aston, 2024a). The meta-review on which this paper draws covers over 150 documented social-accountability programme experiences.

[1] The invisible weaver presented in Guerzovich (2025a) uses the same metaphor and builds on network weaver – a concept defined by Holley and Krebs (2002). It draws on a broader set of literature including Scott (1998), Ang

The paper draws on over 150 documented programmes (Guerzovich & Aston, 2024a) to examine these questions. Box 1 also defines a few key terms that are used throughout.

Highlighting the fact that invisible weaving is a recurring function across settings, the paper shows how this is already happening across different opportunities and constraints. It traces how donor staff and partners use judgment, continuity, and low-overhead routines to carry locally generated insights into decisions – essentially what 'letting go' looks like when it works – while offering practical cues to recognise this pattern or function and distinguish effective, resilient connective work from common distortions (performative, captured, exclusionary). The concluding section turns lessons from practical experience of weaving into guidance: it identifies ways in which donor agencies can resource connective work – roles, time, continuity, and routines – more purposefully and intentionally.

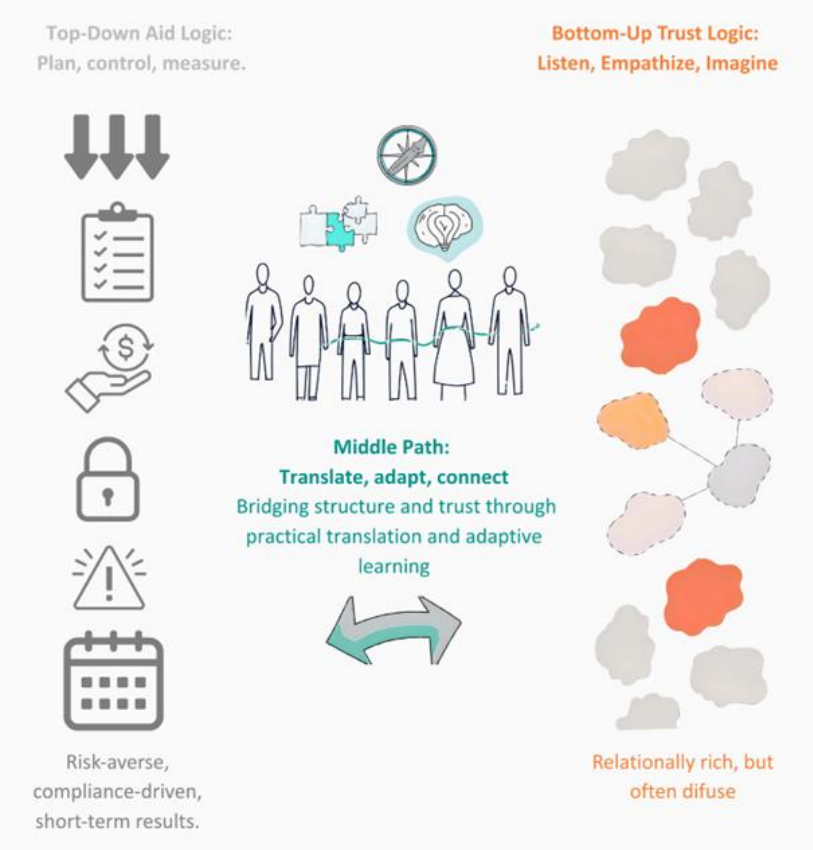
The paper develops a straightforward argument.

Different levels in a donor ecosystem legitimately need different kinds of information to make decisions at their level – resource allocation, risk, strategy, and whether an intervention or trusted partner remains the right bet as conditions shift (Patton & Richardson, 2023). The binding constraint is not willingness to learn; it is what I refer to as the *translation infrastructure* that would enable locally generated insights to inform calls and decisions at each level. Most donor systems tend to have templates for upwards reporting, but few have routines for translating what is learned locally into decision-relevant signals that take account of the uncertainty, trade-offs, and political constraints that are often involved.

So, if donors want their investments to be both effective and durable, they need to work in ways that can loosen control without losing coherence. This careful balance is what enables donor staff and partners to exercise local judgment and remain adaptive while organisations continue to meet legitimate needs for portfolio-level decision-making, justification, and risk management (see Figure 1). A first and vital step in that process begins with recognising and assessing the connective work on which donors already depend to maintain the coherence of configurations of efforts and to stretch scarce resources further.

(2016; 2025), Wenger Trayner & Wenger Trayner (2021), and Ramalingam (2023). These actors are also referred to as nodal actors, orchestrators, catalysts, systems stewards, gardeners, interlocutors, facilitators, systems conveners, among others. There is also a growing body of work about so-called 'interstitionaries' with an affective, emergent stance towards those who might weave or perform other functions in complex systems, see e.g. Brandel (2023).

Figure 1: A Middle Path Between Control and Drift



Source: Author's elaboration

2. Invisible Weavers: Hidden in Plain Sight

Invisible weavers (see Box 1) are not a new phenomenon in the development field. They have been part of and often play a vital role in efforts to support locally led change across time and space. In programme work, they are often the glue that holds together loose cooperation across a variety of stakeholders that would otherwise work in parallel or even at cross-purposes: the mid-level professionals, civic organisers, programme staff, community facilitators, or public officials whose judgement connects what formal systems fragment. A simple diagnostic test to help identify them is this: they are the person others call to better understand what is going on and where real power and decision-making lie in order to manage and act upon complexity and related uncertainty and ambiguity more effectively – in other words, what to try next, which dots to connect and when, what must be protected when there are risks or shocks, and what can wait.

What makes weavers distinctive is not a job title, an organisational affiliation, or a mandate. It is the ability and political nous to do what they do. They exercise agency and political judgement to improve loose coordination, develop mutual clarity about others' constraints and incentives, identify possible overlapping interests and practical ways to act collaboratively on those, inform and nudge decision points at relevant junctures, and help preserve institutional memory across boundaries – between communities and government, between formal and informal civic groups, between donors and implementers, between agencies that compete for authority, between one funding cycle and the next. They work with the grain of what exists in the system, repurposing relationships, routines, and trust to sustain problem-solving under pressure and uncertainty. This is not spontaneous improvisation but disciplined situational intelligence and political judgement under constraint. Their usefulness often comes from their pragmatism as well as from being trusted across divides that others cannot easily cross. They may be working in one organisation, but their function is shaped by how they move across relationships, organisations, and roles, and how they maintain credibility over time.

What makes weavers 'invisible' is that this connective function rarely appears in terms of reference, results frameworks, programme budgets, sector conferences, or strategy consultations. Their invisibility follows from the structure of aid systems, which tend to fragment efforts and make it easier to reward short-term, formally legible representation than connective functions. Donors depend on it but do not name it. Organisations benefit from it but do not always prioritise or protect it. When it works, things look as if they are simply progressing. When it disappears – because a weaver moves on, a funding cycle ends, or a reorganisation breaks the relational chain – the effects are unmistakable: coordination frays, institutional memory evaporates, and the next initiative starts from scratch (Moore, 2025).

2.1 What invisible weavers do (and recognising what they cannot do or be)

Invisible weavers perform a connective function that is distinct from other roles in development ecosystems. They are not frontline service providers implementing defined activities within a single organisation. They are not advocates whose influence works primarily through public pressure or formal channels. And they are not simply visible 'leaders' of movements or formal coalitions, although they often make those efforts more coherent 'under the radar'.

