Building more locally-led aid ecosystems

2025

Insights from Global South Civil Society

NEAR

Acknowledgements

Contents

1 Introduction

In her 2009 TedTalk, Nigerian author Chimamanda Ngozi Adiche warned about the dangers of a single story. *"Power is the ability not just to tell the story of another person,"* she said, *"but to make it the definitive story of that person".*

The aid sector is at a critical juncture with attention spans and donor budgets reducing, but increasing and increasingly varied needs. As conversations around the future of aid pick up pace, it is important that alternatives do not mimic the same one-story problem.

This study was conceived before the chaos of 2025. Even then, the writing was already on the wall. The aid sector is not working in the way it needs to for those at the frontlines of delivery. The story of 'localisation' is still primarily being told by those sitting in what are considered the centres of power in the Global North, rather than by those who have always been at the centre of the action: national, local and grassroots organisations and communities in the Global South.

During the main data collection period alone (February–September 2025), the international system further retreated from its stated commitments. The closure of the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) was followed by other donors in the Global North slashing their aid budgets and redirecting them into defence spending. This was accompanied by a series of tariff increases by the United States, which compounded economic pressures in many countries.

The financial abdication was accompanied by a moral one – the prevailing shadow of an ongoing genocide in Gaza. 2025 also saw deepening conflicts and increased climate-related crises in countries across the Global South.

Building More Locally-Led Aid Ecosystems is an attempt to bring nuanced insights from Global South civil society on the hopes and struggles of daily realities, as well as their efforts to find a different way forward. Mimicking the realities in which many national and local organisations find themselves, the report looks both within the dominant international system and outside it.

Through the course of the study and analysis, several threads emerged that illuminate where we are at this juncture and where we may need to go.

1. Ten years on from the World Humanitarian Summit, 'localisation' is an accepted term, but it has not been transformational in the way the international aid sector actually works. For those on the ground, the same challenges continue around funding, flexibility and equitable value. The gaps between on-paper commitments and risk-averse bureaucratic practice remain unresolved. The expectations still required to become a 'good partner' often damage the natural ways of working that exist within local communities and organisations.

2. Small, grounded practices can inform more transformative system change. The study shows how examples of trust-based community activities and network building become the foundations for locally-led grant making initiatives. Hopes for the future centre on these notions of solidarity, breaking entrenched mindsets about what a 'system' should be.

3. Non-monetary assets need to be valued. The time, resources, space, intellectual capital, labour and in-kind materials that local organisations and communities themselves provide are often taken for granted. These systems exist naturally, but accounting for and valuing them offers a way forward, showcasing just how much people do themselves and helping to rebalance where power actually lies.

4. If locally-led action is to respond to people's actual needs and address the root causes of humanitarian crises, it inherently needs a rights-based approach.

5. The report deliberately uses the plural term "ecosystems". Insights from this study underscore the multitude of stakeholders, issues, complexities and opportunities within a single country, let alone across the entire Global South. Emerging systems will have to be more decentralised and take plurality into account.

Approach and methodology

Given the scope and breadth of the Global South country contexts, this study does not attempt to measure progress on localisation, nor to adjudicate whether global commitments have been met. While tools like the Network for Empowered Aid Response (NEAR's) Localisation Performance Measurement Framework have informed research design, this study is an analytical one. It tries to draw out broader insights into localisation / locally-led action in the aid sector from the perspective of Global South civil society, both within and beyond the gaze of the formal system.

This focus on lived realities and experience, as opposed to measurement, helps capture some of the similarities and nuances that echo across the varied contexts of the Global South. It offers a view of surviving and recovering from crisis that goes beyond numbers. Given the breadth of the topic, the Global South and the diversity of civil society views that exists across it, this study does not claim to present all viewpoints.

Conceptually, the process attempted to look at a few broad issues, which informed the various stands of entire research process. These included the evolution of localisation over the last few years from the standpoint of national and local actors; the ways national and local actors are navigating political and social challenges in their own contexts; their innovations and locally-led ways of working; emerging and alternative funding sources, including Global-South led ones; and south-south cooperation and solidarity.

The analysis and triangulation of the various input sources revealed overlaps and broader findings.

The report therefore explores the topics in the following manner:

Part 2, navigating the localisation landscape, explores the current state of localisation in the humanitarian sector and how it evolved.

Part 3, beyond the gaze of the international system, has two sections. The first explores systems of solidarity, asking what types of innovative solutions local organisations are developing. While the question of southern-led funding avenues did not elicit many responses, the chapter explores alternative sources of funding used by local and national organisations.

The second section of Part 3, dives into Global South contexts and collaboration. It explores how national and local organisations are navigating political and social challenges within their own national and sub-national contexts. It also looks at emerging examples of South-South solidarity.

Part 4 explores hopes for the future of aid ecosystems.

Finally, Part 5 offers reflections and recommendations to move towards more locally-led aid ecosystems.

A peer-led, broad-based approach to inputs

The design, study implementation and writing of this report was accompanied by a Research Advisory Committee involving NEAR member representatives and external research experts.

A survey was sent to national and local organisations in the Global South, including NEAR members.

- The survey garnered 261 unique and full responses from across 38 countries. The number of responses per country varies widely. Roughly 40 per cent are from Africa, 34 per cent from Asia-

Pacific, 17 per cent from the Middle East and North Africa and 9 per cent from Latin America and the Caribbean.

- Roughly 70 per cent were from NEAR membership and 30 per cent from other Global South organisations.

- 61 per cent self-identified as national organisations; 28 per cent as local; 5 per cent as grassroots; 3 per cent as regional; and 3 per cent as other. Others were unable to pick one category to define themselves, and felt their work stretched across categories.

- These level definitions were created for the purposes of this survey, and to support ease of understanding for the respondents.

Grassroots: Work within the smallest administrative unit (e.g. village) with most of your staff and volunteers coming from that area.

Local: Focus on one sub-national area, (e.g. one province, municipality, region, governorate or state).

National: Work in multiple sub-national areas across your country.

Regional: Work across multiple countries.

We undertook a **literature review** covering papers and syntheses, grey literature and organisational policies, and broader editorial and opinion pieces on some of the nuanced aspects of the localisation debate. Given that several comprehensive studies have already examined the measurement of localisation progress in different areas, we did not attempt to duplicate this work, instead drawing on existing analysis.

Interviews and meetings: The study integrated 35 key informant interviews with national, local and grassroots civil society practitioners, donors and INGO representatives. Insights for this study were also discussed at four NEAR regional workshops: the Middle East and North Africa Summit in February 2025; the Asia-

Pacific Summit in August 2025; the Latin America and Caribbean Summit; and the Africa Summit in November 2025. Additional inputs were gathered from other virtual and in-person meetings.

Interviews and discussions were all conducted on the basis of non-attribution and quotes in this report have been anonymised.

Country-level case studies: This report draws on four country-level studies selected through an expression of interest process based on financial and technical viability, the strength of the proposed research and the potential benefit to applicants for their future work. The reports were written mainly for national contexts and have informed this broader analysis. The case studies are from South Sudan, the Philippines, Colombia and Nigeria.

Terminology

Global North and Global South

For the purposes of this report, Global North and Global South are used not as geographical terms, but to replace older language including "developed" and "developing."

The Global North includes wealthy and politically stable countries and territories such as Australia, Canada, Europe, Japan, New Zealand, Singapore, South Korea, and the United States.

Global South countries are low or middle-income economies or recipients of Global North humanitarian and development assistance or have a history of political and/or social dominance by countries in the Global North. These include countries in Africa, Latin America, the Caribbean and Pacific Islands and many countries in Asia and the Middle East. Generally, this also includes large, heavily populated countries such as Brazil, India, Indonesia, China, Nigeria and Mexico.

NEAR recognises that these terms are contested, often obscuring complex geopolitics, the wealth, technical skills and scientific knowledge in the Global South, and poverty in the Global North. However, they remain uniquely relevant in the context of aid.

National and local organisations

This report uses the broad term of national, local and grassroots (or community-based) organisations as per NEAR's criteria that they are:

• present in locations, before, during, and after a crisis;

• accountable to local laws;

• accountable to communities where they work;

• led by local nationals;

• and not internationally affiliated in terms of branding, governance, or financing (that results from that affiliation).

Note: Unless otherwise explicitly mentioned, NGOs referred to in this report are national, local and grassroots organisations.
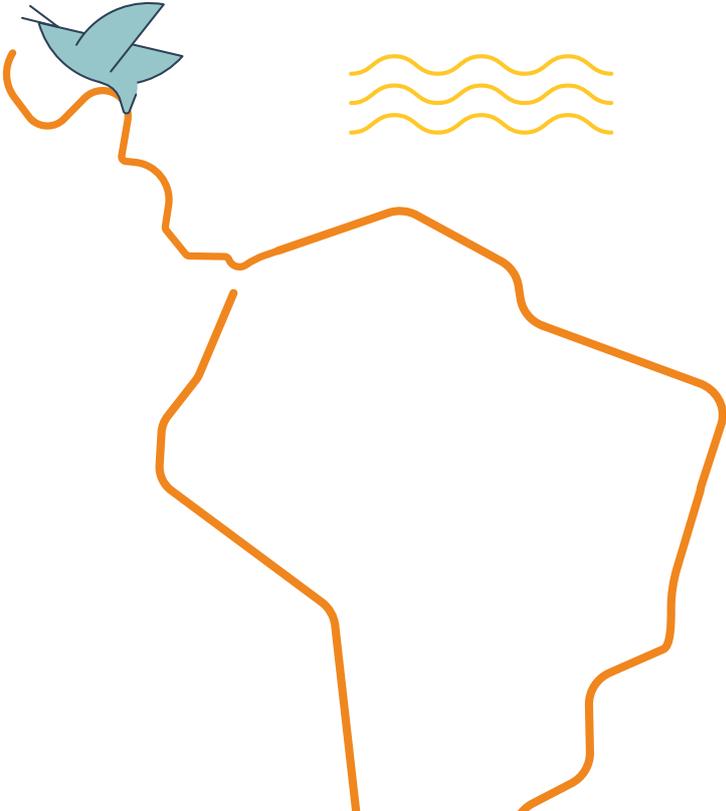
2 Navigating the localisation landscape

"As long as you are going with this 'yes, Sir, yes, Ma'am' approach, they [the international system] like you a lot. They will always have a chair for you around the table. No one can say that you are not local. You are local, but you are not challenging them. You are not questioning the very basics. As soon as you start raising questions, they will find an excuse to replace you with another local actor who is just going to say yes."

Local Organisation Leader from Pakistan

"Local actors really want to see resources being provided to them through direct funding. Unfortunately, that's not going to shift in the immediate future. We will continue as institutional donors to provide funding through or to international humanitarian actors in some capacity just because of the way that the structures are set up and due to human resources which are limited. But again, we're hoping that pooled funds can unlock some of those potentials. We're really hoping that the decision making, and the leadership is decentralised in some capacity so that that local and national actors are more recognised in the system as equitable actors."

Bilateral Donor Representative

"Across the culture of the organisation, people said, we always worked with partners. This will be so easy. We already do it. And of course, it's not how we work through partners. So that's been a real mindset and behaviour change that we're still struggling to embed in practice at that kind of global team level. That being partner– led really means making the space and the time to listen, to plan together, to develop proposals together. Not just choose a partner because you've got to get a brief in quickly. So, we've been putting these things in place, training staff on that, getting training from external sources to help us think about shifting power."

International NGO representative at the headquarter level

Chapter 2 highlights

Part 2 provides an important snapshot and view of 'localisation' from the perspective of Global South civil society. It looks at the day-to-day realities of what a decade of struggling to implement a top-down localisation agenda yielded (or in some cases destroyed). Many of these challenges are not new, but their continued presence in 2025 is a powerful indicator that more transformative change movements are required.

- A shift in rhetoric around localisation, but less change in grounded action.

- The need to focus on the "how" and "what" of programming, not just "who" delivers it.

- Attempts to shift partnership dynamics by INGOs and multilateral systems.

2.1 A shift in rhetoric around localisation, but less change in grounded action

Across the sector, localisation has become an accepted idea. It has become the norm for international actors to incorporate country-based expertise into proposals and plans (often at donors' request); to implement programmes through national and local actors to ensure smooth delivery (with cost-efficiency arguments still often playing a role); and, to a lesser extent, to give visibility to their "local partners".

Across the humanitarian system, only 3.6 per cent of all funding went directly to local and national organisations in 2024, according to data from the Global Humanitarian Assistance (GHA) Report. Overseas Development Assistance (ODA) funding remains concentrated among a small number of recipients. In 2024, the top five ODA-accepting countries received 41 per cent of country-allocable international humanitarian assistance, the same percentage as 2023. These countries were Palestine, Ukraine, Yemen, Sudan and Afghanistan. With aid funding set to decline

further, donors are likely to re-prioritise their allocations, potentially leading to an even greater concentration of funding to a small number of countries (GHA Report).

Equally, the spirit of equitability remains elusive in many day-to-day interactions. Consultations with local and national actors often still feel tokenistic. Even when invited to conferences, the journey to attend and meaningfully participate can be challenging. International meetings remain difficult to access, with locations usually decided for the convenience of Global North actors, requiring significant time and financial resources for Global South organisations to attend. Visa protocols and travel restrictions create barriers even with advance planning. While modes of communication have improved, particularly through online tools, translation and interpretation are still not standard. Where available, these tend to be limited to recognised United Nations (UN) languages such as French, Spanish and Arabic. Digital inequities also pose challenges to accessing meetings virtually.

Similar challenges exist for coordination meetings at the national level – particularly for smaller organisations based outside big cities.

Box 1

The vocabulary of localisation and locally-led action

This study reiterates findings from other pieces of research on the need to shift thinking and vocabulary on the spectrum from localisation to locally-led action (Baguios, 2021; Viswanathan, 2023; Barbalet, 2024).

NEAR defines localisation as a process of changing the way support to communities is designed, funded and delivered. A system where local response systems have the agency and resources they require to support communities before, during and after crises. Localisation aims to make aid more effective, sustainable and more able to meet the needs of people affected by crises. Localisation is also a process of challenging power within the existing aid system with the objective of putting local response systems at the heart of supporting communities. Localisation is a solution to current sectoral challenges anchored in the belief that shifting power to local actors and rebalancing roles towards local systems of response will enable better support to communities.

Initiatives such as the Pledge for Change have also tried to deepen the idea of equitable partnerships.

Yet, despite efforts made to broaden and deepen the idea of localisation, it is still widely perceived as the mainstream approach taken by the formal international system. It is associated with reform efforts like the Grand Bargain – which speaks of being "as local as possible, as international as necessary" and narrowly frames localisation in terms of "strengthening international investment and respect for the role of local actors, with the goal of reducing costs and increasing the reach of humanitarian action" (Grand Bargain Localisation Workstream, 2021). Participants in this study still broadly saw this as a more "top-down' approach" as an "efficiency argument" and as vocabulary imposed by the international system.

More problematically, funding and representation remain the key attributes associated with "localisation'" As a national practitioner from Yemen commented, *"We are not yet ready to practice the true definition of localisation – it remains a fundraising place, a place to practice the Grand Bargain. If you don't like it and there is another local organisation who is willing to compromise, then many donors have taken advantage of it."*

A decade after localisation commitments were made at the Grand Bargain, what this means in practice still varies widely among international actors. It has yet to be transformational! In general, local and national actors continue to feel like sub-contractors rather than equal partners.

In Colombia, this also had a terminological paradox. The problems with translating terms into Spanish-speaking debate can exclude local actors from the debate and maintain North-South asymmetries if not properly contextualised.

Locally-led action is broader and generally used to denote approaches where programmes are conceived, shaped and delivered closer to affected communities. They are designed in accordance with local norms and needs and perhaps most importantly they may occur with or without the support of the formal international system.

This resonates with the hopes and worries that emerge from this study, moving the focus from traditional centres of power to what have always been the centres of action. The challenge is not just with the formal system, but within Global South civil society themselves, where a mindset shift is required. Can consciously shifting the vocabulary help shift the lens? It is with this view that further chapters in this report use the term "locally-led action" when referring to activities carried out by national and local actors themselves.

In addition, coordination challenges arise due to the use of aggregated, averaged macro-data. Variations and diversity at sub-national levels, including in the types of crises, are often bypassed or ignored. This is compounded by the absence of a data-sharing system in the humanitarian sector: every major actor maintains their own database and treats it as a protected silo, conditionally accessible only to their own partners. This results in overlaps and duplication in reaching the most affected households, undermining the very purpose of coordination.

In other words, how, where and for whose convenience such meetings are organised have not moved far enough with the rhetoric.

This is true also of risk sharing. While the passing down of physical and social risk to 'implementing partners' has been well documented, financial risks also emerged in two ways over the course of this study. First, there were examples, particularly among women-led organisations, of individuals putting in their own savings to sustain projects whose funding was pulled. Second, and more systemically, fluctuations in currency exchange rates have a major impact on budget proposals, which are still primarily required in US dollars, euros or British Pounds. The gap between the time a proposal is written, and the time of implementation can result in significant losses, usually borne by the implementing agency, and this risk persists throughout the implementation period. The number of approvals required to amend budget proposals, or, in some cases, to change project activities as a result, adds further pressure on local organisations. High transaction costs, unfavorable exchange rates and regulatory burdens have also been identified as threats to NGO effectiveness and sustainability more broadly (Common Reserve, 2024).

