ALNAP

SUPPORTING MUTUAL AID
WHAT THE EVIDENCE TELLS US

The Active Learning Network for Accountability and Performance in Humanitarian Action (ALNAP) is a global network for advancing humanitarian learning. Our goal is for all humanitarians to benefit from our sector's collective experience.

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Cover image: In the weeks following the devastating Cyclone Nargis in May 2008, survivors across the Irrawaddy Delta helped one another through the first days and weeks after losing relatives, homes, and livelihoods. Outside assistance only reached the more remote parts of the Delta after several weeks or months.
Credit: ©nilscarstensen, L2GP/DCA

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INTRODUCTION

The international humanitarian system[1] is facing unprecedented pressure. Politically motivated financial cuts are taking place amid rising global needs, and there are urgent questions about the future direction of the system (Chawla, 2025; Ground Truth Solutions, 2025). There is widespread discussion about 'resetting' and 'prioritising', but it is unclear what This means in practical terms (ICVA, 2025; Obrecht and Swithern, 2025). Will the system return to basics, or could this be the moment to structurally scale people-centred reform?

Some view localisation as a cost-effective strategy for constrained times, to meet escalating needs by working more closely with local actors. But progress on localisation reform over the past decade has been slow and, for many, disappointing (ALNAP, 2025a; Viswanathan, 2023). The proportion of direct funding to local actors has stagnated or declined, and there is concern that much of what has been labelled as progress replicates an unchanged international system at the national level (ALNAP, 2025b). This risks reproducing centralised, compliance-driven models that have long hindered genuine transformation, deepening international control (Khoury and Scott, 2024).

Communities are their own first, last and often most effective responders.

What about the existing efforts, informal systems and networks through which communities have always supported one another in times of crises, often without interference from the international humanitarian framework? 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.

This multi-year research, led by ALNAP in partnership with Local2Global, explores precisely these questions. Could the international system connect to truly locally led efforts? What happens when the conventional humanitarian system engages with and supports informal community-led initiatives?

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.

1 A working definition of the international humanitarian system is the network of interconnected institutional and operational entities through which humanitarian action is undertaken when local and national resources are, on their own, insufficient to meet the needs of a population in crisis (**ALNAP, 2024**).

Rooted in local networks and resources, such initiatives have existed for generations, but they remain largely unrecognised and unsupported by the international humanitarian system. Evidence shows, however, that embedded actions can deliver timely, relevant and sustainable assistance grounded in local realities (McLisky and Pittaway, 2025; Petitdemange and Hubert, 2025; Pidkurkova and Grünewald, 2025).

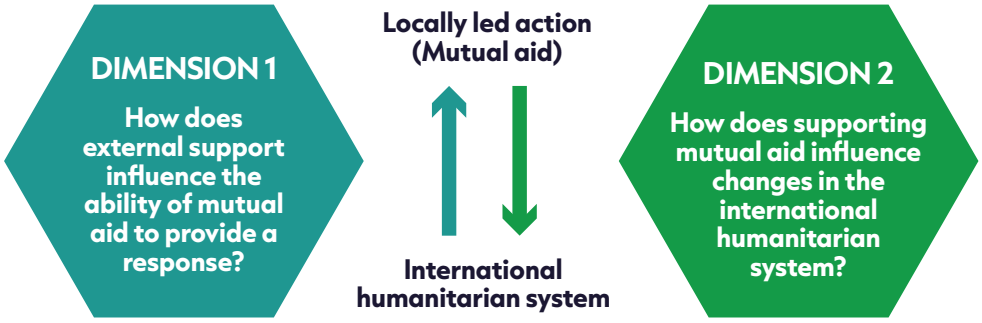
This begs the question: **What happens when international resources are used to support mutual aid efforts, and what can be learned from these experiences?**

Two dimensions frame this inquiry.

- **Dimension 1** examines whether external support to mutual aid positively or negatively influences the ability to meet the needs of at-risk populations. This speaks directly to the prioritisation challenge. **By supporting mutual aid, can the international system deliver assistance that is more responsive, efficient and grounded?**

- **Dimension 2** examines whether external support (from international non-governmental organisations (INGOs), donors, funders, and national and local organisations) contributes to meaningful changes in the systems and practices of the international humanitarian sector. Because mutual aid efforts function through different logics, timeframes and decision-making processes, in theory the conventional system may have to adapt and transform in fundamental ways to deliver effective support. This is central to the system resetting debate. **Does supporting mutual aid provide a pathway to transformation?**[2]

Figure 1. Connecting international funding and mutual aid: key research dimensions

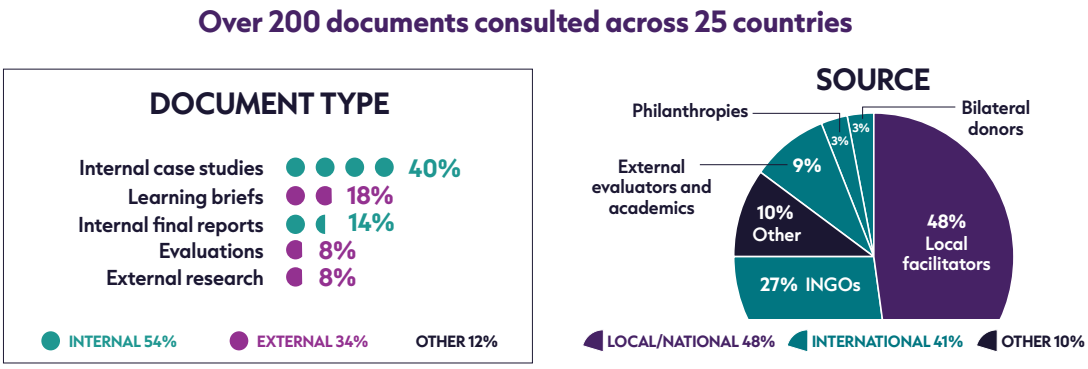


2 We use 'systems change' to mean the potential transformation of the underlying structures, processes, relationships and norms that shape how international humanitarian assistance is designed, funded and delivered. Our analysis focuses on whether supporting mutual aid might indirectly contribute to changes within the international humanitarian system. Specifically, this research examines the adaptations and modifications undertaken by those providing support to mutual aid, and the extent to which these changes influence broader institutional practices and relationships.

Before examining these questions through primary data collection, we must first understand the current evidence base. This report represents that initial step – we map what is already known, key gaps and directions for subsequent research phases.

We collected available evidence on the learnings, changes and outcomes resulting from international support to mutual aid efforts. Our initial assumption, based on conversations with those involved in such support, was that little has been documented, with most being anecdotal. We used a targeted approach to also access internal, non-traditional learning resources, including those at local and national levels. Over 200 documents (learning briefs, evaluations, case studies and reports) were included in our analysis, spanning 25 countries. Most of these resources are internal documents, so examples and references are anonymised and referred to by country only to comply with data contributor agreements. **Annex 1** details the types and characteristics of the data collected, and our methodological approach.

Figure 2. Evidence snapshot: sources and document types in the review



This synthesis considers all forms of support, but most findings relate to an approach known as 'supporting community-led responses' (sclr) (see **Box 1**). Within sclr, and as reflected in the data, local and national NGOs facilitate between international organisations and mutual aid groups, enabling external support and shaping related outcomes. We refer to these NGOs as 'local facilitators'.[3] They are not mutual aid groups but they do channel support to them. The evidence shows that their role has extended beyond financial intermediaries, to also facilitate an approach that aims to amplify the intrinsic values of mutual aid.

Overall, our systemic review of this untapped segment of the literature reveals a promising outlook for connecting the international and locally led humanitarian systems. However, significant limitations in the evidence prevent us from making confident conclusions. The next phase of this research will focus on addressing some of those limitations. Independent assessments will be conducted of the

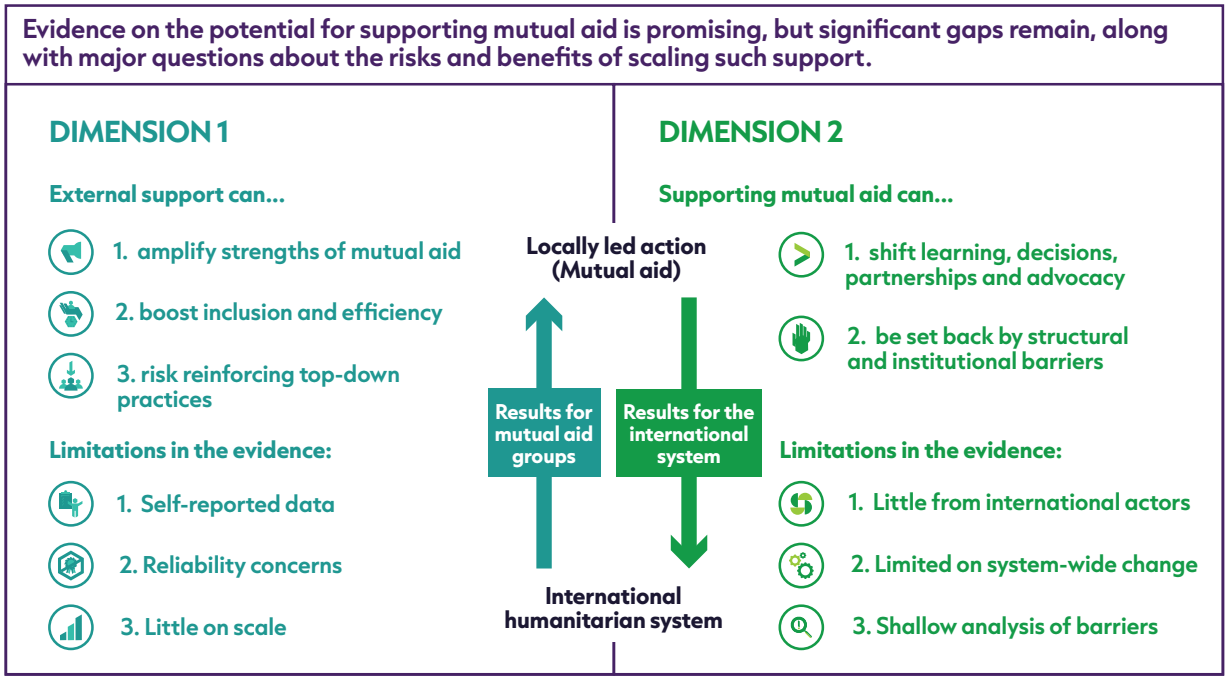
3 In sclr, these are typically known as facilitation agencies, and they enable and accompany mutual aid initiatives.

outcomes of supporting mutual aid, and whether such support can be scaled without compromising its effectiveness. We will also examine the risks of scaling, as well as system-level shifts necessary among those supporting mutual aid. This includes the different mechanisms that may be needed in philanthropic and bilateral funding to sustain flexibility and local ownership.

In the sections that follow, **Dimension 1** examines the results experienced by mutual aid groups and **Dimension 2** focuses on the results and adaptations experienced by those providing support.

KEY FINDINGS

Figure 3. Summary of key findings



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

FINDINGS:

- **External support can amplify the core strengths of mutual aid.**

  The data most frequently identified improvements for mutual aid groups relate to their ability to deliver quality responses that uphold dignity and relevance, which contributes to resilience and sustainability. While these qualities are inherent to mutual aid structures, the findings suggest that external support, when provided through key approaches, can reinforce these strengths and create space to amplify them. It is promising that flexible, community-led approaches like sclr appear to support these results, but concerns remain about the evidence base.

- **Results experienced by mutual aid groups challenge common assumptions about funding community-based structures.**

  Evidence suggests that approaches like sclr could strengthen the ability of groups to deliver responses that are accountable, inclusive and cost-efficient, thus addressing common concerns about funding locally led or informal groups. Support that reinforces existing, community-owned initiatives and prioritises communal over individual objectives is frequently associated with positive results.

- **External support risks replicating top-down practices**

  Although few unintended consequences have been documented, potentially due to confirmation bias,4 some challenges are noted in the evidence. These are often linked to external factors, such as traditional systems at broader humanitarian and government levels, which have complicated the functioning of sclr. Other internal challenges relate to implementation and full absorption of the approach. These issues have often emerged when practices have reverted to previous ways of working.