What distinguishes invisible weavers is a combination of the following features:

1. They work across boundaries, not within them. Invisible weavers routinely engage actors from different institutions, sectors, or levels of authority – not because their job description requires it, but because they see where connections are missing and move to fill them. Their positional ambiguity can help because they are often not seen as representing a single organisation's agenda, which can make cooperation possible when a more formally placed intermediary would be resisted.

2. They are understood and trusted by actors who do not understand or trust each other. This is one of the most visible markers. Invisible weavers hold relational credibility across divides – between communities and government, between donors and implementers, between professional and informal civic groups, between agencies that compete for resources. That understanding or trust is not given once; it is maintained through repeated acts of reliability. Because political environments often discourage self-convening, weavers act as intentional brokers who enable others to discover the value of greater coherence. They build trust by meeting stakeholders where they are – whether through joint problem-solving on defined challenges or loose, targeted coordination. By being 'attentive' and 'always there', they nurture dialogue where none existed, sustaining relationships between project cycles, layering new cooperation onto existing relational infrastructure, and using their insight to connect dots across silos. They do not force a single agenda but match strengths to roles, making complementarity a strength rather than a source of friction.
3. They carry memory and meaning across cycles. When projects end, staff move on, or political conditions shift, weavers remember what was tried, which relationships still hold, and which informal agreements remain consequential. They do not simply store information; they reinterpret it – deciding what still applies and what needs to be adapted. Invisible weavers do not freeze, but work between short-term predictability and longer-term uncertainty.
4. They make diversity productive without forcing consensus. Invisible weavers enable better understanding and cooperation among actors with different interests, different perspectives, and different preferences by translating, sequencing, and finding workable overlaps rather than imposing a single integrated framework. This is different from alignment-as-consensus; more is not always merrier. Invisible weaving makes judgments about and works with the messiness of the ecosystem rather than trying to tidy it up.
5. They adapt their role to what the moment requires. Invisible weavers do not perform one fixed function. They assess and convene when loose or tight coordination is needed, route information when timing matters, translate when actors misunderstand each other, and hold memory when continuity is at risk. This versatility is not improvisation for its own sake; it is responsiveness to what the system needs and can produce.

While invisible weavers perform these tasks in one way or another, it is also essential to recognise risks and avoid romanticising them.

Invisible weavers are not:

- Saviours. Weaving is a relational function, not a personality trait. It can be performed by different people at different times, and it can be supported or undermined by programme design and donor practice.

- Always benign. The same relational position that enables weaving can be used to gatekeep, exclude, or capture resources. A connector who controls information flows or access to decision-makers can become a bottleneck rather than a bridge.
- Substitutes for institutional reform. Invisible weavers work within and around existing systems. Their presence does not substitute for the need to address structural constraints – governance failures at local levels, short funding cycles, rigid reporting, high staff turnover – that make connective work precarious.
- 'The movement'. Invisible weavers may be part of or support social movements but reducing them to a movement narrative obscures what is distinctive: they pragmatically exercise their agency and connect across the system, including actors that movements may not reach or may distrust (Spector, Lilienthal & Barish, 2025). Their unique power is in bridging, not belonging to one side.

If invisible weavers are a recurring function rather than a rare personality type, the next question is practical: what does invisible weaving look like in action, and how can we tell when it is effective? The following section draws on examples from over150 documented programme experiences to describe four recurring forms of connective work and the markers that distinguish effective invisible weaving from potential distortions (see Table 3.1).

3. How Invisible Weavers Work: Four Recurring Functions

The evidence on which this paper is based (Guerzovich & Aston, 2024a), combined with applied practice across different contexts, points to four recurring forms of connective work through which invisible weavers contribute to strengthening a system.[2] These are observable patterns that recur across sectors and regions often enough to warrant deliberate attention – especially if the aim is to support locally led efforts that build cumulatively rather than fragment or reset. Each function is described below. This is how one may recognise invisible weaving and judge whether it's effective.

3.1 Convening: holding spaces where 'good enough' alignment can happen

What it is. Invisible weavers create and sustain repeated spaces where actors who would not otherwise engage with each other can interpret shared information, negotiate trade-offs, and build working trust in ways that can help work through disagreements and catalyse action. This is not event management. It is the deliberate prioritisation and cultivation of relationships and spaces through which stakeholders develop shared reference points over time – even when they agree to disagree, or

[2] Social accountability is defined in Box 2. The review methodology is described in Annex A.

judge that information exchange or loose coordination is more relevant than collaboration or strategy integration, or have unresolved power differentials (Wenger-Trayner & Wenger-Trayner, 2021).

What it enables. Convening builds trust and mutual clarity so that actors can see where they can and cannot align, and to recognise what factors might have been blocking 'fit for purpose' alignments. It allows insights to move between spaces – from schools to districts to national authorities, from communities to ministries, from one organisation to another – in ways that formal information exchange channels typically cannot. It prevents fragmentation and stalling. Convening also creates conditions for other functions: routing, translation, and memory stewardship often depend on relationships that are enabled and nurtured by convening.

Illustrative case: Moldova, Școala Mea. Through the civil-society-led partnership Expert-Group, supported by the World Bank's Global Partnership for Social Accountability, a series of school-level public hearings were convened in participating schools to bring together students, teachers, parents, and school administrators to review budgets, priorities, and performance information. The formal organisation of these hearings was coordinated by the project team at Expert-Group, but the work relied on regional coordinators and facilitators who worked directly with school communities. These individuals functioned as local weavers: they did not merely organise meetings but took proactive steps to ensure that diverse stakeholders attended, translated technical data into accessible formats, and helped participants interpret information collectively, even when they 'agreed to disagree' (Costachi et al., 2018). These hearings established routines of joint interrogation, enabling parents and teachers to question data alongside school managers and develop shared understandings of roles and responsibilities. These same facilitators also routed feedback upwards, communicating insights through project channels and informal networks to district stakeholders, national officials, and donor staff. In this way, these convening spaces did not remain isolated forums; they became part of a broader relational infrastructure linking local participation to national policy dialogue.

After the formal project ended, what persisted was a network of 30 regional ambassadors drawn from participating communities who continued to promote engagement around school governance (Savva, 2019). While working with limited formal resources, these ambassadors maintained relational channels between communities and school authorities and helped sustain participation practices initiated during the project. Importantly, the network did not persist in isolation: ambassadors retained light-touch relationships with project connectors and external partners, which helped keep the experience visible and created openings for subsequent collaboration and support when opportunities arose. The durability of these relational channels – rather than the continuation of the project itself – illustrates how effective convening can leave behind a connective infrastructure that sustains participation beyond the life of a funded intervention.

Table 1: Convening – What To Look For

Dimension	When it's working	Common distortions
Purpose of the space	Participants exchange information, improve mutual understanding, and can make judgements and act on what they learn – even without full consensus	Compliance convening: meetings held to satisfy mandates and standardisation rather than to enable exchange and judgement
Inclusiveness and contestation	Diverse voices can shape priorities; disagreement is workable	Captured convening: same actors dominate and exclude dissenting voices
Continuity	Participants draw on relationships across cycles because these are useful	Performative convening: meetings take place and joint statements are issued but do not inform decisions or action
Cross-organisation learning	Insight travels across levels/organisations (e.g. school → district; professional organisation→ movement)	Token convening: voices are heard but not taken up to shape or correct any pathway

3.2 Routing: moving insight to the right people at the right moment

What it is: Invisible weavers know who needs to hear what, when, and from whom. Routing is the work of moving information, insights, and signals through a system – not up a formal hierarchy, but through the channels where they will be heard and acted upon (Holley & Krebs, 2002). It requires a solid understanding of where authority and discretion sit in practice (which may differ from the organigram), which messengers are credible for which audiences, and when timing creates an opening. It keeps insights from languishing in the wrong inbox.

