



Photo: Charlotte Pedersen/Icon

Supporting community-led response

Learning paper: Experiences from Honduras, Guatemala and Colombia

Written by Charlotte Pedersen and Rania Salameh

Table of contents

Executive summary	4
Key recommendations	6
Acknowledgement	6
Key statistics from sclr implementation in Colombia, Guatemala and Honduras in the period of December 2024–October 2025:	7
Abbreviations	9
Introduction	10
What is sclr?	11
Research methodology	13
Key learnings from sclr practice in Colombia, Guatemala and Honduras	15
Observations and emerging lessons at community level	16
Emerging leaders and community cohesion	16
Challenges related to emerging leaders and community cohesion:	18
Women’s agency and psychosocial wellbeing	18
New partnerships and collaborations	22
Sclr and peace in conflict settings – learning from Cauca, Chocó and Antioquia, Colombia with Milbia Díaz, programme coordinator CIJYP, Colombia	24
Mutual aid	26
Community contribution	26
Accountability as a collective practice	29
From practice to policy: how sclr changed the way organisations work	31
Transformation of organisational roles: from implementers to enablers	31
Institutional and structural changes to support community leadership	32
A culture of mutual learning and innovation	33
Conclusion	35





After being forcibly displaced from their land in the Guatemalan rainforest, the community members rebuild their community in the mountains. Through various sclr initiatives they supported recovery, healing and community well-being (ASECSA, Guatemala).

Executive summary

This learning paper presents findings from the implementation of the Supporting community-led response (sclr) approach across Colombia, Guatemala and Honduras between December 2024 and October 2025. Through collaboration with 11 national organisations, the sclr pilot project supported 78 community groups to implement more than 80 locally-led initiatives. These initiatives reached approximately 19,000 people through flexible microgrants designed to enable rapid, contextually grounded action, with a total amount of approximately USD 375,680. The experiences documented reflect how communities mobilise their own knowledge, capacities and collective resources when they are recognised as leaders and drivers of their own development, particularly in contexts shaped by protracted crises, inequality, climate vulnerability and violence.

Across all three countries, the implementation of the sclr approach demonstrate that community-led processes generate outcomes that extend far beyond the individual initiatives supported. A key observation was the emergence of new leadership, particularly among women and young people who had previously been excluded from decision-making spaces. These individuals took on prominent and active roles in shaping and implementing community priorities, contributing to shifts in local power dynamics and expanding participation in collective processes. The emergence of new leaders was closely linked to strengthened social cohesion within the community. Spaces created through the sclr approach, where communities could come together to reflect, exchange and act collectively, fostered dialogue, collaboration and the ability to address tensions. In contexts marked by insecurity, displacement, or social fragmentation, these spaces helped foster collaboration.

The process also led to significant changes in women's agency and psychosocial well-being. Participating in and leading community initiatives enabled women to move beyond roles

traditionally confined to caregiving or domestic responsibilities and take on positions of leadership, resource management and public engagement. This shift was both practical and deeply personal. Women developed new skills in financial management, planning and coordination, while also strengthening confidence, self-perception and their voice. The initiatives created spaces not only for action but also for collective healing, particularly in contexts marked by trauma, violence and displacement. These processes contributed to a broader redefinition of women's roles within their communities and increased the recognition of their contributions.

The findings further demonstrated how community-led initiatives can act as a foundation for building new partnerships and strengthening engagement with external actors. As community groups gained confidence and organisational capacity, they began to interact more actively with local authorities, civil society actors and, in some cases, private sector stakeholders. These relationships enabled access to additional resources, strengthened the reach and sustainability of initiatives and supported communities in navigating institutional systems that had previously been perceived as inaccessible. In several cases, community initiatives served as entry points into broader processes of advocacy, collaboration and engagement with governance structures, indicating that locally-led action can influence not only immediate outcomes but also longer term positioning and agency.

Collective action emerged as a defining feature across the implementation. Communities mobilised significant local contributions in the form of labour, materials, skills and financial resources, frequently increasing the overall value of initiatives far beyond the original microgrants. More importantly, these contributions reinforced a strong sense of ownership and collective responsibility. Initiatives were widely perceived as belonging to the community rather than to external actors, which strengthened

commitment, participation and longer-term sustainability. The process also contributed to a renewed recognition of local capacities, as communities increasingly valued their own knowledge, labour and resources, assets that are often overlooked in more traditional aid approaches.

Accountability practices within the sclr approach were similarly shaped by collective processes. Communities developed transparent and participatory mechanisms to manage resources, monitor progress and report back to the wider community. Public assemblies, monitoring committees, open accounting practices and the use of locally-adapted communication tools ensured that information was accessible and shared. These practices were not only about financial oversight but also about reinforcing trust, legitimacy and shared ownership. In many cases, communities applied standards of accountability that were rigorous and carefully observed, reflecting a strong sense of stewardship over collective resources. At the same time, the implementation of these mechanisms revealed challenges related to the need to balance flexibility with accountability obligations.

At the organisational level of the facilitating organisation, the implementation of the sclr approach prompted significant shifts in roles, structures and ways of working. Facilitating organisations moved from positions of direct implementation toward roles centred on accompaniment, facilitation and enabling community leadership. This transformation required changes in mindset, as well as in operational systems. Several organisations adapted internal policies, financial procedures and coordination mechanisms to accommodate flexible microgrant modalities and decentralised decision-making. These adjustments often led to increased collaboration between programme, finance and administrative teams and required staff to engage more directly with communities in processes for learning and support. Facilitating sclr also contributed to the emergence of a culture of learning and adaptation. This included a greater acceptance of uncertainty and recognition that not all processes would unfold in predictable ways. For many organisations, this involved letting go of control and placing greater trust in communities'

ability to manage resources, make decisions and navigate challenges. These changes extended beyond the sclr pilot itself, influencing broader organisational practices and approaches to work with communities.

Across the different contexts, the findings illustrate that community-led approaches such as sclr operate across the intersections of humanitarian response, development and peacebuilding. The initiatives supported addressed immediate needs while also contributing to longer term impact such as social cohesion, livelihood development, environmental protection, conflict mitigation and peacebuilding. This reflects the reality that in protracted crisis settings, these dimensions are deeply interconnected. The sclr pilot project shows that when communities are supported to define and act on their own priorities, they naturally develop responses that bridge these domains in ways that are contextually relevant and sustainable.

At the same time, the experiences highlight that such processes are not linear and involve navigating tensions related to power dynamics, institutional constraints and social norms. The emergence of new leadership can challenge existing structures, organisational systems may not always align with the flexibility required and increased participation and leadership can create new expectations and pressures. These dynamics underscore the importance of approaches that are attentive to context, grounded in relationships of trust and capable of adapting to evolving realities.

Overall, the learning so far from sclr practiced by 11 actors in 3 countries of Latin America demonstrates that when communities are recognised as leaders of their own response and supported through flexible, enabling approaches, they mobilise significant collective capacity, strengthen social cohesion and generate responses that are both immediate and long-term in nature. The experiences from Colombia, Guatemala and Honduras show how community-led action can contribute to meaningful change in complex environments, while also reshaping the roles and practices of the organisations that engage with them.

Key recommendations

The following recommendations are intended for practitioners, civil society organisations, donors and policymakers engaged in or supporting sclr approaches:

- Increase flexible, community accessible funding.
- Provide small, adaptable funding (e.g. microgrants) that allows communities to define priorities and respond to changing needs.
- Adapt compliance expectations to enable community-led action.
- Acknowledge and use proportionate, context sensitive risk and community-led accountability systems that align with community processes while maintaining transparency.
- Invest in facilitation skills, not only technical or programmatic delivery.
- Strengthen sclr facilitating organisations' roles as "facilitators" and enablers of community leadership, with sustained accompaniment and trustbuilding at the centre.

- Create conditions where women, youth and marginalised groups can lead, while collectively mitigating risks such as overload, backlash and unequal power dynamics.
- Place value on and support community contributions and existing mutual aid practices as core assets and build on them to strengthen sustainable, locally rooted responses.

"We are very satisfied with the sclr experience.

It is one of the projects we value most, due

to its strong local ownership and outcomes

that go beyond numbers or reports. Although

our core focus is on women's leadership, the

work has extended to the community level,

engaging men, youth and even children".