Finally, the multitude of UN and INGO frameworks – from Grand Bargain to Pledge for Change – are extremely unevenly implemented. In region after region, and country after country, there are staff of international signatories who are not even aware that these frameworks exist, and others pushing collectively at both the headquarters and country levels. This uneven implementation puts the burden on national organisations to advocate for what has been promised. In Indonesia, it was civil society who convened signatories to the Pledge for Change, briefing them on the commitments and working together to push them to act on it. This dilutes the significance of such promises.

2.2 The need to focus on the "how" and "what" of programming, not just "who" delivers it

"We take our western trends and sectors and technical buzzwords, and we impose those on to onto local actors as opposed to having local actors and their practices inform our wider discussion. We've also skewed things by putting dollar values on it. I mean we've incentivised certain aspects of localised response with per diems and sitting allowances. We've introduced Western monetization into programming in ways that that I believe has done harm."

Country Director, INGO in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region

(The key informant went on to describe how discussions and debates that would naturally take place in local gathering places were formalised into conferences with per diems, upsetting the natural balance of the community.)

Much of the localisation debate over the last decade has focused on who qualifies as "local," which remains an area of dispute in international tracking. This remains a necessary push but, on its own, cannot deliver the changes required in the system.

Box 2

Four challenges to "localisation" that continue to exist across regions
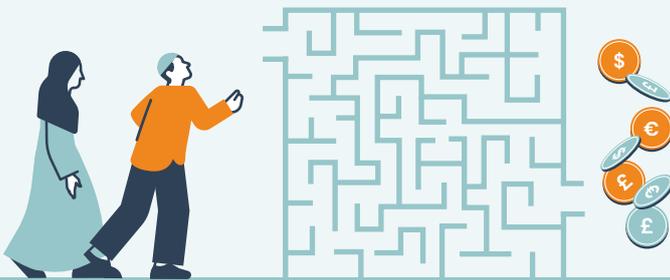
1 **Funding:** The lack of direct, long-term and / or flexible funding continues to be a major issue. The level of scrutiny, compliance and bureaucracy remain hurdles to access.

2 **Operational sustainability:** Even where there is flexible funding, it still does not systematically cover indirect cost recovery (otherwise known as overhead costs). This limits the ability to build organisational sustainability, retain staff and do longer-term planning.

3 **Uneven progress for 'local' organisations:** While National NGOs (NNGOs) have made strides in representation within coordination platforms and partnerships, grassroots organisations, indigenous peoples, youth organisations and women-led groups remain marginalised.

4 **Power and decision-making:** Representation has not yet moved to giving-up power. Within the recognised humanitarian system, decision-making is still primarily controlled by international agencies and Global North funders.

The fact that these challenges persist after a decade is indicative of the entrenched norms and the strong resistance to actually change. It also signals a need to think deeply about the success factors for the international system. Tiny movements forward are celebrated, while so much remains unchanged. Until there is a willingness to think radically – without the constraint and excuse of bureaucracy – little will actually shift, even after another decade.

The unique role of indigenous local actors and organisations stems both from who they are and from how they naturally function. Their ways of being and working can drive trust and problem solving. Yet, in the bid to become 'good partners' to those who hold the power in the international system, they often have to adapt their ways of working. This is essential to access and continue receiving funding, but it can also create a mini-me effect, cascading from national organisations down to the grassroots.

There was a palpable fear among contributors to this research that continuing along current localisation patterns may result in a shift of actors, but not necessarily in ways of working within the sector. This risks reproducing existing hierarchies unless deliberate efforts are made to include grassroots organisations and emerging actors, and to truly allow for nuances in how programmes are delivered. Existing patterns risk destroying what naturally exists and instead reinforcing persisting "beneficiary" mindsets shaped by how the system currently functions – where the focus is on the immediacy of providing aid.

In the Philippines, for instance, interviews with survivors of Typhoon Haiyan on Gigantes Island, Iloilo and the Taal Volcano eruption in Taal, Batangas, reveal the hesitancy of local communities to question aid, as humanitarian actors are already providing assistance. "I have no questions with the aid they provided me, since I have no right," said one community member from Gigantes Island. This sentiment was echoed in other places, including community surveys in Catatumbo, Colombia, where participants noted that many organisations present projects that have been designed without consulting the community.

However, the lack of participation by crisis-affected people in deciding what relief is provided, and how, often leads to aid that is irrelevant or has negative impacts on sustainability. In some projects, such as water and sanitation, there are instances

where wells are constructed without local consultation, resulting in long-term water shortages because wells are often placed in areas with limited underground water supplies. Another example was in Estancia, Iloilo, in the Philippines, following Typhoon Haiyan, where a surplus of donated fishing boats resulted in fisherfolk receiving two or three boats, while even non-fisherfolk were given boats (NDRRMC, 2014). One grassroots organisation in Latin America described frustrations commonly expressed in their area: *"Why are you bringing me fish in a can, corn and rice in plastic bags that pollute my river? I fish myself; I grow corn and rice. Give me gasoline or something else I actually need."*

The need to focus on the "how" and "what" of assistance in order to deliver truly locally-led action on the ground was further exemplified by two main contradictions that emerged across the study. The first was the demand from local and national organisations for less siloed uses of funding, contrasted with the humanitarian sector's pullback to funding only lifesaving needs. The second was the tension between increasing requirements of upward accountability and the need for informal community trust-building.

The request for less siloed use of funding, contrasted with the sector's pullback to funding only "lifesaving needs"

For at-risk communities, needs do not fit neatly into thematic or sectoral silos (i.e. humanitarian, development, peacebuilding etc.) Grassroots, local and national organisations likewise do not categorise themselves as having a singular focus in their work.

Over 90% of the organisations that responded to the survey self-identified as working on more than one thematic area (see figure 1 below). Of the remaining that selected a singular focus, the majority identified as women's rights/women's issues, followed by humanitarian.

Figure 1: What is your organisation's focus?

85%
Humanitarian work

80%
Development work

61%
Disaster risk reduction/ Climate adaptation work

65%
Women's rights / Women–focused issues

42%
Peacebuilding

22%
Refugee–focused issues

30%
Other
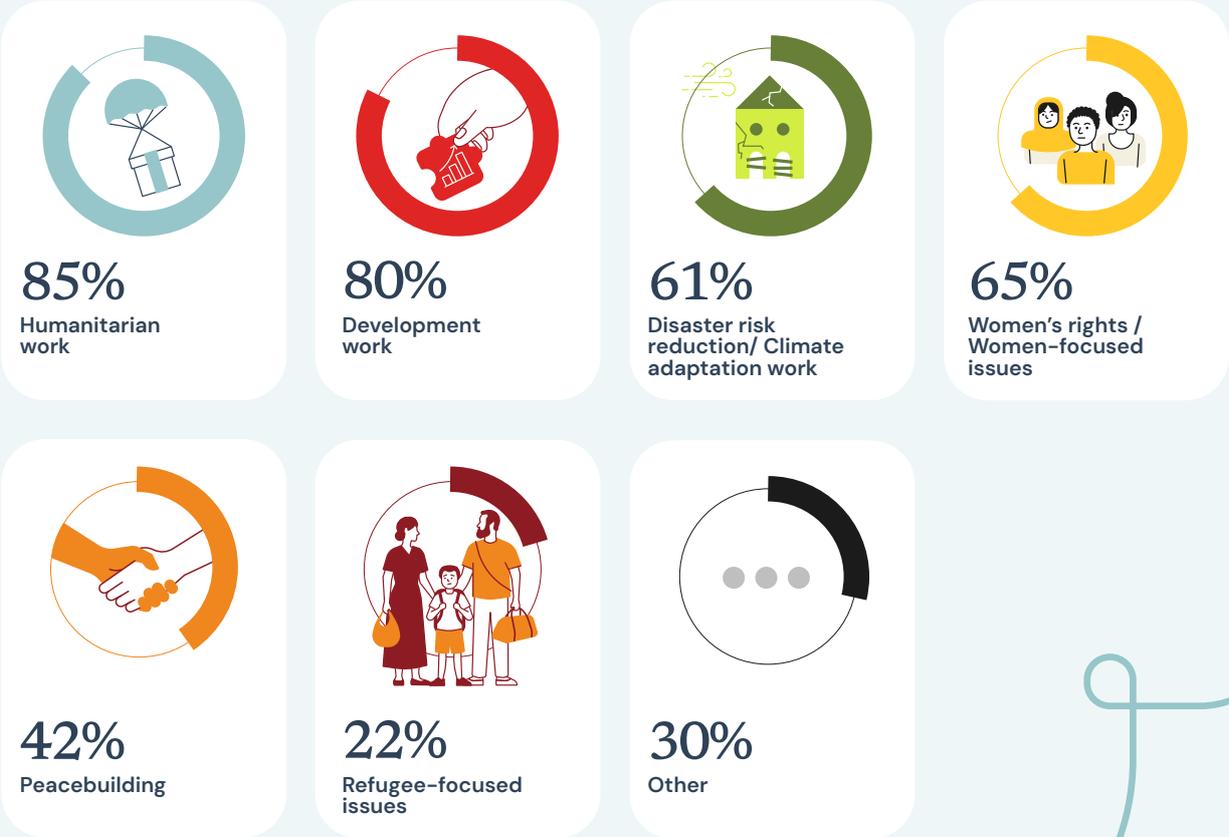
This trend was echoed in conversations more broadly. Much of this is an attempt to respond to actual community needs and demands, as opposed to imposing or selling them a solution.

In essence, practitioners spend a lot of time and effort switching hats and struggling to "projectise" different community needs to fit within specific grants. How does this manifest in practice? In Myanmar, following the 2025 earthquake and amid continued fighting, a group of internally displaced people were temporarily stationed on a large plot of land. Since they were traditionally farmers, they asked for seeds to grow their own vegetables and /or animals to sustain themselves, rather than receiving sacks of rice, oil and salt. The national NGO working with this community approached the UN system to adjust its budget but was told that "resilience building" fell under development and could not be funded through their humanitarian activities. The organisation continued to advocate with other donors bilaterally and was ultimately able to respond to community demands using a different funding source.

Yet practices in the dominant humanitarian system are primarily around further narrowing silos rather than breaking them.

The push for the "nexus" has taken a backseat, with few actors agreeing on what it means in practice or how to implement it. Despite being a pillar of the Grand Bargain, it has not featured prominently in discussions. Likewise, despite the Swiss Development Corporation (SDC) pushing the agenda by merging its Humanitarian and Development departments in 2022, other donors have not followed suit (ALNAP, 2025).

More recently, with the budget cuts in the system, the focus is on cutting back further to "lifesaving needs". As one institutional donor put it, *"we are already stretching the limits of what short-term, response-driven humanitarian funding can do."* This has echoed across donors, with little hope of better bridging siloed funding in the current environment.

Whose trust? Upward accountability versus informal community trust building

Across regions, cycles of resource dependency continue. The danger of over-reliance on a single donor is clear. Organisations observed this during the COVID-19 shutdowns when programmes were suddenly halted, and again throughout 2025 in the wake of the USAID cuts and closure. The impact of these financing gaps is not just money; it is again trust. This brutal funding environment therefore forces local organisations to adjust goals and values to fit with INGO or donor mandates and frameworks (Hajeeb, 2025).

The international system has long favoured standardisation as a way to engage with complex local and national civil society dynamics. For instance, anti-terrorism clauses, security protocols and prioritisation mechanisms such as standardised "needs assessments" and "beneficiary" lists. It has also included audit protocols, particularly the dreaded three quotations, which mandate that any purchase or service above a certain price threshold obtain three separate bids in order to find the cheapest option. This process is time consuming, not always feasible and, in some cases, the cheapest option does not work, requiring separate documentation to justify deviations from the standard. These standardised mandates have served to professionalise operations, analyse results and serve accountability functions. However, they have also contributed to the internationalisation of local and national actors, distancing them from contextualised and embedded responses.

Ironically, this harmonisation – particularly of due diligence requirements - has not progressed significantly across international actors, despite being a consistent ask from national and local civil society. This continues to be in dialogue and pilots, with the only tangible example coming from Ukraine, where members of the Disaster and Emergency Committee (DEC) have put this into practice.

The results of imposing these highly technical standardised requirements and checklists without regard for contextual nuances play out in different ways.

In one example, standard conflict of interest clauses designed for large populations have become very difficult to implement in a small village in the Pacific, where everyone is related in some way.

Prioritisation decisions – and the push to identify the most vulnerable people – can sometimes clash with the culture and prevailing dynamics of the area. In many instances, communities decide to share the resources and take less, rather than alienate other members of their village. In the most extreme cases, such a push for a standard list can lead to community divisions or even fatalities (Thu Thu et al, 2024).

This is not just a question of filling forms, but of changing ways of being and impacting culture, even for larger local and national organisations. Informal systems of accountability such as signs posted in the village have been replaced with contractually obligated paperwork. *'Everything is now written'*, as one practitioner from Nepal commented.

Likewise, the relationships that allow deep work to happen and sustain over the longer term are often built in non-emergency times. Attending a community wedding; supporting an issue completely unrelated to the programme; drinking endless cups of tea while sitting with families who would otherwise consider themselves 'beneficiaries'; or developing relationships with government officials as individuals, not officers or institutions.

Yet, time, resources and acknowledgment for this informal trust building are still not accounted for in log frames and timesheets.

Another overlooked area is the way costs incurred by local actors through mobilising local resources, contributing materials, providing space, etc. are ignored. Reporting systems and success metrics used by many international actors account only for their own funding. If local contributions were accounted for in the same manner, the resulting cost-sharing ratios within projects would present a very different picture. Scope for amplifying local voices and claiming their share/visibility would be evolved, perhaps explaining why the system does not change. (See box 5 for more details on how local actors are innovating to address this challenge.)

Ironically, the way grant proposals are designed is also subtly changing where organisations focus. Since larger grant applications often equate visibility and annual 'turnover' with trustworthiness, some feel an obligation to put more focus on fundraising and marketing their work. This shift has repercussions on where resources are invested and how programmes are executed. The branding craze (labelling everything with a logo) for which people have long criticised the UN and INGOs is starting to take hold amongst larger national and local organisations as well.

Too much focus on upward accountability can, and does, damage legitimacy with the communities that organisations serve. Trust building is an extremely difficult process and one that is equally easy to break. This is particularly true in contexts where civil society is already being vilified by government actors (see chapter 3.4).
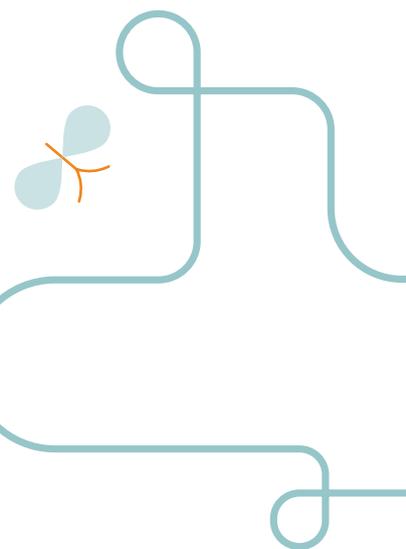
Box 3

The militarisation of aid: Gaza as a foreshadowing of broader trends?

> *"What we're seeing in Gaza is an extreme wake up call to an extreme situation. If that were the design and way forward for humanitarian response, we should all be terrified. Because there's nothing locally led about it, and there's nothing principled or ethical about it."*

INGO Country Director in the MENA region

> *"Humanitarian structures are being replaced by military companies to distribute aid. This is not only Palestine (we are the test case) but it will then be everywhere. Then there will be no localisation, no voice. If we keep silent, then this will be easily replicated elsewhere."*

Civil Society Practitioners in Palestine

In Gaza, in the midst of an ongoing genocide, famine and blockade of humanitarian aid, the newly formed Gaza Humanitarian Foundation – backed by the US and Israeli governments – became the only way for thousands of Palestinians to access food. The highly militarised distribution points had no clear systems and were difficult to access. A number of massacres took place near or on route to these sites. Numbers vary, but casualties are estimated to be around 2,000 (Al-Jazeera, 2025). Many families felt the choice was literally between starvation and the added risk of getting killed in line.

Other international actors and donors were highly encouraged to support the work of GHF; and with no other route to deliver aid (or more cynically, to showcase their budget spends), some did actively consider it (KIIs).

This again became a question of International Humanitarian Law including starvation of civilians as a method of warfare, targeting objects indispensable to civilian survival (food, water, agriculture), failure to distinguish between civilian and military objects, launching disproportionate attacks, and obstructing humanitarian aid access.

Throughout these times, national and local organisations in Palestine continued to operate to the best of their ability – often facing starvation themselves. They feel their challenges were amplified because of the stringent ways that counter-terrorism and anti-money laundering clauses have been defined which treat them as suspect entities rather than legitimate humanitarian actors. These immense challenges have made it difficult for Palestinian NGOs to unite under a single umbrella, to defend rights or push back against donor-imposed conditions. One example of this financial vulnerability is the large number of national organisations forced to sign the current Anti-Terrorism Pledge, essentially completely stopping them from advocating for Palestinian resistance.

Militarised / privatised aid is not new, and neither is Gaza the first place it has been used. The ability of governments and aid delivery agencies to circumvent basic humanitarian norms by using private contractors has been seen in Afghanistan, Iraq, DRC and Haiti, among many others. Armies have also been actively involved in emergency responses for decades in their own national contexts, particularly in Asia, oftentimes working alongside civil society. (This has not been without its own controversies.)

However, the impunity with which GHF operations were carried out – and the inability (or unwillingness) of the international community to intervene – brings new concerns for the future. If, watching a genocide broadcast live with protests happening around the world, is

not enough to stop a militarised takeover of aid, then what hope is there for areas that have less coverage? If the power of the multilateral system speaking together was not enough to stop the impunity, what does this mean for the legitimacy of the current system?

