Supporting Local Leadership in Humanitarian Coordination

Stocktaking | Where we stand and where to go from here

NRC NORWEGIAN REFUGEE COUNCIL

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Acknowledgements

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Norwegian Refugee Council
Prinsens gate 2
N-0152 Oslo
Norway

www.nrc.no

Written by: Zulfiye Kazim

Edited by: David McDevitt

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1 Executive Summary

NRC is committed to using its interagency leadership and coordination roles, as well as its broader country presence, to act as an enabler of locally led humanitarian action. To inform the development of a strategic plan on supporting local leadership within the humanitarian coordination architecture, NRC commissioned a consultancy to review available resources and enablers of local leadership, and identify practical steps and considerations for taking this forward as part of NRC's work. This report summarises the findings of the review, drawing on the perspectives of 54 humanitarian and local and national actors consulted as part of this stocktaking exercise. NRC is sharing this summary in the hope that it can also benefit other organisations.

Key findings from the consultations

Three main approaches emerged for supporting local leadership: facilitating local and national actors (LNAs) to co-lead; systematically including LNAs in decision-making; and avoiding inhibiting local leadership by failing to adequately build on, work with, and transition towards local and national systems.

Support for leadership must be meaningful rather than symbolic. This requires managing power imbalances between local and international co-leads; providing LNAs with financial, technical and institutional support; and ensuring real, rather than demonstrative, inclusion in decision-making.

Progress towards greater local leadership can be hindered by a lack of internalised belief among some international actors in the value, feasibility and relevance of LNA leadership. While some participants saw a need to build buy-in, others favoured compelling organisations to act through stronger targets and greater accountability.

Creating enabling conditions for LNA participation within existing coordination bodies can increase prospects for local leadership. Coordination teams could embed translation support, the inclusion of national team members within secretariats, and resources for member training in their budgets. Despite the importance of agreed interagency standards for enabling participation, there was broad agreement that the international system does not typically meet them – a failure of collective responsibility on the part of host organisations, donors and interagency leadership.

Contextual factors strongly influence the opportunities and pathways for local leadership, while approaches to risk remain contested. Too often, risk considerations lead to blanket decisions about whether to support local leadership, based on the biases of international actors and/or outdated analysis, rather than actual evidence.

Strategic reflection on the intended outcomes of support to specific LNAs is needed. This could encourage consideration of the complementarity of different LNAs, and strengthen accountability for achieving clear objectives. For example, some LNAs may be appropriate

partners for system strengthening, some could facilitate more effective community engagement, while others may fulfil multiple objectives. The lack of support to leadership of women-led organisations, youth groups and organisations of persons with disabilities was also noted.

More guidance is needed on approaches to supporting local and national authority leadership. System strengthening, technical support and collaborative coordination through existing local bodies or adapted international structures may be the most appropriate. Organisations should not expect local and national authorities to co-lead in international coordination structures, which tend to apply uniform models across very different contexts. Where local or national authority leadership is strong, the focus may need to shift towards partial or full transition.

Four main obstacles to local leadership emerged: a lack of willingness among international actors to share power; insufficient direct funding for LNAs; disagreements over LNA capacity, based on the biases of international actors who undervalue the comparative strengths of LNAs; and structural barriers within the international system itself, including top-down planning processes, power imbalances, and a failure to adequately plan for and realise transition.

Several catalysts for change can help challenge these barriers. The efforts of individual champions and the demand for space by LNAs themselves can work against systemwide and institutional barriers. Institutional leadership, accountability and donor prioritisation could further shift the emphasis towards creating an enabling environment, rather than relying primarily on LNAs to push for change.

Practical considerations

Different practical approaches can support LNAs to co-lead in international mechanisms. These include mechanisms for selecting and identifying LNAs, rotational leadership, tripartite coordination arrangements, partnership-led approaches, and approaches adapted to the different types of coordination groups.

Despite the wealth of resources available to organisations seeking to advance local leadership, important gaps remain. A framework for operationalising co-leadership could help avoid inconsistencies in approaches that may disadvantage LNAs; guidance on mentoring and coaching, with a focus on two-way capacity sharing, could advance meaningful leadership; and case studies of successful efforts to adapt to and build on local systems could also counter the tendency to default to mandates and traditional international structures.

New approaches to supporting local leadership are emerging. These include decentralising decision-making and resource management to LNAs enhancing accountability, and reducing the operational footprint of international actors in favour of providing technical backstopping to LNAs.

Recommended actions for supporting local leadership based on these insights

Start from the premise that local leadership *can and should be supported* in most contexts, even if the modalities, the LNAs engaged, and the level of ambition vary

according to the risks and contextual realities. Organisations should regularly scrutinise these realities in collaboration with local actors.

Organisational leadership needs to provide clarity on what it means to support local leadership within the culture of their organisation, including the intended outcomes, acceptable levels of risk and mitigation measures. Leadership at all levels should regularly reinforce the strategic direction.

Support to local leadership cannot be isolated from broader organisational efforts to support locally led action. Organisations need to ensure that partnership-enabling and compliance policies support this work, that recruitment policies value the skills needed to advance local leadership, and that adequate risk-sharing arrangements are in place. Consistent communication across all levels will support internal coherence and a sense of collective responsibility.

Tools, policy guidance and resources for enhancing local leadership can accelerate, scale-up and standardise existing efforts. Organisations can build on a combination of internal and interagency resources, as well as lessons learned from existing internal efforts to support local leadership. Platforms for peer learning can facilitate the exchange of good practice, while creating a sense of momentum and progress.

Measurable outcomes, that go beyond 'nice-to-do' recommendations, can strengthen internal and external credibility, support resource mobilisation, and build trust among local and national actors. While organisations need to account for contextual differences and maintain country-level leadership and ownership of decision-making, selectively mandating requirements may be appropriate in some cases, such as with direct cost-sharing.

Fundraising may be needed to finance local actors in leadership roles, contribute to capacity sharing, develop tools, and ensure ongoing technical guidance to teams embarking on this work. Relying exclusively on existing resources and programme budgets could undermine and discourage efforts to support LNA leadership.

The emphasis should be on meaningful leadership. LNAs should receive funding and capacity sharing-support, assume greater responsibilities, and be included in all stages of decision-making. If international actors perform the same roles, in the same numbers, while adding LNAs to decision-making bodies and coordination teams, there is risk of misleadingly labelling LNA *inclusion* as LNA *leadership*. If international actors do not transfer power to LNAs, the integrity of these efforts may be undermined.

Internalising a transition mindset is key. This requires organisations to continuously reflect on the opportunities for supporting local leadership within existing local systems, rather than focusing on bringing LNAs into rigid international mechanisms.

Institutional steps towards local leadership should go hand-in-hand with advocacy for and support to systemwide improvements. This will help nurture a broader enabling environment and demonstrate to teams and LNAs that advancing local leadership requires collective action.

2 Introduction

Supporting local leadership in coordination is part of NRC's wider commitment to enabling and promoting more locally led humanitarian action. There are long-standing global commitments to build on existing national systems and to strengthen and support locally led action – from the 2016 Agenda for Humanity and the Grand Bargain, through to the 2025 Humanitarian Reset and its associated targets for local and national actor (LNA) co-leadership and representation. Yet progress has been slow. Current data shows that LNA leadership in coordination structures remains far below these targets – for example, ranging from 20% co-leadership of clusters to 8% of inter-cluster groups.[1,2] Missed opportunities to better leverage the expertise, contextual understanding and proximity to communities of LNAs continue to compromise the outcomes and sustainability of humanitarian responses. NRC shares the growing consensus that the status quo is inadequate.

Box 1: Local and national actors (LNA)

LNA's include national NGOs; local NGOs; civil society organisations (CSOs) and community based organisations (CBOs) such as youth, faith-based, women-led and girl-led organisations; organisations of persons with disabilities; groups representing older persons; lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersex (LGBTGI+) groups; Red Cross and Red Crescent societies; diaspora organisations; academic and research organisations; national and local authorities; and the private sector.

NRC currently holds leadership roles in approximately 170 coordination and interagency bodies, which we believe provides us with an important opportunity and responsibility to do more to enable local leadership within the humanitarian architecture. This means working first and foremost through our existing roles at national and sub-national level, while continuing to engage at the global level to help create a more enabling system.

To inform the development of a strategic workplan, NRC commissioned a consultancy to explore the common enablers and barriers to local leadership in coordination, identify practical steps that can be taken, map existing resources that could be drawn upon, and consider other factors relevant to our internal planning.

This stocktaking is one product of that consultancy. It draws on consultations with 54 internal and external humanitarian actors, including 21 LNAs and LNA representatives. A mapping of key resources is also included in Annex 1. The stocktaking was developed by and for NRC, to

support our own work and strategic planning; it was not conceived as a comprehensive, interagency stocktaking exercise. Recognising its potential relevance to others embarking on similar efforts, NRC is making it available in the hope that it will be useful to the wider sector.

NRC would like to thank everyone who participated in the consultations for their openness and collaboration, and for sharing a common desire to strengthen local and national actor leadership in humanitarian response.

3 Methodology and overview of participants

Of the 54 consultations, 45 were conducted through online interviews and nine through written inputs. Participants worked across conflict, natural disaster and refugee settings in Colombia, Ecuador, India, Lebanon, Mali, Myanmar, Somalia, South Sudan, Sudan, Syria, Türkiye, Ukraine, Venezuela and Yemen.

Of the 21 LNAs consulted, ten represented wider groups of local actors, including youth platforms, working groups for organisations of persons with disabilities (OPDs), women-led organisation (WLO) networks and NGO networks. Other LNA participants included representatives of local and national authorities, local and national NGOs and civil-society organisations. Several LNAs held representative roles in strategic coordination bodies such as humanitarian country teams (HCTs). International participants included representatives of international NGOs (INGOs), other NGOs, UN agencies and the Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement. Participants held a wide range of positions, including country and global leadership roles, technical advisors, coordinators and programme managers.

Throughout this note, anonymised quotes from the participants provide an unfiltered snapshot of their views. Each section captures some cross-cutting reflections. The findings are not generalisable or statistically representative of the views of the groups consulted, whether LNAs or international actors (IAs).

Participants often referred to LNAs as ‘local actors’, and used ‘localisation’ and ‘locally led action’ interchangeably. In this note, ‘LNA’ and ‘IA’ are used to denote the participant profile, with additional details provided where relevant. The term ‘LNA representative’ refers specifically to a participant representing a wider network of LNAs.

The majority of participants did not distinguish between ‘co-chair’, ‘co-lead’ and ‘co-coordinator’. The distinction between ‘co-lead’ and ‘co-coordinator’ within the cluster system was not familiar to all participants, and several of the insights shared applied to coordination groups more broadly, rather than to clusters alone.[3] To avoid confusion, this note uses the term ‘co-lead’ to cover all forms of co-leadership, except when a different term is used in a quote.

4 Overarching reflections on local leadership in coordination

This section brings together participants' reflections on a series of questions at the heart of this work: What do we mean by local leadership in coordination? Do we have a shared understanding of what we are aiming towards, and why? What enables or inhibits local leadership? And what have been the main catalysts for change to date?

1. What does it mean to support local leadership?

Participants identified three main mechanisms for supporting local leadership: co-leadership in coordination; systematic inclusion in decision-making; and maintaining a focus on transition, supported by building on and meaningfully working with existing national systems from the offset. Empowering national staff within international organisations was also considered important, but as a complementary and separate goal from supporting local and national actor leadership.

Co-leadership

Co-leadership within international coordination bodies was the mechanism most commonly referenced by international actors as a way of supporting local leadership. This included facilitating LNA leadership of technical working groups (TWGs) and task teams. Some participants viewed subnational co-leadership better suited to the skills and comparative strengths of LNAs than leadership roles at the national level:

- "For national clusters, local NGOs lack experience from other contexts." (IA)
- "Local actors are suited to subnational coordination as they are close to communities." (IA)
- "Isn't it better if we use their local expertise at the subnational levels?" (IA)

Most participants noted that while the subnational level is important, inclusion at the national level should also be a priority:

- “We can offer a lot at all levels. We have strategic ideas.” (LNA)
- “Why are we only being kept at the district or regional level? If we want bottom-up approaches, we need local actors where all the planning, needs determination and key decisions are made.” (LNA)
- “Key decisions are at the national level, where you engage donors, where roles and responsibilities are divided, where a lot of programme design happens, and where priorities are determined.” (LNA)
- “This is where there is the engagement with federal government; local actors need to be there.” (LNA)
- “The decision-making is at the national level, so if we relegate local actors to the subnational level, or technical groups, we are not empowering them.” (IA)
- “Focusing on strategic advisory groups, technical working groups, the subnational level is a cop-out.” (IA)

As the humanitarian system increasingly focuses on decentralisation, others stressed that the subnational level will become more important, and, in some contexts, is already more important than the national level:

- “We see more empowerment of subnational levels. That power shift is occurring.” (IA)
- “There are contexts where subnational governments are powerful.” (IA)

Systematic inclusion in decision-making

Participants considered systematic inclusion in decision-making essential to local leadership. This included participation in pooled fund advisory boards, global decision-making platforms, and country level decision-making bodies such as humanitarian country teams (HCT) or strategic advisory groups (SAGs).

- “What really matters is that we also make decisions. Where are decisions being made about funding? Who is deciding on prioritisation? We need to be there.” (LNA)
- “We need to be involved in the initial stages of planning and decision-making. This helps us to consider how we can take over or adjust our own plans” (LNA – national authority)
- “Having power over decision-making is a top priority for local actors. We need influence over decision-making on how humanitarian action is delivered, who to, and where.” (LNA)
- “We should really map out – within the wider system – where decision-making is taking place and ask ourselves whether LNAs are engaged there. We know that some platforms have become theatre and the real decisions are made behind the scenes.” (IA)
- “International and public organisations should not view CSOs and local NGOs as implementers but recognise their decision-making capacities.” (LNA representative)

A transition mindset

Several participants challenged the premise of the question (*What does it mean to support local leadership?*). Instead, they emphasised the need to avoid *inhibiting* local

leadership through international presence. This view was particularly prominent among the local and national authorities consulted:

- "The transformative agenda was about building on and working with national systems. Rather than how international actors can enable local leadership, the question is how to avoid inhibiting the evolution of local leadership and local systems. In some countries, where the cluster system really is the dominant, and only feasible, coordination mechanism, it may mean that we focus on NGO co-leadership at first. In other contexts, we need an honest conversation about existing national systems and how we recognise and work with them." (LNA representative)
- "Humanitarian actors need to ask themselves what their overall goal is. They want us to take ownership. We are an internationally recognised government, we want solutions for our people, but most of them work in a way which undermines us and erodes our legitimacy." (LNA – local authority)
- "We are often excluded by international actors. We know international actors are here because there are things we can't do, but there should be handover and we need to be involved to plan for that, to build our capacity." (LNA – national authority)
- "The most important thing we can do for localisation is to get ourselves out of the way." (IA)
- "We need to see ourselves as temporary." (IA)
- "In many contexts, humanitarian structures are marginal to local structures." (IA)
- "Clusters used to be more timebound. We have to also ask ourselves the extent to which we are prolonging the internationally formulated coordination system. It is not just about whether we let them into our room, but why we built those rooms in their space in the first place." (IA)
- "In some cases, local actors will want international actors to remain, and that means working within the existing systems. In other contexts, they are questioning the relevance of international presence, and support to local leadership means knowing when to step out." (LNA representative)

Empowering national staff within international organisations

Empowering national staff to take on leadership roles within international organisations was cited less frequently as a way to support local leadership:

- "I am local, this is part of supporting local leadership. Maybe now I'm with an INGO and tomorrow with a local organisation." (IA – local staff)
- "We should give chances to national staff to exhibit his or her talent and leadership. There are a lot of capable staff that are not given the chance." (IA – local staff)

While many participants agreed this was important, they viewed it as a complementary but separate goal from supporting LNA leadership:

- "It's better than someone international, but they are still working within the framework of an international organisation. It won't change ways of working." (LNA)

- "I was in a meeting where a local UN staff delivered a presentation with so many terms local people didn't understand. Being part of an international organisation conditions you in a certain way." (LNA)
- "This is not the same conversation." (LNA representative)
- "This is just another way to maintain power." (IA)
- "When we had this conversation internally, I was surprised this was suggested as a way to empower local leadership. We should be doing that anyway." (IA)

Reflection: To help guide practical efforts towards local leadership, teams need guidance on the different approaches available and the considerations involved in choosing between them. This guidance should avoid focussing exclusively on how to bring LNAs into existing international mechanisms. It should also encourage reflection on how to avoid undermining existing locally led mechanisms. These approaches need not be mutually exclusive: when done intentionally, engaging a local actor as a co-lead may also help accelerate the transition towards more locally led coordination.