Nathalia, Project coordinator, RNM, Colombia

Acknowledgement

The authors wish to acknowledge the valuable work and contributions of all colleagues and sclr practitioners in Colombia, Honduras and Guatemala who implemented the **supporting community-led response** (sclr), a pilot project supported by Act Church of Sweden. Among them Justicia & Paz, CEDH, IELCO, Red Nacional de Mujeres, Diálogo Intereclesial por la Paz (DIPAZ), Gempaz and Pontificia Universidad Javeriana in Colombia; ASECSA in Guatemala; and Red COMAL, Las Hormigas and Foro de Mujeres por la Vida in Honduras. Through their tireless efforts, perseverance and strong belief in the capacities of the communities, the organisations demonstrated first-hand that meaningful and sustainable change

is achieved when communities are recognised as leaders, agents and drivers of their own development. We also express our deepest gratitude to the communities and community groups from whom we have all learned and whose courage, determination and collective vision for change have been truly inspiring.

A special thank you is extended to Milbía Díaz (CIJYP), Nathalia Cubillos (RNM), Johana Morales (IELCO), Noemí Dubón (FMPV), Jorge Alberto Díaz (Red COMAL), Miriam Bac (ASECSA) and Leidy Arévalo (CEDH) for their deep insights, thoughtful analysis, and generous sharing of knowledge and experience.

Key statistics from sclr implementation in Colombia, Guatemala and Honduras in the period of December 2024–October 2025:



17 regions (departments)
reached



11 local and national facilitating
civil society organisations



78 community groups
supported



80 microgrant initiatives
implemented



Approx. 375 680 USD
(3 444 358 SEK)
used for sclr microgrants*



Approx. 19 000 people
reached

* This amount excludes the contributions that community members made themselves. Across all community groups supported, local contributions including labor, material, food, logistics support, technical support, financial resources etc. accounted for approximately 25–50 % of the initiative value.



Renovation of a school kitchen and establishment of a fruit and vegetable garden in Mixcure, Honduras, through sclr initiatives, improving school nutrition and basic infrastructure in a rural area lacking basic services (Las Hormigas, Honduras).

Abbreviations

sclr: supporting community-led response

L2GP: Local to Global Protection

NGO: Non-Governmental Organisations

FGD: Focus Group Discussions

CIJYP: Comisión Intereclesial de Justicia y Paz

CEDH: Centro de Empresas y Derechos Humanos

IELCO: Iglesia Evangélica Luterana de Colombia

RNM: Red Nacional de Mujeres

DiPaz: Diálogo Intereclesial por la Paz

GemPaz: Grupo Ecuménico de Mujeres Constructoras de Paz

ASECSA: Asociación de Servicios Comunitarios de Salud

Red COMAL: Red de Comercialización Comunitaria Alternativa

FMPV: Foro de Mujeres por la Vida in Honduras.

SOPs: Standard Operating Procedures

Act CoS: Act Church of Sweden

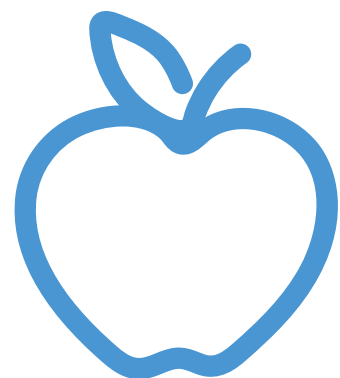




Photo: Charlotte Pedersen/Kon

A member of the community at a water point in Guatemala where the sclr approach was implemented.

Introduction

Latin America is facing multiple crises that are deepening vulnerability for millions of people, especially in rural and marginalised communities. Persistent poverty, uneven economic growth and growing environmental pressures intersect across the region. Around 25.5 % of the population (162 million people) live in poverty, while extreme poverty affects 9.8 % (62 million people) (ECLAC, 2025). Rural households are disproportionately affected due to socio-economic inequality, limited access to basic services, fragile livelihoods and high exposure to climate shocks.

The ongoing presence of armed non-state actors in Colombia, including guerrilla and paramilitary groups, remains a key driver of insecurity, displacement and limited access to land, economic opportunities and essential services. These challenges are embedded within broader regional migration patterns, as Colombia has received

nearly three million migrants in recent years, many affected by the Venezuelan crisis, while the Darién Gap has become one of the most hazardous migration routes globally. Structural economic inequality, especially for women, further intensifies the impacts of conflict and migration.

Honduras and Guatemala are at the centre of the regional migration crisis, functioning both as countries of origin and transit, where violence linked to criminal gangs, widespread poverty and limited economic opportunities have forced many families to leave their homes. At the same time, growing transit migration places increasing pressure on local communities, while returning migrants often struggle to reintegrate amid weak institutional support. Gender-based violence, state corruption and limited access to quality public services further compound these challenges and are widely recognised as key root causes of migration.

Climate change is further intensifying existing challenges across the region, significantly affecting Honduras and Guatemala, both of which are considered highly climate-vulnerable countries globally (according to the Climate Finance Vulnerability Index 2025 and the ND-GAIN Country Index 2024). Prolonged droughts in the Central American Dry Corridor have led to widespread crop failures and hunger, while increasingly severe hurricanes and storms have destroyed homes, infrastructure and livelihoods. As water scarcity and food insecurity worsen, climate-related displacement and migration continue to rise. In Colombia, these environmental pressures threaten the country's exceptional biodiversity. It is one of the most dangerous places in the world for those working to protect the land and environmental resources (Global Witness 2024). Despite these challenges, the region is characterised by a strong local capacity and resilience. A vibrant civil society, including rights-based and faith-based organisations, plays a critical role in responding to humanitarian needs and defending human rights.

For decades, a wide range of civil society organisations and community groups, both formal and informal, have played a central role in responding to humanitarian needs and development challenges in Colombia, Honduras and Guatemala. Mutual aid practices have been pivotal at the community-level, especially among populations affected by violence, displacement, climate shocks and socio-economic inequality. These practices have enabled communities not only to cope with crises, but also to organise collective responses rooted in local knowledge and solidarity.

Act Church of Sweden has a long-standing presence in Honduras, Guatemala and Colombia, supported by a regional office provided in Bogotá, working closely with local partners. This provided a strong foundation for piloting, learning and sharing approaches rooted in local leadership and regional exchange.

Building on the long-standing role of civil society and community experience in responding to crisis, 11 local organisations, with support from Act Church of Sweden, began to pilot the supporting community-led response (sclr) across Colombia, Guatemala and Honduras in October 2024. The pilot aimed to explore how the sclr approach



Photo: Charlotte Pedersen/Ikon

What is sclr?

Supporting community-led response (sclr) places crisis-affected people and communities at the centre of humanitarian action by recognizing, supporting and strengthening their leadership, knowledge and resources. Promoted by Local to Global Protection (L2GP), the approach emerged from research on how people cope with crises, emphasising that communities are consistently the first and last responders. Through sclr, support seeks to be more relevant, dignified, accountable and sustainable by reinforcing, rather than replacing, community-driven solutions.

Guiding principles of sclr

1. Communities are the first and last responders to crisis.
2. How external actors engage with people in crisis affects how they behave and respond.
3. All communities have rich knowledge, skills and insights to respond to crisis and long-term vulnerabilities.
4. Given the chance, communities respond to crises holistically, unconstrained by humanitarian and development divides and looking to long-term resilience.
5. Locally-led response can be much faster and more cost-efficient than conventional aid or humanitarian interventions.
6. Strengthening psychosocial wellbeing is crucial to recovery.
7. Crisis response is strengthened when women and other marginalised groups are also given a chance to lead
8. Local agency and accountability require local ownership and mutual trust.
9. Innovation and learning require a safe-to-fail environment.
10. Social connection and cohesion strengthen crisis response and resilience.

could strengthen local responses by supporting, scaling and, in some cases, revitalising existing community-led mutual aid initiatives.

Between December 2024 and October 2025, the sclr pilot supported over 80 community-led initiatives across 17 departments in the three countries through microgrants totalling USD 375,680, reaching approximately 19,000 people. These initiatives reflected a wide range of community-identified priorities, capacities and opportunities, including:

- improvements to shared infrastructure and schools
- the creation of child-friendly spaces
- advocacy and peace-building efforts
- women-led income-generating activities
- migrant-led initiatives
- environmental conservation and protection
- the prevention of forced recruitment and substance abuse among youth.

