

CHAPTER 4.1

BEYOND LOCALISATION AND THE POLITICS OF POWER

'Everyone talks about localisation. Last week we had an event on localisation, today I am speaking at an event on localisation, next week I am participating as a respondent in a study on localisation ... a lot of money is allocated for it because it is currently fashionable. But mostly what is being done is research.'

– *Ukrainian aid worker*

Localisation remained a hot topic throughout this period, which saw a proliferation of pilots, frameworks and initiatives on the subject – as well as enduring critiques and tensions. A decade after the Grand Bargain, however, many saw it as either having failed or remaining an 'unfinished project'. The same barriers to localisation repeatedly showed up in this period: limited funding, influence and flexibility for local and national actors (LNAs), as well as transactional partnerships with international humanitarian actors. In 2025, the rapid expansion of pooled funds managed by the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) as a mechanism for localisation heightened these tensions and contributed to a more explicit consideration of the wider funding ecosystem, including locally led pooled funds, intermediary models and governance restructuring. Mutual aid and approaches to strengthen it such as support to community-led responses (sclr) similarly moved from being treated as niche to being discussed more seriously and with more nuance, alongside warnings that mainstreaming could turn support into compliance and control. Power also continued to operate via knowledge systems and narratives, with international actors often extracting data, stories and expertise from local actors when it suited their own goals but rarely allowing it to meaningfully inform their decisions.



An unfinished project

Interpretations of 'localisation' varied significantly across contexts, sectors and Inter-Agency Humanitarian Evaluation (IAHEs) over the study period. ACAPS research in Ukraine found that no two organisations surveyed (including United Nations (UN) agencies, international non-governmental organisations (INGOs), and local and national NGOs (L/NNGOs)) shared the same definition of what localisation is or what it should look like – and some definitions contradicted each other.² Evaluation evidence similarly found a spectrum of meanings: from narrow interpretations, which focused on directly funding LNAs, to broader interpretations regarding the international system working with (rather than through) local actors to deliver assistance and protection.

There was continued debate around distinguishing more clearly between 'localisation' and 'supporting locally led action', reflecting different understandings of where change should occur and how it should be achieved.³ ALNAP, for example, frames localisation as efforts to bring the international aid system closer to LNAs through changes in funding, coordination and decision-making, often while retaining many of the system's existing processes, norms and structures.⁴ Supporting locally led action, in contrast, focuses on recognising, resourcing and connecting with initiatives that are already locally driven, often outside formal aid structures.⁵

While these terms are defined differently and are sometimes used interchangeably across organisations, reports and practitioners, here we use *localisation* to refer primarily to efforts within the formal humanitarian system; we use *supporting locally led action* to refer to efforts that engage with and strengthen existing locally led initiatives, often outside that system; and we use *locally led ecosystems* to describe the broader relationships between formal and informal systems of response and solidarity, including mutual aid.

Interviewees described an ongoing tension around the importance of defining localisation and differentiating it from locally led action (among other terms). Some viewed the debate as increasingly 'overdone' and a contributor to the lack of substantive progress, arguing that localisation continued to be approached through the international system's so-called 'Global North' mindset of 'we need to define this before we do anything about it'. This focus on language was seen by some as a way of obscuring limited progress while still centring the international system within humanitarian discourse. As one humanitarian put it:



'We're so tangled in the language, especially within the localisation, locally led piece, that the discourse is moving faster than the progress.'



Others, however, argued that conceptual clarity remained important because terms such as localisation and locally led action are increasingly applied to wide-ranging approaches and activities. In their view, without clearer distinctions, these concepts risk becoming depoliticised or diluted, allowing limited or tokenistic reforms within largely unchanged power structures to be presented as transformative change.⁶

The last *The State of the Humanitarian System* (SOHS) noted that, despite the momentum of 'localisation debates', change had been incremental and uneven and there had been no real increase in funding for L/NNGOs, which largely continued to operate as subcontractors with limited influence.⁷ During this 2022–25 study period, a decade after the World Humanitarian Summit and Grand Bargain, localisation had still not proven to be transformational; critical voices were increasingly calling on humanitarian leaders to bite the bullet and acknowledge that localisation had, in many respects, failed – or, as one humanitarian put it, remained an 'unfinished project'.



A decade after the World Humanitarian Summit and Grand Bargain, localisation had still not proven to be transformational



The same constraints persisted around funding levels, flexibility and equitable partnerships in this period as in the last one, while the gap between formal commitments and risk-averse bureaucratic practices remained unresolved.⁸ The Network for Empowered Aid Response's (NEAR) 2026 flagship report on locally led ecosystems echoed this assessment,⁹ as did Oxfam's 10-year Grand Bargain review, which found that progress was often stronger in rhetoric and organisational positioning than in sustained, system-wide change – and that impact and power shifts remained patchy and hard to evidence.¹⁰ One senior humanitarian leader with first-hand experience of the Grand Bargain process told us:



'We actually were not able to accelerate localisation. Talked about it in a million seminars in Geneva and not much changed.'

Our in-country research across six contexts similarly found that, despite its ubiquity, localisation discourse continued to eclipse action.

A growing body of frameworks and guidance attempted to translate commitments into practice in the period. Between 2024 and 2026, the Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC), International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC), International Council of Voluntary Agencies (ICVA), International Organization for Migration (IOM) and other entities issued guidance



on equitable partnerships and expanding direct and intermediary funding to LNAs.¹¹ However, evidence on how far these frameworks translated into meaningful institutional change remained limited.

An evaluation of IOM's localisation agenda in May 2026 showed that its localisation framework was not mandatory and its content was limited to treating localisation as an operational approach, rather than a strategic one.¹² At the donor level, the Directorate-General for European Civil Protection and Humanitarian Aid Operations' (DG ECHO) 2023 guidance note stated that Programmatic Partnerships – one of DG ECHO's tools to provide high-quality, long-term funding – should be designed to promote certain aspects of the Grand Bargain, such as localisation.¹³ DG ECHO launched nine Pilot Programmatic Partnerships (PPPs),¹⁴ with plans to extend flexibility and predictability to LNAs, including 'potentially' sharing indirect support costs with LNAs.¹⁵ The DG ECHO–IFRC Final Evaluation (December 2025) found



Humanitarians critiqued requests for more evidence on effective localisation approaches as reflecting a lack of political will to act on existing learning



that the PPP both conveyed and operationalised a strong commitment to localisation, meeting or exceeding its benchmark for 70% of funding to be managed or implemented by national societies in most contexts, including South Sudan, Lebanon and Ecuador. However, national societies often lacked full decision-making autonomy, partners retained key approvals, complex and fragmented compliance systems absorbed staff time and constrained flexibility, and community participation remained uneven in terms of depth and level of influence.¹⁶

Humanitarians critiqued requests for more evidence on effective localisation approaches as reflecting a lack of political will to act on existing learning.¹⁷ Oxfam argued that appeals for 'context specificity' were too often the default justification for not pursuing system-wide changes, and that they masked an absence of political will to do so.¹⁸ L/NGOs continued to carry the burden of advocating for commitments that were promised but not delivered. Senior humanitarians in Indonesia told us civil society repeatedly attempted to operationalise localisation commitments by convening in-country donor dialogues and urging signatories and donors to mobilise their country offices.¹⁹ However, donor participation remained minimal – only one donor very briefly attended their first dialogue, and only one junior representative the second – which they viewed 'as indicative of the gap between stated commitments and practical follow-through'.



A Start Network brief, drawing on a recent external evaluation of the Start Fund, found that communities affected by crisis rated L/NNGO-led projects higher than INGO-led projects across several measures, including for assistance arriving at the right time (95% vs 53%, respectively), for responses rated 'excellent' (87% vs 49%) and for assistance rated 'very fair' (98% vs 46%).²⁰ Cost data also pointed to gaps in efficiency: between 2023 and 2024, the median cost per person of L/NNGO-led projects fell from £22.37 (approximately US\$27.70)ⁱ to £10.16 (approximately US\$13.00), while the median cost for INGO-led projects increased from £15.48 (approximately US\$19.20) to £19.27 (approximately US\$24.70).²¹

Evidence found that communities affected by crisis rated L/NNGO-led projects higher than INGO-led projects across several measures

Arguments that localisation improves efficiency and effectiveness of aid are common; indeed, cost-efficiency formed a core premise of the Grand Bargain (see [Chapter 2.3](#)). However, a 2024 Start Network/Humanitarian Advisory Group literature review cautioned against reducing localisation to economics, warned that focusing exclusively on metrics risked compromising the quality of aid and accountability to populations, and highlighted tensions between efficiency, equity and the broader challenge of rebalancing power.²² Some of our interviewees, humanitarians working globally, said:



'Rather than giving autonomy, ...[localisation is] using cheap labour.'