LIMITATIONS IN THE EVIDENCE:

- **Self-reported data dominates.**

  Much data is self-reported and overwhelmingly positive, raising questions about potential bias. Many evaluations and learning briefs are authored by organisations closely involved in promoting sclr or similar approaches, with a vested interest in their success. Complementary independent evaluations are needed, alongside a 'safe-to-fail' culture among those involved that encourages transparent reporting of negative outcomes or unintended consequences.

- **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. This is why we refer to results, immediate outcomes and learning, not impact. Much evidence reflects valuable local insights, but the ways that learning is captured and communicated varies. This makes it difficult to assess attribution or consistency across contexts. While traditional linear reporting may not be appropriate, even flexible methods require clearer articulation of how activities contribute to results. Local facilitators could be supported to capture and communicate more useful and understandable evidence, while maintaining a locally led learning approach.

- **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 such support be scaled while maintaining positive results? What risks accompany scaling, and how can they be mitigated? This also raises questions about system-level changes for donors and intermediaries: do funding modalities for philanthropies and bilateral donors need to shift to preserve qualities of ownership, adaptability and foresight?

4 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.

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

FINDINGS:

- **The most common changes documented by those providing support to mutual aid groups have been in how they learn, make decisions, partner and advocate.**

  There are examples of changes and adaptations within sclr programming, along with some limited instances of these changes influencing broader organisational or institutional practices. Some also reflect on the benefits and outcomes associated with these changes. However, the evidence remains fairly general and lacks depth in terms of changes to processes, tools, protocols and workflows.

- **It is unclear how those supporting mutual aid have adapted their monitoring, reporting, compliance, accountability or funding mechanisms.**

  This is surprising, as evidence from Dimension 1 suggests that adaptations in these areas must have occurred to enable the flexibility, the demand-led approaches and the power-sharing practices associated with many of the results. There is minimal insight into broader organisational or institutional changes. However, some early indications suggest that adaptations in these rigid procedural areas may signal deeper shifts in power and institutional norms, even if such changes are not yet systematically documented.

- **The limited evidence hints at structural barriers to why external actors might not be changing their systems.**

  Several challenges to systems change are identified in the evidence, including institutional reluctance to relinquish power, reliance on individual champions, internal scepticism and the time-intensive nature of adopting sclr. Financial dependency, rigid compliance systems, entrenched paradigms and legal constraints can also limit the potential for deeper shifts.

LIMITATIONS IN THE EVIDENCE:

- **Overall, there is limited evidence on the results experienced by external actors.**

  There is little systematic evidence on learning and adaptation among those providing support. This restricts understanding of the potential for systems-level change. Is this knowledge gap influenced by a lack of 'safe-to-fail' learning in a highly competitive financial environment? Is this simply an area that has not been considered relevant to document and to share lessons on? Efforts are needed to expand the evidence here.

- **Minimal evidence exists from donors, funders and international actors.**

  Most evidence comes from local facilitators. This gap is particularly significant considering sclr's emphasis on learning and reflection – principles that are widely applied at the local level but less so among those who have the capacity and responsibility to leverage their influence for systemic reform at the global level. 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. Strengthening learning and documentation at all levels is a priority to assess the potential for systems change.

- **Barriers to systems change are insufficiently understood.**

  Concerns have been raised about power dynamics and institutional resistance that can complicate systems change, but few sources analyse these barriers or offer solutions. These remain essential areas for investigation to understand how scaling support to mutual aid will interact with these barriers.

BOX 1: WHAT IS SCLR?

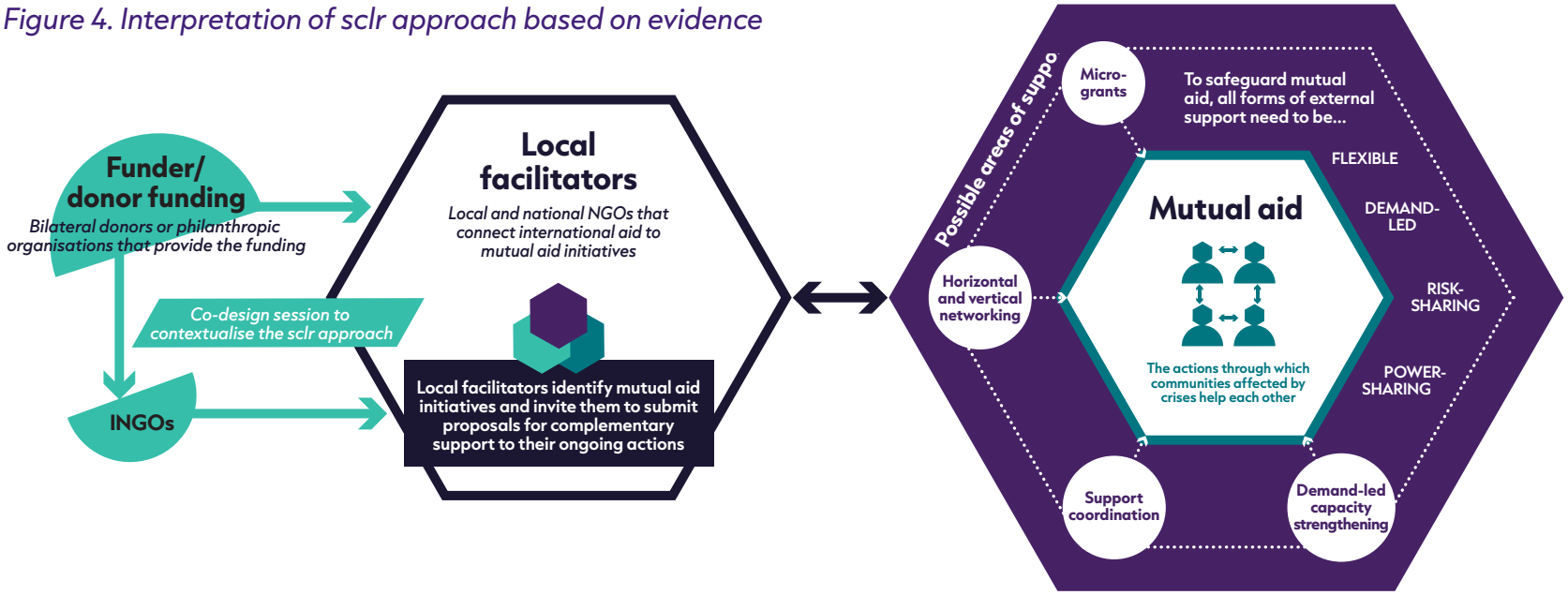
Supporting community-led response – or sclr – is an approach that connects international funding to mutual aid efforts in humanitarian contexts. While the term has sometimes been used interchangeably with 'survivor- and community-led response', we treat sclr as a structured method for supporting mutual aid, rather than synonymous with mutual aid itself.

Sclr emphasises local ownership, responsiveness, connectivity, power sharing, social cohesion, flexibility and complementarity with traditional aid. It is designed to be adaptable across different contexts, aiming to support immediate humanitarian response and longer-term resilience. But there remains some confusion and lack of consensus: what does sclr constitute in practice, does what it support always counts as mutual aid, and is it still a single approach given the flexibility and adaptation required in each context?

Across the evidence reviewed, sclr typically functions as follows. An international donor or funder (INGO, philanthropic organisation or bilateral agency) allocates funding for an sclr project in-country; a local or national NGO acts as a facilitator, participating in a co-design process to align the approach with local realities and agree core principles. Next, existing mutual aid efforts are identified through appreciative inquiry, a participatory method that focuses on actions that communities are already taking, and efforts build from there.

Mutual aid groups can then submit simple, flexible proposals for support. This may include unearmarked microgrants, demand-led capacity sharing, coordination support, and efforts to foster horizontal and vertical connections. Groups do not need to be registered formally and they typically have a collective, community-oriented objective. The process is intended to strengthen initiatives that communities already lead, while encouraging those providing support to 'unlearn' traditional, top-down ways of working. Although groups may receive multiple rounds of support, sclr is designed to promote resilience and reduce long-term dependency on aid.

Figure 4. Interpretation of sclr approach based on evidence



DIMENSION 1:

THE RESULTS FOR MUTUAL AID GROUPS RECEIVING EXTERNAL SUPPORT

Figure 5. Summary of key findings for Dimension 1

Humanitarian actors are facing pressure to re-prioritise as humanitarian needs intensify. Therefore, it is essential to understand whether external support to mutual aid – through microgrants, horizontal and vertical networking, and demand-led capacity sharing – can enhance the capacity of locally led action and the ability to better serve communities. It is also important to consider how such support might undermine those efforts.

We applied diverse criteria to investigate the experience of sclr by mutual aid groups, incorporating conventional concerns in constrained contexts, such as cost-efficiency and timeliness. We have also considered areas emphasised by international actors (eg accountability and inclusion) alongside categories central to people-centred action (eg quality and dignity, relevance, sustainability and resilience). These areas align with localisation indicators, drawing on specific frameworks: the Humanitarian Advisory Group's Localization Impacts Tracking Framework (HAG, 2019), ALNAP's adapted Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) evaluation criteria (ALNAP, 2025c), and the guiding principles of sclr (Local2Global, 2024).

The objective was to identify what evidence is being captured, how it is being captured, which changes are associated with the support provided, and where

there are significant limitations in the evidence. Our analysis was guided by an initial set of categories, but ultimately the data itself brought to life trends and emerging results under this dimension.

There is a substantial body of evidence on the changes and results experienced by mutual aid groups from external support. Importantly, the evidence commonly associates positive changes and results with characteristics of the approach used by external actors to provide support. This is particularly true for the flexibility of sclr, its demand-led nature and emphasis on collective benefit. Overall, the findings are quite promising; however, there are some significant limitations with the evidence available.

External support can strengthen the capacity of mutual aid groups to continue operating, adapt to challenges and remain effective over time, while reducing dependence on external actors.

As noted previously, much of the evidence consists of internal reports and documents – we refer to these only as country examples and have maintained the anonymity of authors and organisations, according to our data collection agreement.

1.1 RESILIENCE AND SUSTAINABILITY

The result area that features most commonly in the evidence concerns how external support can strengthen the capacity of mutual aid groups to continue operating, adapt to challenges and remain effective over time, while reducing dependence on external actors. This contribution is broadly understood as enhancing the ability of mutual aid groups to deliver resilient and sustainable responses.

When communities lead their own responses organically, they tend to integrate recovery and resilience as long-term concerns rooted in their proximity and belonging to the context. Mutual aid, even without external support, often demonstrates a strong orientation towards resilience and sustainability. When external support respects and champions the fluid and flexible nature of mutual aid decision-making, it can reinforce rather than undermine this orientation.

The evidence points to three ways through which sclr or similar approaches contribute to the delivery of resilient and sustainable responses through mutual aid:

- **Forward-looking, demand-led support drives resilience – This includes the provision of flexible financial and technical support, especially microgrants linked to livelihoods and organisational capacity strengthening. Such support allows groups to reinforce their resilience during the period of engagement and sustain themselves afterwards.**
- **Supporting long-term thinking enhances independence – Beyond addressing immediate needs, external support can also enable and encourage mutual**

aid groups to focus on risk management, preparedness and non-traditional humanitarian initiatives. This support nurtures the 'triple gain' of survival, recovery and resilience that is inherent to mutual aid, with several cases indicating that groups have incorporated sclr practices into their future independent work.

- Strengthening connections and collective action facilitates durability – External support can facilitate vertical and horizontal connections that enhance access to resources, legitimacy and long-term planning for mutual aid efforts. These connections also catalyse collective action and cooperation, helping communities build social cohesion, increase self-reliance and reduce dependence on external actors.

Despite the largely positive results associated with sclr and similar approaches, several challenges complicate the sustainability and resilience of mutual aid efforts. A major issue is the need for systems change among supporting actors: donors, INGOs, and local or national NGOs must shift their mindsets, systems and processes to effectively support mutual aid. However, these changes are often resource-intensive, slow to cascade and may initially replicate legacy practices that undermine resilience. Additionally, even when actors internalise the methodology, they frequently face external tensions around compliance and top-down humanitarian approaches. This is in their interactions with other agencies, within their own organisations and in the communities they serve. Where there are national security concerns and restrictive policy environments, the evidence describes complications in identifying mutual aid efforts – and therefore in being able to support these efforts.

