

SUPPORTING MUTUAL AID: WHAT THE EVIDENCE TELLS US

The international humanitarian system is under severe strain, facing politically driven funding cuts amid growing global needs and uncertainty about its future direction. Calls for 'resetting' and 'prioritising' abound, but their practical meaning remains unclear, raising questions about whether this moment could enable deeper, people-centred reforms. Localisation has resurfaced as a proposed solution – seen by some as a cost-efficient way to meet escalating needs by engaging local actors during resource constraints. However, progress has been slow. Direct funding to local actors has stagnated and reforms have often replicated centralised, compliance-heavy models at national levels, reinforcing international control.

Against this backdrop, there is growing interest in connecting with the informal systems and networks through which communities have always supported one another in times of crisis, often without interference from the international humanitarian system. **What if, instead of 'localising' by replicating approaches, the international system connected more deliberately with locally led, organic and informal systems?** Experience shows that communities are their own first, last and often most effective responders – suggesting that engaging with these existing efforts could unlock more genuine and transformative change.

Mutual aid lies at the heart of locally led responses. It encompasses the self-forming, self-organised and voluntary actions of individuals, families and communities who support one another during crises. These informal efforts may arise spontaneously, or they may emerge in response to a crisis. They can also take the form of more structured and traditional systems of mutual support. Rooted in local networks and resources, such initiatives have existed for generations, but they remain largely unrecognised and unsupported by the international humanitarian system.

This begs the question: **What happens when international resources are used to support mutual aid efforts, and what can be learned from these experiences?**

Two dimensions frame this inquiry:

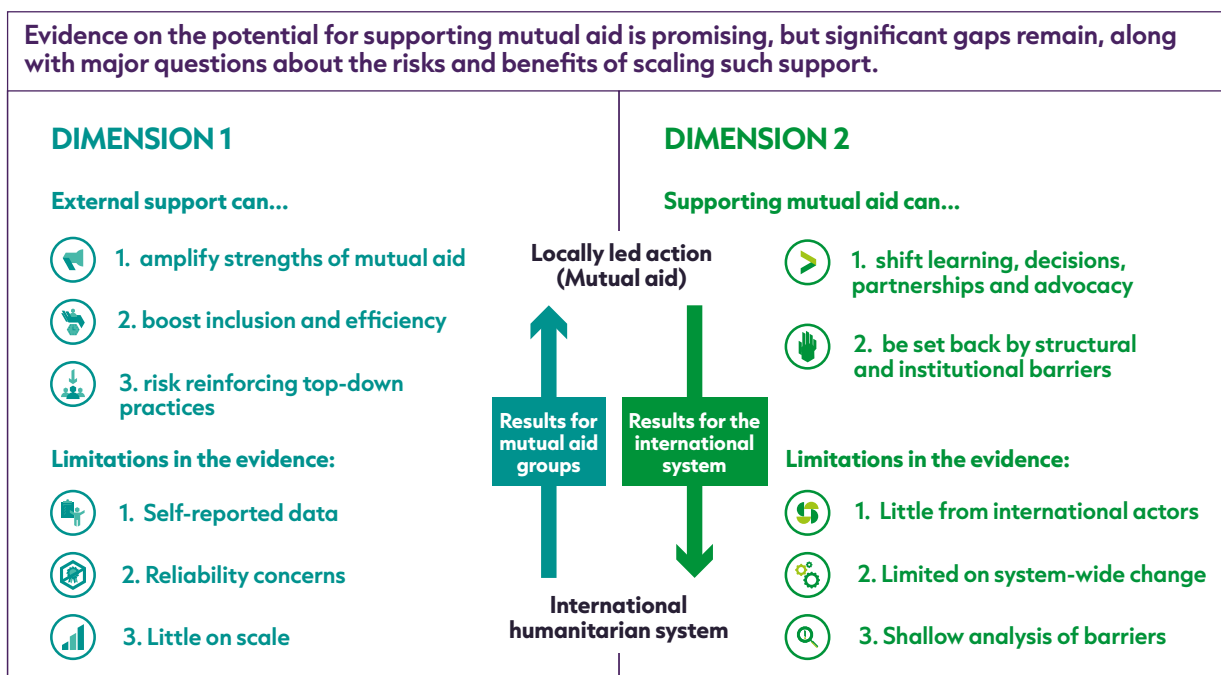
- **Dimension 1** looks at whether external support to mutual aid helps or hinders the ability to meet the needs of at-risk populations. This speaks to the prioritisation challenge: can supporting mutual aid make assistance more responsive, efficient and grounded? **The research focuses on the results experienced by mutual aid groups receiving support.**
- **Dimension 2** explores whether external support from INGOs, donors and other actors drives meaningful changes in the systems and practices of the international humanitarian sector. Because mutual aid operates through different logics and decision-making, effective support may require fundamental system shifts. **The research examines the changes experienced by external actors providing support.**

In this first phase of research we have mapped what is known, identified evidence gaps and outlined directions for future enquiry. To do this, we reviewed all existing evidence we could identify on learnings, changes and outcomes from international support to mutual aid efforts. Based on early conversations, we assumed documentation would be limited and mostly anecdotal. However, using a targeted approach, we also accessed internal and non-traditional resources at local and national levels. Our analysis covered over 200 documents, including learning briefs, evaluations, case studies and reports spanning 25 countries.

