BUILDING A LOCALLY DRIVEN HUMANITARIAN FUTURE IN SOMALIA

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This research paper examines the evolving landscape of humanitarian localization in Somalia and Somaliland since 2020. It highlights progress in local leadership, funding access and coordination, while underscoring persistent power imbalances, limited direct funding and fragmented capacity-sharing efforts. Drawing on extensive stakeholder insights, the study identifies barriers and opportunities for systemic change and offers strategic recommendations for donors, INGOs, LNNGOs and government actors. It emphasizes the need for power sharing, long-term capacity investment and genuine community engagement to achieve a more equitable, sustainable and locally led humanitarian system.

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Acronyms

DRA	Dutch Relief Alliance
HCT	Humanitarian Country Team
ICCG	Inter-Cluster Coordination Group
ICR	Indirect Cost Recovery
INGO	International Non-Governmental Organization
KCS	Kwality Consulting Solutions
KII	Key Informant Interview
LNNGOs	Local and National Non-Governmental Organizations/Actors
NRC	Norwegian Refugee Council
SADO	Social-Life and Agricultural Development Organization
SHF	Somalia Humanitarian Fund
SHH	Somalia Humanitarian Hub
SMWCDO	Somali Organization for Minority Rights and Development Organization
SOLO	Somali Lifeline Organization
SWS	South West State
UNOCHA	United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs
USAID	U.S. Agency for International Development
WASDA	Wajir South Development Association
WASH	Water, Sanitation and Hygiene
WHH	Welthungerhilfe
HUCOCA	Humanitarian Country Capacity Assessment
DRRIPs	Disaster Risk Reduction and Intervention Plans
HADMA	Humanitarian Affairs and Disaster Management Agency – Puntland
NADFOR	National Disaster Preparedness and Food Reserve Authority – Somaliland
ERP	Enterprise Resource Planning
SOMJR	Somali Joint Response

Executive summary

This Phase II assessment of localization in Somalia[1] and Somaliland builds on the 2020 *Breaking the Localization Deadlock* report, hereafter referred to as Phase I. While Phase I focused primarily on mapping organizational capacities, this second phase (conducted from January to May 2025) shifts towards assessing leadership transformation, power dynamics, and the practical implementation of localization commitments within the Somalia Localization Framework and the Grand Bargain.

This research draws on 24 key informant interviews (KIIs)—including 14 representatives from local and national NGOs (LNNGOs), five from INGOs, two government stakeholders, two community leaders and one UN representative—as well as six diverse focus group discussions. It provides an updated analysis of localization progress, persistent barriers and emerging opportunities.

Our analysis shows that gradual but uneven progress has occurred since Phase I. Local actors (especially LNNGOs) are increasingly visible in humanitarian coordination spaces and are assuming more strategic roles. Some have gained limited access to direct funding, particularly through pooled mechanisms like the Somalia Humanitarian Fund (SHF) and consortiums like the Somalia Resilience Programme (SomRep) and Somalia Joint Response (SOMJR). However, despite this improved visibility, power asymmetries remain deeply entrenched. INGOs and donors continue to dominate decision-making and retain control over most financial resources, constraining the autonomy and leadership of local actors. Similarly, although LNNGOs' operational capacities have strengthened in areas such as project management, financial accountability and technical delivery, significant gaps persist in securing flexible, multi-year funding, achieving financial sustainability, retaining skilled staff and accessing advanced technical expertise. These challenges are compounded by limited influence in key humanitarian coordination and decision-making spaces.

The role of government institutions has also shown modest improvement since Phase I. At the federal level, the Somali Disaster Management Agency (SoDMA) has begun to reassert its disaster management mandate, convening national humanitarian forums and launching preparedness initiatives such as the 2024 La Niña Mitigation Strategy. At the same time, member states such as South West State and Puntland have strengthened their coordination platforms, while Somaliland's National Disaster Preparedness and Food Reserve Authority (NADFOR) has advanced localized preparedness and response mechanisms. Across all levels, however, serious capacity and resource limitations persist.

The assessment also highlights mixed progress on gender equality and inclusion. Women's leadership within LNNGOs has improved in some cases, but systemic barriers, patriarchal norms and a lack of targeted support continue to restrict women's access to senior leadership roles. Community perceptions of local actors remain favourable, recognizing their contextual expertise and responsiveness. However, there are misconceptions about the financial independence and decision-making power of LNNGOs, and achieving meaningful community participation in program design and delivery remains a challenge.

Comparison with Phase I reveals that while technical capacity-strengthening efforts have had some positive impact, critical structural barriers particularly in funding flows, trust and power sharing remain largely unchanged. Phase II findings indicate that while more local actors are present at the table, they often lack real influence over strategy and resource allocation.

To advance genuine localization, this study recommends:

- Long-term capacity investment beyond project-based training to strengthen institutional sustainability, leadership pipelines and financial resilience.
- Increased direct and flexible funding to LNNGOs to enable strategic autonomy and reduce dependency on international intermediaries.
- Leadership development and mentorship initiatives to build second-tier leadership, including dedicated support for women and leaders from minority groups.
- Stronger collective advocacy by LNNGOs to enhance their bargaining power and influence in coordination platforms.
- Co-creation and accountability frameworks to ensure that partnerships are equitable, transparent and driven by mutual learning.
- Support for government capacity – such as technical assistance, policy development and institutional strengthening; to enable stronger national ownership, alignment with humanitarian strategies, and long-term planning.

Ultimately, meaningful localization in Somalia and Somaliland requires moving beyond rhetoric toward genuine power sharing, equitable funding and the recognition of local actors as leaders—rather than just implementers—of humanitarian action.

1. Introduction and methodology

1.1. Background and rationale

Somalia, including its federal member states such as South West State, South Central, Puntland and regions like Somaliland, continues to face complex, recurrent humanitarian crises.[2] The Somalia Localization Framework[3] provides a nationally owned structure aimed at increasing direct engagement and funding for local actors, enhancing their decision-making power and promoting equitable partnerships with international organizations. It is intended to shift both practice and mindset from internationally led responses to those driven by Somali actors.[4,5] Strengthening localization in Somalia is particularly critical given that local organizations possess deeper contextual knowledge, trusted community relationships and the ability to respond more quickly and sustainably than external actors. By placing resources and decision-making in the hands of Somali institutions, humanitarian interventions can be more culturally appropriate, cost effective, and better aligned with long-term resilience goals.

It is against this backdrop that this Phase II assessment was commissioned in early 2024, to explore how the humanitarian system in Somalia is localizing leadership in response to these complex emergencies.

For the purpose of this study, local humanitarian leadership is defined as the ability of LNNGOs to lead, influence and shape humanitarian decision-making, response design, coordination and implementation at all levels.[6] Localization is understood as the process of systematically shifting power, decision-making, and resources towards local actors, with a specific focus on enhancing leadership, funding and institutional capacity.[7] This definition aligns with the Somalia Localization Framework and the commitments of the Grand Bargain.[8]

Phase I refers to the 2020 Breaking the Localization Deadlock report[9], which primarily mapped organizational capacities and the operating landscape of LNNGOs. Phase II builds directly on that baseline, taking the analysis further by evaluating the operationalization of localization principles and assessing leadership transformation among local actors in recent humanitarian responses.

1.1.1. Research objectives

This study was conducted between January and May 2025 and is guided by the following objectives:

1. **Evaluate localization progress** by assessing how localization efforts have evolved since the 2020 *Breaking the Localization Deadlock* report identifying both advances and persistent gaps.
2. **Analyze the operationalization of localization principles**, specifically examining how leadership, participation, equitable partnerships and capacity strengthening are being applied in Somalia's humanitarian response.
3. **Document best practices and persistent challenges**, identifying effective localization strategies as well as barriers that hinder full implementation of localization

commitments.