Donors, INGOs, and local or national NGOs must shift their mindsets, systems and processes to effectively support mutual aid.

In the following subsections we give examples of how support to mutual aid has affected resilience and sustainability.

1.1.1 FORWARD-LOOKING AND DEMAND-LED SUPPORT DRIVES RESILIENCE

The evidence shows that demand-led and flexible technical and financial support via international funding strengthens the resilience and sustainability of mutual aid. It is not just the availability of support, but also its responsiveness to community-identified needs and adaptability to changing contexts that matter.

A key practice has been to allow mutual aid groups to request tailored trainings and mentorship from supporters, which has had lasting benefits to their capacity to respond. The central argument is that the lived experience and embeddedness of mutual aid groups in local contexts positions them to identify the skills and resources needed for sustainability. In Afghanistan, women's self-help groups identified training needs ranging from leadership and enterprise development to

financial management and market linkages. In Sudan, mutual aid volunteers requested training on negotiation, cybersecurity and trauma support – highlighting the breadth of capacity needs in insecure environments.

Although many trainings have been demand-led, it is important to critically examine whether they truly centred on the needs of groups and communities or were shaped by what groups assumed are funder expectations. This raises concerns about the potential risk of training becoming an avenue for the 'NGO-isation'[5] of community efforts. Additionally, most evidence on capacity sharing remains uni-directional, with few cases describing local facilitators or their international counterparts requesting or receiving teachings from mutual aid groups.

Despite these concerns, the evidence does associate capacity-sharing efforts with tangible results – reducing the dependency of mutual aid groups on external aid, expanding their support networks and strengthening their resilience. A group in Palestine described their experience after a project ended: 'It is like raising a child. You pushed us to be able to do things on our own ... so we didn't feel left behind'. This sentiment reflects a broader trend. Groups felt empowered, not abandoned, when support ended, and capable of sustaining change independently.

It is not just the availability of support, but also its responsiveness to community-identified needs and adaptability to changing contexts that matter.

Another practice is the provision of unearmarked, flexible and community-managed microgrants. These enable groups to decide which initiatives matter most, even when they fall outside conventional humanitarian categories. Strikingly, across diverse contexts, many communities have consistently prioritised livelihood-related initiatives when given the freedom to choose, underscoring that populations affected by crisis seek long-term solutions and self-reliance, even during emergencies.

In the Philippines, an impact evaluation with over 70 community groups finds that 67% of microgrant-funded initiatives focused on livelihood recovery, followed by emergency relief and disaster risk reduction. Focus groups emphasised that autonomy in decision-making led to more sustainable outcomes: 'We realized that we need livelihood the most ... so that we can financially sustain ourselves'.

However, this emphasis on livelihoods may reflect familiarity rather than innovation. Some livelihood activities risk reverting to less effective approaches instead of exploring options better suited to emergency contexts. Moreover, the

5 NGO-isation refers to the process by which grassroots or community-led initiatives adopt the structures, practices and norms typical of conventional NGOs. This often includes professionalisation, bureaucratic procedures, and donor-driven priorities, which can shift the focus away from community-defined needs towards external expectations (**Lang, 2022**).

focus on livelihoods should be critically assessed against the collective orientation of sclr and mutual aid efforts. Sclr is designed to support initiatives with collective, community-wide objectives. Although livelihood activities can contribute to these goals, they often centre on individuals or households rather than the broader community.

1.1.2 SUPPORTING LONG-TERM THINKING ENHANCES INDEPENDENCE

The evidence shows that mutual aid efforts, by their nature, tend to incorporate long-term thinking into crisis response. Flexible external support can encourage and amplify this long-term orientation, contributing to preparedness, risk reduction, and the fostering of resilience and sustainability.

A central feature of this is the space sclr and similar approaches provide for risk reduction and preparedness initiatives. In India, flood-prone communities organised themselves to prioritise search and rescue preparedness, using microgrants for preparedness kits and related measures. This proactive choice strengthened communities' confidence and morale, shifting perceptions from helplessness to preparedness. One mutual aid group participant commented: 'We no longer feel helpless; instead, we are empowered to protect our loved ones and our livelihoods'. In a 2025 impact study in Turkey involving over 175 mutual aid group representatives, 84% of respondents reported microgrant support improved their communities' readiness for future disasters (Support to Life, 2025).

Mutual aid efforts, by their nature, tend to incorporate long-term thinking into crisis response.

Across the data, multiple benefits are reported for mutual aid groups when support has been flexible and when it has encouraged groups to focus on recovery and resilience simultaneously. The continuation of initiatives beyond the period of external support suggests this approach helps drive the sustainability of their response. In Palestine, mutual aid groups reported that their way of working persisted and even deepened after external actors exited, with some lobbying local governments to sustain or expand their initiatives. In Ukraine, several groups registered as legal entities to continue their work and fundraise locally. In the Philippines, 84% of community groups supported through microgrants remained operational one to three years after the intervention, showing the sustainability of locally driven recovery. That impact evaluation notes: 'Affected people were not treated solely as victims … but as active survivors capable of leading and sustaining their initiatives'.

1.1.3 STRENGTHENING CONNECTIONS AND PROMOTING COLLECTIVENESS FACILITATES DURABILITY

Mutual aid efforts benefit from their informal and context-specific nature, but groups commonly suffer from limited access to broader stakeholder networks. External support can meaningfully contribute to resilience and sustainability by fostering horizontal and vertical connections.

These connections have yielded positive results through multiple pathways. Partnerships have been facilitated with local governments, NGOs, coordination bodies and financial institutions, enabling mutual aid groups to access resources and decision-making spaces that would otherwise be out of reach. The most frequent vertical connection has been with local government agencies, which has enhanced legitimacy, supported integration into long-term planning, and strengthened the durability of community-led initiatives. In Ukraine, sclr connected mutual aid with local authorities. In turn, the local authorities supplemented community grants for home repairs, provided social services in response to needs raised by mutual aid groups, and began drafting formal cooperation agreements to strengthen preparedness for further conflict. In another region of the country, authorities partnered with a youth-led group to renovate a medical room after the group purchased surgical equipment for emergency procedures. These examples show how engagement with local government can evolve from ad hoc support to structured collaboration, reinforcing both immediate response and long-term resilience.

In some contexts, vertical connections have enabled communities to understand and claim their rights. This shift, from filling gaps to holding duty bearers accountable, is evident in places like the Philippines, India and Colombia. There, communities have organised campaigns, engaged in policy dialogue and advocated for services and entitlements. In Ethiopia, women's groups not only petitioned local authorities for improved seeds and working spaces, but they also demonstrated growing confidence to make decisions and demand services.

While these vertical connections have yielded many positive results, there is little evidence on how mutual aid groups have navigated or have been affected by traditional and rigid structures within those new relationships. Not all external stakeholders connected to these groups may be willing to apply the same level of flexibility or power sharing as those involved in sclr. Therefore, it is equally important to evaluate how stakeholders might introduce constraints or reinforce hierarchical dynamics.

Engagement with local government can evolve from ad hoc support to structured collaboration, reinforcing both immediate response and long-term resilience.

Horizontal connections have fostered cooperation and collective action. The evidence shows how sclr has catalysed collaboration, reinforcing the collective values already embedded in mutual aid. These values, often constrained by limited resources or recognition, have been expanded through sclr-supported initiatives that have strengthened shared responsibility and community agency. In Ethiopia, supporters fostered peer-to-peer learning and collaboration by encouraging horizontal linkages among community groups. This resulted in joint initiatives such as resource pooling, infrastructure maintenance, proposal development and experience sharing among multiple local actors.

Across contexts, participants describe transformative shifts resulting from these linkages – from fear and passivity to pride in leading planning, budgeting and implementation. However, the extent to which these new connections provide mutual aid groups with the flexibility they need to operate, or conversely push them towards formalisation, remains an open question.

1.2 QUALITY AND DIGNITY

The second most commonly identified result area is the role of external support in influencing the quality and, as a result, the dignity of the response that mutual aid groups provide. The data suggests that the quality of mutual aid initiatives is influenced by how support is provided, particularly when support emphasises mutual respect, power sharing, holistic approaches and community leadership.

The evidence points to three main ways in which sclr or similar approaches contribute to the quality and dignity of mutual aid efforts:

- **Holistic support provides psychosocial benefits – Initiatives have been supported to address material and psychosocial needs, including food, water, shelter and emotional well-being. Addressing both dimensions is essential in shaping how communities perceive the relevance and usefulness of aid.**
- **Enabling decision-making power encourages ownership and dignity – Community decision-making on resource management, initiative design, monitoring and accountability is associated with increased dignity, agency and ownership. National NGOs frequently highlight this shift as a defining feature of a quality response.**
- **Reinforcing community-driven and collective approaches increases social cohesion – Inclusive participation and collaboration is linked to stronger social cohesion. These dynamics improve how communities assess the legitimacy and effectiveness of initiatives.**

However, the data also surfaces a few challenges. In some cases, internal power dynamics have led to conflict, mismanagement or elite capture[6] – despite the presence of protocols intended to prevent such issues. There are also instances where community engagement has proved difficult to sustain, or where leadership structures have been contested. In a few cases, limited understanding or resistance to the sclr approach by facilitators and mutual aid groups appears to have compromised the quality of the response.

In the following subsections we give examples of how support to mutual aid has affected the quality and dignity of responses.

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

1.2.1 HOLISTIC SUPPORT PROVIDES PSYCHOSOCIAL BENEFITS

Support that enables holistic, community-led responses appears to shape the perceived quality of mutual aid initiatives. Often, sclr-supported efforts have addressed both immediate material needs (food, water, shelter) and psychosocial well-being – which communities describe as essential for support to be relevant and meaningful. The evidence describes psychosocial results that emerged indirectly through community-led projects like school renovations, street lighting and safe spaces for children, as well as directly through targeted activities such as trauma counselling, art therapy and women's support groups. These efforts are widely seen to have restored dignity, fostered belonging and improved morale, contributing to a deeper sense of recovery and cohesion.

Support that enables holistic, community-led responses appears to shape the perceived quality of mutual aid initiatives.

The process of collective action itself also appears to contribute to psychosocial well-being. Participating in planning, budgeting and implementation is frequently described as empowering communities, particularly for women and other marginalised groups. In Turkey, communities reported improved mental well-being and resilience due to exposure to social solidarity, even in projects that did not focus explicitly on psychosocial outcomes. In Iraq, joint activities brought together internally displaced persons, refugees and host communities, helping to overcome social divisions and build trust. In Sudan, psychosocial support was provided through group counselling, music and dialogue, particularly for those affected by conflict.

1.2.2 ENABLING DECISION-MAKING POWER ENCOURAGES OWNERSHIP AND DIGNITY

Across contexts, the data indicates that giving mutual aid groups decision-making power over support – particularly over resources, planning and implementation – shifts communities from passive recipients to active agents in their own recovery. This shift is frequently associated with increased dignity and ownership, thus improving the perceived quality of the response compared with traditional aid models where communities report feeling sidelined or disempowered.

This does not imply that mutual aid groups lack decision-making power over how they support one another in their own survival and response – their organic and self-formed nature means they already possess this authority. Instead, it refers to decisions about allocation and implementation that are often centralised at the international level. Shifting this power closer to communities and respecting the existing decision-making authority of mutual aid groups changes who controls resources and planning, rather than suggesting that communities were previously passive.

Participants have described a strong sense of dignity in leading their own initiatives. In India, one group emphasised the value of being able to 'seek support for precisely what we needed rather than adjusting to the aid provided by NGOs'. In evidence from Senegal, early and inclusive decision-making is linked to a high degree of ownership: 'The big difference between this project and others is that it belongs to us'.

Having the ability to manage one's own budget and set priorities is also highlighted as key in building a sense of ownership. In Myanmar, a local research team surveyed 105 community members who rated the sclr approach very highly. Respondents emphasised that sclr gave them the freedom to make decisions based on their own ideas and priorities. For many, it was the first time they had control over aid resources to implement initiatives they had identified and designed themselves. These experiences are often described as transformative – not only for the results achieved but for the confidence and independence fostered.