In Guatemala, one initiative led by women in the community involved practicing ancestral weaving traditions. Coming together through this shared cultural practice became an important source of healing and recovery following the trauma of displacement (ASECSA, Guatemala).

Taken together, they highlight both the diversity of priorities and circumstances communities face in times of crisis and the ways these often extend into protracted crisis contexts beyond the traditional scope of international humanitarian response. Selected by committees made up of representatives of local community members and stakeholders, these initiatives offer important insights into how communities define their own priorities and organise collective responses and how these priorities bridge traditional humanitarian and development gaps. This learning paper highlights key observations and early lessons emerging from sclr practice, grounded in the experiences of all communities and the 11 local organisations facilitating the sclr approach: CIJYP, CEDH, IELCO, RNM, DIPAZ, Gempaz and Pontificia Universidad Javeriana in Colombia; ASECSA in Guatemala; and Red COMAL, Las Hormigas and FMPV in Honduras.

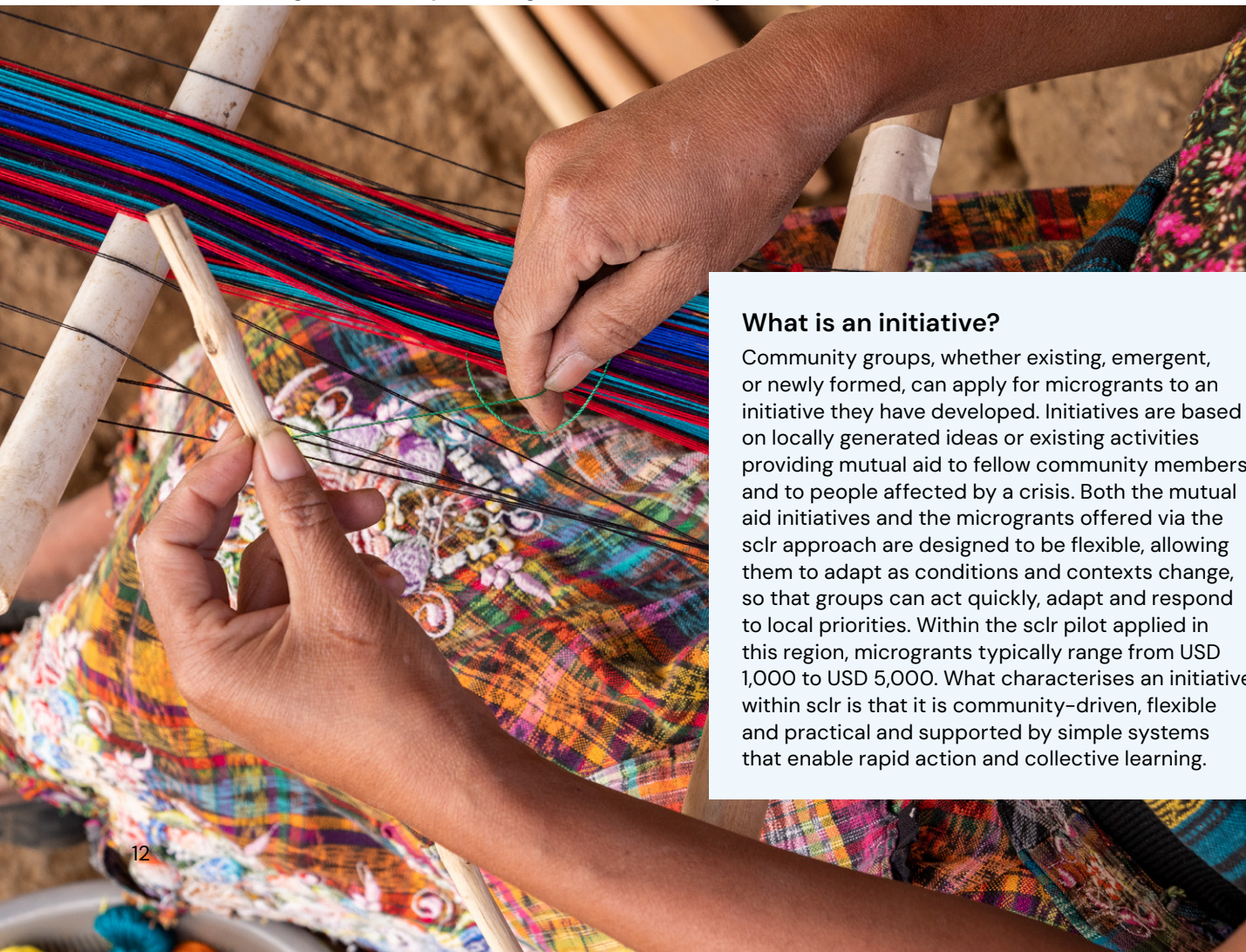


Photo: Eva Perez Janil/Kon

What is an initiative?

Community groups, whether existing, emergent, or newly formed, can apply for microgrants to an initiative they have developed. Initiatives are based on locally generated ideas or existing activities providing mutual aid to fellow community members and to people affected by a crisis. Both the mutual aid initiatives and the microgrants offered via the sclr approach are designed to be flexible, allowing them to adapt as conditions and contexts change, so that groups can act quickly, adapt and respond to local priorities. Within the sclr pilot applied in this region, microgrants typically range from USD 1,000 to USD 5,000. What characterises an initiative within sclr is that it is community-driven, flexible and practical and supported by simple systems that enable rapid action and collective learning.



Visiting some of the sclr initiatives in a community in Honduras.

Research methodology

This learning paper was developed by Act Church of Sweden in close collaboration with practitioners from 11 national organisations from Colombia, Honduras and Guatemala as part of our collective commitment to strengthening learning and reflective practice within community-led humanitarian and development approaches, particularly within the supporting community-led response (sclr) framework.

The overall purpose is to deepen the understanding of how local and national organisations and civil society actors can support community-led initiatives, identify factors that enable or hinder their effectiveness and success and generate evidence that can contribute to learning from sclr and evolving the approach. The focus of this practice learning paper is to try to understand how interventions and relationships have unfolded in practice, identifying contextual and

organisational factors shaping results and examine both achievements and obstacles across the three countries.

The analysis of sclr practice applied qualitative research design consisting of multiple complementary approaches to unpack the often complex, context-specific and socially embedded nature of community-led processes. The research design provided the necessary flexibility to explore emerging issues, interpret diverse forms of data and triangulate findings across multiple sources.

“The overall purpose is to deepen the understanding of how local and national organisations and civil society actors can support community-led initiatives”.

Data collection source	Date	Location
Reflection and finetuning workshops. During workshops facilitating teams reflected on process, results on community and organisational level, achievements, challenges, contextual and methodological factors.	August 11–12, 2025 August 19–21, 2025	Honduras Colombia
Review of reports. To define analytical framework for the study and highlight issues in need of further exploration. Reports contained Programme activities, community engagement processes, perceived outcomes and operational challenges.	2025–2026	Desk study
Continuous bilateral meetings	2024–2026	Online / hybrid
Joint learning and update meetings with the facilitating organisations, convened by Act Church of Sweden. Enabled cross-country exchange, identification of shared patterns and challenges and refinement of themes for deeper investigation. Guided the selection of field visits.	2025	Regional (online)
Field visits to 6 facilitating organisations and more than 15 community groups. Conversations with community members and leaders. Direct observations of communities and initiatives, providing insights into local practices, interaction dynamics and concrete examples.	November 2024 and August 2025	Guatemala, Honduras Colombia
Semi-structured focus group discussions (FGD) with key staff from facilitating organisations. Informed by findings from the reflection and finetuning workshops. Purpose was to deepen analysis, in-depth exploration of issues observed in other fora such as field visits.	December 18, 2025 January 15, 2026	Online

“Flexibility, listening and collective reflection open up possibilities for innovation and building trust in new approaches and accepting that failure can help us build better. We need to keep alive that ability to dream also during implementation”.

Nathalia, Project coordinator, RNM, Colombia

Key learnings from sclr practice in Colombia, Guatemala and Honduras

Photo: Charlotte Pedersen/kon



A community leader in Honduras presenting a community mapping and local priorities.

