

Responsible Recalibration

A practical approach to localisation within the realities of an existing project

The idea

Every project rests on assumptions: about what people need, how a context works, who can participate, how change will happen and what responsible action requires. These assumptions are unavoidable. They allow organisations to design programmes, allocate resources and act. Many are carefully considered and initially well founded.

But assumptions can be incomplete. Circumstances can change. Organisational intentions and lived experience can begin to drift apart. A project may continue delivering its planned activities while becoming less aligned with the people and context it is intended to serve.

Responsible Recalibration provides a structured way to respond. It makes the assumptions behind a project visible, tests them against community perspectives and local knowledge, and adjusts the project where those assumptions do not hold.

Core proposition

Responsible Recalibration is a practical approach to localisation within the realities of an existing project. It creates a credible route for community and local insights to influence work that is already designed or underway.

An honest starting point

Responsible Recalibration does not begin with a blank page. It begins with an existing project and a provisional belief that the project offers something useful, or that at least part of its intended value is worth preserving.

That starting point introduces a bias. The organisation already has a mandate, objectives, funding commitments, responsibilities and a view of the contribution it intends to make. The approach cannot remove that framing and should not pretend to do so. It offers a practical, if necessarily imperfect, way for local knowledge and lived experience to influence work that already exists.

The four movements

The approach moves from organisational assumptions to local insight, practical adjustment and verification. Each movement is necessary if listening is to influence real decisions.

1 Identify the assumptions

The organisation makes explicit what the project currently takes for granted: what people need or value, how they experience the issue, who can participate, which institutions carry trust and how change is expected to happen.

Useful questions include:

- What are we assuming, and what are we treating as fixed?
- Which parts of the project logic depend on these assumptions?
- What feels misaligned, unexpectedly difficult or insufficiently tested?

2 Test the assumptions locally

The organisation engages people who understand or experience the consequences of the project. Depending on the context, this may include community members, local organisations, frontline staff, implementing partners, people facing barriers to participation and people who have quietly disengaged.

Testing considers both what needs correction and what should be preserved. It asks what is useful, what is misaligned, what outsiders may be missing, who is not benefiting and which elements support fairness, confidence or trust. Communities are not homogeneous, so diverse perspectives and differences matter.

3 Recalibrate the project

The organisation interprets what it has heard and decides what should remain, what should change and why. Recalibration may affect objectives, eligibility criteria, activities, language, timing, delivery methods, partner roles, participation, accountability, data practices or the project's underlying logic.

Recalibration does not mean changing everything whenever perspectives differ. It means making a reasoned and transparent choice, while being honest about mandate, funding, legal or operational constraints. Local insights may confirm much of the original approach, support adjustment within existing boundaries or reveal a more fundamental problem that requires reconsideration.

4 Verify the proposed recalibration

Before changes are finalised, the organisation returns to the people whose insights informed its understanding. It explains what it heard, what it believes those insights mean, what it proposes to preserve or change, and which constraints affect the response.

People are invited to correct misunderstandings, identify what remains missing and consider whether the proposed adjustment addresses the issue they raised. This is more than communicating the outcome of a consultation. It gives people an opportunity to verify the organisation's interpretation before that interpretation becomes action.

What makes the approach different

Responsible Recalibration treats local engagement as part of project decision-making rather than as a separate consultation exercise. The organisation begins by naming its own assumptions, remains open to preserving as well as changing elements of the project, and returns to verify its proposed response.

The verification stage closes the loop. It makes misunderstandings visible and demonstrates whether participation had consequences. This does not guarantee trust, which also depends on history, power, behaviour and what happens afterwards. But when people can recognise their insights in a response and see that an organisation is willing to be corrected, the basis for trust can grow.

When it may be useful

- A project is delivering outputs but its relevance or effects are uncertain.
- Implementation is struggling for reasons that existing reporting does not explain.
- The context has changed since the project was designed.
- Participation or localisation commitments have become largely procedural.
- Community feedback challenges the project's working assumptions.
- Intended users are not participating or are quietly disengaging.
- An organisation needs to adapt without losing what remains valuable.

Possible outputs

- A concise map of the assumptions underpinning the project.
- A synthesis of community and local insights, including differences and uncertainties.
- A clear account of what should be preserved, adjusted or reconsidered.
- A proposed recalibration, tested and refined through community verification.
- Practical changes to project design, delivery, relationships or accountability.

Limits

Responsible Recalibration does not automatically make a project locally led, eliminate unequal power, remove institutional constraints or guarantee agreement, trust or success. Its contribution is more practical and modest: it helps organisations test whether the assumptions behind an existing project hold in context, act on what they learn and verify that their proposed response reflects what people intended to communicate.

Central question

Which assumptions behind this project hold in the community's lived reality, which do not, and how should the project be responsibly recalibrated in response?