One interviewee even commented that localisation:



'Led to a modern-day slavery.'

Despite the lack of clear criteria to judge when evidence is 'good enough',²³ LNAs were expected to prove they were 'better placed' than international actors to respond, and their performance was largely judged through compliance and risk management.²⁴ Meanwhile, the humanitarian system did not treat the perspectives of people affected by crises, the expertise of local actors, or locally led knowledge as central forms of evidence, revealing the political nature of evidence and the way in which it is influenced by positionality.²⁵ One senior humanitarian told us:



'What counts as evidence is decided elsewhere. A community knows exactly who to call and who to trust in a flood does not count. An attendance sheet does. What passes as evidence are "beneficiary" lists, photos and tarpaulins.'

ⁱ Approximate US dollar equivalents were calculated using the European Central Bank (ECB) annual average exchange rates for the relevant currency and year. For figures covering multiple years, the annual average exchange rate for the midpoint year was used as an approximation. Where a full-year average was not yet available, the ECB year-to-date average exchange rate was used (<https://data.ecb.europa.eu/currency-converter>; <https://data.ecb.europa.eu/publications/ecbeurosystem-policy-and-exchange-rates/3030624>).



A Humanitarian Advisory Group learning series highlighted why localisation initiatives were hard to scale: project-level steps towards localisation were short-term and often conflicted with larger INGOs' standard ways of working. The series documented promising examples – including emergency financing mechanisms (such as New Zealand's High Commission Emergency Fund and the Change Fund); advocacy by Bangladesh's National Alliance of Humanitarian Actors (NAHAB) for a pooled fund; and partnership transition models in Myanmar, where Trócaire shifted from prime recipient to grant-management support, while Karuna Mission Social Solidarity (KMSS) became the primary recipient – but instances of more sustained and integrated initiatives were scarce.²⁶ Promising practicesⁱⁱ were rarely documented, researched or evaluated – and when evaluations did find improved outcomes, there was little additional funding to investigate what enabled this improvement.²⁷ This created a self-reinforcing cycle: lack of evidence justified limited implementation, yet robust but limited implementation prevented evidence from being generated.

Funding pathways and the politics behind the numbers

Localisation became heavily focused on funding flows to LNAs and the Grand Bargain's 25% funding target in this period. Broader questions around the politics and tensions underpinning those figures received comparatively less attention, even as sharper and more contested debates emerged following funding cuts, the Humanitarian Reset and the US\$2 billion humanitarian funding allocation.



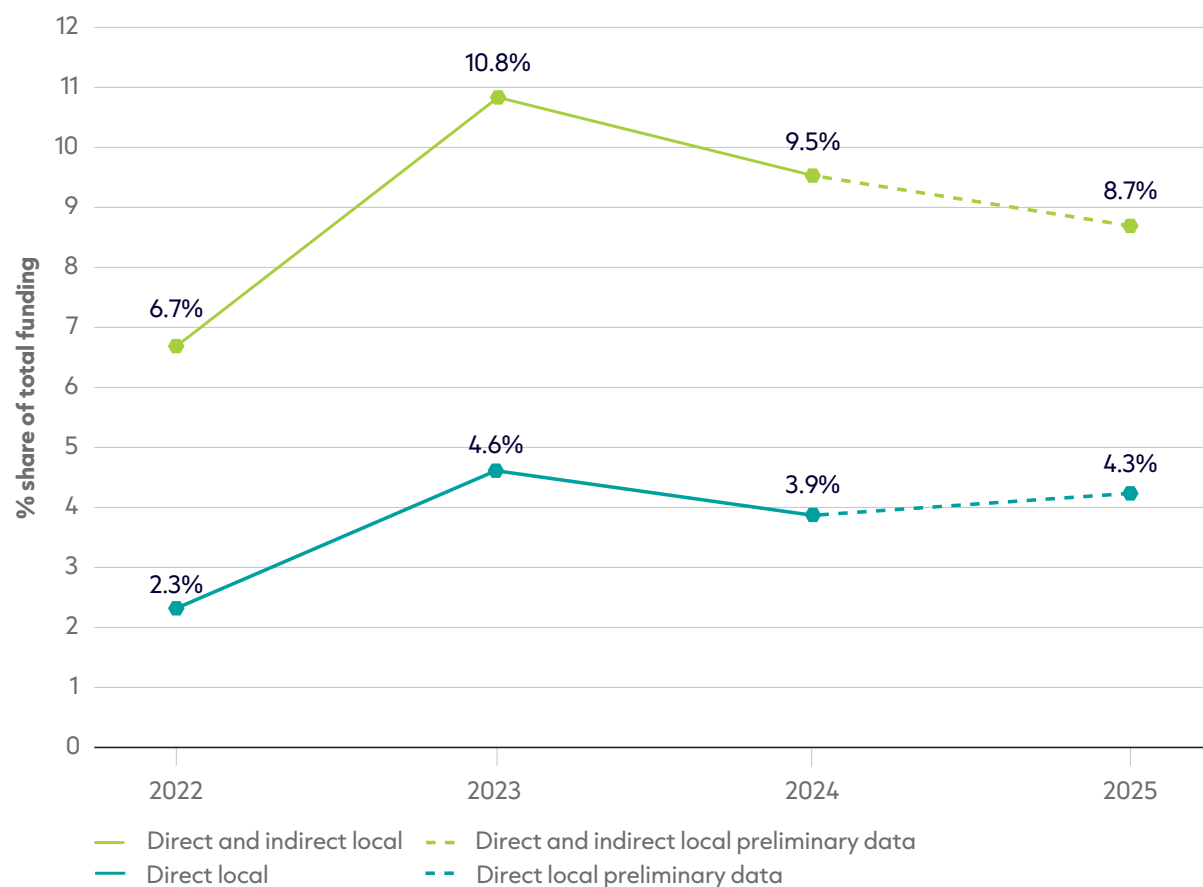
Only 8.7% of all reported humanitarian flows were directly and indirectly allocated to LNAs in 2025 – a fall from 9.5% in 2024



Only 8.7% of all reported humanitarian flows were directly and indirectly allocated to LNAs in 2025 – a fall from 9.5% in 2024 – while direct funding flows to LNAs increased slightly from 3.9% in 2024 to 4.3% in 2025.²⁸ This was marginally better than the last SOHS period, when direct funding to LNAs was also extremely low, ranging from a high of 3.3% (in 2018 and 2020) to a low of 1.2% (in 2021).²⁹

Our aid-practitioner survey indicated a slight improvement in perceptions of L/NNGOs' ability to access direct funding from international donors, with 5% of

ii Given the limits of the existing evidence, Barbelet et al. 'describe promising practices, rather than good or best practices'. They add: 'For a practice to be considered "good" it must have strong evidence based on a high quality methodology, evidence of intermediate and higher level performance outcomes, replicability across multiple geographical contexts or crises, and verification through independent research or evaluation.' They also note that: 'Donor measurements of success and outcomes do not necessarily match the measures of success held by local and national actors or communities', and that: 'The question of who decides what outcomes to pursue, and therefore what evidence counts, is a critical one for localisation' (see Barbelet et al. (2024) <https://alnap.org/help-library/resources/harnessing-evidence-and-learning-for-people-centred-humanitarian-action/>).

Figure 4.1: Direct and indirect funding to local actors, 2022–2025

Source: OCHA Financial Tracking Service (FTS), IFRC Network Databank, IOM grant awards data, OCHA Country-Based Pooled Funds (CBPF) Data Hub, UN Children's Fund (UNICEF) Transparency Portal, UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) collaboration with funded partners, and World Food Programme (WFP) field-level expenditures data.

Notes: Partner data for IFRC and WFP is not yet available for 2025; IOM data for 2025 is partial. Funding allocated by UN agencies with partner data (IOM, UNICEF, WFP and UNHCR) in each year are taken from their own reports where available. Sub-grants on CBPF projects are excluded from the percentage calculation as these include more than one intermediary before funding reaches local and national actors.



practitioners rating it 'excellent' and 23% 'good' during this period, compared to 3% and 18% in the previous SOHS period. However, respondents said that direct funding opportunities remained very rare. They attributed this to stringent donor eligibility and compliance requirements, and a funding system that continued to monopolise resources within UN agencies and large INGOs through intermediary arrangements and high operating costs, rather than investing in local organisations. As one respondent put it:



'It's like giving a poor person who doesn't have food a dozen of eco-friendly spoons and plates according to the best sustainability standards but not giving them food or the means for a decent life!'