National staff members can also act as important bridges between their organisations and communities. When empowered, they can influence internal thinking and help steer organisational practices towards more locally led action. Participants strongly supported the empowerment of national staff, while cautioning against conflating this with support for LNA leadership. If international organisations continue to occupy leadership roles, regardless of whether those roles are held by international or national staff, all this does is maintain the status quo.

2. How to ensure meaningful, rather than symbolic, local leadership?

Participants identified three main challenges to meaningful support for local leadership: power imbalances between co-leads, tokenistic efforts to support LNA leadership, and the demonstrative rather than substantive inclusion of LNAs in decision-making.

Managing power imbalances between co-leads within international coordination structures

When LNAs are brought in as co-leads within international coordination structures, power imbalances between existing leads and LNA co-leads can undermine meaningful local leadership:[4]

- "It's problematic if an INGO or UN Chair funds the local actor; it's an immediate power imbalance." (IA)

- “I’ve been in situations where the UN lead is on leave and some people won’t reply to my emails as an INGO co-lead. What can we expect if it is a local actor?” (IA)
- “If the current lead does capacity-building for the local actor this reinforces power dynamics.” (IA)
- “You need checks to avoid a dynamic where the local co-chair is viewed as junior.” (IA)

Proposed solutions:

Participants suggested several ways to address these power imbalances and support more equal relationships between co-leads:

- “Maybe the global cluster can help design a plan between the lead and the co-chair so it’s actually capacity exchange, and responsibilities are defined together.” (IA)
- “You have to incrementally increase responsibilities [of local actors] and share tasks to ensure that you are sharing power.” (IA)
- “You need to document roles and responsibilities and have a mechanism to escalate [[if there are tensions between co-leads or other issues].” (IA)
- “Having rotational representation at, for example, the inter-cluster group, could be a good way to signal that you have equal power to make decisions and to lead.” (IA)
- “I think this is partly about selection and personalities. You can see, I am demanding, I will raise my hand if I have an issue, I won’t accept being treated as an assistant.” (LNA coordinator)
- “You need to avoid limiting the local chair to engaging with other local actors or communities, which means they can’t cover for the international actor when they go on leave.” (IA)

Avoiding tokenistic efforts to support LNAs within international structures

Tokenistic efforts to support LNAs were also viewed as undermining meaningful local leadership:

- “If there is no coaching, no mentoring, no efforts to ensure sustainable funding, and they are volunteers who are triple-hatting, it’s setting them up to fail.” (IA)
- “Local actors are asked to volunteer for leadership roles, we are already so busy.” (LNA)
- “Saying you have a national co-lead without funding them is just ticking a box.” (LNA representative)
- “[International actors] will focus on capacity-building, or small opportunities, but they will still lead.” (LNA)
- “We demanded that we take over a coordination group. To be honest, it all stopped working. It was running more smoothly with the UN co-leads. It was the right decision but we needed more technical support and capacity strengthening to make it work.” (LNA – national authority)

Proposed solutions:

Participants emphasised the importance of planned transitions, adequate resources and sustained organisational support to make local leadership roles effective:

- "There should be planned transition for leadership to local actors." (LNA representative)
- "We need to give resources to local actors for operational and staff costs for coordination." (LNA)
- "We have to focus on institutional capacity strengthening. INGOs and the UN have the backing and support of their organisations, the ability to ensure continuity of roles." (IA)
- "It takes a lot of work to coordinate, and to coordinate well, the positions have to be funded." (LNA)
- "It's not just about getting people on the seat, they need to really be confident in their roles, they need to be involved in all processes, they need to be supported technically." (IA)
- "Organisations need to dedicate resources towards enabling local leadership." (IA)
- "[International actors should] technically support and publicly recognise national NGO platforms." (LNA representative)

Ensuring meaningful, rather than demonstrative, inclusion in decision-making

Participants raised concerns that the inclusion of LNAs in decision-making can be demonstrative rather than meaningful:

- "I don't want to be asked to 'advise'; this is the trend we see. There is a box-ticking effort to say we consulted local actors, but we want an equal right to sign-off, not just be asked and ignored." (LNA)
- "It's about who is making the final decisions. There could be ten local actors in the room but if decisions are made outside the room, then it doesn't matter." (IA)
- "We have local NGOs in the HCT but we know the real decisions are made by the UN country team." (IA)
- "We are brought in at the middle or even end of a vision. One donor stated that partners need to collaborate with our [government] department but then they came to us with a rigid set of activities and a shortlist of partners, so it felt like they were forcing our hand." (LNA – national authority)
- "We understand they have their targets, aims, project concepts, but even if there is a general concept, the details should be developed jointly with civil society and the municipality, so there is more local ownership and more efficiency." (LNA – local authority)
- "Involve us, make us part of it. They need to engage us earlier. There is no transparency. They are discussing everything between themselves and deciding things without us." (LNA – local authority)

Proposed solutions:

Participants suggested several ways to strengthen LNAs' influence over decision-making, including involving them earlier in planning, ensuring their representation carries weight, and recognising the value of their contributions:

- "A good case study is a partner we worked with from A-Z. Agreeing on the initial idea, how we do it, where we prioritise, it took time but it is worth it" (LNA – National Authority)
- "I thought it was good when OCHA gave a good proportion of seats to local actors in the pooled fund advisory board. I you have a few local actors their voice is drowned out." (IA)
- "I get invited to national meetings or global meetings because I speak good English. I have colleagues that have very good ideas and perspectives. We need to be flexible with language." (LNA)
- "For high-level meetings, I would like to see our contributions documented and valued in the same way as others. You see it in the dynamic of the meeting, where a local NGO says something and it is dismissed, whereas an international person says a similar point and it is taken seriously." (LNA)
- "We do need to sensitise local actors, for example, those who join HCTs, to avoid focusing on their own organisations, and ensuring we are really making the most of the opportunity to influence." (LNA)

Reviewing metrics for measuring progress towards local leadership

Taken together, these views led some participants to suggest that, beyond tracking co-leadership, additional indicators at the system level could help assess whether support for LNA leadership is effective:

- "Cluster co-leadership is one tracker, but we need other trackers." (IA)
- "The issue of meaningful leadership is important. We have overly simplistic indicators at the inter-cluster level on whether we are supporting leadership." (IA)
- "We are increasingly using perception surveys to assess things such as increasing influence and participation in decision-making." (IA)

Reflection: Further discussion is needed on how to ensure that opportunities for LNA leadership are meaningful. This could lead to a set of considerations, best practices or standards for assessing whether LNAs are proactively being supported to lead. These should be tracked and monitored to assess progress – for example, through indicators such as increased responsibility, opportunities for representation, agreed two-way capacity sharing plans, and funding for leadership roles within international coordination mechanisms.[5] Modified metrics could be used to assess the meaningful inclusion of local and national authorities based on feedback from the authorities themselves, including for example, documented evidence of consultation efforts.

Years of systematic exclusion from leadership and decision-making may also have eroded trust and reinforced perceptions of exclusion, even where efforts are being made to support meaningful leadership. Rebuilding trust will take time and require concerted and persistent efforts to create space for and support LNA leadership.

Finally, while there may be valid reasons why immediate transition or handover is not possible, if organisational and systemwide commitments to LNA leadership do not result in any handovers or transition to local actors, their credibility may be called into question.

3. Why is it important to support local leadership?

Participants highlighted cost effectiveness, improved access, a better humanitarian response and normative arguments for why support to LNA leadership is important.

LNA leadership can lead to a better humanitarian response

Cost-effectiveness, along with declining funding, was viewed as one reason why local leadership is necessary:

- "Contraction of the sector and the drop in resources have caused a localisation by 'default' measure, which has imposed progress." (IA)
- "The Reset was prompted by a significant drop in funds." (IA)

Access to communities was frequently cited as a reason why locally led action is important:

- "Some of the best examples of localisation are in situations where local actors have more access and we have to trust them and let them lead." (IA)

Better outcomes for communities was a commonly cited argument. Participants highlighted the improvements LNAs can bring to the speed, sustainability and contextual relevance of humanitarian responses, as well as to community engagement:

- "If you make local systems resilient, they are better than we are at adapting to the coordination needs as crises evolve. They are there before, during and after crises." (IA)
- "We are responsible for our people; we know the dynamics and different needs." (LNA – local authority)
- "We are not doing this for the system; it is about the quality of the response. We have all seen that when local actors lead, the outcome and quality is better." (IA)
- "They are often first responders." (IA)
- "The community trusts us." (LNA)
- "We need to take advantage of the deep understanding local actors have of sociopolitical and cultural dynamics; the fact they are rooted in communities which facilitates access." (LNA representative)
- "We understand the context, we have better access, we engage with communities regularly." (LNA)

- “We know how to talk to communities and to understand the needs. It means programmes are actually relevant. I can think of a recent situation where a community that rely on fishing were told that they would receive support for farming. This still happens all the time.” (LNA)
- “We have been engaging with the national system for a long time. We know how to navigate it; we will be the ones working with it after the response ends.” (LNA)

Normative arguments – i.e. that supporting local leadership is inherently ‘the right thing to do’ – were cited by several participants:

- “I am in disbelief that we are still debating the need to do this, that so many discussions are absent of local actors, that we are deciding when they are capable or worthy of leading in their own countries.” (IA)
- “It is not for international actors to say ‘what we do is better’. There is assumed power in deciding what is best for people.” (LNA representative)
- “You come to a country with your way of doing things, your systems, telling the local actors that this is better, even if they don’t agree, and the resources and decision-making power are in the hands of the international actors…I don’t want to use the word colonisation, but that is it.” (LNA)
- “This is really about decolonising aid.” (IA)

A small number of participants questioned whether LNA leadership necessarily leads to better outcomes:

- “I don’t agree that local leadership automatically leads to a better response.” (IA)
- “Local actors are not necessarily going to represent the interests of the community, or even the interests of other local actors.” (IA)
- “Are we sure it will lead to better community outcomes? They have not necessarily had years of experience or time to build their institutional expertise.” (IA)
- “I have been in situations where there is a lot of hostility between local NGOs. I don’t think choosing one of them to lead would help.” (IA)

However, others strongly disagreed with these views:

- “We hold local actors to different standards. There is a lot of competition between UN agencies or INGOs who don’t always represent the greater good or act against their organisation’s interests.” (IA)
- “We favour a few NGOs and then we are surprised they are competitive with each other.” (IA)
- “When funding is limited, it creates competition and a lack of unity among local actors, when we really need to unify and mobilise.” (LNA)
- “Some people are approaching this question academically, which is offensive to local actors. Of course, there are lots of challenges but what are they saying? That we should not support local leadership? There are ways to do this responsibly.” (IA)
- “Local actors won’t always be better, we need due diligence, selection criteria. I think we can confidently say they are *more likely* to do better in many things.” (IA)

- "If the mindset is that we think local actors won't do better, then we should give up. It makes this localisation discussion meaningless. Are we trying to create dependencies and ensure that everything will be lost once we leave? We can mentor, we can second staff, share technical expertise." (IA)
- "Locally led action is not an experiment. There is a long-standing history to it. There is no comparative analysis or basis to say the international system is better. Who gets to decide that? In fact, there is a lot of evidence of the problems with the international system. By and large, the international aid system has done more good than bad, but is it really the best system?" (LNA representative)
- "They call us a fragile state, then they don't want to give us money, do not trust us. They say our capacity is low so they have to do it. This keeps us fragile." (LNA - local authority)

Reflection: Consensus on the importance of supporting LNA leadership cannot be taken for granted. A lack of internalised belief in the value, feasibility and relevance of LNA leadership among some international actors contributes to a lack of focused action to strengthen LNA leadership, even where there are clear institutional or systemwide commitments in place. This contributes to, and is reflected in, views that LNA leadership is something you 'resort to' only when there is a lack of funding or access. Some participants highlighted the importance of building greater understanding of and support for the value of LNA leadership. Others, as explored in subsequent sections, argued that international actors need to be compelled to take action through measures such as targets and mandatory requirements.

4. What are the enabling conditions within a coordination body?

Several participants emphasised the importance of creating an enabling environment within coordination bodies to support the participation and influence of local actors, thereby increasing the prospects for local leadership.

Participants identified minimum standards that coordination bodies should meet to improve participation and influence and strengthen prospects for local leadership. These standards are well documented in global guidance:[6]

- Proactively reach out to LNAs to encourage membership, adapting approaches depending on the LNA to different organisational profiles – e.g. for women-led organisations (WLO), organisations of persons with disabilities (OPD) and youth groups.
- Use local languages as the *main* language in meetings, and provide simultaneous, rather than sequential, translation.
- Avoid jargon and use clear, accessible language in guidelines and documents.
- Increase familiarity with coordination mechanisms – e.g. through induction sessions.
- Consider meeting locations and their accessibility for LNAs.

- Adopt flexible approaches to seeking feedback and input on processes and documents, including seeking input directly from local actors who may prefer to share orally.
- Adapt and contextualise guidelines and tools to the context.
- Review communication channels to ensure they are appropriate to the context.
- Develop agendas in consultation with LNAs on an equal basis with international members.

While most participants were well-versed in these standards, and acknowledged them as critical enablers of local leadership, **there was broad agreement that they are not consistently being met across the system**:

- "I was in a training on activity info and I couldn't help but think that they should have done a separate session for the local actors, in the local language, and go much more slowly." (LNA)
- "We are still asking for the usual things: use local languages in meetings, contextualise guidelines." (LNA representative)
- "At least we could start doing the basics of what local actors have been asking for." (IA)

One participant cautioned that focusing on minimum standards should not delay progress towards local leadership:

- "We should push for those things but also recognise they will follow with more local actors in the leadership space." (IA)

Reflection: Coordinators with a strong commitment to local leadership may nevertheless struggle to meet these standards because of a lack of resources, security considerations that limit options for meeting locations, and the pressure to deliver a timely response. Meeting these standards is the collective responsibility of donors, host agencies, country-level and inter-cluster/sector leadership.