Observations and emerging lessons at community level

The sclr approach influenced community-level dynamics across all three countries in three main areas:

- Emerging leadership and strengthened community cohesion
- Women's agency and psychosocial wellbeing
- New partnerships and collaborations

Emerging leaders and community cohesion

Each of the sclr facilitating organisations recognises that the approach has generated transformations in community dynamics and the ways communities organise and work together. One of the most visible impacts was the emergence of new leaders, especially among women and youth who previously lacked access to local decision-making spaces around them. Several organisations observed that it was not the usual people whose leadership was further strengthened. Instead, new voices emerged, particularly among young women and youth.

"Young women who at first waited for

instructions and doubted their ability

to lead gradually overcame their fear

and began assuming leadership roles".

Nathalia, Project coordinator, RNM, Colombia

In the department of Lempira, Honduras, a similar pattern was observed: "We set out to challenge the deeply rooted culture of machismo and women did not just participate – they led. 45 % of participants were women and 23 % were youth, which strengthened decision-making and how communities responded to identified needs.", (Jorge Alberto Dias, Programme coordinator, Red COMAL, Honduras).

These emerging leadership dynamics were accompanied by a notable shift in how communities perceive women. In contexts where stigmas were strong and women's organisations were sometimes met with suspicion, the active and

visible leadership of women helped dismantle negative narratives and opened new spaces of legitimacy. Their contributions increasingly came to be recognised as essential to community well-being. This shift translated into greater respect for women's leadership and broader acceptance of their participation in community roles that had previously been restricted to men.

"They shifted from being seen solely as

housewives to being recognised as women

with the capacity to lead and coordinate

community initiatives".

Noemí, Programme coordinator, Foro de mujeres

por la vida, Honduras

New dynamics of community work were also catalysed, often characterised by greater cohesion and collaboration among mixed groups.

"Women's groups initiated the community initiatives, but mixed groups carried them out, demonstrating strong community coordination and collaboration", (Nathalia, Project coordinator, RNM, Colombia).

This further strengthened coordination, communication and mutual recognition within the community. This not only made collective capacities more visible but also reinforced the sense of belonging and the value of working together.

"The sclr approach helped resolve internal conflicts and, in doing so, strengthened the social fabric and the dynamics of coexistence within the community." (Milbia Diaz, Programme coordinator, CIJYP, Colombia).

Youth leadership also emerged as transformative. In territories marked by violence, armed control and recruitment risks, sclr supported initiatives became safe spaces where young people could gather, conduct research, learn and exercise leadership through creativity and community organisation. In the department of Cauca in Colombia, a group of young people not only managed to develop their initiative in an extremely challenging context, but also established



Community members in Honduras brainstorm and map needs, opportunities, capacities and priorities.

connections with youth from other territories, expanding their networks and strengthening their collective vision. In the words of the facilitating organisation CIJYP, “this process strengthened their leadership and generated support networks that extend beyond the territory.”

These developments demonstrated that even in contexts of extreme risk and vulnerability, young people can lead solid initiatives, manage resources and build transformative alliances. Finally, the sclr approach supported the resolution of internal conflicts and the strengthening of local social fabric. In several communities, the spaces created around the initiatives became safe opportunities to meet, talk and rebuild relationships that had been fractured for years. In one case, families with longstanding conflicts were able to reconcile through collaborative work. In other territories under armed control, the sclr community group meetings enabled dialogue on sensitive topics that had previously been impossible to address due to fear or contextual

tensions. These protecting spaces were essential for reactivating dynamics of co-existence, such as rebuilding everyday interactions between groups and people who had long kept distance from one another or enabling joint problem solving in shared community spaces, restoring internal trust and strengthening community organisation.

“The community resolved conflicts once deemed ‘unsolvable,’ thanks to the approach and collaborative process that enabled dialogue and reconciliation, strengthening local organisation and sparking new community work dynamics”.

Milbia Diaz, Programme coordinator,
CIJYP, Colombia

Challenges related to emerging leaders and community cohesion:

Supporting mutual aid initiatives through sclr has demonstrated its significant transformative potential while also revealing structural and contextual challenges across communities in Colombia, Guatemala and Honduras. One of the most notable tensions emerged around the rise of new leadership, particularly women and youth, whose increased visibility sometimes generated resistance from traditional authorities, such as Juntas de Acción Comunal, or from established community leaders. In a few cases, these actors attempted to dominate processes or claim undue credit for initiatives, creating confusion around leadership roles and undermining the emergence of new leadership. This dynamic, often described as “elite capture” risked discouraging the very actors the approach sought to empower. In this context, facilitating agencies played a critical role in mitigating such interference. For example, IELCO was able to navigate these tensions by limiting the influence of traditional leaders without excluding them or triggering conflict.

In addition, some women leading sclr supported initiatives faced challenges via persistence of rumours questioning their integrity or capacity, including accusations of mishandling funds. These attempts to discredit women’s leadership were addressed through community dialogue, which helped to reaffirm trust and uphold the legitimacy of their roles.

Sclr facilitating organisations recognised these risks early on and implemented a range of mitigation measures to prevent internal tensions and ensure the protection and recognition of emerging leaders. These measures included publicly acknowledging the work of community groups, ensuring transparent communication about who generated and led the initiatives and emphasised that the ideas originated from the community members themselves. By reinforcing equitable validation of contributions and distributing responsibilities more intentionally, staff from sclr facilitating organisations helped safeguard the integrity of the process and prevented the concentration of influence within a single group or the existing and traditional leadership structure.

Across these experiences, a clear learning emerged: while sclr can catalyse deep community

transformation, broaden ownership and action and shift power relations from within, it can also reshape local dynamics in ways that generate resistance or additional pressure on the emerging leaders. However, with well-considered and adaptive facilitation, transparency and attention to local power structures, women, youth and other emerging leaders not only maintained their roles but also grew in confidence, visibility and legitimacy.

Women’s agency and psychosocial wellbeing

Across the community group initiatives in Colombia, Guatemala and Honduras findings from practice and learning show how the process sparked significant shifts in women’s self-esteem, autonomy and emotional wellbeing. Beyond strengthening individual groups’ technical or administrative capacities, the approach enhanced women’s confidence in their own abilities, increased the visibility of their leadership and offered safe spaces for collective healing among populations marked by violence, stigma and patriarchal norms. Notably, most women-led initiatives were grounded in collective impact and wellbeing, and rather than focusing solely on women’s individual benefits, they addressed issues that reflected women’s priorities while generating positive outcomes for the broader community.

One of the clearest impacts was the transformation in how women understood their own capabilities; women who had once internalised the belief that they lacked the skills to lead or make decisions began to see themselves differently. As Noemí, Programme coordinator, FMPV noted in Honduras, “Not only was the social notion that women lack capacity dismantled, but also the idea that they themselves held about themselves”. The shift was not merely technical; it was deeply personal. Also in Honduras, a woman leading one of the community initiatives described empowerment as:

“Gaining the knowledge and confidence needed to navigate environments that remain profoundly sexist and, at times, violent”.

Sclr enabled a space where people and groups could practice leadership, challenge restrictive norms and redefine their social role from within their communities.

A crucial dimension of this change was the shift from being passive recipients of aid to active social contributors and leaders of their own initiatives. Many women who had previously described themselves primarily as housewives and caregivers began taking responsibility for managing community resources, leading collective processes and representing their communities in decision-making spaces. This shift

to community protagonists strengthened their self-worth, fostered pride in their contributions and enhanced their emotional wellbeing.

“Women, young people and older adults regained their sense of dignity, confidence and voice in decision-making. The experience was seen as transformative, helping the displaced community move from being viewed only as ‘victims’ to becoming active participants and key contributors to their own recovery.”, Miriam Bac, Programme coordinator, ASECSA, Guatemala. The development of practical skills further reinforced this transformation. Through their initiatives,

Photo: Rania Salameh/Ikon



Photos from a forcibly displaced community in Atlántida, Honduras. The women pictured are all part of a sclr community group that implemented two key initiatives: the installation of several lampposts to improve safety for community members and the construction of an aqueduct to channel water from a nearby river during heavy rains, helping to protect the community from being flooded (FMPV, Honduras).





In 2021, large-scale student protests took place across Colombia. The protests were met with violence in Cali, resulting in the deaths of many young people. The photos show a sclr initiative that established a memorial site for the victims and their families. This space serves to honour and remember those who lost their lives, support collective healing within the community and raise wider public awareness to ensure that such violence is neither forgotten nor allowed to happen again (DIPAZ, Colombia).

women learned to keep financial records, calculate costs, prepare quotations and negotiate prices. These new competencies and skills increased the women's autonomy and were an evident source of pride for them.

