

Local leadership in a changing humanitarian architecture

**Humanitarian
Exchange**

Number 87
August 2026



**Humanitarian
Practice
Network**



ODI Global

Humanitarian Exchange

Issue 87 August 2026



Humanitarian
Practice
Network

About HPN

The Humanitarian Practice Network (HPN) is an independent, global forum for humanitarian practitioners and researchers embedded in crisis response to publish local knowledge, analysis and experience. HPN contributes to improving the performance of humanitarian action by facilitating knowledge-sharing and contributing to individual and institutional learning. The views and opinions expressed in HPN's publications do not necessarily state or reflect those of the Humanitarian Policy Group or ODI Global.

Humanitarian Practice Network

ODI Global
Four Millbank
London SW1P 3JA
United Kingdom

Tel: +44 (0)20 7922 0330
Email: hpn@odi.org
Website: www.odi.hpn.org

Cover photo: Asylum Access staff member facilitating a workshop in Tanzania for a group of refugee community members.
Credit: Gabriel Diamond

Contents

7
Localisation in words, centralisation in practice: why local leaders still don't lead
Rajeev Jha

12
Humanitarian leadership in Syria: how are the capacities of local organisations built?
Moriab Gerges Haddo, Narges Ardwan and Muhammad Al-Kajak

19
The missing local actor: refugee-led initiatives in the Asia-Pacific and beyond
Baqir Bayani

24
Refugee-led leadership in Cox's Bazar
Khair Ullah and Ahtaram Shin

29
Beyond response: women leading humanitarian action in Palestine
Ohaila Shomar and Majeda Saqqa

35
From data to power: centring displaced women in climate and humanitarian decision-making
Anila Noor and Madina Yunis

40
Supporting communities rather than replacing them: the evolution of community-led response in Syria
Sara Bahsass

46

From 'affected populations' to leaders: how Syrian refugees led an unprecedented humanitarian response in Türkiye

Areej Al-Mohammad

52

Assessing the impact of the Global Statelessness Fund on resourcing and decision-making power for affected communities in the Asia-Pacific

Subin Mulmi

58

Designed to exclude: what pooled funds reveal about localisation in practice

Amrita Paul



A community group restores a public park in the Hama countryside, with support from the Survivor and Community-Led Crisis Response. Credit: Center for Civil Society and Democracy

A different way of working

Asia Pacific
Refugee Rights
Network

CCSD
Center for Civil Society and Democracy



a4ep
Alliance for Empowering Partnership

Every edition of *Humanitarian Exchange* magazine begins with a question: whose perspectives shape the conversations that influence humanitarian action? Too often, those closest to crises are invited to contribute examples or validate existing debates, but rarely to define the agenda itself. This edition sets out to do something different. Rather than selecting the theme internally in the Humanitarian Practice Network (HPN), the network invited its partners – **Alliance for Empowering Partnership (A4EP)**, **Asia Pacific Refugee Rights Network (APRRN)**, **Feminist Humanitarian Network (FHN)** and **Center for Civil Society and Democracy (CCSD)** – to lead the process. Through a series of discussions, they identified the central theme of this issue emerging from practice priorities, *Local leadership in a changing humanitarian architecture*, and brought together authors from across their networks in Bangladesh, Indonesia, Kenya, Palestine, Syria, Thailand and Türkiye. HPN's role was not to set the agenda, but to create the space for it to emerge through dialogue, collaboration and South–South exchange. In doing so, this edition reflects HPN's ongoing commitment to fostering more inclusive, collaborative and decolonised knowledge that strengthens both individual and institutional learning across the humanitarian sector.

Furthermore, local actors are usually expected to contribute their expertise, relationships and lived experience without compensation. And yet this takes time, requires intellectual effort and institutional resources. For this edition, authors and partner networks received financial support for their contributions. This was a deliberate recognition that local expertise has value and that equitable partnerships should also be equitable in how they recognise and reward contributions.

Accessibility and inclusion were also guiding principles throughout this work, as we sought to invite authors to write in the language in which they felt most comfortable, while providing support from editors with contextual and linguistic expertise. This led to articles being originally produced in English and Arabic before they were translated into Arabic and Swahili, as necessary.

Inside this issue

As indicated earlier, this edition's theme is local leadership in a changing humanitarian architecture, and it couldn't be more timely. The humanitarian reset has renewed calls for responses that are locally led and globally supported. Yet many local and national organisations continue to receive only a small proportion

.....

of humanitarian funding and remain underrepresented in decision-making spaces. The articles in this edition move beyond familiar debates to explore what local leadership looks like in practice. They highlight how communities and local organisations are navigating an evolving humanitarian landscape, challenging existing power structures and reimagining partnerships. Together, they offer not only a snapshot of a changing humanitarian architecture, but also valuable insights into what a more equitable and effective future for humanitarian action could look like.

The edition starts with **Rajeev Jha** from **A4EP**, who explores structural barriers to local leadership that still exist even amidst the reset. **Moriab Gerges Haddo**, **Narges Ardwan** and **Muhammad Al-Kajak** from **CCSD** further examine the gap between localisation rhetoric and practice based on three years of experience supporting more than 50 Syrian organisations.

The next two articles highlight the experiences of displaced communities and refugee-led organisations that often remain overlooked in localisation debates. **Baqir Bayani** from **APRRN** examines how prevailing localisation frameworks continue to exclude refugee-led initiatives despite their role as first responders and trusted community actors in countries such as Indonesia and Thailand. While **Khair Ullah** and **Ahtaram Shin** from **APRRN** draw on the experiences of refugee-led organisations in Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh, highlighting their contributions to emergency response, education and protection while documenting the structural barriers that prevent their meaningful participation in decision-making.

Despite these constraints, several articles demonstrate how local actors continue to lead in responses. **Ohaila Shomar** and **Majeda Saqqa** from **FHN** reflect on the work of women-led organisations in Palestine and how they have adapted programmes and services to respond to escalating violence, displacement and humanitarian need. **Anila Noor** and **Madina Yunis** from **FHN** showcase the Kente Threads methodology being trialled in Kenya, which exemplifies how displaced Kenyan women are generating and using their own data to shape climate and humanitarian decision-making.

Local humanitarian leaders are also emerging from those who are often viewed primarily as aid recipients. **Sara Bahsass** from **CCSD** examines the community-led approach in Syria that enables communities to identify their needs and address them. **Areej Al-Mohammad** from **CCSD** spotlights Syrian refugees in Türkiye and how they have transformed themselves from recipients of assistance into humanitarian actors. These articles challenge conventional distinctions between aid providers and aid recipients, and show that affected populations are not merely participants in humanitarian response but leaders in their own right.

This edition also examines efforts to reshape funding relationships. **Subin Mulmi** from **APRRN** analyses the Global Statelessness Fund, which provides flexible, multi-year and unrestricted funding to grassroots informal groups addressing statelessness that may lack formal registration or access to funding channels. **Amrita Paul** from **APRRN** examines the network's role in supporting refugee-led and community-based organisations to access and manage pooled funds, illustrating both the opportunities and persistent barriers that exist within humanitarian financing systems.



Key lessons

Although the articles draw on experiences from diverse contexts, from Syria and Palestine to Kenya, Bangladesh and the Asia-Pacific, they converge around a common message: local leadership already exists. Communities, refugee-led organisations, women-led initiatives and local civil society are not waiting to be internationally recognised; they are already leading responses, innovating, adapting and sustaining their communities through crises. What continues to constrain them is not a lack of capacity, but a humanitarian architecture that too often concentrates on funding, decision-making and legitimacy in international institutions.

Across the contributions, authors highlight recurring barriers, including inflexible funding mechanisms, exclusion from coordination and governance spaces, burdensome compliance requirements, and legal and political restrictions that prevent many local actors from directly accessing resources. At the same time, the articles offer compelling examples of alternative approaches, demonstrating how flexible funding, trust-based partnerships, participatory decision-making, community-led responses and recognition of lived experience produce more effective, accountable and sustainable humanitarian action. Together, these contributions challenge the humanitarian sector to move beyond the language of localisation towards a genuine redistribution of power, resources and knowledge, where local leadership is recognised not as an aspiration for the future, but as a reality that already exists and deserves to shape the future of humanitarian action.

Acknowledgements

This edition has been a truly collaborative effort. We extend our sincere thanks to our partner organisations and all the authors who generously shared their knowledge, experience and reflections. We are especially grateful to our editorial team and the translators, namely **Tamarind** and **Hashem el Hashem**, whose contextual and linguistic expertise ensured that the ideas presented here could reach audiences in Arabic, Swahili and English while preserving the integrity and voice of each contribution.

Catherine Komuhangi

HPN Coordination Manager

Serena Abi Khalil

HPN Head of Development and Partnerships

Localisation in words, centralisation in practice: why local leaders still don't lead

Rajeev Jha

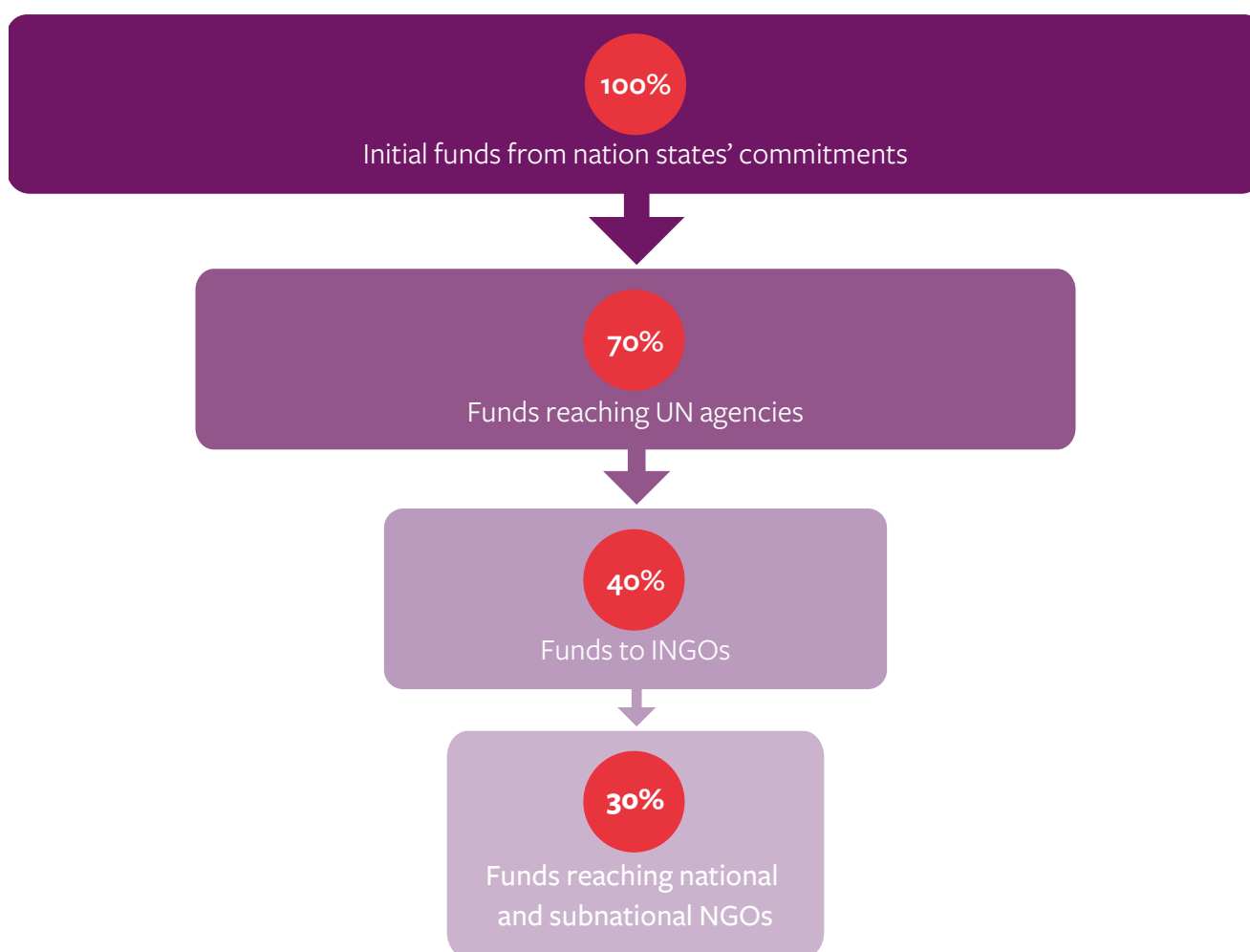
Local actors are unable to take the lead in humanitarian responses primarily because the humanitarian system was not originally designed for them. The development of this system began in the early nineteenth century and accelerated after the First and Second World Wars, leading to the establishment of several international organisations focused on humanitarian and development contexts. This development centred on an aid-centric model that essentially ensured resource or fund flow in a linear pattern from top to bottom. This has historically prioritised upward accountability to donors and governments rather than downward accountability to affected communities. Yet, localisation continued to unfold. The **World Humanitarian Summit** led to the launch of the **Grand Bargain**. Since then, localisation has been examined, debated and reimaged. The language has evolved – from ‘direct funding’ to ‘equitable partnership’, from ‘targets’ to ‘systems’, and from ‘participation’ to ‘power’. Yet, the distance between aspiration and reality remains. This article explores why that distance persists.

Business architecture, procedural hurdles and funding flows

The **business architecture** of the humanitarian system is largely structured around multilateral agencies and international non-governmental organisations (INGOs), which continue to dominate funding flows and programme governance. Despite years of efforts through the Grand Bargain to increase the proportion of funding to local and national actors, **humanitarian funding continues to be distributed largely to multilateral actors and INGOs**. Alliance for Empowering Partnership (A4EP) has members across Asia, Africa and the Middle East. Those consulted for this article indicated that only a small number have received direct funding from donors or multilateral agencies. This is because local and national organisations, who frequently undertake frontline implementation, often face significant procedural hurdles when attempting to access funding directly. These hurdles include navigating competitive funding calls, complying with extensive due diligence requirements, meeting stringent procurement and financial management standards, and adhering to complex reporting obligations. For instance, the United Kingdom's Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office **due diligence guidelines** demand quantifiable **key performance indicators** for all partners. However, local actors often struggle to meet these standards due to limited capacity in monitoring and evaluation, a lack of dedicated staff for data collection, and challenges in conducting baseline surveys, tracking indicators and reporting. Marie-Rose Romain Murphy, Co-Founder of the Haiti Community Foundation, offered a candid assessment: ‘adherence to the guidelines continues to be a challenge for many local actors’.

Funding often flows through multiple intermediary layers including through United Nations (UN) agencies and INGOs, before reaching local and community-based organisations.

Figure 1 Illustrative pathway of humanitarian funding



Note: At each stage of this process, a portion of the funding is withheld to cover administrative and overhead costs, which reduces the amount that ultimately reaches local actors.