The Gaza example signifies even more strongly the need to adopt solidarity and rights-based approaches that go beyond aid delivery.

2.3 Attempts to shift partnership dynamics by international NGOs and the multilateral system

INGOs currently play a complex role across the Global South. From the perspective of local and national organisations, they are simultaneously seen in three roles. First, they are competitors for the same international grants and, in the case of nationalised INGOs, (see below) for the same limited domestic resources. Second, they are partners and co-collaborators on many programmes. Third, they often serve as funding intermediaries for local organisations. Over 80 per cent of NEAR's members receive some funding through INGOs (NEAR Annual Survey, 2023). For many smaller organisations across the Global South that do not have face-to-face access to institutional donors, the INGO effectively becomes the donor.

These overlapping roles make it even more complex to shift how these relationships function.

Yet there are some promising ideas that INGOs, many of whom are signatories to the Pledge for Change or the Charter for Change, have been developing or scaling up in an effort to rebalance these equations. Some would argue that these efforts represent a form of cynical self-preservation, aimed at staving off the decolonisation drive. Where these ideas are being invested in, they are happening slowly and extremely unevenly, often driven by country office dynamics rather than a concerted push across the entire organisation. There is equal acknowledgment that gaining buy-in for these changes is complicated in large, federated INGO structures.

Supporting overhead costs: In projects where indirect cost recovery is not included, some INGOs are using parts of their voluntary funding to give overhead costs to local partners.

Closing down country offices: There are growing instances of INGOs closing down country offices. For instance, in April 2025, Christian Aid announced that it would be shifting from a country office model to working more closely with national organisations through five regional hubs – located in Bogotá, Abuja, Nairobi, Amman, and Dhaka.

'Nationalising' country offices: Other INGOs are working on a model of nationalising their country offices. This approach has been highly debated and criticised but continues to occur. It is happening in two ways. First, a local partner is made a part of the INGO structure (essentially a national organisation becomes an INGO affiliate). Second, the INGO registers as a national organisation – for instance Save the Children in India is known as Bal Raksha Bharat.

Having communities pick their donors: The Re-Imagining the INGO (RINGO) pilots on reverse calls for proposals are trying to turn the entrenched system on its head, giving communities the chance to select their donors. The pilot in Zambia was led by the Zambian Governance Foundation (ZGF). ZGF facilitated a process to identify priorities in nine communities across four districts (Chibombo, Chisamba, Luangwa and Rufunsa). INGOs working in Zambia were invited to apply to support these community-based projects. Interestingly, there were very few quality applications. Some INGOs were concerned about this approach including due diligence. Others were unable to find money because their annual budget was pre-allocated. Plan International was finally selected as partner.

Shifting to an enabling role: Finally, some INGOs are experimenting with shifting their role to that of an enabler, supporting organisations in non-monetary ways. Examples of this work include supporting local partners in applications for networks. They have also been facilitating access to different types of funding – private sector, foundation and institutional - through introductions and support, help with due diligence and proposal writing.

New initiatives within the multilateral system with a localisation lens

National reference groups for the Grand Bargain: The Grand Bargain has been one of the few global reform spaces open to local civil society. However, the process remains dominated by international actors. There continues to be a disconnect between rhetoric at the global level and progress at the country level, where engagement from international signatories has been highly inconsistent.

Grand Bargain 3.0 supports structured engagement with local actors through the National Reference Groups (NRGs). Each NRG is led by local and national actors and supported by international co-leads. The aim is to bridge global commitments and local realities, and to enable structured engagement, learning and accountability. There continues to be political momentum and support for the 15 (and counting) NRGs. A country-level perception survey conducted by the Alliance for Empowering Partnership (A4EP) ahead of the 2025 Grand Bargain Annual Meeting showed that, in the seven "Priority NRG" contexts, stakeholders held a slightly more positive outlook on Grand Bargain progress – suggesting that NRGs may have generated momentum and action that global processes have not (A4EP 2025). The seven countries currently prioritised under the Grand Bargain NRG revitalisation are Colombia, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Lebanon, Myanmar, the Philippines, South Sudan and Ukraine.

In Colombia, the Declaration of the National Reference Group in October 2025 recognised progress in raising the visibility of local capacities, improving access to common funds and increasing presence in coordination clusters. However, gaps in direct financing, administrative barriers and lack of recognition "as peers" in governance were also noted. To address these issues, the Colombia NRG Terms of Reference

established a shared leadership model involving HALÜ, Corpocaminar, SAHED and Oxfam, alongside a diverse membership comprising local CSOs "including grassroots, ethnic and women- and migrant-led organisations" as well as UN agencies, donors, government, academia and the private sector. The agreed functions include coordination, advocacy, knowledge sharing, and participatory monitoring of Grand Bargain commitments. There will also be strategic dialogue with other ongoing initiatives such as the Flagship to avoid duplication.

Consistent with this, the Colombia Declaration proposes institutionalising the NRGs, creating an annual Country Localisation Report, and positioning Colombia as a pilot country for translating global commitments into territorial actions.

Indonesian Humanitarian Coordination Platform: Where national organisations take the lead, there are also sparks for hope in transforming international humanitarian structures. In August 2025, a five-month negotiation between local civil society organisations (CSOs) and United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) in Jakarta culminated in the transition of a customarily UN-led Humanitarian Country Team into a locally-led coordination platform. This platform, co-chaired by local civil society organisations and OCHA, will run in a six-month transition before becoming fully civil society organisation-led. However, the handover was done on OCHA's terms and was not accompanied by adequate financial, social or technical resources. While Indonesian civil society is keen to be in the driving seat, the lack of accompaniment means that the model risks having gaps. Yet, comparisons between the systems will be made on these uneven terms, with even the hint of not being able to manage being seen as a red flag for future handovers.
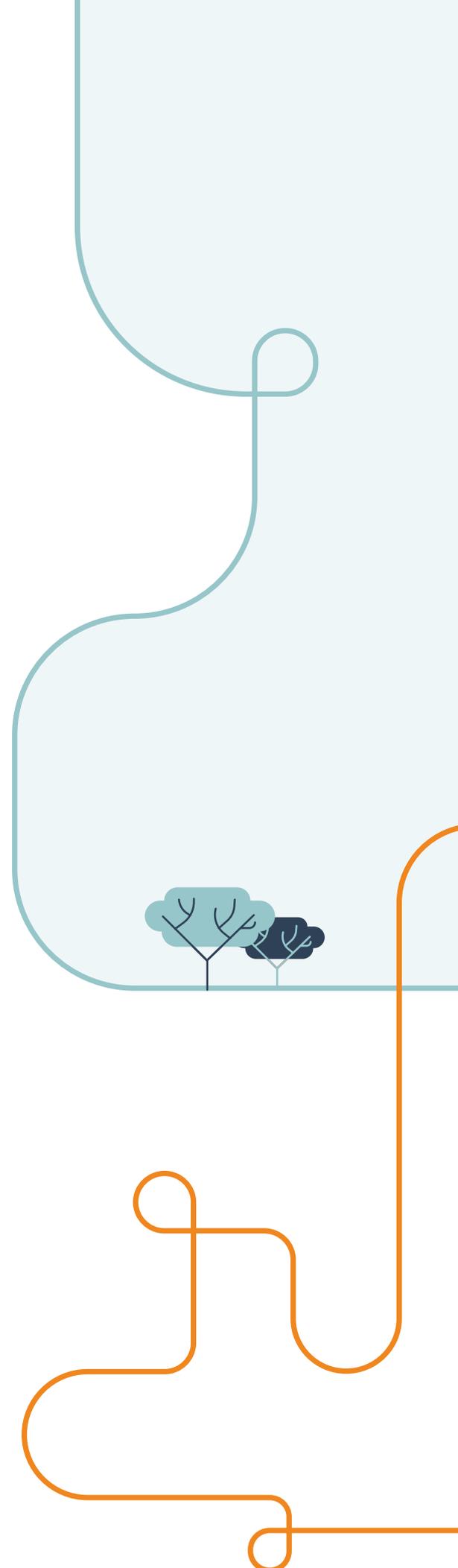
3 Beyond the gaze of the formal international system

Understanding the local context, the local people know their real needs, and they often bring them to local agencies in search of solutions. They believe that whatever they do affects them directly. So, when it comes to implementation, they know who can do what and where with impact and less risks.

Focus Group Discussion (FGD) with the community in Bor, South Sudan

"To me, solidarity means being present with communities—empathising with them, trusting them and supporting them genuinely without seeking recognition. It calls for less branding and less visibility. Morally and ethically, how are we approaching this now? Do we loudly announce a charity? Yes, we do now, unfortunately! As the saying goes, give with your right hand without your left hand knowing."

National NGO leader, Somalia

"I also challenge local organisations. How do we get back to managing the process of transformation, as opposed to managing projects on behalf of the donors?"

National NGO leader, India

Chapter 3 highlights

Chapter 3 looks at the systems of solidarity that already exist across the Global South, often unseen, suppressed or co-opted by international actors. Beyond the gaze is a reference to changing the lens with which we view these issues. There is no doubt that some of these challenges also affect international actors – including restricted civic space. Yet, the impact on local and national civil society is unique, and it is on this lens that the report focuses.

The chapter is divided into two broad sections.

Ways of being and working

- Grassroots and local systems of support
- Diversifying funding sources and funding mechanisms
- Funding avenues that help shift thinking, not just resources

Enabling (and disabling) environments for Global South Collective Action

- Navigating challenging contexts and restricted civic space
- The critical role of Global South governments
- Building bridges across the Global South

Ways of being and working

3.1 Grassroots and local systems of support

In 2013, the International Federation of the Red Cross (IFRC) estimated that 90 per cent of the world's disasters passed by 'silently' without any visibility in the international aid world. This is often a complex interplay between media attention, government policies and humanitarian agency mandates. Silence is a consequence of many factors – nationally and internationally. This includes scale; slow onset versus the dramatic visuals of a sudden disaster; political, social and economic significance of the area; whether it is caused by underlying stresses; and whether it fits neatly into an organisation's scope of work (Viswanathan & Sharma, 2019).

Just because it is not in the gaze of the international system does not mean it is not an emergency, or does not have a response. The affected individual, their neighbours and their larger community are the first responders. For those at the forefront, these actions are often grounded in a cultural understanding of collective action. Every place has its own versions of this.

One example is *Gotong royong*, the Indonesian ethos of communal mutual aid and collective responsibility.

In the Pacific, there are traditions of *"putting what you can on the table,"* known as *solesolevaki* in Fiji, *fa'alavelave* in Samoa and similar practices across the region. In this approach, everyone contributes what they can and together the total meets the shared needs.

In the Zulu and Xhosa languages, there are practices of *Ubuntu*, the deeply relational approach to being, connectedness and community. *"I am because you are."*

In the Philippines, it is powered by *pakikipagkapwa*, the deep understanding that your neighbour's pain is your own, and strengthened by *bayanihan* (solidarity), that enduring spirit of coming together to lift burdens no one should carry alone.

For national and local organisations grounded in these values, innovation has shifted from being about invention to recognising existing capacities and solutions that are waiting to be supported.

Today, these values are still found in more formalised systems of mutual aid. One of the most prominent examples are the Emergency Response Rooms (ERR) in Sudan. Founded on the principle of Nafeer – a call to collective action – emergency response rooms have been lifelines to providing assistance to community needs. The idea draws from existing resistance committees – neighbourhood-based collectives advocating for democracy – that emerged during the 2019 uprising. From the first ERRs established in 2023 in Khartoum, today the number has grown to over 700 neighbourhood ERRs nationwide. Over time, ERRs have developed more coordinated structures and governance mechanisms while remaining grounded in community leadership. More recently, national-level coordination and operational presence outside of Sudan have been established to facilitate funding. Most ERRs remain unregistered entities in order to navigate the ground realities, but this also leaves volunteers without much protection themselves. The day-to-day activities of ERRs remain diverse, reflecting the range of people involved and their ability to respond to hyper-localised needs (Olsen et al., 2024).

These approaches show how community participation and the role of grassroots organisations are fundamental societal pillars. Several studies agree that proximity to crises, knowledge of the territory and social legitimacy make these organisations essential actors for more relevant and culturally appropriate responses (Robillard, Grace & Maxwell, 2020).

These systems show a sense of rootedness and solidarity that can play a critical role in responding to actual needs. Together, they build, but this is not a way of working that formal systems have recognised or valued. From the perspective of the international system, each of these remain small (compared to the giant programmes of the international system). But there are fears that too much professionalisation and scaling of these approaches will lead to the same co-opting and mini-me syndrome that national and local organisations are already facing.

What do locally-led solutions entail?

The types of locally led solutions and initiatives that came up through the course of the study defied neat classification. Responses ranged from peacebuilding efforts and trauma care to disaster resilience, mobile health outreach and tech-based tools. A large number focused on process initiatives – mainly around enabling and working together with really grassroots organisations. What was common was the deep relationships based on trust and an understanding of nuanced needs.

One illustrative case involved the construction of a dyke between Bor and Twic East counties in South Sudan. When a contracted international firm failed to meet community expectations, local volunteers took the initiative, mobilised resources,

and completed the dyke using local materials and labour. This community-led effort not only restored trust but also demonstrated the capacity and willingness of local populations to take charge of their own recovery and resilience when given the space to do so.

In Kurigram District, Bangladesh, a national NGO helped address the interaction of gender-based violence (GBV) and climate vulnerability. This included the formation of women's resilience committees, safe spaces in cyclone shelters, and training on both climate resilience and women's rights. The initiative also introduced early warning dissemination mechanisms that specifically targeted women and girls, ensuring they are informed and prepared during climate-related disasters. They collaborated closely with local women's groups, union-level disaster management committees, the Ministry of Women and Children Affairs, and other national NGOs. One of the main challenges was overcoming entrenched social norms that discouraged women from participating in public decision-making. Additionally, integrating GBV considerations into existing climate resilience frameworks was initially met with resistance from local authorities who perceived it as beyond the scope of climate work. But the outcomes mentioned above exceeded expectations because it was rooted in lived experiences of women and girls.

In Idlib, Syria, a vocational training and psychosocial rehabilitation program led to the launch of Tawasol Café—Syria's first café managed by individuals with Down syndrome. This initiative combined skill-building, psychosocial support, and social integration in a safe, supportive space. The initiative involved community leaders in Dana and surrounding IDP camps, local municipalities and mental health experts. At the centre of it were families and caregivers of individuals with Down syndrome. Social stigma and lack of awareness, as well as ongoing security concerns were huge challenges. There was also a need for continuous staff re-training and developing inclusive vocational training

curricula. The result, however, has been an increase in self-confidence, emotional well-being, and independence among participants. Surprisingly, community attitudes also shifted significantly "many locals now openly support and frequent the café. Another surprise was the high level of engagement from caregivers, who began forming support networks and requesting similar opportunities in other towns. The success hinged on listening to families and local actors throughout the process" not just during assessments.

In the Hobyo district in Somalia, a joint government and civil society initiative helped peacebuilding and strengthened governance by listening to community demands. The area was badly affected by both extremist violence and piracy. The donor fund which the national organisation was applying for assumed that they would want access to health or education facilities, or cleaner water (given that there were few clinics or schools). The NNGO negotiated time to consult on community needs and the main demand was for an airstrip since road connectivity was bad. Their thinking was that if there was access, other resources – including security forces, teachers or doctors would come. They would also be able to reach markets in larger areas to sell their fish. Otherwise, nothing would happen. Community contributions reached around 60 per cent of the project cost, and its work even continued when the donor project period and fund ended. The airstrip has changed the face of the area, with knock-on impacts of reduced piracy due to greater opportunities, greater investment, and more income due to access to markets.

BOX 4

Work is not just business, it is personal!

As humanitarian and development work gets more "professionalised", it is easy to see it as just another job. But for local and grassroots organisations, and all frontline workers, it is not just business, and it is not being done from behind a safe desk.

Locally-led initiatives are often romanticised, but the impact on those carrying out the work – physical, mental, financial and social- is rarely seriously discussed.

In conversations for this study, we heard stories of built-up trauma; of finding yourself suddenly responsible for people in need around you, while you have lost your own family; of having colleagues arrested; of not being able to pay staff at all; of deciding to break off relationships to keep loved ones out of danger; and of a lot of survivor's guilt. For national and local organisation leaders, the decisions they have to make with their teams is often around duty of care versus organisational survival.

These feelings are common across regions. As a previous study on frontline workers found, *"The funding disparity, coupled with the practice of risk transfer by international organisations and donors, has created a systemic imbalance where LNNGOs are inadequately equipped to fulfil their duty of care, provide fair compensation, or protect their staff."* (Greenaway et al, 2024)

As a national organisation leader from Yemen put it, *"It is like climbing a mountain and everyone is throwing rocks on you to prevent you from reaching the top."*

3.2 Diversifying funding sources

Overall, across regions, there was little recognition of cross-border Global South-led funding, apart from that channelled through networks. This was echoed in the country-based research. In Nigeria, for example, there was a low level of awareness as not many groups have been given money through Global South funded avenues. It does not seem to have really infiltrated much or become a substantial provision to the local organisations.

However, beyond the traditional international system (bilateral donors, UN and INGOs), six different types of funding and partnership sources used by national and local organisations in the Global South emerged through the course of the study.

These were not expected to make up for the shortfall caused by global cuts to aid. Yet for many smaller organisations who have had little or no access to the international system over the years, these have always been the main sources of funding.