Ukraine showed how quickly commitments could be sidelined in complex contexts: only an estimated 0.003% of tracked humanitarian funding went directly to LNAs in the first three months after Russia's invasion, which rose to 1.2% by the end of



2022 before dropping to 0.3% by July 2023.³⁰ Our in-country teams highlighted the continuous lack of funding reaching L/NNGOs. One Palestinian local actor in the West Bank with direct oversight on Gaza said:



'Localisation was indispensable in practice, invisible in structure and undervalued in funding.'

A local actor from Sudan was similarly direct:



'Donors don't trust us directly, they trust the international organisations more.'

In June 2025, Emergency Relief Coordinator Tom Fletcher called for significant expansion of CBPFs and aspired to 70% of pooled funding being channelled to local actors, particularly women-led organisations.³¹ He proposed expanding CBPFs to manage at least one-third of global humanitarian funding 'to make this the electric shock the system needs'.³² This growing concentration around a single mechanism raised concerns about over-centralisation, funding diversity, governance, dual mandates for Humanitarian Coordinators and Resident Coordinators, and impartiality.³³

These concerns intensified for some following a United States–UN agreement, in December 2025, to provide US\$2 billion to OCHA-managed pooled funds. An analysis in early 2026 found that the funds were initially covering 18 countries, with only six months for implementation and 98% of funding slated for UN agencies and INGOs.³⁴ A further US\$1.8 billion was announced in May 2026, bringing total funding to US\$3.8 billion across 21 countries and extending implementation timelines to 12 months.³⁵ Some saw benefit with the US channelling funding to the coordinated international system rather than private contractors. Fletcher stated that 'millions, millions more will get that support',³⁶ but some interviewees viewed the rapid scale differently:



'it's like a patient who is starving, and you give them a huge heavy meal.'

Civil society actors, who felt excluded, described early CBPF allocations as 'predetermined' and again skewed towards large agencies.³⁷ The scale and speed of the expansion was perceived by some as a setback for localisation; multiple INGOs reported that the allocation's design, and OCHA's discouragement of subgranting, led them to abandon their usual practice of partnering with local actors.

In 2025, 46% of CBPF funding reached LNAs directly (compared to 35% in 2021), rising to 55% when including subgrants;³⁸ some localised over 70% (Ethiopia,



Venezuela, Syria and Somalia), others below 5%.³⁹ Somalia represented a particular success story with a sustained improvement in allocations to LNAs over the last decade. However, it also reflected 'low quality localisation' out of necessity, driven by access constraints for international actors rather than a genuine commitment to localisation.⁴⁰ The Sudan Humanitarian Fund (SHF) illustrated the complexity of measuring localisation. While a Humanitarian Policy Group report found that direct SHF allocations to local actors had fallen to just 1% in 2024,⁴¹ a Share Trust report found that the overall proportion of SHF funding reaching local actors increased from 12% in 2020 to 35% in 2025, largely through intermediary arrangements. The SHF also introduced multiple innovative funding windows, such as Area-Based Coordination (ABC), 48-hour response and mutual-aid groups, to provide more flexible and targeted funding to local actors.⁴²

OCHA expanded Regional Humanitarian Pooled Funds (RHPFs) in this period.ⁱⁱⁱ These remained relatively new and small-scale; however, the recent surge in largely US funding (from US\$39 million disbursed in 2025 to US\$841 million contributed by March 2026) highlighted questions about whether RHPFs can absorb much larger volumes while sustaining localisation outcomes over time.⁴³ Subgrants from the Central Emergency Response Fund (CERF)^{iv} to LNAs via UN agencies remained low: 15% in 2022 and 12% in 2023 (the latest available data at the time of writing). LNAs received 69% of all subgrants in both years.⁴⁴ The CERF's localisation efforts in 2025, including for Under-Funded Emergencies (UFE), were inconsistently applied across countries and had limited impact on enhancing LNAs' participation and leadership in coordination mechanisms.⁴⁵

Tensions over funding to L/NGOs surfaced across all our in-country research. One local NGO worker in Gaza reflected on the Occupied Palestinian Territory Humanitarian Fund⁴⁶ disbursed at the beginning of the response in 2023:



'When the first localisation standard [commitment] was applied, more than 80% of the funds went to UN agencies and INGOs. This was a catastrophe, a shock for me. We, who were working on the ground, were left behind, while those who had left the country received the funding.'

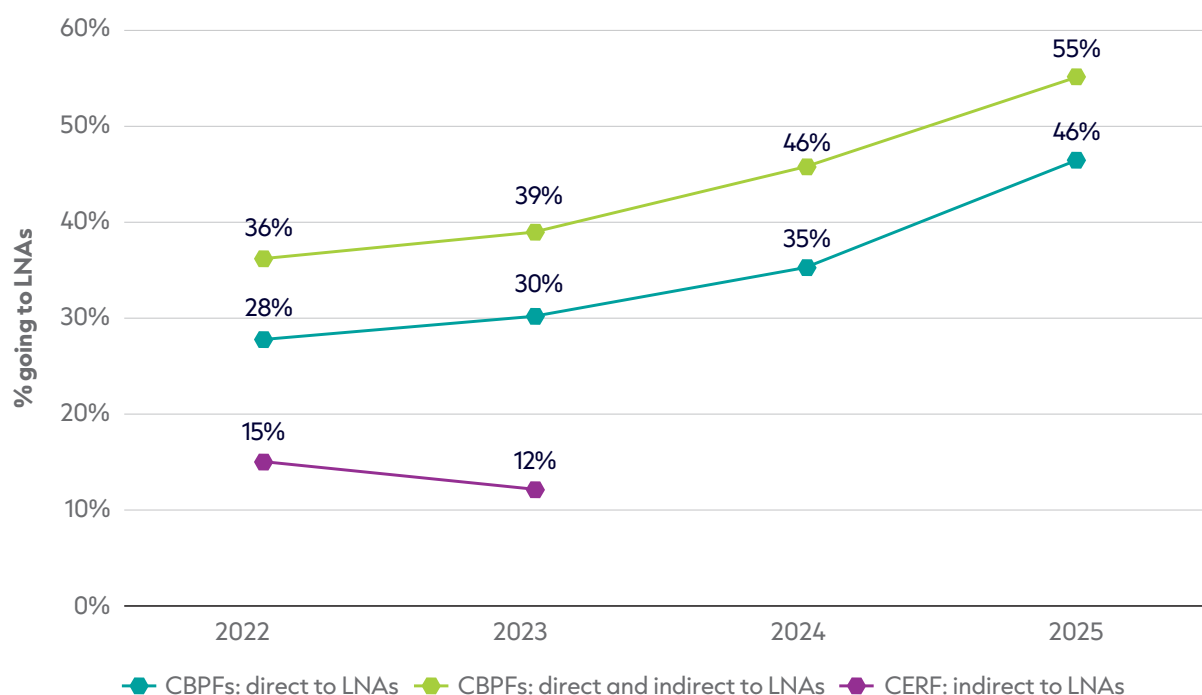
Pooled funding increasingly re-centred attention on raw financial figures and the UN-led system, often making the human and political dimensions of funding less visible. Our interviewees and the literature highlighted the importance of

iii Three RHPFs were established in 2024: Latin America and the Caribbean (RHPF LAC), the Asia-Pacific Humanitarian Fund (AP HF) and the Eastern and Southern Africa Humanitarian Fund (ESA HF). The Regional Fund for West and Central Africa (RHPF WCA), established in 2021, started operating in Chad in 2024. The RHPF LAC allocated US\$7 million through three funding rounds (two in Colombia and one in Haiti) during its first year and applied a community-based approach through micro-grants, directing US\$132,000 to 25 community-based and civil society organisations, including Indigenous groups. In Niger, partners conducted participatory community consultations and invited communities affected by crisis to join the strategic review process, so proposals reflected their priorities (see OCHA (2025) <https://www.unocha.org/publications/report/world/country-based-pooled-funds-and-regional-humanitarian-pooled-funds-2024-review>; OCHA (2025) <https://www.unocha.org/publications/report/colombia/regional-humanitarian-pooled-fund-latin-america-and-caribbean-annual-report-2024>).

iv CERF is a pooled fund mechanism that only directly supports UN agencies (as per its General Assembly mandate); as such LNAs only receive funding from the CERF via an intermediary UN agency.

maintaining an ecosystem of complementary funding models and intermediary actors that reflected the diversity and complexity of funding routes and mechanisms, and that was able to serve different goals, audiences and specific contextual needs. Outside UN-led structures, several NGO-led and locally led funding modalities emerged and were increasingly documented, which attracted investment by both government and philanthropic donors.