Cluster system – coordination or exclusion

The United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian affairs (**UNOCHA**) serves as the primary focal point for coordinating international humanitarian responses. The ongoing humanitarian reset has reduced the **number of thematic clusters from 11 to 8**. While this change may enhance operational efficiency, it is uncertain whether it will advance the localisation agenda. The coordination mechanism also reflects underlying inequalities in participation and influence within the humanitarian system. **Evidence suggests that national NGOs are not always adequately included** in coordination processes and that decision-making and strategy development are sometimes driven by smaller groups of actors shaping which priorities are advanced and how resources are allocated.

At the national level, Humanitarian Country Teams are primarily led and dominated by UN agencies, often setting the agenda and deciding who will speak and be heard. This exclusion is frequently confirmed in

invite-only meetings, which typically involve only the heads of international organisations. Additionally, barriers such as the requirement for English proficiency, extensive documentation and standardised proposal templates can marginalise some local actors from the coordination structure.

Despite these challenges, there are instances of more inclusive coordination practices that deserve recognition and exploration. For example, at the time of the Global Camp Coordination and Camp Management **cluster endorsement by the government of Ethiopia in 2021**, a local organisation, Action for the Needy, was nominated as a Cluster Co-Coordination Partner alongside the International Organization for Migration and the UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR) as co-lead agencies. As reported by Humanitarian Action, there is a **modest increase in leadership roles being taken by national NGOs** in cluster coordination between 2021 and 2023, at around 3% to 5%. Although such examples are few and far between, they demonstrate that genuine co-leadership between local and international actors in cluster coordination is feasible. The primary barriers to achieving this co-leadership, as expressed by Meschac Nakanywenge, Executive Director of the Union for Promotion Protection, Human Rights Defense and the Environment in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, are ‘not technical but political and structural-resistance to change by international actors and their desire to retain control of resources and power’.



Charter for Change Working Group at Bassin Du Congo Hotel in Goma, North Kivu Province, Democratic Republic of the Congo. Credit: UPDDHE



Domestic barriers, social and cultural norms

Structural barriers also operate domestically at the level of national and subnational organisations, many of which are based in Global South countries and are subject to national laws on registration, regulations, audits and other compliance requirements. Most of the localisation debates occur at the global level, but local actors' functioning is shaped by the rules, regulations and domestic laws of the region or country in which they are based. For example, the [government of Ethiopia's 2009 Proclamation to Provide for the Registration and Regulation of Charities and Societies](#) (CSP) introduced certain restrictions on the governance and operation of civil society organisations (CSOs). 'Article 57 authorises the government to refuse registration to CSOs whose aims or activities are contrary to public morals.' Furthermore, 'Article 75(1) of the CSO Proclamation requires organisations to obtain written approval from the CSO Agency to open a bank account'.

The reformed law, [Civil Society Organizations Proclamation No. 1113/2019](#), was passed in January 2019, and was an improvement on the previous legislation. However, the transition to the new law required hundreds of CSOs to re-register under the revised framework, placing considerable administrative burdens on organisations already operating with limited resources and capacity. For smaller local organisations with lean administrative structures, navigating complex registration and compliance processes can prove as debilitating as any funding shortfall. Often, local organisations are not able to operate independently, as they remain reliant on international organisations for funding support – an intermediary layer that localisation seeks to reduce or bypass. This dependency is not merely financial, it is structural and systemic, reinforced by both the international humanitarian architecture and the domestic legal environments in which local actors must operate.

[Social and cultural barriers operating across national and subnational levels significantly constrain meaningful localisation](#), particularly in coordination spaces and for the ability of local actors to raise their institutional profile. In practice, fluency in English, familiarity with humanitarian jargon, and proximity to capital-city coordination hubs have become informal markers of credibility and professionalism. This has contributed to the emergence of a new 'local elite' within the humanitarian system – urban, English-speaking NGOs that are better positioned to access coordination forums, funding opportunities and partnerships. Meanwhile, rural, grassroots and community-embedded organisations, despite their proximity to affected populations, remain largely excluded from these platforms and from direct access to resources.

Recommendations

Grand Bargain signatories and major institutional donors should adopt enforceable policies requiring time-bound road maps as a credible pathway toward meeting long-overdue commitments to local and national NGOs.

.....

UNOCHA's **Country-Based Pooled Funds** (CBPFs), which increased direct funding to local actors to 31% in 2023, offer a transparent model for funding allocation that should be more broadly adopted. At another level, there is a need to establish regional pooled funding, such as South Asian pooled funds, Association of Southeast Asian Nations disaster funds and the African Union Humanitarian Fund. However, CBPFs are not without contradictions, depending as they do primarily upon a single source of funding. The **United States' \$2 billion funding to UNOCHA** raises serious questions about the sustainability of the model.

Conclusion

Structural reform may be well designed, but it cannot achieve the desired outcomes without a corresponding transformation in the organisational culture, norms and social dynamics that have persisted since the colonial origins of the humanitarian system. Funding continues to flow through layered intermediary structures, and coordination spaces often serve as a gatekeeping mechanism, allowing only select organisations to participate by invitation.

Additionally, limitations of localisation are not confined to a single barrier, but are embedded across the system. Domestic regulatory environments influence the extent to which local organisations can operate independently, and social and cultural norms influence who is recognised, heard and resourced within the system.

Taken together, these constraints reveal that localisation remains limited not due to lack of commitment or capacity among local actors, but because of how the humanitarian system is structured and operates in practice. With the launch of the humanitarian reset, efforts to advance localisation will need to go beyond formal commitments and technical adjustments and instead address the structural issues across the humanitarian architecture.

This represents a thoughtful evaluation of systems with their own institutional interests, including the incentives that prompt international actors to maintain control, even as they publicly advocate for local leadership.

Rajeev Jha is a development professional with over 19 years of experience in South Asia, specialising in disaster risk reduction, climate change adaptation, resilient livelihoods and community-based resilience-building. With a strong commitment to localisation and community leadership, Rajeev collaborates closely with grassroots organisations, local governments and civil society networks to promote sustainable and long-term resilience strategies.

Humanitarian leadership in Syria: how are the capacities of local organisations built?

Moriab Gerges Haddo, Narges Ardwan and Muhammad Al-Kajak

Over the past decade, Syria has witnessed one of the most complex humanitarian crises of the modern era, one whose reverberations have cut through the lives of millions of civilians. Against this backdrop, local leadership has ceased to be a matter of mere practicality. It has become an existential necessity, the very thread by which aid reaches those who need it most.

This article is grounded in three years of hands-on experience working with more than 50 local organisations across diverse sectors,¹ under the programme ‘Supporting organisations to improve humanitarian, development, and peacebuilding responses in Syria,’ implemented by the Center for Civil Society and Democracy (CCSD).



Participants during the Coordination and Collaboration Forum held in Qamishli, Al-Hasakah Governorate, Syria. Credit: DemoS Organisation

¹ These sectors include peacebuilding, relief, service provision and capacity-building for diverse groups such as women, youth and people with disabilities.

.....

The article draws on several analyses conducted throughout the programme period. Data collected by the programme shows that 81% of local organisations were able to reach areas that large international agencies could not due to security and administrative restrictions. That figure alone exposes an undeniable truth: the geographic and social proximity of local actors is the decisive factor in saving lives.

Yet despite their growing role, local organisations continue to operate within a humanitarian system that does not always grant them the space they need to lead. In an internal programme survey, 82% of executive directors of local organisations reported that their greatest challenge is not a lack of competence, but limited access to direct funding and lack of meaningful participation in decision-making. These challenges reflect not a weakness in the capacities of local actors, but a structural gap in how the global humanitarian system is organised and how roles are distributed within it.

Why local leadership? The numbers tell the story

In recent years, debate around the localisation of humanitarian action has grown considerably. This concept refers to transferring responsibility, leadership and resources to local actors in crisis-affected countries, rather than relying on international or external organisations. Yet the gap between rhetoric and practice remains wide. While our data shows that 64% of local organisations participating in the programme have extensive community networks with local communities that far exceed the reach of international partners, they receive less than 10% of the total humanitarian funding in Syria.

This gap was not just an abstract figure in a report. It was a lived reality for Abdullah al-Yassin, director of the Golden Hands organisation (الأيادي الذهبية) operating in Idlib and a participant in the programme. Al-Yassin told us in an interview:

‘We were witnessing with our own eyes new needs emerging overnight because of bombardment or sudden displacement. We knew exactly which family needed what. But we would spend weeks writing reports for international donors just to reallocate 10% of the project budget to meet those needs. Sometimes, the family in need had already been displaced or had fled before the approval came through.’

This testimony reflects the structural challenges of inflexible funding. In our programme, we found that organisations receiving flexible financial support² were able to respond to emergency needs three times faster than those bound by rigid budgets.

But numbers alone are insufficient to capture the transformative depth of local leadership. Take, for example, the experience of Awda for Development in rural eastern Deir ez-Zur. When we began working together three years ago, the organisation faced a common predicament: funding restricted to short-term educational projects, with no capacity to address the real barriers preventing children, girls especially, from attending school.

² That is, allowing for the reallocation of 20%–30% of the budget without prior approval from the donor.

.....

To get to the root of the problem, the organisation convened a series of community sessions. Team members heard what they already knew, there was a shortage of books and teaching materials. But they also uncovered something far more painful. Amina, a teacher at one of the local schools, recounts:

‘Girls were dropping out of school not because their families didn’t want them educated, but because the school had no functioning bathrooms. In our conservative community, a teenage girl cannot spend her day in a place that offers her no privacy or sanitation. Because of this, we were losing girls every single month.’

In response to this reality, and through the flexible funding we provided within the programme, Awda for Development did not stop at rehabilitating classrooms. It allocated a substantial share of the budget to rebuilding water and sanitation facilities, supplying water tanks and installing interior doors to ensure privacy. But more important than any of that was the decision-making process itself. Rather than having the donor impose its priorities, the community became a partner in the decision.

Ahmad, a parent from the village of al-Jurd al-Sharqi, describes this shift:

‘We used to think these organisations came to implement whatever was dictated to them from the outside. But this time, they sat with us, the fathers, the female teachers, even the students themselves. They asked us: “What is keeping your children away from school?” We didn’t think anyone would listen to us. But they listened, and they built on what we told them.’

The result? Within a single year, girls’ school enrolment in that area rose by 32%, and the dropout rate fell by nearly half. These numbers are not merely an achievement, they embody a fundamental principle. When local actors are given the resources and the space to work, the response transforms from emergency interventions into pathways of sustained change.

Hidden challenges: when local leadership hits the glass ceiling

Despite the successes, the journey was not without obstacles. One of the most significant lessons drawn from our experience was that the challenges facing local organisations are not solely tied to their own internal capacities. They reflect deeper, systemic imbalances embedded in the very architecture of the humanitarian system.

For instance, the programme’s internal evaluation data reveals that 78% of participating local organisations demonstrated marked improvements in their financial and administrative systems thanks to intensive support. Yet their share of strategic decision-making at the macro level remained largely unchanged, with local organisations occupying fewer than 15% of leadership seats in major coordination platforms.

.....

Suad al-Aswad, director of Change Makers (صانعات التغيير), a women-led organisation in northwestern Syria, explains this paradox:

‘We have built our internal systems to the highest standards of transparency and professionalism. We can now produce financial and administrative reports that rival any international institution. But when the time comes to make decisions about next year’s response priorities, we find ourselves in the room as spectators, not partners. The major financial decisions are still made in distant capitals and reach us as finished products.’

This testimony reveals a pivotal truth. Building the internal capacity of local organisations is not enough. It must be accompanied by a fundamental restructuring of power relations within the humanitarian system itself.

Community mobilisation and peacebuilding: the twin pillars of sustainability

A focus on administrative and financial aspects alone was not sufficient to ensure the lasting impact of local organisations. CCSD recognised that strengthening community mobilisation and integrating a peacebuilding approach were decisive factors in transforming organisations from implementing bodies into deeply rooted anchors of their communities. Rather than imposing ready-made solutions, we worked with partner organisations to harness community mobilisation mechanisms with the aim of turning affected populations into active partners in setting priorities and implementing projects to reinforce a genuine sense of local ownership.

Alongside this, we were committed to embedding peacebuilding principles as a comprehensive methodology across all phases of the programme. Organisations sought to identify vulnerabilities and latent conflicts within their communities, then channel them into opportunities for cooperation and cohesion. This dual approach had a direct bearing on organisational sustainability. Organisations that successfully applied community mobilisation and peacebuilding tools proved more capable of diversifying their local support base and building relations of trust with communities and local elites, thereby reducing their exclusive reliance on external funding and shielding them from the shock of sudden funding closures.

Experience has shown that an organisation that invests in the cohesion of its community becomes an inseparable part of its fabric, and therefore far more capable of enduring and persevering.

Voices from the field: women leaders speak

One of the programme’s central areas of focus was strengthening women’s participation in leadership positions. We began with a simple idea: a humanitarian response that is not led by women, or in which women do not participate meaningfully, will inevitably be an incomplete response. What we did not anticipate was that this idea would become one of the programme’s most powerful success stories.

.....

Diana al-Ali, who began as a volunteer in a shelter centre eight years ago, is today the director of the Suryana organisation operating in northwestern Syria. She looks back on her early days:

‘No one paid us any attention at first. We were a group of women who knew, better than any foreign expert, which woman was suffering domestic violence, which family had a child facing malnutrition, which pregnant woman needed urgent medical care. But we were there to implement, not to lead.’

Through our programme, Diana and her team received diverse training over three years, aimed at developing the organisation’s performance on both the administrative and operational levels. She also took part in dialogues bringing together other women leaders from northwestern and northeastern Syria, as was the case for all 50 organisations that participated in the programme.

Diana speaks of the pivotal moment that changed the course of her organisation:

‘Before the programme, we would wait for instructions from international partners about what to do and how to do it. We were implementing plans made by others. The first real change I felt was when the programme asked us to draft our own strategic plan ourselves, then supported us with the tools to carry it out. We learned how to analyse our community’s needs not through ready-made questionnaires, but by sitting with women in the tents and truly listening to them. We started a small psychosocial support programme for widows, which then grew into an economic empowerment project, and then into an advocacy platform. Today, Suryana doesn’t wait for anyone to tell us what we need. We go to the donors and say: these are our priorities, support us in achieving them. That is the difference between being an implementer and being a leader.’

Diana was not alone on this journey. Suad al-Aswad, of Change Makers, had long endured the isolation that comes with working in a demanding, male-dominated environment. She recalls:

‘Male local leaders used to look at us as if we were “just a women’s organisation” that offers sewing classes. They didn’t take our input seriously in broader humanitarian response planning. But through my participation in the CCSD programme, I learned not only how to manage budgets and reports, but more importantly, I learned how to show up in local coordination platforms, how to present my community’s data, and how to assert my presence as a partner rather than a voice on the margins. Today, I serve as an advisor on women’s affairs at the Ministry of Social Development, and I see that women’s voices have become heard in the decision-making circles responsible for aid distribution.’