What it enables. Routing converts insights generated in one part of the system into broader influence. It allows frontline findings to shape decisions about programming, coordination, and/or policy, not only through formal reporting but through relational channels that determine whether information is taken seriously.

Illustrative case: Indonesia, maternal and child health. World Vision's Maternal, Newborn, Infant, and Child Health programme strengthened health systems by enabling staff to provide better care and improving accountability (Ball & Westhorp, 2018). Alongside this, a bureaucrat in the Ministry of Planning, with support from a World Bank staff member, acted as an informal router between community and local officials' insights, The Asia Foundation, and AusAID. He knew when to surface emerging insights, who needed to hear them first, and which messenger would make them credible for each audience. This work allowed localised findings to influence subsequent programming funded by a different donor and implemented by another organisation, as well as to help shape parallel national policy-making processes supported by the World Bank (Guerzovich & Wadeson, 2024). Yet the project's final evaluation – designed to assess 'policy uptake' – did not capture these channels, because it equated influence with formal advocacy by the implementing organisation. The relational and time-consuming labour through which insight moved across actors, hierarchies, and mandates remained invisible and underappreciated, even though it was decisive for both adaptation and influencing.

Table 2: Routing – What to Look For

Dimension	When it's working	Common distortions
Decision-relevance	Insights from one part of the system inform decision-making in another	Performative routing: information circulates but is never aimed at ongoing decision-making processes or acted upon
Credible messengers	The weaver uses relevant intermediaries, not one fixed channel	Bottleneck routing: one individual controls information flows, creating fragility/manipulation risk
Timing and sequencing	Information is surfaced when it can land; engagement is sequenced	Selective routing: insights go only to sympathetic audiences, avoiding scrutiny
Cross-boundary reach	Insight crosses organisations/levels without losing its point	Noise routing: too much information moves without prioritisation or targeting

3.3 Translational brokerage: translating language, incentives, and evidence so insight can travel

What it is: Invisible weavers mediate among distinct institutional and knowledge communities, translating language, incentives, and forms of evidence so that they can be understood and used across divides. This is not just 'communication' or simplification. Translational brokerage makes different actors' logics legible to the other – what each side sees as credible, feasible, and legitimate – and adjusts how information, tools, and claims are framed so that others occupying a different place in the system can act upon them who (Guerzovich et al., 2022; Kruks-Wisner, 2022; Cant, 2025). In practice, it requires compromises such as adapting local government regulations or external tools so that communities can use them, and prioritising and translating lived experience into forms that are useful to ministries and donors, but without stripping out constraints and trade-offs.

What it enables. Translational brokerage makes local insight usable in institutional settings and makes institutional requirements workable in local practice. It increases the likelihood that place-based adaptations are treated as legitimate complements to formal systems, rather than deviations to be corrected. When it works, insight circulates between actors–community ↔ local official ↔ implementer ↔ ministry/donor – so that what is learned in one setting can influence how rules, guidance, and expectations are interpreted and applied in others.

Illustrative case: Mongolia, TAME. The Transparency and Accountability in Mongolian Education (TAME) initiative depended on invisible weavers translating in multiple directions. They helped herder parents and school staff to understand how the education system worked – its entry points, roles, incentives, and the limits of what could realistically be influenced from their position – so that efforts were directed where change was possible. At the same time, they helped local government and the Ministry of Education to treat local insights and adaptations as legitimate complements to formal school-based management systems and training mechanisms rather than deviations to be corrected (Guerzovich, 2015; Meyanathan, 2021). The brokerage was not only about conveying 'views', but also involved making local experience legible in terms the education system and political authorities could use, while also adapting how tools and expectations were introduced so that communities could engage meaningfully. The practical effect was to reduce asymmetries of power as well as the risk that place-based adaptation would be regarded as non-compliance, and to increase the likelihood that insights from practice could gradually move into institutional routines rather than remaining trapped at the margins. In Mongolia, insights from TAME informed the World Bank's support to the government in a cycle; they seemed less relevant as national politics changed for a period, but connectedness and translation enabled 'older' insights to be picked up again in subsequent decision-making processes, rather than forgotten.

Table 3: Translational Brokerage – What to Look For

Dimension	When it's working	Common distortions
Multiple-way legibility	Communities or other actors can use external tools (without performative compliance). Institutions can judge and *use* local insight (as input to decisions, not as 'voice' in a report).	Extraction without return: perspectives flow upwards, not back as usable choices/explanations
Fidelity of translation	The translation doesn't iron out the hard parts. Constraints, risks, and disagreement survive the trip. Headquarters get something they can judge and work with, even if it's not taken up wholesale and it's messy.	Compliance packaging: realities sanitised to fit templates; headquarters receives a neat story it's expected to take up, not usable insight
Actionability	Brokerage is selective on purpose: it routes what matters to where it can land. It calibrates language, messenger, and timing so insights are heard rather than side-lined or punished. Crucially, good brokers also *carry the 'awkward' signals*, such as the disconfirming evidence, the minority read, so that the system doesn't drift into shared illusion.	Capture masquerading as curation: selection becomes control. The broker filters to protect access, reputation, or deals; inconvenient perspectives stop travelling; the headquarters hears what is safe or normatively desirable by one set of actors, not what is relevant.
Legitimacy and contestability	People can recognise themselves in the translated version, and can correct it. Eventually, translation becomes a shared practice, not a private art.	Gatekeeping by default: the broker becomes the only doorway; translation turns into credentialling ('this is the only legitimate local view').

3.4 Stewardship of institutional memory: carrying insight through staff turnover and crisis

What it is. Invisible weavers preserve what matters through staff turnover, funding transitions, political changes, or crisis (Guerzovich & Aston, 2024b). They address which relationships might still hold, which informal agreements might be consequential, and which lessons might remain relevant. They remember relevant insights from an old report commissioned by a previous authority and send it to

the new one. Critically, stewardship is not just remembering – it is also re-interpreting: deciding what still applies as conditions change, and what needs to be adapted or dropped.

What it enables. Memory stewardship prevents institutional amnesia whereby each new project or government mandate starts again from scratch, rebuilding trust and relearning lessons that were already known. It allows successive initiatives to compound rather than reset or uncritically keep doing the same as the context shifts.

Illustrative case: Zimbabwe, CSSP → CEADZ. Invisible weavers maintained connective tissue across two successive Pact projects – the Civic Society Strengthening Programme (CSSP) and the Community Engagement and Accountability in the Development of Zimbabwe (CEADZ) – as well as other initiatives led by PSAM and other local stakeholders. Instead of losing momentum and restarting engagement with sceptical authorities, they ensured that initial gains from CSSP and its partners – such as demystifying civil society's goals for government counterparts – were retained and built upon. Insights based on how CSSP fell short in incentivising community engagement as well as how key political economy conditions had changed from CSSP to CEADZ informed course corrections. The mix of continuity and change meant that relational capital was compounded rather than being dissipated, influencing resource allocations in communities (The Cloudburst Group, 2021; Guerzovich & Keevill, 2023).