Nevertheless, established norms can reduce the likelihood that practices that are not in line with agreed interagency standards will be challenged. For example, translation capacity could become a standard component of coordination team budgets or there could be more systematic interagency efforts to provide these services. Similarly, coordination teams could routinely include members from the local context, helping to ensure more inclusive input.

One participant gave the example of a sector coordinator who, on joining a response, began sharing meeting invites in both English and the local language. Other coordinators quickly followed, suggesting that this practice had always been feasible but had not yet become the norm. A related challenge is whether there is sufficient confidence that individual actions can drive and catalyse wider systemic change, an issue relevant beyond the humanitarian sector.[7] The systemic changes needed to support local leadership are explored further in a later section on barriers to local leadership.

Of all the standards discussed, overcoming language barriers was cited as a potentially pivotal change, with positive effects that could extend across the coordination system. Unless a coordination body is exclusively international (e.g. an INGO forum), it could shift towards 'local language dominance', with the support of interagency translation resources, software for simultaneous rather than sequential translation, and the use of AI tools for live multi-language

translation. This could also encourage a shift in how meetings are conducted, who chairs them, and how documents are produced.

5. What are the contextual factors and risk considerations for LNA leadership?

The majority of participants emphasised that the opportunities for and approaches to supporting LNA leadership will be influenced by contextual factors. They noted the challenge of recognising and supporting the central role of governments in humanitarian action when governments may be restricting access to humanitarian assistance for all or part of the population. Overall, while participants acknowledged that there may be a need to identify and manage risks, they challenged the assumption that any risks make support for local leadership impossible.

Context

Participant highlighted a number of contextual factors that need to be taken into consideration:[89]

- "Localisation of leadership will look different in each country. [In this context] you have local actors that only cover a few villages; we have to focus on local, rather than national, leadership." (IA)
- "There are crises where local actors have a lot of familiarity with coordination because the response has been going on for some time." (IA)
- "There are cases where a response has been uneven and fragmented. The feasibility for local leadership will vary by area." (IA)
- "Protracted settings, such as refugee settings, could be more conducive." (IA)
- "[Here] national authorities are strong so this has enabled transition." (IA)
- "When there are access challenges, there's an impetus to reimagine leadership." (IA)

Some contextual factors were highlighted as significant barriers to local leadership, including cases where working with local and national authorities is constrained:

- "If there is a country where entire areas are covered by local actors that are not registered with de facto authorities, we can't expect local actors to want to be visible in coordination." (IA)
- "It's an interagency dilemma but we have a shrinking civil-society space in some countries." (IA)
- "There are places where donors won't accept engagement with governments." (IA)

- “Working with authorities is not possible. We have many non-state actors, leadership that is not internationally recognised.” (IA)

Risk

Several participants viewed risk as a primary consideration. Three main areas of concern emerged:

1. **Risks associated with conflict dynamics and perceptions of impartiality**

The most commonly cited risk to supporting local leadership related to conflict settings involving multiple groups (ethnic, tribal, religious, political, etc). When there are tensions among these groups, or where local actors are associated with certain state or non-state actors, participants highlighted the challenges of identifying LNAs who are perceived to be neutral, independent and impartial:

- “Some local actors may be inclined to raise issues benefiting their interests as opposed to speaking on behalf of a broader coalition.” (IA)
- “There are concerns about perceived political affiliations or the possibility that local actors could come under pressure from host governments to share sensitive information. If we are serious about locally led responses, these challenges need to be acknowledged and addressed rather than ignored.” (IA)
- “If done haphazardly without consideration of context and the need to include a wider, diverse range of local actors, it could pose challenges to perceptions of neutrality, impartiality and independence.” (IA)
- “Local actors [here] are either pro-government or pro-opposition. We worry about information being shared in a misleading way that could pose a risk to the personal safety of people or to the operations of the organisation.” (IA)

2. **Risk to LNAs associated with the visibility and responsibilities of co-leadership roles**

A second concern was the risk to LNAs themselves, particularly where co-leadership roles increase their visibility or pressure them into taking positions on sensitive issues.

- “Someone international may be confident in highlighting protection issues, LNAs would not. We did a survey of why participation in our meetings was low among local actors, and aside from language, safety and security were cited as risks.” (IA)
- “Recently the protection sector released a paper which resulted in a lot of backlash. If it was a local actor leading the group, they may even have been arrested.” (IA)
- “It’s difficult for local actors to speak against their governments.” (LNA representative)
- “We were really advancing on local leadership, then there were threats made against local NGOs by the de facto authorities so they went low profile.” (IA)

3. **Risks associated with supporting local and national authorities**

A third concern was that local and national authorities may not always act in the interests of the broader population, or may themselves be parties to a conflict:

- "There are countries where the government is the problem, and the reason we are there." (IA)
- "[The] local government are not acting in the interest of the general population." (IA)
- "We need international actors to consult us at state level, because there are individuals who may not always be thinking of the wider interest of the community at the local level." (LNA – national authority)

Challenging blanket approaches to risk

Several participants agreed that these were valid concerns but cautioned against blanket approaches that could stall efforts to support local leadership. Their views addressed the three areas of risk outlined above:

On impartiality and independence when supporting co-leadership:

- "You have to choose the right person, who is respected, has a nuanced understanding of the different dynamics and actors, but it is possible." (LNA)
- "If there was just a national actor leading the cluster entirely, it's sensitive here, but you could have a local actor as part of the coordination team." (LNA)
- "This is just about due diligence. It is a genuine fear but you have to look at the risks, at the profile of the local actor. You can't make blanket statements." (IA)
- "This is patronising. There are professionals among us, you can't generalise." (LNA)

On risks to LNAs associated with visible coordination roles:

- "This would not be my biggest worry in being national-level, I'm just not ready." (LNA area-coordinator)
- "It has to be case by case. It may be true that it is too risky in some cases, or there may be ways to mitigate risk. There are ways to do this responsibly." (IA)
- "It might have been true here before but it definitely isn't now. Why don't they just ask us?" (LNA)

On risks associated with supporting local and national authorities:

- "International actors may need to take principled positions in some countries of whether or not to support a government, but that is not relevant here. We understand the human rights-based approach, and that there cannot always be compromises, but it is not approached in a respectful way, based on building trust and understanding. If you take the time, there is space to negotiate." (LNA – local authority)
- "It feels like international actors abuse humanitarian principles to create an accountability vacuum where they don't have to consult us, can bypass us and undermine us. We are a recognised government" (LNA – local authority)

- "I see this as part of capacity strengthening. Sometimes [rather than a general issue of not meeting humanitarian principles], it's an absence of protocols or policies, lack of experience doing vulnerability assessments in a way which captures all parts of the population." (LNA - national authority)

Others stressed that the concerns about risks are outdated and not based on evidence:

- "Risks are exaggerated and feel like an excuse." (IA)
- "You always hear about concerns over risks, capacities, humanitarian principles. I don't buy it; where there is a will there is a way." (IA)
- "These are old arguments that are becoming less acceptable." (IA)
- "We have assumptions about local respect for humanitarian principles which are not always backed by evidence." (IA)
- "We need to show we are willing to challenge our own assumptions, and have evidence to back up claims around the humanitarian principles, capacity and risks." (IA)

Finally, several participants noted that the risks associated with LNAs are exaggerated, while the risks associated with international actors receive less attention:

- "What about the biases and influence of international organisations that have to serve the interests of specific donors? It just feels like they are saying 'local actors are less civilised'" (LNA)
- "You haven't done your homework well enough if you think that. Many international actors are heavily dependent on local staff, so they face these risks. Some of the biggest problems we've seen have come from international actors, where a lack of knowledge in the context means you end up doing harm." (IA)
- "We are operating in a geopolitical reality. There are risks of working with international organisations that are described as humanitarian. There are real, recent examples, not just suspicions. We are nervous about making the wrong decisions and facing consequences from central government" (LNA – local authority)
- "There are so many different international actors, we don't know all of them, we don't know their agendas, we don't know their history. We manage risk all the time." (LNA – national authority)

Reflection: Context analysis, with periodic reviews, would avoid maintaining the status quo on the basis of outdated analysis. These reviews should be grounded in discussions with local actors to sense-check conclusions. Risk assessments, in particular, should be scrutinised to determine the consensus on real versus perceived risk, and to identify reasonable risk mitigation measures where possible. While organisations can provide clarity to teams on what levels of risk are considered acceptable, systemwide efforts to identify potential risks and propose mitigation measures could also be helpful.

In general, more collective thinking is needed on how to build on existing national and locally led mechanisms, and to promote government leadership and ownership in contexts where governments are recognised but there are concerns about their adherence to humanitarian principles.

6. What considerations apply to different LNA profiles?

Participants noted the importance of being clear about the intended outcomes of working with different types of LNAs. For example, some local and national actors may be better suited to facilitating community engagement, while others may be strategic partners in strengthening national or local systems. A more intentional approach is likely to lead to more effective outcomes, consideration of a broader range of LNAs, and greater accountability for achieving defined objectives.

Local and national authorities

Participants highlighted several considerations when working with local and national authorities, including those that are internationally recognised:

- "We want sustainability in systems, and we automatically think of authorities, but that might not be the best for communities in the short term. We can engage authorities in other ways." (IA)
- "There is a mismatch in how we operate; more vertical decision-making, authoritative communication; it's easier to engage local and national authorities in decision-making, rather than expect them to co-lead according to our structures." (IA)
- "We should engage with the government but they keep changing focal points." (IA)
- "They sit at the head of the table, but they don't take on coordination tasks." (IA)
- "There was an effort to bring local authorities as co-chairs. It meant all our discussions became very cautious. The authorities here blacklist you if you say something they don't like." (LNA-NGO)
- "If the goal is to build on national systems we should be working with local and national authorities, or civil society networks, but there are obvious constraints in both cases." (IA)
- "Authorities want financial support but we have real issues with accountability." (IA)
- "Local authorities are easier to work with [than national authorities]. There is a different dynamic. Politics are more entrenched at the national level, but at the local level, people are friends, neighbours, there's more openness. We value trust and relationship building, so there is more scope to come to agreement. The national level is more driven by protocol and formal relationships" (LNA – local authority).

Others, including local and national authorities themselves, emphasised that authorities should be respected and supported, given their importance to transition, system strengthening and local ownership:

- "We have to take a big picture approach with government. They are crucial to local leadership." (IA)
- "Yes, government engagement takes work. The impression that NGOs give to donors is that the government is an obstacle, they don't want to put in the work." (LNA - local authority)

- “We are responsible for our communities. International organisations are here to support us financially and technically so they are no longer needed one day.” (LNA – national authority)
- “We keep saying that we need to collaborate. How do you think society views the government when we are being undermined? They say ‘look, I get help from INGOs, not the government’, so you are solving one problem and creating another.” (LNA – local authority).
- “We’re supposed to plan for transition, so we should work with the government.” (IA)
- “What is the ultimate goal? To capacitate the government so they can take over.” (LNA – local authority)
- “When we have a functional government, we have to work hand-in-hand.” (IA)
- “For education and health, it makes most sense to engage with technical ministries.” (IA)
- “We have experience of local authorities leading in clusters, we know it can work.” (IA)
- “Maybe authorities can’t be in every group, but we need to consider how to include them.” (IA)
- “We need more discussion on how we create the link between civil society and governance structures, noting all the challenges.” (IA)
- “Authorities are very busy, so we don’t have time to work with inflexible or challenging organisations. We have our own priorities, we assess the potential loss or impact, but we can’t unconditionally support the work of international actors.” (LNA – local authority)

Several participants also noted that, in some contexts, supporting authority leadership may be less about helping authorities to lead and more about recognising their existing leadership and avoiding obstructing it:

- “We don’t need to support them to lead. They *are* leading here. We have meetings between ourselves to get organised in how we approach them.” (IA)
- “I don’t see it as co-leading in an international mechanism. We are collaborating in a group we set up jointly, where we have a common objective” (LNA – local authority).
- “We are currently co-chairing with international actors. They may say it is part of the international mechanism, but it’s state-led, with international support.” (LNA – national authority)
- “Authorities are easier to engage as part of transition, when we are not saying, ‘come and co-lead with us’ but focusing on how to ensure continuity of certain operations when we leave.” (IA)
- “[Rather than focusing on inclusion in our coordination mechanisms], supporting government local leadership is really system strengthening.” (IA)
- “From my perspective, if you have a very capable local government who is playing a strong role in coordination, then should we have a cluster model at all? Shouldn’t we be moving towards government led coordination, even if just for some sectors?” (IA - donor)

Local and national NGOs

Most international participants viewed national NGOs as the most viable LNA partners for leadership, particularly in contexts where engaging with local and national authorities is constrained:

- "NGOs bridge the gap between communities and international actors." (IA)
- "There is a reason NGOs are the go-to in many contexts [for LNA co-chairing]. We are closer in how we work with the international system compared to other local actors." (LNA)

Others, while in agreement, highlighted the need to consider the intended outcomes of engaging with particular organisations:

- "If we want to strengthen national systems, focusing on the bigger national NGOs is more logical, but there's is an obsession with the hyper local. What are we trying to achieve?" (IA)
- "If we go for a big NGO, sometimes as big as, or bigger than, an INGO, then what's our added value? It's just a tick box exercise." (IA)
- "NGOs have started mirroring international organisations because that's what was asked of them. We never really adapt to the existing ways of working." (IA)
- "NGOs have good perspectives and international actors can gain from them. But there are so many; everyone wants to start a new NGO with their family or friends. There should be some criteria for who is selected and a focus on more established NGOs." (LNA - national authority)
- "International actors always select the same large NGOs, ignoring smaller NGOs. Why can't they share the fund across more organisations?" (LNA – local NGO)

Women-led organisations (WLOs), organisations of persons with disabilities (OPDs) and youth networks

Several LNAs involved in WLOs, OPDs and youth networks felt that these groups were not systematically or appropriately engaged in humanitarian response more broadly, particularly in leadership roles:

Youth:

- "There have been four publications since the reset and none of them mentioned youth. There is a lack of effort to find ways of funding youth networks; the system is not set up for it. People find one youth-led organisation and they only then engage with them. It feels like they want to tick a box. It is tokenistic." (LNA representative - youth network)
- "Youth never get funding." (LNA - youth)
- "For youth, we want parity with WLOs and OPDs." (LNA representative - youth network)
- "People don't believe in youth. The international system also doesn't believe in us." (LNA - youth)

OPDs:

- "People with disabilities are an afterthought but having OPD leadership changes everything – how the agenda is set, setting a tone of the right terms and language to use, how the meeting functions to ensure inclusiveness. It isn't the same to ask others to be considerate of the specific needs of persons with disabilities. Most of us are people with disabilities. If we have leadership roles this can support wider learning in the system." (LNA - OPD)
- "OPDs are not prioritised. There aren't specific efforts to ensure they get funding. I appreciate that OCHA included OPDs as priority groups in the pooled fund strategy, it makes a difference. It's also important to make websites accessible to people with visual impairments; we need this to be systematic. I wanted to build leadership skills in my team and couldn't find accessible materials."[10] (LNA - OPD)

WLOs:

- "Women-led organisations need to be more present in different bodies. We play a very important connector role. As co-chair of the GBV group we helped to connect women youth groups with dignity kits to distribute. It was possible because of our contacts and community knowledge." (LNA - WLO)
- "There are a lot of commitments to include women-led organisations in leadership and decision-making but we're not seeing it happen." (LNA representative - WLO)

Purposeful inclusion

Several participants suggested being supportive of leadership by a range of local actors:

- "The reality is that everyone has a role; NGOs, civil society and authorities, we have overlapping priorities. It's just that most international actors have conditions for who they can work with." (LNA)
- "We have a rich landscape of local actors who can be supported." (LNA)
- "Why can't we have a seat for all of these organisations? It's necessary." (LNA – women-OPD)

However, other participants stressed the importance of balancing inclusion with efficiency, and the need for purposeful inclusion:

- "We can't have every type of LNA co-leading every coordination group. Meaningfully engaging them in decision-making is more realistic." (IA)
- "Maybe it's a matter of reviewing different coordination bodies and seeing where there is more value in having specific actors in leadership." (IA)
- "We cannot be all inclusive, we are trying to achieve an outcome, we are not just trying to make sure that everyone is included." (IA)

Reflection: Most participants viewed interagency targets for local co-leadership as being primarily oriented towards local and national NGOs. This was largely due to their compatibility with international ways of working, due diligence requirements, and donor, institutional or interagency parameters based on humanitarian principles, which can create barriers to working

with authorities or smaller CSOs. This may also reflect a tendency to retain established international coordination structures, rather than consider how to build more meaningfully on local systems.