Beyond traditional training: investing in interconnected local systems

Perhaps the most important lesson we drew was that supporting local organisations cannot be reduced to organising workshops and conventional training sessions. Time and again, we would see organisations send their staff to intensive training courses, only for the impact to dissipate the moment they returned to a work environment that offered no support for change.

For this reason, we adopted an approach centred on applied learning and network-building. Rather than holding a series of disconnected workshops, we established platforms that brought together the directors of local organisations on a regular basis to exchange experience and work through shared challenges.

Ahmed Kallo, director of the Green Heart organisation (منظمة القلب الأخضر) in Aleppo, describes this experience:

‘We used to see each other as competitors for limited funding. Today, we have a WhatsApp group where we exchange news, opportunities and advice on topics that help us develop our work as local organisations.’

These informal networks proved their worth in times of crisis. During the recent period of military escalation in northwestern Syria, organisations participating in these networks were able to redirect 45% of their resources toward emergency response within just 48 hours. This was made possible by the speed of communication and information-sharing, a rate that far surpassed what was achieved through formal traditional channels.

Persistent structural constraints: why does the gap remain?

Despite the progress made, we cannot claim to have solved all the challenges. Our programme data indicates that local organisations continue to face structural obstacles that exceed their individual capacity to overcome. The most prominent of these include:

1. Limited autonomy over finances and funds: Despite improvements, more than 85% of the funding received by participating organisations came through international intermediaries, limiting their autonomy and adding layers of bureaucratic burdens that drain both energy and time.
2. Short funding horizons: 72% of implemented projects had a duration of less than 12 months, rendering long-term strategic planning virtually impossible.
3. Operating in complex environments: 83% of organisations reported direct security and administrative challenges that affected their ability to implement projects. This includes difficulties obtaining necessary permits, movement restrictions, and at times even direct targeting.

Lessons learned beyond the Syrian context

This experience offers valuable lessons for the global humanitarian sector, among them:

1. Flexible funding is not a luxury, it is a necessity: When local organisations are given room to reallocate within their budgets, effectiveness rises by up to 40%.
2. Institutional capacity-building requires a minimum of 3–5 years: Short-term training programmes alone are simply not sufficient.

- 
3. Women's leadership is not only a matter of representation: Organisations with gender-diverse leadership demonstrate greater capacity to reach the most marginalised groups.
 4. The programme's focus on the sustainability of local organisations contributed to cementing civic spaces and strengthening their presence within communities.

The future of local humanitarian leadership

Ultimately, this experience points to the fact that strengthening local leadership is more than an operational priority. It is a fundamental shift in how we understand humanitarian work itself. The question is no longer whether local organisations are capable of leading, but whether the humanitarian system is truly ready to make space for that leadership.

One member of the affected populations of the small projects delivered by the Sada (صدى) organisation in the Nour camp in northwestern Syria, a mother of five, puts it this way:

'I don't know what "capacity-building" means. But I do know that the organisation that helped me had members who were from my own town. They knew my name. They knew my son needed chronic medication. They knew I couldn't leave the camp on my own. If the organisation's team hadn't known me, they would have chosen someone else to benefit from a project I needed most.'

These words capture the very essence of local leadership: it is not simply about efficiency in implementation, but about the capacity to build human relationships in the harshest of circumstances. Investing in this ability not only enhances the effectiveness of humanitarian response, but also contributes to preserving the social fabric and the resilience of communities in one of the most fragile environments in the world.

Moriab Gerges Haddo is a project manager at the Demos organisation based in Qamishli city in northeastern Syria. He is also a peacebuilding practitioner with extensive experience in community resilience, social cohesion and preventing violent extremism in Syria.

Narges Ardwan, from the city of Derik in northeastern Syria, is a civil society activist and project manager working in the fields of humanitarian response, development and peacebuilding at the Demos organisation. She is experienced in designing and managing community initiatives and promoting the participation of women and youth in dialogue and decision-making processes at the local level.

Muhammad Al-Kajak is a Syrian civil activist, writer and language editor. He holds a postgraduate diploma in Arabic language from the University of Aleppo and has worked with numerous international and local organisations in northwestern Syria.

The missing local actor: refugee-led initiatives in the Asia-Pacific and beyond

Baqir Bayani

The humanitarian sector has spent the past decade calling for a shift toward localisation. International agencies and donors increasingly emphasise equitable partnerships, local leadership, and the transfer of resources and decision-making power to actors closest to affected communities. Yet within these conversations lies a striking paradox: while the sector seeks to strengthen locally led responses, forcibly displaced communities remain largely absent from localisation frameworks.

As a practitioner and a person with lived experience of forced displacement, I argue that prevailing localisation frameworks remain structurally ill-equipped to include refugee-led initiatives (RLIs). While recent iterations of the Grand Bargain have begun to explicitly recognise organisations led by displaced people, my engagement with institutions of power reveals that operational frameworks continue to interpret ‘local actors’ primarily through partnerships with national non-governmental organisations (NGOs), host community civil society organisations, or local government institutions. Refugee communities, however, organise under very different legal, political and protection conditions. As a result, RLIs are frequently excluded from funding, partnerships and decision-making spaces in the humanitarian sector despite already playing operational roles. If localisation is to move beyond rhetoric toward genuine shifts in power, external humanitarian actors must formally integrate RLIs and adapt partnership frameworks to the distinct realities in which refugee leadership emerges.

Refugee-led initiatives as first responders and proximate actors

In many displacement contexts, refugees live within host communities for decades in uncertain circumstances. While forced displacement takes many forms, refugees and asylum seekers who have crossed borders face distinct and severe restrictions on legal status, formal employment and public services. In such contexts, RLIs frequently emerge as community-based responses to immediate realities. Ranging from small volunteer networks to structured organisations, they coordinate education programmes, legal information services, language classes and community support networks. Experiences from Indonesia and Thailand illustrate how these initiatives operate in practice.

Indonesia

In Indonesia, which is a non-signatory to the 1951 Refugee Convention, refugees navigate a highly restrictive legal environment where the overarching 2016 Presidential Regulation omits any right to formal integration or employment. Following civil society advocacy leveraging the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, a 2019 Ministry of Education circular (expanded in 2022) permitted refugee children with United Nations Refugee Agency (UNHCR) cards to attend local schools, without needing state

.....

budgets. While a landmark achievement, this policy is legally confined to ‘school-aged children’ (*anak usia sekolah*) under regional jurisdiction. Once refugees graduate high school, they hit a bureaucratic wall as university enrolment falls under national immigration laws requiring formal student visas and valid passports, effectively locking refugees out of higher education.

Even within basic education, while policy changes may legally open public school doors, significant practical barriers to inclusion remain. Based on my communication with fellow refugees, linguistic misalignment is a primary hurdle. Because many families hope to be resettled in an English-speaking country, parents overwhelmingly prefer English-medium instruction for their children. Consequently, when these students transition to local public schools, they face immediate language barriers, which are further compounded by cultural friction, social exclusion and bullying.

Because formal systems remain largely inaccessible, RLIs in Indonesia have historically stepped in to fill these critical institutional voids, long before such policy changes were introduced. Community-based initiatives such as the [Refugee Learning Centre](#), [Cisarua Refugee Learning Centre](#), [The Sisterhood Community](#) and others [provide daily informal education](#) to refugee children and adults who would otherwise be left behind. Beyond informal education, these initiatives organise vocational training and sports activities, provide healthcare and psychosocial support, and run cultural exchange programmes with local institutions. Because of their proximity, these RLIs operate as trusted intermediaries and informal first responders, identifying emerging needs and mobilising community resources long before external agencies can intervene. They act as a central source that sustains social cohesion and resilience during endless transit.

Thailand–Myanmar border

Similarly, on the [Thailand–Myanmar border](#), refugee-led camp committees have long coordinated key services for more than 100,000 camp residents, managing complex administrative responsibilities alongside humanitarian agencies. In practice, this means these committees do not act as passive conduits for aid; instead, they independently maintain comprehensive population registries, verify household demographics, and execute the intricate logistics required to distribute monthly food rations to thousands of families. Far from informal volunteer networks, umbrella bodies such as the Karen Refugee Committee and the Karenni Refugee Committee function with the administrative capacity and bureaucratic maturity of established NGOs. Their governance is deeply rooted in democratic accountability, with camp residents regularly voting to elect their Camp Committees, zone leaders and section leaders. Once elected, these bodies manage a complex, highly formalised architecture subdivided into specialised departments. They oversee dedicated entities for comprehensive schooling (such as the Karen Refugee Committee Education Entity), alongside fully staffed initiatives managing public health coordination, camp security, ration logistics, and camp-level justice and dispute resolution.

This intricate, democratically elected infrastructure allows refugee leaders to effectively govern daily life and administer complex services for tens of thousands of forcibly displaced individuals, proving that

refugee leadership already exists as a practical reality in many displacement contexts. Refugee-led initiatives should therefore not be treated as peripheral actors or ‘beneficiaries’ of humanitarian programmes, but should be actively validated and supported as essential contributors to local response ecosystems.

Structural barriers within localisation frameworks

The limited inclusion of RLIs is not simply an oversight; it reflects systemic barriers embedded within localisation policies and partnership mechanisms. In many host countries, strict domestic laws prohibit refugees from formally registering organisations, forcing RLIs to operate informally. In Indonesia, for example, the [Law on Societal Organisations \(UU Ormas\)](#) requires founders to hold Indonesian citizenship or formal residency permits (KITAS/KITAP), documentation that refugees with UNHCR cards do not possess. This lack of legal standing automatically disqualifies them from humanitarian partnership frameworks, where donor compliance requirements, financial due diligence processes and procurement systems are rigidly designed for registered NGOs with formal administrative capacity.

Protection considerations present an additional dimension. Refugee leaders frequently operate under uncertain legal status and may face risks associated with public visibility, advocacy, or engagement with authorities. Partnership models that assume legally secure operating environments may inadvertently expose refugee leaders to additional vulnerabilities.



Asylum Access staff member facilitating a workshop in Tanzania for a group of refugee community members.
Credit: Gabriel Diamond



Finally, refugee leadership itself is shaped by mobility. Refugees may be resettled, relocated, detained, deported, or compelled to move onward in search of protection or opportunity. These patterns of mobility challenge partnership models that assume stable organisational presence within fixed geographic contexts.

While traditional partnership and compliance requirements serve important accountability purposes, they are fundamentally at odds with these realities of displacement. By assuming that partners possess legal standing, safe operating environments and geographic stability, the humanitarian sector unintentionally excludes refugee community-based actors, limiting their ability to sustain their work or scale their impact.

RLIs as local actors within the humanitarian system

Despite operating outside these formal legal and institutional frameworks, RLIs remain deeply embedded within the communities they serve, already performing operational roles that mirror other local actors. Therefore, if localisation is to become inclusive, the humanitarian system must adapt to the realities of displacement rather than penalising refugees for them. RLIs must be explicitly included within definitions and operational understandings of ‘local actors’. Acknowledging them as a distinct sub-category is critical to ensuring that localisation efforts do not inadvertently erase refugee-led leadership. However, addressing these gaps demands more than just updating definitions, it requires a fundamental paradigm shift. International agencies and donors must transition from viewing RLIs as informal community support groups to integrating them as vital operational partners with unique advantages. To move beyond rhetoric and dismantle the structural barriers that keep refugee leadership invisible, the sector must prioritise the following key operational shifts.

1. **Redesign partnership and funding models.** Localisation frameworks and humanitarian partnerships must be grounded in principles of equity, co-design and shared accountability. More inclusive approaches require moving away from rigid institutional requirements and embracing flexibility. This includes alternative partnership modalities, intermediary or pooled funding arrangements, proportional due diligence based on grant size, and adaptive programme timelines that better reflect the operational realities of RLIs. Specifically, donors should explore participatory grant-making and direct funding mechanisms that intentionally bypass the heavy administrative layers of traditional UN agencies and international NGOs. By piloting trust-based philanthropy models tailored to grassroots capacities, funding can reach frontline RLIs faster and more efficiently. Such approaches would enable RLIs to participate meaningfully in humanitarian responses without imposing structural requirements that they are unable to meet.

- 
2. **Reconsider risk and compliance frameworks.** Traditional risk analysis frameworks within humanitarian systems typically prioritise financial and administrative risk management. However, they often overlook the protection and legal risks faced by refugee leaders themselves. Humanitarian actors should develop protection-sensitive partnership models that recognise the vulnerabilities associated with refugee leadership. This may involve discussing potential risks associated with public visibility in partnership arrangements, adjusting public branding accordingly to avoid exposing refugee leaders to authorities, and adapting reporting procedures where disclosure could create protection risks.
 3. **Build mobility-adaptive partnerships.** Unlike many local organisations, RLIs operate within contexts where mobility is an inherent feature of community life. Refugee leaders may be resettled, relocated, detained, or compelled to move across borders, potentially disrupting conventional partnership arrangements. Humanitarian actors should therefore design mobility-adaptive engagement models that allow collaboration to continue even when refugee leaders relocate. This requires flexibility regarding delays due to leadership transitions, establishing remote collaboration mechanisms, and supporting cross-border digital networks that enable knowledge sharing even when leaders move across contexts.

Conclusion

As displacement across the Asia-Pacific region and globally continues to evolve, the role of refugee leadership will likely become increasingly important. RLIs already contribute significantly to community resilience, social cohesion and service provision within displaced populations. Yet despite these contributions, prevailing localisation frameworks often fail to recognise them as legitimate actors within humanitarian response systems. Recognising RLIs within localisation frameworks is therefore not simply a matter of compliance. It is a necessary step toward reimagining humanitarian leadership in a changing architecture that acknowledges refugees not only as recipients of aid, but also as leaders shaping the futures of their own communities. However, meaningful inclusion requires accountability. Humanitarian actors and donors must develop refugee-specific localisation indicators – such as the proportion of partnerships involving RLIs or the share of direct, high-quality funding allocated to them. Without such metrics, refugee leadership risks remaining invisible within the broader localisation agenda.

Baqir Bayani is a refugee, the Global Partnerships and Refugee Leadership Associate Director at Asylum Access, and the former co-chair of the Equitable Partnerships Working Group at Pledge for Change.



Refugee-led leadership in Cox's Bazar

Khair Ullah and Ahtaram Shin

In Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh, Rohingya youth and refugee-led organisations (RLOs) are at the centre of community life. They play a range of roles including acting as first responders during emergencies, supporting education systems and documenting protection concerns. Yet despite their central role, they continue to be treated as helpers rather than leaders within the humanitarian system.

This article draws on interviews with 50 leaders of Rohingya-led organisations, representing 50 organisations with hundreds of members across the camps in Cox's Bazar. Based on discussions with community leaders, there are an estimated 300 RLOs operating in the camps, most of which were established after 2017. These organisations are largely youth-led and emerged in response to gaps in service delivery, coordination and representation. Their work spans emergency response, education, advocacy, documentation and community support.

While humanitarian actors increasingly emphasise localisation and local leadership, the experiences of RLOs in Cox's Bazar highlight a persistent gap between rhetoric and reality. This article explores what refugee-led leadership looks like in practice, the structural barriers that constrain it, and what needs to change for refugee-led leadership to be meaningfully recognised and supported.