Figure 2: The different types of alternative funding/partnership sources that research participants mentioned – beyond traditional donors, UN and INGOs

Philanthropic /
Foundation funding

Individual funding
(remittances, donations,
crowdsourcing)

Micro-enterprises
and savings groups

Local
Government

Private Sector /
Corporate Social
Responsibility Funds

Green bonds /
impact bonds

On the whole, philanthropic or foundation funding was seen to be more flexible and grantee-friendly. The examples that emerged were still primarily Global North–based philanthropies. There was usually a long-term and supportive relationship once you were in the system. However, there were caveats that these funds could not usually be accessed through a normal application process. Personal connections with the foundation to start the process of trust building were seen as necessary, and vetting to become a grantee was usually extensive. This meant it was not easy for all organisations to get in the door.

Individual funding – including remittances, donations and crowdsourcing - serves as the primary source of funding for most smaller, area-based programmes. Remittances typically come from friends and family working overseas, and individual donations

Micro-enterprises and savings groups emerged mainly among women's groups and feminist organisations as a core source of financial sustainability. One women-led organisation leader from Burkina Faso explained:

"For example, women are trained to produce loincloths. They dye them and make the plans. We sell them on. Each woman has her share, and the organisation gets its share. Otherwise, as a women's organisation, it's not always easy for us to apply for projects."

Corporate social responsibility and private sector funding were mentioned mainly in Asia, with only a few references in MENA, Latin America and the Caribbean (LAC) and Africa. This was seen mainly as the 'no other option' funding source. While there were fewer barriers to entry, respondents also identified pitfalls associated with current private sector funding, including a big focus on visibility, less attention to values and pressure for immediate results.

Where *government* was mentioned as a funding source, this was usually as an additional source or scale up to an ongoing programme, and less as direct grants (see Abot Kamay Fund story below). Examples also referred primarily to local government entities as opposed to the national level.

Green Bonds/Impact bonds were mentioned only in the Asian context. Local governments and civil society are tapping into regional climate funds and impact bonds to support resilience-building. This is still rare, but a growing opportunity, with examples like the Asian Venture Philanthropy Network (AVPN).

Surprisingly, Zakat[1] was not often mentioned as a current source of funding, but it did come up in discussions about future possibilities.

3.3 Funding avenues that help shift thinking, not just resources

Avenues to channel funding to local and national organisations continues to be a challenge. Within the UN system, country-based pooled funds are touted as a way to overcome this gap. Other internationally-supported funds such as START Ready are experimenting with anticipatory action triggers that integrate local knowledge.

More locally-led, managed or facilitated funding avenues can help shift not only resources but also thinking. Examples exist across the Global South: cross-regional funds such as the Change Fund; region-specific funds such as the upcoming Proximate Fund in Africa; national funds such as CORE Nepal or the Bulsho Fund in Somalia and Somaliland; and sub-national funds run by local grant makers and civil society organisations. In the long run, sub-national locally led funding mechanisms will be a strong pillar for building the resilience capacity of local actors.

While each example is unique, some of the differentiating factors remain common. Governance mechanisms usually involve people closer to ground realities. Application and vetting processes tend to be more simplified and adapted to the reality of applicant organisations. Decision-making on how funds are used is more flexible and adaptable. Perhaps most importantly, the funds tend to build in organisational sustainability, as well as project budgets, into the grants.

The Change Fund

In 2022, NEAR, supported by some of its 300 members from across the Global South, launched the Change Fund. It was

---

[1] Zakat is one of Islam's five pillars – a financial obligation to donate a portion of your wealth to charity.

intentionally designed to challenge the persisting idea that local organisations can't be trusted to lead responses and can't be funded quickly or directly.

It is a peer-led pooled fund in which an elected Oversight Body of NEAR network members decides on disaster declarations and funding allocations, with local organisations receiving funds directly. The peer-to-peer grantmaking system means that from crisis declaration to grant approval, Oversight Body members draw on experience rooted in their work with Global South communities. While timespans vary depending on access constraints, funds have in some cases been transferred within two weeks – far outpacing international counterparts. These perspectives are critical to approving grants that are both impactful and sustainable for the implementing organisations. Cost recovery is built in, enabling partners to strengthen their institutions as well as deliver projects.

> "What happens is that most often, civil society organisations are conditioned to just implement. So, we forget about sustainability. We forget about even our own organisation and our own members, how they have to survive."

Oversight Body member, NEAR's Change Fund

The Change Fund's application and reporting processes are intentionally simple, with flexibility a key component of grants. This allows organisations to update their responses based on real-time changes in the emergency.

Currently, the fund has worked across three windows – emergency response, displacement and a now-closed bridge funding window (launched for a very short period to help those most acutely affected by USAID closure tide over the sudden losses).

As of September 2025, the Change Fund had dispersed USD 6 million through 62

grants across 25 countries. Organisations were able to respond to earthquakes, floods, typhoons and civil unrest. There have been challenges. For instance, getting funding to countries facing sanctions remains a work in progress. However, the fund continues to learn and grow.

Abot-Kamay Community Solidarity Fund: Resourcing relationships, not just projects

> "Almost all farmers who are involved in this farm area [Simbayanihan Communal Farm] are women and their commitment to come together and cultivate the land for food security is immeasurable. Empowering women especially mothers cultivating the land deserve utmost support from all partners."

Rev. Fr. Gilbert Billena, KFPC

The Abot-Kamay Community Solidarity Fund (ACSF) doesn't start with a problem statement; it begins with people and their aspirations. It offers grants to organisations with innovative ideas and projects that align with the mission of safe, resilient, and developed communities. These funds are designed to support projects in disaster risk reduction and management innovations and initiatives through the Pinnovation Academy, and emergency response efforts, including survivor and community-led responses (SCLR). Since 2022, ACSF has supported 32 community organisations across the Philippines on their own terms. This includes fisherfolk, farmers, Indigenous Peoples, women's groups, and youth collectives. There were no fixed themes. Proposals could be submitted in a variety of languages (i.e. Tagalog or Visayan) and media (either written or even on video). The message was clear: You are trusted. And they delivered. A women's cooperative in Batangas turned its small savings group into a registered enterprise. An Indigenous Person's group in Palawan, NTCQ, used the grant not as aid but as a counterpart to its internal funds—a partnership, not a handout.

The Kilometer 7 Farmers–Producers Cooperative (KFPC) in Butuan, one of two organisations with proposals written in the Visayan local language, leveraged its grant to access an additional PHP 10 million in government support, organising 13 new farmer groups within a year. With ₱999,560.00 in support from ACSF, KFPC was able to mobilise additional partnerships and resources, resulting in an impressive ₱20,093,000 in community assets. This substantial leveraging of resources illustrated the multiplier effect of flexible compliance. By reducing procedural burdens, KFPC could focus on developing relationships and securing the necessary tools to expand its impact. Their capacity to sustain and grow their efforts drew support from diverse stakeholders, further amplifying the project's reach. One example is the San Roque Integrated Farmers Association (SRIFA), a group KFPC helped organise, which recently secured an additional ₱300,000 from the Department of Social Welfare and Development's Sustainable Livelihood Programme. Altogether, PHP 34 million was mobilised in combined cash and in-kind assets, from volunteer labour to community-donated meals. The power of the fund wasn't in its size but in its solidarity. Investing in people is not just an act of funding; it is a commitment to justice, dignity, and lasting impact.

Box 5

Beyond money: Recognising non–financial resources

The affected person and their neighbours are the first responders. This line is often repeated in disaster risk reduction, preparedness and response initiatives. Affected people and those around them have already contributed land, labour, knowledge and care long before donors, any donor, arrives.

The demand for recognition of resources beyond money is not new. For decades, it has been practiced in owner-driven reconstruction initiatives and as part of cash-for-work programmes. More recently, the idea of community-based assets has attracted attention as part of mutual aid narratives.

However, these are still rarely accounted for in formal funding frameworks. Traditional donor systems often fail to recognise what they dismiss as "small monies." Worse, they sometimes displace them. Yet donor funding is a fraction of what is actually provided by the community. Hence, it is essential to experiment with identifying and tracking community assets, as well as creating funding systems that reward solidarity, not just scale.

The National Alliance of Humanitarian Actors, Bangladesh, (NAHAB) is experimenting with ways to formalise and quantify these inputs from local actors and communities. Their view is that counting the local and external contributions with equal standing and reporting would create scope to lobby for changes in the financial accounting and reporting systems of humanitarian actions, both nationally and internationally.

The Local Contribution Accounting (LoCA) model was designed to systematically include locally contributed costs in the accounting and financial reporting system by computation of monetary values. This includes in-kind items such as construction materials, food, household supplies, healthcare items, stationery, fixed assets, accommodations and staff and volunteer time.

The model details how items can be grouped and related updating of organisational policies and manuals. Cost calculations of each item are made objectively so that the process can be verified with rates comparable with local market prices.

Once the accounting systems include these local sources under separate heads or sub-heads, the standard financial reporting of the organisation automatically generates separate reports showing local contributions and external funding.

Enabling (and disabling) environments for Global South collective action

3.4 Navigating challenging contexts and restricted civic space

The ability to freely move, gather, speak and work – without fear of reprisal, imprisonment or bodily harm – is a luxury that most national and local actors in the Global South do not possess. This applies of course to active conflict situations, but surprisingly is equally prevalent in stable areas as well.

Many governments in the Global South have become increasingly wary of civil society. In fact, no Global South country currently has an open civic space, with the exception of Uruguay (Civicus Monitor, 2025).

State authorities sometimes question the very legitimacy of NGOs, people's organisations or community-led responses, especially when these challenge prevailing narratives or expose systemic neglect. This lack of trust can spill over into political agendas and rhetoric, creating an

environment in which building connections with communities becomes increasingly difficult. This is compounded by curbs on, and intimidation of, journalists and grassroots media, limiting public understanding and access to knowledge.

Conversations about the challenges faced by grassroots, local and national organisations can be grouped into four main categories.

1. **New restrictive laws are being put in place across the Global South. These pose operational and bureaucratic burdens and can put practitioners in real danger, They include increasing restrictions under the garb of anti-terrorism laws, "foreign agent" laws, and political pressure.**

The Philippine Anti-Terrorism Act, passed in 2020, further aggravated red-tagging and prejudice against grassroots organisations and groups, marking them as communists. Despite this, local organisations continue to organize grassroots trainings, facilitate participatory disaster planning and support informal groups, demonstrating that resilience and rights must go hand in hand.

National governments are also increasingly scrutinising the influx of international funding and placing restrictions on how these funds can be used. In India, for example, updated Foreign Contribution Regulation Act (FCRA) rules have made it far more difficult for Indian NGOs to receive or pass on funding. The updated

rules include requirements such as having a bank account only in a certain Delhi branch of the State Bank of India, and passing on funding only to other organisations that are also FCRA licensed. Considering the complexity of both acquiring and keeping the license, most smaller organisations are unable to do so.

El Salvador, a new law enacted in August 2025 requires all organisations – local and international – that receive foreign funding to register with the newly created Registry of Foreign Agents, which has wide powers. All foreign money received are subject to a 30 per cent tax, making continued operations highly challenging. There are worries that similar measures may be replicated across other Latin American state.

In Zimbabwe, the Private Voluntary Organisations Act, enacted in April 2025, is viewed as similarly oppressive, imposing extensive reporting requirements and government oversight on organisations with international ties,

These are just a few examples, but the tone echoes across countries in the Global South where civil society is viewed sceptically, with one Act often prompting others to mimic certain restrictions. These foreign agent laws *"impose complex registration processes, demanding reporting requirements, frequent audits and stigmatising labels to silence critics, with the effect of making it harder for civil society groups to function and fulfil their core purposes"* (Pousadela, 2025).

Figure 3: CIVICUS Monitor (2026) National Civic Space Ratings: 39 rated as Open, 37 rating as Narrowed, 39 rated as Obstructed, 50 rated as Repressed & 33 rated as Closed. Available at: www.monitor.civicus.org (Accessed: 2026–01–07).

| CLOSED | 1–2 | REPRESSED | 21–40 | OBSTRUCTED | 41–60 | NARROWED | 61–80 | OPEN | 81–100 |
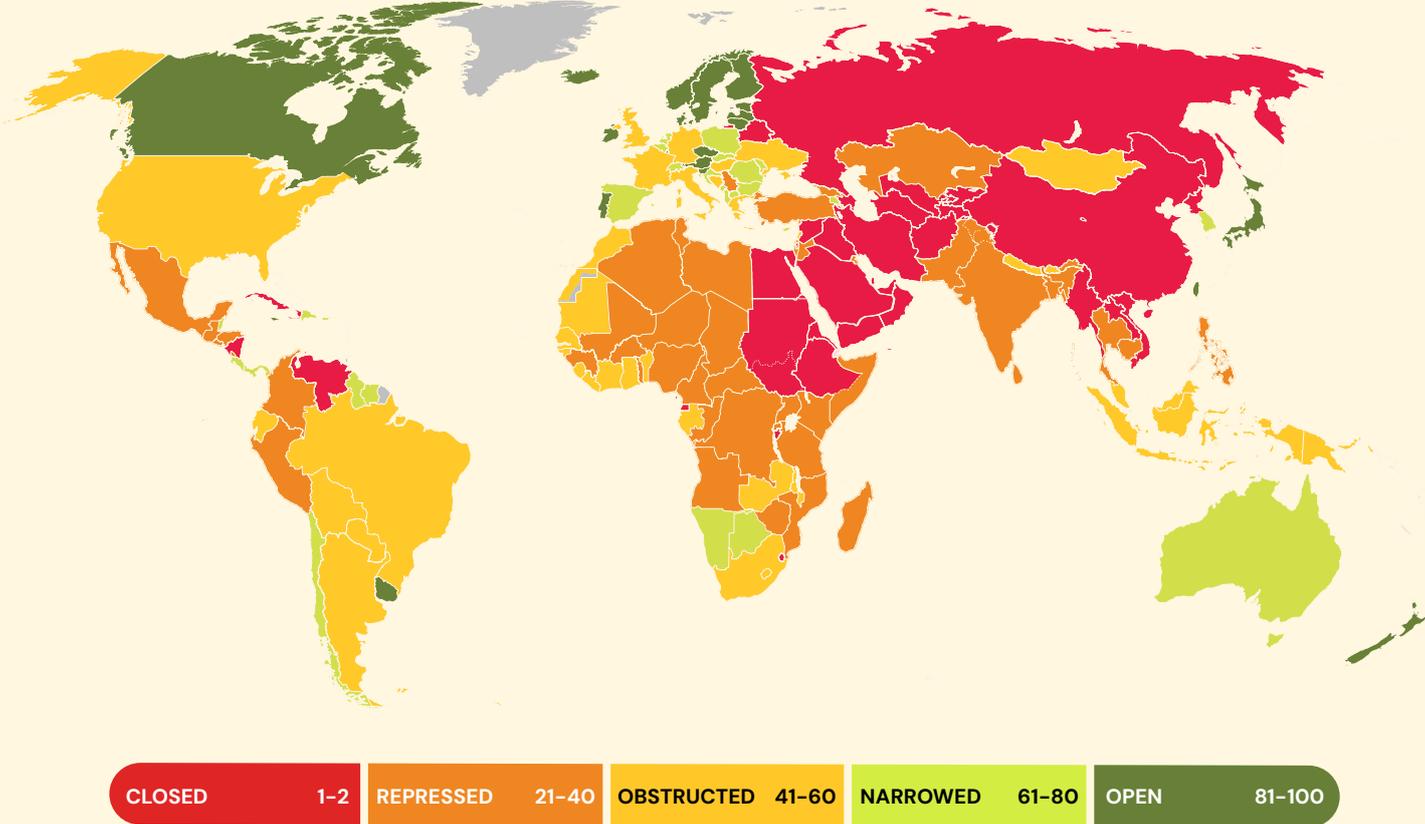
Pressure on civil society to conform to the political persuasion of the state has been mounting, not just through laws but also through intimidation. In several countries, dissent has been met with imprisonment, the shut-down of organisations and the targeting of organisational leadership.

2. Civil society actors are increasingly forced to navigate unofficial power structures and informal approval systems

Formal laws aside, civil society actors are increasingly being forced to navigate uncertain, ad hoc, and varying levels of informal approval systems. This varies from permissions needed from a specific government department to tacit buy-in from a de-facto authority in the operating area.

In South Sudan, a widely practised but unofficial 'income policy' requires NGOs to obtain operational licenses and letters of no objection, even after national registration. Though not stipulated in the 2016 NGO Act, these requirements are enforced through administrative directives and often involve additional fees or levies. This has raised concerns about financial unpredictability, restricted operational space, and a departure from the Act's intent to support, rather than hinder, NGO work. Delays due to bureaucracy or unclear regulations are seen as a major impediment. Such delays can stifle creative problem-solving, especially when timely responses are critical during crises. Respondents in South Sudan also highlighted government-imposed movement restrictions. One notable issue was the presence of security personnel at project implementation sites. Local authorities often deploy police or armed forces to accompany field staff, allegedly for protection. However, these personnel are not budgeted for in project proposals, and their involvement is sometimes perceived as coercive or intimidating by community members, potentially undermining trust in the interventions.