There is a need for more clarity on what supporting government leadership entails and what the intended outcomes are. While there are instances of authorities co-leading coordination, as outlined in the Global Cluster Coordination Group (GCCG) compilation of case studies,[11] support for local authority leadership usually takes the form of transition arrangements or technical, material or staffing support for existing local or national bodies. As several participants pointed out, where authorities are already taking the lead, and where there are no significant concerns about the associated risks, the focus should shift to accelerating transition of the humanitarian response. Organisations could also provide guidance on how different local and national actors can complement one another, helping to inform decisions on which actors to engage to achieve particular outcomes.

7. What are the obstacles to LNA leadership?

Participants highlighted four main obstacles to supporting LNA leadership: a lack of willingness among international actors to share power; a lack of direct funding to local actors; disagreements over the coordination and leadership capacity of LNAs, and the structural barriers within the coordination system itself.

The lack of willingness to share power

The most commonly cited obstacle to LNA leadership was the unwillingness of international actors to share power, whether over resources, decision-making or leadership space.

Participants viewed a lack of willingness to share power as an existential issue for international actors:[12]

- "It feels like locally led action depends on whether international actors can find business models that allow them to continue to survive." (LNA)
- "We are not in the habit of doing ourselves out of business." (IA)
- "Would international actors work to get themselves out of a job?" (IA)
- "This is all about power, it is existential." (LNA)
- "Leadership roles give access to resources, influence." (IA)
- "Organisations are built to grow, to continue existing, to be powerful. Giving that up is extremely difficult. Few organisations come in thinking how they're going to leave. There are pushes from HQs to go after funding." (IA)
- "It feels as though international actors never want to leave." (LNA - local authority)

Participants cited several examples of this lack of willingness:

- “There is a lot of defensiveness. Whether we engage more directly or soften the language, the response is defensive; ‘we are already doing this’ or, ‘we support this’. It’s very self-preserving.” (LNA representative)
- “Lack of progress is because of a lack of will.” (LNA)
- “Global level entities have a lot of experience and knowledge. Do they have the willingness to share space? To share resources?” (LNA)
- “The UN will not cede space. We have a case where two UN agencies were fighting over co-chairing of a cluster, now we have both [co-chairing] and no INGOs or local actor.” (IA)

This unwillingness to share power was also seen as contributing to inaction on global commitments:

- “There was an agreement within the coordination system that local actors should co-chair clusters, but it isn’t respected.” (IA)
- “There was supposed to be a transition plan for clusters; I haven’t seen it.” (LNA)
- “If international actors would just do what they’ve said they will do …. trust is lost.” (LNA)
- “Cluster lead agencies were tasked with deciding on how to streamline clusters. They found ways to keep everyone happy.” (IA)
- “So many INGOs and the UN talk about expansion and growth, which is contradictory to commitments to shift responsibilities to local systems and actors, and to transition out.” (LNA representative)

Several participants suggested that space for LNA leadership could be created with greater willingness and imagination:

- “There are ways for the UN to be a provider of last resort without leading the coordination body.” (IA)
- “You have responsibility but that doesn’t imply you have to do everything. It’s about managing the space so you achieve the intended outcome.” (IA)
- “Why not give space to a local actor and an INGO or OCHA have an advisory role?” (IA)
- “The conversation has become very technical, such as defining what we mean by a local and national actor, debating the direct funding percentage. It was never about that; it was about thinking of the best way to ensure that the resources being channelled through the international system reach the people who don’t have direct access to them. There’s a lack of creativity and understanding of other ways of doing things, including looking at the history of the country, pre-international response, and how aid was being delivered.” (LNA representative)

The majority of LNAs placed a strong emphasis on complementarity and collaboration:

- “UN and INGOs think that localisation means we are replacing them. We just want to share more decision-making, resources and leadership, while maintaining quality of work.” (LNA)

- "I read the recent complementarity guidelines over and over. This is it. If we could work this way." (LNA)
- "Our preferred way of describing it is cooperation. We see value in engaging with international organisations, noting their different perspectives, experiences, knowledge. It promotes a new way of seeing things, and creates opportunities." (LNA – local authority)
- "There is a lot of value in international actors including technical expertise, financial support, enhancing accountability, providing secondments to government departments that may have funding gaps. We just need to work more collaboratively." (LNA – local authority)
- "We do need the support of humanitarian actors also. We are strong, but we don't have robust disaster management protocols for example. There could be a lot of vulnerable people that would lose out if humanitarian actors were not here, ready to respond immediately." (LNA – local authority)

Reflection: There is a need to consider who makes the decisions about support to local leadership and how potential conflicts of interest may influence those decisions. Otherwise, there is a risk that changes to leadership will be symbolic rather than entail real power-sharing. In many cases, this could lead to greater LNA inclusion in international mechanisms without international actors changing their own positions. It could also lead to a lack of effort to consider transition options or to support leadership within existing local and national mechanisms.

This would also run contrary to global commitments towards greater efficiencies and a more streamlined system, and would fail to ensure that international actors are positioned as facilitators, rather than owners, of humanitarian response. From an organisational perspective, there needs to be clarity on what supporting local leadership means within the cultural of the institution, when there is willingness to share power, and how this aligns with other organisational priorities.

Box 2: Co-leading dynamics: LNAs, INGOs and UN agencies

INGOs are more likely than local actors to co-lead humanitarian coordination bodies with UN agencies. Given that provider of last resort (PoLR) responsibilities and cluster leadership have historically gone hand-in-hand, the assumption is that if an LNA steps into a co-leading function, they will do so either alongside a UN counterpart or as part of a tripartite arrangement with both a UN actor and INGO Where a tripartite arrangement is not possible or preferable, it is typically the INGO co-lead (rather than the UN actor) that is expected to step back.

Local and national NGOs and CSO networks, on the other hand, tended to view INGOs as more committed to locally led action and as 'easier to work with' than the UN (although participants noted that this did not apply to all INGOs).

- "INGOs compared to the UN are more receptive to the localisation agenda."

- “We feel closer to INGOs.”
- “I don’t feel the power the same way as with the UN, I can share my ideas.”
- “The UN look at as contractors, the INGOs look at us as partners.”
- “The UN are good with technical expertise, INGOs are better at partnership approaches.”

However, the UN are seen as a more obvious partner for local and national authorities:

- “We have relationships with authorities, but the government likes working with the UN.” (LNA – NGO)
- “I think the assumption is that the UN will support leadership if we are trying to work with government but, in most cases of [co-leadership, it’s a local NGO and INGO’s [that] are a more obvious peer.” (IA - UN)
- “We don’t see the UN as homogeneous but, generally, the UN has more credibility, there is no perceived risk in engaging with them. With INGOs we need to do more due diligence” (LNA – local authority).
- “The UN have deeper pockets, they bring structure, they have leverage” (LNA – local authority)
- “The UN respect authorities more. There are just so many INGOs. They all have different approaches” (LNA – national authority)

Several participants noted that both UN agencies and INGOs have important roles andresponsibilities:

- “Both UN and INGOs need to create space, they need to give up some of their seats and opportunities. Both are international actors. If there is a genuine commitment to move forward with more local actors, then both need to create space.” (IA - donor)
- “Everyone has a role. The UN does have more resources but INGOs are on the ground, they deal with authorities more quickly.” (LNA – local authority)

“LNAs can support LNA leadership. We are better than international organisations at engaging smaller volunteer networks and civil society bodies. We speak their language, we listen better, we have more flexible approaches to funding them.” (LNA – NGO)

A lack of direct funding for LNAs

> An overwhelmingly dominant view was that local and national leadership cannot be meaningfully advanced without direct funding to LNAs.

Participants noted that a lack of direct funding limits the ability of local and national actors to both take on leadership roles in international coordination mechanisms and to sustain meaningful leadership within international or locally led mechanisms:

- "If the INGOs and UN left tomorrow, we have the capacity, we just don't have funds." (LNA)
- "We could support a local actor to take on the [co-leadership] role, but how would they fund it after? (IA)
- "We have agreed that area-level coordination will be co-led by local NGOs. The challenge is ensuring that NGOs selected for these roles have the human resources." (LNA representative)
- "It feels contradictory that we don't get direct funding. We are being held to account to assume certain duties, but then you are refusing to give funding, creating dependencies." (LNA – local authority)

Greater autonomy over the use of financial resources was also cited as important for LNA leadership:

- "To support local leadership, local actors should receive funds which are directly managed by grassroots organisations and CSOs." (LNA representative)
- "Locally led pooled funds are an interesting idea that is gaining support." (IA – donor)
- "Pooled funds are not the answer; there is still very little going directly to local actors and more work to do to simplify the criteria. In the end, they're also just following a strategy defined elsewhere." (IA)

Finally, participants noted that, in reality, many humanitarian donors cannot fund local actors directly, undermining efforts to support local leadership. From this perspective, intermediaries will continue to perform an important role:

- "It's not straightforward for donors to fund a wide variety of local organisations directly. Most of us struggle to fund more than one or two local organisations. It is not going to be direct funding from donors." (IA – donor)
- "We have to reduce barriers and review our policies to support LNA leadership. I think donors with empowered, decentralised, decision-making tend to do better." (IA – Donor)
- "It is not so easy to change donor rules and regulations. There may be more possibilities based on interpretations of established rules." (IA – donor)
- "Donors need to fund local actors directly. We need collective advocacy on this." (IA)

- "We did so much work without any funding. We used our own laptops, we paid for our internet, we attended free courses online to build our skills, we attended cluster meetings, we shared our ideas. Imagine what we could do with funding?" (LNA)
- "A lot of this is on donors. Pass-through mechanisms don't work as effectively; there is a power dynamic. We need to ensure local actors can get funds." (IA)

Reflection: Direct funding to LNAs was seen as pivotal to enabling and promoting LNA leadership. It could strengthen institutional capacity, increase the sustainability and continuity of leadership roles, and create space for local and national actors to focus more on coordination. It was also seen as a way of supporting and reinforcing locally led systems, which can, in turn, lead to local leadership.[13]

However, participants, including donors, were not optimistic about the prospects for imminent shifts in donor policy that would lead to more direct funding of LNAs. This suggests a need for sustained advocacy for increased, high-quality direct funding of local actors. In the meantime, intermediaries and pooled funds will continue to play an important role to support local leadership until this important shift occurs.

Disagreements over the coordination and leadership capacity of LNAs

Leadership and coordination capacity among LNAs was a highly contested issue. Participants were divided over whether capacity was a real obstacle to leadership or a perceived one.

The need for capacity strengthening

International actors who viewed LNA capacity as an obstacle shared the following views:

- "It took us years to build our expertise. I have in-country and global technical counterparts, internal resources I can seek, credibility of being associated with the institution." (IA)
- "You have to first look at the capacity of different actors and it can be difficult to find someone with the skills and profile in many contexts." (IA)

LNAs agreed that coordination and leadership require distinct skills that may require capacity strengthening, noting that international actors have an important role to play:

- "They have helped us improve standards." (LNA)
- "I saw the value of international actors in coordination when the earthquake happened." (LNA)
- "We learned a lot from international actors, their technical expertise, their global experiences." (LNA)
- "International actors are key channels for building our capacity." (LNA)
- "We need to learn more about leadership skills and technical coordination skills." (LNA)

- “International actors are good at administration, like documenting meetings, tracking progress.” (LNA)

However, LNAs highlighted the limitations of existing approaches to capacity strengthening, particularly the lack of emphasis on institutional capacity and tailored support to LNAs:

- “We don’t need another workshop. We need investment in software, financial systems.” (LNA)
- “The UN and international organisations use systems and technology that we don’t have. We need more help with that, we don’t want more training on how to write proposals.” (LNA)
- “Training one person is not very useful, they can leave.” (LNA)
- “We need focus on systems…formal email addresses, data storage; individuals leave” (LNA - national authority)
- “I can’t tell you the number of safeguarding trainings I’ve done. It’s a lack of trust. There are long, complicated, capacity assessment forms we have to fill every time, no coordination between international actors and no discussion with us so we can agree on the gaps.” (LNA)
- “I understand that if you work with many smaller CSOs or groups that you might start to see common capacity gaps, or you don’t have time to sit with each of them so you start offering standard topics. It’s not generally preferred though. We should tailor to their needs.” (LNA)
- “It may be more effort but there should be tailored capacity sharing. Let’s sit and look at where our comparable strengths are and work out a plan.” (LNA)

LNA capacity as a contested obstacle to leadership

While many participants agreed on the importance of building skills for leadership and coordination, they did not necessarily see capacity gaps as a reason to delay support for LNA leadership. Instead, participants cited biases among international actors in relation to LNA capacity as a reason why local capacities are undervalued and different standards are applied to local and international actors. They also identified the growing ‘bureaucratisation’ of the sector as an explanation for why local capacities have become increasingly devalued:

Undervaluing local capacities:

- “The community trust us, we have more access. What capacity is more important?” (LNA)
- “They did a survey at the HCT about whether local actors have capacity and concluded we don’t have capacity to lead. We couldn’t believe it. How could they say that? We’ve been working for years.” (LNA)
- “They just don’t trust us, it feels very disrespectful.” (LNA)
- “There are still perceptions that we can’t speak technically, that we don’t know how to collect data, we don’t know how to present needs. They just automatically dismiss anything from civil society.” (LNA)

- “We have an international system, heavily dependent on local actors and systems to achieve anything, and somehow they think that without them the work will never get done.” (LNA representative)
- “They keep saying capacity. What have they been doing all these years?” (IA – local staff member)
- “We tend to assume we can do it best. We underestimate local capacities.” (IA)
- “Local governments have social services departments, including sociologists, field workers etc. We feel this is undermined by international actors. Good cooperation means building on this information, not constantly doubting it.” (LNA – local authority).

