

## Key Take aways

### Partnerday Africa Exchange on Thursday, 29 January 2026

#### Panel discussion:

Geopolitical shifts, resource constraints and the need for more locally led development: Opportunities and risks

The panel discussion highlighted how geopolitical shifts, resource constraints, and localisation debates are fundamentally reshaping international cooperation in Africa. **Africa's diversity, complexity and political volatility** as well as the need to look at the root causes of vulnerabilities require **long-term, context-specific** approaches that recognize African governments as key development actors while safeguarding accountability and legitimacy. The continent's rapidly growing youth population represents a significant potential demographic dividend, but exclusion from political and economic opportunities (often reinforced by neopatrimonialism aimed at maintaining power) risks increasing instability and inequality.

**Civil society actors** play a crucial role in implementation and accountability, but their operating space varies widely across contexts. While localisation opens opportunities for smaller local NGOs, restrictive political environments and rigid donor requirements often limit their effectiveness. At the same time, Swiss NGOs and government actors are rethinking partnerships in light of localisation and geopolitical pressures, reaffirming core values while emphasizing the need for closer engagement with local partners and more equitable, context-sensitive forms of locally led cooperation.

Traditional bilateral development actors and multilateral institutions, particularly the UN, face growing pressure to adapt to a more complex development landscape marked by new actors and shrinking resources. While funding constraints challenge the UN's operational role, they also increase pressure to become more efficient and more effective, and thus create **opportunities for reform, greater coherence, and a stronger normative focus**. At the same time, **multilateral development banks** are gaining influence and relevance, in particular regarding the implementation of social and climatic programs. Locally led cooperation and civil society engagement were seen as essential, yet uneven political environments and rigid donor requirements continue to limit their effectiveness. Overall, the discussion underscored the **need for realistic, value-based, and locally grounded international cooperation** in an increasingly fragile global context, drawing on the expertise of bilateral or traditional development actors and the substantial contextual understanding that locally led organizations bring.

### Group Discussion 1:

#### Ecosystem of international Cooperation

This working session served to **deepen cooperation** within the **changing IC system** and to develop concrete approaches for future challenges. Following an introduction to current trends, new financing approaches and institutional developments, around 60 participants discussed three topics in small groups: collaborative partnerships, LLC and capacity sharing, and innovative financing models and the role of NGOs and foundations. The groups identified opportunities, challenges, and practical examples, and the results were then brought together and prioritized in a plenary session.

The exchange in the small groups particularly emphasized the **central importance of localization** for the future work of IC. The discussion showed that local ownership not only strengthens partnerships, but also opens up new scope for action – for example, through the **targeted involvement of the local private sector** in operational and strategic processes or through considerations regarding the design of a **Locally Led Cooperation Fund**, which could transfer more resources, decision-making authority and flexibility to local actors. Participants emphasized that such approaches can both unlock innovation potential and significantly improve the impact and sustainability of cooperation in complex contexts. The considerations developed are now being incorporated into the SDC's ongoing internal reflection processes.

### Group Discussion 2:

#### Gender Backlash in Western Africa

The exchange focused on main contextual challenges (conflicts, violence, anti-gender rhetoric & trends, see power point presentation), and the questions of what strategies SDC and partners apply, what adaptations they make to promote gender equality in this challenging context.

The discussion groups are converging on a very **pragmatic approach** to promoting gender equality in the current context: starting from the local level, reducing polarization and gaining social acceptability. One central idea is to **work with a narrative that is non-confrontational** and favoring a framing that highlights the benefits for everyone (women's engagement benefits families and communities e.g. in terms of social cohesion, well-being, economic gains) rather than a discourse that is perceived as a foreign imposed and threatening concept. In some environments, this effort involves **anchoring the narrative in locally legitimate references**, for example – legal texts, religious values (e.g. supportive arguments based on the Koran) – and **relying on credible intermediaries** to deconstruct dominant narratives and open up spaces for discussion using the terms and codes of the target audience. It is important to **engage men** in addressing harmful social norms and gender stereotypes (e.g. differentiated understanding of masculinity, role as a father, husband, etc.). Another identified promising avenue is to **focus on young people**, sensitize them and promote joint discussions among young men and women (youth clubs, mixed classes). Local media can be a useful 'instrument' to sensitize and portray differentiated narratives, if handled in a responsible way.

**The strategy is to engage with and enlarge coalitions** to create a **favorable ecosystem**: close collaboration with community, religious and traditional leaders, engaging with youth, mobilization of resource persons, networking and support for committed organizations, including feminist organizations (and queer organizations, depending on the context).

In terms of **thematic entry points**, women's economic empowerment has been identified as one promising avenue, which not only strengthens women's self-confidence but also highlights their valuable contribution to the society and improves acceptance of their activities and leadership. Addressing specific protection needs, particularly those related to gender-based violence and sexual harassment issues, is another important field of intervention. Finally, the accompaniment of different interventions with psychosocial support (including at the level of our own teams) should be considered.

### **Group Discussion 3:**

Climate Change across Africa, with a focus on Southern and Eastern Africa

The global risks, international objectives (including their current backlash) and institutional anchoring of the CDE (Climate, DRR and Environment) topic in the **cascade of Swiss strategies** were presented in an introduction. The **CDE Thematic Section** and the **Africa Division** of SDC then discussed their respective projects and the institutional tools that are also **available to partners**. The **13 new bilateral cooperation programmes** for 2026-29 were given special attention in the presentations. A SDC colleague in Maputo gave next an example how SDC addresses the CDE theme **at country level** in Mozambique. The **questions** asked by participants concerned impact-linked finance and SDC's strategic orientations in terms of improving resilience and emissions mitigation.

**Discussions in two groups** allowed to summarize the **challenges** faced by partners (access to climate finance, need to anticipate disasters despite competing priorities and high investments required) and **good practices** (promotion of solar energy, collaboration with universities and communities, Swiss expertise, technologies for preparedness and role of civil society in accessing information). Particularly, this session was an opportunity for participants to make **recommendations** or formulate **expectations to SDC**. The discussions revealed that knowledge sharing, cross-border collaborations, communication and tools should be promoted by SDC. Similarly, maintaining flexibility for partners and long-term commitments (several project phases) are advantages, but limit the involvement of new partners. Finally, human rights violations in mitigation projects, sustainability of private sector impact investments and carbon footprint of our organizations must be given particular consideration.