Table 4: Institutional Memory – What to Look For

Dimension	When it's working	Common distortions
Continuity across cycles	Successive initiatives build on prior initiatives, relationships, and learning	Dependency: memory resides in one person or organisation; departure causes collapse
Reinterpretation	Past lessons are adapted to new conditions, not applied rigidly	Nostalgia: past approaches preserved uncritically, blocking adaptation
Socialised memory	Memory is shared and embedded in routines, not hoarded	Gatekeeping: memory used as leverage and to control access
Compounding	Relationships and know-how reduce restart costs; trust accumulates	Reset cycle: staff turnover/funding breaks chains; each cycle starts from zero

3.5 Synthesis: what the four functions share

These four functions are analytically distinct but operationally intertwined. In practice, the same invisible weaver often performs several of them, and they reinforce each other: convening nurtures the relationships on which routing depends; translation makes insights usable across different ways of working; memory stewardship prevents nostalgia from ruling and each new cycle from starting at zero.

These functions are observable, and the evidence suggests that they recur across enough contexts and sectors to treat invisible weaving as a regular feature of locally led work and not as a special case. The practical implication is straightforward: if donors fund locally led efforts without resourcing the connective work that helps to nurture and compound it, they will repeatedly undercut the very value on which they depend for effective engagement and sustainability. The next section builds on this by tracing the donor workarounds that already help locally generated insight to travel across different levels; and how those practices can be made more intentional and fundable.

4. Bridging Differences in Perspective: How Donor Staff Already Make Insights Travel – And Why It Stays Informal

Section 3 showed that weaving is observable and recurring. So why is it still so hard to recognise, assess, and fund deliberately within donor systems – the organisations whose very effectiveness increasingly depends on locally generated adaptation?

The short answer is not that donors are blind to relational work. Many programme officers, country directors, and evaluation specialists are aware of the importance of connective actors. The problem is structural: the routines through which donors plan, contract, report, and learn are designed to produce auditable signals – activities, outputs, deliverables, and formal partnerships – that travel well to the portfolio level. They are much less able to register the relational functions that determine whether those elements hold together over time (Ramalingam, 2013; Honig, 2018).

That mismatch underlies the central tension this paper highlights: how to loosen control without losing coherence (Figure 2). In practice, 'accountability' is not a single thing (Schommer & Guerzovich, 2025). It operates as an authorising environment: a set of audiences, relationships, risk thresholds, and narrative tests that shape what can be said, funded, and defended at each level. As it does so, it often pushes out uncertainty, trade-offs, and political constraints just when they matter most.

The question, then, is not whether donors should 'let go' of accountability for managing resources, risk, and legitimacy under scrutiny. Rather, it is whether donor systems can build the translation infrastructure that allows locally generated insights to travel upwards – becoming usable for portfolio

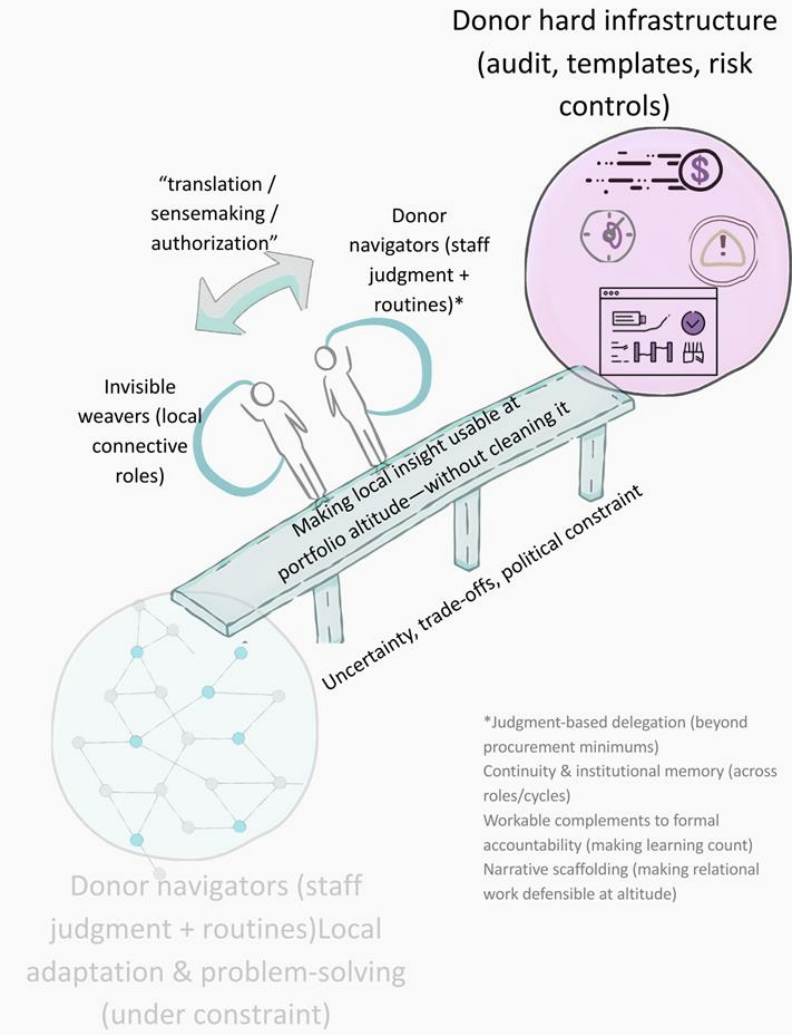
judgement and decisions while still facilitating the connective work that produces it – in other words making that work fundable, discussable, and justifiable internally.

That accountability and learning need not be inherently incompatible has been argued persuasively (Guijt, 2010).[3]What remains underdeveloped is the operational question this paper addresses: what connective roles and donor routines make co-existence workable under the real constraints of hierarchy, audit, limited resources, and staff turnover – without turning relational work into yet another compliance artefact (cf. Guerzovich & Aston, 2025).

This section traces where differences in perspective across the system come from and then shows– drawing primarily on the case of the Dominican Republic – how donor staff already bridge it, and what it would take to make those practices more intentional and less fragile.

Figure 2

Bridging Differences in Perspective: How Insight Becomes Usable Without Being 'Cleaned'



Source: Author's elaboration

[3] A parallel critique is that the 'systems-oriented learning vs conventional evaluation' divide is often a false one: learning requires evaluative work, but not necessarily narrowly minded, compliance-oriented evaluation (Gates et al., 2025; Gates & Vidueira, 2025).

4.1 Why locally generated insights don't travel

'*None of us see the system. We see our own part based on our own background and history. And we all think we see the most crucial part*.' Peter Senge, Accelerate, 2014

Each level of a donor ecosystem faces different decisions and legitimately needs different kinds of information. Programme teams need to know whether relationships are holding, and that adaptation is on track. Country-level leadership needs to judge where to sequence the next investment. Boards and portfolio committees need signals about whether a particular funding approach is producing durable value, whether a trusted counterpart remains the most appropriate as conditions shift, and whether the 'story' will sustain scrutiny. These are real information needs and relevant judgements made at different levels, and they require different kinds of insight.

The problem is rarely that decision-makers at the upper echelons of a donor organisation ask the 'wrong' questions, given their place in it. It is that the connective work described in Section 3 generates significant insights, but when these travel upwards they often arrive either too thin to be decision-relevant or too 'clean' to be true. Part of the failure is both technical and political: portfolio-level judgment requires aggregation across heterogeneous perspectives and judgements – deciding which apples can be compared with which oranges to be observable and actionable when seen at several removes, where interaction effects may be driving outcomes, and what constitutes a signal of systemic risk rather than a local anecdote.