Figure 4.2: Share of CERF and CBPF allocations to LNAs, 2022–2025



Source: OCHA.

Notes: Data on funding direct from CBPFs from the CBPF Data Hub, indirect funding data to CBPFs provided by OCHA directly. CERF data from the CERF Annual Results reports. CERF data missing for 2024 and 2025 due to time lag in the publishing of data.



Development Initiatives and the Norwegian Refugee Council's (NRC) catalogue documented a growing range of funding approaches, including locally led humanitarian funds and NGO-led crisis-response mechanisms.⁴⁷ The Community Resilience Fund (CORE) in Nepal, launched in 2023, was one of the country's first locally led pooled-fund mechanisms and was governed by a consortium of Nepali NGOs.⁴⁸ The Human Mobility Hub, established by NRC in 2023, supported and connected a range of local partners in Tunisia and Egypt, including refugee and migrant-led organisations. As of 2024, its budget was US\$3.5 million, 70–75% of which it passes onto its local and national partners.⁴⁹

The Danish Refugee Council hosts the Sahel Regional Fund, which was launched in 2023 with an initial £33 million (approximately US\$42 million) commitment from the United Kingdom's Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO). Within its first 24 months of operation, 31.21% of its total investments supported



L/NGOs.⁵⁰ Trócaire piloted a pre-positioned funding mechanism that provided small grants of €10,000–30,000 (approximately US\$10,800–32,400)⁵¹ to local partners in Malawi, Myanmar, Nicaragua and Rwanda.⁵² Between 2020 and 2026, Trócaire allocated 29 pre-positioned funds to local and national organisations – of which 25 have been activated supporting locally led emergency responses – with a simplified documentation process, allowing partners to initiate responses immediately and report back within two months. Charter4Change (C4C) also highlighted intermediary models, such as the Call to Action Field Implementation (CAFI) project: funded by Germany and facilitated by CARE Deutschland, in equitable partnership with 11 women-led organisations from nine countries, with a budget of €6.11 million (approximately US\$6.6 million)⁵³ for 2023–25 across the Middle East and North Africa, West and Central Africa, Latin America and the Caribbean, and Ukraine. These partners, in turn, supported a broader network of 205 women-led organisations across these regions.⁵⁴

ICVA's Interactive Directory mapped humanitarian pooled funds led by NGOs, civil society organisations, networks and the UN, supporting humanitarian action globally. At the time of writing, the Directory listed 90 active pooled funds, including 20 locally led funds.^v NEAR Change Fund, launched in 2025, established three financing streams – Emergency Response, Displacement Window and the Bridging Fund – of unrestricted funding grants (up to US\$25,000) for members most affected by aid suspension.⁵⁵ Start Fund provided fast, collaborative, proactive, needs-based funding through five mechanisms: Global Start Funds, National Start Funds, Start Ready, Disaster Risk Financing and Support Grants.^{vi}

Several pooled funds and intermediary mechanisms also underwent governance restructuring. The Sudan Local Response Pooled Fund transitioned to become fully independent and nationally registered and governed.^{vii} Through the multiphase ENHANCE programme (2015–25), the Catholic Agency for Overseas Development (CAFOD) and partners in Myanmar supported a long-term journey from INGO-led humanitarian response towards nationally led and networked humanitarian leadership. The lead partner – which scaled from managing approximately US\$3 million in humanitarian funding in 2015 to over US\$30 million by 2025 – now operates as a national intermediary, sub-granting to local CSOs and CBOs, and leading national coordination platforms.⁵⁶

ICVA, among others, highlighted the experience, evolution and governance structure of Aid Fund for Syria (AFS),⁵⁷ including its integrated programming, multiyear grants and Anchor Organisation approach, as practices worth documenting and supporting.⁵⁸ In December 2024, following the fall of the

v See <https://www.icvanetwork.org/page/pooled-fund-mapping>

vi See <https://startnetwork.org/funds>

vii Another example of locally led governance structures is the NEAR Change Fund, which is largely supported by philanthropic funds, has a governance committee comprising 12 NEAR members (local organisations) chosen by members in each geographic region (see Swithern and Poole (2025) <https://reliefweb.int/report/world/financing-locally-led-action-framework-understanding-options-and-accelerating-impact>).



Syrian regime, AFS allocated US\$7.5 million within four days to support locally led, multisectoral assistance in newly accessible frontline areas with grants for interventions of up to 24 months. AFS also completed a comprehensive reform process to become a permanent, locally led governance structure.

Analysis by the Share Trust estimated that local intermediaries could deliver humanitarian programming 32% more cost-efficiently than international intermediaries by reducing inflated international overheads and salary costs (see [Chapter 2.3](#)).⁵⁹ However, tensions and uncertainties emerged regarding the growing number of INGO-managed 'locally led' pooled funds and the extent to which governance and decision-making were truly locally led. One consultant working on locally led pooled funding in the Middle East and North Africa region noted that INGOs needed to ask themselves:



'What do [INGOs] bring to the table? What is their added value? How can they still be relevant and present in the new setup and survival mode? How can they genuinely be of use to the local decision-makers?'

Competition over funding and institutional survival also pushed several INGOs to nationalise or rebrand their country offices – a trend that was itself criticised. One senior representative of a Syria-focused locally led pooled fund said:

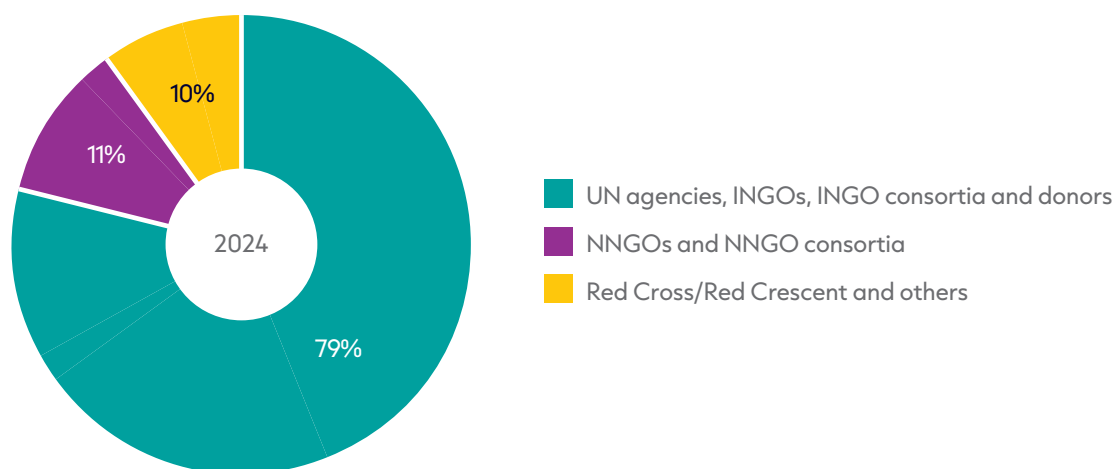


'When the transition in Syria happened, all of a sudden INGOs, including some that had been at the forefront of localisation, started direct implementation. They came into Syria, started setting up offices, and the work they had done before on partnerships and localisation was gone. International organisations tried everything to stay alive, stay present to the detriment of the localisation agenda.'

Leadership and decision-making without power

The Grand Bargain 3.0 Implementation Agenda called for a 'greater participation of local actors in coordination and decision-making fora'.⁶⁰ This was complemented by a commitment, under the Grand Bargain Caucus on Efficiency Measures, to 'promote coordination structures that enable co-leadership of local actors'.⁶¹ However, L/NGOs' representation in Humanitarian Country Teams (HCTs) stood at only 11% in 2024, compared with 44% for UN agencies, 23% for INGOs, 12% for donors and 10% for the Red Cross/Red Crescent Movement and others.⁶² Drawing on research across Ethiopia, Somalia, South Sudan, Colombia and Venezuela, ICVA quoted one L/NGO representative who described these dynamics: '3 or 4 national NGOs, with much less resources, are sitting in front of 12 UN agencies which are your donors ... do you really have a voice?'.⁶³

Figure 4.3: Representation by organisation type in HCTs, 2024



Source: Humanitarian Action (2025) <https://humanitarianaction.info/document/pulse-humanitarian-coordination-2024/article/national-level-humanitarian-country-teams-hcts-0>



ICVA's *Cracks in Coordination* report found an overarching sense among NGO Forum Coordinators that HCTs and UN-led coordination bodies were broadly information-sharing platforms rather than strategic decision-making bodies, with some participants feeling frustrated, excluded, underrepresented and demotivated – leading some NNGO leaders to give up participating altogether.⁶⁴ Beyond the figures, L/NNGOs' inclusion remained limited to their presence rather



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than their participation, influence, leadership or decision-making.⁶⁵ The IAHE of the Covid-19 Humanitarian Response cited that Syrians working on the ground were unable to convince the HCT or Covid-19 Task Force that risk communication and community engagement was not working. Referring to messaging around face masks and social distancing, one IAHE interviewee said: 'you can't go to the local community thinking that you're in Geneva'.⁶⁶

LNAs' lack of decision-making power was underscored by the Humanitarian Reset and UN80 processes. LNAs reported little contact with the Reset process and limited information about it.⁶⁷ A joint statement from civil society representatives worldwide called for a 'true Reset' to fundamentally change longstanding power structures,⁶⁸ and an open letter warned that UN80 had excluded LNAs.⁶⁹ Our interviewees in Poland similarly described these reforms as:



'[moving] in completely [the] opposite direction [from localisation], with UN agencies taking full control of the process, without taking into consideration suggestions from NGO groups.'