Applying different standards to LNAs and international actors in co-leadership roles:

- “Anyone who has worked in coordination knows that there are many experienced international coordinators that are bad coordinators. Capacity can be worked on.” (IA)
- “We have a lot of international coordinators that start without experience. OK, they are backed by their organisations but we can find ways to support LNAs. In any case, the organisational support is exaggerated. Most coordinators report to someone who has never been a coordinator.” (IA)

Bureaucratisation of the sector:

- “Overtime, local actors were shoved out due to humanitarian administration. We used to have a lot of local leadership at the early stages of the cluster system. Capacity as a barrier is nonsense.” (IA)
- “Why did clusters become so technical? The important capacity is local knowledge, what kind of capacity are we looking for to satisfy all the coordination possibilities? (IA)

Two-way capacity sharing

Several participants noted that biases against local capacity have limited two-way capacity sharing, resulting in missed opportunities to leverage the comparative strengths of LNAs:

- “We need to value presence and context-specific knowledge as the guiding criteria for who takes on coordination leadership.” (LNA representative)
- “We say, how can we support local leadership, but we should ask, ‘how can they support our work?’” (IA)
- “A lot of our thinking and assessment of partners is through a risk and compliance view. Not looking at things such as how they complement our access, or have experience we don’t have.” (IA)
- “It is uncomfortable how we talk about coaching and mentoring local actors to work within our coordination system, rather than ‘what can we learn from you and what can you learn from us?’” (IA)
- “One INGO offered us protection training and we said, no thanks, we have our own approach. In the end, we sat together, looked at our different approaches and what we could both adapt.” (LNA)

- "I really appreciate that the health cluster is directing new international actors to us [for briefings]. It is more work but at least we get to share available data. They are valuing our expertise."

LNAs were asked which topics they would focus on if given the opportunity to share their knowledge or expertise:

- "Knowledge on national systems, legislation, ways of working for local actors."
- "How to effectively engage communities and communication channels."
- "We do a lot of work with indigenous communities - they have their own social and power dynamics so we need approaches to be adapted. For example, I see international organisations using complaint boxes when indigenous communities communicate orally."
- "Understanding the context and the big differences in different parts of the country."
- "We have a good approach to MHPSS, for example, which is adapted to our culture."
- "I'd like international actors to understand what existed before and how to leverage those networks."

Reflection: Capacity, when cited as a barrier to enabling local leadership, is increasingly being called into question.[14] While there is widespread consensus, including among LNAs, of the need to strengthen skills specific to coordination – whether for international or local actors – most participants felt that this was not a reason to stall progress towards strengthened local leadership, particularly as capacity is best built on the job, and perceptions of LNA capacity gaps are often rooted in biases that undervalue the comparative strengths of local actors.

While there is much talk of capacity sharing, the concept appears to be poorly embedded, with participants providing few practical examples. Renewed systemwide emphasis – for example, through the Humanitarian Reset – on community engagement, contextualised approaches, decentralised decision-making and locally led action, may prompt a reimagination of the profiles best suited to coordination roles. This could reduce the weight given to planning, reporting and administrative skills associated with international actors. However, one participant viewed this as unrealistic, noting that, despite the Reset, there was still a need for systemwide efforts to simplify processes in ways that would make them accessible to, or favour the strengths of, local actors. This links with the next barrier explored in the discussions.

Systemic barriers

Participants identified the system itself as a fundamental barrier to enabling local leadership. In addition to the lack of direct funding to local actors, addressed earlier, they pointed to top-down, centralised interagency planning processes; inherent power imbalances between local and national actors; a lack of effort to build on and work with existing national and local systems; and mismatches in ways of working.

Top-down and centralised interagency planning processes:

- “We spend so much time serving global. This is such a mismatch with local priorities.” (IA)
- “We need to ask how much of this is irrelevant. Such as when we are making sure someone in New York has a better PowerPoint.” (IA)
- “Sometimes the best representatives for local leadership may be less well-placed to advocate at higher levels and spaces. Language, communication approaches, and cultural norms may vary between the local context and the global space.” (IA)
- “Even though everyone had been talking about localisation [in this group], no one thought of including local actors, they thought it isn’t necessary at the global level as it just makes things complicated.” (IA)
- “Humanitarian action needs to value approaches which grow from communities [that are not centrally determined], through local actor empowerment, autonomy in decision-making and decentralisation – which requires trust in local capacities.” (LNA representative)
- “There is a persistence of a humanitarian architecture that concentrates governance and strategy formulation with global actors.” (LNA representative)
- “It’s difficult to transition toward shared leadership in local spaces when decision-making power remains centralised.” (LNA)

Power imbalances between international and local actors:

- “I recently left my country for the second time only to attend a workshop. I was shaking every time I spoke, everything was in English, I didn’t understand half of what was going on.” (LNA)
- “They [international actors] never let us speak to donors. I think donors prefer it like that?” (LNA)
- “Local actors expect international leaders. They see them as more legitimate. The capacity of all of us is similar so why would they accept me in a coordination role?” (LNA)
- “We need to build horizontal relationships based on mutual trust, avoiding power dynamics.” (LNA representative)
- “We need to dismantle the monopoly on representation and the exclusionary power dynamics.” (LNA representative)
- “We need shared representation and decision-making in coordination, overcoming current dynamics of subordination.” (LNA representative)
- “There are power dynamics between INGOs and the UN, let alone between international and local actors.” (IA)
- “The system has a bias towards international actors.” (IA – donor)
- “International actors still think we know better. We are better at operating within the system we have built.” (IA)

A lack of meaningful effort to build on local and national systems in line with global commitments, and to adapt to local ways of working:

- "Do we ever see international actors building on local systems? They came here and ignored them." (LNA)
- "There is always a standard project, with standard objectives; it is not well contextualised. We have different realities, geographies, issues." (LNA – local authority)
- "International actors should take initiative to identify government counterparts for relevant groups or decision-making. They need to understand the context and how the authorities work. They should also look at existing policy. We have an IDP policy, we have a refugee law." (LNA – national authority)
- "We had an [international] agency tell their local team that the authorities don't have capacity to do intentions surveys. We have done this. It was only because their local team told them that the authorities can do it that they then engaged us. Their issue wasn't even whether we could do it, it was because they wanted the data. It took some work but we found a way to collaborate." (LNA – national authority)
- "International actors need to do more homework. We have our own strategic plans, most of them are in line with the SDGs. Sometimes we're asking for a small adjustment to the project to better suit our agreed commitments and priorities, but organisations are very inflexible." (LNA – local authority)
- "The entry point is the problem. We should be asking 'what are the existing structures?'. There could be more effort to bring local actors in earlier." (IA)
- "International actors need to better understand the legal space, the cultural space, how local structures work, and the most effective communication channels." (LNA)
- "Bringing local actors in requires a change in the system, which I am not sure we are ready to do." (IA)
- "We are trying to fit local actors into our system, not making our system more localised." (IA)
- "We are copying the cluster system with the expansion of ABCs, but we need to work more as enablers, on the local system itself." (IA)

Mismatches in ways of working:

- "Relationships and trust matter a lot. This is not valued by international actors." (LNA – local authority)
- "Our timelines don't match. What I need now is different from later, but organisations tend to be slow. Sometimes we take time. We are not aligned." (LNA – national authority)
- "They have short-term projects, pressure to spend money quickly; we are not thinking in the same way." (LNA – local authority)
- "National NGOs and civil society do not work in the same paradigm as we do." (IA)
- "Local actors need access to knowledge and information. We did a survey of local actors [in our youth network] and 50% of people didn't know anything about the Reset. We need to diversify the sources of information. For example, emails, websites, these are not

accessible to a lot of people. Simplify the language of documents to facilitate translation." (LNA representative)

- "We are trying to enable local leadership within a system that they keep telling us does not work for them." (IA)

Some international actors cited mismatches in ways of working and systematic barriers as reasons why LNAs may not be interested in leadership roles:

- "We don't get consistent attendance, let alone expecting leadership." (IA)
- "Local actors want to discuss the response and operations. We focus on reporting." (IA)
- "Are we sure they want to do it? What's in it for them?" (IA)
- "Is it the best use of their time to be pulled into lengthy planning processes?" (IA)

Others suggested that these perspectives lacked nuance:

- "As the director of a local NGO, who loses half his team with the end of every project, doing 3 or 4 roles …how can I be interested? We either coordinate or we operate." (LNA)
- "The idea that we are not interested is baseless." (LNA)
- "National and local organisations recognise that local leadership is an indispensable condition for achieving more sustainable, relevant, and effective responses." (LNA)
- "This is a top priority; participation in leadership is the first step towards influence." (LNA)
- "You can feel the system does not work for you and not want to be excluded from it." (IA)
- "International actors can criticise the system, challenge the relevance of coordination bodies, but no one says 'that means they don't want to be part of the system'." (IA)
- "It's true that some people do not see an added value in this, but that just reflects a lack of engagement and efforts to include local actors." (LNA)
- "This reminds me of discussions that used to take place about women in leadership: 'Are they really suited to lead? Do they want to lead? Do they want to be in such a male environment? Do we think they will actually do better than men'." (IA)
- We do have some members who are not interested in engaging, especially in contexts where they wonder why international actors are there." (LNA representative)

Reflection: It is important for organisations to demonstrate a commitment to identifying and addressing systemic barriers, while, at the same time, looking at practical measures to better enable local leadership, even while those barriers persist. This can help motivate teams at the country level, which are closer to the contradictions between global ambitions and local practice, while ensuring that systemic barriers are not a reason for inaction.

A key systemwide challenge is the mismatch in ways of working between international and local actors, as well as a lack of effort to build on existing local and national systems. Beyond the unwillingness of some international actors to share power, other overlapping factors contribute to these challenges. These include: a) pressure to ensure a timely response, which is viewed as being at odds with the need to meaningfully engage LNAs in decision-making; b) the perceived contradiction, in some contexts, between providing effective and immediate support to communities, with the medium- to long-term goal of transition to LNAs; c) adherence to

humanitarian principles which, in many contexts, is seen as irreconcilable with commitments to support the leadership of LNAs; and d) the short-term nature of humanitarian project and funding cycles, and their associated conditions, which limit flexibility to support LNA ownership and leadership. These challenges have led many participants to call for a paradigm shift in how international actors operate, in order to fully realise the goal of supporting local and national leadership.

Finally, the view that LNAs are not interested in leadership does not align with the priorities identified by global CSO networks or LNA participants.[15] While there are cases where LNAs have expressed no interest in these roles (although these were not raised in the consultations), this does not appear to be the prevalent view. Calls for separate platforms for local and national actors are also common among international actors, such as for UN country team meetings and INGO-only forums. In some contexts, a lack of interest in participating in humanitarian coordination among some LNAs, may reflect a marginal international response that is poorly integrated with existing local and national systems – systems that LNAs may view as more relevant or effective. In such cases, the focus should be on supporting local leadership within existing locally led mechanisms or accelerating transition.

8. What are the catalysts for change?

Eight catalysts were identified as supporting local leadership: individual champions; institutional leadership; accountability; donor prioritisation; LNA engagement; LNA self-organisation and mobilisation; direct LNA funding; and opportunities created through contextual factors.

Individual champions:

- "Some of us really believed in this and we made a lot of effort." (IA)
- "The Humanitarian Coordinator is about to leave. She was pushing for this; her departure is a loss." (IA)
- "Some people believe local leadership is important, others don't." (LNA)
- "I was surprised [local co-leadership] was not considered before so I just asked the lead. There was no real reason, no one else had thought about it, so I started the process." (IA – coordinator)

Institutional leadership:

- "If you want to avoid relying on individuals, you need institutions to convey a commitment to locally led action and to have policies and processes that do not contradict that." (IA)
- "It needs to come from the top level. You need to change your structures, processes, incentives, and mindsets." (IA)

- “Localisation strategies by Humanitarian Coordinators who champion them are critical.” (IA)

Accountability and “carrots and sticks”:

- “If your main motivation for local leadership is because of funding or a lack of access [rather than a belief that this is the right thing to do] then you will only do it if you are told to.” (IA)
- “Without targets, nothing will be done. This is why we’ve seen no action for the last twenty years.” (LNA)
- “If it isn’t happening on the ground, who can you report to? The system relies on self-assessment. I’ve heard OCHA say that partners can report to them but, aside from obvious power dynamics, is OCHA really going to bypass the HC and go to the ERC with complaints?”
- “Some people are criticising the Reset targets. I am a big proponent. They are not perfect, not sufficient, but we need to start somewhere; other things will follow.” (IA)
- “Targets are a form of affirmative action, which is basically a corrective measure.” (IA)
- “With the Reset, suddenly many organisations are coming up with localisation strategies.” (LNA)
- “We need an accountability system. We rarely get there even when we set targets. People can always come up with excuses.” (IA – donor)

Donor prioritisation:

- “Donor regulations which insist on cost sharing, for example, make a difference.” (IA)
- “We’ve talked about localisation for years. I only see change when donors push.” (LNA)
- “A lot of it sits with donors. Our partners keep telling us, ‘it’s easier if a donor puts on requirements rather than someone trying to initiate change internally’.” (IA -Donor)
- “Donors can ask more questions, about how budgets are set for local partners, whether they are funding coordination roles, etc.” (IA – donor)

Greater LNA engagement:

- “If you listen to local actors, it gets more and more uncomfortable to ignore their demands for basic things like doing meetings in their local language or including them in decision-making.” (IA)
- “Locals should lead localisation. Ask us, include us, give us more information.” (LNA)
- “We don't hear enough from local actors on what type of leadership models, and structures, work for them, and what resources and support they need to take on leadership roles.” (IA)

LNA self-organisation and mobilisation:

Joint approaches by LNAs were viewed as a powerful tool for demanding, rather than asking for, leadership space**:**

- "Localisation is strong here because we organised, we got together, we demanded the space." (LNA)
- "We came together, made our asks clear, didn't let go." (LNA)
- "We need to demand space; it won't just be given." (LNA)
- "We should not wait for direction from the government or humanitarian leads. We should take the lead at the local level and this will catalyse [LNA] coordination and leadership at other levels." (LNA representative)
- "I see progress when local and national actors speak up, which is helped by strong national networks or mixed NGO Fora." (IA – donor)

Direct funding as a catalyst:

- "Once we gave direct funding to a local actor it was much easier for them to get more funding, and for other [local] actors." (IA – donor)
- "The problem with not funding local actors directly is that you miss an opportunity to really understand their challenges, then all the barriers become obvious and less theoretical. It made me work harder to find internal solutions." (IA – donor)
- "The real change was when we got direct funding. It reduced layers, made it easier to advocate for our ideas, rather than implementing UN or INGO ideas. It also led to more funding, and more multi-year funding, because there were not so many costs with someone in the middle." (LNA)

Contextual factors that create opportunities:

- "Access challenges increase support to local leadership." (IA)
- "It [support to local leadership] tends to happen when circumstances demanded it, not by design." (IA)
- "There are many reasons why local leadership is strong here, but it was partly because there were so many funds that even international actors couldn't absorb." (LNA)

Reflection: While institutional and global commitments to local leadership are clear, the current status quo is one in which international actors are more likely to inhibit, rather than enable, local leadership. For most humanitarian actors, individual decisions are driven by the desire to 'do no harm' and to prioritise the best outcomes for communities. However, it can be difficult to separate these motivations from factors that discourage challenges to the status quo. Organisational goals for fundraising and strategic positioning, inadequate risk-sharing, and perceived defensiveness among peers can all disincentivise efforts to advocate for and support local leadership.