3. Ethnic tensions, violence and security constraints

State-imposed restrictions were not the only challenges facing civil society. Ethnic tensions, security risks and even personal death threats were mentioned. In many areas, these factors limit freedom of assembly and the ability to organise public awareness campaigns. In contexts marked by extensive gang violence or active armed conflict, simply staying alive to be able to carry out the job the next day becomes a challenge. As a national organisation leader from Haiti commented: *"In Haiti, the life expectancy is 24 hours. We don't know what the next sunrise will bring. You can be sitting in your home and be killed by a stray bullet."*

4. Ripple effects to these challenges

There are knock-on impacts of these regulations and challenges. They have made it more difficult to access funding and to pay and retain staff. In some cases, project timelines have been delayed or disrupted due to compliance challenges, while embargoes on specific types of programmes or partnerships have further restricted the ability to serve communities effectively. This environment of uncertainty and caution has also forced many organisations to adapt their strategies and scale down their activities.

Additionally, an increasingly restrictive civic environment has created a cautious atmosphere for discussion. Organisations and individual practitioners alike have begun to self-censor. More broadly, public space for rights-based dialogue on issues such as humanitarian justice, gender rights, localisation and climate resilience remains limited.

Figure 4: Survey respondents were asked how they are navigating through the social and political challenges – and to pick all that apply.

83%
Becoming part of national or regional networks for collective advocacy and joint work

39%
Avoiding working on issues that are controversial / sensitive for the government

31%
Becoming more visible and speaking out publicly about these pressures
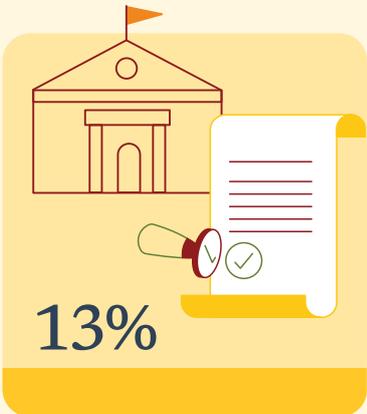
26%
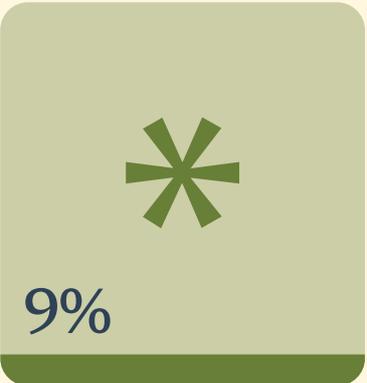Adding legal support or increased security for your team

23%
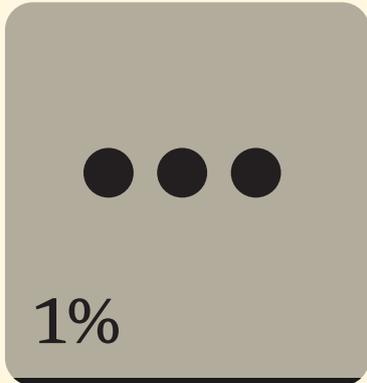Being more selective about your funders (who you take money from)

23%
Working more quietly and without drawing attention

13%
Working only alongside the government

9%
Other

1%
N/A

Local and national organisations are using creative methods to navigate these complex landscapes.

Going off the grid: In areas with a high risk of being tracked or put under surveillance, civil society practitioners have made it a practice to only have sensitive discussions in person, without phones or any electronic equipment.

Changing terminology in order to avoid confrontation: To avoid additional scrutiny around sensitive topics, organisations are changing the way they frame projects and the vocabulary they use. These shifts are, of course, area specific, but include avoiding terms such as "advocacy", and reframing projects related to gender, climate change or rights issues that could be seen as anti-development.

Keeping resources aside to defend frontline workers wherever necessary: National and local organisations are using their reserves (or sometimes personal funds) to defend frontline workers. Currently, this is not included in most donor budgets, but the request for a focussed discretionary budget for this purpose was consistent across regions. This includes legal fees, payoffs, and relocation out of the country in some instances.

Joining networks for anonymity, joint advocacy and risk sharing: The most used methods, reflected in the survey, country case studies and broader discussions, was joining networks. Network membership was not only the main way to engage in joint advocacy and increase visibility, but also served other, less obvious functions. Networks enabled organisations to work semi-anonymously, without being individually identified and the risk of being targeted when working in high-risk areas. They also functioned as informal risk sharing mechanisms.

When one organisation was more targeted by the government, others with better relationships were often able to step in, absorb some of the pressure and vouch on their behalf.

Being creative with gendered barriers: In areas where restrictions on the hiring and employment of women exist – whether socially or legally – organisations are pivoting hiring policies to prioritise couples (even if the husband is only a nominal employee). This provides cover, the assurance of a "valid" escort when travelling and the ability to continue programming for women.

Likewise, the showcased focus of some women-centred programmes is flipped towards men. For instance, adaptive farming techniques for male farmers are highlighted in order to secure permissions from local government authorities. The women-focused micro-enterprise component, involving simple processing techniques, is presented as an add-on.

Moving money without formal systems: How do organisations get funding to areas of a country where banks are not functioning or transactions are blocked? Hawala transactions[2], the use of cash and the use of personal bank accounts located outside the country were all cited as ways national and local organisations address this challenge within their diverse contexts. In rare cases, these routes were also used by funders. This indicates that donors do make exceptions, but such cases are few and typically limited to grantees with whom they have long-term, trusted personal relationships.

Shifting to a social enterprise model: In rare examples, participants brought up shifting to a social enterprise model – registering as a for-profit organisation but with a social mission. This helped take

---

2   Hawala transactions are an informal money transfer system that works outside formal banking channels. It works with (usually) trusted networks. Money moves without money actually moving. For example, an organisation in Country X hands over money in dollars to a hawala operator. They contact their counterpart in Country Y who hands over the equivalent money in the local currency to the receiving organisation.

themselves out of the 'NGO' bracket in order to avoid additional scrutiny as they would fall under different laws. This did not change their mission or ways of working, however, and they continued to do similar activities, not always actually generating profit!

Building government relationships:
Rather than discarding national or sub-national state actors altogether, organisations in areas with more stable governments are attempting trust-building with officials at the local level. This often starts with identifying a like-minded champion within a department and working with them on a shared priority, or in other cases getting to know them as an individual. These relationships are often the only way to be able to continue work. In fact, for partners who manage this, it is a force multiplier! Donors are risk-averse, but a local partner who can secure government co-funding or pass enabling policy (as seen in the Abbot Kamay example above) has demonstrated a level of legitimacy and sustainability that significantly de-risks the donor's investment and provides a clear path to scale (a level of assurance INGOs often cannot achieve).

At a systemic level, these political and social challenges have an impact not just on the ways of operating, but also on how local leadership is understood. They raise fundamental questions about what local leadership entails and how it manifests in different contexts. At its core, this means that local leadership looks different in every context, and expectations of actions and behaviour should be calibrated accordingly.

On one hand, these realities often mean working under-the-radar, with visibility being a curse rather than a blessing. In practice this can mean remaining unregistered, as is the case for many ERRs in Sudan. Yet the way systems are set up – including the Sudan Humanitarian Fund – requires any direct grantee to be registered, effectively cutting off this source of funding. Equally, legitimacy is often directly associated with visibility; choosing not to be seen therefore requires different ways of organising and advocating.

On the other hand, even where organisations are registered and operating openly, the risks they assume carry their own toll. The nuances of who is considered legitimate, what it means to build partnerships and the time and resources required to navigate unexpected challenges do not always make sense to external actors.

3.5 Counterpoint: The critical role of Global South governments and governing bodies

> "I think that we would have a lot more decentralised development if we have many more of our governments coming on board. Let's be honest, there is no non-governmental organisation that can really do any project at scale. We have to really work with our governments on what we call our national development plans."

Civil Society practitioner, West Africa

Despite the number of challenges around civic space, the critical role of Global South governments was still emphasised by respondents across the study. It was clear that in any emerging system, governments cannot be optional actors. This seeming contradiction is part of the landscape that national and local organisations navigate in their daily realities.

The role of Global South governments in broader aid transformation – nationally and internationally – emerged in four ways. The first was scale and responsibility. Basic needs are the responsibility of the state. Yet in many Global South countries, civil society organisations have gone from complementing and covering gaps to being the main service providers (whether as NGOs or social enterprises).

There was a recognition that – particularly in places without active conflicts – responsibility needs to rest with government institutions. A prominent example comes from the White Helmets (the highly awarded volunteer group in Syria). Following the fall of the Assad regime and the formation of a new government, the group decided to close its operations and transition to working directly with the Ministry of Health.

The second was their role in creating an enabling environment, in setting laws and regulatory frameworks in ways that allow civil society to function – and work alongside them. Governments can play a critical role in institutionalising locally-led action by creating enabling policy frameworks, integrating local actors into formal disaster response systems, and allocating domestic resources.

The third was their role, acknowledged or not, in exerting influence in an already multi-polar world. The example that emerged most often was of South Africa putting a case on Israel at the International Court of Justice. Global South governments also have a massive role to play in bringing voices to multilateral spaces and investing in global public goods.

The fourth - and particularly vocal from the African region - was enabling free movement across borders.

3.6 Building bridges within the Global South

"The Global South, especially South Asia, remains too fragmented and siloed to bring about real change at the moment. Advocacy will continue and advocacy will probably be one of the spheres where collaboration might be possible. Yet, beyond that when it comes to real action on the ground – humanitarian or development – it is very unlikely that there will be cooperation as what is "expected" to be seen between countries at the European Union (EU)."

Local grant maker, Sri Lanka

The report sought to explore cooperation between Global South countries in the context of locally-led action. South–South cooperation refers to technical and formal initiatives between Global South states to empower themselves economically and/or politically.

That inquiry, however, proved to be one of the most difficult questions for respondents in key informant interviews. Answers ranged from "What south–south cooperation? There is none" to examples of promising initiatives such as a single currency across the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) region which has been slow to progress.

This is not surprising as civil society involvement in South–South cooperation has been limited. Even across BRICS countries (the grouping with Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa plus others now), it is the private sector that has been the main non–state actor. With the exception of Turkey, civil society has not been included in South–South decision-making by governments (Bergamaschi et al, 2017).

To some extent, the Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN) and regional cooperation across the Pacific were cited as positive examples.

The Facility Aiding Locally-led Engagement (FALE), for example, is a Pacific model of South–South collaboration, with national hubs established in Fiji, Tonga, Vanuatu, Samoa, Kiribati and the Solomon Islands. The model operates through a decentralised hub and spoke structure, with volunteers based across different islands in each country. The national hub coordinator and the regional coordinator work in tandem to bring in civil society, NGOs, local organisations, local government and different ministries on one platform to sit as equals and to actually work on supporting local leadership.

Figure 5: What would South–to–South solidarity look like over the next five years (pick up to three that are most important to you)

67%
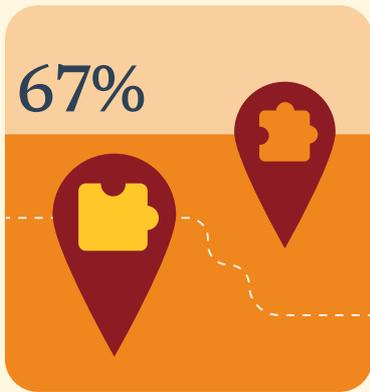
Local and national civil society organisations collaborate across borders on local resilience building, emergency response and risk reduction efforts, and long–term sustainable programming.

42%

Networks across the Global South grow stronger, with a mix of corporate, civil society, government and donor stakeholders to address emerging needs.

38%
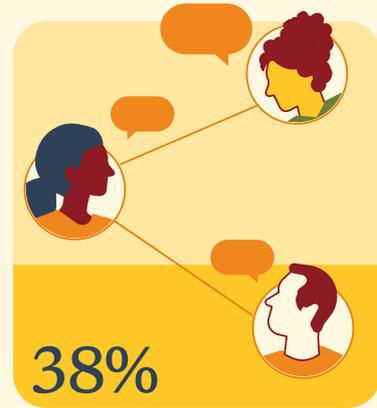
There is consistent shared advocacy around important issues.

38%

There are combined fundraising efforts, particularly around Global South–led pooled funds.

27%
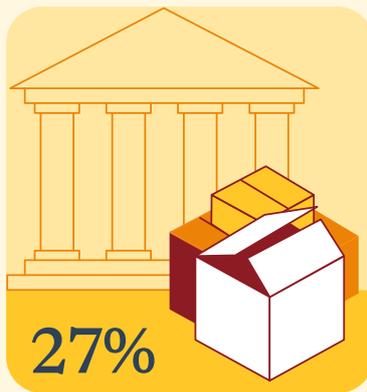
Global South governments increase their contributions for humanitarian and development work in other Global South contexts.

23%
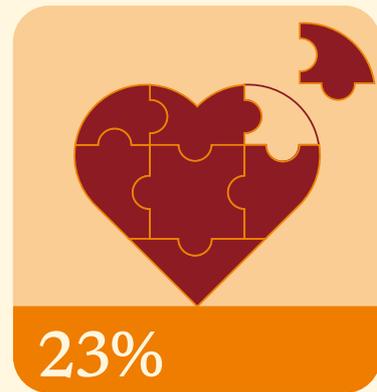
Solidarity becomes more around creating an alternative blueprint to the existing aid system.

22%
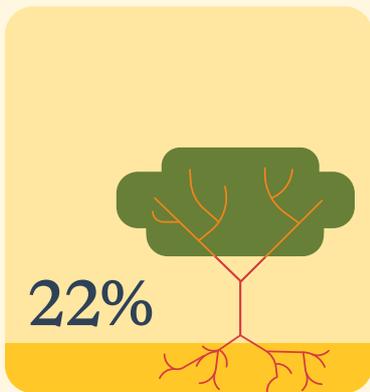
Systems become more decentralised, with more emphasis on grassroots work.

1%

Other

0%
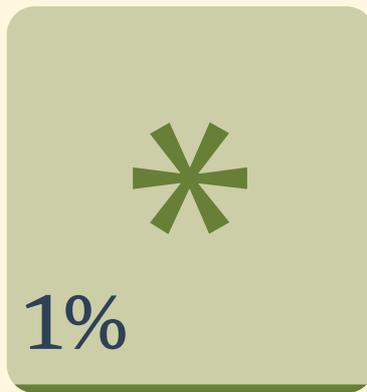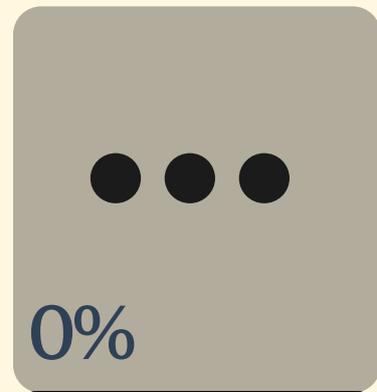
None of the above

In 2025 alone, FALE activated multi-stakeholder coordination in response to major cyclones, supported national localisation reviews and reinforced governance structures of National FALEs. These efforts are shifting the balance-making local actors more prepared, visible and effective in humanitarian action. The journey has not been easy. In order to build this structure, people had to push through fragmentation and historical marginalisation. What helped was inclusive dialogue and locally-rooted governance mechanisms. A key milestone has been the endorsement of the Pacific Localisation Measurement Framework.

While there were few examples of bilateral government cooperation, South-South solidarity had more examples. This refers to Global South actors taking action with and/or for one another through a foundation of shared values or identity – this can cover a range of formal and informal actions and take place across governments or small grassroots communities.

A lot of people brought up networks as the main space for cooperation amongst civil society in the Global South. The consensus was that there needs to be a convening space and sustained resources for this to happen. For instance, even if local organisations meet at an event, there are still few examples of them reaching out to one another individually to work together in the future. Some argued that this needed more convenings that focus on specific interests, others that this was simply a matter of priorities and resources. Many NGO regulations also don't allow civil society organisations to work freely across borders, though this was the number one answer around the hope for South-South solidarity (see figure 5).

South–North–South civil society cooperation?

Several people also brought up that the convening space of different Global South organisations is often done by or in the global north given their resources (essentially making it South-North-South cooperation). There were positives brought up about this as well, including that it becomes a safe space for organisations from antagonistic countries to meet and get to know each other as people; or to discuss issues that cannot safely be done within the country.
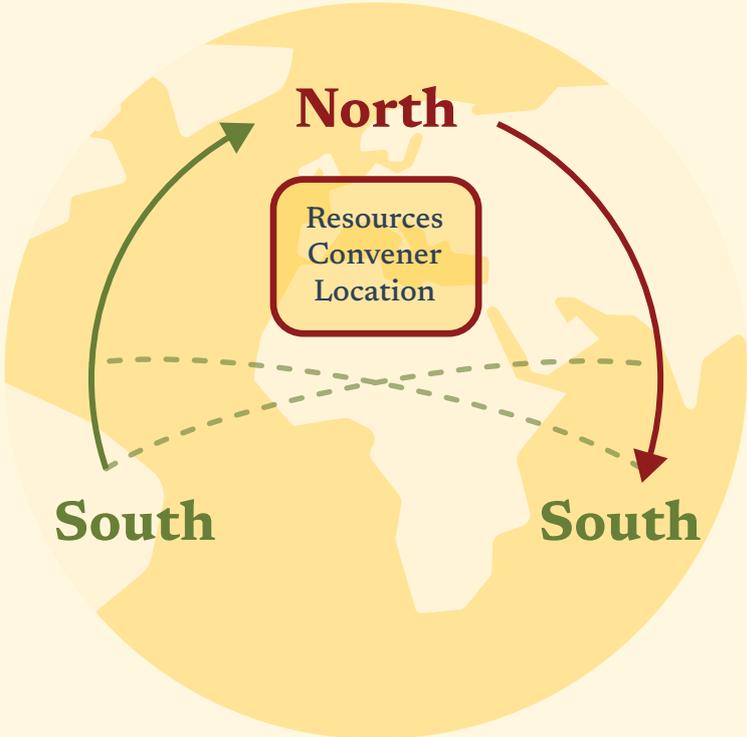
Box 6
NEAR's Localisation Labs

"It's a space for us as local organisations to think together, reflect together, suggest new practical things, take risks. Although the objectives of the labs are similar, it is co-related with the objectives and needs of each country. Problems related to funding, sustainability of the work we are doing, or even sustainability of the labs themselves. It's a lab because we are presenting the best available solutions, acknowledging that we might fail."