Perhaps most transformative, however, is the influence on improved dignity. In the evidence, participants frequently contrast sclr with disempowering aspects of traditional aid. By leading their own responses, communities feel respected, hopeful and proud, shifting from 'assistants' to 'actors'. Dignity is expressed through outputs – new latrines in Ethiopia or school repairs in Iraq – and through the process of being consulted and trusted to manage resources. This participation and decision-making power is as meaningful as the tangible results.

When people feel respected and proud, they volunteer more, organise better and sustain their initiatives.

Culturally relevant and locally driven decisions further reinforce well-being. Importantly, dignity is not just a byproduct of this transfer of power but a driver of quality itself. When people feel respected and proud, they volunteer more, organise better and sustain their initiatives.

1.2.3 COMMUNITY-DRIVEN AND COLLECTIVE SUPPORT INCREASES SOCIAL COHESION

A focus on collective and community-driven action appears to strengthen social cohesion. Across diverse contexts, when people worked together in mutual aid initiatives, they met urgent needs and also reshaped relationships within and across communities. In spaces where individuals collaborated on shared goals (such as repairing roads, restoring water systems or organising protection groups), sclr is associated with increased trust, solidarity and a sense of common purpose.

This collective element is noted particularly in contexts where divisions have existed. In Iraq and Syria, protection groups brought together refugees, internally displaced people and host communities who previously had limited

interaction. Jointly managing initiatives created opportunities for new relationships and empathy, as one Kurdish participant reflected: 'This was the first time we worked with refugees and IDPs … it was a very positive experience'.

Volunteerism is also a marker of cohesion. Groups describe how individuals contributed time, labour and personal resources beyond the original scope of a project, motivated by a sense of shared responsibility. In a powerful example from the Kenya–Ethiopia border, the promotion of inclusive participation is linked to social cohesion: one community donated over KSh 100,000 to help a neighbouring group relocate for safety.

Collective action may contribute to lasting cooperation, which enhances accountability, continuity and preparedness for future challenges.

These dynamics are not limited to the period of a project. In Haiti, diverse stakeholders – including authorities, religious leaders and grassroots groups – reportedly set aside their political and socio-economic differences to rebuild infrastructure, reinforcing community unity. Such examples suggest that collective action may contribute to lasting cooperation, which enhances accountability, continuity and preparedness for future challenges.

Despite many positive results linked to social cohesion, however, there are also cases where groups have faced significant internal tensions over resource management. In the Philippines, conflicts between leaders over the handling of microgrants escalated until the group split and project resources were divided. Similar disputes in other groups are linked to unclear policies and mistrust, sometimes resulting in complete dissolution of the initiative. These cases highlight that collective action requires clear governance and accountability mechanisms to prevent divisions. The relatively limited evidence on unintended consequences for social cohesion needs to be critically examined to understand if such tensions are more common than documented.

1.3 RELEVANCE

The third most frequently observed result area of supporting mutual aid is how it enhances the capacity of mutual aid groups to provide a response that aligns with communities' needs, priorities and contextual realities. There is some overlap with section 1.2 (since relevance also contributes to perceptions of response quality), but there is sufficient evidence for this to be discussed separately.

Relevance has long been a central goal of localisation. The evidence suggests that mutual aid, when supported appropriately, can help deliver on this promise. These improvements are not simply the result of funding, but of how support is provided: in ways that respect and respond to communities' existing efforts to help one another.

Across contexts, there are three interconnected ways that external support influences (largely positively) the relevance of responses delivered by mutual aid groups. These approaches enable communities to receive support that meets their immediate and longer-term needs, and that also enables them to shift from dependence towards self-reliance.

- **Flexibility enables contextualised response – Simplified processes and flexible decision-making allows mutual aid groups to tailor responses to evolving community priorities and conditions. In particular, the evidence emphasises flexibility around the types of initiatives proposed, the adaptation of activities to changing needs or security dynamics, and discretion in how microgrant funds are disbursed and used.**
- **Community involvement strengthens alignment – Relevance is associated with the degree of community participation and leadership in decision-making. The active role of communities in identifying and organising initiatives around their own strengths, needs, risks and capacities directly shapes more appropriate and accepted responses.**
- **Traditional and local knowledge informs creative solutions – Supporting mutual aid creates space for traditional practices and local knowledge to guide crisis responses. This not only enhances the creativity and adaptability of initiatives but also revives and amplifies long-standing forms of mutual support.**

We found limited evidence of negative unintended consequences associated with relevance. But this may reflect limitations in the overall data on reporting unintended consequences and potential risks linked to support. Where such consequences have occurred, they are connected primarily to the value of funds relative to needs – limited funds have sometimes constrained flexibility and have risked fuelling competition within communities.

There is a significant evidence gap on how scaling sclr approaches and funding might risk the relevance of results. When approaches are scaled, they can become institutionalised and systematised in ways that limit adaptability to context. This raises key questions: What are the potential risks of scaling sclr and support to mutual aid? And what measures need to accompany scaling to mitigate those risks?

In the following subsections we give examples of how support to mutual aid has affected the relevance of responses.

1.3.1 FLEXIBILITY ENABLES CONTEXTUALISED RESPONSE

Flexibility in how local facilitators and donors support mutual aid efforts improves the relevance of responses. This is evident in how facilitators, particularly local ones, have simplified protocols that have allowed groups to

focus on implementation and how they have introduced adaptive processes that have enabled changes during delivery. This contrasts with traditional humanitarian models that often impose procedural barriers.

The evidence consistently highlights three areas of flexibility in sclr, starting with appreciative inquiry and also proposal development. Groups describe being able to propose initiatives beyond conventional humanitarian sectors and submit proposals in locally adapted formats. This has enabled participation from actors typically excluded from formal programming. One Turkish actor noted, 'sclr is more flexible than other humanitarian aid activities ... communities can design initiatives for restoration, WASH [water, sanitation and hygiene], disaster preparedness, etc according to the needs they identify'.

In Ukraine, one initiative quickly shifted from repairing bomb shelters to repairing vehicles for evacuation after a planned shelter site was destroyed by bombing – a change that participants described as empowering because they could find practical solutions under extreme uncertainty. This adaptability is consistently reported as a strength of sclr, reinforcing community confidence and ownership.

Adaptability is consistently reported as a strength of sclr, reinforcing community confidence and ownership.

The third area is financial and procurement flexibility. In many contexts, financial restrictions and security risks have posed challenges for local actors. The willingness of sclr to adapt disbursement and monitoring systems to local realities is seen as essential. In Haiti, credit unions were used instead of banks to facilitate direct access to funds. In Sudan and Palestine, flexible procurement allowed groups to source items locally and securely. Trust between local facilitators and communities is cited repeatedly as enabling these adaptations.

Beyond operational benefits, flexibility also appears to influence perceptions of aid. For many groups, simplified but rigorous grantmaking was their first experience of formal proposal and budget preparation. While challenging, this marked a shift from being passive recipients to active decision-makers – and, in some cases, even grantmakers. A Ukrainian local intermediary commented, 'Though a challenge, this has also been an opportunity of transforming from an "aid recipient" to being the "ones in control"'.

Flexibility improves relevance by allowing facilitators and donors to adapt systems and processes to local realities. Yet there is also a tension around flexibility that is not captured in the evidence. As sclr or similar approaches scale and more actors become involved, flexibility could be stretched to the point where the core aim is lost of connecting to mutual aid and of providing demand-led support. This raises questions about how flexible these approaches should be and whether minimum standards are needed to safeguard relevance.

1.3.2 COMMUNITY INVOLVEMENT STRENGTHENS ALIGNMENT

The active involvement of community members is identified repeatedly in the evidence as key to ensuring the relevance of sclr-supported responses. Rather than engaging only a few leaders, sclr emphasises broad and inclusive participation, especially of those often excluded from decision-making. This has helped align initiatives with the social and technical realities of communities affected by crisis.

Mutual aid groups are inherently integrated within their communities; however, this section addresses engagement of the wider community, including individuals outside the groups themselves.

The identification by communities of skills, needs and risks through sclr approaches influences relevance. This approach has shifted the focus from deficits to assets, and it has helped build trust between communities and supporting agencies. A participant in Iraq explained, 'When you do something through the community, you get their trust, and they will protect the projects you do with them'. In Sudan, communities identified risks, prioritised initiatives, managed budgets and accounted directly to their peers – practices that reinforced both trust and relevance.

The evidence suggests that communities are involved in implementation as well as planning, which is critical to tailoring responses to local contexts. A key result associated with deeper community involvement is increased ownership. Communities have gained confidence in asserting their priorities, even rejecting external aid that did not align with their needs. In Sudan, volunteers described how their engagement with donors depended on 'a shared understanding of the context and the needs of target communities'. If external actors pushed irrelevant interventions, communities simply abstained from cooperation. In Somalia, groups empowered through sclr began planning longer-term responses and, in some cases, opted for self-sufficiency over external assistance.

Due to limited funds, a small number of pilots have had to be more prescriptive about fund allocation and community involvement than originally intended. They feared a more open approach would increase competition for microgrants and potentially heighten community tensions.

1.3.3 TRADITIONAL AND LOCAL KNOWLEDGE INFORMS CREATIVE SOLUTIONS

Recognising local and traditional knowledge systems as valuable sources of insight and innovation also contributes to the relevance of responses. In many communities, knowledge is inherited through long histories of living with crisis, environment and social change, and it also continuously evolves. While often referred to as 'traditional', these systems are dynamic – providing communities with tested ways of making decisions, mobilising support and designing solutions.

The evidence suggests that, by creating space for this knowledge to guide responses, supported initiatives are more likely to be technically appropriate, culturally grounded and contextually relevant.

A clear way that local knowledge is seen to shape relevance is through the design and implementation of initiatives based on communities' understanding of their environment, resources and risks. In initiatives designed by mutual aid groups themselves, communities have been able to embed this knowledge throughout their decision-making. In the Philippines, survivor groups chose to plant bamboo trees as part of a water system initiative, noting their deep root systems helped retain groundwater and prevent erosion. This decision reflects local understanding of ecosystems and demonstrates how environmental knowledge contributes to practical, context-specific solutions.

Rather than imposing unfamiliar models, sclr elevates ways of working that communities already know, trust and value, while adapting them to new challenges.

Beyond environmental expertise, the support process has also encouraged the revival and appreciation of traditional systems of mutual support and collective action. Across facilitation and training, communities and supporting agencies have been prompted to identify existing cultural practices and, where appropriate, use these as foundations for their initiatives. An approach in the Philippines aligned with *Bayanihan* – a practice of community self-help and cooperation. A learning paper notes that engaging communities 'led to active leadership and revitalized cultural practices like "Bayanihan"'. In Sudan, the concept of *nafeer* – a spontaneous call to collective action – was central to the rapid operation of Emergency Response Rooms during the 2023 crisis: 'We just call people to do this, and they respond'. In Syria, participants linked their involvement in sclr to long-standing cultural norms of community support: 'If you wanted to build a house, all the people of the village helped … Now we do something better. We are cooperating with other communities.'

Recognition and activation of these knowledge systems reinforces the relevance of responses by situating them within cultural logics and practices. Rather than imposing unfamiliar models, sclr elevates ways of working that communities already know, trust and value, while adapting them to new challenges. This aligns responses with local realities and supports sustainability because communities are more likely to take ownership of solutions rooted in their traditions.

1.4 ACCOUNTABILITY

A common concern in the literature on supporting local actors, informal groups or mutual aid efforts is accountability in humanitarian response (Jenkins, 2024; Barbelet et al, 2021). Specifically, those concerned worry that relinquishing

control to community-based actors could lead to corruption, misuse of resources or elite capture.

We analysed the evidence to examine the presence and effectiveness of mechanisms through which mutual aid groups remain answerable to the communities they serve (downward accountability) and to donors and funders (upward accountability). The evidence suggests that results tend to be positive when external support reinforces the collective and inclusive nature of genuinely communal initiatives, and when partnerships are built on trust that enables communities to lead their own accountability processes. This is particularly so for downward accountability. However, reporting on accountability across the humanitarian sector can be highly skewed. Within the data, there is very limited reflection on negative or unintended consequences, which raises concerns about whether these issues occur but are unreported.