In these circumstances, progress towards local leadership is heavily reliant on local and national actors demanding space, alongside individual champions who work against these pressures because of their strong belief that it is the right thing to do. There is a need to tip the balance so that enabling attitudes and practices become more dominant than those that inhibit progress.

The catalysts identified point to potential areas for systemwide action. From an organisational perspective, a clear and coherent strategic direction, enabling processes and procedures, accountability, and a demonstrated willingness to share power would reduce reliance on

individual champions and create greater opportunities to structure and scale-up efforts to support meaningful local leadership.

5 Practical considerations for supporting local actors in co-leadership

This section draws on participants' feedback to offer practical considerations for supporting local actors to take leadership roles within exiting international coordination bodies. It includes the identification and selection of local actors, capacity sharing, and potential partnership and funding modalities.

Clusters and sectors, along with their associated sub groups, make up the majority of global coordination bodies, so the processes outlined here are most applicable to these groups. However, considerations for other types of coordination bodies have also been included. This overview is non-exhaustive and is intended to provide an indication of practical considerations rather than provide comprehensive guidance.

Selection and identification

Participants highlighted three main avenues for identifying an LNA lead in coordination: informal approaches, formal selection processes and automatic identification.

Informal approaches:

Depending on the context, the process for identifying an LNA lead can be informal, particularly for task teams, technical groups or area focal points. Informal approaches typically involve no selection processes, documented procedures or dedicated funding. Examples include:

- A coordinator may anticipate that a specific agenda item in an upcoming meeting will lead to agreement on forming a task team, and may proactively reach out to LNAs ahead of the meeting to encourage them to volunteer.
- There may be an agreement to establish area focal points. A call for interest may be shared via email, stating a preference for local actors.
- A cluster or sector may directly select a subnational co-coordinator and communicate the decision to the group. This may be based on their level of engagement in meetings, the extent of their activities in the area, or other indications of their commitment to the coordination body.

- A local or national actor may propose establishing a task team or technical working group based on their expertise, which the cluster/sector lead supports.

One international actor noted that, in reality, the lack of funding for these positions tends to discourage other members from contesting selections made through informal approaches, highlighting that "we are lucky to even get one volunteer."

Formal selection processes:

When formal selection processes are adopted, these are communicated in advance and documented through, for example, an overview of the selection process, selection criteria or terms of reference. These processes vary depending on their level of formality, the duration of assignments and whether positions are funded. Examples include:

- **Selection of LNAs for strategic advisory groups (SAGs):** Within clusters or sectors, selection is usually made through a call for nominations based on agreed criteria. SAGs may allocate a fixed number of seats for different groups – for example, two seats for NGOs and two for INGOs – and agree on rotation periods that determine how long members retain their seats before a new call for nominations is launched.
- **Selection of LNAs for Humanitarian Country Teams (HCT):** This usually involves a fixed number of seats for each entity, a call for nominations against agreed criteria, potential voting among local actors, and rotating seats. Directors of mixed NGO forums (i.e., those with local and international NGOs) may be invited to support the voting process among their members.
- **Selection of cluster or sector co-chairs:** Selection processes for co-chairing can vary considerably in their level of formality. The South-Sudan Education Cluster has documented, in detail, the process for selecting a LNA co-coordinator as a third co-chair.[16]This is an example of a more formalised process involving several steps: SAG endorsement of the decision to appoint an LNA co-chair; a call for expressions of interest; shortlisting by the SAG and cluster; a vote among members; and the drafting of an MoU and a contractual agreement with a host organisation.

Automatic identification:

- In some cases, LNAs are automatically identified for leadership roles. For example, local and national authorities may be approached to lead or co-lead specific groups, particularly for clusters or sectors with clear government counterparts, such as health and education. This may be better understood as an effort by international actors to seek collaboration with local and national authorities, rather than to 'select or identify' them as co-leads of international mechanisms. There are also instances in which a cluster lead agency or an INGO may select an organisation they currently partner with, without issuing a call for expression of interest or holding a vote among existing members. This approach can cause grievances among other local and national actors, who may view it as favouritism. Another less contested example is the automatic invitation of a local NGO network to join the HCT.

Selection criteria

Selection criteria for leadership roles typically apply to the organisation hosting the role and may include:

- Geographic coverage relevant to the role – for example, coverage of a particular region for a subnational role.
- Regular attendance and reporting within the coordination body.
- Registration or legal status of the organisation.
- Established programming relevant to the coordination body.
- A requirement to dedicate a certain percentage of staff time, whether or not the position is funded. For funded positions, there may be a requirement that the organisation will seek funding to ensure continuity.
- For national-level roles, the mobility and logistical capacity to travel across the country

Additional criteria may relate to the profile of the individual expected to take on the role. For more formalised processes, a detailed terms of reference would outline the expected qualifications or experience.

Funding

More often than not, particularly for subnational roles, there is no funding provided to local actors. This means they must rely on staff funded through existing budgets, a significant challenge for local and national NGOs: “We have all been volunteering and working for free for these coordination roles, while doing our usual jobs; it is very challenging if you want to do the job well” (LNA).

Potential ways to fund LNA leadership include standalone coordination grants or funding embedded in broader partnership agreements. However, the latter tends to be a contribution towards participation in coordination mechanisms and normally requires staff members to ‘double-hat’ – i.e. cover both programme responsibilities and coordination leadership. Participants also called for more funding to be made available through interagency funds, such as pooled funds, which are not currently geared towards funding coordination staff.

There is broad consensus that having dedicated capacity is best practice and strengthens coordination effectiveness, given the amount of work involved and the need to represent a broad range of constituents. However, one coordinator disagreed: “I see it as an advantage that I am double-hatting. If we want to focus on empowering LNAs, they want someone who also supports them institutionally, for example, in fundraising skills. It’s a strength to understand, and work on, partnerships” (IA).

In reality, double-hatting is likely to remain common. According to annual OCHA reporting, only an estimated 36% of cluster coordination capacity was dedicated at the start of 2026, based on projections reported by cluster coordinators. At the subnational level, dedicated capacity was much lower, at 24% as of 2024.[17]Given the growing focus on area-based coordination as a means of empowering local leadership, there is a need to consider how to

ensure the meaningful and sustainable leadership of local actors, and the question of whether donors will be willing to fund these roles, whether directly or through intermediaries.

Equity will likely be a guiding consideration – i.e., whether different standards are applied to local and national actors, compared to international actors, in terms of funding expectations for coordination roles. At the same time, given the disproportionate financial pressures local actors face (due to a lack of direct, quality and sustainable funding), expecting local and national actors to continue double-hatting may be less reasonable than it is for international coordinators, who generally have greater institutional support.

Rotational leadership

Rotational leadership can help ensure fair opportunities for different actors, whether international or local, to be represented and take on leadership roles within specific coordination groups. For example, INGOs may have seats on HCTs for a set period before a new voting process is launched so that different INGOs can take on the representative role. In clusters, there is more variation in how rotational leadership is applied.

There are differing views on the appropriate frequency of rotation. One coordinator viewed frequent rotation as a good way to give more local actors exposure to leadership, and had adopted a six-month rotation cycle for LNA co-leadership, although this was a volunteer role. For coordinators that had been involved in selecting and funding LNAs for leadership roles, short rotations were viewed as unworkable given the effort involved in identifying funds, preparing contracts, and supporting coaching and mentoring. In these cases, one to two years was identified as the minimum. Even two years was considered too short by one LNA: “They want to change after two years, after we invest so much, build trust with communities. We need four years maybe. It is my biggest issue with the whole process.” (LNA – ABC Group)

Given the time it takes to become familiar with coordination processes, build relationships and develop the trust of members, shorter rotation periods (i.e. less than a year) may need to be reviewed and justified. Rotation periods should also be comparable to those set for international actors, to avoid symbolic support to LNA leadership.

Capacity sharing and mentoring

The insights from participants highlighted several themes relating to capacity sharing, including a) the critical importance of working with organisations rather than individuals to ensure institutional capacity strengthening, and b) the limited practical implementation of two-way capacity sharing. Additional insights are provided below:

- **On-the-job support:** Mentoring and coaching were generally viewed as the most effective means to incrementally increase responsibilities, transfer skills, build positive perceptions of LNAs as leads through ‘an evolution of power’, and ensure that individuals are equipped for their roles. Set training sessions or workshops on specific topics were seen as complementary but not sufficient.

- **Responding to LNA priorities**: Several participants noted the need for dialogue with local and national actors to understand capacity strengthening priorities, rather than assuming that support is required or imposing it on LNAs. From this perspective, ensuring coaching and mentoring support is available when an LNA lead wants advice or support, is preferable to a predetermined mentoring and coaching plan. This approach would be more adaptive and responsive to the identified needs of LNAs. This should be viewed as separate from a more structured, jointly agreed capacity-sharing plan.
- **More consistent guidance**: A number of participants argued that approaches to capacity sharing and mentoring appeared inconsistent and unstructured. This may partly reflect a) the inherent nature of mentoring and coaching, which should be ongoing and responsive, and b) the fact that different forms of local leadership may require different levels of support. For example, the level of support required to help a local actor temporarily oversee a task team will differ considerably from helping them to transition into a national coordination role. However, participants also noted a lack of clarity about how coaching and mentoring could work, and when different capacity-sharing approaches may be more suitable:
    - "There are discussions about shadowing but I haven't seen it in practice; not sure what it means." (IA)
    - "Secondments should be used more but we need to think about how it could work." (IA)

Further guidance may be needed on how to support mentoring, coaching and capacity sharing, to move beyond reliance on classroom-based teaching and ensure meaningful support to local leadership.

A third LNA co-coordinator

Establishing a third LNA co-coordinator alongside existing co-chairs – know as tripartite coordination – was cited as one way of supporting local and national leadership. This is particularly relevant when a) there is a significant workload and additional coordination capacity is needed, or b) when an LNA is supported through a transition period with a view to taking over from one of the co-leads. There were mixed views on these arrangements:

- "There is plenty of work, local actors are cost effective, donors would support this." (IA)
- "A period of 'third co-chair' is the responsible approach, otherwise it's a lot of pressure on the LNA." (IA)
- "I think tripartite could be looked at more and tested out in more locations. There are positive sides to it. You can divide responsibility and work load more. It's an opportunity for a local actor with less experience to learn from others. However, there is a risk of a power struggle." (IA – donor)
- "What are we trying to achieve if we are never really willing to give resources and power? A third co-chair is ballooning the structure and making it more expensive." (IA)
- "This risks creating a hierarchy, with the LNA seen as an assistant." (IA)

- “Someone needs to just create space.” (IA)

When pursuing tripartite arrangements, it is important to be clear about the intended outcome. The arrangement should facilitate an eventual transition to local leadership rather than delay progress or lead to symbolic leadership because power imbalances are not well managed. An additional consideration is how roles and responsibilities are divided between leads to support coaching and mentoring of the LNA co-lead. One participant noted that “the cluster lead has not stood in the way but they are not involved [in mentoring and coaching]” (IA – INGO coordinator). An existing lead who is accustomed to working with an established international co-lead, may not have the capacity to support the onboarding of an LNA chair while also covering tasks that the previous co-lead was responsible for. This requires a reasonable transition period or additional backstopping support from global clusters or the organisations hosting the coordination role, to facilitate the handover to a local or national actor.

Partnerships and technical backstopping

Several participants identified partnerships as an important means of supporting LNA leadership. They were viewed as particularly effective for strengthening institutional capacity and transferring technical skills, whether support is provided through a contract to specifically fund a coordinator or embedded within a broader programmatic partnership. For example, a partnership might support an LNA to take on area-based coordination, fund participation in decision-making platforms or provide training.

- “Partnerships are an excellent way to strengthen institutional capacity. You work with local actors over time, understand their different needs; it’s more effective.” (IA)
- “I have the best experience of capacity strengthening when it was part of a [partnership] agreement with an organisation. We could take time to work together and had more fluid communication.” (LNA)

A related and overlapping means of supporting local leadership is through technical backstopping support, which may not require a formal partnership. This can be applicable even in cases where an organisation has never held the coordination role or is not currently part of the coordination team. For example, in one context, an interagency team of mentors provides technical guidance to locally appointed ABC members. In another, an INGO supports a local partner to lead a subnational coordination group through funding and technical backstopping, even though the INGO is a member of the strategic advisory group rather than the coordination team. Technical backstopping was highlighted as an obvious modality for supporting local and national authority leadership, including through staff secondments, advisory support, or the provision of equipment or materials.

Responsibilities within organisations for supporting LNAs

An important consideration is who, within an organisation, should lead decisions about LNA leadership. Where support is being provided for LNA leadership in subnational coordination,

task teams or third co-coordinator arrangements, existing coordinators within the relevant coordination body may be well placed to lead the effort, with institutional support.

However, in situations where there are no plans in place for interagency transition, decisions about whether national-level coordination could be handed over to a local actor may be beyond the remit of individual coordinators. At a minimum, these decisions should be made collaboratively with the senior leadership of the host agency or organisation. It is also a strategic decision as to whether it would be more appropriate to focus on existing coordination mechanisms that are already locally led.

When an LNA is supported to lead within an international mechanism, an overlapping period may be needed during which the existing coordinator remains involved in the handover. This requires a period of dual funding. Technical or coaching support may also be needed beyond the initial overlap, particularly where the necessary expertise is not available within country teams. Global clusters, or global and regional technical advisers within organisations, may therefore need to provide ongoing mentoring and coaching in response to questions or needs identified by LNAs.

Variations across coordination bodies

This section provides examples of coordination groups beyond sectors or clusters, where adapted approaches may be needed to support local leadership.

I/NGO forums:

I/NGO forums were viewed as important actors in discussions on local leadership. While participants identified some overlap between how INGO-only and mixed forums (i.e. those involving a mixture of international, local and national NGOs) could help to advance local leadership, they also noted some important differences.

The types of support that INGO-only forums could provide include:

- Advocating for and highlighting the importance of LNA leadership in strategic decision-making bodies.
- Collaborating with NGO networks to develop shared messaging.
- Facilitating capacity-sharing initiatives or joint discussions on improving the quality of partnerships.
- Promoting and facilitating shared approaches to funding and providing technical backstopping for local leadership.

Mixed forums were considered to have greater potential to facilitate local leadership, given the role they often play in supporting selection processes for co-leadership roles or in electing representatives to decision-making bodies such as the HCT. In addition to the approaches listed above, mixed forums could support local leadership by:[18]

- Exploring the feasibility of becoming a distinct legal entity, to avoid becoming an INGO-hosted mixed forum with the associated power imbalances that this entails.
- Selecting a national NGO as the host agency.

- Establishing co-leadership between an INGO and national NGO, with responsibilities shared equitably.
- If the forum is hosted by an INGO, appointing a national actor as lead or chair, rather than as a deputy to an international chair.
- Ensuring the steering committee allocates seats proportionally between INGOs and local and national NGOs.

