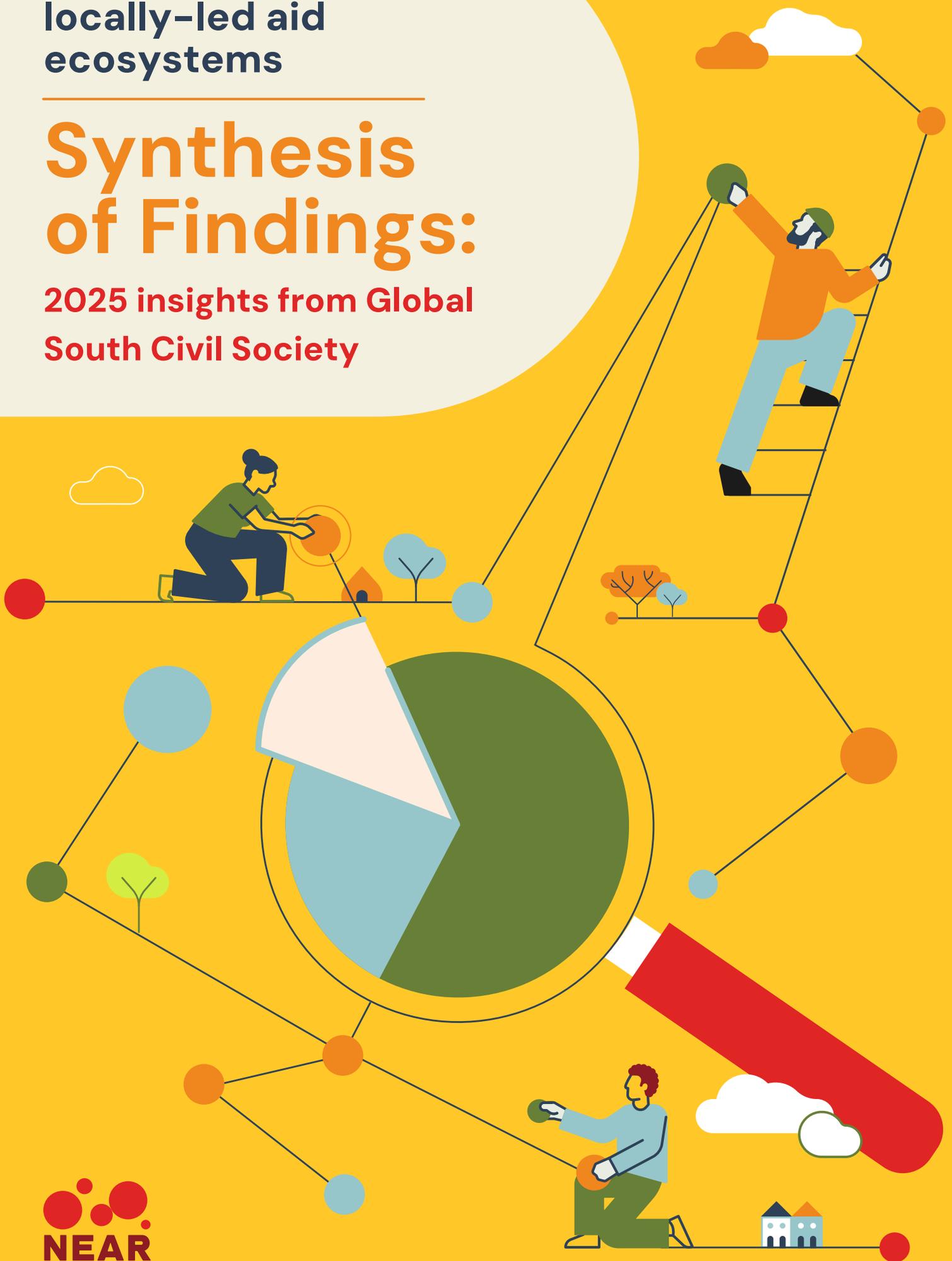


Building more
locally-led aid
ecosystems

Synthesis of Findings:

2025 insights from Global
South Civil Society



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.

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.

The study incorporated a broad-based and peer-led approach to inputs that were triangulated to arrive at conclusions that resonated across regions. This included a survey (with 261 responses from national and local organisations across 38 countries); 35 in-depth key informant interviews; literature review; and virtual and in-person consultations. The report also incorporates findings from four country-level case studies carried out by NEAR members and partners – South Sudan, Nigeria, Colombia and the Philippines. 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. Instead, it highlights recurring dynamics, tensions, and insights that emerged across the research.

What the research shows

"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



Localisation has stalled at the level of practice, not rhetoric.

Ten years after the World Humanitarian Summit, localisation is widely accepted in principle, yet it has not delivered structural change in how aid is financed, governed, or controlled. Across contexts, national and local organisations described a persistent gap between policy commitments and day-to-day realities.

At the country level, long-standing challenges remain largely unchanged. Funding continues to be short-term and inflexible, direct access remains limited, and expectations of equitable value are rarely met. Risk-averse bureaucratic requirements routinely override stated commitments, leaving on-paper reforms unreconciled with operational practice.