Our team in Palestine found that the response in Gaza exposed a longstanding structural imbalance: L/NNGOs remained and international staff withdrew, while INGOs retained control over strategic decision-making, access negotiations and resource allocation. L/NNGOs perceived this as marginalising their local agency and operational leadership, and reinforcing dependency. One local actor in the West Bank, with direct oversight on the situation in Gaza stated:



'Local actors were the backbone of the response. But structurally, their role was marginalised. They had no seat at the decision-making table, no direct line to donors and no sustained funding. They were seen as implementers, not as equal partners.'



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Evaluation evidence on power and decision-making was largely anecdotal; where more systematic analysis was available, it suggested that decision-making power shifted only to a very limited extent, linked to both constrained direct funding and tangential involvement of L/NNGOs in coordination mechanisms. Our team in Ukraine cited relative progress and a similar conclusion: Ukrainian NGOs gained formal representation in the HCT, but power imbalances persisted in decision-making and resource allocation. One national NGO said:



'Donors still have a fixed vision of humanitarian response. From what I observe, no structures or consortiums can change this approach yet.'

Even where positive examples emerged, they often remained contested, tokenistic or ambiguous. The transition from the UN-led HCT to the new Indonesian Humanitarian Coordination Platform in August 2025 was considered a historic moment. This platform, co-chaired by local civil society organisations and OCHA, intended to operate through a six-month transition before becoming fully locally led; but transfer of power with no significant transfer of financial and technical resources, no capacity strengthening and no strong donor message felt 'more like a handshake than a proper handover'.⁷⁰

The power dynamics that localisation sought to address remained deeply embedded within the humanitarian system, including in persistent inequities in pay and working conditions. A Share Trust study, which analysed staff costs across 51 Ukraine humanitarian projects in 2023 (US\$55 million total), revealed that international UN staff earned 17 times more than national L/NNGO staff – and



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5 times more than the UN's own national staff.⁷¹ Another study showed that inequity also featured in recruitment: one of 64 positions aimed at national staff disclosed the salary, compared to 25 of 34 positions for expatriate staff; furthermore, only 20% of frontline workers said their contract was permanent – and 19% reported having no formal contract at all – while 94% of INGO staff had a formal contract.^{viii} National staff also usually had weaker benefits and medical coverage, limited access to equipment and protective resources, fewer evacuation options and greater exposure to

security risks. These conditions, some argued, related to structural inequities visible in everyday practices; for example, national staff were expected to take public transport in high-risk settings, while international staff were provided with private vehicles and drivers.⁷²

Knowledge systems and narratives

Questions of power extended to knowledge and narratives. A Global Change Center analysis of evaluation practices argued that Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) criteria were imposed with minimal consultation with 'Global South' actors, and evaluations remained focused on efficiency and effectiveness rather than transformation.⁷³ This left the system measuring its progress through operational and technical metrics that were far removed from the lived realities of the communities they intended to serve. In 2025, ALNAP updated its guide on adapting the OECD evaluation criteria to humanitarian contexts through an extensive consultation process. ALNAP added three priority themes to the evaluation criteria to make evaluations more transformative: locally led humanitarian action, centring people affected by crisis, and the environment and climate.⁷⁴ IAHE evidence found that local knowledge and understanding of varying needs in different communities were neither valued nor used to select which projects were implemented.⁷⁵

Some organisations described their efforts to decolonise their evaluation processes by proactively seeking out other forms of knowledge (such as practice-based knowledge, stories and oral history) and prioritising people's lived experiences.⁷⁶ Evidence showed that local evaluators from the 'Global South' were often relegated to data-collection or field roles, excluded from analysis and dissemination, and denied lead-authorship opportunities.⁷⁷ Findings were disseminated primarily in English, without translations in local languages, rendering communities unable

viii The study surveyed 734 frontline humanitarian workers across over 60 countries and reviewed 208 INGO job advertisements (see Greenaway et al. (2024) <https://alnnap.org/help-library/resources/the-status-of-frontline-humanitarian-workers/>).



to access learning from evaluations about their own contexts. Local actors from the 'Global South' were rarely offered the opportunity to document their ways of working and methodologies in their languages, nor to share knowledge and impacts with donors and organisations in different continents.⁷⁸ Initiatives like Made in Africa Evaluation suggested that evaluation practice should centre African contexts, culture, history, beliefs, values and ways of knowing, challenging the ways 'Global North' methods are treated as universal to the exclusion of other knowledge.⁷⁹

Similarly, our in-country team in Ukraine told us that some UN agencies demanded fixed numerical targets and offered local partners minimal ability to contribute or negotiate justified deviations; they cited an example in which UNICEF decided that 15,000 children in one area must receive psychological support, despite local partners' doubts about whether such numbers reflected needs in that region. In Myanmar and Sudan, local actors highlighted that UN agencies routinely collected data and made decisions unilaterally, while local actors – despite being used as a source of data – were not able to see whether the data was used or how it informed decision-making. One study on the refugee response in Jordan found that INGOs only included local aid workers' perspectives when they aligned with an INGO's perspectives or goals, disregarding local expertise and contextual knowledge because they did not contribute to meeting targets swiftly. A female Jordanian interviewee said:



'[My] expertise and moral understanding are neglected and undervalued, even though this compromises both staff safety and the success of the project.'

Our in-country teams revealed that knowledge and narrative framing were barriers to localisation. Local actors in Gaza said that their knowledge and expertise were 'used for data, not for decisions':



'Our intelligence was exploited without recognition, decision-making power or corresponding funding.'

One Palestinian local actor said:



'The humanitarian story of Gaza is still largely written in Geneva, New York and Amman. Palestinians provide the facts, but internationals frame the narrative. Even our daily situation reports are written in English, formatted for donor capitals and distributed globally before communities see them.'

Our teams in Ukraine and Poland highlighted that INGOs continued to operate extractive research practices and were often unwilling to share data, knowledge and experience with local actors. Interviewees who had transitioned from decision-



making positions in L/NNGOs to managerial positions in INGOs reported that only after this shift did they gain understanding of organisational decision-making, including the dynamics shaping entry and exit strategies.

The formal humanitarian system, operating under enduring power dynamics and legacies, often failed – intentionally or not – to recognise the diversity and value of existing local knowledge systems. However, our in-country team in Gaza found that the crisis during this period prompted a shift: although international actors historically dominated the framing of Gaza’s humanitarian narrative, since 2023, Palestinian civil society increasingly challenged international narratives – producing their own data, contradicting international officials’ political claims and public statements, and grounding their assessments in direct community observation. One respondent described no longer relying on UN figures but instead on their own organisations’ data to expose violations and correct misinformation.



The formal humanitarian system, operating under enduring power dynamics and legacies, often failed to recognise the diversity and value of existing local knowledge systems



Compliance, risk and operational realities

L/NNGOs have cited the same pressures for years, which often result in them doing much of the frontline work with little room to breathe. Our in-country research and wider evidence similarly found that persistent structural, financial, political, legal and organisational barriers to localisation – alongside heavy compliance requirements, donors’ risk perceptions and cultural constraints – shaped the space in which L/NNGOs operate. This is despite years of advocacy. A local actor in the Democratic Republic of the Congo described these challenges as:



‘enabling international actors to avoid fully honouring localisation commitments as there is no pressure to do so. They operate in an environment of limited accountability.’

In Gaza, a local actor said:



‘Donors were not set up to fund local actors directly at the scale of the emergency, leaving local organisations as subcontractors. When local actors pushed for more direct involvement, donors and intermediaries reportedly cited due diligence, fiduciary risk and neutrality concerns, with the practical outcome that Palestinian NGOs were left competing for short-term grants while international actors controlled the pipeline.’