The evidence shows that support to mutual aid strengthens accountability through two main avenues:

- Simplifying upward accountability while promoting downward accountability improves responsiveness – There are improvements for communities and donors when communities are trusted to lead their own accountability processes. This enhances transparency, resource use and conflict resolution. Sclr approaches foster ownership and downward accountability through inclusive monitoring, feedback and oversight mechanisms; sclr strengthens relationships and trust without compromising upward accountability.
- Promoting diversity enhances downward accountability – External support strengthens accountability by promoting diversity, which reinforces ownership, transparency and inclusion. Sclr that engages diverse groups and prioritises community-wide impact reduces elite capture, fosters civic responsibility and embeds locally grounded, sustainable accountability systems.

That said, the evidence includes a small number of cases involving the misuse of resources. This limited number could reflect the overall lack of reporting on unintended consequences or negative experiences, however, rather than indicating that such issues do not occur. This is a limitation in the evidence concerning the reliability of the data. In most recorded instances, misuse of resources is linked to the actions of individuals rather than systemic problems within the group. Importantly, in several cases, groups addressed the issues through their democratic and locally rooted conflict management processes, without external intervention.

The sclr approach is seen to create space for locally led accountability systems. Yet there are widespread concerns about how conventional external support continues to impose accountability requirements that are often more burdensome than relevant, diverting attention and resources from core operations.

In the following subsections we give examples of how support to mutual aid has affected accountability within responses.

1.4.1 SIMPLIFYING UPWARD ACCOUNTABILITY AND SUPPORTING DOWNWARD ACCOUNTABILITY IMPROVES RESPONSIVENESS

Multiple reports and learning briefs argue that, when communities are trusted and supported to manage their own accountability processes, improvements can occur for both communities and donors. This includes greater transparency, better conflict resolution and more effective resource use (Carstensen and Sebit, 2023; Christian Aid, 2023; Corbett et al, 2021).

This requires simplifying upward accountability so mutual aid groups can focus on downward accountability through community-based monitoring, financial oversight and feedback mechanisms. Sclr is seen to foster a strong sense of ownership, motivating communities to lead accountability efforts and manage resources responsibly. In this way, accountability can shift from being donor-facing to being rooted in relationships among community members and local NGO staff, reinforcing ownership and reducing misuse (Corbett et al, 2021).

Donors and facilitators have supported these dynamics by providing training, encouraging the formation of community accountability committees, and allowing groups to build on existing mechanisms. In West Bank and Gaza, committees provided localised oversight in the absence of formal monitoring, reinforcing civic responsibility. These committees did more than symbolic oversight – they actively monitored cash grant planning and expenditures, checked procurement prices and followed implementation closely. This helped dispel suspicions or rumours about who was managing funds and for what purpose, strengthening trust within the community. These practices are seen to have contributed to stronger downward accountability. Communities were regularly informed and able to hold initiatives to account through forums, social media and meetings. In Somalia, groups held transparency meetings to share plans and budgets with the wider community, increasing trust and confidence. In the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), communities were informed about the overall budget and grant size, while representative selection committees assessed and chose micro-projects based on criteria agreed upon collectively.

When communities are trusted and supported to manage their own accountability processes, improvements can occur for both communities and donors.

Importantly, strengthening downward accountability is not linked in the evidence to weakened upward accountability. In fact, it is seen to improve the transparency with which mutual aid groups communicate with those providing support. In Haiti, community members began openly discussing livestock theft with an NGO, something they had previously avoided for fear of losing assistance. While this shows that communities and mutual aid groups may now

be more willing to discuss issues and unintended consequences, the same does not appear true for those providing support. There is minimal reflection in the evidence from facilitators and donors on risks and unintended consequences, which raises concerns about accountability.

Another area of concern is the time required to understand and adopt sclr approaches. During initial phases, some national NGOs facilitating the approach expressed apprehension about losing control, but they gradually shifted their stance as the benefits of community-led accountability became clear. Finally, questions remain about whether adaptations by facilitators, intermediaries and donors to upward accountability processes have translated into systemic change within their organisations (see **Dimension 2**). Mutual aid groups continue to face accountability pressures when interacting with actors or departments not involved in sclr.

1.4.2 PROMOTING DIVERSITY ENHANCES DOWNWARD ACCOUNTABILITY

Multiple examples exist of how external support can strengthen accountability by encouraging diversity in mutual aid initiatives. This reinforces communal ownership, extends benefits beyond narrow groups and increases community investment in oversight and transparency.

Evidence from multiple contexts shows that initiatives have been more accountable and transparent when those providing support have deliberately engaged groups led by diverse social groups across age, gender, religion, displacement status or background, or when they have incentivised diversity (where relevant). In Ukraine, selection panels included internally displaced women, academics, legal experts and local public figures, meaning that oversight was not concentrated within a single network. One review emphasises that no single organisation should make up more than half of a selection committee. Another Ukrainian partner notes that diversifying committees and sharing calls for proposals publicly adds layers of transparency and helps mitigate risks of elite capture.

Diversity also supports accountability by strengthening social cohesion and reducing tensions. At the Syrian and Turkish border, mutual aid groups collaborated across communities, sharing experiences and conducting joint projects – described as 'a significant step' in building future accountability systems. This was not only about cooperation but about leveraging diversity: 23 local teams and associations involving over 250 activists worked together, bringing different cultural and social perspectives. This mix of backgrounds generated creative solutions and expanded the emergency

While diversity and collective benefit strengthen accountability, they must be paired with clear governance, transparency measures and safeguards against power imbalances to prevent unintended consequences.

response, illustrating how diversity can drive innovation. A report from Palestine argues: 'The diversity in community groups in terms of age and gender promotes accountability and ensures the exchange of experiences'.

However, cases of misused funds are also recorded. In Somalia, a chairman managed a grant without consulting other members, creating tension and eroding collaboration. Elsewhere, local authorities or influential individuals have steered resources towards their own agendas, which highlights the risk of elite capture. While diversity and collective benefit strengthen accountability, they must be paired with clear governance, transparency measures and safeguards against power imbalances to prevent unintended consequences.

1.5 INCLUSION

A common concern with supporting locally led action – especially informal, community-based structures – is the risk of reinforcing exclusion or unequal power dynamics, such as elite capture. These concerns are valid, but the evidence suggests that, when mutual aid groups are supported through flexible, demand-driven and collective approaches like sclr, the result can be the opposite: increased inclusion and redistribution of power within communities.

In the evidence, sclr-supported mutual aid efforts are often seen to promote positive outcomes for marginalised groups. While not all forms of support have yielded these results, inclusive design approaches have turned mutual aid into a mechanism for equity and community empowerment. However, most data stems from local facilitators, not communities or mutual aid groups. Although several reports include quotes or describe focus group discussions with communities and mutual aid groups, little evidence originates from communities themselves.

There are two main avenues through which external support can strengthen the ability of mutual aid groups to provide inclusive responses:

- **Supporting inclusive leadership and collective benefits reduces elite capture and incentivises inclusion – By supporting initiatives that have achieved or that strive to achieve community-wide benefits, external support can help reduce the incentives for individual corruption or elite capture – ensuring that outcomes are benefiting all community members. Giving decision-making power to marginalised communities also means that initiatives are responsive to the needs of those groups.**
- **Supporting women-led initiatives with collective benefits promotes gender equity – Gender equity can be advanced by creating spaces for women to participate and lead, which can contribute to increased agency in community and household decision-making. These approaches can gradually shift norms, empower women through mutual aid and collective action, and foster cultural change, though tokenism and restrictive social norms persist.**

Overall, the evidence related to inclusion is largely positive, but there are a few examples of challenges and unintended consequences. Some projects excluded communities due to geographic isolation, internal power dynamics or resource constraints. A limited number of cases also reflect tensions or gaps in the inclusion of vulnerable groups (particularly displaced persons, people living with disability and refugees), often shaped by social norms or lack of representation. Additionally, small grants and limited support have occasionally made it difficult to achieve inclusive outcomes, as communities have had to make tough prioritisation decisions.

In the following subsections we give examples of how support to mutual aid has affected the degree to which responses are inclusive.

1.5.1 SUPPORTING INCLUSIVE LEADERSHIP AND COLLECTIVE BENEFITS REDUCES ELITE CAPTURE AND INCENTIVISES INCLUSIVE BENEFITS

Some evidence emphasises mutual aid initiatives that have pursued community-wide objectives rather than individual ones. Prioritising initiatives with collective outcomes has helped reduce incentives for individuals to manipulate access to resources, and it has encouraged participation from those motivated by broader community interests.

However, supporting mostly community-focused initiatives has not always been straightforward. In many cases in the evidence, there is not a clear distinction between projects with community-wide benefits and those that primarily benefit a few households. Some initiatives that appear to have benefited only a few households could have generated indirect benefits for the broader community.

Each selection committee has had to make decisions based on its own community-driven criteria. In India, a proposal for poultry farming that would benefit only 13 members was declined because it lacked a clear long-term plan for broader community benefits. This highlights the need for support in developing clear criteria and review processes to align with collective principles.

The emphasis in the evidence on inclusive leadership and collective benefit is frequently linked to stronger ownership, unity and locally grounded accountability.

Additionally, a focus on collective benefit has sometimes created challenges with traditional reporting formats, which typically rely on individual or household counts. In DRC, facilitators note that micro-projects often benefit people beyond the immediate group, but it is difficult to quantify impact using conventional beneficiary metrics.

Inclusive leadership has been most successful when grounded in community-owned structures. In Somalia, local facilitators supported women-led initiatives using proverbs and references to pre-war volunteer groups, thus encouraging

dialogue on inclusion rooted in local history. Some groups have challenged traditional gatekeeping roles despite resistance, as seen when a women's group continued their work after a village chief tried to stop their project. This signals a move towards more equitable decision-making.

Across contexts, these practices have contributed to responses that address both general community needs and those of the most vulnerable. In Haiti, microgrants supported grassroots organisations working with small farmers, the elderly and people living with disability. In South Sudan, sclr helped communities prioritise initiatives benefiting women, children and other marginalised groups. In Syria, respondents reported improvements in the well-being of individuals requiring special assistance, such as the elderly and those living with disability. The emphasis in the evidence on inclusive leadership and collective benefit is frequently linked to stronger ownership, unity and locally grounded accountability.

1.5.2 SUPPORTING WOMEN-LED INITIATIVES WITH COLLECTIVE BENEFITS PROMOTES GENDER EQUITY

Sclr and similar approaches can contribute to gender equity and women's empowerment. In Palestine, Kenya, the Philippines, Turkey, Iraq, Myanmar, Haiti, DRC and Afghanistan, these approaches have partly helped some women move from the margins of community life into positions of leadership, influence and agency.

A key mechanism for this contribution is the intentional design of sclr to support collective, community-wide objectives. This design is reported to create space for women to participate and lead without them being perceived as a threat to established power dynamics. In numerous contexts, women's leadership has emerged organically as communities have recognised the value of their contributions to collective well-being. In Palestine, women's participation in protection contributed to creating new opportunities for engagement beyond the household, helping them build confidence and enhance their influence. Several women describe moving from isolation and fear to actively influencing community decisions, with two female members later elected to village council positions.

These approaches can challenge traditional narratives of women as passive recipients or victims and instead highlight their roles as strong local responders and informal leaders.

The process of empowerment is described as gradual and context-specific. For some women, their participation in mutual aid initiatives contributed to building self-confidence, developing new skills and negotiating for their priorities within the community. This is not limited to formal leadership roles; some women have also reported increased agency in household decision-making, economic activities and community advocacy. In several contexts, women's groups used their new roles to address issues specific to women, such as health services and protection from gender-based violence.

Sclr approaches can also help shift community norms around gender. By supporting women who lead collective initiatives, these approaches can challenge traditional narratives of women as passive recipients or victims and instead highlight their roles as strong local responders and informal leaders. In evidence from Myanmar and DRC, women's leadership in community projects is associated with improved group dynamics, reduced conflict and more sustainable outcomes. In Turkey and Afghanistan, women's participation in initiatives contributed to broader cultural shifts, encouraging women to play more active roles in their communities and households.

But challenges remain. In some contexts, women's leadership has been tokenistic, with men retaining decision-making power behind the scenes. Cultural and social norms, as well as security concerns, continue to limit women's full participation in some areas. The process of empowerment is gradual and often requires ongoing support, training and advocacy to sustain gains and address resistance.