Mixed NGO forums often hold separate meetings for local/national NGOs and international NGOs when the groups have different issues they would like to discuss. Joint meetings also take place, but these are typically less frequent – in some cases, only annually. Participants involved in NGO coordination justified this approach as follows:

- "Half the room switches off when you discuss a topic that is not relevant to them, for example registration or operational impediments, which are different for local and international NGOs." (IA)
- "INGOs tend to know what to expect from the forum, they end up dominating." (IA)

However, one LNA representative that had previously been part of a mixed forum with joint meetings, felt that subsequently separating the meetings had reduced opportunities for relationship-building and mutual understanding between international actors and local actors. Instead, the separation helped to create a 'them and us' culture. While there is a need to be pragmatic to ensure that meetings function effectively, potential solutions may include holding ad hoc joint meetings if there are topics common to both groups, increasing the frequency of joint meetings, and creating opportunities for networking and joint discussion on thematic issues or workstreams outside general meetings.

Finally, maintaining separate INGO and NGO groups could help advance local leadership if local and national NGOs feel that mixed forums dilute or soften key demands for local leadership. This can also be approached progressively: in one country, there was strategic recognition that separate bodies might be helpful, but there were no local or national actors were, at that stage, willing to take on the leadership role. It was agreed to keep a mixed forum, but review this arrangement over time.

NGO representation in Humanitarian Country Teams:

NGOs are the LNAs most likely to be given representative seats on HCTs, with the expectation that they will also represent other NGOs. While this is also the case for INGOs, the burden of responsibility can be particularly demanding for local and national NGOs. Their networks are often large, they frequently lack funding for a secretariat (which is typically staffed by volunteers from local and national organisations), and their membership is usually highly diverse. As one LNA HCT representative explained: "It's a lot of responsibility. I take time to prepare, we need to bring the discussion to our NGO group, gather feedback, then share these points well in the meeting." Another LNA elected representative noted that seeking input on documents can be especially challenging: "Our members don't understand the processes, so you spend a lot of time trying to explain the purpose of the document before you even get the inputs."

A number of participants felt that the power imbalances between local and national actors were more pronounced in HCTs. Both LNAs and international actors described the number of

UN seats on HCTs as disproportionate, and noted that while these seats were often meant to be held by the UN agency in connection with their cluster lead agency function, the individuals often represented their agency's views rather than the views of the cluster.

Participants highlighted the following good practices:

- Sharing (translated) documents in a timely manner so NGO representatives can seek member feedback, where relevant (e.g. on key messages, new policies or strategies).
- Humanitarian Coordinators holding separate discussions with LNA representatives, in addition to their inclusion in the HCT, to ensure they can openly and comfortably share their views.
- Briefing newly elected LNA representatives on the purpose and functioning of the HCT to ensure they feel confident participating in and influencing decision-making.
- Ensuring that seats are allocated to LNAs, rather than only to the chairs of LNA networks.

Access working groups:

Participants involved in access coordination noted OCHA's central role in identifying co-chairs, given its access mandate. They proposed that a more centralised global approach to promoting local leadership in these groups could help guide country-level decision-making. This could be pursued jointly with a global CSO or NGO network, such as ICVA, given the role that NGO forums often play in selecting local or international co-chairs at country level.

6 Emerging approaches to supporting LNA leadership

Accountability through measurable targets:

The systemwide shift towards measurable outcomes, is based on the view that a lack of accountability has contributed to slow progress on locally led action to date. Targets, rather than recommended 'nice-to-do' actions have become increasingly important – e.g. through localisation plans developed by HCTs or mandated donor requirements such as direct cost-sharing.[19] CSO-led localisation monitoring frameworks have contributed to these efforts, including the monitoring frameworks developed by NEAR, the Pacific Island Associations of NGOs and the Humanitarian Advisory Group.[20]

Capacity-sharing:

There are a few cases where the meaningful application of capacity sharing has resulted in increased emphasis on shifting rhetoric into practice. Charter4Change's paper, initiated by the IASC Localisation Task Force, provides examples of this approach, including the case of ALIMA, a Senegal-based INGO, which facilitates capacity sharing through grants and secondments to local and national NGOs. These organisations then inform ALIMA's governance through a seat on its board of directors.[21]

Reducing operational footprints in favour of technical backstopping:

An increasing number of international organisations are favouring a reduced operational footprint, shifting their focus towards technical backstopping. For example, the Cascading Change Project in North-East Syria[22] was led by a consortium composed of Secours Catholique Caritas France (SCCF), the Catholic Agency for Overseas Development (CAFOD), and the Syrian NGO Basmeh & Zeitooneh (B&Z). B&Z led implementation and engagement with local actors, with international partners providing operational support, technical assistance, training and strategic accompaniment. Community-based organisations received tailored capacity support, and communities led decision-making. The goal was to reduce overall dependency on intermediary actors by the end of the project.

Greater LNA engagement in decision-making:

There is a growing demand for 'inclusion by design, not as an afterthought'[23] This includes sufficient representation of LNAs in decision-making bodies such as advisory boards and HCTs. As with capacity sharing, translating greater awareness of systemic exclusion into practical action may take time. It remains important, however, to ensure that inclusion is meaningful.

LNA-managed pooled funds:

Locally led and managed pooled funds are gaining traction. An ALNAP guidance note provides examples of how pooled funds can support locally led action, including NEAR's Change Fund, through which local actors govern the funds and all funding goes to LNAs.[24,25]

Decentralised, locally led hubs:

LNAs surveyed as part of Humanitarian Reset planning processes recommended establishing community-led hubs that "include representatives from affected communities, marginalised groups, and civil society" to lead needs assessments, response and feedback. A number of global CSO networks have elaborated on this vision, stressing local ownership of project design, resources and prioritisation. The START network describes its support to a "network of networks" that gives locally led groups access to their own resources and decision-making authority over how those resources are used.

Measuring impact:

An emerging area of focus is gathering evidence of the benefits of localisation to inform and influence policy. Examples include a 2024 Share Trust report on the comparative cost of local and non-local actors in Ukraine[26] and an ALNAP review of evidence of the impact of accountability to affected people (AAP), inclusion and localisation.[27] However, ALNAP's briefing note on locally led action[28] cautions that international actors do not face the same scrutiny when it comes to 'proving their value' as local actors. Other participants felt that this type of work was an unnecessary distraction given there is already a systemwide commitment to locally led response.

7 Gaps in tools and resources

A wide range of guidelines, tools, documents and research papers is available to inform organisations seeking to support local leadership (see Annex 1). Following a review of these resources, this section identifies a limited number of additional interagency resources that could strengthen collective action.

Interagency framework for operationalising local co-leadership:

The absence of a commonly agreed framework for operationalising local leadership in international coordination mechanisms has resulted in inconsistencies in approaches that can be detrimental to local actors. These include expectations that local actors will volunteer for roles that international actors are paid for, short rotation periods that undermine capacity sharing, and non-transparent selection processes that create grievances among and between LNAs. While there can be good reasons to adapt approaches to a specific context, a standard framework reflecting consensus on best practice could increase accountability by encouraging organisations to reflect on whether there are valid reasons to diverge from agreed approaches. The framework could include considerations for different coordination bodies, where relevant.

Resources that could inform an agreed interagency approach include: a) a compendium of case studies of LNA leadership developed by the Global Cluster Coordination Group (GCCG);[29]b) a detailed process guide developed by the South Sudan Education cluster for selecting an NGO co-coordinator;[30] and c) a tipsheet developed by the Global Education Cluster for onboarding a local co-coordinator.[31]

Mentoring, coaching and capacity-sharing guidance:

There is a lack of interagency guidance on approaches to two-way mentoring and coaching, as well as capacity sharing, when LNAs take up leadership positions. Documented best practice could include content on how to power share and create space for LNA leadership, how to promote incremental increases in responsibility, and how to avoid relegating LNAs to 'support' or more junior roles. Current resources focus on how the cluster system works and the technical skills associated with coordination bodies, which were viewed as important but insufficient.

Guidelines could outline how to create opportunities for learning and capacity sharing *led by local actors*, including topics suggested by LNAs such as context briefings, community engagement approaches and navigating national systems. Further examples of secondment and shadowing arrangements would be particularly helpful.

Examples of alternative ways of working:

There are plenty of resources outlining how to support local leadership within the existing structures of humanitarian coordination mechanisms, and guidance on transition and phase-out[32] (i.e. handover to national and local authorities or other actors). However, there is a lack of documented examples showing how international coordination has: a) built upon existing national or local systems from the outset (i.e. approaches that diverge from typical coordination models); and b) put commitments to plan for transition from the outset into practice.

Many participants noted that meaningful transition planning would trigger greater discussion about which national systems already exist and the extent to which there are opportunities to work with and through these systems, even if, initially, the international presence failed to take them into consideration.

The *Pulse of Humanitarian Coordination Report for 2024* notes that only 5% of assessed contexts had adapted cluster leadership arrangements, reflecting what many participants described as a tendency to default to mandates and traditional structures. Such structures should be the last resort when local alternatives are feasible.

8 Concluding reflections

Based on the consultations carried out for this analysis, a number of key takeaways emerge for organisations like NRC that are seeking to enable and empower LNA leadership in coordination:

Cultural and mindset shifts are key: Advancing local leadership requires challenging entrenched beliefs and norms that create barriers to the equal participation of LNAs, which in turn reinforce the view that they are not able or willing to lead. The starting premise should be that local leadership *can and should* be supported, even if the approaches, the LNAs engaged and the level of ambition vary according to risks and contextual realities – realities that should be regularly scrutinised in collaboration with local actors. This entails systematically asking 'why not local or locally adapted?', documenting outcomes and reviewing them periodically. All the subsequent actions listed below can contribute to the shift in mindsets and culture needed to advance local leadership.

Teams need clear strategic direction: Leadership needs to give clarity to teams on what it means to support local leadership within the culture of their organisation, the intended outcomes, acceptable levels of risk and potential risk mitigation measures. Teams need confidence that their decisions and actions are consistent with other organisational priorities, within parameters acceptable to the organisation. The strategic direction should be regularly reinforced by leadership at all levels.

Support for local leadership cannot be isolated from wider support for locally led action: All participants referenced the broader institutional enabling environment needed for local leadership, including a sense of shared responsibility, partnership-enabling and compliance policies, and adequate approaches to risk sharing. Consistent communication across organisational levels and departments will help maintain internal coherence, and and avoid placing the responsibility for advancing local leadership primarily with programme teams and coordinators.

Teams need to be equipped to take decisions and actions to advance local leadership: Tools, policy guidance and resources for enhancing local leadership can accelerate, scale-up and standardise efforts. These include tools for assessing feasibility and risks, guidelines on leveraging partnerships to support leadership, guidance on capacity sharing and mentoring, and advice on potential approaches to supporting local leadership. Organisations can draw on existing internal and interagency resources. Platforms for peer learning can facilitate exchange of good practice, creating a sense of momentum.

Success should be measurable and concrete: Measurable outcomes, that go beyond 'nice-to-do' recommendations, can help maintain internal and external credibility, support resource mobilisation and strengthen trust among local and national actors. While there is a need to account for contextual differences and maintain country-level leadership and ownership of

decision-making, selectively mandating requirements may be appropriate in some cases, such as with policies on direct cost-sharing.

Investing in local leadership requires resources: Fundraising may be needed to fund local actors in leadership positions, support capacity sharing, develop key tools and provide technical support to teams embarking on this work. Stretching existing resources and budgets could discourage efforts to support LNA leadership and undermine the perceived credibility of the organisation's strategic commitment.

The emphasis should be on meaningful leadership: LNAs should be supported to sustain leadership roles through funding, capacity sharing and the transfer of responsibilities. If international actors continue to perform the same roles, in the same numbers, while more LNAs are added to decision-making and coordination teams, there is a risk that LNA *inclusion* could be misleading labelled as LNA *leadership*. If there are limited cases of international actors transferring power to LNAs, the integrity of these efforts will be questioned. This is closely linked to the need to embed a 'transition mindset': critically reviewing opportunities for supporting local leadership within existing locally led systems, rather than focusing exclusively on bringing local and national actors into international mechanisms.

Institutional change should be coupled with efforts to influence systemwide change: While cultural and mindset shifts are necessary, systemic barriers to local leadership are real and significant. While pursuing institutional steps to advance local leadership, efforts should also be made to advocate for and contribute to collective efforts to improve the wider system. This would help create a broader enabling environment while demonstrating to teams and local actors that LNA leadership cannot, and will not, be advanced through individual efforts alone.

The main systemwide changes that would facilitate the efforts of individual organisations are: a) increased direct and quality funding for local actors; b) more decentralised decision-making and greater local authority over resource management; c) stronger collective approaches to adapting and contextualising coordination mechanisms to local systems; d) meaningful transition planning from the outset; and e) greater systemwide accountability for achieving commitments to local leadership.

As a final note, it is important to acknowledge the wealth of existing good practice and efforts to support local leadership. Very few organisations are starting from scratch. Instead, the insights above are intended to help scale up efforts and promote a more structured and systematic approach, while nurturing a greater sense of shared responsibility. Ultimately, the goal is to achieve a better, more relevant and more sustainable humanitarian response to improve outcomes for affected communities.

Annex 1 – Key guidelines, tools, frameworks and research on local leadership

Section 1: Outlining localisation commitments, principles and goals	
Document	*Overview*
Agenda for Humanity World Humanitarian Summit 2016	Five-point plan/set of responsibilities outlined by the Secretary General to take forward the commitments made at the 2016 World Humanitarian Summit (WHS) in Istanbul.
Grand Bargain Workstreams | IASC The Grand Bargain 3.0 Implementation Agenda | 2023	The Grand Bargain, Workstream-2 is focused on more support for local and national actors – with sub-commitments on quality and direct funding to local actors and capacity strengthening. Later iterations, re-emphasised localisation, in particular in leadership – including with the establishment of a localisation community of practice. See below.
Community of Practice - Localisation | IASC 2025	Replaces the IASC localisation workstream; promotes renewed focus on localisation through more coordination, accountability and collaboration. Four workstreams: i) investment in local practices, ii) intermediaries and partnerships, iii)

	funding, innovative financing, local consortia etc., i.v) locally lead action, focussed on local leadership in decentralised coordination.
Humanitarian Reset Road Map, 2025; Humanitarian Reset |	Outlines priorities towards locally led action, including simplification of clusters, promotion of local actor leadership in these roles, as well as measurable localisation targets.
IASC cluster simplification guidelines 2026	Emerging from the Humanitarian Reset, this guidance by the IASC Humanitarian Working Group outlines four key recommendations to simplify coordination at the country level, ensure LNA co-coordination by default, scale area-based coordination and plan for transitions of clusters from the outset. It follows interim messages on cluster simplification circulated to Humanitarian Coordinators (HCs) in September 2025.
IASC Principals Meeting, 11 February 2026.pdf	Following the Reset, the meeting led to an agreement to strive for "25% local/national representation in HCT composition (by Q3 2026); 25% local/national representation in cluster SAGs (Q4 2026); and 50% of country-level clusters co-led by local/national actors (Q3 2026).
Humanitarian Complementarity - June 2026.pdf	An IASC framework for aligning roles, responsibilities and comparative strengths across humanitarian actors – which notes existing local and national capacities as one of the key starting points on assessing 'who is best placed'.
IASC Principles of Partnership 2007	Commitments made by partners who joined the Global Humanitarian Forum (created in