Conventional accountability is not neutral about what counts as 'usable'. It is built to withstand audit and scrutiny, which often means privileging what can be standardised, defended, and compared across grants. But many of the determinants of place-based effectiveness and durability resist that format: whether convening spaces are enabling workable alignment (not just being held), whether insights are reaching decision points through credible messengers at the right time, whether translation is happening in both directions rather than being packaged upwards, and whether relational pathways and institutional memory are surviving beyond one project cycle. These are not 'nice to have' add-ons; they are often the very mechanisms through which locally led adaptation becomes effective rather than fragmented and cumulative rather than episodic.

Without an explicit translation layer that does the aggregation work – what is comparable to what, how, and why – the system defaults to two imperfect currencies: micro-level narrative that cannot travel, or clean summaries that travel but cannot guide judgment in a context of uncertainty. The predictable result is a bias in what becomes legible in headquarters, away from connective function and towards what can be standardised and defended. What is at stake is not just better information; it's whether the portfolio can maintain adaptive traction – moving *with* uncertainty rather than freezing into control or drifting into noise.

That bias is not accidental. It follows from how donor organisations manage risk and legitimacy under scrutiny: they rely on forms of evidence that travel cleanly across hierarchy, audit, and time. Weaving often produces value through the opposite pathway – through relationships, timing, and context-specific judgment – so it is systematically harder to authorise. The staff skills that make this bridge possible in practice, such as political judgement, continuity work, and the ability to read relational signals also remain unevenly recognised and supported (Mwamba, 2025). Their lack of support for donor programme staff is particularly paradoxical in organisations that value those skills and their pay-offs for so-called country dialogue and diplomatic relationships.

This matters because the functions that are hardest to translate across different levels of a donor agency are often the ones that determine whether locally led efforts add up within a portfolio and across cycles. A project can achieve planned outputs and yet still fail to produce lasting value if no one is carrying the connective work that holds collective action together. The problem compounds when donors design new strategies: the voices that show up in consultations tend to be previously funded organisations and their formal representatives, who have incentives to argue for continuity rather than surface what would help new actors connect, sequence, and learn. Invisible weavers – precisely because they work across the ecosystem rather than representing one funded position – are often absent even when they hold decision-relevant knowledge about what connects.

What is different in the arguments presented here is not that formal systems miss relational work. It is the empirical observation that donor staff routinely bridge differences in perspectives across the system – and that these workarounds are sufficiently patterned to be incentivised and made fundable, without turning them into a new compliance layer.

4.2 How donor staff already work around this: the Dominican Republic as an interface case

The good news is that donor staff do not always wait for their systems to catch up. Across the cases reviewed for this paper, a recurring pattern is that effective support for weaving depends on donor routines: lightweight roles and practices – often informal, sometimes improvised – through which staff translate relational signals into forms that can inform decisions at higher levels, without converting them into a new compliance burden.

The Dominican Republic provides a longitudinal view of how this works. Over nearly 30 years, the World Bank and USAID, among others, invested in social accountability, including in the education sector – from fragmented efforts in the 1990s to more policy-aligned initiatives in the 2010s (Guerzovich et al., 2020). Two programmes anchor the analysis: the community component of USAID's READ initiative (2015–2020) and the World Bank's 'Mi Comunidad Participa en Como Va Mi Escuela' (MCPCVME, 2019–2023), both implemented by World Vision. What made this sequence more than a collection of separate projects was not a single master plan. It was the persistence of a loose mesh of connective roles across levels over time: people moved jobs, organisations and sectors, but they

carried relationships, credibility, and practical know-how with them – so the relational pathways across communities, implementers, ministries, and donors did not have to be rebuilt from scratch each cycle (Guerzovich & Aston, 2024b). Donor staff, in turn, exercised forms of judgment and continuity that standard procedures could not prescribe, helping to keep that mesh legible and usable inside their own organisations as well as at donor-dialogue tables.

a) Judgment-based selection (beyond minimum procurement requirements). When the Bank team needed to select an implementing partner for MCPCVME, formal procurement criteria were necessary but not sufficient. The wider authorising environment also pulled in the opposite direction: from a conventional accountability vantage point, the safer move would have been to retain the existing counterpart and their preferred intervention (Oxfam's Vigilantes) – especially given their familiarity with World Bank compliance processes.

   What tipped the decision was a different kind of evidence: relational credibility and connective capacity that were deemed critical for implementing an intervention suited to the evolving politics of education in the country (Guerzovich, et al., 2020). The Bank team backed an implementing set-up anchored in a small group of individuals with proven connective reach – especially a project manager who functioned as an invisible weaver – and willingness to collaborate with government authorities and Bank staff. World Vision's proposal focused on people with established working relationships with parent associations, school principals, and government officials, built over years of engagement, and with trajectories that also reduced institutional uncertainty for the Bank. The Bank team treated this as actionable infrastructure – not just 'good people', but a more likely ability to fit with the evolving context by connecting MCPCVME to the parallel USAID track, leveraging individuals' prior World Bank experience, and moving learning across levels: from communities and schools into national problem-solving and decision-making arenas, and back again. In other words, they gave weight to relational capital and cross-programme brokerage and alongside formal contracting experience, entrusting a team whose contextual knowledge and connective reach could balance World Vision-Dominican Republic's lack of experience with Bank formal procedures.

   This reflected learning from the earlier Vigilantes cycle: formal delegation without trusted connective capacity had proved insufficient to carry the work across communities and government and between them and the World Bank (Guerzovich et al., 2020). The selection was not based on blind trust; it was an informed judgment about where connective infrastructure already existed and might be activated quickly. By choosing a team whose relational credibility was already in place, the Bank protected the translational brokerage and routing functions described in Section 3 – avoiding the common pattern of rebuilding those functions from scratch under a new contract or prioritising programmatic continuity despite changing contextual or organisational needs. At the same time, the Bank required embedding

a strong, real-time independent evaluation component to verify, manage risks, learn, and adapt.

b) Preservation of institutional memory across cycles (portfolio continuity rather than project continuity). Episodic funding and staff turnover routinely erode what has been learned. In the Dominican Republic, particular donor staff, including national staff and consultants, functioned as memory nodes – transferring knowledge across project and funding cycles, sequencing new initiatives to build on prior relational footholds, and maintaining informal connections between the World Bank, USAID, national government counterparts, and civil-society partners who had participated previously or who maintained working relationships with individuals involved – creating a broader mesh of continuity and change that no single organisation mandated. This continuity was not the result of unusually long staff postings or nostalgia. At the World Bank, it was maintained partly by relying on a cadre of consultants and national staff despite standard rotation cycles or relationships that helped the team to contact colleagues who had moved to other posts but could fill in the information gaps. In the Dominican Republic, continuity took a different form: people changed jobs, moved from universities to ministries, from one civic organisation to another, from civil society to donor agencies, but carried their relationships and accumulated insights with them. When a former university researcher joined the ministry, or a member of staff in one civil society organisation (CSO) moved to a different one, a social movement, or a district body, the new organisation inherited relational capital it had not built. This informal portability of trust and contextual knowledge – across organisations, not just within them – created a broader mesh of continuity that no single institution mandated but from which many benefited. This bridging reduced the sequential loss that typically accompanies staff turnover, enabling the World Bank, sometimes along with USAID, to place their trust in cumulative adaptation rather than repetitive reinvention or continuity without politically relevant adaptation (Guerzovich et al., 2020; Guerzovich & Aston, 2024b). In terms of the functions described in Section 3, these practices directly enabled stewardship of institutional memory (3.4) and protected the routing pathways (3.2) that allowed insights from one programme cycle to inform the next.