1.6 COST-EFFICIENCY AND TIMELINESS

Cost-efficiency and timeliness are key criteria for evaluating humanitarian response, especially amid shrinking aid budgets. Recent studies highlight the efficiency potential of localisation (Venton et al, 2022), but concerns persist that informal, locally led mutual aid may lack the financial systems or speed required in emergencies – in other words, the absorptive capacity. These concerns are reflected in perceptions that mutual aid groups might struggle to meet fiduciary standards or take longer to mobilise than traditional actors.

However, the data on mutual aid responses supported by external actors – particularly through sclr – shows positive results for both cost-efficiency and timeliness. Evidence on timeliness is more limited, and there are concerns that, even though mutual aid efforts are inherently quite timely given their organic and informal nature, the infrastructure to support such efforts via sclr can take time to set up. Yet, overall, findings suggest that locally led approaches can deliver efficient and timely support when facilitated appropriately.

There are several ways that support to mutual aid via sclr or similar approaches contributes to a more cost-efficient and timely response:

- **Providing microgrants to mutual aid initiatives drives cost-efficiency – Microgrants can leverage community co-financing and local ownership, and have catalytic impact. Often, small-scale funding has unlocked broader resource flows, reduced overheads, and enabled communities to deliver affordable and effective initiatives.**
- **Rapid fund disbursement and flexible financial support enhance timeliness – sclr or similar approaches enable mutual aid groups to act quickly and adapt during crises. Through simplified funding processes and flexible**

implementation, microgrants have allowed communities to respond quickly and appropriately.

Despite positive results, the evidence reveals multiple challenges around timeliness and cost-efficiency. In some contexts, external challenges include financial regulations and sanctions that complicated fund transfers, while inflation, exchange rate fluctuations and security constraints further limited operational capacity and reduced the real value of grants. Internal challenges include impractical or poor financial planning, limited financial management capacity and inadequate risk forecasting. Some communities have also raised concerns about small microgrants and overall funding levels, which have constrained results. Delays in disbursement, whether due to administrative bottlenecks or logistical hurdles, have often led to frustration, diminished trust and reduced community engagement.

It is promising and valuable that the data contains multiple examples of cost-efficiency, but there are risks in using this solely as the main argument to drive support for mutual aid. Many of the positive results associated with supporting mutual aid efforts are linked within the evidence to the flexibility and demand-led characteristics of the support, not just to the amount of funding provided. Cost-efficiency should not lead to using mutual aid merely as a tool to cut expenses during shrinking humanitarian budgets.

There is also an evidence gap in how scale influences the cost-efficiency of responses and, in particular, how this influences the effectiveness of the results presented so far. What is the appropriate mechanism to scale support while ensuring that a cost-efficiency goal, driven by concerns about absorptive capacity, does not lead to only a few large-scale mutual aid support infrastructures becoming centralised?

In the following subsections we give examples of how support to mutual aid has affected the cost-efficiency and timeliness of responses.

1.6.1 PROVIDING MICROGRANTS TO MUTUAL AID INITIATIVES DRIVES COST-EFFICIENCY

The evidence shows that directing microgrants to existing mutual aid activities through sclr drives cost-efficiency and influences the overall value-for-money of a response. Across contexts, relatively small amounts of funding have delivered outputs that have often exceeded those of more conventional, top-down approaches. However, a significant proportion of the data is self-reported, so independent and multi-context cost-efficiency analysis would be beneficial.

A key factor contributing to cost-efficiency is the scale of community co-financing and in-kind contributions. Because most initiatives were already planned or underway, communities were already helping one another through

mutual aid before external support was provided. This means communities were already motivated to contribute time, labour, land and resources. The sense of ownership expanded the reach of each microgrant beyond its monetary value. In Kenya, the Manyatta Ginda community matched their grant with KSh 20,000 in land and labour. In Gaza, community contributions represented over 70% of total project value. In Ethiopia, diaspora networks and local communities mobilised over 20 million Birr – far exceeding the initial grant. Across the evidence, co-financing ranges from 10%–50% of project costs, with some cases surpassing the original funding. For donors, this means each dollar invested has leveraged significant community-driven contributions.

Microgrants have often unlocked additional resources by strengthening community credibility and capacity.

Another dynamic is the catalytic effect of sclr. Microgrants have often unlocked additional resources by strengthening community credibility and capacity. In Palestine, groups that began with US$5,000 grants later secured investments from local authorities in infrastructure. In Kenya, women's groups reinvested profits from milk trading to sustain health services. In a 2025 impact evaluation that surveyed more than 175 mutual aid group representatives in Turkey, 92% of participants reported increased confidence to apply for further resources after managing their first grant (Support to Life, 2025). These examples illustrate how modest funding can lead to broader partnerships and sustained resource flows.

Cost-efficiency also stems from the use of local knowledge and networks, which has enabled community-led initiatives to identify affordable and effective ways to source materials and services. In India, bamboo screening was implemented at nearly half the cost of an NGO-contracted equivalent. In Palestine, groups report delivering infrastructure 'cheaper, faster, and better' than external actors. Spending remains within local markets, supporting local economies and preserving resources for future use.

1.6.2 RAPID FUND DISBURSEMENT AND FLEXIBLE FINANCIAL SUPPORT ENHANCE TIMELINESS

Although evidence is limited, several examples indicate that supporting mutual aid enhances the timeliness of humanitarian response by enabling rapid, community-led action. Unlike conventional mechanisms, mutual aid groups often emerge organically and quickly after a crisis. Approaches like sclr aim to channel resources to these already active groups – boosting both speed and relevance in addressing evolving needs. In Ukraine, one group restored heating for families within days of receiving funds, noting that 'by the time international aid arrived, our project was already finished'.

Timeliness also depends on how quickly mutual aid groups access external support. When procedures are simplified and align with community capacities

through sclr, funding moves faster than through conventional systems. In several contexts, groups report having received funds within weeks of applying – versus the longer timelines typical of state- or INGO-managed grants. In Turkey, one community describes the process as 'much easier and faster than applying for government support', enabling them to establish a safe playground shortly after approval.

Flexibility during implementation contributes to timely responses too. Once microgrants are disbursed, groups can adapt activities in real time as conditions change. In the Philippines, preparedness projects were adjusted to meet urgent needs following a typhoon. This flexibility allowed for rapid reallocation of resources without bureaucratic delays, ensuring that assistance remained relevant. In Gaza, a facilitator notes, 'the community was already organised, so once the grant came, they knew exactly what to do and could act the same week'.

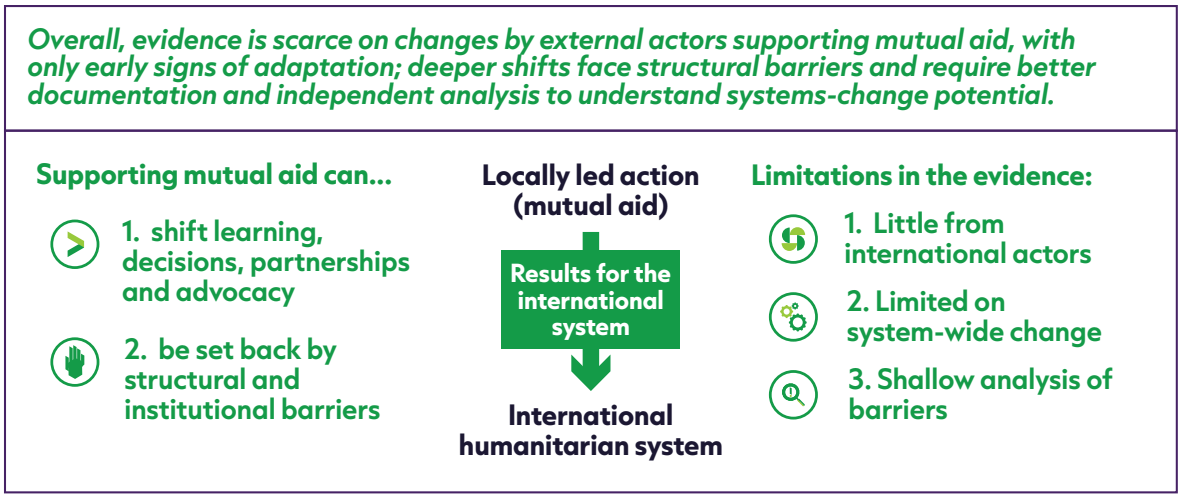
However, while mutual aid groups can act quickly, establishing a new sclr process takes time. Participatory training, 'de-learning'[7] and mindset shifts are needed for national and local NGOs to take on facilitation roles. And early rounds of implementation may involve learning how to identify and support mutual aid efforts effectively. Still, the evidence suggests that, with experience, both speed and efficiency can improve over time.

7 De-learning in the humanitarian context refers to the process of unlearning entrenched paradigms, assumptions and practices rooted in conventional top-down humanitarian programming. It involves critically questioning and letting go of approaches that prioritise centralised control, donor-driven compliance and hierarchical decision-making to create space for more locally led, participatory and adaptive models.

DIMENSION 2:

THE RESULTS FOR ORGANISATIONS SUPPORTING MUTUAL AID

Figure 6. Summary of key findings for Dimension 2



This second dimension examines the evidence on the changes and results experienced by actors who support mutual aid groups through international funding. This includes donors, philanthropic funders and INGOs, as well as local and national NGOs that facilitate support. This is an important dimension because, as noted under Dimension 1, it appears necessary for the international system to adapt its paradigms, processes and ways of working for the conventional sector to support more informal mutual aid efforts. And, if this is the case, these adaptations could potentially drive systemic change in how the international humanitarian system operates, particularly in advancing towards a humanitarian reset and contributing to localisation and locally led reform.

To assess the potential for systems change, we analysed the evidence to find examples of adaptations and modifications made to traditional programming to support mutual aid. We examined whether these adaptations were later mainstreamed or if they influenced broader organisational systems and partnerships. We also considered if those providing support experienced any results or outcomes as a consequence of adapting their programming to support mutual aid. The objective was to understand the extent of systems change and the results associated with it.

In the following subsections we group examples and evidence around areas of humanitarian programming commonly viewed as barriers to localisation. These include learning, decision-making, partnerships, advocacy, accountability, capacity strengthening, due diligence and compliance, and direct funding.

Overall, there is far less detailed documentation on the systems change experienced by those supporting mutual aid, than evidence on Dimension 1. This does not mean that changes and adaptations are not occurring or that there is no potential for systems change. Rather, the current evidence base is too limited to draw firm conclusions.

As noted previously, much of the evidence consists of internal reports and documents – we refer to these only as country examples and have maintained the anonymity of authors and organisations, according to our data collection agreement.

2.1 MOST COMMON AREAS OF CHANGE

Among the limited evidence available under Dimension 2, there are signals that supporting mutual aid has the potential to contribute to shifts in paradigms and mindsets. In some cases, sclr processes have been mainstreamed into organisational functioning, and participation in the methodology appears to support scaling. In multiple instances, those involved in supporting mutual aid have become advocates of the approach, expanding its application across new contexts.

However, documentation remains particularly scarce from international actors, especially regarding the spaces and processes needed to capture and sustain systems change. Understanding what drives this gap is critical. Is it influenced by a lack of 'safe-to-fail' learning in a highly competitive financial environment? Could it stem from concerns about appearing extractive in learning processes, and a desire to centre learning locally and within mutual aid groups? Or is this simply an area that has not been considered relevant to document and to share lessons on?

Across the areas of change where evidence is available, we find the following:

- **Learning: Supporting mutual aid fosters more dynamic and inclusive learning environments – Local facilitators have adapted programming in real time and shifted towards multi-directional learning across communities, donors and peer networks. Challenges remain in capturing learning that contributes to broader systems change, however.**
- **Decision-making: Changes in decision-making power enable more locally relevant and efficient programming – The roles of local facilitators and international intermediaries and donors are reshaped when decision-making power changes. In turn, these shifts contribute to changes in organisational**

practices and mindsets, though there is little formal recognition of community-led decision-making within institutional systems.

- **Partnerships: Sclr-like approaches contribute to more equitable partnerships – sclr encourages relationships that increase trust, expand networks and reconfigure roles between international, national and mutual aid actors. But legal constraints, exclusionary practices and unequal access to coordination mechanisms create structural barriers that limit the participation of some groups.**
- **Advocacy: Many supporting mutual aid actively promote sclr and locally led action – Those providing support advocate for sclr across policy, donor and government spaces, helping expand programming and influence institutional practices. Nonetheless, advocacy is fragmented and scaling across the sector is constrained by limited coordination and uneven recognition of diverse local actors.**

In the following subsections we give examples of these four relational areas of humanitarian programming.

