



Dialogue: Addressing barriers to local actors in NGO security coordination

Thursday 26 March 2026 | 10.00 - 11.30 CET | Zoom

Summary Report

Introduction

This KUNO session drew on findings from a recent multi-country research initiative examining persistent disparities between international and local/national NGOs (L/NNGOs) in humanitarian security coordination, particularly in conflict-affected contexts. The research highlights how limited access to key decision-making spaces can constrain L/NNGOs' ability to shape humanitarian access strategies and safeguard their staff and volunteers, and it offers practical recommendations for transforming coordination structures into more inclusive and effective systems. Developed through a mixed-methods and collaborative design with L/NNGOs, INGOs, and academics, the study centres the experience and expertise of local actors.

Building on these findings and the lived experience of panellists, the session explored pathways toward systemic change, moving beyond tokenistic participation to operationalise the equal role of local humanitarian responders in shaping access, security, and protection outcomes. Speakers were **Diletta Salviati** (Policy and Research Manager, INSO), **Nadine Saba** (President, Akkar Network Development), **Sudhanshu Shekhar Singh** (CEO, Humanitarian Aid International), and **Elsa van Zoest** (Local Humanitarian Leadership & Learning Advisor, Oxfam). The session was moderated by **Rafael van den Bergh** (Research Coordinator, Protect Humanitarians).

The session has previously been hosted at the **Humanitarian Network and Partnerships Week**.

Key findings of the research: Barriers to participation

Diletta Salviati presented the key findings of INSO's research, which explores the experiences of frontline workers in humanitarian security coordination. The findings suggest that although local actors increasingly participate in safety coordination fora, structural barriers continue to exclude them from decision-making processes, despite being the most exposed to security risks.

INSO's research revealed a multi-layered set of barriers preventing equitable engagement. Firstly, intermediate donors and international NGOs frequently overlook opportunities to facilitate access to local partners, as evidenced by the fact that fewer than twenty-five per cent of INSO's research participants were introduced to security coordination by an international partner.

Furthermore, local actors are often not invited to NGO security coordination fora. Humanitarian security coordination requires safety and confidentiality, which results in memberships and codes of conduct. While this is understandable given the security risks, invitation pathways shape who enters coordination spaces and who doesn't. One of the underlying factors INSO

identified relates to neutrality and proximity. Although local actors' proximity to affected communities is recognised as a key factor in enabling access and programme implementation, international NGOs treat this proximity as evidence of compromised neutrality and increased liability in high-risk contexts. At the same time, the neutrality of international organisations is not subject to the same level of scrutiny.

Moreover, even when they are invited, practical barriers prevent local NGOs from participating in NGO security coordination. Local organisations often lack the time, staff, and financial resources to travel to urban centres where humanitarian security coordination fora are typically hosted. Additionally, given that most of INSO's research participants operate in conflict-affected contexts, long-distance travel is often unsafe. Even remote meeting options are often inaccessible, because digital access and connectivity are limited in contexts like the DRC and CAR.

Lastly, when local actors managed to be present in humanitarian security coordination fora, they frequently experienced exclusion from full participation and decision-making. This was partially due to language barriers, as the meetings are typically held in languages like English or French.

International organisations tend to participate more regularly in coordination mechanisms across all levels – regional, national, and international – while local actors usually only participate when coordination happens close to programme activities. Research participants described a pattern of knowledge hierarchy; despite being most at risk and passing on critical information like early warning signs and community dynamics, their insights had to be validated or reworded by international actors before being taken seriously. They were essentially used as a data source, rather than treated as a decision-making partner.

These insights led INSO to reflect on the definition of 'safety' within coordination spaces. Safe can be interpreted as confidential; being able to talk without fearing repercussions or leakage. But safety can also be understood as relational, meaning a space where all parties feel respected and heard, rather than sidelined because of their identity.

Intersectionality and Women's Participation

In response to Diletta Salviati's identification of barriers preventing local actors from meaningfully participating in security coordination, the other panellists identified which barriers they experience most acutely within their team.

Nadine Saba stated that one barrier doesn't topple the other, describing it as a circle where different variables feed each other. She highlights the relevance of intersectionality, for instance, as experienced by women from local organisations working with refugees. Women are frequently required to work harder and prove themselves to be taken seriously, which mirrors the experience of local NGOs in security coordination. She emphasized the importance of mentoring opportunities to strengthen the positions of women working in local NGOs.

Nadine Saba also witnesses international actors' tendency to assume local organisations are more prone to politicisation and corruption. It highlights the contradictory nature of the exclusion of local actors: international organisations want to work with local NGOs because of their embeddedness in affected communities, while simultaneously penalising them for their community connections. Meanwhile, no one questions international organisations' funding from Western governments.

Evolving duty of care

Elsa van Zoest explained that, as part of the wider Oxfam confederation, she is working on harmonising duty of care towards partner organisations. However, reaching a common position about Oxfam's role is complex due to the diversity of partners and their operational contexts. INSO's research has confirmed the need for organisations like Oxfam to expand its efforts beyond financial assistance, raising the question of how INGOs can meaningfully use their platform to ensure local actors are not merely present, but also heard.

These reflections bring Elsa van Zoest back to her experience in Syria. She recalls it was contractually required for partner organisations to inform Oxfam if they experienced any security incidents. Yet when Oxfam itself encountered a security issue, it was not yet common practice to inform its partners, highlighting the one-sided approach to information sharing. This sparked an internal shift, with Oxfam now being more intentional to share information and enable local actors to access relevant security coordination spaces.

Frontline workers

Sudhanshu Shekar Singh raised the question of whose expertise is recognised, and how the Humanitarian Reset and grand bargain influence these processes. He recognises the influence of capitalism on the humanitarian sector, resulting in people becoming secondary to financial resources. He also witnessed that unbalanced decision-making processes are transferred from urban contexts into local ones, in which foreign aid workers position themselves as bringers of information, rather than listening to local voices.

These complexities are compounded by ongoing global developments, such as large-scale conflicts that overshadow smaller crises, as well as the financial crisis that forces NGOs to downsize. In this situation, frontline workers are often the first whose jobs are sacrificed, as they are the least valued despite doing the most critical work.

What is needed is a critical and inclusive reflection of ongoing discussions in the humanitarian sector, such as the grand bargain and accountability, because those who are currently talking most are not the ones suffering from these systems.

Other recommendations and good practices given by the panel

The first recommendation given is to proactively invite local actors to NGO security coordination fora to create space for diverse perspectives and forms of expertise, while ensuring respectful and constructive engagement. This begins with recognising that participants enter humanitarian coordination spaces with different levels of power shaped by who they are, where they work, and the organisations they represent. This requires coordination to serve and adapt to different actors to create equity and proactively account for differences.

Moreover, there is a gendered dimension of equitable access within humanitarian security coordination. Gender is a key factor that determines power, the ability to influence decision-making, and the perception of knowledge and expertise. Women working for local organisations are often deeply embedded in the communities they serve, yet their expertise is not recognised to the same extent as that of their male counterparts. Mentoring programmes could help make NGO security coordination processes more accessible, including by demystifying specialised terminology and supporting greater female representation in security roles.

A prominent problem mentioned is the lack of resources for local organisations to participate in humanitarian security meetings or other activities, especially in conflict contexts, and when resources are already lacking severely: "You cannot do more with less". The availability of resources relates to the risk-sharing dialogue between donors and partners. One participant shared that their local partners were not informed that their unearmarked funding could be used for security means.