c) Workable complements to formal accountability (making learning count inside and alongside the log frame). Recognising that standard results frameworks were poorly suited to capture local adaptation, donor staff worked on two fronts: they improved what the formal frameworks themselves could register, such as introducing adaptive-management indicators (Guerzovich & Poli, 2016) and refining evaluation questions; and they embedded parallel learning practices alongside formal reporting, including 'thinking and working politically' routines and structured reflection moments. These were not a replacement for accountability. They were an effort to make formal tools better at doing their own job while also adopting complementary routines

that made it possible to discuss relational signals within the organisation. In one instance, a Bank-required evaluation process nudged MCPCVME invisible weavers to reprioritise and reallocate efforts towards a process that eventually contributed to a ministerial Protocol – a system-level outcome that neither side could have imagined, specified, or pulled off on their own, but that connectivity, agency, and judgement helped make possible (Guerzovich & Aston, 2024b). Over time, donor staff iteratively refined concepts, measures, and learning loops, translating tacit practice into institutional evidence. When the Independent Evaluation Group judged Oxfam-Vigilantes as being 'unsustainable', without valuing why and how the World Bank was funding continuity and change via World Vision-MCPCVME instead, donor staff negotiated internally and externally a reframing of sustainability as a system property, as evidenced by the durability of relational pathways rather than project continuation and branding – and this reframing informed the redesign of the GPSA portfolio's theory of change (IEG, 2018; Wadeson & Guerzovich, 2023; Guerzovich & Wadeson, 2024).

d) Narrative scaffolding (making relational work defensible at portfolio level). Donor staff also worked to reshape what counted as credible knowledge within the organisation – and whose voice could carry it. A concrete illustration: at the 2019 GPSA Global Partners Forum, navigators used the *World Development Report 2018* on education as a loose scaffold for presentations – but rather than imposing the frame, they translated and bridged knowledge, discussing with partners and trusted local actors and consulted them on what they wanted to explore from it. Those conversations helped to refocus evaluation questions collectively, challenge shared assumptions, and inform the design of evidence and monitoring processes, including the independent evaluators hired by the TAME, Şcoala Mea, and MCPCVME teams. This was embedded in a broader effort to close a gap that had become increasingly visible: between what global thematic experts hoped and lobbied the Bank for – e.g. citizen-led confrontation to sanction – and what local counterparts were reporting, which looked more like building trust and collaborative engagement for improved service delivery (Jacobstein, 2019; Aston & Zimmer Santos, 2022). The mismatch was consequential: some robust research found positive results from work on social accountability while other studies found no effects, and much of the divergence turned on whether the research built its assumptions and benchmarks from the strategies of local change agents or tested the exogenous logic embedded in donor funding frameworks and influential narratives (Guerzovich & Aston, 2024a). Donor staff worked to relay the practitioner version into institutional spaces where it could be heard, recruiting allies and translators among colleagues well placed in the donor ecosystem. It took several subsequent forums and publications to move these conversations from side sessions into plenaries and keynote speeches by external foreign experts to public officials and activists from the countries in question – a gradual process of making relational practice not just discussable but also credible at the institutional level. Cases from the Dominican Republic and beyond entered the

Bank's institutional memory as credible illustrations of how connective infrastructure functions in practice. Without this kind of narrative scaffolding, the other three routines remain invisible at the levels where strategy and resources are decided – or are evaluated against benchmarks that were never designed to register the work partners are actually doing.[4] Relatedly, celebrating invisible weavers on an international stage may, in some cases, help to legitimise them within their own organisations, which can be helpful to resist other pressures to conform.

Taken together, these four donor routines show something more nuanced than 'donors don't see'. In practice, donors often do see – selectively, unevenly, and through workarounds that make political judgement possible and relational signals defensible at the portfolio level. The challenge is that the authorising environment for these practices is frequently personal rather than institutional.

4.3 From individual workaround to organisational routine

The case of the Dominican Republic is not a heroic exception. It illustrates a pattern the broader review also confirms, namely that where locally led efforts compound, there is almost always someone on the donor side bridging the gap between what the system requires and what the context demands. Evidence from other hybrid experiments – including USAID's gradual mainstreaming of 'thinking and working politically' approaches or country portfolios celebrated for embedding thinking and working politically, adaptation and system lenses into standard operating procedures (SOPs) – suggests that calibrated discretion can contribute to systemic change while preserving fiduciary discipline (Guerzovich & Aston, 2025; Jacobstein, 2025). Their innovative path is more often remixed than revolutionary.

But the example from the Dominican Republic also shows the limits of relying on ad hoc political judgements made by individual staff members. The mesh that made cumulative adaptation possible remained vulnerable to internal shifts. When some World Bank staff acquiesced to an experimental researcher-led intervention ('Como Va Mi Escuela') that stripped the social-accountability work of its medium-term relational core and challenged the autonomy of local weavers, it was the staff of donor agencies who protected the space for MCPCVME's team to mitigate the unintended consequences – another instance of relational resilience in action (Guerzovich & Aston, 2024b). Yet the episode illustrates two things worth naming: donor staff actively chose to embed relational capacity rather

[4] World Bank project evaluations used this framing to assess interventions, including those cited in this paper. The framing was used to raise local learning and assess work against local actors' assumptions in other organisations' assessments, including Moses, et al. (2025).

than simply accommodating ill-fitting institutional dictates, and their gains were non-linear – reflecting continuous internal power struggles with fits and starts, not a smooth arc of organisational learning.

This is precisely why workarounds need to become incentivised and funded routines. When the staff member who carries memory moves or is moved on, the continuity breaks. When the programme officer who exercised judgment leaves, the next person inherits the reporting template but not the relational knowledge that made it usable. And when institutional incentives shift – when experimental researchers or compliance-minded staff gain influence, when innovation and fundraising logics win the internal debate, when the same influential voices are invited to strategy consultations, and evaluators prioritise them – the structural conditions that protected relational work can change overnight, regardless of what individual staff members and their local counterparts experience and evidence (cf. IOD-Parc, 2024). Eventually, this reproduces the very dynamic donors say they want to avoid – local initiatives that repeatedly fragment and restart rather than ultimately adding up to more than the sum of their parts. It also reproduces a popular binary framing suggesting that organisations must choose between top-down compliance and bottom-up emergence rather than developing hybrid strategies that work with the grain of complex, existing incentives across levels and organisations.

This is the practical case for making donors' routines more deliberate – not by adding a new compliance layer, and not by romanticising discretion, but by making effective practices visible, discussable, and transferable. The question is not whether to create new institutional architecture. It is whether the practices that already make judgment possible and connective work legible can be protected from depending on individual heroism.

Section 5 proposes three practical moves that do exactly that – each grounded in what the evidence suggests already works, and each designed to be feasible under real operational constraints.

5. Funding Without Drift: Three Moves That Make 'Letting Go' Work

Section 4 showed that donor staff already use informal ways to exercise their judgement and make locally generated insights travel across levels. The moves proposed here do not assume organisational transformation. They build on what staff already do when they succeed in making the case for effective locally led efforts – and they aim to make that practice more intentional, more transferable, and less dependent on whoever happens to be in post. These moves are deliberately low-overhead: they formalise roles, time, continuity, and reset the menu of options for a small number of choices and translation routines that donors already make and fund.