What local leadership looks like in practice

RLO leaders explained that refugee leadership in Cox's Bazar means standing with and supporting their community in situations where the international governments or aid agencies may not fully understand their realities. As one leader shared, 'We feel it is our responsibility to address our own issues.'

Leadership also means becoming a voice for vulnerable people, speaking for justice, seeking solutions and advocating for dignified repatriation. For many RLO leaders, it means encouraging refugees to participate as decision-makers, planners and implementers in community programmes related to education, protection and emergency support, even without formal recognition of their work.

However, many RLO leaders said they are often treated by non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and authorities as volunteers or helpers rather than community leaders. RLOs cannot easily approach NGO officials or camp authorities, but community members frequently seek RLOs' support and guidance. As one leader noted, 'People trust us and come to us to address their problems.'



Frontline role in emergencies

RLO leaders play an important role during emergencies. In 2024, when violence in Arakan displaced thousands of people toward the Bangladesh border, RLO members helped injured people reach hospitals, rescued people from boats near Teknaf and provided emergency support to affected families. They also sent food, medicine and clothing to people who remained in Arakan.

Within the camps, RLOs respond to fires, floods, landslides and disease outbreaks by sharing information quickly and identifying vulnerable people such as children, elderly individuals and people with disabilities. They collect and distribute basic items from the community and sometimes conduct small surveys to understand urgent needs before NGOs respond.

However, RLOs are rarely included in formal emergency planning or coordination. As one RLO member explained, ‘They listen politely to our opinions, but in the end, the decisions are always made by others.’

Community-led education systems

In 2017, there were only NGO learning centres in the camps, and these were mainly for nursery students. They provided toys and basic literacy and numeracy lessons. It did not matter whether the learners were children, adolescents, or adults; the system remained severely limited. Later, Rohingya community teachers began offering private tuition by organising students according to grade levels. However, they mostly taught Burmese, mathematics and English. Over time, these efforts developed into informal community-based learning centres, which were run completely on a voluntary basis. As one community teacher explained, ‘Many of us work as volunteer teachers, facilitators, or mentors, helping children continue their education even though we have no proper space, schools, or learning materials.’

In 2020, [when UNICEF introduced the Myanmar Curriculum Pilot](#), it consulted community-based schools and used feedback in the design and implementation of its pilot programme. However, the programme was limited to about 10,000 students from grades 1 to 9. It operated like an NGO project with strict management and limited payments, which discouraged many qualified community teachers from joining. As a result, community teachers continued running their own schools independently by collecting small fees from students to support teachers and basic school activities.

RLO leaders have also been active in discussions with the National Unity Government of Myanmar, in an effort to make board examination more widely accessible in Cox’s Bazar. For example, in 2023, 26 community schools collaborated for the first time to organise board examinations and conduct midterm and final exams. In 2025, senior teachers and community leaders established the Examination Board of Rohingya Refugees. They have successfully conducted midterm and final examinations, and the initiative has gained strong support from the community. However, NGOs and authorities have not formally recognised or supported it. Most activities continue through voluntary contributions without dedicated funding or proper facilities.



When some United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF) and NGO learning centres closed after funding cuts in 2025, community schools continued operating. Currently, around 95% of Rohingya families rely on these schools to educate their children. Some RLOs also support students by providing stationery and learning materials.

However, several major gaps remain in the camp education system. One key challenge is the lack of cooperation between authorities, NGOs and RLOs. Community-based schools and the Examination Board of Rohingya Refugees are not officially recognised, even though they were created to respond to real educational needs. Without recognition and support, these schools face shortages of learning materials, classrooms and trained teachers. Many teachers continue working without regular stipends.

Documentation of protection concerns

According to many Rohingya representatives, documenting protection concerns and human rights violations is also an important focus of their work. They collect testimonies from affected individuals, including details such as date, time, location and description of incidents. These reports often involve child protection issues, gender-based violence, discrimination, abuse and gaps in service delivery. They have also assisted with documentation and victim support related to international justice processes, such as with the International Court of Justice and the International Criminal Court. Notably, RLOs do not conduct formal investigations. Their role is mainly to document responsibly and refer cases to human rights organisations, protection actors, or humanitarian agencies.

However, RLOs face challenges in their documentation and referring role. This comes in the form of backlash from community members and local authorities, to whom RLO staff are visible and accessible. For example, one RLO member explained that when they reported an acid attack against a daily labourer on social media, authorities threatened them to remove the post. Such situations make it very challenging for RLOs to document and speak up against injustice.

Key challenges to refugee leadership

The main challenge in registering an RLO is the refugee status of Rohingya in Bangladesh. Bangladesh has not signed international refugee treaties, and Rohingya are allowed to stay only on humanitarian grounds and bilateral understandings. Because of this, registering RLOs is seen as a sovereignty concern, as authorities may view it as an act of state recognition. Therefore, refugees are not legally permitted to register independent organisations.

Among the 50 RLOs we spoke with, none are officially registered in the host country. Although some are recognised by the UN, they are not allowed to receive financial support directly from NGOs or private donors, and they do not have legal work permits. Because of these restrictions, RLO activities operate informally within the community and only inside the camp boundaries.

.....

RLOs must seek permission from the Camp-in-Charge to conduct any activity. Getting approval is difficult and can take months, even for small workshops. While authorities do not completely stop refugees from forming organisations, they do not allow them to work independently, access funding, build formal partnerships, or join coordination platforms. This limits their visibility and participation in decision-making spaces.

Many RLO members have skills, commitment, lived experiences and strong community trust. If RLOs were allowed to register, they could develop projects, build partnerships with aid agencies and create livelihood opportunities for many people.

Donors usually require legal registration, bank accounts and formal authorisation. However, Rohingya RLOs are not allowed to use the Bangladesh banking system or mobile financial services. As a result, they cannot apply for most donor grants or contracts. NGOs are also not permitted to provide grants directly to RLOs.

For financial transactions, some RLOs rely on informal methods, such as bank accounts in foreign countries or accounts of trusted Bangladeshi individuals. However, these arrangements remain uncertain and risky. One RLO leader shared that:

‘An American university approved funding for our school but cancelled it when we couldn’t provide bank details under our RLO and host country registration.’

Partnerships

Due to legal and legitimacy restrictions, NGOs, international stakeholders, grassroots networks and major donors are generally unable to form formal partnerships with Rohingya-led organisations in the camps. By contrast, many Rohingya diaspora organisations receive funding and support from host countries. They can travel, work legally, establish offices, and collaborate with international courts, lawyers and international NGOs. However, camp-based RLOs do not have these opportunities.

Some NGOs engage RLOs informally as volunteers, community mobilisers, or outreach partners, but these interactions are limited and inconsistent. Partnerships usually focus on specific activities such as awareness campaigns, volunteer work, or information sharing. As one member shared:

‘An INGO once invited our art club to display artwork at a camp exhibition and selected two volunteers for their project. That is all the partnership we experienced with NGOs.’

There have been a few small collaborations similar to this art club collaboration. In 2020, the Omar Film School received support from the United Nations Refugee Agency (UNHCR) for filmmaking and embroidery training, and in 2021 UNHCR supported the *Rohingyatographer* magazine. Beyond these examples, collaboration with RLOs remains limited.



Mobile exhibition of the Rohingya Art Club. Credit: Enayet Khan

Sometimes NGOs invite RLOs to events or consultations, such as activities organised around World Refugee Day or Human Rights Day. However, these engagements rarely lead to long-term partnerships. RLOs also lack offices or meeting spaces, although some organisations occasionally provide temporary venues.

Conclusion and recommendations

Rohingya-led organisations in Cox's Bazar demonstrate that local leadership already exists. They respond to emergencies, sustain education systems and support protection activities for their communities – often without recognition, funding or formal support. Yet the humanitarian system continues to treat them as helpers rather than leaders. They are not treated as central to localisation. Bridging this gap requires more than commitments to localisation. It requires changes to legal frameworks, funding systems, coordination structures, refugee status and partnership models that currently exclude refugee-led actors.

.....

Our suggested recommendations for the many actors and stakeholders involved in the Cox's Bazar refugee camps are as follows:

- Recognise and formally register RLOs as legitimate partners.
- Include RLO leaders in decision-making processes.
- Establish stronger coordination mechanisms for refugee participation in humanitarian planning and policy discussions.
- Create livelihood opportunities for refugees.
- Support capacity-building initiatives for youth and RLOs.
- Co-design programmes with RLOs.
- Provide small grants, office space, materials and learning facilities to strengthen community-led initiatives.

Khair Ullah, Chair of South Asia Working Group of Asia Pacific Refugee Rights Network (APRRN) and founder of Resilience Refugee Alliance, is a Rohingya youth advocate, researcher and human rights defender whose work amplifies Rohingya voices and advocates for justice, education and community empowerment.

Ahtaram Shin, Deputy Chair of the Geographical Working Group of APRRN and founder of Rohingya Youth Club, is a Rohingya writer, researcher and civil society activist, and *Rohingyatographer's* Editor in Chief.

Beyond response: women leading humanitarian action in Palestine

Ohaila Shomar and Majeda Saqqa

Across Palestine, women-led organisations continue to sustain their communities through prolonged crisis, genocide and blockade. Their leadership moves between emergency response and long-term care, immediate survival and rebuilding of social and community life. It is grounded in lived experience, collective responsibility and accountability to those most affected.

This article draws on reflections from two women-led organisations, Sawa Organisation and the Culture and Free Thought Association (CFTA), and explores what women-led humanitarian leadership looks like in practice and how it operates under extreme conditions.



Continuous response in conditions of crisis

Women-led organisations in Palestine have long been at the forefront of responding to crises under occupation, working within and beyond constrained systems to meet urgent needs while sustaining community resilience. Their leadership does not begin or end with emergency response. It is continuous, adaptive and grounded in accountability to those most affected.

This current emergency has jarred us all, bringing levels of violence greater than expected. It has forced the Sawa team to rethink existing policies, strengthen contingency planning, make more exceptions and find creative ways to make things (a little) easier for those seeking support.

Sawa's helpline and adaptive training

At the heart of Sawa's work in Palestine is the national toll-free helpline, which provides psychosocial support, and medical and legal consultations. Anticipating worst-case scenarios, Sawa prepared for electricity cuts by securing solar panels and laptops, enabling helpline operations to continue from home if staff could not reach the office.

As call volumes and complexity increased, Sawa adapted its emergency trainings, shifting methodologies to rapidly bring in more experienced counsellors. At the onset, Sawa's training was slow, intentional and expansive. The 110-hour programme welcomed volunteers from all academic backgrounds, grounding them in a sense of responsibility to their communities while building their capacity to offer primary psychosocial support. But as the emergency deepened, the nature of the work shifted. The calls became heavier, the needs more urgent and the time to prepare new counsellors grew shorter. In response, Sawa reshaped its approach. A 70-hour training course was developed, to meet the needs of urgent response. It was designed for those already with some experience, focusing on what was needed in the immediacy of crisis and sharpening their skills. Counsellors were equipped to assess mental health conditions, recognise signs of severe distress and make responsible referrals, all while holding a client-centred approach at the core of their practice.

What changed was not just the length of the training, but its rhythm and intention. It moved from building broad foundations to enabling rapid, grounded response, ensuring that even in urgency, care remained thoughtful, accountable and deeply human. This allowed the helpline to respond faster and more effectively under extreme pressure.

Sustained support amid rising needs

Sawa's role in facilitating access to material aid became critical during the assault on Gaza, as survival needs dominated calls. In response, Sawa expanded its efforts, sourcing resources across sectors and making 41,457 referrals since 2023. The volume of requests led to the creation of a dedicated role to handle material aid inquiries, allowing counsellors to focus on delivering high-quality mental health and psychosocial support.

.....

Despite constant disruptions and shifting access to services, Sawa maintained and regularly updated referral pathways in coordination with local and international organisations. Its helpline operated without interruption and remained free across historic Palestine. Since the escalation, Sawa has received 390,715 calls and answered 245,977 (63%), reflecting both the scale of need and the organisation's sustained response under extreme conditions. 'What are callers saying?' became the central question guiding daily operations.

Counsellors worked closely with families facing impossible choices in real time. At the beginning of the Israeli military assault, callers were in a panic asking Sawa operators where to find safety: 'Should we listen to the evacuation orders or not?' The helpline functions as a form of frontline response, supporting individuals in real time as they navigate impossible decisions (see Box 1).

Box 1 Examples of the calls received by Sawa operators

- A mother calling to say the Israeli army was close and her family had nowhere to go.
- A father who angrily cried out to us after his son died of starvation due to the Israeli-imposed siege.
- A woman grieving her family members not returning from the American military aid sites.
- The school girl who was frustrated at being unable to take her exams.
- The parents looking for their missing children.
- The released prisoners from Israeli jails unable to find food or assistance.
- The boy looking for work and aid to take care of his siblings.
- **The woman and man who endured sexual harassment from the Israeli soldiers.**
- The caregiver who threatened to burn himself and his family members.
- The woman abused by her husband who lost her only source of family support.
- The women facing psychological collapse.
- The men despairing in their inability to provide for their families.
- The orphans calling for help.
- The people with disabilities looking for mobility aids and other equipment.
- The displaced people returning to find their homes and lives demolished.
- The last surviving family member who is unsure what to do with themselves next.

Sawa's responses adapting to myriad needs

These calls did not end at listening. They shaped how Sawa organised its response in real time. When families called in panic, asking where to go or how to survive the next few hours, counsellors moved beyond emotional support to actively map available services and connect people to what little remained accessible. Repeated calls about starvation, displacement and lack of basic supplies led Sawa to strengthen its referral systems and expand coordination with local and international actors, ensuring faster pathways to food, shelter and medical support. In cases of acute distress, such as

.....

caregivers expressing suicidal intent or when speaking to survivors of violence, counsellors applied crisis intervention approaches, conducted immediate risk assessments, and stayed present on the line while coordinating urgent referrals where possible.

Sawa's support is not always one-off. Where possible, it is relational and ongoing. This is reflected in cases such as Hiam, a blind mother of three navigating displacement and isolation, who first called only seeking material aid and resisted speaking about her emotions. Over time, through consistent, patient engagement, the helpline became a space she trusted, returning not just for assistance but also for connection, reflection and release. She began to share her story in her own time, describing the helpline as the only place she could unburden herself and feel at peace. This continuity of care, where callers are met again and again with presence and respect, has shaped Sawa's approach, reinforcing the importance of building trust over time alongside immediate response.

Together, these experiences have guided operations. Sawa introduced a dedicated role to manage material aid requests, allowing counsellors to focus more deeply on mental health support, while also strengthening training on trauma, grief and crisis response. The helpline has become not just a point of contact, but also a living system of care that adapts daily, grounded in both urgent needs and the longer, quieter work of holding people through ongoing crises.