4. **Assess alignment with existing frameworks**, including the Somalia Localization Framework and Grand Bargain commitments, to understand whether current humanitarian practices support or diverge from these goals.
5. **Develop actionable, context-specific recommendations and a roadmap** for enhancing localization efforts, focusing on sustainable local leadership and equitable humanitarian partnerships.

1.2. Methodology and approach

1.2.1. Research design

This assessment utilized a mixed-methods approach, combining qualitative and quantitative data collection to explore the multi-dimensional nature of localization in Somalia. The study draws on the Somalia Localization Framework[10] and the Grand Bargain as the primary conceptual reference points, focusing on key elements such as leadership, funding, capacity strengthening and partnership equality. The research scope covered the humanitarian sector, but also included actors involved in resilience building, development and peacebuilding due to their operational overlap and influence in the humanitarian space in Somalia.

The assessment does not claim to offer exhaustive coverage but rather attempts to capture a broad and representative perspective across different regions (South-Central Somalia, South-West State, Puntland and Somaliland) and humanitarian sectors.

1.2.2. Data collection

The data collection process included a detailed desk review of relevant documents (including Phase I, the Grand Bargain commitments and Somalia-specific policy documents). Twenty-four key informant interviews (KIIs) and six focus group discussions (FGDs) were conducted between January and May 2025. Two of these FGDs were with men, two with women, one with young men and one with young women. Geographically, two were carried out in Baidoa, one in Mogadishu and three in Somaliland among internally displaced persons (IDPs). Key informants included representatives from LNNGOs, INGOs and UN agencies. The approach also utilized the Humanitarian Country Capacity Assessment (HUCOCA[11]) tool, designed to assess local humanitarian leadership and institutional capacity across key domains such as governance, leadership, participation, funding access and coordination. HUCOCA provides a structured, locally grounded framework to identify both strengths and gaps in the localization ecosystem.

Table 1: Respondent sample composition

Stakeholder group	Number of KIIs/FGDs	Gender distribution
Community-level stakeholders (local leaders, clan elders, media)	2	2 men
Local and national NGOs (LNNGOs)	14	9 men, 5 women
International NGOs (INGOs)	5	4 men, 1 woman
UN Agencies	1	1 man

Stakeholder group	Number of KIIs/FGDs	Gender distribution
Government/state agencies (South West State and Puntland)	2	2 men
IDP, adult male	2	2 male FGDs
IDP, adult female	2	2 female FGDs
Youth FGD	2	1 for young men and 1 for young women
Total	**24 KIIs and 6 FGDs**	**KII (8 men, 6 women)** **FGD (3 male FGDs and 3 female FGDs)**

Notes: The table shows that a total of 24 key informant interviews and 6 focus group discussions were conducted, with diverse stakeholders. Most KII respondents were men, while FGDs were evenly split between male and female groups, ensuring representation across community leaders, NGOs, UN, government, and displaced populations.

The respondent sample consisted of 24 key informant interviews (KIIs) and 6 focus group discussions (FGDs). The KIIs included 14 men and 10 women, while the FGDs were segregated by gender, with three male and three female groups. The interviews followed a semi-structured format, exploring localization progress, power dynamics, funding access and leadership challenges. Some KIIs preferred not to be named; therefore, organizational names have been withheld throughout the report to respect confidentiality.

While the primary focus was on humanitarian actors, the inclusion of development and resilience actors reflects the integrated nature of humanitarian programming in Somalia, where siloed approaches are rarely feasible. This intersectionality was carefully considered in both sampling and analysis.

1.2.3. Limitations and ethical considerations

The research faced typical challenges, including the unavailability of some key stakeholders and occasional reluctance to participate due to competing priorities. To mitigate this, the research team applied flexible scheduling, triangulated data from diverse sources and ensured broad regional representation. Ethical safeguards were rigorously applied, including securing informed consent, maintaining participant confidentiality and using culturally sensitive interview techniques. Where respondents preferred anonymity, their identities were fully protected.

2. Shifting humanitarian dynamics and localization progress

This section presents the key findings of the Phase II localization assessment in Somalia, covering the evolution of humanitarian needs and the role of local actors between 2020 and 2025. The section also examines partnership dynamics; shifts in the operational landscape; community perspectives on local leadership; and the progress and limitations in gender equality, inclusion and power-sharing.

2.1. Changes to local actors' roles and influence between 2020 and 2025

2.1.1. The humanitarian context

Between 2020 and 2025, humanitarian needs in Somalia were deeply shaped by recurrent and intensifying regionally specific crises that reflected both climatic shocks and political complexities. The 2023 drought (one of the most severe in decades), followed by devastating Deyr season floods in December 2023, displaced over 1.6 million people and pushed an estimated 6.5 million into acute food insecurity.[12] These shocks exacerbated the vulnerabilities of drought-affected communities and overwhelmed already-fragile infrastructure, compounding public health risks – particularly for women, children, the elderly and people with disabilities. In addition, Somalia's humanitarian context has evolved in terms of complexity, scale and response dynamics. Protracted displacement has worsened,[13] with many communities trapped in cyclical vulnerability with limited access to durable solutions.

More specifically, in South West State's Bay and Bakool regions, the 2023[14] drought devastated crops and livestock, leaving communities in Emergency (IPC Phase 4) conditions, while subsequent floods worsened public health risks. Beledweyne and Middle Shabelle experienced catastrophic flooding during the December 2023 Deyr rains,[15] displacing tens of thousands and trapping families in long-term vulnerability. In Gedo, ongoing insecurity and federal–state tensions disrupted humanitarian access, delaying life-saving assistance during peak drought conditions and increasing child malnutrition rates.

Other areas faced equally acute challenges. In Puntland's pastoral zones, repeated failed rains led to severe livestock losses, devastating pastoralist livelihoods despite targeted resilience programs. Along the contested Somaliland–Puntland borderlands in Sool and Sanaag, overlapping drought impacts, clan disputes and administrative restrictions complicated aid delivery and coordination. Together, these examples highlight the varied and localized nature of Somalia's humanitarian crises, underscoring the importance of broad regional representation in both research and response to ensure diverse needs and perspectives are addressed.

Political developments, particularly federal–member state tensions, have influenced coordination, access and the delivery of aid.[16] At the same time, there has been a gradual shift in donor and agency priorities toward resilience-building and the humanitarian-development-peace nexus, with greater emphasis placed on locally led responses. While this shift has opened new opportunities for localized action, it has also exposed capacity and coordination gaps within the existing humanitarian architecture.

2.1.2. The role of Somali-led organizations

In response to these worsening crises, Somali-led organizations have progressively transitioned from delivery partners to strategic humanitarian leaders. Organizations such as Wajir South Development Association (WASDA), Zamzam Foundation, NEXUS, Somali Lifeline Organization (SOLO), KAALO, Somali Organization for Minority Rights and Development (SMWCDO), Social-Life and Agricultural Development Organization (SADO) and the Somali Humanitarian Hub (SHH) have assumed expanded roles in project

design, coordination and policy advocacy. New consortia such as NEXUS, which evolved from a coordination platform to a legally registered national consortium, have deepened local actors' collective capacity to influence humanitarian policy and funding structures.