2.1.1 LEARNING

Traditional humanitarian programming often assumes a top-down flow of knowledge, but the evidence suggests sclr supports multi-directional learning.

Experiential learning is central to the sclr approach. It encourages local facilitators and mutual aid groups to engage in real-time learning, learning-by-doing and a safe-to-fail mindset that supports continuous adaptation to community needs. Among the evidence from those supporting mutual aid, learning is cited most frequently as an area of change and adaptation. This encompasses practical applications to enable real-time adaptations, and shifts in how learning is understood to inform future programming. While examples are common from local facilitators, there is limited evidence of learning-related changes at the international level.

Those supporting mutual aid have demonstrated a willingness to adjust processes based on feedback and experience, encouraged by the flexibility embedded in sclr. In Iraq, reporting requirements were adapted to address literacy barriers, with social media posts and videos introduced as acceptable formats. In some cases, local facilitators used a more personal approach, supporting mutual aid groups to draft proposals through phone calls and visits. This prioritised capturing the groups' ideas and ensured they had an opportunity to contribute, regardless of literacy levels. Such adaptations are technical and also relational, reflecting deeper understanding of community dynamics. A local facilitator in Gaza observes that, while previous engagement relied on predefined activities, the new approach allowed for unexpected, learning-driven adaptations, including more effective trust-building. They reflect that, if such an approach had been adopted earlier, impact could have been greater and achieved with less effort.

Other examples point to shifts in the direction of learning. Traditional humanitarian programming often assumes a top-down flow of knowledge, but the evidence suggests sclr supports multi-directional learning. In some cases, donors have adjusted their practices based on feedback from local facilitators, including changes to grantmaking and reporting. Some donor templates have invited local facilitators to assess the quality of donor accompaniment. There is also evidence of mutual learning between local facilitators and communities.

Peer-to-peer learning among local facilitators is also a significant theme in the evidence. Regional Communities of Practice (CoPs) are mentioned frequently as spaces to share learning, discuss challenges, and co-develop tools and strategies. These CoPs have been active across Ukraine, Haiti, Myanmar, and countries within Latin America and East Africa, supported by donors and global platforms. They are described as important spaces for building trust and solidarity, and for sharing ownership of the learning process.

There is some evidence of initial adaptation and changes in how learning takes place, but limited evidence on whether this has influenced broader organisational or institutional learning policies. Also, although a safe-to-fail approach is a component of sclr, there are few reports of unintended consequences or risks.

2.1.2 DECISION-MAKING

The evidence indicates that sharing or relinquishing decision-making power is central to sclr, accompanied by greater flexibility in how decisions are made. These shifts occur across multiple levels – from donors and funders to local facilitators, and from facilitators to mutual aid groups and communities.

But this does not imply mutual aid groups are powerless. By their very nature, these groups already lead decision-making on how to respond. Rather, the change refers to sharing decision-making power over how they are supported by external actors and funding sources.

Sharing or relinquishing decision-making power is central to sclr.

Across several contexts, local facilitators report that sharing decision-making power with actors closer to populations affected by crisis has led to multiple benefits. One is the ability to increase coverage and scope by reducing the time local facilitators spend on traditional aid formats and implementation. This allows them to focus on accompaniment and support rather than direct implementation. In the Philippines, local facilitators experienced a turning point when donors moved away from rigid, compliance-driven approaches and adopted a stance of flexibility and trust. This involved donors recognising that their most valuable contribution was to provide financial resources, technical support and mentoring, while allowing local actors to lead. As a result, local organisations were able to create space for communities to

assume a much higher degree of control over the entire response cycle. This change also expanded the scope and relevance of the response because decisions were grounded in community priorities rather than plans imposed externally.

Another benefit experienced by local facilitators from shared decision-making is an increase in the relevance and responsiveness of aid. In Ukraine, local facilitators report that traditional humanitarian packages often failed to meet actual needs and sclr-supported activities align better with local priorities. In Turkey, a local facilitator notes that the shift from externally determined needs to locally defined priorities transformed their understanding of humanitarian aid. It significantly enhanced their capacity to grasp local needs, so they could support more inclusive and locally driven strategies.

Perceptions of communities have changed – from passive beneficiaries to capable and resourceful actors.

Flexibility in decision-making by facilitators and funders is also associated in the evidence with improved efficiency, particularly in rapidly changing or high-risk contexts. In Kenya and Turkey, local facilitators emphasise the ability to pivot quickly in response to drought or post-earthquake recovery. In Ukraine, local facilitators adapted tools and templates to align with the legal and operational context. Because working with informal groups posed legal challenges, they channelled support through registered partners or assisted informal groups to register. Local facilitators could engage with community-led efforts while complying with national regulations.

Indirectly, the evidence also points to shifts in mindsets and paradigms. Several local facilitators describe how their perceptions of communities have changed – from passive beneficiaries to capable and resourceful actors. In Gaza, one actor notes that the approach restored dignity and status to communities, challenging the notion that they were the weakest link in the aid chain. In Iraq, facilitators reflect on the need to shift vocabulary and frameworks to better capture values such as social cohesion, accountability and democratic participation.

In multiple contexts, international staff have reported that sclr challenges paternalistic tendencies and encourages more respectful, collaborative relationships with local actors. Some INGOs describe internal changes to grant procedures and a growing recognition of the need to support rather than direct community-led responses. While these shifts are often described as transformative, there is limited evidence of how they have translated into institutional changes – particularly among donors.

There are examples of local facilitators beginning to mainstream sclr into organisational systems and strategies, however. In the Philippines and Ethiopia, one organisation integrated sclr into its new structure under humanitarian action, aligning processes and culture towards locally led response. In Myanmar, sclr was integrated into youth leadership training programmes through updated

curricula and feedback systems that supported continuous learning. In Kenya, the approach was incorporated into national advocacy work and donor dialogues. In Haiti and Iraq, sclr principles were aligned with existing humanitarian projects, suggesting a growing effort to harmonise methodologies across programmes. These examples indicate that, at least among some local actors, sclr could be moving from a pilot or project-level approach to more embedded organisational practice.

2.1.3 PARTNERSHIPS

Flexibility, respect and power sharing are commonly cited in the evidence as guiding characteristics in the evolution of more equitable partnerships. These changes are apparent in how donors and international actors have partnered with local facilitators, and in how those facilitators have engaged with mutual aid groups and communities.

A repeated result is the strengthening of trust across all partnership levels. Trust is emphasised particularly in relationships between local facilitators and mutual aid groups, where consistent engagement, transparency and shared decision-making has fostered deeper collaboration. In Haiti, the provision of microgrants is described as a turning point in trust-building: 'the community sees that we trust them, and so they trust us'. This shift required staff to change from implementers to mentors and to allow communities to lead.

Consistent engagement, transparency and shared decision-making has fostered deeper collaboration.

Trust also supports longer-term relationship building, with some local facilitators continuing their collaboration with communities after the formal end of sclr programming. In Ukraine and Moldova, several mutual aid groups maintained their engagement with local facilitators, applying for new grants and volunteering in other initiatives. In Palestine, local actors describe a shift from a traditional project exit to a transformation in relationships, maintaining collegial ties and integrating community groups into other programmes. These examples suggest that approaches like sclr can foster more sustained and meaningful partnerships beyond the grant cycle. However, there is a risk that prolonged relationships contribute to aid dependency or alter the nature of mutual aid itself, which requires critical evaluation.

A second outcome, largely experienced by local facilitators, is increased confidence and capacity to broaden networks. In Iraq, facilitators built relationships with ministries and local authorities, facilitating smoother coordination and approvals. In Turkey, local actors report increased visibility and credibility among public institutions. In Yemen and Syria, local actors have engaged diaspora networks and international forums to bridge gaps between government, donors and civil society. These expanded networks are often described as contributing to greater legitimacy and influence in humanitarian coordination spaces.

The evidence also points to mindset shifts among both local and international actors resulting from changes in partnership dynamics. In Kenya, staff have reflected on how the approach challenges assumptions about communities, leading to greater recognition of local capacities and dialogue. In Iraq, one local facilitator removed logos from initiatives to reinforce the perception that communities were leading the response. These shifts are also reflected in how partnerships have been sustained and valued, with some facilitators reporting improved reputation and increased recognition by local authorities.

Expanded networks are often described as contributing to greater legitimacy and influence in humanitarian coordination spaces.

Persistent gaps are also noted in the capacity for equitable partnerships, however. In Sudan, formal collaboration between international actors and unregistered local groups was difficult due to legal and political constraints. Some local actors describe having to 'prove themselves' through action rather than being recognised as legitimate partners from the outset. In India, some grassroots organisations faced language and technology barriers that limited their ability to engage in partnership structures. Across several settings, local actors report limited access to humanitarian coordination mechanisms and funding opportunities, often citing bureaucracy, exclusionary practices and unequal power dynamics.

2.1.4 ADVOCACY

Many of those supporting mutual aid have become advocates for sclr and for locally led action more broadly. This signals a positive experience with implementation and a belief, shaped by observed outcomes, that the methodology can contribute to sector reform.

Advocacy among local facilitators and implementing organisations has taken various forms: expanding programming, engaging in policy dialogue, influencing donor strategies, driving government uptake, attracting funding and modelling alternative approaches for the wider humanitarian sector.

In Turkey, a local facilitator transitioned from aid provision to advocacy, defending community demands and promoting their inclusion in decision-making and financing processes. Expanding programming is an immediate form of advocacy. In Ukraine, a local facilitator adapted the sclr approach to work with people living with HIV/AIDS, securing support from multiple donors.

In the Philippines, local actors participated in regional and global forums, including the European Humanitarian Forum and the Global Summit for Shift the Power, using these platforms to promote more equitable funding and partnership models. In Ethiopia, national dialogues featured sclr principles in efforts to rethink humanitarian aid and promote community-led development.

In Kenya, success with microgrant initiatives mobilised additional funding from donors such as Oxfam, the United Nations Development Programme's Global Environment Facility (UNDP-GEF) and the Center for Disaster Philanthropy. In Sudan, the 2025 Humanitarian Needs and Response Plan included financial support for over 4,000 community-based groups, reflecting increased donor recognition of mutual aid.

In the Philippines, sustained engagement with disaster risk reduction councils led to institutionalised representation of marginalised sectors and the piloting of sclr with local government units. In Palestine, national actors report shifts in policy and intervention strategies following exposure to sclr outcomes. In Kenya, efforts are underway to formally recognise sclr within local government frameworks and financing mechanisms.

There is a real concern that efforts to increase funding for sclr could compromise or dilute the approach in ways that undermine mutual aid.

Although the evidence shows that awareness of sclr is growing, the multiplier effect of scaling sclr-like approaches across the sector remains limited. Advocacy efforts are often fragmented, and stronger coordination is needed to drive systemic policy change. There is also recognition that local actors are not a monolith, and advocacy must reflect the diversity of grassroots groups, including those without formal legal status. Ensuring these voices are included in policy dialogue and funding mechanisms is crucial for the future of locally led humanitarian action. At the same time, there is a real concern that efforts to increase funding for sclr could compromise or dilute the approach in ways that undermine mutual aid. This risk is largely unexplored in the evidence and requires critical assessment.

2.2 LIMITED AREAS OF CHANGE

There is significantly less evidence of change in humanitarian programming around reporting, due diligence, compliance, processes for direct funding, accountability and capacity sharing. There is limited documentation for each, with only a handful of examples. Most evidence focuses on adaptations to enable the immediate support of mutual aid, with little to no information on their potential for systems change.

Many of the results experienced by mutual aid groups are linked to flexibility and non-traditional donor–beneficiary interactions. These patterns suggest that technical changes may be occurring at the facilitator, intermediary and funder levels, even if they are not documented systematically. This points to an evidence gap in how donors and INGOs capture and report their learning and experiences.

It is particularly important to capture the systems-change implications of these areas because, often, localisation and locally led reform encounter the greatest obstacles within these rigid procedures and standards.