Community-rooted, participatory response

The CFTA provides another example of female leadership grounded in community participation. Founded in 1991 by five women in Gaza, CFTA has built its work around the principle that communities must not be spoken for, but must speak for themselves. This approach is reflected in its network of community centres, where women, youth and children define priorities and participate in designing and implementing programmes.

From the first days of the genocide, CFTA mobilised without pause. As offices and centres were damaged, teams repaired and reopened them using whatever was available, from wooden pallets to tents and makeshift structures, despite severe shortages under blockade. These efforts ensured continuity of education, health support and safe spaces for women, youth and children.

At the beginning, displaced people arrived with visible signs of hardship. Some were injured, others, including pregnant women and children weakened by illness, in need of immediate assistance. Care emerged organically from within the community itself. Among those present was a nurse – a CFTA staff member who had previously worked at the Women's Health Centre and who brought her professional experience into this new reality. In that fragile space, expertise met urgency and from a small improvised corner, she began rebuilding basic health services. Step by step, with other professionals, staff and volunteers, what began as an emergency response evolved into a functioning medical centre, shaped by people's needs, resilience, commitment and collective action, rather than formal structure, eventually offering primary health care, and sexual and reproductive health services.



Gynaecologist at a CFTA clinic in an internally displaced persons shelter in Palestine reviewing ultrasound results. Credit: Hanibal Zoroub, CFTA Media Unit

Working through grief and trauma

The grief endured by the people of Gaza is heavier than what constitutes ‘normal’ grief. It is grieving everything, not only a single loss; it is every family being too weighed down by their own loss to support anyone else. It allows no time to recover. There is constant anticipation of more grief, and it is collective.

Helpline operators listen closely to these emotions every day. Some counsellors experience secondary trauma, as they listen to the outpourings from callers that so resemble their own grief. Palestinian workers in the humanitarian sector are responding, not to ‘beneficiaries’, but to their fellow citizens, their friends, and perhaps their relatives, with a deep sorrow and constant anxiety. Some try to suppress it to continue their daily work. With the situation also deteriorating every day in the West Bank, the grief felt by Gazans is an inner trauma that many do not want to (or cannot) properly acknowledge, even in deep introspection.

.....

In response, Sawa and CFTA have been intentional about creating structures of care within the organisations. Sawa has done this through regular check-ins within the office, offering space for staff to share how they are coping and to be met with understanding rather than expectation. Staff also have access to mental health support, ensuring they are not left to navigate this burden alone. Sawa has also strengthened peer support systems, created moments for collective debriefing after difficult cases and adjusted workloads where possible to reduce burnout.

CFTA has prioritised the wellbeing of staff and volunteers by creating small but meaningful spaces of support within an otherwise overwhelming environment. Through stress-relief activities, psychosocial support, debriefings and flexible working arrangements adapted to highly unpredictable conditions, the organisation has sought to sustain emotional wellbeing and strengthen collective resilience.

These practices recognise that sustaining care for others requires actively caring for those providing it, especially in a context where the line between personal and professional grief is so blurred.

Conclusion

Women-led organisations in Palestine demonstrate that local humanitarian leadership is not something that needs to be built from scratch: it already exists and is already responding under the most extreme conditions.

Sawa's helpline and CFTA's community-based work show that leadership is continuous, adaptive and deeply rooted in lived realities. It operates across emergency response and social support, often without the recognition, resources, or structural support afforded to larger humanitarian actors.

For international humanitarian actors, this raises important questions. What would it mean to design responses that build on rather than bypass the leadership that already exists within communities? How can systems adapt to support organisations that are embedded in crisis, rather than external to it? And how can partnerships move beyond consultation toward genuine power-sharing?

As the sector undergoes a broader reset, the experiences of women-led organisations in Palestine offer a clear message: effective humanitarian response is not only about reaching people in crisis, but also about recognising and supporting those who are already leading within it.

Ohaila Shomar is the founder of Sawa Organisation in Palestine and a prominent human rights activist specialising in sexual and gender-based violence. She has established multiple helplines for survivors, authored anti-violence programmes, and provides consultancy on women's and children's rights.

Majeda Saqqa is one of the founders of the Culture and Free Thought Association, established in 1991. She is an activist working on rights, justice and community resilience.

From data to power: centring displaced women in climate and humanitarian decision-making

Anila Noor and Madina Yunis

Climate-related disasters are becoming more frequent and severe, **increasing displacement in fragile, conflict-affected areas**. In refugee-hosting regions such as Dadaab and Hagadera in Garissa County, Kenya, extended periods of drought, unpredictable rainfall and flooding directly influence daily survival. Nevertheless, humanitarian interventions are impeded by inadequate data-collection systems and the ongoing marginalisation of the most severely impacted populations, especially displaced women and girls. The lack of gender-specific and intersectional data transcends technical issues, revealing fundamental structural inequalities in the processes of knowledge creation, validation and application. By referencing examples from Kenya, this article explores how refugee women-led organisations are innovating climate response strategies through co-design, participatory data systems and genuine engagement. These methodologies illustrate that incorporating lived experiences into data-collection and decision-making processes improves the targeting, efficiency and sustainability of humanitarian initiatives.

The gender–climate–displacement nexus

In places such as Kenya, **climate change, displacement and gender inequality** come together to create what some call a ‘triangle of vulnerability’. Events such as prolonged droughts or unpredictable rainfall patterns lead to displacement among populations, with the scale of displacement contingent upon prevailing inequalities. Many of those displaced reside in regions highly susceptible to climate variations, where infrastructure is inadequate, resources are scarce and governance structures are weak. Women and girls in these regions encounter additional hardships, including limited access to land and financial resources, increased unpaid caregiving responsibilities and heightened risks to personal safety.

However, looking only at vulnerability misses an important part of the story. Displaced women play key roles in helping their communities stay strong and respond to crises. They act as first responders, managing immediate needs at home and in their communities; resource managers, making sure food, water and fuel are available during shortages; knowledge holders, using local experience to adapt; and community leaders, keeping people united and resolving conflicts.

These roles are essential for survival and resilience. Yet humanitarian systems often overlook them, viewing refugee women primarily as passive recipients. This misunderstanding has serious consequences. It narrows who is consulted, leads to programmes that ignore local realities, and limits access to funding and leadership roles. As a result, efforts may fail to leverage existing strengths, causing inefficiencies and lost opportunities for lasting impact.



A systemic gap: data, power and exclusion

The main challenge is a systemic failure in how data is created, managed and used in humanitarian systems. Data is often treated as a neutral tool for decision-making. In reality, it reflects and reinforces power imbalances. While many humanitarian programmes collect basic gender-disaggregated data, they often lack more nuanced, intersectional data that captures how factors such as age, disability, legal status and displacement shape different experiences. Programmes then struggle to reach those most in need. More importantly, the issue is not only which data is collected but also who controls it. Usually, external actors set priorities, collect data without community involvement and analyse it far from local realities. Those affected receive little feedback.

The emergence of ‘Kente Threads’

In Kenya’s climate context, **the ‘Kente Threads’ project actively addresses systemic issues**. It was co-designed by displaced women and feminist organisations. Inspired by traditional West African Kente cloth, this project reflects the idea that each thread signifies a specific story, identity, or history. It recognises that displaced women and girls experience a spectrum of diverse experiences rather than a singular narrative. It uses a method that synthesises various personal realities, acknowledging and respecting each ‘thread’, which is influenced by factors such as gender, displacement, disability, sexuality, age and social roles. Bringing together different personal realities of diverse refugee women-led groups, including women and girls living with disabilities, and lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, queer/questioning (LGBTQI+) women and girls, to collectively generate data rooted in their lived experiences.

Through a participatory approach, these groups lead data collection within their communities, capturing realities often overlooked or excluded. They are then supported with training in data analysis, alongside tailored organisational capacity-strengthening, enabling them to interpret and own their data. This process positions them not just as participants, but also as leaders, using evidence they have shaped to drive advocacy and advance solutions for their communities. This opposes the uniform, one-size-fits-all practices common in current data systems and rejects models that treat refugee women-led organisations as passive participants without agency. The notion of ‘growing’ Kente threads illustrates how refugee women continually develop this knowledge.

Using Kente Threads for climate action

To deepen understanding, one can examine the Hagadera camp, where women-led groups informally document climate impacts through community dialogues and savings groups, such as Village Savings and Loan Associations (VSLAs). These platforms serve dual roles as financial support mechanisms and vital forums for sharing experiences and collective reflection. During regular meetings, women discuss issues such as water scarcity, rising food prices, gender-based violence (GBV) and changing rainfall patterns. For instance, in VSLA discussions, women frequently emphasise that unpredictable and erratic rainy seasons have caused recurrent livestock losses and disrupted vulnerable livelihoods.



They also monitor how droughts increase the need for longer trips to fetch water and firewood, raising protection concerns, while heavy rains cause flooding that damages shelter and pollutes water sources. These diverse experiences, shaped by gender, age, disability and displacement status, create unique ‘threads’ of data rarely captured by formal systems.

By collaboratively analysing this data, women identify new risks. Although these phenomena are deeply experienced at the household level, they are rarely documented within formal data-collection frameworks. Nevertheless, they offer immediate, context-specific insights into the ways climate change affects daily life in displacement scenarios.

Through collective analysis of these experiences, women not only identify emerging risks but also develop practical, locally driven responses. These responses include adjustments to livelihood strategies, reinforcement of informal safety nets and coordination of community-based resource-sharing mechanisms. In this manner, they demonstrate that displaced women are not merely passive data subjects but active producers of knowledge and decision-makers whose insights are vital to effective and inclusive climate and humanitarian initiatives.

Women as owners of their data

‘Kente Threads’ redefines power in data by shifting control to displaced women as active participants. Unlike traditional systems that view communities as mere data sources, this approach involves women as co-designers, co-researchers and co-leaders who choose questions, lead data collection, interpret results and steer advocacy efforts. This method replaces extractive models by ensuring community members influence the process and decisions. Consent, accountability and feedback are integral at each stage, with data created collaboratively to empower communities to represent and shape their narratives.

A clear example of this approach is observed in the work of the Pastoralist Girls Initiative (PGI) in Hagadera. Collaborating with the International Rescue Committee, PGI trains women and girls as enumerators, thereby equipping them to oversee data collection within their communities. This strategy not only enhances data quality but also strengthens local capacity and promotes ownership of the process. Beyond data collection, women and girls actively conduct routine, women-led safety and security audits in both refugee and host communities. These audits evaluate various protection risks, including those exacerbated by climate change, such as water scarcity, increased vulnerability to violence during resource collection, and risks associated with displacement and environmental shocks.



Monitoring visit by representatives from PGI during a VSLA women's group meeting in Hagardera, Garissa County, Kenya. Credit: Pastoralist Girls Initiative

Crucially, the process does not end with data collection. Women and girls are supported in interpreting the findings and are provided with platforms to advocate for action. Through these platforms, they engage with humanitarian actors, service providers and community leadership on priority issues identified through the audits. This model not only enhances the relevance, accuracy and timeliness of data but also shifts power by ensuring that those most affected directly influence the decisions that shape their safety, resilience and future. This approach makes the initiative unique and powerful. By using Kente Threads to track climate impacts, the project gathers missing data on gender and social groups. It changes how knowledge is built and shared, as community members contribute their insights and link them to current systems.

Refugee women-led groups collect data through deeply rooted, community-led processes, in quiet, familiar spaces, under trees, in homes, in community centres, where women, girls and gender-diverse people reflect together on how climate change is shaping their lives, and speak in their own time. They gather stories through oral testimonies, intergenerational dialogues and collective mapping

.....

of environmental changes, drawing on lived experience as a form of evidence. They share stories of changing seasons, failed harvests, rising heat and displacement. Knowledge is gathered not as extraction, but as something held collectively, through storytelling, listening and reflection across generations.

Local knowledge, local responses

Women map these changes with their own hands, tracing water sources that have disappeared, lands that no longer yield and the routes they now take to survive. Rather than relying only on formal interviews, they engage trusted community members, including religious leaders, community heads and women leaders, within ongoing relationships of accountability and care, ensuring that the knowledge produced is grounded, collective and owned by the community. In this way, data becomes something lived and felt, grounded in care, memory and everyday experience, and power begins to shift back into the hands of those who have both understanding and experience. They learn data analysis and practise advocacy. They use this knowledge to show what needs to change, and how. Their data shapes practical decisions about shelters, health services and resource use.

For example, women in Dadaab organised a fair water-distribution system, prioritising the most vulnerable households and coordinating access to reduce tension. What guided this system was not formal data, but grounded, community-held knowledge. Women drew on a deep understanding of household needs: who had more dependents, who was caring for children, older people, or people with disabilities, and who had the least access to alternative water sources. They mapped scarcity through daily observation, including which areas ran out fastest, where tensions were rising and which families were being left out. Conversations within the community – listening, cross-checking and building consensus – functioned as a form of collective data validation. Trust, proximity and accountability shaped decision-making, allowing them to prioritise the most vulnerable and coordinate distribution in ways that reduced conflict and ensured more equitable access.

There were no external frameworks guiding this, nor any data dashboards capturing it, and yet it worked. And here lies the problem. These experiences, these solutions, these insights often remain invisible in the systems that shape humanitarian response. Data is collected, but rarely by those living the reality. Priorities are defined externally. Analysis happens far away from the communities it represents. Displaced populations are grouped together, their differences flattened, their realities simplified.

Conclusion

Displaced women's experiences, shaped by gender, displacement, disability, age and social roles, form the complete picture. Refugee women in Garissa don't just face climate change, they respond to it, adapt and lead. Yet, decision-makers seldom include them. Climate justice demands fairness, access, inclusion and recognition, but limited funding, mobility and training hinder progress. The project empowers women to lead discussions, gather data, analyse and advocate, turning data into a community resource. Refugee women face higher risks, yet their insights are missing from data and decisions. Kente Threads aims to

.....

change this by listening, recognising diverse experiences and integrating them into community data for policy. Change is starting, valuing knowledge differently and highlighting new voices, beginning with the women we serve. The world must see and follow their pattern.

Anila Noor is a Feminist Visionary leader, New Women Connectors.

Madina Yunis is Gender and Health Coordinator at Pastoralist Girls Initiative.

Supporting communities rather than replacing them: the evolution of community-led response in Syria

Sara Bahsass

In many crises around the world, local communities demonstrate a remarkable capacity to organise themselves and respond to challenges, even amid weak public services and limited resources. In times of crisis, social solidarity networks are often at the forefront of addressing daily needs, whether through supporting the most marginalised families or organising collective efforts to improve local living conditions.

This reality has prompted humanitarian practitioners to rethink the very design of humanitarian responses. Rather than focusing exclusively on programmes planned and implemented by organisations, growing attention has turned to humanitarian responses built upon the initiatives and capacities that already exist within crisis-affected communities. Among these approaches, the community-led response (CLR) methodology stands out: one grounded in supporting communities' ability to identify their priorities and organise their collective responses to the challenges they face.