Lab convener, Lebanon

In 2023, NEAR began experimenting with Localisation Labs to build spaces for members within their national / regional contexts to gather, collectively advocate and build solutions. The four primary focuses of each lab include movement building, building bridges, solutions and learning.

The labs are convened by interested NEAR members through a process of consultation with like-minded (and sometimes extremely diverse) peers in their contexts. Being centred in the communities they serve, Labs help galvanise and build movements of local actors that bring collective local voices to engage with the aid ecosystem and to find effective context-specific solutions to local challenges. Each Lab establishes its own governance mechanisms and decides how many members they will have and who they will be – for instance, some labs also include non-NEAR members. As of October 2025, there were 20 country-level labs and two regional labs.

The goal is for labs to act as enablers, furthering South-to-South solidarity. This is not always easy. The spectrum of organisations with different capacities and interests means it is challenging to get people on the same page. Each Lab has taken different approaches to building this solidarity.

For instance, the Yemen Lab process took over a year of multiple consultations and heated discussions in different places across the country to even get to a shared understanding and vision.

In the Philippines, they have focused on grassroots organisations, helping create the Philippine Alliance for Sustainable and Inclusive Knowledge on Local Action Building (PASIKLAB). The alliance has five conveners, with POs and community organisations each from the National Capital Region, Luzon, Visayas and Mindanao and then NGOs responsible for representing their areas/sectors, consolidating efforts, and resolution or decision-making. It aims to promote locally led development and empower marginalised sectors through transformative models, facilitating societal change.

The Lab in Myanmar is working on a local perception of partnerships index, among its other goals, to build out a bottom-up analysis that has context-specific measures.

The Lab in South Sudan reflected that it is a promising initiative for bridging divides between actors. Its role as a neutral convener, knowledge hub and platform for joint advocacy positions it well to address some of the fragmentation and trust deficits within the localisation ecosystem. However, they were also conscious that its long-term impact will depend on its ability to meaningfully include grassroots voices, influence policy decisions and provide tangible support to local actors seeking systemic change.

The approach is also yielding results in innovating solutions across regions. The Asia-Pacific Local Leaders – one of the two regional labs – is working on the Aasha Fund, a pooled fund solution that is regionally governed, community-led and people-centred. It will aim to provide flexible funds for small and medium crises and to work across siloes.

4 Spurring broader aid system change

"The future of aid will have to be locally laid, rooted in specific wisdom and geared toward building long term resilience and not dependencies which the traditional donors have been doing. It must prioritise investment in adaptation, climate mobility, indigenous knowledge, community innovation and legal frameworks to protect us. We want to be our own architects, our own contractors, our own construction people, to decide for ourselves what is best."

Civil society leader, the Pacific

"It is becoming more and more clear that investment in risk reduction in a country which is 10,000 kilometres away from you is not philanthropy. Ultimately, those risks will be at your doorstep. You know, if you are part of a global market, global supply chain, so you have to invest in resilience everywhere. Everything is connected."

Former Global South official,
now part of the international system

"For many of us, even that power to decide what our problems are, how we want to address them with our available resources had been taken away from us. And if we really want development to be sustainable, we need this power. Because there is something in being able to diagnose the challenges that I have and find the resources to solve it which helps ensure it doesn't repeat itself. If that is taken away, it takes away your dignity as well. And I think that is where for many Africans and African countries we find ourselves. That we are in this world within a certain structure that has been created that keeps us perpetual cup in hand."

Civil society leader, West Africa

"The new system will have to be built from the heart as well as the head."

Community philanthropist

Chapter 4 highlights

What does the system look like from a broader perspective – when you look beyond the jargon, rigid frameworks and capitalist foundations of the current system. What does the future look like? Part 4 explores how we need to change mindsets to even dream… and to think beyond aid.

Changing mindsets in order to even dream… and thinking beyond aid

"We also need to decolonise our own minds. I mean, I think that we, Global South people, have a very hard time breaking out of the mould. Even in terms of the use of language or in terms of exploring certain possibilities. We have a hard time considering them because we keep waiting for Global North's institutional approval, we keep waiting for trust that we shouldn't need to earn. We wait with anger and everything else, but it's still there. The insecurities and this colonisation conditioning are still there."

National NGO leader, Haiti

Many key informants reflected on how entrenched notions of what "a system" should look like have limited people's ability to dream, or even to see what already exists. One key informant described this as needing to have a plan to give to the donor which they can execute easily on Monday. Another saw this as the power of the "NGO Industrial Complex".

While no blueprint emerged, it was clear the future will need to be more decentralised, with true resilience coming from building-up grassroots organisations and communities themselves. There were also three main alternative visions.

Thinking beyond money to reward solidarity, not scale

Can alternative systems really be transformative if they reproduce similar capitalist logics – where access to funding is the central aim? This was a recurring question. Competition for resources has already distorted incentives across the sector. The value of volunteerism, of community philanthropy, of building collectively and trying to change the financial imperative all came up in different conversations. As one respondent commented, *"I think we have become very preoccupied by chasing the money. We should be open but also have a realistic appreciation that it's not as simple of just replacing one type of money with another type of money and not expecting it to cause a whole lot of other kind of issues."* To reward solidarity, the very systems of measurement and determinants of success need to change. This is echoed in some of the solidarity systems described in Chapter 3, but as the pressure to scale builds, there are fears that these systems themselves will be co-opted by dominant ways of working.

A post–neutrality, more rights–based lens?

Neutrality has long been contested within the humanitarian sphere, but for a long time organisations have felt pressured to avoid confronting politics. Yet, the shifts for an alternative system demand a move away from symptom–based responses towards confronting the deeper causes

of crisis – whether caused by climate-induced disasters, development patterns, weak governance, war or economic injustice. Addressing root causes is inherently political, and there is no resilience building without rights building. Humanitarian resistance has already been well documented in active responses in Myanmar where Resistance Humanitarians have worked invisibly and creatively to deliver aid without Junta permission; and build structures within areas outside Junta control (Kamal and Fujimatsu, 2024).

Can true solidarity occur without assuming some element of risk? For many feminist organisations, this occurs naturally, as a way of working with each other. Prioritising rights-based lenses will require sacrifices from organisations and movements that decide to walk a different path. This includes making difficult decisions about who to partner with, both technically and financially. It was best summed up in one question asked by a participant at the 2025 NEAR Asia-Pacific Summit, *"Have we articulated the price? And what we are willing to pay for our visions?"*

Beyond aid: More just and equitable global systems

> *"I don't like the word "aid." We need to change that term. We need to reveal that the North has prosperity because of what has been extracted from the Global South, and also due to the contributions of people from the South who live in the North and support their welfare systems."*

Local NGO leader, Guatemala

Almost paradoxically, the need for more locally-led systems was intertwined with the view that we are all connected. Connected as people, as markets and as natural ecosystems. Economic, social and political capital moves across borders every day, but this is not accounted for in current project-based thinking.

The growing impacts of climate change, the unpredictability of the economic system and the volatility of governments around the world all combine to make it difficult to predict what will happen next (Kennedy et al, 2025).

However, there were two hopes that went beyond the current aid paradigm, looking at creating a more just and equitable global system – one that moves toward addressing some of the broader root causes of humanitarian need.

The first was around fairer trade and debt relief. Given the amount of interest being paid by Global South countries and the inability to get out from under the debt, fairer trade practices were seen as critical to a more sustainable world.

The second was around climate reparations which are increasingly coming up as a form of justice. A case brought by Vanuatu and supported by many countries across the Global South has set a precedent that states have a legal obligation to act on climate change. The fascinating case began with a student's union in Vanuatu, was supported by advocates within their government and later by other countries across the Pacific and broader Global South.

As one key informant commented, *"We have to find the connections with the climate movement and the feminist movement and the trade unions and the workers' rights and the tax justice and all of the other things that are necessary for humanity to succeed a bit more."*

These reflections highlight that system change must begin with a shift in mindsets. The next section builds on this, translating those shifts into recommendations and pathways for action.

5 Reflections and recommendations to move towards more locally-led aid ecosystems

The findings from this report point to the need for multiple, simultaneous pathways to building visions for the future. National, local and grassroots organisations across the Global South are navigating a difficult balance: attempting to reform a dominant aid system that continues to marginalise them, while simultaneously building alternative approaches rooted in their own contexts.

With this dual balancing act in mind, this chapter lays out recommendations for different stakeholders within and beyond the aid system to move from commitment to practice in enabling more locally-led ecosystems. These range from incremental changes to more transformational ones.

Recommendations to donors and philanthropies

Direct funding – including sustained, multi-year flexible funding – remains the single biggest challenge across regions and types of organisations. This gap is most acute for smaller, less visible organisations, and particularly those based outside large cities. Feminist / women-led entities, grassroots and indigenous groups are particularly affected. Yet, different types of existing funders all seem clear that they will not have the bandwidth (or will) to administer multiple smaller grants, and often administrative costs of small amounts do not pass internal financial regulations. In practice, "direct" funding will continue to mean "as direct as possible," meaning at least one pass through. Given this reality, there need to be multiple avenues for smaller organisations to access resources, beyond UN country-based pooled funds. It also reinforces the need for better intermediaries.

- **Diversify and invest in locally–led funding mechanisms:** Invest in multiple and diverse grant making organisations and funding mechanisms. The range can help reach varied populations, including informal and unregistered organisations, and underserved parts of countries.

- **Put sustainability first:** Move beyond project-based funding. Ensure all grants include pre–approved, flexible indirect cost recovery, as well as line items for the "informal trust building" and "community solidarity" activities essential for long–term success.

- **Build in radical trust and flexibility:** Abandon complex, top–down compliance burdens. Mandate simplified applications and trust local partners to manage resources. Adapt due diligence procedures to local contexts without compromising accountability.

Recommendations to the UN and INGOs

- Find ways and means to break thematic siloes, beyond the formal "nexus" debates. Fund what is actually needed and invest in long–term resilience building that addresses root causes of humanitarian needs.

- Support peer–to–peer learning through efforts that are defined by local needs, rather than pre–set donor–defined training models and promote exchange across regions.

- Truly shift from a delivery to an enabling role, allowing Global South practitioners to make allocation decisions of their funds. This includes playing the role of convener for South-South exchanges where needed, but without dictating the content.

- Use your voice to raise issues which national and local organisations cannot without putting themselves at greater risk!

Recommendations to stakeholders within the emergent systems – Regional bodies, Global South governments, businesses, philanthropies and civil society networks

From one perspective, what is referred to as "emergent systems" within the Global South have always existed. They just haven't been in the purview of the dominant system. Some would argue that this framing again reinforces inequities. From another perspective, as the struggle to build out alternative systems and rebalance power structures continues, how these decentralised systems intersect will need to evolve.

- **Avoid the trap of replication:** Recognise that locally–led ecosystems cannot have the same shape and defined structures as those within the dominant system if they are to actually yield change. Build operational systems that are designed to adapt, not standardise. The norms, incentive structures and ways of working themselves, not just the actors involved, will have to change to yield positive results. The expectation that this will be a swap-out of one for another is not possible.

- **Think and plan holistically, beyond Western development frameworks:** The inter–connected nature of challenges is well recognised, particularly in indigenous communities. Years ago, when an innovation fund was first being established in Guatemala, there was talk of a human–centred design process. "Humans aren't at the centre," the response from local organisations came, "nature is at the centre."Broaden the lens with which solutions are designed and delivered, considering alternative views like

climate justice, indigenous governance or natural ecosystem restoration. This will be essential to meet an uncertain future.

- **Institutionalise local actor involvement and champion domestic resource mobilisation**: Where possible, create formal mechanisms for local actors to participate in areas such as budgetary planning, responses such as national disaster management and humanitarian coordination and other critical sectoral planning. Consider allocating part of national and sub-national budgets to support local humanitarian preparedness and response systems, especially in areas that are not served but where local actors have presence.

- **Invest in multistakeholder meetings and joint planning:** The power and critical role of working with different stakeholders – including the government, private sector and civil society – is apparent for both funding and cohesive planning. Networks have emerged as one of the main spaces for these conversations and will need to find more opportunities to facilitate multistakeholder spaces.

Recommendations for local and national organisations and broader civil society in the Global South

- **Foster collective platforms:** Form, join or strengthen consortia, alliances or national networks that will act as platforms for coordinated advocacy, combined resources, and stronger negotiating power with donors and government.

- **Value non-financial assets:** Expand beyond external funding as the central driver of change or success, placing greater value on knowledge, trust,

networks and existing assets within the area.

- **Invest in unlearning and walking the talk**: So many of the mindset shifts required to foster change start with national and local organisations themselves. Invest in grassroots organisations. Build operational systems that actually work for the areas and families you work with – including adapting for those who are illiterate or follow an oral culture.

- **Build solidarity-based approaches that support collective action:** Work on developing proposals that allow organisations to pursue shared goals together rather than competing individually for funding. This goes beyond pooled funding to include pooled projects, where organisations connect (locally, nationally, regionally and globally as appropriate) to find solutions to challenges in their communities.

- **Continue to build Global South-led research: There are many strands in this study that deserve greater attention.** Since little awareness and access to the Global South-led funding mechanisms has been demonstrated, future research should consider a more in-depth view of this topic. Similarly, South-South cooperation and solidarity are topics that will become increasingly critical to achieving more locally-led ecosystems.

Annex 1: Snapshots of country-based research

Organisations undertaking case studies in each country were given the freedom to design and execute their study in a manner that worked for them, and their context. This was purposely not standardised across grants.

Nigeria: The Nigeria case study focused on development and humanitarian actors operating in Nigeria, with a focus on organisations active in regions with high levels of crises and aid activity, in particular Northern Nigeria.

South Sudan: Research was conducted across four locations in South Sudan, representing the three regions of Upper Nile, Equatorial and Bahr El Ghazal: Juba (Equatorial region), Rumbek (Bahr El Ghazal) and Bor and Bentiu (Upper Nile), selected for their diverse humanitarian and development contexts.

The Philippines: The research was done at the national level, focusing more on synthesising the experience, practices and challenges in advancing localisation from the perspective of local actors and communities.

Colombia: The Colombia research was done at the national level. It analyses the evolution, challenges and opportunities of the localisation process in humanitarian action, based on the recognition of local communities and organisations as key actors in crisis response. While insights from these case studies have been integrated into the main report, additional snapshots of each are provided below. These highlight a number of cross-cutting patterns that emerge across the varied regions:

- The challenges of localisation remain common – including due diligence, funding constraints and tokenism.

- Grassroots and smaller organisations continue to be left out of representation, as compared to national NGOs.

- Locally-led solutions exist. They are innovative and contextually relevant but still do not get as much recognition in the broader system.

- There is little awareness of Global South-led funding!

Snapshot from Nigeria

What does localisation mean to you?

59.0%
Shifting power and decision-making to local actors

0.8%
Other

4.5%
Strengthening local leadership

16.0%
Capacity building of local organisations

19.7%
Direct funding to local organisations
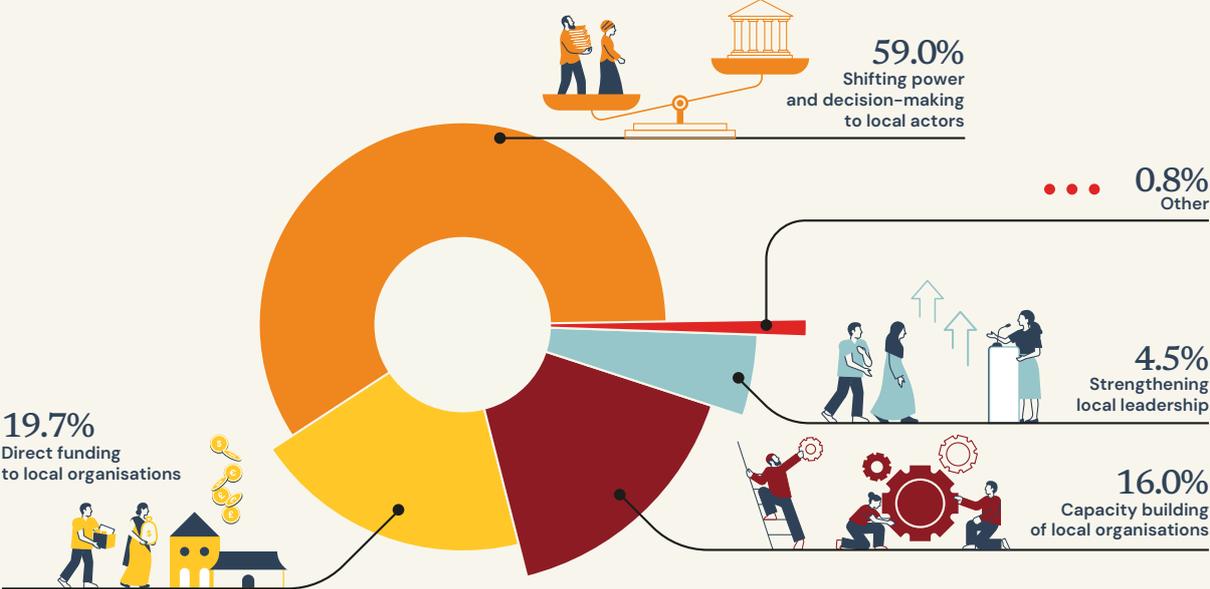
What social issues affect the work of local NGOs at national or subnational levels?