"Each women's group carried their own finance book... they wanted to show us how they had learned to keep their records, make calculations

and negotiate better prices." (Noemí, Programme Coordinator, FMPV, Honduras)

This also enabled them to demand transparency from existing community committees. Other women's groups similarly reflected this new confidence, "Now we do not accept any community committee presenting a financial proposal without at least three quotations." (female leader of a community initiative, FMPV, Honduras). In one community in Honduras, women from one of the community initiatives even started to train men, who were part of other community committees, on financial management, signalling a shift in local power dynamics and recognition of women as technical experts.

These skill gains translated into increased legitimacy and influence. Women became more visible within community structures and were slowly becoming recognised by others as capable leaders. As Nathalia, programme coordinator, RNM, in Colombia explained, "Sclr paved the way for them to be more visible and to take on leadership roles.". This growing recognition is essential in contexts where leadership has long been gendered and exclusionary; the base of community leadership has been broadened and contributes to active participation in decision-making that impacts community life.

Another example of this is from the rural areas of the department of Tolima in Colombia where the work that women had been carrying for years, now became visible through the sclr activities. As Leidy, the Community Facilitator part of CEDH explains: "Working with women in rural contexts often involves deep cultural, social and economic barriers." More than half of the initiatives supported through the sclr project were led by women. Their leadership emerged organically and proved instrumental in shaping resource management, coordination and follow-through. This approach not only made women's existing capacities more visible but also strengthened them further.

Sclr also served as an important psychosocial space for women facing emotional exhaustion, stigmatisation and isolation as they navigate highly demanding and patriarchal environments. In contexts where defending forests, water or land often exposes women to threats,

surveillance or silencing, the sclr approach offered a rare opportunity to pause, feel recognised and rebuild confidence.

In Baja Verapaz, Guatemala, a women-led initiative centred on traditional weaving workshops became a space for emotional healing. Many of the participating women had experienced violence and trauma linked to forced displacement. Through weaving güipiles, they found not only a source of income but also a therapeutic practice. Working with colours, focusing on techniques and revitalising ancestral knowledge helped women process emotions, reduce anxiety and strengthen self-esteem.

“Each initiative became a collective space of listening, commitment and respect, where women’s leadership fostered dignity and hope. Sclr opened new opportunities and supported the most vulnerable, helping weave pathways toward wellbeing and a more hopeful future” (Miriam Bac, Programme coordinator, ASECSA).

Challenges related to women’s agency and psychosocial wellbeing:

While gains in women’s agency and psycho-social wellbeing are evident and positively impactful, some of the facilitating organisations also noted unintended pressures linked to women’s increased leadership. Many female participants had to balance new leadership responsibilities alongside existing domestic and caregiving roles and other income generating work, resulting in a double or even triple workload. These challenges were mitigated most of the time by sharing the workload between several of the community group members and other community members volunteering to support. These added expectations sometimes exposed women to criticism, stress and community tensions, particularly in fragile or insecure environments. Without adequate support systems, such as women’s groups or collective spaces for sharing responsibilities and emotional support, these additional demands risked contributing to burnout and emotional strain.



Photo: Sara Lara/Ikon



Photo: Zenaida Xoná/Ikon

Women-led traditional weaving workshops in a displaced community in Baja Verapaz, Guatemala. Through this sclr initiative, weaving became a source of income, cultural continuity and collective healing, as older women pass on Mayan textile techniques to younger generations (ASECSA, Guatemala).

New partnerships and collaborations

Learnings from sclr practice across these three countries so far demonstrates a significant shift in how communities build relationships, collaborate with others and plan beyond immediate results. The approach strengthened community-level organisation whilst enabling them to forge new partnerships, support networks and institutional links that enhanced the sustainability, visibility and overall impact of community-led action.

Across all of the communities in which sclr was facilitated, partnerships were formed and/or enhanced with local organisations, associations and neighbouring communities. These relationships created opportunities for future collaboration, access to additional resources and peer learning, reinforcing more holistic and interconnected models of community development and leadership. For example, in a forcibly displaced Maya community in Guatemala, a partnership was formed between the informal women-led community group with an existing association of women weavers and artisans, creating a support network that strengthened production initiatives and emotional wellbeing. As described by Miriam Bac, Programme coordinator, ASECSA:

"The Association of Women Weavers

offered holistic and compassionate support.

Beyond technical guidance, they brought

medicinal plants and shared herbal teas,

creating a space of sisterhood, emotional

support and mutual care".

This collaboration was further expanded through exchanges with women's groups from neighbouring communities, enabling the sharing of lessons learned and strategies that could be adapted and replicated in other displaced or vulnerable settings. These relationships strengthened trust, widened support networks and enhanced collective resilience.

Youth participants identified sclr spaces as safe environments to learn, organise and explore leadership. In Cauca, Colombia, young

participants established links with youth groups from other regions, creating support networks that "extend beyond the territory" and broadened their understanding of collective action. These experiences demonstrated that even in highly vulnerable settings, young people can lead initiatives, build alliances and over long distances, establish trust that overcomes geographic and social isolation. The sclr approach also enabled communities to engage more confidently with local authorities and institutional actors who had previously seemed inaccessible. As the capacity to organise themselves and others locally increased, several community groups mobilised family contributions, negotiated with local authorities and secured support from governmental and technical institutions. As noted by Eva Sanchez, Executive Director, Las Hormigas in Honduras "The communities gathered family contributions, lobbied the local council and secured support from several organisations and institutions".

In the Galilea Forest in Tolima, Colombia, communities, with support from local organisation CEDH, strengthened relationships with the mayor's office and other governmental actors, leading to improved dialogue and more coordinated action. Community members contributed labour, expertise and collective resources to expand activities, while additional support was secured from mayoral offices, civil society networks, scientific associations, universities etc. Fabián, the CEDH Colombian director reflected:

"A key lesson learned was the recognition that all contributions matter. Strengthening self-management and local investment, while clearly defining and prioritising expected transformations, ensured that external support aligned with and reinforced locally defined agendas and context-specific needs."

In Casanare, Colombia, another community group supported by IELCO successfully engaged private-sector actors obtaining contributions for community kits, partnering with a veterinary hospital to provide sessions on responsible pet care and coordinating with a local waste management company to deliver talks on hygiene practices and environmental responsibility. These partnerships supported a broader community initiative promoting health, environmental care and responsible animal welfare.



Youth-led cultivation of edible mushrooms in Cauca, Colombia, through a sclr initiative supporting food sovereignty, circular economy practices and peaceful alternatives to illicit economies and armed group recruitment (CIJYP, Colombia).

Together, these examples illustrate how strengthening confidence, internal coordination and self-management enabled communities to build legitimacy and interact more effectively with other key local actors.

Finally, the sclr approach encouraged the emergence of broader community networks aimed at sustaining long-term processes. Also, in the Galilea Forest of Tolima, Colombia, community members collaborated to establish their own communication initiative – the Guacamayas de

la Cordillera newsletter. The newsletter documents local developments, amplifies community voices and has begun engaging young people and municipal leaders interested in establishing a community radio station. Beyond information-sharing, the newsletter emerged as a platform for building relationships, coordinating with other stakeholders and linking initiatives active in the region. Collectively, these actions increased visibility, reinforced community cohesion and helped ensure that the gains achieved during the pilot phase are sustained over time.

Sclr and peace in conflict settings – learning from Cauca, Chocó and Antioquia, Colombia with Milbia Diaz, programme coordinator CIJYP, Colombia

“These community-led initiatives go beyond addressing just urgent needs, they also build sustainable conditions for peace”.

The community-led rapid response initiatives emerge in highly constrained and insecure contexts characterised by territorial control, the silencing of community leadership, persistent threats and the presence of armed actors. In these environments, where risk levels are high and state protection is largely absent, affected people are not passive recipients of aid. Rather, communities not only resist but also build concrete alternatives to defend and protect life, dignity, social fabric and territory.

In this sense, the sclr initiatives developed by the community groups show how these initiatives contribute directly to peacebuilding. On the one hand, strengthening the economic conditions of social leaders who carry out advocacy and denunciation work enables them to continue their work in safer and more dignified conditions, reducing their vulnerability to external pressures. Supporting those who defend rights and bring visibility to local challenges is, in itself, an act of peacebuilding.