Many organizations have successfully adopted digital financial systems and enterprise resource planning (ERP) tools to improve financial transparency and donor compliance. For example, under the Dutch Embassy-funded 'Actualization of NEXUS Platform' project, implemented by Oxfam Somalia, eight local NGOs (TASCO Somaliland Community [TAAKULO], Save Somali Women and Children [SSWC], WASDA, KAALO, Center for Peace and Development [CPD], Horn of Africa Voluntary Youth Committee [HAVOYOCO], SADO, and Gargaar Relief Development Organization [GREDO]) received tailored support to integrate ERP systems into their finance, HR, procurement and project management operations. These upgrades have enhanced data accuracy, real-time reporting and compliance with donor requirements, as documented in the NEXUS Annual Narrative Progress Report (2023–2024).

International NGOs (INGOs) and donors, including Save the Children, Concern Worldwide, Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC), Welthungerhilfe (WHH), United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (UNOCHA) and Oxfam Somalia, have progressively integrated localization into their operational strategies. Oxfam Somalia,[17] in particular, has actively supported leadership development among local partners, facilitated power-sharing within consortia, and prioritized direct funding to Somali NGOs.

Table 2: Trends in direct funding to local NGOs (2020–2024)

Year	Funding source	Percent to local NGOs	Notes	Source
2020	Somali Humanitarian Fund (SHF)	Approx. 10%	Limited direct access	KII with SHF
2024	Somali Humanitarian Fund (SHF)	Approx. 70%	Significant progress	KII with SHF
2024	Save the Children	31%	Up from 15-16% in 2021; 50% target by 2027	KII with SCI
2024	NEXUS Members	30-50% of budgets	Increase from 10% in 2020	KII with NEXUS
2020	Oxfam	Approx. 10%-25% of the budget	Not fully achieved	See endnote
2024	Oxfam	Around 50%-60%[18]	Significant progress	See endnote

Notes: The table shows that while LNNGOs have increased their presence across humanitarian coordination platforms, their influence varies. Participation is strongest and most influential in sub-national clusters and joint consortia, while involvement at higher-level forums like the Humanitarian Country Team and ICCG remains limited or marginal.

Between 2020 and 2024, direct funding to local NGOs in Somalia saw a substantial increase across major donors. The Somali Humanitarian Fund's allocation grew dramatically from approximately 10% to about 70%, while other organizations like Save the Children and Oxfam also reported significant rises, often doubling or tripling their previous figures. This trend reflects a sector-wide shift, with many donors setting even more ambitious targets for direct local funding by 2027.

The operational space for local and national NGOs (LNNGOs) has significantly expanded over the past five years. LNNGOs have increasingly occupied strategic leadership positions, co-chaired coordination forums, and accessed direct funding, including SHF allocations. For instance, KAALO implemented over 20 humanitarian programs in 2023 alone, while Zamzam Foundation now represents local NGOs on the Humanitarian Country Team (HCT).

Partnership dynamics between INGOs and LNNGOs have shifted from transactional subcontracting towards more strategic and equitable relationships. Save the Children, Concern Worldwide, NRC and Oxfam Somalia have actively worked to embed local partners in decision-making, pass on a share of overhead costs and support capacity strengthening as a process of peer-to-peer knowledge sharing rather than unidirectional capacity building.[19]

However, power asymmetries between INGOs and local organizations persist. Local actors interviewed for this study frequently reported that despite being consulted, major decisions are often predetermined by international partners. Challenges such as exclusion from proposal co-design, limited access to indirect cost recovery and unequal budget negotiations remain systemic barriers. INGOs' complex compliance systems, coupled with donors' risk aversion, disproportionately disadvantage local actors.

Quotes from local organizations reinforce these dynamics:

> *'We want to co-create, not just receive subcontracts. We are not only responders; we are leaders in our communities.'* – *Local NGO director*

> *'INGOs still control the resources and the space. Localization should not stop at rhetoric.'* – *Local NGO leader, South West State*

2.2. Changes in the humanitarian landscape affecting local actors

As well as the complex humanitarian shifts driven by climate-induced disasters, protracted displacement and persistent insecurity and conflict, the localization agenda has advanced against a backdrop of changing donor commitments. The temporary USAID funding freeze in early 2025 was a major turning point that exposed the fragility of Somalia's humanitarian ecosystem, particularly its heavy reliance on a single donor. In 2020, the U.S. accounted for nearly half of Somalia's humanitarian aid, and by 2025, 70% of NGOs (national and international) were receiving funding from USAID and BHA (Bureau for Humanitarian Assistance).[20] When more than 50% of those organizations were issued stop-work orders, including those with indirect funding, it resulted in widespread program paralysis and service disruption. This crisis triggered renewed discussions around aid sovereignty and prompted several international and local organizations to explore alternative funding sources and local resource mobilization strategies to mitigate such future shocks.[21]

INGOs frequently retain primary control over decision-making, with local partners often excluded from high-level negotiations or reduced to the role of project implementers. Funding remains largely project bound and short term, with few opportunities for sustained, flexible and multi-year support for local actors.

Direct financing to local and national non-governmental organizations (LNNGOs) has improved but remains limited. NEXUS members now manage up to 30-50% of project budgets, a notable increase from approximately 10% in 2020. The Somali Humanitarian Fund (SHF) has significantly expanded its direct support to national NGOs, with nearly 70% of its funding now allocated to these organizations. Save the Children has also increased its local partner funding from 15-16% in 2021 to 31% in 2024, with a target of 50% by 2027, and is pioneering indirect cost recovery (ICR) mechanisms for LNNGOs.[22]

2.3. Community perspectives on local leadership and localization

Across all FGDs, communities repeatedly recognized local and national NGOs as being more present and responsive than international actors. Their proximity to communities, cultural understanding and ability to communicate directly were seen as major strengths. Women-led organizations were especially appreciated by the beneficiaries and community members for listening to community needs and engaging women respectfully during distributions or outreach. However, participants also expressed concern about the short-term nature of these interventions and emphasized that these improvements remain limited.

Some community members reported modest improvements in aid coordination and relevance. For example, according to them, cash-based assistance is more frequently used, giving families the flexibility to prioritize their own needs. Programs have also become slightly more sensitive to cultural and gender dynamics. Women are increasingly visible in aid delivery roles, especially in health and hygiene promotion. There were also positive mentions of young people being trained in practical skills like carpentry and tailoring.

Yet these gains are fragile. Basic needs are still unmet, and most initiatives are short lived. Support for education, livelihoods and mental health are notably lacking. Recurrent droughts, inflation, and weak program continuity make it difficult for communities to build resilience. Participants called for longer-term investments and locally driven solutions that go beyond immediate relief.

Community voices highlight a growing preference for local organizations as humanitarian responders. Local actors are perceived to have deeper contextual understanding, stronger community trust and greater accountability to affected populations. Beneficiaries[23] across Somalia (including Puntland and Somaliland) emphasized that local organizations are often the first responders during crises and provide culturally appropriate assistance. This sense of greater accountability is felt in the way local organizations stay close to the people they serve (not just during emergencies, but every day). Their regular presence in communities helps build genuine relationships and open lines of communication. People know who they are, where to find them, and how to raise concerns. Whether it's through a simple phone call, a community help desk, or informal conversations after meetings, local actors often listen more actively and adjust more quickly. This closeness allows them to respond in real time and adapt support based on what people need—strengthening both trust and local ownership. However, FGD respondents mentioned that once project funding ends, the presence of local organizations often diminishes, limiting their sustainability and overall impact.

Communities also expressed concerns about potential bias, lack of neutrality and uneven service coverage when local organizations dominate. Clan-based affiliations and local power dynamics can influence aid targeting, underscoring the need for robust accountability mechanisms.