In the Syrian context, this approach has gained increasing importance throughout the long years of conflict, which have profoundly affected economic, social and service conditions across different regions. Faced with mounting pressures, communities themselves began generating initiatives to address the diverse challenges affecting their daily lives. These initiatives became a crucial launchpad for developing humanitarian practices that strengthen community action and support its role in crisis response.

Community initiatives as a promising starting point

Across many Syrian regions, resident-led initiatives have emerged to address issues affecting local realities. In some neighbourhoods, residents organise clean-up campaigns or efforts to rehabilitate deteriorating shared public spaces. In other areas, initiatives take shape to support the most marginalised families or to respond to environmental challenges threatening livelihoods, such as seasonal fires endangering agricultural land or natural resources.

These initiatives reflect the deep-rooted spirit of social solidarity within local communities. They often arise spontaneously from within the community itself, born of a shared sense of responsibility among residents toward their surroundings and one another. When a problem emerges, people begin discussing it in everyday encounters between neighbours or within their social networks, proposing ideas for improvement. Over time, these conversations translate into practical steps: residents begin organising themselves, distributing roles and pooling locally available resources to implement initiatives that address the problem.



A community group restores a public park in the Hama countryside, with support from the Survivor and Community-Led Crisis Response. Credit: Center for Civil Society and Democracy



This community spirit has been particularly evident during major crises. For instance, when the devastating earthquake struck areas of northern Syria in 2023, many residents immediately mobilised to take part in search and rescue efforts, evacuate the injured and assist affected families. In many cases, volunteer teams formed from within the same community, with neighbours and friends working together to organise rescue efforts and provide support to families who have lost their homes or loved ones. These responses were not the result of prior planning or organised intervention; rather, they were direct expressions of community solidarity, an impulse driving people to help one another.

This same spirit manifests in confronting seasonal fires that affect some agricultural and forested areas of Syria. When fires break out threatening crops and woodlands, residents and farmers cooperate collectively to limit the spread of flames, using simple tools at hand and local knowledge of the surrounding terrain. This is all in the effort to protect the land and properties that serve as the livelihood of many families.

These experiences reveal that community solidarity in Syria is not a phenomenon tied exclusively to organisation-supported initiatives. It is part of the social practices deeply embedded within the community itself. In many cases, organisational interventions come afterward to support or build upon these efforts. It is therefore essential to understand these community initiatives and recognise their role to develop humanitarian approaches that genuinely support community-led response and strengthen communities' capacity to face challenges.

Supporting community-led initiatives rather than replacing them

Building on these local initiatives, local organisations in Syria have begun exploring new ways to support community action rather than supplant it. In this context, the role of humanitarian actors shifts from directly implementing projects to facilitating processes that enable communities to develop their own initiatives. This typically begins through dialogue with community members themselves to understand the challenges and opportunities available to address them. Through these discussions, community members can identify their priorities and develop ideas for collective initiatives that respond to their real needs. They can then move on to organising themselves to implement these initiatives, drawing on local resources, volunteer efforts and the social relationships that form the foundation of collective action.

For example, in one neighbourhood, community discussion sessions revealed that elderly residents were struggling to access health services. In response, individuals took the initiative to form a local volunteer team to organise regular home visits and coordinate with local pharmacies to secure essential medications, drawing on the social networks within the neighbourhood. The organisation's role was limited to providing modest support to cover some supplies, without intervening in the management of the initiative. This helped preserve community ownership and strengthen its sustainability.

.....

In some cases, organisations can offer flexible, complementary support that reinforces community efforts and helps implement self-designed initiatives. This may include small grants, material resources, or limited technical assistance, while ensuring that core decisions remain in the hands of the community. This is essential to safeguard the continuity of these initiatives and ensure that they remain closely rooted in people's actual needs.

Local organisations play a pivotal role in enabling these approaches. Their proximity to communities and deep understanding of local context allow them to facilitate dialogue among community members and encourage the development of initiatives. In this framework, facilitators organise community discussion sessions in a structured manner: beginning with the invitation of diverse community groups (men, women, youth and elders), followed by an open discussion allowing everyone to voice the challenges at hand. The dialogue is then guided toward identifying shared priorities, generating collective ideas and ultimately agreeing on a feasible initiative, with roles and responsibilities clearly defined. Through this participatory process, practical initiatives take shape that reflect community needs and strengthen its capacity for self-organisation.

As these initiatives begin to take form, organisations can provide flexible, complementary support that strengthens implementation without replacing the community's role. This support reinforces the existing self-driven efforts, whether through volunteer work, local knowledge, or the social networks that communities rely on to organise their initiatives.

In this way, organisations do not replace community forces; rather, they play an enabling role that strengthens them and enhances their effectiveness. This contributes to responses that are more sustainable and more closely rooted in the local context.

An emerging community of practice and a new approach

As community-led initiatives expanded across Syria, the importance of sharing experiences among humanitarian practitioners became increasingly apparent. Spaces for dialogue began to form, bringing together practitioners from different organisations to discuss and exchange practical experiences related to supporting community initiatives. These professional meetings and workshops offer opportunities to collectively reflect on how to develop humanitarian practices suited to the Syrian local reality, to extract lessons learned from diverse experiences, and to explore the most effective approaches for supporting community initiatives without undermining their autonomy or weakening the community's ownership of them.

In this context, the Center for Civil Society and Democracy organised a reflective workshop in Damascus from 30 September to 4 October 2025, focused on mutual aid and the CLR methodology. The workshop brought together 30 participants from 12 organisations, all working in the humanitarian field, alongside local organisations working directly with communities in different parts of Syria. The workshop was held following a flexible pilot period that allowed organisations to explore and support existing local initiatives.

.....

The workshop was led by Syrian and international facilitators, who shared their experience applying this methodology across various contexts and discussed its core principles. This includes strengthening community ownership of the process, building trust, maintaining flexibility in response and relying on local resources. Practical tools for supporting community initiatives were also reviewed, including structured community discussion sessions, participatory prioritisation tools, micro-grant models and simplified community monitoring mechanisms that allow communities to evaluate the progress of their initiatives autonomously.

Among the workshop's key areas of focus were: first, how to identify initiatives already underway without disrupting them, and instead building on their work through direct, joint field assessment and analysis; second, thinking through how to amplify impact by providing requested training, nurturing relationships, or offering complementary material support to what already exists; and third, advancing the CLR methodology so that it becomes a reference model for the humanitarian, development and peacebuilding sectors.

The workshop provided participants the opportunity to share their field experiences working with local communities in Syria, discuss cases in which initiatives emerged from within communities themselves and reflect on the role organisations can play in supporting these initiatives without undermining community ownership. The discussion also touched on the challenges of implementing initiatives, including institutional and funding constraints that limit organisations' ability to support small-scale, flexible initiatives.

Thanks to this continued engagement, a community of practitioners is taking shape within the Syrian context, working to develop and strengthen the application of the CLR methodology. This reflects a notable shift in how interventions are designed and implemented. They are no longer limited to responding to immediate needs but are increasingly oriented toward supporting the community's role as the primary actor in identifying priorities and leading solutions. This direction opens space for more flexible and sustainable models, grounded in the exchange of experiences, skills and knowledge, thereby consolidating and expanding this approach within the Syrian context.

The group's work continues through 2026 with the aim of broadening the search for existing community initiatives, finding innovative ways to support them, assessing and refining working mechanisms in Syria, and sharing lessons learned with civil society groups and influencers.

For example, the experience of SEEN, a project launched by Action for Humanity, exemplifies a pioneering practical model for empowering local communities. The project's actual implementation began in Idlib in 2024, before gradually expanding to cover several areas on the strength of its achieved success and the growing demand for this approach. Initiatives under SEEN included direct infrastructure interventions (such as road rehabilitation, lighting and sanitation), education and health services, alongside environmental and economic initiatives, achieving tangible impact on people's lives. The project has sustained itself since 2024 through its reliance on knowledge transfer and capacity-building for local facilitators and volunteer teams, enabling communities to manage and



develop initiatives autonomously through maintenance, expansion and replication in other areas. This approach also helped establish a scalable model, one that extended beyond implementation to foster a culture of community action and consolidate the role of individuals as initiators and agents of change. All these factors contributed to the project's sustainability, transforming interventions from temporary responses into long-term development pathways.

Challenges and opportunities for the future

Applying the methodology outlined in a complex context such as Syria presents several challenges. On the one hand, organisations face difficulties stemming from funding systems that tend to favour pre-planned projects with predetermined outcomes, whereas community-led initiatives require greater flexibility in identifying, supporting and developing them. On the other hand, some administrative and institutional procedures occasionally limit organisations' ability to support the small-scale or fast-moving initiatives that arise within communities.

In addition, humanitarian workers need to develop new skills and working approaches suited to community-led initiatives. This approach requires a shift away from project implementation and toward the facilitation of community initiatives themselves. Building trust and relationships with local communities also requires sustained time and effort, a challenge in humanitarian environments characterised by rapid change and significant operational pressures.

Yet despite all of this, the accumulated experiences in Syria suggest that supporting community initiatives contributes to developing humanitarian responses that are more closely connected to local realities. It is increasingly clear that initiatives originating from within communities tend to reflect a nuanced understanding of the challenges faced by residents. When supported in ways that preserve community ownership, they can strengthen communities' self-capacity to address challenges with flexibility and develop more sustainable local solutions. This manifests in practice through communities' growing ability to self-organise, collectively identify priorities, manage available resources more effectively, and in the continuity and further development of some interventions even after external support has concluded.

Sara Bahsass is a humanitarian and development specialist in Syria. Her work focuses on cross-sectoral programming, coordination, stakeholder engagement and inclusive approaches.

From ‘affected populations’ to leaders: how Syrian refugees led an unprecedented humanitarian response in Türkiye

Areej Al-Mohammad

Syrian refugees began arriving in Türkiye in early 2012, shortly after the outbreak of the Syrian revolution. The waves of displacement grew steadily as the conflict expanded in scope and as military operations against Syrian cities and villages intensified. **By 2016, Türkiye had become the world’s largest refugee-hosting country**, with approximately 2.7 million registered Syrian refugees. Among the principal drivers of the surge in displacement during this period were the escalating military campaigns waged against cities and towns by the forces of the former regime and its allies, as well as the seizures by the Islamic State organisations of vast swathes of Syrian territory (most notably, the three eastern governorates of Deir ez-Zur, Raqqqa and Hasakah, along with portions of the governorates of Aleppo, Homs and Idlib).

The flow of Syrian refugees into Türkiye did not cease until shortly before the fall of the Assad regime at the close of 2024.

A significant proportion of Syrian refugees settled in the southern Turkish provinces of Urfa, Gaziantep and Kilis. Most had originated from the Syrian governorates of Raqqqa, Deir ez-Zur, Hasakah and Aleppo.

Several factors explain this geographic concentration. These provinces lie in close proximity to the Syrian border, making them a natural first point of entry. Many refugees also had pre-existing social ties with local Turkish communities of Arab descent. And perhaps most powerfully, many were simply following family members and relatives who had already settled there.

This article traces how Syrian refugee-led initiatives in Türkiye evolved and transformed over time and examines how they came to express themselves as a civic and humanitarian endeavour. It further reviews the interventions that were carried out and explores how accumulated knowledge and expertise were leveraged to develop experience, ensure continuity and secure long-term sustainability.

From ‘beneficiaries’ to leaders

At the outset, Syrian refugees in Türkiye were direct recipients of the support and assistance provided by international and Turkish organisations, as well as certain initiatives launched by the host community. There were few, if any, meaningful or clearly defined roles available to refugees in leading, or even participating in, humanitarian response operations. This reality, however, changed quickly. From early 2013 onward, the following decade witnessed a significant and cumulative shift: refugees began taking on increasingly active roles in leading and implementing response efforts, building on one another’s contributions over time.

.....

It began with grassroots initiatives launched by volunteer groups seeking to provide refugees with necessities such as household supplies, food staples, winter clothing, blankets, heating materials and school supplies. These goods were sourced through a combination of approaches, either through collecting donations from within the refugee community itself,³ reaching out to Syrian diaspora communities in the Gulf and Europe,⁴ or coordinating with organisations and official and civil society bodies to procure and deliver aid to those in need.

Alongside these efforts, a pivotal transformation took place with the emergence of Syrian civil society organisations as structured, institutionally grounded entities. These organisations brought with them a clear vision and methodology for humanitarian work, encompassing defined roles, mechanisms and objectives, and were staffed primarily by Syrians.

Volunteer groups, particularly women and youth, were among the first community groups these organisations sought to engage. They provided them with technical and administrative support, and opened doors to funding opportunities, grants, networking, training and capacity-building.

This period proved to be a defining moment and a mutually beneficial one for both sides. Civil society organisations gained access to volunteer teams and community networks as implementing partners, enabling them to advance projects, strengthen civic spaces and broaden community participation. Volunteer groups and teams, for their part, benefited in multiple ways. They were introduced to the concepts and practice of civic work. They gained structure, organisation and capacity. They took part in activities, training sessions and workshops.⁵ And perhaps most meaningfully, this period fostered new connections and collaborations among refugees arriving from different Syrian governorates, turning shared displacement into a foundation for collective action.

This collaboration between the two sides helped break down stereotypes held by some refugees about others. It strengthened social relations and the humanitarian and national dimensions to public discourse, while firmly establishing a values-based and rights-based framework as the guiding reference for all work and interventions. As a result, between 2014 and 2024 Urfa witnessed the rise of a dynamic space for civic engagement, activity and collective action.

The result was both fruitful and telling. Many volunteer teams were able to seize these valuable opportunities and transform into licensed, active civil society organisations capable of securing funding, support and resources. Examples include Ward El Balad, Nisaa Al Ghad, and the Euphrates, among others.⁶

3 A group of Syrian women in Şanlıurfa took the initiative to launch the ‘Open Your Wardrobe’ campaign, with the aim of securing winter clothing and distributing it to refugees in need.

4 Heating supplies and special Ramadan food baskets were secured by reaching out to Syrian donors; this initiative has become a regular fixture of Ramadan to this day.

5 This includes training in mobilisation, advocacy, empowerment, forming civil bodies, managing civil workspaces, network-building, policy development and role distribution, among other areas.

6 This is a translation of the official Arabic names:

(ورد البلد) (نساء الغد) (الفرات)

.....

In a conversation with us, Amal al-Hajj, founder and Executive Director of El Furat, an organisation active in the Turkish city of Urfa, spoke about the role played by the Center for Civil Society and Democracy (CCSD) in helping her volunteer team evolve into a licensed civil society organisation. Amal says:

‘Before obtaining official registration, the Center played a pivotal role in supporting the El Furat team through capacity-building and training in facilitation skills and the management of community sessions. This support helped strengthen the team’s readiness to carry out fieldwork professionally, increased members’ confidence in themselves and in their ability to lead initiatives and improved the quality of the activities implemented. Our team became able to carry out effective interventions and respond to the needs of our community in a more impactful way.’