Evaluation syntheses repeatedly highlighted ‘service-provision’ partnerships between UN agencies or INGOs and L/NNGOs and consistently found unequal or ‘transactional’ partnerships.^{ix} Our in-country teams across six contexts noted that modest improvements in partnerships tended to occur where access constraints limited the presence of INGOs, resulting in a form of ‘forced localisation’ rather than a deliberate equal partnership.



The quality of partnerships also depended on the extent to which funding arrangements were flexible, multiyear and adaptive to partners’ priorities

The quality of partnerships also depended on the extent to which funding arrangements were flexible, multiyear and adaptive to partners’ priorities. The 2024 Pledge for Change partners’ survey gathered feedback from 342 local and national partner organisations across 61 countries on five INGO signatories. It found that, while 82% of partners reported involvement in defining project scope and success indicators, 56% rated signatories as not flexible in funding reallocation, and 50% said funding did not adequately cover all costs.⁸⁰ The NRC argued that INGOs can play

a role by critically reviewing their partnership approaches and sharing the benefits of multiyear and flexible arrangements across partners, including LNAs.

⁸¹ Oxfam’s Partners’ Investment Fund tested multiyear, fully flexible funding by allocating £1.5 million (approximately US\$2 million) across five locations – Myanmar, Nepal, Yemen, Palestine and Southern Africa – with £300,000 (approximately US\$400,000) over three years per location, distributed as grants to 42 partners. Partners set their own priorities and adapted spending, reporting requirements were minimal and due diligence was tailored.⁸² Through its commitment to the principle ‘Why us? Why not local?’, Christian Aid similarly increased its proportion of projects that provided partners with flexible core funding – from 6% in 2024 to 12% in 2025.⁸³

Despite a proliferation of overheads policies and guidance, most donors did not mandate to pass overheads on to subgrantees; nor did they systematically monitor whether LNAs received what they should. An overheads ceiling of 7% became a default, yet it remained ‘a woefully inadequate and outdated allocation that reflects historical budgeting norms and is a relic from the 1990s’.⁸⁴ LNAs’ overheads needs can be far higher: some studies estimated 27–30%, especially for smaller organisations and those operating in high-risk, complex contexts. In practice, even where a 7% rate existed, evidence suggested intermediaries may pass on only around 4–5% in some settings, leaving LNAs under-resourced for the organisational infrastructure required to operate safely and sustainably.⁸⁵ This was compounded by a ‘double financial shock’ linked

ix ALNAP commissioned evaluation synthesis. See [Methodology](#).



to the effective withdrawal of the US Agency for International Development's (USAID) protected overhead funding for LNAs at the same time as overall funding volumes contracted.⁸⁶ A national NGO staff member in Ukraine said:



'We know that a programme has money for indirect costs, but when we fill in the application, we are told that for us, as a local partner, indirect costs are not provided for. This is truly painful.'

The lack of adequate and quality financing for LNAs left many highly exposed when funding cuts arrived. Without sustained investment in organisational infrastructure, overheads and reserves, they lacked the financial resilience needed to absorb the shock. The impact was particularly severe for women-led organisations, refugee-led organisations (RLOs) and small organisations. A March 2025 UN Women rapid survey of 411 women-led organisations across 44 humanitarian settings found that 90% had been financially impacted, 72% had laid off staff, 51% had suspended programming and 47% expected to shut down within six months.⁸⁷ RLOs were already underfunded and sidelined before the cuts, receiving only US\$49 million in 2024 (compared to US\$4.7 billion for nine UN Refugee Response Plans), with average grants of just US\$35,000.⁸⁸ The funding cuts further deepened the gap between commitments to refugee leadership and the resources provided to RLOs, leaving 'the humanitarian system celebrating RLOs, then starving them'.⁸⁹

Over this study period, the conversation on 'harmonisation' processes expanded to due-diligence passporting^x but did not progress significantly, since most efforts remained at the level of pilots – although there was a tangible example in Ukraine.⁹⁰ ICVA analysis cautioned that attempts to solve donor-driven inefficiencies, through mechanisms such as due-diligence passporting and shared-reporting formats, proliferated to the point that they could create new inefficiencies through duplication or overlap. ICVA underscored the need for donors to collaborate rather than multiply parallel compliance schemes.⁹¹ Similarly, the review of the Ukraine Local Pooled Fund noted that, while several organisations cited due-diligence passporting as a best practice, it remained largely exceptional – and was not realised.⁹²

x Due-diligence passporting has been piloted primarily by networks of INGOs/NNGOs, including TechSoup, Start Network, NEAR Network and a scheme developed by Humentum for signatories of Charter4Change. Several initiatives sought to harmonise due diligence and reduce duplication, ranging from common assessment and passporting tools to shared verification platforms and joint partnership models. These included the Collaborative Cash Delivery Network's common assessment tool across Türkiye, northwest Syria and Ukraine; the Charter4Change–Humentum Due Diligence Passporting Tool; Alliance2015's passporting initiative; PhilinUA's verification platform; the Ukraine Humanitarian Fund's pilot Contextualised Capacity Assessment; and the Joint Emergency Response Ukraine, which adopted shared due diligence and partnership processes across its members (see: BDO (2025) <https://voiceeu.org/publications/due-diligence-harmonisation-in-ukraine-local-organisation-focused-learning-report.pdf>; Alliance2015 (n.d.) <https://www.alliance2015.org/project/due-diligence-passporting-advancing-equitable-partnerships/>; Humentum (2024) <https://alnep.org/help-library/resources/charter-for-change-due-diligence-passporting-tool/>).



One senior humanitarian working for an INGO, one of the first INGOs to work on passporting, told us:



'There are now so many passport initiatives that a community of practice on passporting was established, but there seems to be some kind of competition. My passporting, your passporting. Is it passporting? Is it harmonisation? What is the starting point for due-diligence passporting? Is it to increase the efficiency of many INGOs? Then that's a different conversation. Or is it to reduce the burden of LNAs and support them in accessing funding?'

Multiple initiatives tried to move practice towards risk-sharing. Evidence suggested there was limited donor coordination on risk-sharing in this period, however, and that collaboration tended to occur within bilateral chains rather than across donors (or across a single donor's multiple partners).⁹³ The Netherlands Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Dutch Relief Alliance conducted a risk-sharing pilot with L/NGOs in three contexts – Yemen, the Democratic Republic of the Congo and Ethiopia – which highlighted good practices. This included conducting risk-sharing dialogues with local partners and other stakeholders, using the Global Risk Sharing Framework developed under the Grand Bargain's Risk Sharing Platform,^{xi} to develop joint action plans on risk management.⁹⁴ But when asked whether institutions took any steps to share risks with partners, 33.9% of Grand Bargain signatories did not respond; those who did reported that donors often framed shared risk management primarily as compliance with their accountability and due-diligence requirements (but see [Chapter 3.1](#) for some positive examples).⁹⁵



Evidence suggested there was limited donor coordination on risk-sharing in this period



Beyond the system: informal response ecosystems

Mutual aid and approaches to supporting it, such as support to community-led responses (sclr), are not emerging concepts.^{xii} Communities began organising, supporting one another and mobilising collectively long before the birth of the formal humanitarian system; indeed, it is 'as old as humans'.

xi The Risk Sharing Platform was established in 2021 and co-led by the Netherlands Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) and InterAction. It brought together Grand Bargain signatories – including national and international NGOs, Red Cross/Red Crescent actors, UN agencies and government donors – to improve how organisations identify and share risk (see Government of Netherlands et al. (2023) <https://reliefweb.int/report/world/risk-sharing-framework-enhancing-impact-humanitarian-action-through-improved-risk-sharing>).

xii ALNAP defines mutual aid as the self-forming, self-organised and voluntary actions through which individuals, families and communities support one another during crises, rooted in local networks and resources, and often remaining unrecognised and unsupported by the international humanitarian system. Sclr is an approach that connects external funding to community action; it should be treated as a structured method for supporting mutual aid, rather than synonymous with it (see Posada and Ahimbisibwe (2025) <https://alnnap.org/help-library/resources/supporting-mutual-aid-what-the-evidence-tells-us-pdf/>).



Communities began organising, supporting one another and mobilising collectively long before the birth of the formal humanitarian system



Definitions and understandings of mutual aid and sclr differ across contexts, cultures and communities themselves though. They may refer to connectedness, solidarity, reciprocity, collective responsibility or simply the fundamental human instinct to care for one another during times of crisis. These concepts are expressed far more meaningfully by communities themselves, reflecting deeply rooted local histories, values and social ecosystems of support.⁹⁶ However, these approaches received increased attention within formal humanitarian debates during this period – driven partly by growing

frustrations among LNAs and reform-oriented organisations with the limitations, bureaucracy, unequal power dynamics and localisation failures, and partly by a tendency in some international policy debates to frame such approaches as a potential ‘silver bullet’ to widening funding cuts.

