



Empowering Local Expertise: How Local Consultants Deliver Long-Term Value for the Country

Abdulla Naushad, President, ACE Maldives

In today's interconnected world, Maldives as other developing countries are constantly faced with the question of whether to rely on foreign expertise or to invest in local knowledge and capacity. While international consultants often bring valuable perspectives and specialized skills, the long-term success of any nation depends heavily on empowering local consultants. These professionals not only understand the unique context of Maldives but also play a vital role in retaining knowledge, building capacity, and ensuring that financial benefits circulate within the local economy.

This article explores how local consultants create sustainable value that extends well beyond the immediate project outcomes, and why government, development partners, and private enterprises should prioritize local expertise in their planning and execution.

The Case for Local Consultants

Consulting services are critical in driving change, implementing projects, and shaping national development strategies. Traditionally, many countries, especially in the Global South, have relied on international consultants to fill gaps in technical knowledge and management expertise. While this has occasionally produced short-term gains, it often comes with hidden costs: knowledge drain, dependency, and financial outflow.

Local consultants, by contrast, offer a pathway to self-reliance, resilience, and **sustainable growth**. They bring contextual understanding that cannot be taught in textbooks or imported through temporary contracts. More importantly, they stay in the country long after the project ends, ensuring continuity and cumulative impact.

Knowledge Retention: Keeping Expertise Within Borders

One of the greatest risks of relying too heavily on external consultants is the **loss of knowledge** once the project concludes. International experts frequently fly in for short assignments, transfer limited skills, and then leave, taking with them the valuable insights they developed via the assignment they just completed. As a result, Maldives often finds itself dependent on repeat engagements, with little internal learning carried forward.

Local consultants solve this problem by anchoring expertise within the country. Every project they work on contributes to a national pool of institutional memory. Their understanding of policies, regulatory environments, cultural sensitivities, and historical lessons learned is not exported, it remains embedded in local practice.

For example, a local consultant engaged in infrastructure planning may build a knowledge base of challenges specific to the region's climate, soil conditions, and community expectations. Over time, this knowledge accumulates and becomes a critical asset for future projects, ensuring that mistakes are not repeated and innovations are adapted to local realities.

Knowledge retention also strengthens government institutions. When local consultants support ministries, municipalities, or state enterprises, they often transfer skills directly to public servants. Unlike transient foreign advisors, they are more likely to remain accessible for follow-up, mentoring, or subsequent collaborations. This continuity of expertise contributes to stronger institutions and long-term policy coherence.

Development of Local Capacity: Building Skills for the Future

Beyond retaining knowledge, local consultants are instrumental in **developing** human capacity. Every project offers opportunities for learning, whether through exposure to new technologies, management practices, or global best standards. When these opportunities are given to local professionals, the benefits ripple across the economy.

1. Skills Transfer and Specialization

By taking the lead in consulting roles, local experts gain exposure to cutting-edge methodologies and innovative approaches. Over time, this leads to specialization in areas that are most relevant to national development priorities, whether in engineering, information technology, public health, or environmental sustainability.

2. Professional Networks

Local consultants strengthen professional ecosystems within the country. They mentor junior colleagues, collaborate with universities, and contribute to knowledge-sharing platforms. This network effect multiplies the impact of individual expertise, creating a vibrant community of practice.

3. Reducing Dependence on Foreign Expertise

Perhaps most importantly, capacity development reduces the reliance on costly external assistance. A country that invests in its consultants today is better positioned to handle complex challenges tomorrow, whether in responding to climate change, managing infrastructure growth, or navigating economic reform.

Retaining Financial Benefits Within the Local Economy

Another significant advantage of engaging local consultants is financial sustainability. When we hire international firms, a large portion of the consulting fees often flows out of the local economy, covering foreign salaries, international overheads, and global profit margins.

In contrast, local consultants recycle income back into the **domestic economy**. Their earnings are spent on local goods, services, and investments, creating a multiplier effect that benefits small businesses and households. This retention of financial benefits supports job creation, strengthens tax revenues, and fuels broader economic development.

Moreover, nurturing a competitive local consulting industry can position the country as a regional knowledge hub. Once developed, local consultants can export their services to neighboring countries, bringing in foreign exchange and enhancing national prestige. For instance, countries like India and South Africa have leveraged their consulting sectors not only to serve domestic needs but also to become leading exporters of professional services across Africa and Asia.

The Long-Term Value: Beyond Projects

The true impact of empowering local expertise lies in its long-term value creation. While individual projects may last months or years, the benefits of investing in local consultants extend across generations.

- **Resilience:** Countries with strong local consulting capacity are better equipped to respond to crises such as natural disasters, pandemics, or economic shocks without waiting for foreign assistance.
- **Policy Continuity:** Local experts ensure that reforms and development strategies are grounded in domestic realities, leading to policies that are politically feasible and socially acceptable.
- **National Pride and Ownership:** Empowering local consultants reinforces a sense of national self-reliance. Citizens and governments alike take greater pride in solutions crafted by their own professionals.

Striking the Right Balance: Collaboration, Not Exclusion

It is important to note that empowering local consultants does not mean excluding international expertise altogether. There will always be situations where specialized knowledge from abroad is necessary, particularly in highly technical or emerging fields. However, the engagement of international consultants should be structured to complement and strengthen local capacity, **not replace it**.

This requires deliberate policies:

- Mandating partnerships between international firms and local consultants.
- Prioritizing knowledge transfer as a key deliverable in all foreign contracts.
- Creating platforms for collaboration and co-creation.

By striking this balance, countries can benefit from global insights while ensuring that local expertise remains at the core of development efforts.

Conclusion

Empowering local consultants is not just a matter of preference, it is a strategic investment in national development. By retaining knowledge, building capacity, and keeping financial benefits within the local economy, countries lay the foundation for self-reliance and long-term prosperity.

In an era where sustainability and resilience are more important than ever, the value of local expertise cannot be overstated. Government, donors, and private organizations should recognize that every rufiyaa spent on local consultants multiplies in impact, strengthening not only the individuals and firms involved but the entire national fabric.

Ultimately, the path to lasting development lies not in dependency but in empowerment. By trusting and investing in local consultants, countries ensure that their progress is built on a foundation of knowledge, capacity, and financial strength that endures for generations to come.