65.2%
Ethnic Tension

0.8%
Others

2.5%
Religious Intolerance

10.2%
Poverty

4.9%
Gender Inequalities

16.4%
Environmental Issues
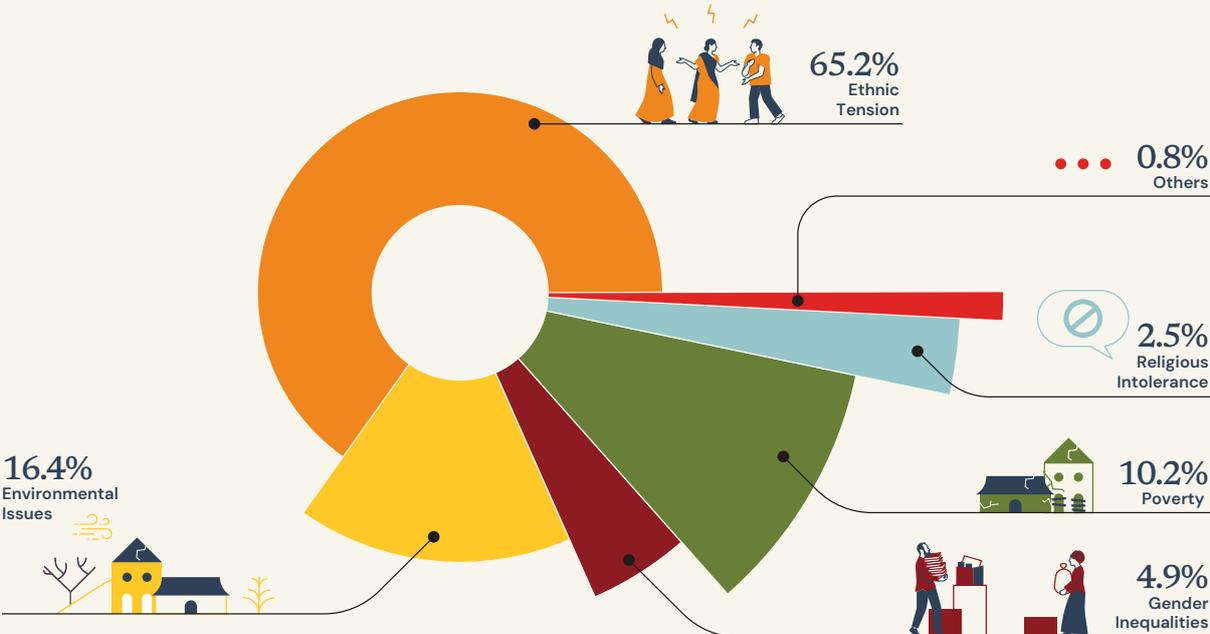
Nigeria localisation research

There is widespread knowledge of the concept of localisation, however, implementation has been slow and fraught with persistent challenges of limited direct access to funding by local and national organisations, capacity gaps and other social issues. The study revealed that "localisation" is not a new term in Nigeria, and most citizens are aware of its fundamental principle, which states that power and decision-making should be transferred to local actors and local organisations should be funded directly.

However, rather than collaboration and partnerships with indigenous local organisations, this study identified a common trend of integration of international organisations into the Nigerian local non-governmental scene to become national organisations themselves, cementing the role of INGOs and displacing local and national organisations. There is also a standing argument among local organisations that international actors do not often prioritise long-term capacity building or trust-building initiatives which undermine the impact of capacity building efforts.

Nigerian local and national organisations face numerous political and social complexities, but have devised a range of coalition-based approaches to mitigate these challenges across different areas. The study found that local organisations are actively navigating Nigeria's political and social complexities, while employing various strategies to advance localisation. Socio-political issues like ethnic tension, bureaucratic delays in registration and a crowded civic space leading to sparse resources and weak cohesion, significantly affect the operations of local NGOs, underlining the complicated contexts they often operate in.

Despite challenges, some positive trends are beginning to emerge, suggesting opportunities for reform and progress.

Local actors have taken to forming consortiums, coalitions and working groups aimed at creating awareness on localisation and furthering the discourse with groups like the Nigeria INGO Forum and Nigeria National NGO Consortium facilitating dialogue, research and learning. Pooled funds with local allocations, such as the Nigeria Humanitarian Fund, have also started disbursing small percentages directly to local actors.

National and subnational networks and coalitions are very important to local NGOs in amplifying their advocacy in their quest to shape policy and enlist the support of the government.

There are pockets of instances of innovative solutions emerging or being developed across the country, however, they are not widely known or impactful enough to be universally recognised. Several local groups respond effectively to their communities' needs by designing interventions that address issues like conflict recovery, displacement, gender inequality, and education gaps. However, these solutions rarely reach audiences outside their specific contexts. They often go undocumented or are not widely shared, leading to a lack of awareness even among stakeholders in similar thematic or geographic areas.

There is little to no knowledge around Global South-led funding mechanisms and their impacts. The study found that the level of awareness of Global South-led funding mechanisms is quite low in Nigeria, with most respondents indicating that they were unaware of its existence.

Box 7

Fuelling local resilience

In Northeastern Nigeria, the role of local and national organisations in taking the lead especially in humanitarian response, aid delivery and resilience efforts is demonstrated because of persistent humanitarian crises experienced over the years – local actors cite that the immediacy of their response is fuelled by the effects of the decade-long Boko Haram insurgency, poverty, flooding and displacement. At the frontlines in Borno State, according to the state government, over 170 local NGOs operate, provide response and lead interventions that are contextually grounded, culturally appropriate and rooted in community ownership. The following case studies portray a snapshot of the work that they do.

Initiative for Educational Awareness and Economic Development (INEAED): For over two decades, INEAED has been at the forefront of education recovery in local communities, in Maiduguri, affected by conflict and displacement, in hard-to-reach areas. INEAED works with local schools, traditional leaders and camps for internally displaced people (IDPs) to help bring out-of-school children back into formal and informal learning systems. By creating teaching materials that fit local needs and recruiting volunteer teachers and trainers from communities, INEAED takes a grassroots approach that strengthens local capacity and guarantees sustainability.

Zenith of the Girl Child and Women Initiative Support (ZEGAWIS): A woman and youth-led organisation headed by a previously IDP from one of the first local government areas in Borno state to be attacked by insurgents in 2010, ZEGAWIS focuses on providing support to women and girls across 12 local governments in Borno state, including Chibok, Bama, Gwoza, Damboa and Mafa. The organisation prioritizes displaced and marginalised

women and girls, offering hands-on training, reproductive health education, and psychosocial support tailored to the needs of survivors of conflict and GBV. ZEGAWIS is committed to engendering community recovery and resilience, helping women and girls become financially independent by learning progressive business models and practices. The organisation pushes for the inclusion of affected populations by developing their own solutions and shaping their future by developing sustainable business links across more established lines.

Center for Social Cohesion, Peace and Empowerment (CENSCOPE): CENSCOPE plays a key role in peacebuilding and reintegration in Borno State. The organisation draws on local traditions of community dialogue. It facilitates conflict resolution forums, peace clubs and trauma healing sessions in communities previously affected by insurgency. Its programs include youth, women and traditional leaders promoting inclusive engagement and collective healing. CENSCOPE's efforts show how localisation works in practice. The people closest to the issues design and implement interventions, ensuring legitimacy and relevance while gaining community support.

Snapshot from Colombia

Perception of localisation in Colombia

Research confirms that localisation in Colombia is a process in transition, where substantive advances converge with persistent limitations. Communities, public servants and organisations agree that localisation has improved the relevance of interventions and strengthened territorial trust. However, they recognise that current mechanisms still reproduce financial dependencies and institutional hierarchies.

The divergences focus on the priorities for change: while the state emphasises regulatory management and budgetary sustainability, NGOs and communities underscore the urgency of direct access to resources and a voice in planning. However, there is consensus that the future of localisation will depend on building trust and shared responsibility among all levels.

First, local legitimacy and community trust are the main assets of the process. Cases such as Mocoa and Granizal show that responses led by local actors generate greater acceptance and social sustainability, reaffirming the need to strengthen insider–led processes. The Colombian experience demonstrates that localisation transcends the financial sphere. For instance, in the context of the Andean migration crisis, Appe, Araque and Telch (2025) identify relational accompaniment as a practice centred on trust, closeness and cultural relevance, demonstrating that local innovations strengthen the legitimacy and effectiveness of humanitarian action.

Second, the gap in direct financing remains the most significant constraint. Despite the commitments of the Grand Bargain and the efforts of the UN–led Flagship Initiative, most local organisations continue to depend on international intermediaries, which reduces their strategic and operational autonomy.

Furthermore, bureaucracy, regulatory requirements and institutional fragmentation hinder timely implementation and inclusive accountability. The lack of continuity in strengthening programs weakens installed capacities and perpetuates territorial inequality.

The Colombian debate also warns of linguistic and conceptual gaps (e.g., translations and technical jargon) that exclude local organisations if concepts and accountability mechanisms are not culturally adapted.

Structural barriers and cross–cutting challenges

- **Financing and resources.** The lack of direct funding, high administrative requirements and lack of coverage for indirect costs continue to limit the autonomy of local organisations.

- **Power and decision–making.** The centralisation of decisions in international agencies and the lack of local representation in governance spaces maintain structural inequality.

- **Institutional coordination.** Fragmentation among actors and the lack of coordination mechanisms lead to duplication and loss of efficiency.

- **Local capacities and sustainability.** The lack of continuity in training, the lack of sustained technical support, and weak capacity retention affect sustainability.

- **Regulatory framework and bureaucracy.** Rigid administrative processes and international safeguards that are not adapted to the local context slow responses and discourage innovation.

- **Accountability and transparency.** Monitoring mechanisms remain focused on donors, without including communities in the verification of results.

- **Security and humanitarian access.** Risky conditions for community leaders and territorial control by armed actors limit participation and institutional presence.

However, the study also reveals significant opportunities. Collaborative governance, flexible financing, anticipatory action and the use of open technologies are viable paths to consolidate decentralisation. Networks such as NEAR and local processes demonstrate that social innovation can arise when conditions of trust, support and co-responsibility are in place.

Anticipatory action and climate resilience strategies are also emerging as opportunities for coordination between risk management, international cooperation, and local knowledge. These practices enable reductions in losses, empower communities, and strengthen the capacity to adapt to climate change, thereby consolidating localisation as a tool for comprehensive land management.

In short, localisation in Colombia is moving towards a more horizontal cooperation paradigm, where communities are no longer beneficiaries but become strategic partners. The main challenge is to ensure that these lessons are institutionalised, avoiding setbacks in the face of global dynamics of centralisation and financial dependence.

Snapshot from South Sudan

Localising humanitarian response: Lessons on empowering and strengthening local actors in South Sudan.

NNGOs' resilience and innovation demonstrate their readiness to lead. A paradigm shift from tokenistic inclusion to resource redistribution and mutual accountability is imperative. Without it, the humanitarian system will continue to prioritize efficiency over equity, leaving South Sudanese actors on the margins of their own crisis response. The study results emphasized that meaningful localization requires engaging local actors in planning, implementation, and monitoring. Their local knowledge and community trust make them well-positioned to deliver effective interventions. However, barriers such as complex donor requirements, short and rigid funding timelines, and a lack of donor trust often based on unfounded perceptions of poor capacity continue to limit progress. These constraints were seen as unfair, especially when international organizations are not held to the same standard despite similar challenges.

This study also reveals the need for localisation efforts to move beyond financial redistribution and address deeper structural inequities. Local actors, particularly smaller or marginalized ones, require more supportive political conditions, including legal protection, capacity development and meaningful participation in policy and coordination mechanisms. Without such changes, the promise of locally led solutions may remain unfulfilled.

Uneven progress and fragmentation of localisation: While localisation evolved in South Sudan over recent years, progress remains highly fragmented. NNGOs have made strides in representation within coordination platforms and partnerships, but community based organisations, youth and women-led groups remain marginalised. The findings reveal a stark disconnect between localisation rhetoric and reality. While NNGOs possess the contextual expertise to lead responses, systemic inequities, funding biases, INGO gatekeeping and weak policy enforcement, stifle progress. The Grand Bargain's unmet commitments and donor risk-aversion perpetuate dependency cycles. This disparity underscores that localisation is not a monolithic process. The variation in access to funding, decision-making platforms, and capacity support reflects entrenched structural inequalities. Localisation in its current form risks reproducing existing hierarchies unless tailored efforts are made to include grassroots organisations and emerging actors.

Political and bureaucratic constraints as structural barriers: Political and regulatory conditions significantly affect how organisations operate. These challenges are disproportionately reported by local and national actors compared to INGOs or government-affiliated organisations. This institutional environment hinders meaningful localisation by limiting local actors' ability to operate autonomously and effectively. The administrative burden can also shift attention away from core programming activities and limit participation in donor-funded projects, especially for newly established or rural-based organisations. These point to a complex regulatory environment in which local organisations must navigate shifting policies, uncertain registration procedures, or politically sensitive operating environments. Such conditions erode the operational space of local actors and discourage long-term planning and innovation.

Persistent power imbalances between local and international actors: There is a recurring theme on the dependence of local actors on INGOs for funding, technical support and legitimacy. While INGOs are seen as essential enablers of aid delivery, their dominance within decision-making forums reinforces power asymmetries. National and local organisations often play implementation roles without equal say in program design or strategic direction.

Capacity is present but undervalued: A deficit-based narrative around local capacity continues to dominate discourse and funding decisions. While local organisations possess deep contextual knowledge, community trust, and operational agility, they are often excluded from direct funding due to perceived weaknesses in compliance and financial management. This perception gap perpetuates cycles of underinvestment and limited growth. Bridging this divide requires shifting from a risk-averse funding approach to one that prioritises mentorship, institutional development and shared accountability.

Funding and resources: Local organisations face profound funding barriers, with most resources flowing through international intermediaries. While flexible, long-term funding aligned with community needs remains the ideal, current systems favour large international NGOs, leaving local partners dependent on restrictive subcontracts. The persistent gap between localisation commitments and practice demands urgent reform – simplifying application processes, ensuring fair partnerships and prioritising direct funding mechanisms that empower community-led responses. When local organisations do receive direct support, as demonstrated by rare successful models, they are capable of delivering effective, contextually grounded solutions.

Box 8

Innovation thrives despite constraints!

Despite limited resources and restrictive conditions, local actors, particularly Community-based Organisations (CBOs), youth, and women-led organisations are actively developing innovative responses rooted in local realities. These innovations often defy neat classification. They include community-led early warning systems; locally negotiated access strategies; and culturally appropriate service delivery models – including mobile health clinics, tech based financial tools like mobile money, peer-led youth engagement, and trauma care.

From a climate perspective, grassroots organisations are responding innovatively to local challenges: tree seedling businesses and nursery beds for drought resilience, localised waste management initiatives, community-led construction of dykes to mitigate flooding, solar energy adaptation and advocacy for sustainable climate adaptation strategies. People even mentioned a local chicken breed adapted to South Sudan's climate, though scaling remains difficult due to funding shortages.

> *We have small tree seedling businesses now; they not only help with reforestation but also give income to communities.*

FGD with the women's group and business community in Bor

> *Even the waste management work is now being done by communities themselves. We only need support to scale this.*

KII with the women's group and the business community in Bor

Deep dives into climate change suggest that successful adaptation requires more than just preserving traditional knowledge. It demands institutional innovation to create bridging mechanisms between generations and knowledge systems. Farmer field schools, community knowledge hubs, and revised school curricula can serve as crucial interfaces where elders' wisdom and modern science mutually inform climate strategies. Ultimately, these cases argue for a paradigm shift in climate programming. This needs to treat indigenous knowledge not as folklore to be preserved, but as dynamic, living systems that must be actively supported, documented, and integrated into formal adaptation frameworks to ensure their continued evolution and relevance.

> *Communities have their own ways of mitigating flooding. The introduction of financial incentives in the dyke construction was attracting money-minded people. The quality of their work was low, and they were delayed so they continue to get paid.*

Youth Representative

> *Communities relied on cloud patterns, particularly noting that clouds moving southward were seen as a sign of heavy rain. This knowledge was traditionally passed down orally, through storytelling, proverbs, and participation in community rituals.*

KII with Ministry of Agriculture

Local actors can innovate. However, these innovations are often invisible to donors and policymakers due to a lack of formal documentation, limited participation in coordination structures, and minimal access to innovation funding. There is a pressing need for regulatory reform, inclusion mechanisms, and investment in organizational development. SSLL's advocacy offers hope, but INGOs and donors must cede genuine decision-making power.

Snapshot from The Philippines

Beyond localisation: Innovations strengthening Pakikipagkapwa and Bayanihan in the Philippines

Localisation is not merely a strategic imperative–it is a recalibration of power, resources and trust toward communities that have long stewarded resilience and innovation. It demands that institutions move beyond rhetoric and invest in locally led systems with the courage to cede control and the humility to learn.

As this agenda advances, it is essential to remain committed to the belief that the most effective, equitable, and sustainable solutions emerge from those closest to the challenges. This study calls for deepened commitments, actionable shifts, and mechanisms of accountability that honour community wisdom. By aligning operational structures with principles of justice and local agency, the foundation for a more inclusive and resilient future is laid down.