Local to Global Protection (L2GP) worked on and documented practical experiences on mutual aid and sclr during this period.⁹⁷ Several organisations like Christian Aid and other peer agencies that are part of L2GP (including Dan Church Aid, Act Church of Sweden, Ecosystems Work for Essential Benefits in the Philippines⁹⁸ and East Jerusalem Young Men Christian Association)⁹⁹ have been implementing sclr programming since 2016.¹⁰⁰ Citizen to Citizen Ethiopia (C2C) worked with over 360 mutual-aid groups and funded over 500 community-led initiatives to address local crises.¹⁰¹ Our research team in Gaza noted that localised community structures, including women-led groups, filled coordination gaps. In one Rafah shelter, women organised gender-separated queues, prioritised vulnerable groups (including people living with disabilities and elders) and banned photography to protect privacy: practices described as ‘community efforts, not foreign impositions’. In Idlib, a locally led psychosocial rehabilitation and vocational training initiative led to the establishment of Tawasol Café – Syria’s first café managed by individuals with Down syndrome – which not only strengthened participants’ confidence and independence but also shifted community attitudes and created new support networks among families and caregivers.¹⁰²

In Sudan, Emergency Response Rooms (ERRs) expanded from their roots as neighbourhood initiatives in Khartoum in 2023 to more than 700 community-based groups across the country, becoming critical lifelines for highly localised assistance during the conflict. ERRs gained international recognition, including winning the 2025 Chatham House Prize in March 2026.¹⁰³ Our interviewees in Sudan described mutual-aid groups as agile and legitimate, particularly in places international actors found hard to reach and besieged areas, and emphasised that they needed tailored support without forcing them into formal structures. Even where INGOs engaged,





some interviewees explained that donor vetting, compliance requirements and neutrality could limit or prevent their collaboration with informal groups. The UK more than doubled the proportion of funding directly allocated to Sudanese local aid groups from £6 million (approximately US\$8 million) to £15 million (approximately US\$20 million)¹⁰⁴ – including to ERRs – through the Mutual Aid Sudan Coalition (MASC),¹⁰⁵ channelling funding directly to frontline responders. Furthermore, funding ERRs was reportedly highly cost effective (US\$0.95 of every US\$1 reached local actors) and fast (typically reaching communities within two weeks).¹⁰⁶

Lessons and evidence on mutual-aid efforts were increasingly documented across a range of crisis contexts. In Haiti, the Hand in Hand Consortium documented how community-based organisations in the Grand’Anse and Sud regions used microgrants following the 2021 earthquake to support cash-for-work activities, unconditional cash transfers, psychosocial assistance and aid distributions. Participants considered the approach more transparent, participatory, inclusive, efficient and better adapted to community needs than traditional humanitarian assistance.¹⁰⁷ Following the 2023 Türkiye earthquakes, an impact study by Diakonie and the Turkish NGO Support to Life documented the scale and perceived effectiveness of sclr approaches: by 2024, the programme had funded 379 community-led projects, reached more than 216,000 people and mobilised over 2,000 community members, and 84% of surveyed participants reported improved disaster preparedness.¹⁰⁸

In Ukraine, Christian Aid’s flexible small grants and sclr programming distributed more than £881,000 (approximately US\$1.1 million)¹⁰⁹ through 221 microgrants during the first six months of Russia’s full-scale invasion, supporting initiatives from emergency relief to greenhouse projects to wellbeing activities. Local groups reported strong ownership and pride in their initiatives; one learning paper reflected that ‘the process was a lesson in humility’ as humanitarian actors ‘let go of control and put their trust in communities’.¹¹⁰ Resilio Fund (still in the startup phase) also supported sclr, according to our interviewees, providing 588 microgrants to 580 community-led responses between August and December 2025.

The IAHE on localisation in the Covid-19 response noted that complementarity often comes with a degree of tension and that the added value of localised mutual aid and solidarity networks stems largely from their anchorage outside of established systems, as well as their ability to achieve a level of operational agility less common among more mainstream actors.¹¹¹ An evaluation synthesis on lessons for future pandemics and global crises highlighted examples where localised mutual aid and solidarity networks worked alongside the international response in Bangladesh, Colombia, Pakistan, Somalia and Syria.¹¹²

ALNAP’s evidence on supporting mutual aid mapped the relationship between the international humanitarian system and mutual-aid initiatives through which



communities support one another. The study found that demand-led, flexible, risk-sharing external support can enhance the impact of mutual aid by strengthening what it already does well. However, it also highlighted that external support could replicate top-down practices when actors revert to established ways of working, putting solidarity and community-led structures at risk. While the study identified important findings, it also emphasised that much of the existing evidence is self-reported. As mutual aid received increasing attention across the humanitarian sector during this SOHS period, additional independent evidence would help strengthen the evidence base and inform decision-making.¹¹³

Interviews and literature also warned that mutual aid and approaches to support it such as sclr may be at a 'critical juncture' in which rapid mainstreaming could lead to dilution rather than genuine transformation. System shocks, including loss of access and a major funding decline that 'slightly humbled the system', reinforced the narrative that international actors should support rather than lead. This opened some space for flexibility and funding diversification. At the same time, questions emerged around whether conventional coordination mechanisms and accountability tools could engage with community-led practices without turning support into control. One humanitarian working for an INGO on sclr reflected:

Sclr may be at a 'critical juncture' in which rapid mainstreaming could lead to dilution rather than genuine transformation

'When does coordination become control? Because when you hear things like "we need to track", "we need to map", "we need to know who's doing what" – it all starts with "we need"... 'we' being the coordination body, which is broadly representative of international actors.'

The impulse to translate community-led practice into tracking and targets also showed up in high-level reform spaces, where progress was often framed in terms of system metrics rather than recognising what communities already do. One senior humanitarian cited an example from the Grand Bargain conference, where a community representative from southern Philippines shared how they used mutual aid to recover after Typhoon Odette:

'That example sat alongside presentations about survey methodologies, donor pillars, INGO percentage targets. One person, one paragraph, one community showing what was already there and already working, while the rest of the conference was the formal [humanitarian] system measuring its own progress toward doing what that community already does naturally. So the system keeps measuring itself.'



Before an external agency arrives to respond to a crisis, communities already know whose house can be used as shelter, who cannot leave because of an elderly parent and who people listen to as leaders. A representative of a philanthropic organisation said:



'The community already had a system. It had a name, a history and trust built into it. It worked.'

Yet humanitarian responses often tried to rebuild these systems from scratch – through community volunteers, feedback mechanisms and mapping exercises – without asking what is already there, sometimes disrupting what was already functioning. The challenge, according to one humanitarian working in the Middle East and North Africa region, is that:



'Supporting grassroots, informal, and unregistered groups requires significant time, proximity, trust, relational work, and lots of unlearning.'

There were warnings that mutual-aid approaches risked becoming easily co-opted and folded back into conventional humanitarian approaches centred on formalisation, legitimisation and scale – even when, as one interviewee said, scale 'is not necessarily the right value for those approaches'. Our interviewees who worked directly on sclr as an approach to support mutual aid emphasised the importance of 'scaling out, not scaling up', warning that scaling up could damage organic approaches. Instead, interviewees reflected on the importance of geographic breadth, horizontal expansion through networks and ecosystems, and moving resources through existing community structures rather than growing individual organisations.



There were warnings that mutual-aid approaches risked becoming easily co-opted and folded back into conventional humanitarian approaches centred on formalisation, legitimisation and scale



Several interviewees stressed that mutual-aid initiatives must retain the agency to decide whether they want to grow, remain informal or dissolve once a specific purpose or crisis has passed. These groups already had their own forms of accountability, trust, communication and social legitimacy within their communities, which did not necessarily align with formal humanitarian systems and compliance. One humanitarian working on sclr said:



'What is most important with mutual aid is the process itself. What happens in that relationship when communities work together and have to take joint decisions on priorities? The democratic space, the equal opportunities, and so on.'



Engagement with broader ecosystems also required complementarity and coherence between the central state, subnational authorities and the humanitarian system. Yet the state often appeared marginal or bypassed in humanitarian analysis and evaluations. Meaningful ecosystem engagement will require the humanitarian system to engage more deliberately with political and governance dynamics,¹¹⁴ while recognising both the role and limitations of existing state structures.¹¹⁵

Evaluation evidence from this period suggested that responses were generally more effective where humanitarian actors complemented, rather than substituted, government leadership.