Likewise, providing microgrants for initiatives that generate resources to work with children and adolescents is a local strategy for preventing forced recruitment. Sports activities and environmental education processes create alternative spaces for younger generations of life, belonging and purpose, thus distancing them from the dynamics of violence. These spaces not only provide protection but also sow values of co-existence, care for the territory, peaceful conflict resolution and constitute an innovative strategy for the protection of children and adolescents in contexts of intensified armed conflict.

Similarly, community designed research and production initiatives, such as the cultivation



The sclr initiatives are being implemented in villages across some of Colombia's most conflict-affected regions. The photos show communities in Chocó and Antioquia.

of edible mushrooms, reflect how community-driven innovation can become a tool for territorial transformation. In contexts where there is a lack of socio-economic opportunities and armed groups target young people for recruitment, productive initiatives like this offer lawful livelihoods opportunities, strengthen autonomy and reinforce attachment to their territory.

Knowledge exchange between rural and urban youth further enriches these processes by enabling dialogue and sharing different forms of knowledge, collective problem-solving and diverse lived experiences. These relationships not only strengthen technical and organisational capacities but also constitute peace practice in themselves, as it fosters solidarity across youths who, although in different contexts, share experiences of violence and exclusion.

Likewise, support for productive initiatives such as poultry farming and accompaniment of indigenous and ancestral communities is particularly relevant in territories where alliances are formed between private companies and armed groups to develop large-scale corporate projects. In such contexts, communities face dispossession, often with limited response from the state and in conditions that pressure populations to integrate into imposed economies, even at the cost of becoming labourers on their own land. Faced with this reality, community-led initiatives offer dignified and autonomous alternatives, enabling communities to remain on their land, defend their ways of life and resist coercive economic integration by armed actors. In this context, the secure use and control of their territory became instrumental to peacebuilding, since, without land rights and territorial autonomy, sustainable livelihoods and dignified life are not possible.

One of the initiatives focused on the strengthening of a women-led tailoring workshop in a territory under the control of one of the larger armed groups in Colombia. In a context where women are exposed to manipulation, economic coercion and gender-based violence, the creation of safe and autonomous spaces for work for women is far from trivial. Enabling women to develop dignified economic alternatives helped to reduce their vulnerability to co-option by armed actors,

it strengthened their support networks and enabled women to define their own life projects. These sclr initiatives not only strengthened their economic recovery but they also functioned as a protective barrier and contributed directly to the prevention of gender-based violence and the creation of more favourable conditions for peace in these territories.

“Taken together, these community-led rapid response initiatives go beyond addressing just urgent needs, they also build sustainable conditions for peace. They are expressions of resilience, agency and hope thus demonstrating that, even in highly adverse settings, communities are capable of generating meaningful change and contributing to peace from the local level toward structural transformation”.

Milbia Diaz, Programme coordinator,
CIJYP, Colombia

Photo: Ikon



Despite the challenges of conflict, displacement, natural disasters, and geographic remoteness in Colombia's Chocó department, young people are leading change in their communities. Through sclr, they have created space for collective action, local solutions, and change.



Through sclr initiatives in Mixcure, Honduras, a school kitchen was renovated, a fruit and vegetable garden established, and basic infrastructure strengthened, contributing to improved school nutrition and community access in a rural area lacking basic services (Las Hormigas, Honduras).

Mutual aid

As defined by practitioners from a diversity of crisis contexts, mutual aid is the spontaneous and voluntary action of individuals, families and groups to help others within their wider community to survive, protect and recover. It happens based on their own resources, crowd sourcing and informal coordination, often without external aid.

In some contexts, across Colombia, Honduras and Guatemala, communities have moved away from earlier practices of mutual aid that had eroded due to conflict, displacement, or prolonged dependency on external resources and action. Through the sclr approach, communities were able to rediscover and re-engage with these practices as the process not only supported existing mutual aid efforts, but also supported and built on existing ideas of collective action in places where community mobilisation was weakened or lost. Across all three countries, community members described sclr as a reminder of “how they used to work together” (cómo se hacía antes) to address shared challenges. This thus contributed to rebuilding trust, strengthening social cohesion and creating shared spaces for decision-making and problem solving.

Community contribution

The mobilisation of local contributions was one of the strongest and most consistent expressions of mutual aid across all sclr supported initiatives. It constituted a defining element of the sclr implementation, shaping both outcomes of each initiative and community ownership. Local contributions that communities voluntarily mobilised included:

- manual labour: construction, transportation of materials, installation of material and infrastructure, agricultural work, painting of structures
- materials: from small items such as lemons, panela and snacks to major contributions like cement bags, timber, tools and volunteer labour hours
- knowledge and skills: weaving, technical and engineering skills, agroecology, leadership, environmental stewardship, cultural preservation
- institutional alliances: contributions from mayor's offices, scientific associations, local networks, churches, youth groups and universities.

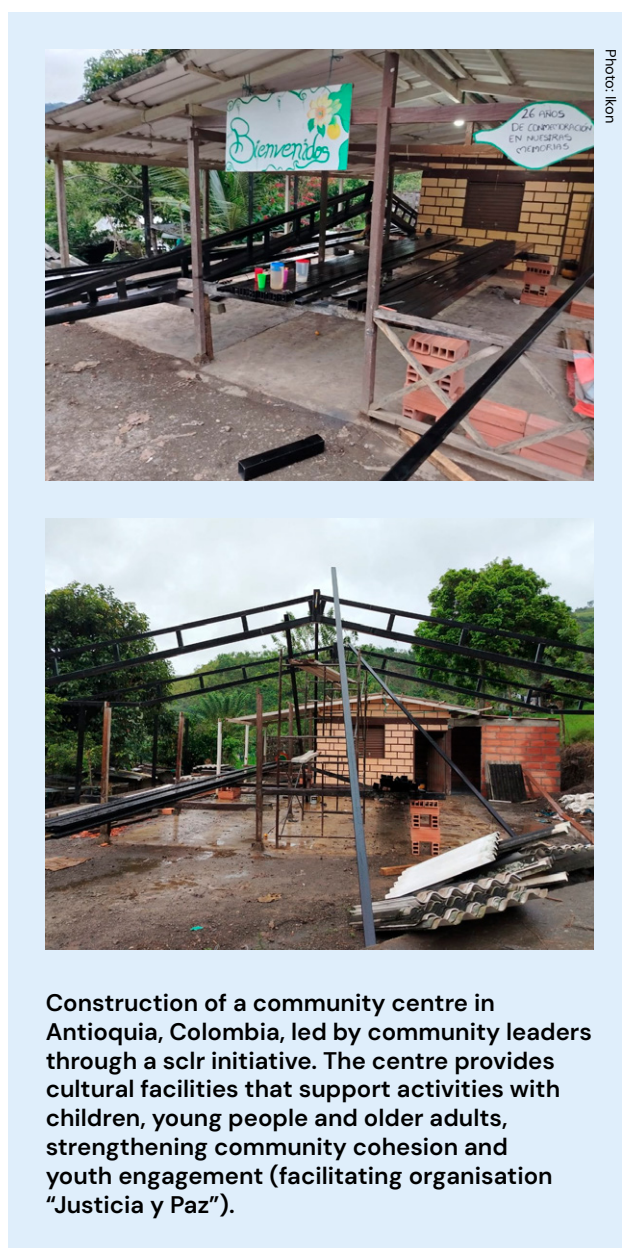
Material and in-kind contributions, such as construction materials, food items and equipment, were consistently recorded and later on presented to the community, reinforcing transparency and strengthening communal valuation of these efforts. Voluntary labour represented a major share of community investment, often doubling or tripling the value of the original financial allocation the community self-help group had received for the initiative. This could be observed in various communities where construction projects relied heavily on both skilled and unskilled labour.

Communities also mobilised financial resources through fundraising events and household contributions. In several cases, community contributions accounted for 25–50 % of the total initiative value, exceeding organisational expectations and demonstrating strong community commitment. In one community on the north coast of Colombia, a community group led by young women organised a sports event, during which they held a fair where they sold the products they had produced during an initiative. The young women explained to the facilitator:

“We understand that you as an organisation have lots of pressure to secure funding for sclr. With this money, we ourselves will invest it in another cycle of sclr to give opportunity to new women”.