> *'We trust the local organizations because they understand us, but sometimes, the aid goes to people close to them first.' – Community elder*

> *'Local NGOs should not just be like the international NGOs. They must remain close to us, not just manage projects from offices in the city.' – Displaced woman, Baidoa*

2.4. Progress in women's leadership, gender equality and inclusion

Women's leadership within local humanitarian organizations has shown measurable progress, but transformation remains partial and constrained. Organizations like SOLO and KAALO have set benchmarks, with women holding over 60% and 50% of leadership positions, respectively. Oxfam Somalia and Save the Children have deliberately partnered with women-led and minority-led organizations to promote gender equality within consortia.

Despite these advancements, gender equality (defined here as the fair distribution of power, opportunities and resources among people of all genders) is far from being achieved. The sector continues to experience male dominance in decision-making, with most local NGO boards and leadership positions occupied by men. Structural barriers such as inflexible work arrangements, limited career progression pathways and persistent social norms inhibit women's full participation and leadership.

Local actors emphasized that men could act as both gatekeepers and potential allies in advancing gender-transformative change. Men in leadership positions within LNNGOs, INGOs and community structures can play a critical role in challenging exclusionary practices and championing inclusive governance.

Oxfam, Save the Children and WHH have promoted practical measures to support women's leadership, such as mentorship programs, flexible work conditions and support for women-led organizations. Yet these efforts require scaling and more systemic adoption across the sector. Gender-transformative policies (those that actively dismantle patriarchal and exclusionary structures) are still not widely adopted. Instead, many organizations continue to apply gender-sensitive or gender-responsive approaches[24] (as opposed to the gender-transformative approach), which are insufficient for shifting power relations.

> *'Women are asked to join, but the decisions are still made by men. We need more than inclusion; we need shared power.'*
> *– Woman-led NGO leader, South Central Somalia*

> *'Gender is not only about women. Men must be part of the change if we are serious about localization.'*
> *– Male director, local NGO, Somaliland*

The intersectionality of gender, age, disability and clan identity requires further attention. Few local NGOs have systematically included young women, people with disabilities or minority clan members in leadership or project design. Community perspectives reiterated that meaningful inclusion goes beyond numbers. Displaced women, young people and people with disabilities called for leadership that genuinely reflects their lived experiences and priorities.

> *'We want women leaders from our own community, not people sent from Mogadishu who do not understand our lives.'*
> *– Displaced young woman*

> *'Inclusion means hearing from people with disabilities, not just adding them to a list.'*
> *– Elderly male participant, Somaliland*

Achieving genuine gender equality and inclusive local leadership in Somalia's humanitarian system will require sustained investments, power sharing and a deliberate shift toward gender-transformative approaches that address the root causes of exclusion.

2.5. Organizational capacities and systems

2.5.1. Strengthening core organizational systems

Since 2020, there have been significant improvements in the capacity of LNNGOs in Somalia across project management and financial accountability, as well as technical sectors like WASH and livelihoods. Targeted training and knowledge-sharing efforts from INGOs and donor agencies have notably enhanced the operational capacities of LNNGOs. Many organizations have successfully adopted digital financial systems and ERP tools to improve financial transparency and donor compliance. Monitoring, evaluation and learning (MEL) capabilities have also been strengthened, enabling LNNGOs to effectively track and report progress.[25]

Local NGOs have also made substantial progress in consortium management and the development of internal systems, including human resources, procurement and financial management. This is exemplified by ongoing institutional strengthening within NEXUS consortium partners, several of whom also participated in the Somalia Joint Response (SOMJR) project through harmonized policies, joint capacity-building and shared risk management efforts. These included peer learning visits, system standardization and coordinated training across departments, as noted in the 2023–2024 NEXUS project report. SHH and NEXUS have demonstrated strong coordination and leadership within multi-agency consortia, enabling joint programming and strategic resource sharing.

In addition, through participation in mechanisms like the SHF and SOMJR, several LNNGOs have also strengthened their internal compliance systems to meet pooled fund requirements, improving transparency and efficiency in both grant management and reporting. These experiences have not only built technical capacity but have also positioned local actors as credible lead agencies in collaborative humanitarian responses. While many of these improvements align with internationally recognized standards,[26] which are often shaped by Global North frameworks, local NGOs are also demonstrating unique contributions rooted in their community-based approaches,

cultural fluency and deep contextual understanding.

For example, during SHF-supported humanitarian interventions in Somaliland, Taakulo Somali Community (Taakulo) adapted the hygiene and dignity kits distributed to displaced women and girls by integrating locally preferred items, such as cotton scarves, traditional wraps (garbasaar) and reusable cloth pads sewn by women-led cooperatives in the area. Instead of distributing generic, imported kits, Taakulo consulted local women's groups on what was culturally appropriate and adjusted the kits accordingly.[27]

Another example is in Bay Region under the Somalia Joint Response project, where GREDO implemented WASH programming in displacement-affected areas. Instead of simply installing latrines and water points as per standard guidelines, GREDO worked with local elders and community groups to design shared water facilities based on clan and sub-clan arrangements to minimize conflict and increase access. For instance, latrines were clustered around communal spaces instead of per household, allowing traditional social groups to use and manage them jointly; water point management committees were formed based on local leadership customs, integrating women and young people in roles that typically wouldn't be considered in externally driven models; and handwashing campaigns used poetry and drama, not posters, to spread messages (building on oral traditions).[28]

From an INGO/donor perspective, LNNGOs are increasingly seen not only as project implementers but as critical actors in strategic advocacy, peacebuilding, gender-based violence (GBV) response and risk management—roles they perform with sensitivity to local norms and dynamics that are not always captured by international standards. Many have assumed leadership roles in thematic areas, directly coordinated with local authorities, and actively influenced sectoral policies and practices in ways that reflect both global best practices and Indigenous systems of knowledge and accountability.

2.5.2. Ongoing capacity challenges and gaps

However, despite these achievements, significant challenges remain, particularly regarding financial sustainability, the ability to retain skilled professionals (who are frequently recruited by INGOs and UN agencies) and the development of advanced technical capacities. There is an ongoing risk that LNNGOs could lose their distinctive local value if they are pressured to conform too closely to external models, potentially becoming smaller versions of INGOs.

For example, in early 2025, the Somali Young Doctors Association (SOYDA), a key health provider in Mogadishu's IDP camps, was forced to suspend essential programs following a U.S. aid freeze. In order to continue operations, SOYDA adopted a volunteer-based model and adjusted its services to meet immediate funding constraints. This shift illustrates how local NGOs can lose aspects of their local identity; by prioritizing donor requirements or emergency adaptations over community-specific approaches, they risk a decline in their culturally informed practices, flexibility, and deep engagement with local social structures, qualities that originally distinguished them from international actors.[29] This highlights the importance of recognizing and nurturing the unique standards and approaches that local NGOs bring to humanitarian work—approaches that are deeply informed by local realities and responsive to the needs of the communities they serve.

In terms of which specific capacity areas require urgent strengthening, local NGOs continue to experience gaps across financial, technical and managerial domains. Financially, there is a need to build expertise across advanced grant management, maintaining compliance with complex donor requirements and conducting multi-donor audits. Technically, LNNGOs need further training in specialized areas such as cash-based programming, climate adaptation, and data analysis in MEAL systems. Managerially, strategic leadership, advocacy and the ability to scale operations remain key areas for growth.

Furthermore, legal compliance, risk management and IT infrastructure remain underdeveloped, especially in light of tightening international financial regulations and the increasing complexity of operational environments. A major hurdle is the chronic lack of core funding, which limits LNNGOs' ability to build reserves or quickly respond to emergencies. Additionally, high staff turnover due to INGOs and UN agencies offering better pay continues to drain skilled human resources from local organizations. The current national policy and legal frameworks, marked by fragmented regulations and bureaucratic obstacles, further complicate efforts to build strong institutional foundations at the local level.