After El Furat obtained official registration, its cooperation with CCSD evolved to include in-depth institutional support. Amal says:

‘The Centre provided us with the technical support needed to develop our strategies and define our long-term directions. It also contributed to developing our internal policies and procedures to strengthen governance and structured ways of working and offered us institutional guidance and mentoring to build a clear and effective administrative system.’

A space for collaboration

Alongside local community initiatives, the experience of ‘a space for collaboration’ emerged as a women-led model, originating in Türkiye before expanding to include active women from inside Syria and beyond. The initiative is built around coordination and exchange among women, and focuses on supporting community-driven efforts, whether or not external funding is available. This approach has given it a high degree of flexibility and staying power.

During the response to the 2023 earthquake, the Space for Collaboration played a meaningful role in making psychosocial support activities accessible to women affected by the disaster, while also connecting local initiatives and facilitating the exchange of expertise among active women. Today, it continues to advocate for Syrian refugee women, shining a light on the challenges they face and pushing for more inclusive responses.

This experience reflects an important shift. Women’s roles are no longer confined to participation in humanitarian response – they now extend to leading it and shaping its priorities, within a flexible model that transcends the conventional boundaries of humanitarian work. This collaboration has also contributed significantly to strengthening the institutional foundation of the El Furat organisation, elevating it to a higher level of professionalism. This has had a positive impact on the quality of its programmes and its capacity to work effectively alongside donors and partners.



The harrowing test: The 2023 earthquake

Through their civic engagement in organisations, working groups and community networks, Syrian refugees had transformed themselves from passive ‘beneficiaries’ into agile and responsive actors, capable of leading and participating in interventions during times of crisis. Perhaps the most compelling examples that support this assertion are what occurred following 6 February 2023, when the devastating earthquake struck Türkiye and northern and western Syria.

Less than 12 hours after the earthquake struck, a group of refugees converted one of the largest Syrian-owned cafés in Urfa into a shelter for displaced families. Over the course of a full month, they secured heating supplies and food necessities for more than 40 families by collecting individual donations and mobilising support from Syrian communities abroad. In parallel, communication and coordination groups formed across neighbourhoods and districts to aid those affected and to help relocate them to safety.

Car owners, for instance, placed their vehicles at the community’s disposal, transporting affected residents within Urfa and beyond, free of charge. A culture of shared housing also emerged in safer areas, with several affected families taking up residence together under one roof – particularly during the critical first week following the disaster. Meanwhile, young people with proficiency in Turkish stepped in to assist affected families wishing to travel outside Urfa, helping them complete flight bookings and providing interpretation services at the airport.

As for civil society organisations, they redirected all their projects and funding toward supporting earthquake-affected communities through collaborative initiatives and activities. The CCSO, working with its partners, supported initiatives to prepare and distribute food baskets, blankets, health supplies and stationery. It also organised psychosocial support activities for various community groups, particularly women and children.

The earthquake experience clearly demonstrated the capacity and resilience of community intervention networks in crisis response. Their performance stood apart from conventional interventions carried out by international organisations and official bodies. This distinction stems from two strengths these networks possess. First, they hold a deep and nuanced understanding of the Syrian context and its social spaces. Second, they can reach affected populations smoothly and safely, thanks to accumulated social relationships that have built strong bonds of trust between service providers and those they serve.

In major crises, community networks therefore represent a valuable opportunity for achieving a fast and effective humanitarian response. They draw on community-rooted knowledge, relationships and experience on one side, and on sound institutional capacities in terms of objectives and working methods on the other. That said, this complimentary picture does not erase real challenges. Organisations and working groups compete for funding. Coordination on where and when to intervene is sometimes absent. These issues call for new forms of collaboration and better joint coordination plans.



A Syrian volunteer team responds to the needs of the earthquake survivors in southern Türkiye (Kilis).
Credit: Center for Civil Society and Democracy

2024: The moment of great change

The collapse of the Assad regime in Syria at the end of 2024 was met with an overwhelming wave of joy. Syrians envisioned a state that would guarantee security and lasting peace for all of them. That joy, however, soon began to dissolve due to several factors, including armed groups operating with impunity, the proliferation of hate speech, the immense economic crisis, and the enactment of laws that disregard human rights and women's rights. All this produced deep frustration among many Syrian refugees in Türkiye and a growing reluctance to return, particularly among those from the eastern provinces.

In addition, a series of decisions and developments had already made it increasingly difficult for families who wished and were able to remain. Compounding this was a sharp decline in funding and support directed at Syrian refugees, civil society organisations and humanitarian bodies. As a result, a large share of Syrians in Türkiye lost their livelihoods. Community networks consequently suffered a drastic erosion in their capacity to intervene and provide support during humanitarian crises.

.....

These shifts compounded a set of challenges that community networks and civil society organisations had been contending with for years. They included the following:

1. The language barrier and communication difficulties between refugees, the host community and official bodies undermined accurate needs assessments and weakened the overall impact of humanitarian responses.
2. Hostile attitudes toward the presence of Syrian refugees in Türkiye, which at times crossed into deliberate political exploitation, combined with the absence of a strong, visible counter-narrative.
3. Legal and procedural obstacles surrounding the documentation of refugees. The majority held temporary protection cards, which prohibited movement between provinces without prior authorisation.

Taken together, these challenges obstructed the full realisation of Syrian civil and community expertise in Türkiye. That expertise had the potential to serve as a genuine force multiplier for humanitarian interventions in times of crisis. It could also have transcended Türkiye's borders and offered a relevant, inspiring model for civil work inside Syria itself.

Toward more equitable, refugee-led partnerships

It is essential to explore how the experience of Syrian refugee community networks in Türkiye can be built upon and sustained. This experience is the product of more than a decade of investment in effort and resources. It has succeeded in generating a civil and community reality that deserves serious attention and continued development. Realising this potential requires a participatory process in which all stakeholders contribute visions, ideas and proposals. The following are some recommendations we offer in this context:

1. Engagement with Turkish official and civil society bodies should be deepened. The aim is to identify, from a Turkish perspective, the strengths and weaknesses of Syrian community network activity. This serves several objectives: building mutual trust between the two sides, identifying shared goals and pursuing them jointly, tracking changes in Turkish laws and official procedures to ensure legal cover for initiatives and interventions, and cultivating partnerships and funding opportunities with Turkish counterparts.
2. Focused dialogues and roundtable discussions among Syrian community networks should be convened. Their purpose is to document the impact of the experience and to develop partnership proposals that can be channelled to Turkish civil society networks.
3. It is important to highlight the efforts made so far in meetings with donors and to encourage them to strengthen their support for these networks.
4. The Syrian landscape in Türkiye must be reassessed considering the recent changes that have reshaped the Syrian civil space. The goal is to understand the nature and scale of current needs and the scope for intervention. To that end, a structured programme of workshops, roundtables and

.....

focused dialogues should be developed, bringing together Syrian civil society organisations and community networks. These sessions should produce clear accounts of the experience, document success stories, map out challenges and draw out lessons learned. The outputs should be shared with relevant Syrian and Turkish official bodies and international organisations, with the aim of developing a strategy and action plan spanning at least five years.

We, the refugees, did not leave our land by choice. We could not prevent the tragedies, the catastrophes and the violations that befell us. Yet we found the strength to transform this bitter reality into a profound human experience. Through it, we gained knowledge, expertise and lessons that we aspire today to preserve and build upon. Our destination is a society grounded in peace, coexistence, equal citizenship and human rights.

Areej Al-Mohammad is a civil society activist based in Şanlıurfa, Southern Türkiye. She is a member of the Space for Collaboration initiative.

Assessing the impact of the Global Statelessness Fund on resourcing and decision-making power for affected communities in the Asia-Pacific

Subin Mulmi

Statelessness remains a serious and widespread human rights challenge globally. **Article 15** of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights affirms that everyone has the right to a nationality and that no one should be arbitrarily deprived of it. Yet conservative estimates suggest that at least **15 million people are stateless globally**, with tens of millions more living at risk of statelessness. Stateless individuals are often **denied access to basic rights and services** including education, healthcare, employment, housing and political participation, leaving them among the most marginalised populations worldwide.

The Asia-Pacific is home to some of the **world's largest affected populations**, including communities such as the **Rohingya, Bajau Laut** in Malaysia, and **hill tribe populations in Thailand**. Statelessness in the region is often rooted in entrenched patterns of discrimination, including exclusion of **minority ethnic groups, gender-discriminatory nationality laws**, and the legacy of colonial borders and **state succession**. Despite the scale and complexity of the issue, the global statelessness field remains **significantly under-resourced**, with many civil society organisations, particularly those led by affected communities, operating with limited funding and institutional support.

As a result, grassroots organisations advocating for stateless communities often rely on short-term project funding or sub-grants from larger non-governmental organisations (NGOs), limiting their

.....

ability to pursue long-term strategies or respond flexibly to community needs. At the same time, there is **growing recognition** that efforts to address statelessness must be led by affected communities themselves, whose lived experiences provide critical insights into effective solutions. Against this backdrop, initiatives such as the **Global Statelessness Fund (GSF)** have emerged to channel flexible, multi-year funding directly to stateless activists and impacted-person-led organisations while promoting participatory decision-making. This article examines the early experiences of organisations supported through the Fund in the Asia-Pacific region, exploring how this model influences organisational capacity, advocacy and the role of affected communities in shaping responses to statelessness.

The Global Statelessness Fund: a participatory model for resourcing stateless communities

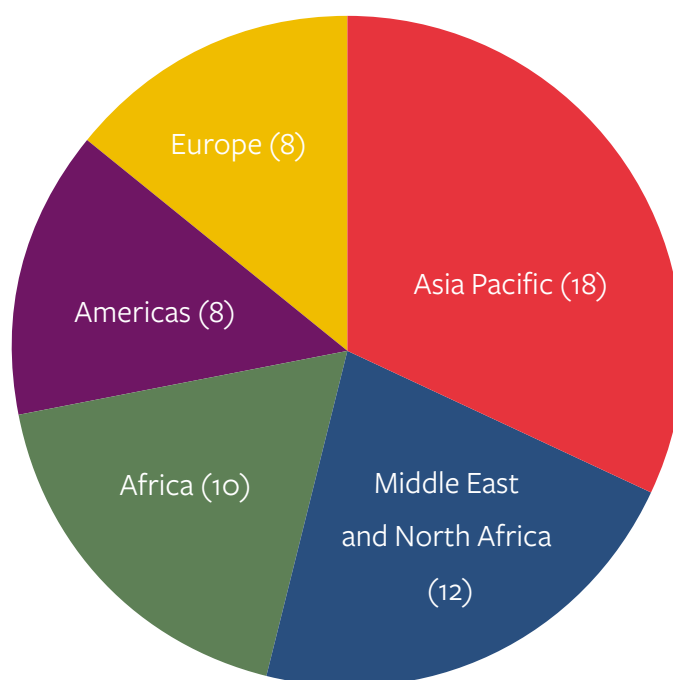
Despite being closely connected to many of the major global challenges of our time including **migration, discrimination, conflict** and **democratic governance**, stateless people and those affected by discriminatory nationality laws have often remained on the margins of international policy discussions. Their voices are frequently absent from decision-making spaces or **included only symbolically**, with limited opportunities to shape the strategies intended to address the injustices they face. At the same time, statelessness itself has historically been an under-addressed issue within the philanthropic sector, often **falling between the thematic priorities** of donors focused on human rights, migration, refugees, gender equality, or development.

The GSF was established in response to long-standing concerns about the chronic underfunding of statelessness advocacy and the marginalisation of affected communities within global policy discussions. Developed through consultations among stateless activists, civil society organisations and philanthropic donors, the Fund aims to address these challenges simultaneously by increasing resources for grassroots advocacy while transforming how funding decisions are made. **The initiative** forms part of broader efforts within the Global Movement Against Statelessness to centre the leadership, knowledge and priorities of stateless people themselves in efforts to address statelessness.

The GSF provides flexible, multi-year and unrestricted funding to organisations and activists working to address statelessness and discriminatory nationality laws. Unlike traditional grant-making models that often favour large international organisations, the Fund prioritises grassroots initiatives, including informal groups and organisations that may lack formal registration or access to conventional funding channels.

Since launching its grant-making activities, the GSF has supported **56 initiatives across 29 countries**, committing US\$3.35 million in flexible funding as of November 2025. These grantee partners work on a range of initiatives including nationality law reform, legal assistance, research and documentation on statelessness, community mobilisation and advocacy for equal nationality rights. The Fund aims to maintain geographical balance in its support, as illustrated in Figure 1.

Figure 1 Geographical representation of Global Statelessness Fund initiatives



Beyond financial support, the Fund provides a tailored Accompaniment Programme offering capacity-strengthening, peer-learning opportunities and networking platforms to help grantee partners build leadership, strengthen partnerships and advance advocacy strategies. The Fund also prioritises initiatives led by women and young people, recognising their important role in driving change. Governed through a participatory structure involving leaders impacted by statelessness alongside civil society and donor allies, the Fund seeks to shift power within the statelessness ecosystem. It also works to overcome structural barriers to funding by supporting organisations without formal registration; currently 20 supported initiatives are unregistered groups, many operating in challenging contexts. Together, these approaches aim to strengthen a more inclusive and community-led movement to address statelessness and discriminatory nationality laws.

Experiences of grantee organisations

To better understand how the GSF operates in practice, the author conducted a short survey with four organisations from the Asia-Pacific region that were selected as part of the Fund's first cohort of grantee partners. Although their operating environments vary significantly, several common themes emerged from their experiences with the Fund's grant-making model.



A group picture of one of the grantee organisations – Citizenship Affected People's Network (CAPN).
Credit: CAPN

Flexible funding and organisational stability

A key theme highlighted by respondents was the importance of flexible, multi-year funding. All four organisations reported that support from the GSF provided a level of financial stability that is rarely available through traditional funding mechanisms. In all cases, the funding supported core organisational needs such as staff salaries, operational expenses and administrative systems.

Three of the four organisations emphasised that the flexibility associated with the funding allowed them to allocate resources according to evolving priorities rather than predetermined project outputs. This flexibility enabled organisations to respond more effectively to changing political contexts, emerging advocacy opportunities and urgent community needs.

Strengthening institutional capacity

Beyond supporting programmatic activities, the funding also contributed to strengthening organisational capacity – building on extant skills, expertise and structures. Three organisations reported that the GSF enabled them to improve financial management practices, strengthen administrative procedures and invest in organisational sustainability. In some cases, organisations were able to build modest financial reserves or establish development funds aimed at supporting future activities.



Two organisations also noted that strengthened organisational structures enhanced their ability to engage with government institutions, international organisations and other civil society actors. Increased institutional capacity contributed to greater credibility in policy discussions related to nationality rights and statelessness.

Expanding advocacy and community engagement

Survey responses also indicated that the funding enabled organisations to expand their advocacy and community engagement activities. All four organisations reported that support from the Fund enabled them to undertake expanded advocacy initiatives. These included research and documentation on statelessness, public awareness campaigns, legal advocacy and engagement with policymakers. Three organisations also reported that the funding enabled them to strengthen networks within affected communities and provide information on legal rights and documentation processes.