In the Philippines context, the issue is not only about shifting power, but also about reclaiming space that has long belonged to local and national actors and has increasingly been taken over by international actors. In the current polycrisis, affecting multiple countries worldwide, the nature of the humanitarian "reset" remains unclear, particularly as to whether it constitutes a genuine reform agenda. There is therefore a need to reframe the mindset of local and national actors to enable them to influence developments in the humanitarian and development fields more effectively.

Partnerships — Power dynamics in partnerships often favour international actors.

As was the case during the early days of international humanitarian aid entry, local and grassroots organisations are expected to prioritise donor expectations and accountabilities over the relevant needs of their communities. Local organisations are confined to serving as implementing partners rather than equal collaborators. They submit proposals, receive funding and report to donors with limited opportunities for input or feedback on succeeding priorities and programs of INGOs or donors.

Funding — Constraints in accessing humanitarian funding

The 2016 Grand Bargain Agreement calls for improvements in the quantity and quality of funding; however, there is continued inaccessibility of the financing for Philippine civil society. There is stiff competition among existing NGOs, and at the same time, there is exclusivity of funders or a preference for local NGOs to work with. Stringent requirements and complex application processes also often exclude smaller, community–based organisations. While INGOs and donors may prioritise familiarity and track record, this can hinder the growth opportunities and sustainability of newly established civil society organisations, particularly grassroots ones.

Capacity — Unequal organisational capacities among local NGOs, CSOs

Considering the vast array of NGOs,CSOs across the country, there are varying capacities in organisational management, recruitment, and human resource management, as well as access to learning and capacity–building opportunities. Compliance with quality standards, especially those of INGOs and donors, is challenging for smaller organisations operating in their communities with varying contexts, values, and priorities.

Smaller community-based organisations also face challenges in maintaining and expanding their human resources, as most rely on volunteers who must balance school, work, and other responsibilities. While some organisations identify and train second-line leaders, others continually reorganise their membership and consolidate networks to sustain services, especially in delivery of relief operations.

Coordination and complementarity — Weak political influence amid shrinking democratic space and threats of red-tagging

Local NGOs/CSOs/POs observe the shrinking of democratic space as a challenge to their effective participation as equal partners in international and national humanitarian coordination. There are cases of development aggression, such as in the Laguna Lakeshore communities, where infrastructure projects are being implemented despite community objections to their negative socio-economic and environmental impacts. Some organisations are also accused of assisting communist groups in their humanitarian efforts. This is the case with the Leyte Center for Development (LCDE), which was indicted and had its financial accounts frozen in 2024, despite being a multi-award winning organisation recognised by various government agencies for excellence in social work, disaster preparedness and humanitarian response.

Policy, influence and visibility — Limited resources and capacities to communicate learning and successes

In recent years, there has been growing recognition of the advocacy efforts and actions of national, local and grassroots organisations in the international sphere, particularly following the emergence of the Grand Bargain in 2016. However, limited time, appropriate framework, technical capacity and resources exist to consolidate learning and communicate success stories. Some organisations in rural areas havelow mobile connectivity, limiting local information-sharing amid the increasing reliance on global online platforms. As a result, the visibility and influence of local CSOs and POs, especially those in marginalised communities, remains constrained.

Participation — Persistent "beneficiary" mindset

The conduct of consultations and the promotion of local community participation in humanitarian responses are often set aside as humanitarian actors and donors focus on the immediacy of providing aid. Hence, there remain limited opportunities for communities to participate and ensure the relevance of humanitarian projects.

Box 9

INNOVATING THROUGH PINNOVATION ACADEMY

> *"I felt safe upon being wheeled through inside the A-TraMS, even with just one person pushing the wheelchair using the ramp. It was sturdy, nothing to worry about. While inside the vehicle, the wheelchair was safely locked through the wheel lock attached to the floor. And a strap was put in place across my body down to the floor. While the vehicle was in motion, my wheelchair remained safely in place with no rocking motion. I don't have fear when the driver abruptly or accidentally steps on the brakes or suddenly stops or misses a hump."*

Person with Disability

Under the global Community-Led Innovation Partnership, the Philippines took a bold step forward through the Pinnovation Academy. In this space, community members become designers of solutions, not just implementers of someone else's plan.

Since 2020, it has supported grassroots teams in developing over a dozen local innovations, ranging from indigenous knowledge integration in climate response to rethinking communal livelihoods after displacement.

One of these "Pinnovators" (https://www.pinnovation.ph/innovators) is the Las Pinas Person with Disability Federation, Inc. led by Anafe Mejia Maravillas, which initially proposed to modify existing electric tricycles for People with Disabilities (PwDs), and has pivoted to developing PWD-accessible L300 vans. The innovation is named "Accessible Transportation Mobile Service for Persons with Mobility Concerns." A-TraMS and its specifications was co-created with local PWD organisations in Las Piñas City to ensure safety and comfort. In partnership with the local government, LPPDFI is now working to expand the A-TraMS across the city of Las Pinas to ensure it reaches more people.

References

A4EP. (2025). *From Crisis to Reckoning: Decolonise Aid, localise Power, Restore Justice.* Alliance for Empowering Partnership. https://a4ep.net/from-crisis-to-reckoning-decolonize-aid-localise-power-restore-justice/

A4EP. (2020) *IASC Definition of 'local' and 'national actors' – a barrier to achieving Grand Bargain localisation commitments.* A4EP. https://a4ep.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/06/IASC-Definition.pdf

Al-Jazeera. (2025). *US-backed GHF 'aid mission' in Gaza ends – a timeline of violence.* Accessed on 5th December, 2025. https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2025/11/25/us-backed-ghf-aid-mission-in-gaza-ends-a-timeline-of-violence

al-Sakkaf, N. (2024). *Localising Aid and Development in Yemen.* Sana'a Center for Strategic Studies. https://sanaacenter.org/files/Localizing_Aid_and_Development_in_Yemen_en.pdf

Aloudat T, Khan T. (2022). *Decolonising humanitarianism or humanitarian aid?* PLOS Glob Public Health 2(4): e0000179. https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pgph.0000179

ALNAP. (2025). *Global Humanitarian Assistance Report* 2025. London: ALNAP/ODI Global.

Appe, S., Araque, J., & Telch, F. (2025). Migration crisis in the Andes: *A case study of localization and acompañamiento from Medellín, Colombia.* Nonprofit Policy Forum, 16(2), 203–228. https://doi.org/10.1515/npf-2023-0056

Baguios, A., King, M., Martins, A., & Pinnington, R. (2021). *Are we there yet? Localization as the journey towards locally led practice: Models, approaches, and challenges.* ODI Report.

Barakat, S., & Milton, S. (2020). *Localisation across the humanitarian–development–peace nexus.* Journal of Peacebuilding & Development, 15(2), 147–163. https://doi.org/10.1177/1542316620922805

Barbelet, V et al. (2024). *Harnessing evidence and learning for people centred: Evidence synthesis and best practice review on AAP, inclusion and localisation.* London: ALNAP/ODI. https://alnap.cdn.ngo/media/documents/HARNESSING_EVIDENCE_AND_LEARNING_FOR_PEOPLE-CENTRED_HUMANITARIAN_ACTION.pdf

Bergamaschi, I., Moore, P., Tickner, A. (2017). *South-South Cooperation Beyond the Myths.* London: Palgrave Macmillan London. https://doi.org/10.1057/978-1-137-53969-4

CIVICUS Monitor. (2025). *National civic space ratings.* Available at: https://monitor.civicus.org/ .Accessed in November 2025.

Common Reserve. (2024). *Funds on hold: Non-profits and the struggle for financial access.* Available at: https://www.commonreserve.com/

Coloniality and the inadequacy of localisation. (2024). *The Humanitarian Leader,* 6(1), Working paper 044, April, 2024. https://doi.org/10.21153/thl2023art1971

Global Nation. (2024). *Global Solidarity Report 2024.* Available at: https://globalnation.world/global-solidarity-report/

Global Resilience Partnership. (2023). *Resilience Evidence Forum 2023 Synthesis Report.* Cape Town, South Africa. https://www.globalresiliencepartnership.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/09/ref_synthesis-report.pdf

Greenaway, L., Joshi, N., Jha, R. K., Ahimbisibwe, L., & Tanner, L. (2024). *Research study: The status of frontline*

humanitarian workers. Humanitarian Aid International. https://hai-india.org/status-humanitarian-frontline-workers

HAG, CoLAB, GLOW, InSights, PIANGO & Pujiono Centre. (2024). The beginning of the road: A practical approach to defining and measuring localisation impact for communities. Humanitarian Horizons. Melbourne: HAG.

Kamal, A., Fujimatsu, R. (2024). From humanitarian resistance to resilience: Nation-building in active conflict. Humanitarian Practice Network Paper. London: ODI. https://odihpn.org/en/publication/from-humanitarian-resistance-to-resilience-nation-building-in-active-conflict/

Kennedy, E., Maietta, M., and Santana, M. (2025). The Future of Aid 2040: Pathways to Transformation. Inter-Agency Research and Analysis Network (IARAN) and the Centre for Humanitarian Leadership (CHL). https://iaran.org/future-of-aid

Kuipers, B., Desportes, I., & Hordijk, M. (2020). Of locals and insiders: The relevance of national and local actors in the 2017 Mocoa landslide response in Colombia. Disaster Prevention and Management, 29(4), 523–536. https://doi.org/10.1108/DPM-12-2018-0384

Lewis, H., Forster, G., & Paxton, S. (2024). METRICS MATTER II: USAID's Measurement Approach is undermining progress on localization. Publish What You Fund Campaign, The Global Campaign for Aid and Development Transparency. https://www.publishwhatyoufund.org/app/uploads/dlm_uploads/2024/06/Metrics-Matter-II.pdf

Meininghaus, E., et al. (2024). How to Decolonialise the Humanitarian-Development-Peace Nexus? Policy recommendations for donors, the United Nations and other international agencies and (I)NGOs (Version 1). Bonn International Centre for Conflict Studies (BICC). https://doi.org/10.60638/S11V-W982

Mohamed-Saleem, A. (2020). Localising humanitarianism, peace making, and diplomacy: The challenges facing Muslim INGOs. Journal of Peacebuilding & Development, 15(2), 178–191. https://doi.org/10.1177/1542316620925802

Moallin, Z., Fouad, L. and Barter, D. (2021). A humanitarian trap? Navigating neutrality, relief and rights in Ethiopia, Myanmar, Syria and Guatemala. HPG working paper. London: ODI https://odi.org/en/publications/a-humanitarian-trap-navigating-neutrality-relief-and-rights-in-ethiopia-myanmar-syria-and-guatemala/

NDRRMC. (2014). Y it Happened: Learning from Typhoon Yolanda. Quezon City: National Disaster Risk Reduction and Management Council. Available at: https://reliefweb.int/report/philippines/y-it-happened-learning-typhoon-yolanda

NEAR. (2025). NEAR Definitions Paper (Updated January 2025). Network for Empowered Aid Response. https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5fc4fd249698b02c7f3acfe9/t/6798d3971b1979433d93b2d4/1738068887958/EN_NEAR+Definitions+Paper.pdf

NEAR. (n.d). NEAR Localisation Policy [Available Arabic, English, Spanish and French]. Network for Empowered Aid Response. https://www.near.ngo/localisation-policy

NEAR. (2019). Localization Performance Measurement Framework. Nairobi: Network for Empowered Aid Response. https://www.near.ngo/lpmf

Oddy-Atuona, J. (n.d). We can't shift power in philanthropy and aid without addressing tax justice, labour rights and debt cancellation. JMB Consulting. https://www.jmb-consulting.co.uk/uncharitablepapers/zxcfhmvgz897lgxnqp7gtnqf77vt19

Rahman, M.F., Falzon, D., Robinson, Sa. et al. (2023). Locally led adaptation: Promise, pitfalls and possibilities. Ambio 52, 1543–1557. https://doi.org/10.1007/s13280-023-01884-7

Rose, J., & Elbaaly, E. (2024). *Cultivating resilience in chaos: Localisation as a mechanism for sustainability and inner development in Syria's humanitarian crisis.* Challenges, 15(1), 11. https://doi.org/10.3390/challe15010011

Olson, S.K., Dahab, M., and Parker, M. (2024). *Key considerations: Mutual aid lessons and experiences from emergency response rooms in Sudan.* Social Science in Humanitarian Action (SSHAP). www.doi.org/10.19088/SSHAP.2024.056

Pousadela, I. (2025). *Cutting civil society's lifeline – The global spread of foreign agent laws. Civicus.* https://publications.civicus.org/publications/foreign-agents-laws-report/download-report/

Schneider, S. (2024). *The locals will know": The role of local actors and local knowledge in trigger development for anticipatory action.* IFHV Working Paper Vol. 14, No. 2. DOI: 10.17176/20241217-113029-0

Thu Thu Nwe Hlaing, Tamas Wells & Anne Décobert. (2024). *Seeing like a donor: the unintended harms of rendering civil society legible,* Development in Practice, 34:8, 965–976, DOI: 10.1080/09614524.2024.2362783

Viswanathan, V and Sharma, A. (April 2019). *The face of disasters 2019.* New Delhi, India: SEEDS. https://seedsindia.org/faceofdisasters/

Viswanathan, Vijayalakshmi. (2023). *Learning to be more 'locally led'? Current practice and evidence gaps in the international humanitarian system.* London: ODI/ALNAP https://alnap.org/help-library/resources/learning-to-be-more-locally-led-current-practice-and-evidence-gaps-in-the-international/

Wijewickrama, E., Lees, J., Phillips, S, et al. (2025). *Navigating the spectrum: a methodology to compare the impact of humanitarian action.* London: ALNAP/ODI. https://humanitarianadvisorygroup.org/insight/navigating-the-spectrum-a-methodology-to-compare-the-impact-of-humanitarian-action/
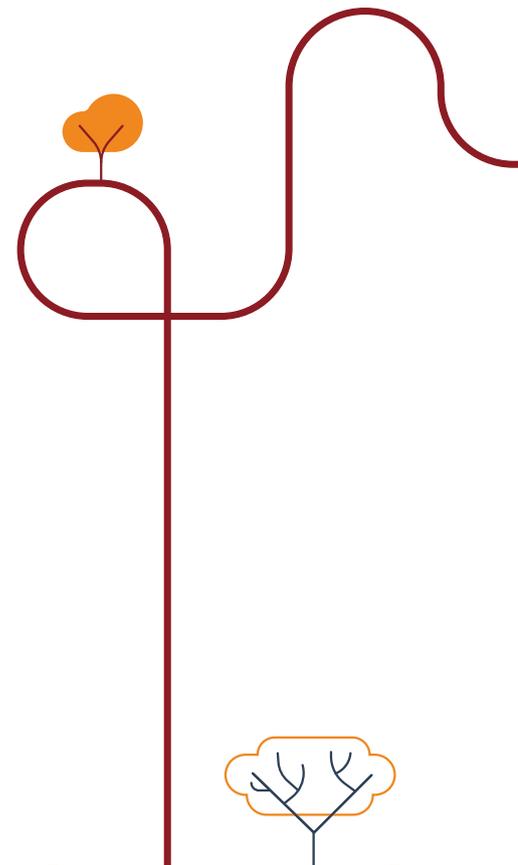
Acronyms

A4EP	Alliance for Empowering Partnership
ACSF	Abot-Kamay Community Solidarity Fund
ALNAP	Active Learning Network for Accountability and Performance in Humanitarian Action
AVPN	Asian Venture Philanthropy Network
CENSCOPE	Center for Social Cohesion, Peace and Empowerment
CRGR	Regional Concertation for Risk Management
CSO	Civil Society Organisation
DEC	Disaster and Emergency Committee
DRRM	Disaster Risk Reduction Management
ECOWAS	Economic Community of West African States
EoI	Expression of Interest
ERR	Emergency Response Room
EU	European Union
Euro	European currency
FCRA	Foreign Contribution Registration Act
FGD	Focus group discussion
GBV	Gender-based violence
GHA	Global Humanitarian Assistance
IDP	Internally displaced person
IFRC	International Federation of the Red Cross
INEAED	Initiative for Educational Awareness and Economic Development
INGO	International Non-Governmental Organisation
KFPC	Kilometer 7 Farmers-Producers Cooperative

LAC	Latin America and the Caribbean
LCDE	Leyte Center for Development
LNGO	Local Non-Governmental Organisation
MENA	Middle East and North Africa
NAHAB	National Alliance of Humanitarian Actors, Bangladesh
NEAR	Network for Empowered Aid Response
NNGO	National Non-Governmental Organisation
NRG	National Reference Group
OCHA	Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs
ODA	Overseas Development Assistance
PHP	Philippine Peso (a currency)
POs	People's Organisation
RINGO	Re-Imagining the INGO
SCLR	Survivor and Community-Led Responses
SDC	Swiss Development Corporation
SRIFA	San Roque Integrated Farmers Association
UN	United Nations
UNCTAD	United Nations Conference on Trade and Development
US	United States
USD	United States Dollar (a currency)
USAID	United States Agency for International Development
ZEGAWIS	Zenith of the Girl Child and Women Initiative Support
ZGF	Zambian Governance Foundation

NEAR

NEAR is a movement of local and national civil society organisations from the Global South centring local leadership in humanitarian action. Through our collective power, we challenge top-down aid systems and reimagine community-centred ecosystems of care, response, and solidarity.

www.near.ngo