2.2.1 ACCOUNTABILITY

There is limited evidence on how organisations are changing or adapting their accountability through the transparent provision of information to mutual aid groups. A few examples highlight budgetary transparency, including communication around financial limitations. There are also instances of downward accountability from donors and INGOs to local facilitators, and from facilitators to mutual aid groups. This includes feedback mechanisms in Palestine, the Philippines, Kenya and Ukraine. In Colombia, financial transparency was facilitated through video formats, while a dashboard was used in India to share budgetary information with both donors and communities. In Somalia, QR codes were used to disseminate information to communities. One recommendation emphasises the need for communities and local stakeholders to be more actively involved in shaping upward accountability mechanisms.

2.2.2 CAPACITY STRENGTHENING

Some evidence points to a shift in how facilitators approach capacity strengthening, emphasising demand-led support and promoting the self-reliance and sustainability of mutual aid groups. In several cases, capacity strengthening began with technical skills and gradually transitioned into more conceptual and strategic areas. Examples reported by facilitators include their improved ability to serve communities, increased confidence in the capacity of mutual aid groups, and a role shift from implementor to facilitator. Some local facilitators have also recognised their own capacity strengthening needs as the scope of their work has evolved.

2.2.3 DUE DILIGENCE AND COMPLIANCE

There is limited but notable recognition of the need to adapt due diligence and compliance procedures, particularly at the INGO level. Several examples highlight the challenges posed by rigid donor financial regimes and internal systems. In Sudan, one intermediary reduced its grant paperwork to three pages and accepted reporting via WhatsApp, acknowledging the risks but emphasising the greater risk of inaction. In Ukraine, proposal formats were adapted to better capture community visions and needs. In Somalia, proposal and reporting templates were simplified and translated, with adjustments made to accommodate oral expression and low literacy. Despite these adaptations, however, compliance often stalls locally led efforts and creates barriers for local actors.

2.2.4 DIRECT FUNDING

There is limited evidence on changes or adaptations among donors resulting from the direct provision of funding to mutual aid groups. Most evidence concerns Sudan, where some INGOs and donors adapted their ways of working to enable direct funding. However, there is little detail on how these systems were updated in practice. The evidence emphasises the importance of the quality – not just the quantity – of direct aid, and it acknowledges that direct funding can improve the appropriateness of the response.

2.3 BARRIERS TO SYSTEMS CHANGE

Across the data there are some examples of gaps and barriers that may affect the systems-change potential of supporting mutual aid within the international humanitarian sector, but this evidence is not structured or numerous. Several general concerns are raised about the reluctance of donors, INGOs and local facilitators to fully let go of power. However, many of these mentions lack deeper analysis of what contributes to this reluctance. A few examples begin to offer insights into the roadblocks to systems change, such as a 'compliance first mindset' that makes it difficult to align due diligence requirements to contextual realities.

Independent research is needed to analyse these barriers, to understand how they can be overcome, and to assess how they may be influenced or amplified by scaling support to mutual aid groups. Some of the most useful evidence comes from learning reports and exercises carried out by Local2Global, as well as from documentation in Ukraine and Sudan.

For sclr to support systems change, it needs to be embedded across functions.

One issue raised is the reliance on individual champions within organisations to promote and sustain sclr. These individuals are often crucial in initiating and expanding the approach, but this reliance can limit sustainability if the support is not embedded institutionally. In several contexts, the uptake of sclr is described as being driven by personal relationships and informal networks, which, while effective in the short term, may not be sufficient to achieve broader systems change. Alongside this, internal scepticism within organisations – particularly among departments not directly involved in implementation – is noted as a barrier to full adoption. For sclr to support systems change, it needs to be embedded across functions such as finance; monitoring, evaluation, accountability and learning (MEAL); and human resources. In some contexts, scepticism is also noted at the community level, often rooted in long-standing fatigue with INGOs and unmet expectations from previous aid efforts.

Another concern is the time required to establish sclr approaches, particularly one that is conducive to systems change. Local facilitators appear to have been

quicker than international intermediaries and donors in adopting and implementing sclr protocols, due to their agility and proximity to mutual aid groups. But several of those involved in providing support note that the process of internalising sclr and adapting organisational systems takes time – especially during the early stages of implementation. In Ukraine, facilitators describe the process as more complex and time-consuming than anticipated, requiring significant preparation, coordination and follow-up. In Myanmar, there have been concerns that short-term pilots may not allow enough time for the deeper shifts needed to change aid relationships and institutional practices. Without sustained support and longer-term investment, there is a risk that organisations revert to more traditional, externally led models.

Financial dependency and the unpredictability of funding are also cited as barriers to systems change. In Sudan, there has been concern that stalls in the funding pipeline can damage community trust and undermine the protection of volunteers. In India, local organisations express difficulty in challenging inequitable partnerships due to their reliance on donor funding. These dynamics can make it difficult for organisations to fully shift power or change internal systems, as the risks of doing so may be perceived as too high.

A broader concern is the inflexibility of humanitarian systems, which can complicate or limit the implementation of sclr. This includes fragmented and time-consuming compliance systems, continued focus on upward rather than downward accountability, and a general unwillingness to change long-established procedures. In Ukraine, local facilitators describe how, outside sclr, some international actors continue to impose their own systems and reporting formats, disregarding local expertise and practices. In Myanmar, some organisations' emphasis on value for money and results-based reporting is described as incompatible with the process-oriented nature of sclr. Across contexts, there have also been challenges in establishing partnerships with informal groups due to legal and bureaucratic constraints.

Without sustained support and longer-term investment, there is a risk that organisations revert to more traditional, externally led models.

Persistent paradigms create tension with the sclr approach and its systems-change potential. These include assumptions about the capacity of community actors, a preference for results-based funding over process-based approaches, and a narrow definition of what constitutes a legitimate humanitarian response. Some national and local NGOs are found to have internalised traditional ways of working, further complicating efforts to share power. In some of the evidence, the humanitarian system is described as having no space for volunteer-led efforts, or as being constrained by sectoral silos that limit the flexibility needed for community-led responses.

CONCLUSION

The humanitarian system is facing escalating needs, shrinking budgets and stalled reforms (Chawla, 2025; Ground Truth Solutions, 2025). Within this context, it is more urgent than ever to consider how to connect formal structures with the informal networks through which communities have always supported one another.

Mutual aid is not a marginal phenomenon – it is a lifeline for millions. Recent developments signal a potential inflection point for humanitarian support to mutual aid. This includes increased funding for approaches that support mutual aid, the creation of new funding mechanisms like the Resilio Fund (with over US$30 million dedicated to community-led response) (Legatum Group, 2025) and exceptional UN procedures that enable pooled fund partnerships with informal groups (OCHA, 2025). But, without a stronger evidence base, this momentum risks being short-lived or misdirected.

Can supporting mutual aid strengthen the humanitarian system's ability to deliver a more people-centred and adaptive response? Can it catalyse the deeper reforms that have long eluded the sector? Current evidence suggests promising answers: **supporting mutual aid improves resilience, sustainability and quality at the community level, and there are hints of the potential for systemic change. Yet critical gaps remain – on scale, unintended consequences and risks, and learning and adaptation among those providing support.**

The question of scale is particularly complex. So far, positive results are tied to highly flexible, demand-led approaches that work precisely because they are context-specific and loosely structured. It is still unclear whether such approaches can be scaled without compromising the qualities that underpin their effectiveness. Moreover, the risks associated with scaling have not been examined sufficiently – nor too the kinds of system-level shifts needed among donors and intermediaries, including how philanthropic and bilateral funding may require different mechanisms to sustain flexibility and local ownership.

There is a real tension: codifying and proceduralising approaches to support mutual aid risks stripping away the adaptability that makes them valuable, while leaving them too loose raises questions about coherence and accountability. At scale, sclr could become a label applied so broadly that its meaning and practical impact are diluted.

It is essential that we understand these dynamics as the sector moves further towards supporting and connecting with mutual aid efforts. Addressing these gaps is not just an academic exercise; it is a strategic imperative. The next phase of this multi-year research will explore these questions through in-country primary data collection and participatory partnerships across five contexts.

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ANNEX 1.

METHODOLOGY AND DATA CHARACTERISTICS

DATA COLLECTION AND ANALYSIS

Data collection combined several strategies: an open data call via ALNAP's social media; targeted emails to more than 100 stakeholders (including donors, funders, intermediaries, researchers and academics); and online presentations and conversations, particularly with local and national actors. Across all channels, the call specified that the study sought any written and visual material documenting learning, outcomes or impacts from international support to mutual aid in humanitarian contexts.

A deliberate effort was made – especially with local facilitators – to clarify that data need not be limited to formal or externally facing reports. We also welcomed insights from experiential or ground-level learning, broadening the evidence base to include diverse expressions and local understandings of impact.

This process yielded over 300 documents, all screened for relevance before in-depth analysis. Materials were excluded if they lacked reflection on real-time or post-action learning, outcomes or impacts – these mostly comprised toolkits, proposals, guidance notes or training materials.

The selected documents were analysed using a hybrid coding approach, combining deductive and inductive methods. Two ALNAP researchers coded the data through a staged calibration process to ensure inter-coder reliability.

STATE OF THE EVIDENCE

Following the initial screening, 209 documents – representing over 3,000 pages of data – were analysed as part of the final evidence base. We do not claim this dataset is representative of all existing relevant evidence, as some data may not have been shared or may have been unavailable, or we may have missed some relevant actors. However, it does represent a broad and diverse sample. Coding saturation was reached during analysis, meaning that we reached a point where no significant new codes were emerging and existing ones were being reinforced.

KEY DATA CHARACTERISTICS

- **Geography:** The evidence comes from 25 countries. In order of volume (by number of pages), these countries include: Iraq, Palestine, Haiti, Ukraine, Kenya, the Philippines, Sudan, Turkey, Myanmar, Syria, Somalia, Ethiopia, Afghanistan, Colombia, DRC, India, Yemen, South Sudan, Tanzania, Zambia, Senegal and Moldova. Regional and global-level documents were also included in our analysis, along with some evidence from Australia. It is important to note that page count does not necessarily correlate with the strength or depth of evidence from each context.
- **Document type:** The most common document type is progress or final reports (40%), followed by learning briefs (18%), case studies (14%), evaluations (8%) and external research (8%).
- **Data sources:** Where identifiable, most documents are authored by local intermediaries (48%), followed by INGOs (27%), external evaluators and academics (9%), philanthropies (3%) and bilateral donors (3%).
- **Primary objectives:** Where the primary objective could be discerned, the most common is reporting (48%) and learning (29%).
- **Intended audience:** The intended audience could be identified in 70% of documents. Of these, 62% are internal documents from intermediaries for donors and funders, 30% are public-facing and 8% are internal to the authoring organisation. No documents are explicitly intended for mutual aid groups themselves.
- **Funding sources:** Funding sources could be identified in 69% of documents. Among these, support is relatively evenly distributed across bilateral donors (29%), philanthropic organisations (30%) and INGOs (32%). However, this distribution may not accurately reflect the broader landscape of financial support to mutual aid. In many cases, INGO-led support has been funded by bilateral or philanthropic donors, though this is not always clearly traceable in the documentation.
- **Years:** Most of the documents analysed were produced between 2023 and 2025 (84%), with 2024 being the most common year (39%).

TRENDS FROM THE ANALYSIS

All data was coded and organised around emerging trends within the two dimensions.

- **Volume of data points:** From the 209 documents, more than 2,600 excerpts (segments) were identified as containing relevant evidence.
- **Type of data across excerpts:** Each excerpt was coded by type – outcomes (60%), lessons (23%), observations/anecdotes (9%) and impacts (8%). While

explicit mentions of evidence gaps are limited within the documents, several significant gaps are identified through analyses.

- **Distribution across dimensions:** Dimension 1 (impacts and outcomes experienced by mutual aid efforts) accounts for 83% of all codes applied. Dimension 2 (systems-change impacts and outcomes experienced by those providing support) accounts for the remaining 17%.
- **State of the evidence:** Rather than assessing the quality of data – which can be subjective – the analysis focused on the origin of the evidence. This includes whether the data was triangulated/verified or community-validated, or if it is anecdotal or based on emerging patterns. For a large proportion of the data (39%), it was not possible to determine the origin. Among the remainder (61%), 23% was triangulated and verified.


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