Participatory and supportive grant-making

Another theme that emerged from the survey was the participatory and supportive nature of the Fund's grant-making process. All four organisations described the application and selection process as accessible and collaborative, with opportunities for dialogue and feedback throughout the process.

In addition, three organisations highlighted that the Fund's reporting requirements were relatively light compared with those of many international donors. Simplified reporting requirements reduced administrative burdens and allowed organisations to focus more fully on programmatic activities.

Two organisations also emphasised the value of engagement opportunities facilitated by the Fund, including town hall discussions and peer-learning spaces that enabled them to connect with other organisations working on statelessness.

Continuing structural challenges

Despite the positive experiences described by respondents, all four organisations emphasised that significant structural challenges remain. In several Asia-Pacific countries, regulatory restrictions limit the ability of civil society organisations to receive foreign funding or impose complex approval procedures for externally funded activities.

Two organisations also noted that activists working on nationality rights sometimes face political sensitivities, public criticism, or security risks in their operating environments. These challenges highlight the broader political and regulatory contexts in which stateless-people-led organisations operate.



Shifting power: from token participation to community leadership

A central ambition of the GSF is not only to increase financial resources for grassroots organisations but also to address long-standing power imbalances within the statelessness field. One such mechanism is the Peer Review Committee, which works alongside the Fund's Steering Group to help develop criteria and processes for selecting future cohorts of grantees.

One of the surveyed organisations reported that a representative from their organisation participated in the Peer Review Committee and was also involved in the Fund's Steering Group, providing a direct opportunity to contribute to discussions related to grant-making and the broader direction of the Fund. While the other surveyed organisations were not directly involved in these governance bodies, respondents emphasised the importance of initiatives that seek to strengthen the leadership of stateless and impacted communities within the broader movement.

Overall, the survey findings suggest that the GSF has contributed positively to strengthening grassroots advocacy and organisational capacity among its partner organisations in the Asia-Pacific region. At the same time, the experiences of these organisations illustrate that while innovative funding models can play an important role in supporting community-led initiatives, they cannot fully overcome the broader political and structural barriers faced by stateless communities and the organisations that represent them.

Challenges and limitations

While the experiences of partner organisations supported by the GSF highlight several positive outcomes, important challenges and limitations remain. The scale of available resources remains modest when compared to the global scope of statelessness and the large number of organisations working to address it. Although the Fund has provided critical support to selected grassroots initiatives, many civil society organisations in the statelessness sector continue to operate with extremely limited resources and rely on short-term or project-based funding. Expanding the availability of flexible funding for stateless-people-led organisations therefore remains an ongoing necessity.

The respondents also highlighted the broader structural and regulatory environments in which they operate. In several countries in the Asia-Pacific region, civil society organisations face complex regulations governing foreign funding, organisational registration and advocacy activities. These restrictions can limit the ability of grassroots groups to expand their work even when financial support is available. In addition, activism related to nationality rights can be politically sensitive, particularly where questions of citizenship intersect with issues of migration, minority rights and national identity. As a result, organisations and activists may face public criticism, political resistance, or security risks.

The GSF itself is also continuing to evolve. As an emerging initiative, its participatory grant-making and accompaniment programmes require ongoing reflection and adaptation. Lessons from the experiences of grantee partners will be important in shaping the future development of participatory funding mechanisms within the statelessness sector.

Conclusion

The experiences of partner organisations in the Asia-Pacific region supported through the GSF illustrate the potential of new funding approaches to strengthen community-led advocacy. Flexible, multi-year funding has enabled grassroots organisations to stabilise their operations, expand advocacy initiatives and respond more effectively to the needs of stateless communities. Participatory elements within the Fund's governance structure have also created opportunities for affected individuals to engage more directly in decision-making processes.

At the same time, the findings of this article highlight that funding alone cannot overcome the structural and political barriers faced by stateless communities and their advocates. Restrictive regulatory environments, political sensitivities surrounding citizenship policies and broader patterns of discrimination continue to shape the context in which advocacy takes place. Nevertheless, initiatives such as the GSF demonstrate how flexible funding and participatory governance can contribute to strengthening a more inclusive and community-led movement to address statelessness.

Subin Mulmi is a human rights lawyer and researcher based in Nepal. He currently serves Nationality For All as the Executive Director. He is also a member of the South Asia Working Group of the Asia Pacific Refugee Rights Network.

Designed to exclude: what pooled funds reveal about localisation in practice

Amrita Paul

Pooled funds and flexible grant frameworks are being positioned as a route to more locally owned humanitarian financing. The theory is to aggregate resources from multiple donors, reduce transaction costs and create pathways for smaller, community-rooted organisations to access funding they cannot reach through bilateral grants alone. While this is being carried out, the success of this practice, and for whom it is successful, are questions yet to be examined.

Refugee-led organisations (RLOs; and this includes refugee-led initiatives) and community-based organisations (CBOs) are a necessity. This article evaluates what actually happens when these organisations and communities try to access, manage and report on pooled funds – the practical reality, the friction, and the moments where the system helps them and where it fails them.

In the Asia-Pacific context, the vast majority of countries have no functioning national asylum framework. Legal protection is extremely precarious. The organisations and initiatives engaged with

displaced communities are often found to be informal and largely invisible to the formal funding architecture. The current environment of the contraction of international humanitarian funding – significant cuts from major donors, scaling back across large international non-governmental organisations (INGOs) and United Nations agencies – makes this more urgent.

The Asia Pacific Refugee Rights Network (APRRN) continues to work as an intermediary between large international donors and very small, often unregistered, community-led organisations in a number of countries in the region. What follows draws upon that experience to examine three questions:

- How do RLOs find a way in?
- After they receive funding, how do they manage it?
- What does the experience of reporting and accounting reveal about the mechanisms and their design; that is, who are they targeting?

Accessing funding: less an administrative and more of a political question

Most pooled-fund mechanisms require applicants to be formally registered with national authorities. In much of the Asia-Pacific region, this is a condition that many community-rooted RLOs and CBOs simply cannot meet – not because they are disorganised or unaccountable, but because formal registration is legally unavailable to them. For example, in Bangladesh, refugees face legal restrictions that prevent them from formal employment and bar them from opening bank accounts – the same policy and legal environment makes it impossible for RLOs and CBOs to register as formal organisations.



Life in a camp does not pause for funding cycles (Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh). Credit: Khair Ullah/ Rohingya Youth Initiative

.....

Organisations run by refugees in a country with no asylum system – and in which the term ‘refugee’ does not register with policy- and decision-makers as they do not ‘exist’ as a legal identity – are built and reliant on deep community roots, years of operational experience and genuine accountability to the people they serve. Yet, these organisations are ineligible for a grant that requires a registration certificate they cannot obtain.

In the Asia-Pacific region, most RLOs and CBOs access pooled funding through intermediaries only, with just a handful in direct partnership with funders, and only after they have been introduced by intermediaries. APRRN regularly operates as such an intermediary – acting as the accountable entity on grants while sub-granting to unregistered community groups. This only works where the upstream grant agreement explicitly permits it, which in turn requires deliberate negotiation at the design stage.

At the proposal design stage, APRRN makes an explicit case to the donor for this model of implementation – drawing on previous impact stories and documented examples of community-led delivery to demonstrate both its track record and the value of routing funds through RLOs and CBOs. This creates the opening to negotiate grant agreement language that expressly permits sub-granting to unregistered groups. Without this groundwork being laid early, such flexibility is rarely offered by default.

Managing: what stewardship looks like on the ground

APRRN has taken on a role as intermediary – sitting between large international donors or INGOs and very small, often unregistered, community-level organisations. Once an organisation has accessed funding, the nature of the challenge shifts. The concern shifts to managing or using the funds responsibly while implementing the activities promised under the grant.

Sub-granting, or channelling funds from larger grant mechanisms to smaller organisations, is time-consuming and can be frustrating. But it is also a workable solution, and ends up filling a gap in the current funding architecture. Large donors are often unable to contract directly with unregistered organisations or groups with no formal grant-management history. APRRN undertakes this work and continues to learn how to respond to the challenges of this evolving funding architecture by consistently asking its partners how best to improve by minimising bureaucracy, while maintaining accountability.

In practice, APRRN absorbs the most burdensome administrative work on behalf of its partners – including proposal writing, the time-consuming task of transferring of funds to designated individuals, donor reporting and negotiating the modalities of the grant agreement. This ensures that RLOs and CBOs are not gatekept from funding by administrative capacity they have not yet had the opportunity to build. At the sub-granting and implementation stage, bureaucracy is further reduced by designing activities in close collaboration with RLOs and CBOs in a way that aligns with their existing capacities and strengthens them institutionally, rather than imposing external frameworks that create compliance burdens without adding value. Accountability, in this model, is maintained not through heavy reporting requirements but through consistent and trust-based communication – regular exchanges between



APRRN staff and RLO and CBO members to surface both progress and challenges. This ongoing dialogue creates an environment where issues are identified and addressed early, and where partners feel supported rather than monitored.

Trust in both directions

The starting point is trust – and trust has to run both ways. Smaller organisations need to trust that APRRN is not simply another layer of bureaucracy between them and the resources they need, that we will advocate with and for them rather than manage them, and that we will not disappear after a grant cycle ends. Organisations trusting the intermediaries will take this opportunity to raise problems early and seek help when they need it. Also, they will share the successes in addition to the challenges.

In practice, this trust manifests itself in the candour that RLOs and CBOs bring to regular check-ins with APRRN. Partners have raised a range of challenges through these conversations – from shifts in camp policies that affect programme delivery, to legal barriers constraining their work, to internal capacity gaps caused by circumstances outside their control, such as the sudden loss of a key team member. Where APRRN is able to work with our partners – whether by advocating with authorities, adjusting workplans, or providing direct organisational support – it does. Where the challenges are systemic and beyond immediate resolution, naming them openly serves an important purpose: it informs APRRN's broader advocacy and ensures that grant reporting reflects ground realities rather than a curated version of success. This two-way honesty, about both achievements and setbacks, is itself a measure of the relationship working as intended.

Building this kind of trust takes time, across several grant cycles. It involves sustained engagement, honesty about limitations and challenges, and a willingness to accept uncertainty rather than defaulting to rigid systems that exclude the very organisations that donors are meant to support.

Accountability that fits the context

One of the most consistent tensions is reconciling the accountability requirements of donors – which are often designed for large, institutionalised organisations – with the realities of small community groups. A reporting template that takes a communications team three days to complete is not a minor inconvenience for an organisation run by a small team of refugee leaders and volunteers. It poses a barrier.

APRRN has worked to develop what might be called conflict-sensitive compliance: an approach to accountability that takes seriously the real-world conditions in which partner organisations operate. This entails simplified reporting focusing on what actually happened and what was learned, flexible timelines and regular check-ins to talk through challenges rather than waiting for a formal deadline to flag them. This does not mean abandoning accountability, but designing accountability systems that serve the relationship rather than replacing it.



For example, APRRN developed its own reporting format for sub-granted projects – one that deliberately moves away from the donor-facing compliance language that smaller organisations often find alienating. The format combines narrative and financial reporting, but is structured around what actually happened, what was learned and what challenges were encountered – rather than simply whether activities were delivered on time and on budget. Critically, it creates explicit space and ownership for partners to flag sensitive issues they may not feel comfortable raising in a formal donor report, including operational difficulties, protection concerns, or contextual shifts that affect implementation. It also invites partners to document the solutions they find, recognising that problem-solving in constrained environments is itself a form of organisational learning worth capturing.

The result is a reporting process that functions less as an audit and more as a structured conversation, one that helps APRRN identify where urgent support is needed while giving RLOs and CBOs a genuine voice in how their work is understood and represented.

Another illustration of this comes from APRRN’s sub-granting experience with a youth organisation in Bangladesh working on an access-to-education project for women and young girls. Early in the project, the organisation raised in a check-in conversation that some parents were hesitant about enrolling their daughters in literacy sessions – unconvinced of their value or uncertain about safety. Rather than allowing this to affect attendance figures and only surface in a final report, the team worked through it together. APRRN and the team at the organisation agreed that a community conversation – bringing together families already engaged in the project alongside those who were ambivalent – might shift perspectives more effectively than individual outreach. They also proposed assigning a companion to accompany girls commuting to classes, directly addressing parental concerns about safety. Both measures were put in place. The results were telling: attendance grew, and parents who had initially hesitated became some of the programme’s strongest advocates. As one parent shared after their daughter completed the sessions: ‘I did not think this would be helpful for us, but now I see what it has given her’.

This kind of exchange – candid, timely and grounded in trust – is precisely what standard reporting formats are not designed to capture, and it is what APRRN’s approach is designed to protect.

What enables honest reporting

Honest and useful reporting from RLOs and CBOs tends to emerge from genuine trust in the relationship and simplified formats, alongside a clear sense that the reporting will actually be used; that is, that someone will read it, respond to it and allow it to shape future decisions. Accountability systems need to be designed with the organisation and the relationship in mind, not with the audit trail as the primary output.



Diversity of funding matters

Another lesson is the importance of diversity of funding streams, both for APRRN as an intermediary, and for the organisations we partner with and support. Dependence on a single donor or a single type of funding is a structural vulnerability. When that source shifts – as has happened for the past year across the sector – organisations with no alternative collapse, as many have already. Building a more resilient funding base, including through pooled funds, smaller local donors and flexible mechanisms, is good financial management, but also a lifeline.

Conclusion

The experiences of accessing, managing and reporting on pooled funds point clearly to the fact that the barriers faced by RLOs and CBOs are not incidental features of an otherwise functional system. They are political choices and they are structural – built into mechanisms not designed with these organisations in mind and which reproduce their own exclusions unless actively disrupted.

The enabling conditions for success are also well understood – trusted intermediaries, simplified systems, relational accountability and genuine capacity support. None of this is new knowledge. The gap is not between knowing what works and not knowing. It is between knowing and consistently doing, at the level of mechanism design, donor policy and institutional practice.

Shifting power in the humanitarian sector does not happen overnight. The language changes faster than the practice. But the experiences described here point clearly enough at what needs to change – and that the organisations that have lived them are ready for a different kind of conversation.

Amrita Paul is Programme Officer at the Asia Pacific Refugee Rights Network. She focuses on access to justice frameworks, protection of detained refugees and asylum seekers in non-signatory states, and ensuring effective legal aid for foreign nationals across the region.

This article draws on the collective experience of APRRN's sub-granting work and the generosity of the RLOs and CBOs who have shared their learning along the way. The author also wishes to thank Hafsar Tameesuddin and Klaus Dik Nielsen for their input, support and feedback throughout the process.



**Humanitarian
Practice
Network**



ODI Global

This edition of **Humanitarian Exchange**
was edited by Sara Hussain

Humanitarian Practice Network (HPN)

ODI Global
Four Millbank
London SW1P 3JA
United Kingdom

Tel: +44 (0)20 7922 0300
HPN e-mail: hpn@odi.org
HPN website: www.odihpn.org