Table 3: Specific gaps and challenges

Capacity area	Specific gaps/needs	Notes/challenges
Financial	Advanced grant management, compliance with complex donor requirements, and multi-donor audits	Chronic lack of core funding limits reserves and emergency response capacity
Technical	Cash-based programming, climate adaptation, and data analysis	Need for specialized training
Managerial	Strategic leadership, advocacy skills, and ability to scale operations	Leadership development and operational growth are needed
Legal and compliance	Legal compliance with national and international regulations	Fragmented national policies and bureaucratic hurdles complicate institutional strengthening
Risk management	Institutional risk frameworks and emergency preparedness	Underdeveloped; increasing complexity in operational environments
IT infrastructure	Robust IT systems and digital tools	Weak development limits efficiency and compliance
Human resources	Staff retention and development	High turnover due to better pay offered by INGOs and UN agencies

Source: KIIs with the target respondents from the LNNGOs

Notes: Local and National NGOs face critical operational gaps in advanced financial management, technical expertise for cash and climate programs, and strategic leadership capabilities. They are further hindered by systemic challenges, including fragmented legal compliance, underdeveloped risk frameworks, and weak IT infrastructure. A fundamental threat to sustainability is chronic high staff turnover, driven by an inability to compete with the salaries offered by larger international agencies.

2.5.3. Leadership readiness and systemic barriers

On the question of whether LNNGOs are ready to take on more leadership in humanitarian response, the responses present a mixed picture. Organizations such as WASDA and the Somali Organization for Minority Rights and Development Organization (SMWCDO) believe they are prepared to lead, particularly because of their deep community roots, contextual knowledge and operational experience. Many local actors are well-positioned to coordinate with local authorities, understand cultural dynamics, and design context-appropriate interventions. Several have demonstrated their ability to operate effectively in hard-to-reach and conflict-affected areas, earning trust from both communities and partners. However, readiness to lead is conditional on a number of factors – equitable access to direct funding, reduced bureaucratic hurdles, increased representation in decision-making spaces and sustained technical accompaniment from donors and INGOs. While LNNGOs may possess the skills and local credibility, the broader humanitarian system is still not fully conducive to local leadership.

2.5.4. Humanitarian Country Capacity Assessment findings

The Humanitarian Country Capacity Assessment (HUCOCA)[30] capacity assessment used a 1-5 scorecard system, where 5 represents the highest capacity and 1 the lowest. Ten LNNGOs were evaluated across organizational blocks such as governance, financial management, human resources, program design, information management, localization and resource mobilization. The average organizational capacity across all LNNGOs is 3.73 out of 5, reflecting moderate functionality with room for improvement.

Table 4: Summary of strengths and gaps of the participating LNNGOs in Somalia and Somaliland

Area	Average Score	Capacity Status
Financial management	4.37	Strong
Governance and management	4.10	Strong
MEAL and accountability	4.33	Strong
Information and data competence	4.00	Strong
Legal recognition and political space	4.83	Very strong
Human resources	2.77	Weak
Localization	2.63	Weak
Resource mobilization	3.13	Moderate, with critical gaps
Risk management and emergency prep.	3.00	Needs strengthening
Leadership development	3.00	Needs strengthening
Gender equality and safeguarding	2.87	Needs strengthening

Source: KIIs with the target respondents during the study (discretion was agreed)

Notes: The table shows that LNNGOs face persistent gaps across financial, technical, managerial, and compliance areas, with chronic underfunding and weak systems as cross-cutting challenges. Capacity is especially limited in risk management, IT, and staff retention, which undermines long-term growth and institutional resilience

Several domains demonstrate strong maturity, while others indicate a need for focused improvement. The area of political and legal context understanding shows exemplary performance across all ten assessed LNNGOs, with an average score of 4.83, the highest among all blocks. This demonstrates LNNGOs' strong awareness of the external environment affecting their operations. Governance and management (4.10) and financial management (4.37) also rank among the highest-scoring areas, reflecting that

these organizations have well-established leadership structures and robust financial systems. These strengths provide a firm foundation for sound organizational functioning and compliance with legal and donor requirements.

Accountability to affected populations scores the highest among programmatic areas at 4.33, highlighting a strong commitment to engaging beneficiaries and maintaining transparency and responsiveness in program delivery. Program design and implementation (3.97) and information management (4.00) also show considerable competence, suggesting that LNNGOs are largely capable of developing effective interventions and managing data and knowledge systematically to support decision-making and reporting.

On the other hand, several critical operational and strategic blocks such as localization (2.63) and human resources (2.77), show relatively weaker scores. This indicates ongoing challenges in empowering local actors to take greater ownership and in strengthening HR systems, including recruitment, retention and staff development. Resource mobilization (3.13) and security management (3.47) also fall into the moderate range, pointing to the need for improved funding diversification strategies and enhanced security protocols to ensure organizational resilience in volatile contexts. Most organizations have documented procedures for data collection and storage, respond to feedback from communities and possess emergency response plans. However, capacities vary significantly across organizations, with smaller or newer LNNGOs struggling more than those with well-established networks.

Coordination and leadership (3.53), response planning and delivery (3.57), and supply chain and logistics (3.83) reflect mid-level capacity, demonstrating that while LNNGOs can collaborate and execute humanitarian responses, there is room to enhance strategic leadership, operational efficiency and logistical readiness to better meet dynamic humanitarian demands.

Figure 1: Average score of the LNNGOs by block as of 2025

Source: KIIs with the target respondents during the study (discretion was agreed)

Notes: The assessment highlights a landscape where foundational governance and financial capacities are strong, and accountability mechanisms are well integrated, but where crucial areas such as localization, human resources and strategic resource mobilization require urgent attention to ensure sustainable growth and deeper impact in humanitarian programming.

Many LNNGOs demonstrate strong capacities in several key organizational areas. Financial management is a notable strength, with many organizations maintaining rigorous financial controls that comply with donor regulations. They often utilize computerized accounting systems and benefit from experienced finance staff, enabling effective management of funds. Governance and management structures are also well established in most LNNGOs, with clear strategic plans and leadership frameworks guiding their operations; however, the level of inclusivity and transparency in decision-making processes varies between organizations. In terms of legal recognition and political context, all assessed LNNGOs are formally registered and operate with a considerable degree of autonomy, supported by strong relationships with local authorities and communities. When it comes to program design and information management, LNNGOs generally develop effective interventions that are underpinned by systematic data collection, analysis and use of evidence for decision-making.

Despite these strengths, significant capacity gaps remain. Localization efforts show limited progress, with many LNNGOs struggling to achieve deeper local ownership and claim their power within humanitarian responses. Human resource challenges persist, particularly in recruitment, retention and staff development, as skilled personnel are frequently drawn away by better opportunities with INGOs and UN agencies. Resource mobilization capacities are moderate but constrained, with many LNNGOs dependent on a narrow range of donors and lacking diversified funding streams. Leadership development and risk management are also areas needing improvement, as strategic leadership and institutional resilience are not yet consistently strong across the sector.

Over time, local NGOs have increasingly moved beyond being mere project implementers. Many now engage actively in advocacy, peacebuilding, gender-based violence response and risk management, often assuming leadership roles in sector coordination and influencing policy development. This shift is supported by improved governance frameworks and leadership development initiatives; however, leadership capacity remains uneven, with some organizations more advanced than others in these domains.