In the Türkiye–Syria earthquake response, the IAHE concluded that a one-size-fits-all approach predicated on a humanitarian response in a country with limited government capacity is no longer appropriate. For example, the

initial Development Assistant Committee (DAC) coordination structure did not capitalise on existing in-country structures and was not adapted to suit a middle-income country like Türkiye that had a strong government with considerable disaster-response capacity.¹¹⁶ In contrast, in Mozambique, effective partnership with government contributed to the swift containment of a cholera outbreak.¹¹⁷ Evaluations of the Covid-19 response found that governments were in the driving seat, with humanitarian agencies playing a complementary, supporting role, while pre-existing relationships with ministries were essential to good collaboration and coordination.¹¹⁸ In Haiti, UNICEF accompanied the government, rather than acting in its place, creating synergy with line ministries and the Civil Protection Agency.¹¹⁹



Responses were generally more effective where humanitarian actors complemented, rather than substituted, government leadership



Where humanitarian actors substituted for state systems, the outcomes were problematic. In Afghanistan, the parallel role assumed by the international system provided no clear pathway to the recovery of state systems,¹²⁰ while in Yemen, the UN and its partners were at times like a ‘shadow government’, with basic social infrastructure ‘hanging by a thread’.¹²¹ In the Ethiopia drought response, the government’s active leadership role and close integration with the international humanitarian response was widely seen as key to success.¹²² While in Northern Ethiopia, the IAHE found that the UN system did not redefine its terms of engagement as the government became a party to an armed conflict, which contributed to a deeply compromised response.¹²³

Colonial legacies and power dynamics

As discussed throughout this chapter, making progress on sharing power with local actors through the international humanitarian system, or working



Working appropriately with domestic locally led ecosystems of support requires that the coordinated system thinks and works in different ways



appropriately with domestic locally led ecosystems of support, requires that the coordinated system thinks and works in different ways. The 2022 SOHS highlighted growing calls for international actors to think more about the colonial legacies that can influence the structure, functions and cultures of both individual organisations and the coordinated international system.

In this 2022–25 period, several actors argued that localisation commitments rarely went far enough, and that a stronger focus on decolonisation was needed to better grapple with issues of power and racism. For example, Peace Direct warned that localisation was being reduced to a technocratic exercise that almost completely neglected structural racism and colonial legacies, leaving the humanitarian system looking at the inequities in the system with one eye closed.¹²⁴ Organisations and academics also continued to debate definitions of decolonisation and its relationship with localisation. Christian Aid offered the distinction that localisation referred to an operational shift to local actors (but remained constrained by donor priorities), whereas decolonisation was a radical critique of colonial and neocolonial power structures that aimed to dismantle racial capitalism, knowledge hierarchies and dehumanising structures.¹²⁵

Beyond the issues already discussed about inequitable international–local partnerships and the under-recognition of locally led ecosystems of support, research pointed to markers of colonial legacies shaping the international humanitarian system from the top down. For example, ‘Western’ donors largely remained the most active in areas they previously colonised¹²⁶ and provided higher volumes of earmarked funding when their own nationals held executive leadership positions.¹²⁷ The people who held the most senior decision-making positions in the system were typically not from contexts affected by crisis. For example, the position of Emergency Relief Coordinator – the international system’s most senior humanitarian official – was held by six consecutive British nationals over 2007–25.¹²⁸

In this period, several INGOs and NGO networks developed decolonial and anti-racist frameworks and practical tools to assess power at organisational levels. Peace Direct established an internal Decolonising Systems Working Group to advance the decolonisation agenda.¹²⁹ Start Network’s 2025 review of its Anti-Racism and Decolonisation Framework provided lessons on successes, failures and challenges,¹³⁰ noting limited integration of the Framework into organisational processes.¹³¹ Christian Aid critically reflected on its ‘traditional’ top-down evaluation practice and aimed to take a decolonial approach, starting with



community-led priorities, values and knowledge.¹³² Beyond frameworks, there was limited evidence of progress in addressing colonial legacies to move commitments on localisation and accountability to affected populations towards changes in institutional behaviour. Indeed, the evaluation synthesis conducted for this report found little direct evidence on decolonisation in this period, suggesting that the humanitarian system did not systematically aim to address or measure it as a goal or performance marker.



There was limited evidence of progress in addressing colonial legacies to move commitments on localisation and accountability to affected populations towards changes in institutional behaviour



The relationship between localisation and decolonisation remained contested, reflected in the limited progress of key localisation commitments.

The Grand Bargain lacked a clear, enforceable definition of localisation, allowing INGOs to qualify as local partners; Charter4Change recognised power dynamics but fell short on 'Global North' willingness to relinquish power. The Pledge for Change advanced dialogue on power imbalances and established the Pledge for Change Accountability and Learning Mechanism (PALM) in early 2024.¹³³ However, with leadership and resources still concentrated among UN agencies and INGOs, it remained shaped by the hierarchies it sought to dismantle.¹³⁴

Some research in this period suggested ways for the humanitarian system to improve how it puts decolonisation into practice. For example, an ODI Global report recommended several measures: appointing heads of organisations from the communities they are mandated to serve, setting a minimum standard for at least 50% of top leadership executives and advisory boards to represent communities impacted by crisis, championing strategies to transfer power to local organisations led by refugees or internally displaced people, working with local experts to apply decolonial assessments of programming and evaluation, and developing a practice of leadership and middle management centring marginalised and most-impacted voices.¹³⁵

Progress on decolonising support has not proved straightforward, however. Research noted that efforts in this period to challenge existing structures often generated resistance and apprehension towards how such changes were enacted.¹³⁶ Indeed, our primary research suggested that discussions of decolonisation and colonial legacies often became sensitive and politically charged, further narrowing the already limited political will and space for constructive engagement by the UN, donors and humanitarian actors not working on the decolonisation agenda.



There were also concerns that, without political will and meaningful commitments to change, decolonisation aims would stall or be diluted and co-opted. Plan International Belgium acknowledged that superficial use of the term decolonisation allowed 'Western' aid organisations to maintain relevance without making any substantive changes.¹³⁷

Similarly, some of our interviewees argued:



'[Decolonisation] was hijacked by reductionist stuff, like localisation and [diversity, equity and inclusion], as a solution.'



'[The] localisation and decolonisation debate is primarily championed by those who are a barrier to both.'

Some interviewees felt that those who continued to control resources and decision-making were one reason why commitments kept failing around localisation and accountability to affected populations.

The language the international system uses when it talks about decolonisation also risks being exclusive to local actors and people affected by crisis. Definitions of decolonisation, localisation and accountability are framed and debated in English, making them less accessible, engaging and conversational for local actors and communities. For example, the usual Arabic translation of 'localisation' carries connotations similar to 'resettlement programme', while the Arabic translation of 'accountability' carries legal connotations, particularly in relation to transitional justice. In Colombia, challenges that arise from translating terms into Spanish exclude local actors from the debate and, if not properly contextualised, maintain power asymmetries.¹³⁸ This was evident in our in-country research: our teams struggled to engage interviewees – both aid practitioners and recipients – on decolonisation; many were either unfamiliar with the term or found it too abstract, limiting the extent to which their perspectives could be reflected.



Without political will and meaningful commitments to change, decolonisation aims would stall or be diluted and co-opted



Throughout this period, frustration grew around the lack of meaningful progress on localisation and slow recognition of the vital role of locally led structures of support. The system will need to continue to grapple with these questions and tensions in the coming SOHS period.



Conclusion

A decade on from the Grand Bargain, the evidence suggests that the debate has shifted: from whether localisation matters to what kind of localisation the humanitarian system intends to create. Several interviewees reflected that the next wave of reform may emerge under different names but will ultimately continue to grapple with many of the same questions.

If the humanitarian system is to make meaningful progress on its localisation commitments, greater attention will need to be given not only to funding flows and institutional commitments, but also to how international actors engage with, support and learn from the wider ecosystem of local actors, community-led responses, mutual-aid initiatives, intermediary models and state institutions that they already rely upon. This will require shifts in institutional cultures, incentives and political courage to translate commitments into practice, alongside stronger accountability and enforcement mechanisms, including greater transparency, public reporting and clearer consequences for failing to deliver.¹³⁹ Noticeable progress was made through new funding models, partnership approaches and greater recognition of locally led approaches, but enduring questions remained about power, colonial legacies, decision-making, trust and whose knowledge counts.

Enduring questions remained about power, colonial legacies, decision-making, trust and whose knowledge counts

ENDNOTES

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