Move 1: Make connective work a legitimate cost – not an invisible subsidy

The problem. Connective work is rarely funded on its own terms. When it is resourced, it is usually because a perceptive programme officer found a way to embed it within existing budget lines – 'coordination' or 'community engagement' – rather than because the donor system recognised it as a distinct function worth investing in. Much of it happens voluntarily: people do connective work because they see its value, even though it is not in their terms of reference, their time is not budgeted for it, and their performance is not assessed against it. The people who do this work are typically funded through project positions that end when the grant does, even when the function they perform is needed across project cycles. Connective work is not cost-free, but the evidence suggests it makes donor funding go further. Investments that build on accumulated relational capital, trust, and contextual knowledge seem to achieve outcomes that starting from scratch cannot. Conversely, episodic funding that forces each initiative to rebuild these assets seems considerably more costly in practice, even if those costs are dispersed across budgets and organisations and harder to see.

What to change. Treat connective roles, and the time they require, as a deliberate investment, not an overhead. In practice, this means:

- Writing terms of reference and job descriptions that name connective functions (convening across boundaries, routing, translation, memory stewardship) as core local responsibilities, not as add-ons to implementation roles – and donor ones, too. Coordination support roles are already appearing in discussions across sectors; the task is to recognise and resource them deliberately.
- Budgeting for continuity: allowing key connective staff to bridge across project cycles through transition funding, or designing successor projects so that relational capital is not lost in the gap between grants.
- Recognising that weaving takes time. The relational work that sustains coordination cannot be compressed into standard deliverables schedules. Funding the function without funding the time tends to produce performative compliance rather than durable coordination.
- Recruiting for connective credibility: vetting for bridging and translation ability, cross-silo legitimacy, and relational judgement – not just technical credentials, organisational brand, or belonging to one side. The case of the Dominican Republic shows that what made the implementing team effective was not only World Vision's institutional profile but the specific individuals' accumulated relationships and messenger credibility across communities, government, and donor systems.
- Creating non-financial incentives that sustain connective work in a lasting fashion: institutional recognition, protected time for reflection, mentoring, and mobility across units. What kept donor staff going in the cases reviewed was rarely a budget line, but rather the organisational space to exercise judgment and the recognition that what they were doing mattered.
- Using the new OECD-DAC criterion of 'coherence' as a key portfolio-level assessment one: when reviewing new investments or evaluating old ones, asking not only 'will this project or partner

work?' but 'does this investment strengthen or weaken the connective tissue already in place?' A project or partner that achieves planned outputs but does not leverage the judgement of invisible weavers or fragments relational insight and pathways may cost more than it produces.

Which functions this protects. All four – especially convening and memory stewardship, which are the most time-dependent and most vulnerable to disruption.

Move 2: Build the translation layer – so insight can travel across levels

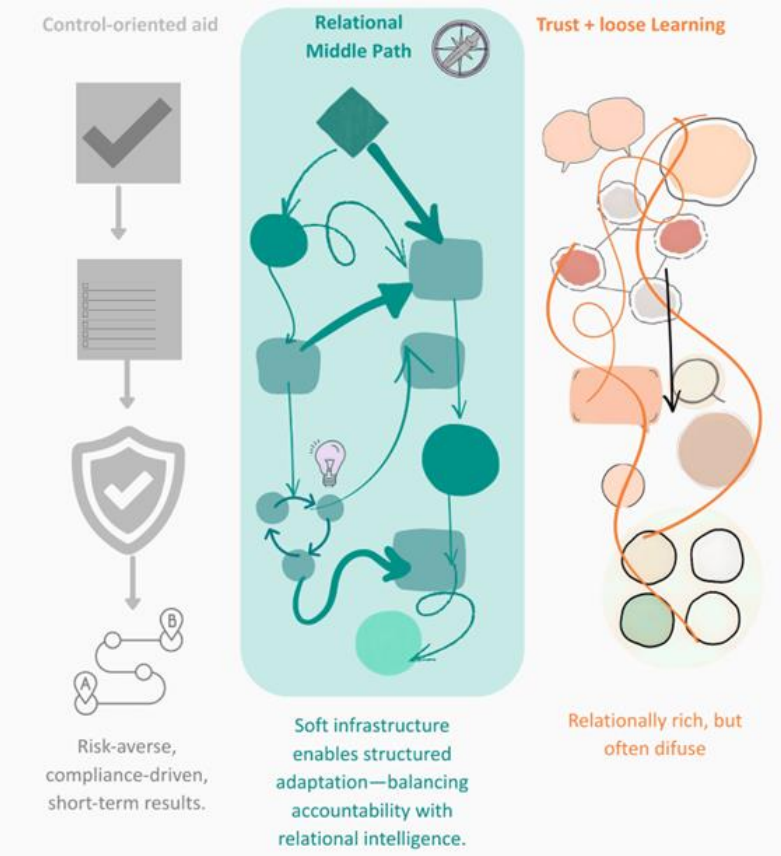
The problem. Donors have no shortage of learning language and guidance, from adaptive management to thinking and working politically (Jacobstein, 2025) to narratives, futures and evaluative systems thinking (Gates et al., 2025). Often, the binding constraint is not lack of awareness or intent, but rather the lack of a structure for making learning usable to exercise judgement at different levels. Most donor systems have routines for reporting and storytelling upwards, but few have a portfolio logic for nested learning: the same underlying reality is read differently at community, programme, and portfolio levels, yet reporting and narrative formats force it into one flattened currency. As a result, the signals that travel are either too granular to guide portfolio judgement or too sanitised to be operationally true. What gets lost in translation is often exactly what decision-makers need: which dynamics are driving outcomes across heterogeneous bets, where interaction effects are emerging, and what trade-offs are being made under constraint. The challenge is to move between the extremes in Figure 3 to the middle.

What to change. Treat learning and strategy architecture as being nested, in which insights not only move from field to headquarters but also **across** weavers (lateral) and **back down** into practice (downwards). Start with a small set of nested learning questions – and, where useful, a few nested indicators – framed explicitly at local, programme, and portfolio levels so that critical insights and evidence can move in all three directions (Guerzovich, 2025c). Consider anchoring the strategy and learning architecture in a mid-level theory of change that explicitly seeks to find a sweet spot between the notions that each investment is unique or that they are all the same (White, 2023). Then operationalise that architecture with fit-for-purpose routines: periodic cross-level sense-making (prospective, plural, critical, and decision-focused) and lightweight translation outputs that answer those questions in the language and with the focus that each level of the organisation can use. In evaluation, use complexity-aware approaches selectively – when causal chains are long and discretion is material – so that contributions can be traced even when attribution cannot (Lynn, Stachowiak, & Coffman, 2021; Gates & Dyson, 2017). Finally, commission portfolio-level evaluation that explicitly examines relationships and learning layers across funding cycles: what accumulates or adds more than the sum of the parts, what resets, and what the system can realistically sustain under constraint.

Why this matters for weaving functions. This move directly protects routing and translational brokerage because it creates a legitimate structure for elevating and curating what needs to travel, to

whom, and in what form while also strengthening convening and memory stewardship by making continuity and cross-level uptake visible in decision-relevant ways.

Figure 3: Three Worlds – Supporting Coherence Between Control and 'Chaos'



Source: Author's elaboration

Move 3: Design for coherence across cycles – not just continuity within organisations

The problem. Sequential loss is real: a project generates relational capital, learning, and trusted relationships, and then a new project begins that ignores – or cannot access – what came before. This actively undermines the invisible weavers who invested years in building connective tissue that held the previous efforts together. The flip side, organisational continuity by default, creates its own challenges. Mixing continuity and change so that coherence wins across project and funding cycles requires judgment – a combination of craft and science.