This synthesis reviews all forms of support to mutual aid, but most findings relate to supporting community-led responses (sclr). Sclr is a structured approach for channelling international funding to strengthen mutual aid in humanitarian contexts. It emphasises local ownership, flexibility and complementarity with traditional aid. In practice, donors work with local facilitators (national and local NGOs) to co-design support, to identify existing community-led initiatives and to provide flexible resources. This includes microgrants, networking and demand-led capacity strengthening to reinforce resilience while avoiding dependency. Most evidence comes from these facilitators and is primarily internal.

Our systematic review of this underexplored segment of the literature shows wide-ranging learning, change and immediate outcomes resulting from the connection between the international system and mutual aid efforts. The evidence is promising, but there are significant gaps in its strength that need to be addressed.

KEY FINDINGS



DIMENSION 1: WHAT DOES THE EVIDENCE SHOW ABOUT THE RESULTS EXPERIENCED BY MUTUAL AID GROUPS BECAUSE OF EXTERNAL SUPPORT?

- **External support can amplify the core strengths of mutual aid.** The evidence shows that external support enhances the resilience, sustainability, quality and relevance of responses provided by mutual aid groups. Mutual aid is inherently strong in these areas, but these values are amplified through the close provision of flexible, demand-led¹ and power-sharing support.
- **Results experienced by mutual aid groups challenge common assumptions about funding community-based structures.** Findings suggest that supporting mutual aid groups can enhance inclusion, cost-efficiency and accountability. This contradicts long-held assumptions about the risks of supporting community-led initiatives or informal structures.
- **External support risks replicating top-down practices.** Few negative outcomes or unintended consequences have been documented, potentially due to confirmation bias². But challenges have arisen when conventional top-down systems have hindered flexibility, become supply-driven and failed to share power.

Limitations in the evidence:

- **Self-reported data dominates.** Most documentation is from local facilitators, which is promising for locally led learning. But the predominance of self-reported and overwhelmingly positive data raises concerns about bias. More independent evaluations are needed, alongside openness to reporting unintended effects as part of a 'safe-to-fail' culture.
- **The nature of the evidence raises concerns about reliability.** Many documents use evaluation language to describe impacts, but the basis for those conclusions is often unclear. Much evidence reflects valuable local insights, but there is wide variation in the ways that learning is captured and communicated. This makes it difficult to assess attribution or consistency across contexts. Local facilitators should be supported in how they document and share learning in ways that are both useful and community-led.
- **Scant evidence reflects on the impacts and risks of scale.** Positive findings are linked to flexible and demand-led support, but there is little evidence on how such approaches can be scaled without losing effectiveness. Can support be scaled while maintaining the benefits of that support? What risks accompany scaling and how can they be mitigated?

DIMENSION 2: WHAT DOES THE EVIDENCE SHOW ABOUT THE RESULTS EXPERIENCED BY EXTERNAL ACTORS WHO SUPPORT MUTUAL AID GROUPS?

- **The most common changes documented by those providing support to mutual aid groups have been in how they learn, make decisions, partner and advocate.** Most changes reported are closely tied to the provision of support, with limited evidence on whether those changes have contributed to broader shifts in system mindsets.

¹ Support given to mutual aid groups by external actors that is requested and tailored to their specific needs, as identified by the groups themselves.

² Where the evidence generators potentially sought out, interpreted and used information that confirmed their hypotheses, beliefs and enhanced the strengths of their programmes and initiatives, while downplaying contradictory evidence.

- **It is unclear how those supporting mutual aid have adapted their monitoring, reporting, compliance, accountability or funding mechanisms.** These are common barriers to advancing locally led action, so it is crucial to document adaptations and their impact on broader institutional change.
- **The limited evidence hints at structural barriers to why external actors might not be changing their systems.** Some surface-level evidence shows persistent barriers to systems change, including institutional reluctance to shift power, rigid systems and limited learning at donor and international levels.

Limitations in the evidence:

- **Overall, there is limited evidence on the results experienced by external actors.** There is far less systematic evidence on learning and adaptation among those providing support, compared to evidence on the results experienced by mutual aid groups. This restricts understanding of the potential for systems-level change.
- **Minimal evidence exists from donors, funders and international actors.** Most evidence stems from local facilitators, with little insight into how donors, funders and INGOs have adapted. This stifles understanding of the potential contribution to changes in systems and mindsets within the conventional sector. As support for mutual aid grows, learning should be embedded early in the scaling process to understand how scale enables or hinders systems change.
- **Evidence is scarce of broader changes in systems and mindsets.** References to new practices and adaptations are common, but there has been little analysis of how these practices have been institutionalised, what outcomes they have produced or how they have influenced broader systems.
- **Barriers to systems change are insufficiently understood.** Power dynamics and institutional resistance are noted in the evidence, but these aspects are rarely explored in depth. Independent research is needed to understand and address these challenges as support to mutual aid scales.

The evidence from this first research phase shows that supporting mutual aid can strengthen community resilience and improve the quality and relevance of humanitarian response. There are indications of potential systems-level change. However, the strength of the evidence is limited and there are significant gaps, including unanswered questions about scale, unintended consequences and how external actors need to adapt their systems.

The question of scale is particularly complex: positive results so far are tied to highly flexible, demand-led approaches that work because they are context-specific and loosely structured. It remains unclear whether such approaches can be scaled without losing the qualities that make them effective. There is also a real tension: codifying and proceduralising approaches to support risks stripping away adaptability, while leaving approaches too loose raises questions about coherence and accountability. These dynamics must be understood as momentum and interest in supporting mutual aid grows. The second phase of this research will explore these issues through in-country data collection and participatory partnerships.

READ THE FULL REPORT OF PHASE 1 [HERE](#)