Findings also reinforced that how and what aid is delivered is as important as who delivers it. Expectations tied to becoming

a 'good partner' often reshape local organisations to fit international systems, undermining the relational, adaptive, and community-embedded ways of working that make them effective. Over time, this erosion of local practice can weaken legitimacy with affected communities and compromise sustainability.

Direct funding to national and local organisations remains low and is widely expected to continue flowing through at least one intermediary. Where representation of national and local actors has improved, it is often experienced as partial or tokenistic, with women's organisations, indigenous groups, and actors outside capital cities still frequently excluded.

Similarly, where coordination mechanisms are being transferred to national or local entities, responsibility is often handed over without corresponding financial or technical resources, reinforcing asymmetries rather than shifting power.

Non-monetary assets are systematically undervalued.

Across the research, respondents repeatedly pointed to the time, labour, knowledge, relationships, and in-kind contributions that local organisations and communities themselves provide – inputs that are essential to response effectiveness yet routinely taken for granted.

These contributions often sit outside formal accounting and reporting frameworks, rendering them invisible within dominant measures of value and performance. Several respondents argued that making such inputs visible through deliberate accounting and valuation practices could help rebalance power by showing where investment, risk, and effort already lie. One example highlighted was the National Alliance of Humanitarian Actors, Bangladesh (NAHAB), which is experimenting with Local Contribution Accounting (LoCA) to formalise and quantify community and local actor contributions.

For grassroots, local and national organisations, the work is personal and increasingly precarious.

For grassroots, local, and national organisations, humanitarian and development work is rarely just professional. Locally-led initiatives are often romanticised, but the impact on those carrying out the work – physical, mental, financial and social – is rarely seriously discussed. Leaders described navigating constant trade-offs between duty of care for staff and organisational survival.

Organisations are navigating civic space restrictions, with tightening laws and restrictions making it more difficult both to access money and to run programmes. Formal laws aside, civil society actors are increasingly being forced to navigate uncertain, ad hoc, and varying levels of informal approval systems. This is leaving aside ethnic tensions, gang violence and conflict zones that many of the study's respondents were facing.

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. 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.

Addressing root causes puts rights and politics on the line.

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.

Examples from Myanmar to Gaza reinforce the need for a post-neutrality lens.

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.



Aid operates through multiple overlapping ecosystems, not a single system.

The report uses the plural term ecosystems deliberately. Insights from this study reinforced the reality that aid operates through a dense web of actors, relationships, power dynamics, and incentives that vary significantly within and across countries. Even within a single national context, multiple ecosystems coexist, intersect, compete, and collaborate.

This plurality challenges assumptions that aid can be reformed through a single blueprint, centre of coordination, or linear transition from one model to another. There is no single centre of control or command shaping how aid functions in practice. As a result, emerging approaches to locally-led action are necessarily decentralised, adaptive, and shaped by local political economies rather than uniform institutional design.

Despite widespread constraints on civic space, respondents across regions consistently emphasised the critical role

of Global South governments – particularly at the subnational level – within these ecosystems. While relationships with state actors are often complex and contested, the findings reinforced that governments cannot be treated as optional or peripheral actors in alternative ways of working. Any shift toward more locally-led aid ecosystems will need to engage with, navigate, and influence state roles rather than bypass them.



What this means for the aid sector

Taken together, 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. This dual reality challenges assumptions that locally-led action can be delivered through a single reform agenda or institutional blueprint.

These findings point to a sector at a strategic crossroads. Incremental reform within the existing system is proving insufficient to deliver genuinely locally-led aid. At the same time, alternative approaches have always existed and are taking more formal shape, often outside international structures.

The question facing donors, UN agencies, INGOs, governments, and civil society networks is no longer whether locally-led action is desirable, but whether current systems are willing to adapt to the political, relational, and operational realities it requires.

The recommendations that follow are grounded in this reality, recognising that enabling more locally-led aid ecosystems will require both shifts within the dominant system and deliberate investment in alternative approaches already being built by Global South actors.



Recommendations



Donors and philanthropies

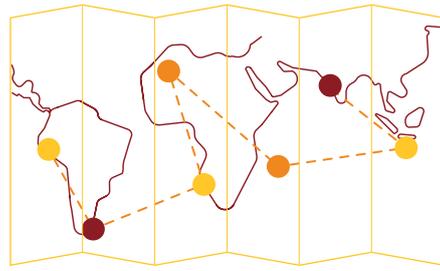
- **Diversify and invest in locally-led funding mechanisms:** Invest in multiple and diverse grant making organisations and funding mechanisms. The range can help reach varied populations, including informal and unregistered organisations, and underserved parts of countries.
- **Put sustainability first:**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



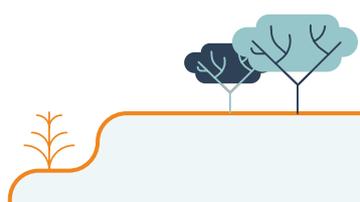
UN and INGOs

- **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.

Regional bodies, Global South governments, businesses, philanthropies and civil society networks



- **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. 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.
- **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** around topics such as south-south solidarity and cooperation, global south-led funding and aid system reform.





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.

Read the full report: www.near.ngo