3. Power dynamics, partnerships, and the role of government

3.1. Power asymmetries between international and local actors

Somalia's humanitarian system continues to be shaped by pronounced power imbalances between international and local actors. While LNNGOs such as WASDA, NEXUS, SOLO, Zamzam Foundation and the Somali Humanitarian Hub have gained visibility in coordination forums, meaningful authority over strategic decision-making and financial resources remains largely concentrated within INGOs and donors. LNNGOs report that although representation in structures like the HCT, sub-national clusters and SHF-funded consortia has increased, their actual influence on resource allocation and program direction remains limited. Funding priorities, thematic focus and project design are often donor-driven, with INGOs controlling resource mobilization, reinforcing a dynamic where local actors are primarily implementers rather than equal partners.

Emerging examples of more equitable partnerships highlight pathways for transformational collaboration. The Dutch Relief Alliance funded Somalia Joint Response, and partnerships with Concern Worldwide and Welthungerhilfe, have enabled shared budget control, inclusive proposal development, locally led project design and risk sharing. These models allow LNNGOs to exercise greater agency in shaping interventions, though entrenched dependency on international systems, limited negotiating power and selective donor preferences continue to constrain the sector. Access to direct funding has improved; NEXUS members now manage 30-50% of project budgets, up from 10% in 2020, and the SHF allocates nearly 70% of resources to national NGOs—but restrictions such as complex compliance frameworks and language-specific reporting requirements still pose barriers for many LNNGOs.

Table 5: LNNGO participation in coordination structures

Coordination platform	LNNGO participation level	Influence on decisions
Humanitarian Country Team (HCT)	Present	Limited
Inter-Cluster Coordination Group (ICCG)	Growing	Still marginal
SHF Advisory Boards	Increasing	Some influence
Sub-national clusters	Leading/co-leading roles	Moderate
Joint consortia (e.g. NEXUS, Dutch Relief Alliance [DRA])	High	High in some cases

Source: KIIs with the target respondents during the study (discretion was agreed)

Notes: The table shows that while LNNGOs are present across nearly all coordination platforms, their influence is uneven. Their strongest participation and decision-making power are in sub-national clusters and joint consortia, whereas their presence in high-level forums such as the Humanitarian Country Team and ICCG remains limited or marginal.

While INGOs are acknowledged for bringing in substantial resources, they are often perceived as distant and disconnected from community realities. These organizations typically only engage with traditional leaders (such as elders and religious figures) who are trusted and respected, particularly by older men. However, many participants, especially women and young people, expressed frustration at being excluded from decision-making spaces dominated by elders. Women's perspectives are often overlooked in meetings, and young people are seldom consulted.

Local NGOs, by contrast, are seen as easier to approach and more embedded in the community. Respondents argued that local actors should be at the forefront of humanitarian response, with international partners providing technical support and funding.

3.2. Partnership dynamics and access to decision-making

Partnership arrangements between INGOs and LNNGOs in Somalia range from transactional to transformational. Some partnerships remain primarily contractual, where LNNGOs serve as subcontractors with limited input in project design or strategy. LNNGOs report that many INGOs continue to impose their systems, restrict co-design opportunities and maintain the upper hand in negotiations, limiting genuine collaboration.

However, examples of more equitable partnerships are emerging. The Dutch Relief Alliance funded SOMJR, for instance, involves multi-year contracts, full-cost recovery (including indirect cost recovery) and inclusive proposal development, fostering a more transformational partnership. Concern Worldwide and Welthungerhilfe have also shifted towards more locally led approaches, with LNNGOs taking leadership in needs assessments, project planning and coordination.

Table 6: Transformational vs. transactional partnerships

INGO/consortium	Type of partnership	Key characteristics
Oxfam Novib (via DRA)	Transformational	Participatory design, budget fairness
Concern Worldwide	Transformational	Co-leadership, capacity investment
Welthungerhilfe	Transformational	Localization-first approach, local needs led
Other INGOs (unnamed cases)	Transactional	Limited co-design, subcontracting
Save the Children	Moving toward transformational	Increasing local funding, promoting leadership

Source: KIIs with the target respondents during the study (discretion was agreed)

Notes: The table shows that LNNGOs experience a mix of partnership types with INGOs. While some, such as Oxfam Novib, Concern Worldwide, and Welthungerhilfe, demonstrate transformational approaches with shared leadership and localization-first practices, others remain largely transactional with limited co-design. Save the Children is positioned in between, moving gradually toward more transformational collaboration.

Despite these gains, trust deficits and unequal negotiating power persist. Many LNNGOs report that INGOs and donors continue to favor long-established local partners, inadvertently excluding newer or less visible LNNGOs from opportunities, which stifles sectoral diversity and the growth of a broader critical mass of local actors.

LNNGO involvement in coordination and decision-making platforms has gradually increased. Organizations like Zamzam Foundation now hold representational roles in the HCT and other key consortia. LNNGOs also lead or co-lead several SHF-funded consortia. However, many LNNGOs, including those engaged with the Somali Humanitarian Hub and Takuulo, report that while their presence in coordination spaces has improved, their influence remains limited. Local actors are often consulted but rarely have the authority to shape strategy or resource allocation. International actors, by sheer numbers and systemic positioning, continue to dominate decision-making processes.

Respondents across all demographics voiced concerns about exclusion from meaningful participation. Young women and girls are particularly marginalized. While some LNNGOs conduct community consultations, they often only engage elders or adult men. Feedback mechanisms, such as hotlines or complaint boxes, exist but are underutilized (mainly due to lack of trust, awareness or access). Face-to-face communication with trusted local leaders is preferred.

Many participants noted that some NGOs make efforts to report back to the community and involve people in decisions. However, this was not consistent. Local organizations were seen as more transparent than international ones, but even they often failed to explain targeting criteria or follow up on feedback. Girls and young women, in particular, reported being excluded from accountability processes.

Local and National NGOs face several barriers in decision making, including insufficient and short-term funding, limited technical capacity, and political interference. Some are perceived as clan-affiliated, which can erode trust. Women-led organizations face additional challenges due to gender biases and underrepresentation in leadership. Young people are rarely seen as legitimate leaders, often told to ‘wait their turn.’

3.3. State institutions’ role in humanitarian leadership and accountability

Since 2020, federal member states in Somalia, particularly South West State (SWS) and Somaliland, have taken notable steps to strengthen government-led humanitarian coordination. In SWS, state-led coordination platforms at both the state and district levels have improved collaboration among humanitarian actors, including UN agencies, INGOs and LNNGOs. The development of disaster risk reduction and intervention plans (DRRIPs)[31] has provided a structured framework for guiding humanitarian priorities and has enhanced early warning and response capacities. These DRRIPs were developed by SWS government ministries at the state and district levels (especially ministries responsible for humanitarian affairs and disaster management) along with UN agencies and INGOs who provide technical and financial support, and LNNGOs involved in implementation and community engagement.

Similarly, Ministry of Humanitarian Affairs and Disaster Management (HADMA) and Somaliland's National Disaster Preparedness and Food Reserve Authority (NADFOR)

have spearheaded coordination efforts, supported disaster preparedness strategies and promoted more localized response mechanisms. At the federal level, the Somali Disaster Management Agency (SoDMA), re-established in 2022 after the dissolution of the federal Ministry of Humanitarian Affairs, has assumed the mandate of national disaster coordination. In recent years SoDMA has convened the Country Humanitarian Forum, launched anticipatory preparedness plans such as the 2024 La Niña Mitigation Strategy, and co-led rapid post-disaster assessments, signaling a gradual move from ad hoc response toward a more strategic federal role.[32] These efforts are supported by regular multi-stakeholder meetings and decentralized response systems.