	2006, ceasing activities in 2010) on Equality, Transparency, Result-oriented approach, Responsibility and Complementarity.
Country-based Pooled Funds Global Guidelines | OCHA	Notes that humanitarian needs is the primary goal of CBPF's, while localisation is recognised as a secondary aim. P.4 of the guidelines outlines how it supports direct funding, quality funding, capacity development and visibility of local actors. .
HPG report 2023	Independent review of Grand Bargain, conducted by ODI, funded by NRC and the GFFO.
Section 2: Defining localisation and the 'why'	
Document	*Overview*
Localisation Policy - NEAR (2025) NEAR Strategic Plan 2024-2026 - NEAR	Describes transformational, cultural and incremental change – noting the slow progress since the Grand Bargain, the inconsistency in progress across contexts and the gap between global policy and county-level action. The policy calls for "greater leadership, presence and influence of local and national NGOs in humanitarian coordination".
Localisation in Practice – (2018)	Pp 16-22 provides an overview of 'understanding localisation' – including system, operational, organisation and strategic levels of change
ICVA - Localisation in Humanitarian Leadership - October 2024 - World | ReliefWeb 2024	This paper shares the outcome of a desk review and 50 interviews to explore national actor presence, participation, influence and leadership in HCTs, country-based pooled fund advisory boards, inter-

	cluster groups and clusters – assesses dimensions such as power, trust and practical barriers.
IFRC Localisation – What it means and how to achieve it 2018	The policy brief looks at defining localisation and why it is important. It assesses commitments to capacity strengthening, partnerships, funding and, more importantly, coordination, including consideration of government co-leadership, meaningful participation, preparedness and decentralised coordination
Local and National Actors Speak Out on the Future of the Humanitarian System - Report, May 2025 | OCHA	The report shares outcomes of a survey of 1,046 LNA representatives participating in cluster meetings across 41 countries, including 22 government representatives. Key findings outline that co-leadership in coordination bodies is a top priority, along with suggestions of 100% CBPF to LNAs
ALNAP_Explain_Localisation_Briefing_072025.pdf	The ANLAP briefing note: overview of 'where we stand', including state of evidence, barriers and opportunities, and ongoing debates.
Section 3: ORGANISATION LEVEL - Localisation monitoring/performance tracking frameworks	
Document	*Overview*
Localisation performance management framework -NEAR 2019	Set of indicators looking at partnerships, funding, capacity, coordination and complementarity, policy, influence and visibility – informed frameworks below.
PIANGO/HAG Measuring Localisation – Framework and Tools (2019)	The framework provides indicators for partnership, participation, coordination and complementarity, policy and influence, capacity, funding, leadership – while also

	providing a self-assessment tool for organisations.
Localisation in Practice – GMI (2018)	A comprehensive document identifying seven dimensions for localisation: funding, partnerships, capacity, participation revolution, coordination mechanisms, visibility and policy.
Pathways to Localisation- 2019	Led by research from INGOs, outlines a localisation framework looking at four areas of partnerships, capacity, financing and coordination, building on frameworks listed above, as well as principles of partnership and the Charter4Change. Looks at localisation plans in Nigeria, Myanmar, Nepal and South Sudan.
Section 4: COORDINATION BODY – Localisation monitoring/performance tracking frameworks	
Document	Overview
The Pulse of Humanitarian Coordination 2024	Published in December 2025 using 2024 figures; based on country-level reporting. Provides an overview of the data gathered by OCHA on coordination body membership/leadership, including data for local and national leadership.
Northeast Nigeria Health Sector Localization Plan (December 2024) - Nigeria | ReliefWeb	Detailed plan, with a monitoring framework covering governance (including local leadership), representation and participation, capacity strengthening, resource mobilisation, monitoring and evaluating localisation progress, addressing barriers to localisation and enhancing community ownership – provides an example of cluster specific localisation plans.

Localisation dashboards - Guidance and Toolkit | Global Child Protection	Includes questionnaires, indicators, process guidelines and examples from multiple contexts of what is referred to as a 'localisation dashboard', i.e. a monitoring framework – a zip file includes templates for adaptation and contextualisation.
Localization in UNHCR-led coordination structures - World | ReliefWeb (2023)	Also referenced below in 'Refugee Coordination Model Guidance' – outlines topline indicators (total of 6) relating to 'identification and inclusion', as well as 'Local leadership of mechanisms', i.e. co-lead, co-chair or chair of groups.
Section 5: Evidence of the impact of locally led action	
Document	*Overview*
PASSING THE BUCK The Economics of Localizing Aid in Ukraine 2024	The findings compare the costs of local vs international actors in the Ukraine response. Findings suggest that local actors are 15.5% more cost-efficient than international intermediaries, showing evidence of lower staff costs, capacity to take on larger grants and take on procurement.
HAG-HH2-PPLL-Pathway-to-Localisation.pdf 2023	Humanitarian Advisory Group, GLOW and CoLab research paper to determine: what is known about the impact of localisation; the barriers to measuring localisation impact; and approaches to overcoming those barriers
A practical approach to defining and measuring localisation impact for communities (Sep 2024)	Follow-up to above – led by HAG, GLOW Consultants, inSights, the Pujiono Centre, CoLAB and PIANGO. The model outlined in the paper was tested in Pakistan, Bangladesh and the

	Philippines, to define and measure changes that took place at the community level due to localised practices.
ANLAP – Harnessing Evidence and Learning for people centered humanitarian action 2024	The report reviews evidence of positive outcomes from interventions aimed at enhancing AAP, inclusivity and localisation.
Section 6: Cluster and IASC guidance	
Document	*Overview*
Guidance-note-on-coordination-may-2020.pdf	Guidance note on engaging local actors in coordination groups. On the topic of coordination leadership, reference is made to adequate funding and support to subnational coordination, representation of local actors on strategic advisory boards, shared cluster leadership, and representation of local actors in Humanitarian Country Teams.
IASC guidance on strengthening participation, representation, leadership of LNAs in IASC structures (2021)	Key reference document outlining how to promote local actor inclusion and leadership.
IASC Cluster coordination at country level (2015)	The chapter on 'Sharing Leadership' notes that "Under the IASC Transformative Agenda, Cluster Lead Agencies were encouraged to consider developing a clearly defined, agreed and supported sharing of cluster leadership by NGOs".
Interagency Toolkit on Localisation in Humanitarian Coordination (2022)	Comprehensive document covering topics such as monitoring progress towards localisation, best practice, how to engage local actors in humanitarian planning processes, inductions for members on a range of relevant topics, along with accompanying tools and guidelines

	for supporting local leadership in coordination.
LNA Leadership in Humanitarian Coordination - Practical Guide English.pdf | Powered by Box 2025	A detailed resource, developed by the Global Cluster Coordination Group (GCCG), with over 25 case studies of national leadership in coordination, including national local leads, co-leads, co-coordinators, subnational coordinators, membership of strategic advisory groups and TWGs.
Tip Sheet to Integrate Localisation in the HNO and HRP - World | ReliefWeb	Developed by the Child Protection AoR, included in the interagency tool kit. One-page concrete guidelines including recommendations for specific chapters that reference localisation, data disaggregation and participation in key planning workshops.
GCCG Localisation in Transition Tipsheet -V3 2025	Guidance for country-level cluster coordination teams to ensure that cluster transition and deactivation processes are inclusive, sustainable and locally led.
Terms of Reference for Area-Based Coordination.pdf	The terms of reference outline the need for national and local NGO leadership and co-leadership by default.
Section 7: Capacity strengthening and sharing	
Document	*Overview*
Guidance note on capacity strengthening May 2020.pdf	Outlines general principles of two-way capacity strengthening as part of localisation
Framework for Strengthening Institutional Capacity 15 Feb 2021.docx 2021	Detailed joint guideline by the Global Education Cluster and Child Protection (former) AoR, including

	how to incorporate institutional capacity strengthening into the humanitarian programme cycle, recognising that institutional capacity strengthening is a key enabler to more locally led action and participation of local actors in coordination leadership
capacity-sharing-paper_may-2024.pdf	Outlines the difference between capacity building, strengthening and sharing

Section 8: Refugee coordination models and localisation

Document	*Overview*
Refugee Coordination Model Guidance - Updated 2024	Notes the goal to "strengthen local institutional and response capacities and the meaningful, equitable and inclusive participation and leadership of local actors".
Localization in UNHCR-led coordination structures | (2023)	A concise, 7-page guide, providing a checklist of good practices, as well as a monitoring framework with indicators that are largely applicable to other coordination settings.

Section 9: NGO fora guidance

Document	*Overview*
NGO-Coordination-Structures-and-the-Localization-Debate.pdf 2021	Paper by InterAction. The document covers the role NGO fora play in supporting localisation; structural factors affecting the role of fora (e.g. government role, legal frameworks for CSOs/NGO, type of crisis); considerations for mixed fora or those with INGO-only members.
NGO Fora member engagement: Achieving active member engagement - 2021	Guidelines by ICVA. Outline applicable recommendations as

	well as a specific section on 'Member engagement with a diverse Membership' – identifies considerations such as power dynamics, language, meeting locations, although not specific to LNA engagement.
ICVA NGO Coordination Guide Version 1.01.pdf 2021	Pp 34-37 explores membership, considerations for mixed fora, including a decision-tree for membership.
Section 10: Good practices and case studies	
Document	*Overview*
Localization - Good Practices IASC Task Force 5 (Feb 2023)	Outlines 8 case studies, including one directly relating to co-leadership of the Nigeria Child Protection area of responsibility.
LNA Leadership in Humanitarian Coordination | Powered by Box 2025	Over 25 case studies of leadership in coordination by local and national actors (also referenced above).
Case Studies- Strengthening Local Leadership in Coordination - 2024	Case studies by Save the Children looking at enhancing diversity and inclusion in groups, institutional capacity strengthening support, and more meaningful participation; not specifically related to co-chairing/chairing but assesses factors contributing to greater local leadership.
Section 11: Process guides for national leadership	
Document	*Overview*
SS National Co-Coordinator Process Guide_Final	Detailed breakdown of the process of appointing a national co-coordinator for the South Sudan Education Cluster: making the case, looking at funding, getting sign-off, establishing criteria, calls for

	expression of interest, and recruitment and selection.
FSSEC Localisation Case Study	Linked to above. Provides feedback from those involved in the process and lessons learned, and highlights additional considerations.
GEC Local Cluster Co-Coordination Tipsheet	Breakdown of the process for identifying and onboarding a local co-coordinator, with recommended approaches to funding, time in post, coaching, etc.
Section 12: Financing	
Document	*Overview*
Humanitarian-Financing-for-Local-Actors-IFRC-Research-Report-Final.pdf 2019	Research commissioned to identify good practices and opportunities for country-level financing to LNAs, and to provide guidance on how to strengthen national and local actors' access to humanitarian financing.
Funding for Localisation_1.pdf 2024	Summarises actions taken by donors to increase direct funding to LNAs.
Promoting inclusive and locally led action through humanitarian pooled funds | ALNAP 2024	Overview of principles and best practices for donors to support pooled funds. A number of local actor-oriented pooled funds are outlined, including DREF NEAR Fund, START Fund and the resourcing refugee leadership initiative.
How underfunding local organisations' overheads undermines humanitarian action | ODI & Annex: policy mapping Overheads.pdf 2026	Outlines the importance of funding to LNAs, particularly overheads. Notes that "Ensuring local and national humanitarian actors (LNA) have access to adequate overheads and are empowered to build healthy organisations is not a financial technicality, but is fundamental to

safe, effective and well-coordinated humanitarian action. Without this support, the much-needed shift to locally led humanitarian responses cannot succeed.”

Endnotes

[1] The Pulse of Humanitarian Coordination 2024: Overview of IASC Structures at the Country Level (December 2025) | OCHA

[2] UNHCR does not yet track similar data for refugee coordination settings.

[3] See IASC Reference Module for Cluster Coordination at Country Level, revised July 2015 | IASC and Country-level Cluster Terms and Definitions | IASC

[4] This is reinforced in numerous papers, such as the ICVA 2024 report "Localisation in Humanitarian Coordination", which highlights that improvements in LNA presence in coordination does not necessarily translate into equal opportunities to influence and lead.

[5] Section 3 and 4 of Annex 1 provides an overview of localisation monitoring frameworks for organisations and coordination groups.

[6] See IASC guidance on strengthening participation, representation, leadership of LNAs in IASC coordination structures (2021)

[7] This is often a topic of discussion relating to environmental action, for example.

[8] Annex 3 of IASC guidance on Humanitarian Complementarity - June 2026.pdf notes similar considerations.

[9] Annex 3 of IASC guidance on Humanitarian Complementarity - June 2026.pdf notes similar considerations.

[10] People with visual impairments often use screen readers such as a NVDA (Non-Visual Desktop Access), which is a free, open-source screen reader. However, websites need to be adapted for these screen readers to work effectively.

[11] LNA Leadership in Humanitarian Coordination - Practical Guide English.pdf | Powered by Box

[12] It should be noted that participants emphasised that were some organisations that were willing to transfer and cede power, but these were viewed as exceptions.

[13] This aligns with a recent report by ODI, which notes that "Ensuring local and national humanitarian actors (LNA) have access to adequate overheads and are empowered to build healthy organisations is not a financial technicality, but is fundamental to safe, effective and well-coordinated humanitarian action. Without this support, the much-needed shift to locally led humanitarian responses cannot succeed." (How underfunding local organisations' overheads undermines humanitarian action | ODI: Think change)

[14] A recent paper, *New global markets consulting*, concludes that the issue is not that capacity-building has failed, but that organisations face an 'opportunity access gap', where capable leadership, credible systems and proven impact does not immediately bring access to funding, networks and partnerships.

[15] In a recent survey of 1,046 LNA representatives, LNAs ranked leadership in coordination and humanitarian action as the number one priority: Local and National Actors Speak Out on the Future of the Humanitarian System - Report, May 2025 | OCHA

[16] Final SSEC Localisation Case Study [English].pdf | Powered by Box

[17] humanitarianaction.info/document/pulse-humanitarian-coordination-2024

[18] There are separate considerations for NGO forums on whether to strive for mixed or independent forums – see Annex 3, Section 9.

[19] ECHOs guidance, Promoting Equitable Partnerships with Local responders in Humanitarian Settings, identified factors viewed favourably during proposal reviews, including sharing overheads, the inclusion of LNAs in programme cycles and supporting LNA engagement in coordination.

[20] PIANGO/HAG Measuring Localisation – Framework and Tools

[21] capacity-sharing-paper_may-2024.pdf

[22] Lessons on Locally led Programming from Northeast Syria Policy Paper_Final.pdf

[23] Local and National Actors Speak Out on the Future of the Humanitarian System - Report, May 2025 | OCHA

[24] Pooled Fund Mapping | ICVA Network

[25] Guidance note for donors: Promoting inclusive and locally led action through humanitarian pooled funds | ALNAP

[26] PASSING THE BUCK The Economics of Localizing Aid in Ukraine 2024

[27] ANLAP – Harnessing Evidence and Learning for people centered humanitarian action 2024

[28] ALNAP_Explain_Localisation_Briefing_072025.pdf

[29] LNA Leadership in Humanitarian Coordination | Powered by Box 2025

[30] SS National Co-Coordinator Process Guide_Final (ENGLISH)-2.docx | xFSSEC Localisation Case Study

[31] Not yet published at time of writing.

[32] IASC Guidance on Cluster Transition and Deactivation.pdf and, for example, the Iraq Humanitarian Transition Overview 2024