



Lunch meeting

Priorities for meaningful local humanitarian leadership

27 May 2025, webinar

Summary report

While the sector is buzzing with conversations on ‘the humanitarian reset’, ‘radical change’ and ‘new humanitarianism’, questions arise on what exactly is being reset and who is meaningfully involved in reimaging and shaping the sector’s future. In a [Joint statement](#) from April 2025, civil society representatives and networks emphasise the need to move beyond small fixes. Instead, they call for a bold, principled transformation that shifts power, resources, and decision-making to local and national actors who are closest to the communities we aim to support, accelerating the slow progress made in the decade since the World Humanitarian Summit. While it’s clear that meaningful transformation will have to be grounded in frontline realities, conversations and consultations on the reset continue to largely centre around voices in New York, Geneva and other capital cities. On 27 May, KUNO and Oxfam organised a lunch meeting to discuss priorities for a truly inclusive, locally led, and fit-for-purpose humanitarian system.

A Local Intermediary Actor Network (LIA)-representative in Myanmar, started by sharing perspectives of local actors on the humanitarian reset. Local humanitarian actors and civil society organisations welcome current initiatives on resetting the humanitarian system and architecture, aiming at shifting power, promoting equal partnerships while ensuring accountability and transparency. These initiatives are necessary because local actors have a better understanding of local contexts, have easier access to affected communities, and are trusted by these communities. Myanmar faces a complex operational space due to the compounding effects of climate shocks and protracted armed conflict. To navigate this complex space, where international actors have limited access and much of the response has been left to local actors, local NGOs formed the Local Intermediary Network, which facilitates collective advocacy for promoting localisation, coordination and networking among local and national organisations.

Certain key messages from consultations with local humanitarian actors and civil society organisations have come forward. Firstly, the reset must lead to fundamental changes in longstanding power structures that have contributed to exclusion, inefficiency and lack of accountability to crisis-affected people. Secondly, the humanitarian system needs to become more inclusive, promote local leadership while building on the needs of local communities. Thirdly, there needs to be more focus on quality and multi-year, flexible funding. Lastly, organisations call for greater accountability in order to implement the Grand Bargain Commitments. In addition, country-based pooled funds are in general perceived as a good strategy, but should diversify beyond the OCHA-managed funds, and local and national actors should become the primary recipients of these funds and simplified and harmonised due diligence requirements should be promoted. The transformation of the humanitarian system cannot be imposed from above; it must be shaped and led by those closest to the challenges.

Nuria Gollo, Executive Director of MWADO - a women's rights organisation- and Chair of the ASAL Humanitarian Network in Kenya, shared experiences and success stories of localisation in Kenya. ASAL Humanitarian Network consists of over thirty local and national NGOs and aims to amplify local voices in effective humanitarian action by facilitating capacity-sharing amongst members, deployment of rapid response teams, influencing national and county policymaking, among other activities. An important priority area for the ASAL Humanitarian Network is localisation and partnership readiness, promoted through local leadership, capacity-sharing, and due diligence. Another key area of focus is advocacy and coordination on issues such as climate justice, overhead funding, partnerships with the United Nations and international NGOs, and the decentralisation of disaster funds to the county level. Thirdly, through multi-stakeholder engagement with the government, the United Nations, international NGOs, and various platforms, the Network aims to facilitate more effective humanitarian action.

The ASAL Humanitarian Network includes a women's caucus. Out of the thirty organisations that are currently part of the Network, ten are women-led. This women's caucus is a transformative initiative that amplifies women's voices and leadership in humanitarian action. The caucus influences county and national policy by contributing to gender-sensitive programming and planning, while also serving as a safe space for women who have faced exclusion in humanitarian action.

The primary recommendation of the Network is to make funding for local actors flexible, long-term, and predictable, including overhead and indirect costs. Additionally, more decision-making power should be granted to local actors, considering that these actors are not merely participants but first responders in times of crisis. Nuria

concluded her address with a call for action to donors and international NGOs. They must ensure joint decision-making with local and national partners, support local platforms that are rooted in communities and are driving systemic change, invest in co-creation spaces and humanitarian innovation led by local partners, and to support locally-led pooled funds to ensure a steady and dedicated flow of funding to local actors.

Reflection and discussion

The audience raised the question of how to simplify and harmonise due diligence requirements when working with local actors, as this is something that local partners advocate for. In the context of Myanmar, it is difficult to work with the current due diligence and compliance requirements as a local actor. For example, local actors are required to carry hard copies of documents, which can put them at risk due to the protracted armed conflict. The Myanmar Humanitarian Country Team is developing flexibility guidelines. During this process, local actors have had the opportunity to share their experiences and challenges in implementing programmes on the ground, as well as offer suggestions for reducing the risks they face. These guidelines will be implemented in Myanmar and can be shared with actors in other countries if successful.

More time was spent talking about the role that the women's caucus of the ASAL Humanitarian Network has had in shaping the humanitarian sector in Kenya. In most counties in Kenya, the caucus drives a gender-technical working group, which influences policy spaces at both county and the national level. In addition, the caucus provides a safe space for women's mentorship, leadership, and solidarity. This safe space helps women maintain a collective voice even when working in different countries. In addition, the caucus enables access to resources during a crisis for women-led organisations.

In addition, participants asked about the outlook of national and local actors on the prospects of quality funding. The speakers shared the experience that local actors often receive short-term - four to eight months - funding. Such short-term funding is insufficient for local organisations to operate effectively. Local organisations do not receive multi-year funding to cover both overhead and indirect costs. Therefore, once a project stops, the civil society organisation ceases to operate entirely and/or loses key staff and expertise.