What to change. Treat the sequence of investments in a sector or context as a portfolio with memory, not as a series of independent projects or blind trust in an organisational brand. In practice, this means:

- Sequencing strategies and grants so future projects can access prior relational infrastructure through transition periods, bridging contracts, or explicit designing for continuity. Rewarding sequencing and adaptive layering across project cycles; weighting continuity and contribution claims – neither wholesale novelty nor nostalgia (Guerzovich & Aston, 2024a; 2024b).
- Requiring incoming project teams to consult with predecessors and with the connective actors who held the previous effort together, making this a standard part of inception rather than an optional courtesy. Requiring ongoing counterparts to embed evaluative, critical thinking into their adaptive routines in between project cycles – making this a standard part of the work rather than an optional one.
- Maintaining donor agencies' memory through practices that do not depend on individual staff. For instance, handover protocols that capture relational knowledge (not just project documents), continuity of at least some staff with connectedness skills across project cycles, and repositories that record not only what was done but who was trusted, what informal agreements held, and what contextual knowledge proved decisive.
- Protecting candour through negotiated transparency boundaries. Not everything that makes adaptation work can or should be made fully explicit in formal reporting – some contextual intelligence, political readings, and relationship dynamics need protected spaces where they can be discussed honestly and verified without being flattened into public deliverables. The challenge of practical design is to agree what must be formally documented, what can remain tacit but verifiable, and how to ensure that accountability does not kill the contextual intelligence on which it depends.
- Authorising protected experiments within existing bureaucracies, and finding concrete ways to leverage the insights. The World Bank funding in the Dominican Republic functioned as a kind of learning sandbox – a space where relational approaches could accumulate credibility over multiple project or funding cycles before being expected to demonstrate results in conventional terms. Designing such spaces deliberately, with clear learning questions and honest reporting on what works and what doesn't, allows managers to build an internal evidence base. The challenge remains to create spaces and mechanisms to defend relational investments – in a place or the sandbox themselves – under scrutiny.

Which functions this protects. Memory stewardship directly, but also convening and routing, both of which depend on relationships that take time to build and are destroyed by discontinuity and nostalgic continuity.

A cross-cutting principle runs through all three moves: reframe accountability as portfolio reliability. The question is not whether each grant in isolation met its targets, but whether the system overall can detect, interpret, and respond to uncertainty – and whether it can do so in language that boards and oversight bodies will recognise. This means translating relational evidence into the terms that decision-makers use in practice: resilience, responsiveness, and risk mitigation. Such moves help to build the infrastructure that makes this translation possible; the reframing makes it defensible.

6. Conclusion

Invisible weavers don't dissolve uncertainty; they keep systems moving within it. They are neither inspirational heroes nor a niche type of actor; they are a recurring function that helps locally led work add up both within portfolios and across project cycles. The practical challenge for donors is not whether to let go of accountability, but how to loosen control without losing coherence –so that locally generated insights can shape decisions at every level while remaining fundable. Supporting connective work and political judgement more intentionally is one way to make that possible.

The case for doing so is sharpened by the current aid environment. High-profile retrenchments and budget pressures are forcing agencies and donors towards false extremes. On one side, contraction leads to prioritising what is easily measured over the complex (Aston, 2025). On the other, the growing model of hands-off giving – minimal reporting, broad discretion, unrestricted funding – highlights the benefits of sustained relational capital for resilience (Arrillaga et al., 2025; Leland, 2025) but many aid organisations perceive this approach as being incompatible with fiduciary duty and the need to manage risk, verify, and learn. For most donors, simply trusting is insufficient and, in some cases, blind continuity of funding without adapting to a changing context can do harm. For many counterparts, these ideal models are also experienced as difficult to operationalise under real political and resource constraints, limiting their usefulness as guides for action (Guerzovich, 2026). What is needed is a structurally pragmatic and operational middle path: discretion exercised within agreed boundaries and reinforced by critical thinking and credible feedback loops (Jacobstein, 2025).

This paper has argued that the middle path already exists in practice, which is exercised informally by donor staff and connective local actors who exercise agency and judgement to make locally led efforts work better under real constraints. Making those practices more intentional does not require an organisational transformation plan. It calls for recognising what is already happening and protecting it from the incentives that reward legibility over insight.

This argument builds on a long tradition within Thinking and Working Politically and related practice: the recognition that change depends not only on technical solutions but on brokering, facilitating, and sustaining 'good enough' coordination across actors and stakeholders with different interests and different logics given opportunity and constraints. What the paper adds is not a new philosophical lens

but a sharper empirical one: evidence that the connective function recurs across contexts, practical cues to judge when it is effective, and a set of feasible moves that build on what local counterparts and donor staff already find ways to do to change how donor agencies work in practice rather than asking them to overhaul structures that they cannot readily change.

Annex 1: Methodological Note

Moral and decolonial critiques have rightly questioned how localisation agendas can reproduce hierarchies under the guise of reform (van Selm et al., 2025). This paper aligns with systems traditions in many countries across the Global South in which the central task is not to moralise aid but to *unlock problems of decision and praxis*. In Latin America, thinkers such as Rodríguez Zoya (2020) have articulated a 'complexity from the South' with a pragmatic orientation: complexity is not only an analytical framework but also a political and epistemic stance, in which situated knowledge informs collective problem-solving amidst asymmetries of power and time. From this perspective, grounding local agency in the relational work of invisible weavers and the enabling functions of donor workarounds belongs to a lineage of works that focus on resilient hope in motion amidst imperfection (Levy, 2014; Ang, 2025).

To identify how invisible weavers and metaphorically bilingual soft infrastructures operate in practice, the analysis draws on theories across political science, organisational learning, and institutional change, as well as empirical evidence tracing *plausible pathways* – not definitive attribution – through which relational acts and interpretive devices become legible at the level of portfolios. The analysis synthesises a longer paper based on a review of a broader bibliography and more detailed discussion of empirical cases (Guerzovich, 2025b). It uses evaluation and meta-review findings, participant observation, and portfolio synthesis to (a) identify micro-mechanisms of invisible weaving and (b) explore how those mechanisms interact with micro-mechanisms activated within donor agencies as well as constraints that operate at portfolio level.

Several caveats apply. The plausibility claims advanced here remain bounded by selection biases and the availability of data. These are mitigated, though not eliminated, through within and cross-case comparison and triangulation across a diverse sample of cases as well as other analytical techniques. Consequently, the paper uses cautious language to reflect the strength of inference. Assessing the transferability of these mechanisms and confirming their causal efficacy remains a critical agenda for future empirical research.

To enhance readability and style, the author used ChatGPT-5o, providing the AI with specific, targeted prompts for individual paragraphs. This AI-assisted refinement process was followed by a strict manual review and fact check of all resulting content to guarantee accuracy and prevent the introduction of misinformation. Canva was used to produce the graphics.

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The Thinking and working Politically Community of Practice (TWP CoP) is a global network of practitioners, researchers and policymakers in development and global affairs committed to promoting more effective policy and practice. The TWP CoP works to foster more politically aware approaches to understand how change happens and why, translate findings and implications emerging from political economy analysis into operationally relevant guidance, encourage more flexible and adaptable ways of working, and provide evidence-based insights that can stimulate innovation, sharing and learning in international development and global affairs.

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