Nathalia, Project coordinator, RNM, Colombia

However, for one planned initiative in Honduras, the costs of the sclr initiative exceeded the initial estimates made by the community group and available resources proved insufficient. Although construction began, the funds were ultimately redirected to other initiatives, as the cost of completing the highway was too high. Instead, the process shifted toward advocacy efforts targeting public and private stakeholders, which eventually led to the highway being financed through a combination of public and private resources. While the highway was not completed as part of the sclr supported initiatives, it would not have been built without this community-led process, thus further demonstrating the importance of collective action.



In Colombia, local contributions enabled climate and protection initiatives, sustainable farming initiatives, vocational training workshops, community and cultural centres to expand far beyond their original budgets. In one community in Casanare, one of the sclr supported initiatives was to build a simple community centre consisting of four walls and a cover to serve as a roof. However, when the community saw the work that was being done, community members started to contribute material, technical skills, labour and refreshments for all volunteers. The result was a fully constructed community house, completed

with both interior and exterior painting, a garden, a pathway, a bathroom with a sink, a fence and electrical installations. The facility will serve as a hub for a wide range of community activities, including meetings, information sessions and livelihood trainings. Similarly, in Antioquia, another community centre was constructed through a sclr supported initiative, which also, due to contributions from the community, the community group were able to build a larger community centre which included child friendly spaces.

In Guatemala, displaced families carried roofing materials through mountainous terrain, installed solar panels together with technicians and organised repairs to the community school, thus demonstrating deep commitment despite the hardships of recent displacement.

“They would walk up and down the mountain carrying all the material on their back as the path was not big enough to use any transportation”. (Quote from one of the community facilitators, Miriam Bac, Programme coordinator, ASECSA, Guatemala).

In Honduras, community groups proudly recorded every contribution in their accounting books, emphasising that even the smallest contributions should be valued and viewing each contribution as a symbol of collective ownership. Various of the women’s groups explained that this experience transformed their position within the community and helped them realise that, by working together and by supporting each other, they were capable of achieving far more than they had ever imagined. As one woman described it:

“The only thing I regret with the sclr process is that we didn’t have the courage to dream even bigger when we started”.

A woman from one of the community groups from the Garifonas community, FMPV, Honduras

Organisation Red COMAL in Honduras mentioned that the microgrants that they supported the community groups with often only covered half of the costs of the community initiatives. The communities then joined forces and contributed

their own resources and skills to be able to complete the initiatives. The communities organised campaigns with the aim of collecting funds from both the community and the local committees. “Beyond the financial aspect, we believe that the greatest impact of the approach lies at the community organisational level. These practices strengthen community cohesion, promote self-management and consolidate local ownership of the processes, which even surpasses our initial expectations” (Jorge Alberto Dias, Programme coordinator, Red COMAL, Honduras).

Beyond the quantifiable contributions, the process helped communities recognise the economic value of their own labour and resources; a factor which is often overlooked by traditional externally led aid programmes.



Photo: Ikon



Along the Jiguamiandó River Basin in Chocó, Afro-descendant families built fishponds as part of a sclr initiative that strengthened community organisation, supported environmental protection and fostered peaceful alternatives to illicit crop expansion (CIJYP, Colombia).

Accountability as a collective practice

Accountability practices within the sclr approach are characterised by transparent, participatory and community centered mechanisms, building on measures already in place in communities. These included self-formed monitoring committees in some communities in Colombia, where members were selected in open assemblies with the role to oversee finances, procurement and progress tracking, often applying standards stricter than those of NGOs or donors. Selection committees with the role of selecting the community initiatives were also established across most of the communities.

Communities also organised public assemblies where the community groups presented financial reports, documented local contributions and explained decision-making processes. These sessions were made accessible to all community members and often included a review of invoices, receipts, quotations and associated documentation.

“We presented every expense, every local contribution and every action we had done to the assembly so the community could trace each peso we had received. We also brought our ledger book to show them how we had recorded it all.” (One of the female community group leaders in Colombia, IELCO).

In some communities, these spaces also served as a space to discuss community priorities and opportunities before decisions were taken on which community initiative and / or mutual aid initiatives would receive financial support.

Local accountability and transparency measures, as shared by CIJYP, CEDH and Las Hormigas, included:

- leaving accounting books in public spaces, such as schools to ensure open access, transparency and foster long-term trust
- using social media platforms, including Facebook pages, to document and share the progress of their initiatives
- recorded videos capturing each stage of the process, which were later shown during community assemblies, further promoting shared learning and community pride
- a community festival at the conclusion of the sclr process to share the results across the communities
- handmade posters displaying full financial information of the initiatives.

To support the accountability practices and mechanisms at the community-level, the sclr approach also drove important changes within some of the organisations facilitating sclr. This included revised internal policies and administrative routines to better support community-led processes. Some organisations such as ASECSA in Guatemala, Red Nacional de Mujeres and IELCO in Colombia adapted their procedures, increasing flexibility and finding new ways to share decision-making with communities. ASECSA and Red Nacional de Mujeres furthermore developed new policies that better support the use of microgrants and diversify transfer modalities, ensuring that administrative systems aligned with the principles of sclr rather than hindering

Photo: Rania Salameh/Ikon



The community garden initiative makes use of the terraces of people's homes to grow plants. As the neighbourhoods in Cali, Colombia, is steep and densely populated, there is no shared community space available to accommodate all the crops (DIPAZ, Colombia).

them. This shift required organisations to unlearn traditional hierarchical project approaches and instead embrace accompaniment, adaptability and meaningful power-sharing.

All these practices strengthened social trust, enhanced emergent leadership legitimacy and supported capacity development, especially among women, youth and groups historically excluded from formal leadership roles. Communities consistently emphasised that accountability under sclr was not solely a financial exercise but a collective reflection on contributions, achievements and responsibilities. In the department of Casanare, in Colombia, one women-led community group described how, by bringing the wider community together to review the sclr implementation, discuss spending and contributions, view photos of the implementation stages, the community and community group jointly created a transparent and inclusive space for sharing and accountability. This proved to be an effective way to strengthen shared understanding and collective ownership of the initiative. As one of the women explained “we created a presentation where we went through the whole process and showed photos and we asked everyone to ask questions and to comment and we all talked even though we had never spoken in public and such large groups before” (female community group leader, Casanare, Colombia).

Challenges related to accountability

Accountability within sclr was transformative but not without its obstacles. One major challenge was the rigidity of a couple of facilitating organisations’ financial systems, which clashed with the adaptive, community-driven nature of sclr. Furthermore, some organisations struggled to adapt procurement procedures, transfer methods, or documentation requirements, resulting in delays and frustration for both staff and community groups. Despite these challenges, all but one organisation was able to adapt its financial structure around the sclr approach.

Communities themselves also faced challenges in managing financial documentation. Many groups had limited experience with procurement procedures, collecting multiple quotations and maintaining bookkeeping records, which made it difficult to meet even basic accounta-

bility requirements without additional support. However, once these challenges were raised, they were in most cases effectively addressed through demand-led trainings in simple book-keeping and financial management.

Communities also experienced high pressure to manage funds flawlessly, often holding themselves to stricter standards than donors. This sense of responsibility sometimes generated anxiety or slowed decision-making, as community members feared making mistakes that could jeopardise future support.

In a few communities, some existing leaders attempted to position themselves as the primary actors behind initiatives, overshadowing the work of women’s groups or committees. This required active intervention by community facilitators to protect newly emerging leadership and avoid reinforcing harmful local power dynamics.



Photo: Iken

Community-led improvement of a cocoa plantation in Chocó, Colombia, empowering local families and enabling continued sports and environmental education activities with children and young people to support biodiversity conservation (CIJYP, Colombia).

From practice to policy: how sclr changed the way organisations work

This section explores how the sclr pilot led to significant organisational changes among the facilitating organisations. The analysis highlights three interconnected areas of transformation identified across partners:

- (1) a shift in organisational roles, from implementers to facilitators and enablers of community-led response;
- (2) institutional and structural changes, including updates to internal policies, stronger cross departmental coordination and new administrative practices; and
- (3) the development of a culture of mutual learning and innovation.

The following sub-sections examine each of these areas in more detail.

