

Rethinking Aid from the Ground Up: Bottom-Up Approaches to Development Assistance

University of Pittsburgh

December 4–5, 2025

The Center for Governance and Markets at the University of Pittsburgh invites paper submissions for a two-day research workshop focused on reimagining international development assistance through bottom-up approaches. The recent elimination of the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) has created a unique opportunity to rethink how aid is conceptualized, structured, and delivered. This moment of disruption calls for a reassessment of development models that prioritize community agency, human dignity, and sustainable local empowerment.

Although nearly all donors emphasize the importance of “locally driven” or “community-driven” development, there is a persistent gap between rhetoric and reality. This workshop seeks to open the black box of such interventions—to investigate the extent to which human agency is truly driving development agendas, rather than donor priorities or externally imposed frameworks.

Rather than reinforcing dependency through top-down interventions, this workshop will highlight efforts that engage communities as active agents in their own development. We aim to identify strategies and practices that shift power and resources closer to the ground—where development happens. We welcome contributions that explore how external assistance can support, rather than supplant, local initiative and innovation.

Workshop Themes

We invite theoretically informed and empirically grounded research papers that address one or more of the following themes:

- **Community-Led Development:** What institutional, cultural, or financial factors enable or inhibit community control over aid resources? How do community-led approaches differ from donor-driven models in design, implementation, and outcome?
- **Post-USAID and the Changing Aid Landscape:** With the end of USAID and shifting global influence, how are governments, NGOs, and private actors responding? What new institutions or arrangements are emerging to fill the vacuum?
- **Tools and Technologies for Local Empowerment:** How are innovations such as fintech platforms, direct cash transfers, and social enterprises enabling more accountable, decentralized aid? What safeguards are needed to ensure these tools promote empowerment rather than exploitation?
- **Accountability and Governance:** What mechanisms exist—or need to be developed—to ensure local actors have oversight and voice in aid delivery? How do bottom-up models create accountability without imposing burdensome reporting requirements?

- **Efficiency vs. Legitimacy:** What trade-offs arise between speed, scale, and legitimacy? Can bottom-up approaches scale effectively, and how do they compare in terms of cost and impact?
- **Beneficiary Perspectives and Success Metrics:** How do aid recipients define and evaluate success? What do standard donor metrics miss, and how can bottom-up evaluations be designed to reflect community priorities and values?
- **Comparative and Cross-Regional Insights:** What lessons can be drawn from successful bottom-up models across diverse cultural and institutional contexts? Are there generalizable principles or highly context-specific dynamics?

Who Should Submit?

We welcome submissions from scholars across disciplines—including political science, public policy, economics, sociology, anthropology, and development studies—as well as from experienced practitioners and policy professionals. We especially encourage early-career scholars and doctoral students to apply. Interdisciplinary approaches and methodological diversity are welcome.

Submission Guidelines

Please submit an abstract of no more than **300 words** describing the argument of the paper along with a brief bio by **September 29, 2025**. Full draft papers (**5,000–8,000 words**) are due by **November 21, 2025** to allow for pre-circulation among participants.

Submissions should be sent via email to cgm@pitt.edu with the subject line "Bottom-Up Development Workshop Submission."

Workshop Format and Logistics

The workshop will be held in-person at the University of Pittsburgh. It will consist of thematic panels, plenary discussions, and interactive sessions designed to foster critical reflection and collaboration. Papers will be assigned discussants and each session will allow time for in-depth feedback and group discussion.

All participants will have their travel and accommodation expenses covered by the organizers.

We are also exploring the possibility of producing a collective academic volume or special journal issue that synthesizes the findings from the workshop under the theme of bottom-up development.

Key Dates

- Abstract and bio submission deadline: **September 29, 2025**
- Paper submission deadline: **November 21, 2025**
- Workshop dates: **December 4–5, 2025**