Despite these advances, government institutions still face critical capacity gaps in areas such as beneficiary targeting, data management, logistics and technical expertise. Donor confidence in government-managed funding channels remains low, resulting in limited direct funding to LNNGOs through state structures. Instead, INGOs often continue to act as intermediaries, reinforcing existing international dominance in humanitarian funding.

Nevertheless, there are promising signs of political will and emerging governance frameworks aimed at promoting localization. In SWS, new legislative efforts like the Safeguarding Humanitarian Assistance Law – which was initiated by SWS's HADMA and whose development was supported by the UN and Oxfam – and the implementation of women's participation quotas signal a commitment to inclusive governance. Puntland[33] and Somaliland have also introduced gender and youth quotas[34] in local governance and are reviewing policies to improve local actor registration and oversight.[35]

Efforts to enhance accountability and public legitimacy are underway, with federal member states introducing monitoring mechanisms to ensure aid reaches intended recipients. In Puntland and Somaliland, participatory planning processes and community-driven monitoring systems have improved trust and responsiveness. However, LNNGOs continue to face stricter due diligence requirements compared to INGOs, perpetuating a double standard that undermines equality. For example, several LNNGOs reported that to access relatively small sub-grants, they were asked to submit multiple years of audited financial statements, detailed internal policies (including anti-fraud, safeguarding and procurement), and proof of compliance with international accounting standards. Meanwhile, INGOs partnering with the same donors often received funding based on organizational reputation or global framework agreements, without needing to submit project-specific documentation or undergo local verifications.

Local governments are increasingly recognized as essential intermediaries, especially in hard-to-reach areas where INGOs have limited access. District-level coordination platforms are helping to bridge the gap between communities and humanitarian actors, though participation of LNNGOs in these structures remains inconsistent due to limited capacity and restricted donor frameworks.

The experiences across Somalia and Somaliland demonstrate that government-led coordination, when supported by adequate resources and donor commitment, can contribute to more localized and accountable humanitarian action. However, realizing a fully localized system will require a significant rebalancing of power, sustained investment in local capacities and the establishment of trust-based partnerships that value local leadership and community ownership.

Community members rarely viewed government as a central actor in humanitarian response. Government officials were seen as arriving late, mostly during registration

exercises or high-profile emergencies. Their involvement is often perceived as symbolic or bureaucratic, lacking consistent support or tangible follow-up. In some cases, respondents expressed uncertainty about who their official representatives even are.

3.4. Donor and national localization frameworks

Donor and national frameworks with an increasing emphasis on localization are beginning to shape Somalia's humanitarian landscape. Donors such as SHF, Save the Children and Oxfam are introducing mechanisms for direct funding, inclusive budgeting and indirect cost recovery provisions for LNNGOs. Nationally, localization principles are gradually being integrated into disaster management laws, coordination structures and governance reforms. But while progress has been made, gaps persist in implementation, access to flexible and predictable funding, and enabling LNNGOs to lead large-scale responses independently.

Overall, the Somali humanitarian system reflects a complex interplay of entrenched power asymmetries, emerging transformational partnerships and evolving state-led governance mechanisms. Achieving fully localized humanitarian action will require continued investment in LNNGO capacities, equitable partnerships, strengthened government systems, and the rebalancing of power to value local leadership and community ownership.

4. Conclusions and strategic recommendations

4.1. Conclusion

Despite persistent barriers, Somalia's humanitarian system presents significant opportunities for systemic change that can advance genuine localization. The growing leadership of local governments in coordination and response planning, alongside increased direct funding to LNNGOs through mechanisms like the SHF and the Somali Humanitarian Hub (under the Start Network), signals a promising shift. Positive examples of transformational partnerships—characterized by shared leadership, joint program design and equitable budget control—are beginning to emerge.

Furthermore, government policies are increasingly integrating localization alongside gender and youth representation, creating further momentum for a more inclusive humanitarian architecture. A rising collective voice among LNNGO networks and coalitions is also strengthening local actors' ability to advocate for equitable partnerships and influence donor behavior. However, unlocking these opportunities requires a deliberate shift from viewing localization as a technical capacity-building exercise to framing it as a process of power redistribution and long-term partnership development.

Despite this potential, several critical barriers continue to hinder the scaling up of local humanitarian leadership in Somalia. Power asymmetries in decision-making and funding control remain entrenched, with international actors often retaining authority over strategic priorities and resource allocation. LNNGOs still face limited direct access to substantial, multi-year funding, which constrains their financial autonomy and institutional growth. Strict compliance and due diligence requirements, while necessary for accountability, often disproportionately burden LNNGOs, creating barriers to their meaningful participation in large-scale programming.

Additionally, local actors experience inconsistent participation in coordination structures and marginal representation in key decision-making bodies, which limits their influence on humanitarian agendas. Capacity gaps in leadership development, digital systems, risk management and organizational sustainability further restrict their ability to scale operations. Fragmentation within the local NGO landscape also weakens their collective bargaining power, reducing their ability to advocate effectively for policy shifts and funding equality.

Table 7: Key barriers to scaling up local leadership

Barrier	Description	Impact severity
Power asymmetries	INGOs/donors retain funding and decision-making	High
Limited direct multi-year Funding	Most funds channeled via INGOs	High
Strict compliance and due diligence	Complex processes exclude smaller LNNGOs	Medium

Inconsistent representation in coordination	LNNGOs often sidelined in decision-making forums	Medium
Fragmentation of LNNGOs	Weak collective bargaining power	High

Source: KIIs with the target respondents during the study (discretion was agreed)

Notes: The table shows that LNNGOs face several structural barriers that limit their influence and access to resources. The most severe challenges are power asymmetries, lack of direct multi-year funding, and fragmentation among LNNGOs, while compliance burdens and inconsistent representation also contribute to their marginalization.

4.2. Summary of key findings

Since 2020, Somalia, and Somaliland have made notable—though uneven—progress in advancing localization in humanitarian response. LNNGOs have increasingly moved beyond their traditional role as project implementers to take on leadership, program design and strategic coordination responsibilities. Organizations such as WASDA, NEXUS, SOLO, Takuulo, Zamzam Foundation, KAALO, SADO and SMWCDO consistently demonstrate readiness and ambition to lead. International actors, including Save the Children and the Norwegian Refugee Council, are beginning to foster more strategic, equitable partnerships, signaling a growing recognition of the indispensable role of local actors in crisis response.

However, the system continues to grapple with persistent power asymmetries. Decision-making and financial control are still concentrated in the hands of INGOs and donors, often reducing partnerships to transactional arrangements. Access to flexible, multi-year direct funding remains limited for LNNGOs, constraining their financial autonomy and long-term sustainability. Capacity-building efforts are often fragmented and short-term, failing to deliver systemic, lasting institutional strengthening.

Meaningful participation of local actors in key decision-making bodies, such as the ICCG, remains insufficient, and LNNGOs are frequently relegated to symbolic roles rather than positions of genuine influence. The inclusion of marginalized groups, particularly women and minority-led organizations, is also far from adequate. Despite public commitments to localization, many international actors and donors have yet to fully transition from rhetoric to action, and the humanitarian system continues to operate in ways that undermine dignity, trust and sustainability.

4.3. Strategic recommendations for donors, INGOs, LNNGOs and government

Addressing these barriers requires sustained investment in the institutional capacities of LNNGOs. INGOs and donors must move beyond short-term, project-based training to provide long-term support for building robust internal systems across financial management, governance, succession planning and risk management. Local actors emphasize that leadership development should be intentional and embedded in organizational structures, with a focus on structured mentorship, second-tier leadership and active participation in decision-making spaces. Building digital capabilities to enhance data collection, accountability and communication is also a critical priority, alongside securing flexible, multi-year funding that covers core operational costs.