Transformation of organisational roles: from implementers to enablers

Several sclr facilitating organisations described a significant shift in how they understand their role in relation to communities. Many noted a move away from centralised, service-delivery, or primarily administrative approaches toward more localised and participatory ways of working, grounded in facilitation, technical support and co-design with communities.

Organisations such as RNM in Colombia highlight that the process enabled them to align more closely with rights-based, participatory and territorial approaches, thereby increasing their legitimacy; being truly seen as a facilitating organisation.” This reconfiguration of their role not only increased trust with local actors but also strengthened horizontal relationships where, “it is now the communities and women’s organisations that lead and propose.” (Nathalia, Project coordinator, RNM, Colombia).

This shift also required unlearning previous engagement approaches and changing the way organisations relate to and support communities.



Project facilitators from Colombia, Honduras, and Guatemala present a community mapping exercise during a workshop on the supporting community-led response (sclr) approach.

IELCO in Colombia, for example, highlights that the sclr approach “was quite helpful in helping us unlearn a little” (Johana Morales, Programme coordinator, IELCO, Colombia) recognises that communities bring valuable knowledge and strategies that can reshape organisational practice. After facilitating sclr in an area of Casanare, Colombia, where more traditional humanitarian activities were simultaneously implemented, IELCO concluded that these operations also needed to change. They recognised that a top-down approach was no longer appropriate and that they needed to continue working in a bottom-up, community-driven way, similar to how they worked with sclr.

Furthermore, organisations such as Red COMAL in Honduras demonstrate how sclr challenges the traditional structure of administrative control and management, creating space for processes that put communities and local actors at the centre, strengthen local capacities and foster new ways of facilitating local initiatives.

Institutional and structural changes to support community leadership

The sclr approach prompted important changes within facilitating organisations, leading to adjustments in internal structures, policies and ways of working. Several organisations described how the experience encouraged them to introduce new procedures, review existing policies and strengthen coordination between technical, financial, administrative and communications teams. These changes were driven by the need to better align internal systems with more flexible, community-led approaches.

Multiple organisations shared concrete examples of how engaging with sclr led to meaningful shifts in both formal policy frameworks and everyday practice. In Colombia, RNM explained how participation in sclr prompted revisions to parts of their Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs), as well as updates to financial policies and guidelines prompting a new policy on the transfer of

resources to community groups. These revisions were introduced to better reflect sclr principles and, crucially, to accommodate different models of community cash grant transfers. As a result, a more transparent and robust financial framework was developed, which is now available to be shared with other donors – demonstrating that community-led approaches can be implemented and financially supported in a low-risk and accountable manner.

In Guatemala, ASECSA also revised several internal policy documents reflecting a shift toward more flexible, community-driven decision-making processes and a stronger emphasis on accountability to communities.

Meanwhile, IELCO in Casanare, Colombia emphasised sclr reshaped how Programmes are designed and planned, how the organisation communicates with communities and partners and how so-called “conventional interventions” are carried out.

Photo: IELCO/Icon



A sclr initiative in Paz de Ariporo, Colombia. What began as a plan to build a simple community house evolved into a fully completed space with a garden, bathroom and painted finish, made possible through strong community contributions of materials, labour, paint and technical skills.

"This shift was described as transformative to the extent that returning to 'old ways of working' was no longer seen as possible".

Johana Morales, Programme coordinator,
IELCO, Colombia

Beyond policy revision, sclr also required greater and more active involvement from administrative and accounting teams, particularly at implementation level. This led to what several organisations described as an unusual but transformative change in practice. As one partner reflected: "Now they had to go on field trips, deliver training and explain how to draw up a budget or a narrative financial report" (Noemí, FMPV, Honduras). Departments traditionally focused on office-based tasks engaged directly with women and communities, gaining a deeper understanding of local realities while promoting greater transparency and shared ownership of financial processes.

Together, these experiences show that sclr has not only influenced how programmes are implemented but has also driven deeper organisational and structural change. By reshaping mindsets and internal processes, strengthening cross-departmental collaboration and institutionalising more flexible and decentralised mechanisms, sclr has helped embed practices that place community leadership and agency at the centre of crises response in these contexts.

A culture of mutual learning and innovation

Several sclr facilitating organisations described how the approach contributed to the emergence of a more open and adaptive organisational culture, one that values experimentation, continuous feedback and learning alongside communities. The process encouraged a logic of ongoing adaptation, where emergent learning informed decisions, adjustments and new responses throughout implementation.

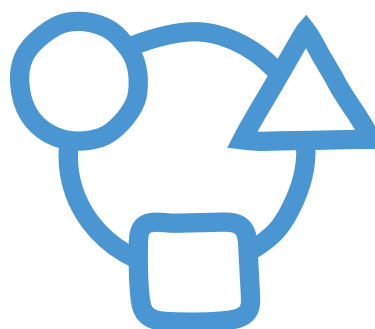
Sclr created space to learn by doing, to test new approaches and to accept uncertainty and risk as part of the process. As Noemí Dubon, Programme coordinator, FMPV, in Honduras

reflected, "Failure can help us build new things". This marked a shift away from more traditional approaches, where initiatives are expected to generate immediate results and where failure is often seen as unacceptable.

For FMPV, working with community microgrants was entirely new and initially accompanied by a high level of fear, both within the organisation and regarding community groups' ability to deliver. Through engagement with sclr, this mindset began to shift, creating space to experiment, adapt and learn. Control and decision-making power were progressively loosened and replaced by greater trust in community groups. When challenges emerged, rather than stepping in to correct the process, community groups were encouraged to work together to identify solutions, test ideas, reflect on outcomes and adapt when something did not work as planned.

This shift in all the above was made possible due to the core principles of sclr. In particular, the emphasis on innovation and having a safe space to test and learn enabled both the organisation and communities to move beyond fear of failure and toward adaptive, community-led problem-solving and learning.

Similar mindset shifts and practices were mentioned across all local actors in Colombia, Honduras and Guatemala, illustrating how the sclr approach has consistently supported organisations in rethinking control, risk and learning in favour of trust and community leadership.





RNM worked with female youth-led sclr groups that, despite challenging contexts, achieved remarkable community impact, showing that enabling organisations that recognise local agency can drive transformative change (RNM, Colombia).

Conclusion

Across Colombia, Guatemala and Honduras, the sclr pilot project demonstrates that when communities are recognised and supported as leaders of their own mutual aid initiatives and responders to crises, they mobilise substantial collective capacity to address complex and protracted crises. Beyond delivering locally relevant initiatives, the approach catalysed broader transformations in how communities organise, collaborate and engage with both internal and external actors. Mutual aid and flexible microgrants, combined with quality accompaniment and facilitation played a central role in rebuilding trust, strengthening social cohesion and reviving collective practices. Significant contributions of local resources expanded the scale and sustainability of initiatives, reinforcing community ownership and demonstrating the value of investing in locally-led processes.

This cycle of sclr also revealed important shifts in power dynamics. Women, youth and other marginalised groups increasingly assumed leadership roles, enhancing participation and contributing to improved agency, dignity and psychosocial wellbeing. However, these changes also introduced new pressures and, in certain contexts, resistance, highlighting the need for continued facilitation, attention to local power relations and targeted support for emerging leaders. These pressures will likely ease with time. Experience

shows it is natural for any social changes to meet resistance, until they become the new norm. For facilitating organisations, the sclr approach required and inspired a transition from direct implementation to enabling roles. This shift called for more flexible systems, shared decision-making and a stronger emphasis on learning and adaptation. Learning from this practice thus far already suggests that meaningful community-led approaches depend not only on funding modalities but also on organisational transformation.

Overall, the learning from sclr practice by 11 Latin American actors indicates that the sclr approach offers a practical, dignified and effective means of bridging humanitarian, development and peacebuilding efforts. By strengthening local agency and systems, it supports more integrated, sustainable and contextually grounded responses.

"The only thing I regret with the sclr process is that we didn't have the courage to dream even bigger when we started".

A woman from one of the community groups from the Garifonas community, FMPV, Honduras

Participating organisations in Colombia, Honduras and Guatemala that facilitated the sclr approach through the Act Church of Sweden supported pilot project and contributed to the development of this learning paper:



Act Church of Sweden
Mailing address: 751 70 Uppsala, Sweden
Phone: +46 10 181 93 00
Email: givarservice@svenskakyrkan.se
Swish: 900 1223
PG: 90 01 22-3
BG: 900-1223
svenskakyrkan.se/act/en