Equally important is enhancing the collective voice of LNNGOs through stronger coalitions, coordinated advocacy and locally led networks. They must have meaningful and empowered representation in key coordination platforms such as the HCT and ICCG, with INGOs supporting rather than dominating these spaces. Developing local advocacy capacity—especially through evidence-based storytelling and digital platforms—will further strengthen LNNGOs' ability to shape humanitarian policies and challenge inequitable power structures.

Localization must also be grounded in genuine co-creation, with local actors fully engaged from the earliest stages of program design through to monitoring and evaluation. Partnerships should be structured around mutual accountability, joint budget ownership and shared leadership, as emphasized by some local organizations. Co-created monitoring frameworks that balance donor compliance with the practical realities of LNNGOs are essential, as is the simplification of administrative processes that often disproportionately burden local actors. Accountability should flow both ways—INGOs must be answerable to their local partners, not just to donors. Establishing neutral, third-party facilitation mechanisms to support partnership evaluations and resolve power imbalances can strengthen trust and collaboration across the system.

Future-proofing local leadership will require shifting from risk transfer to risk sharing, building institutional resilience and securing predictable, multi-year funding that enables LNNGOs to operate effectively in Somalia's protracted crisis context. INGOs and donors must move beyond pilot initiatives and symbolic partnerships, embedding scalable localization benchmarks and tracking progress through robust accountability indicators. National policy reforms that prioritize local leadership, streamline regulatory processes and institutionalize localization within governance frameworks are equally critical. Ultimately, Somalia's humanitarian system must evolve to recognize LNNGOs not as temporary subcontractors, but as central, strategic leaders—capable of driving humanitarian action in partnership with government, donors and international agencies within an equitable, locally led architecture.

Achieving genuine localization in Somalia requires a deliberate paradigm shift—one that centers power-sharing, trust and long-term investment in local leadership.

For donors

- **Increase direct funding to LNNGOs.** Allocate at least 50% of humanitarian financing through pooled funds like the Somalia Humanitarian Fund (SHF), with a focus on multi-year, flexible funding.
- **Simplify compliance requirements.** Reduce administrative burdens, especially for smaller LNNGOs, and invest in localized compliance support to improve accessibility.
- **Tie funding to power-sharing milestones.** Require INGOs to demonstrate tangible progress in leadership transfer and equitable partnerships as a condition for funding approvals.
- **Invest in core institutional development.** Allocate 10-15% of humanitarian budgets to strengthen LNNGO governance, financial systems, risk management and technical capacity.
- **Support diversified funding sources.** Engage non-traditional donors, including Gulf-based philanthropies and private sector actors, to reduce dependency on traditional humanitarian pipelines.
- **Strengthen government collaboration.** Work with federal and state authorities to

create enabling legal and policy environments that support LNNGO registration, operation and leadership.

For INGOs

- **Redesign partnership models.** Move beyond subcontracting by co-designing proposals, co-developing budgets, and sharing leadership in coordination and consortia structures.
- **Guarantee overhead support.** Allocate a minimum of 4% overhead to local partners to support institutional sustainability.
- **Champion local leadership.** Step back from dominant roles in decision-making forums and actively advocate for local leadership within humanitarian coordination spaces.
- **Invest in holistic capacity sharing and strengthening.** Co-create capacity strengthening initiatives that include leadership development, succession planning, digital systems and compliance readiness.
- **Promote participatory programming.** Support LNNGOs in conducting community-driven needs assessments, feedback loops and program adjustments based on local input.
- **Simplify bureaucratic processes.** Introduce tiered compliance systems that build trust and streamline fund disbursement processes.

For LNNGOs

- **Strengthen institutional capacity.** Enhance governance, financial management, inclusion and transparency to build trust with donors and communities.
- **Build collective voice.** Form and lead advocacy coalitions to negotiate equitable partnerships, funding access and strategic decision-making power.
- **Invest in technical expertise.** Prioritize professional development, South-South learning and digital transformation to strengthen technical credibility.
- **Lead in coordination platforms.** Take initiative in forming LNNGO-led consortia and lead in coordination structures to influence humanitarian priorities.
- **Institutionalize community engagement.** Establish robust, community-led monitoring and feedback mechanisms to ensure responsiveness and accountability.
- **Adopt international standards.** Embrace globally recognized accountability and operational standards while promoting context-specific best practices.

For government

- **Anchor localization in national policy.** Align humanitarian strategies with localization objectives and formally recognize LNNGOs as key actors in humanitarian leadership.
- **Simplify regulatory processes.** Remove bureaucratic barriers that inhibit LNNGO registration, coordination and funding access.
- **Co-lead coordination structures.** Chair regional humanitarian platforms alongside LNNGOs to ensure inclusive planning and response.
- **Invest in government capacity.** Work with donors to build the technical, financial and operational capacity of humanitarian government agencies.
- **Institutionalize inclusive governance.** Ensure representation of women, young people

and minority groups in humanitarian and governance structures at all levels.

4.4. Indicators and benchmarks for tracking progress

To ensure accountability and track meaningful progress toward localization, the following indicators and benchmarks should be systematically monitored:

- **Funding flow.** The percentage of direct, flexible and multi-year funding allocated to LNNGOs, with a minimum aim of 50% by 2027.
- **Leadership and decision-making.** The proportion of local actors occupying leadership roles in coordination platforms like the HCT, SHF advisory boards and ICCG, with evidence of influence on decision-making.
- **Partnership equity.** The share of partnerships featuring joint project design, multi-year agreements, indirect cost recovery and shared risk management frameworks.
- **Capacity strengthening.** The levels of sustained investment in institutional capacity, leadership development and operational systems, moving beyond short-term project support.
- **Community engagement.** The presence of community-driven planning, feedback and accountability mechanisms that demonstrably shape program design and adaptation.
- **Accountability systems.** The use of independent localization reviews, adherence to localization benchmarks and establishment of mutual accountability mechanisms between donors, INGOs and LNNGOs.

Ultimately, genuine localization in Somalia's humanitarian system will only be achieved when local actors are fully empowered to lead, when partnerships are rooted in trust and shared decision-making and when the international system shifts from controlling resources to facilitating equitable, community-led responses. This requires collective self-reflection, structural reform and sustained, intentional investment in Somali leadership and institutions, particularly those led by women, young people and marginalized groups.

Notes

[1] Somalia includes South West State, Puntland, South Central Somalia and – in some cases – Somaliland.

[2] Famine Early Warning Systems Network. (December 2023). *Somalia food security outlook update, December 2023*. Accessed 28 August 2025. https://fews.net/east-africa/somalia/food-security-outlook-update/december-2023

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[12] Famine Early Warning Systems Network. (December 2023). Somalia food security outlook update, December 2023. op. cit.

[13] Famine Early Warning Systems Network. (February 2024). *Somalia food security outlook, February 2024*. Accessed 28 August 2025. https://fews.net/east-africa/somalia/food-security-outlook/february-2024

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Acknowledgements

Oxfam would like to thank all those who contributed to this research on Local Humanitarian Leadership in Somalia. The study was conducted by Ibrahim Abdulrazak and Kwality Consulting Solutions (KCS) with support from Oxfam America. Oxfam acknowledges the valuable insights shared by local NGOs, UN agencies, INGOs, and community representatives whose perspectives shaped the findings and recommendations. The views expressed are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect those of Oxfam.

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Published by Oxfam GB for Oxfam International in November 2025.

DOI: 10.21201/2025.000097

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