Read this discussion note in conjunction with DN7, 'Bringing Community into Area-Based Coordination.' DN6 gives context and background and DN7 gives a roadmap for moving forward.

Caafimaad+ and IDS
Discussion Note 6
February 2026

Building bridges: Community-led Humanitarian Coordination

In 2024, OCHA reported that international donors provided nearly USD $ 1 billion ($915 million) in humanitarian aid to Somalia through the Humanitarian Response Plan. Coordinated plans are a key part of the humanitarian programme cycle that fine tune and communicate the scope of response operations. Yet the 2024 Somalia plan was not based on discussion with communities. If an HRP were to incorporate community led analysis and action, could it achieve more for less?

The challenges of coordination

The UN system, led by the Inter-Agency Coordination Committee (IASC), aggregates information and guides the allocation of scarce humanitarian resources. The cluster system, introduced in 2005, was criticised for its inaccessibility to local people and their institutions, as well as for its tendency to fragment the humanitarian response.[1] To decentralise and integrate aid collaboration and increase the involvement of affected people, area-based coordination platforms were added. But the area-based approach has yet to solve one core problem of humanitarian coordination: the tendency of coordination leaders to reject community data and to favour their own solutions.[2] As international humanitarian resources become scarcer, this fundamental flaw in the coordination system has intensified.

The IASC coordination system aims to answer three questions:[3]

- Who is in need, how severely are they in need, and where are they?
- What type of assistance is required, who is best / well placed to deliver it and how should it be delivered?
- What resources are required to deliver this assistance?

One further vital question should be:

- What is already there that can facilitate the relevance and success of the response?

Communities also ask these questions. They coordinate relationally, spatially and often at scale – across neighbourhood networks, rescue units, women's groups, tenant associations, religious networks, diaspora connections and customary governance bodies. When crisis hits, local networks trigger preparedness protocols, galvanise response, mobilise volunteers and raise and accounts for contributions. The mechanisms that spring into life and remain salient throughout the length of an emergency can mean collaboration across a single neighbourhood or a network of supportive connections that have global reach.

Agencies pivoting their operations towards community-led humanitarian programming are asking how to build bridges. In this note we look at how the Caafimaad+ Humanitarian Access Initiative (HAI) is connecting communities and area-based coordination platforms. Dr Hodan Abdullahi, Programme Coordinator, and Abdisamed Da'ar Muhumed, Programme Manager, from Action Against Hunger (ACF) and Mowlid Abdi Ali, Programme Manager for Trócaire discuss humanitarian coordination in the south of Somalia. We also look at Sudan, where Hanin Ahmed from the Emergency Response Rooms and Ibrahim Osman from the Sudanese American Physicians Association (SAPA) explain how voluntary groups built their own coordination bridge, the Localisation Coordination Council (LCC). And we hear from representatives of UNOCHA and two INGOs how the formal system has adapted to engage the LCC.

Community engagement in Somalia

Mowlid, Hodan and Abdisamed are managing their INGO's community engagement activities as part of the HAI. Teams of local facilitators have been holding regular dialogue with communities, getting to know them better. It was not long before the managers realised how many of their agency's internal systems would need to shift to enable them to partner with communities. They worked with different departments in their respective agencies to think how to assess needs *with* communities rather than despite them, and how they could design, fund and monitor programmes through community partnership. Changes of this kind require the agreement of donors, so the team also stimulated a lively debate at the donor level. Excited by the improvements that began to emerge in their own operations, the team are now contributing to helping shift Somalia's humanitarian sector. They asked what it would take to build bridges between community and UN-led coordination systems. They began by analysing what communities do.

Community coordination

'There are people in town who are well known for organising assistance across the district,' says Mowlid Abdi Ali. 'There is a young woman who has been connecting with diaspora networks which give a lot of support. Others have connections in religion, business, and social networks. There are women who want to see women's situation improve. There are young professionals who contribute their skills.'

Mowlid continues. 'They do not have a formal structure. They call in whoever they need to form a team and often give from their own resources. They have no office, nor a name for their group. Politics is not an attraction for the respected persons. If one of them becomes partisan or they misuse resources for their own benefit, they will never be trusted to coordinate initiatives again.'

'Community members have watched these people over the years. It is their performance that has earned them the title of "respected person",' says Hodan Abdullahi. 'People trust them because they've observed that they do not serve themselves.' Hodan describes how respected persons coordinate by using their social and business connections and their traditional institutions. 'Where a group of villages depends on sharing access to a river crossing, a trading route, grazing lands, markets, or water systems, residents organise themselves. While it is often elders who remove political barriers to initiatives that cross conflict lines by negotiating with different factions, there are also examples of women successfully leading negotiations relating to protection and care for children and women. All of them are answerable to communities through the social institutions they belong to.'

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Abdisamed explains: 'If the respected persons hears of violence and people are displaced, or if there is a disease outbreak, one of them will go there. They can negotiate access, whichever armed group controls the area. It is much wider than village coordination. They help in liaising with authorities. When donations have been raised, they share the accounts and photos on WhatsApp with everyone involved. The community system has always been here and will always be here. It's trustworthy.'

Mowlid met some of the respected persons over a cup of tea in town. 'They were polite, but candid with me. They said that humanitarian aid has been eroding locally accountable structures. They

criticised international agencies for not trying to understand how communities work. They used an example of an initiative to expand the district hospital. People were disagreeing on how it should be done. Instead of getting involved in the dialogue convened by elders, the NGOs made their own separate decisions and built the new extension in an inaccessible place. It would have been better if they had understood how communities come to decisions. The international coordination system does not listen to communities.'

Working towards joint analysis

In late 2025, community members were discussing their response to an intensifying drought. Communities were setting measures in motion to protect lives and livelihoods. Elders were travelling from one community to another to discuss preparations. Imams in the mosques called for days of fasting and prayers for rain. Society coordinated.

The international system also raised the alarm. Drawing on rainfall data and household surveys, the IPC issued a warning of crisis levels of acute malnutrition.[4] In November the Government of Somalia formally declared a drought emergency. INGOs, LNGOs and donors started needs assessments. State governments formed task forces to assess the drought situation.

ABC platforms convened representatives of UN, INGOs and LNGOs in their respective districts.[5] The ABC were expected not only to coordinate aid operations across each district but also to facilitate community engagement to 'jointly' identify capacities, needs and solutions. The UNOCHA Flagship launched a training programme for community engagement in four districts and some joint plans were agreed.

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Mowlid chairs one of the ABC platforms in Trócaire's area of operation. Dr Hodan and Abdisamed are members of ABCs in the districts where they operate. They are trying different approaches to representing the community perspective in these fora. Their teams have compiled the narratives from the many communities where they have ongoing dialogues to give an overview of the drought situation and the community response. Hodan's team is helping community groups to create clusters of villages that can represent their joint analysis and initiatives to the international system. Mowlid's ABC has asked some of the respected persons group to take part in the ABC to provide regular updates and feedback.

Each will be working out ways to encourage the ABC members to integrate the community statements of need, priority and approach into the situation analysis and response plans. The obstacles they face relate to data commensurability, trust and power.

- **Data commensurability:** Community data does not fit existing categories of aid reporting. The data come as narratives rather than sets of figures; they integrate problems, priorities and responsibilities. The international agencies can, of course, rethink their categories, but it will mean adjustments to internal systems.
- **Untrustworthy data:** Decades of struggle against aid diversion have left external agencies suspicious of local data. There is also distrust in community capacity to do situation analysis properly. Trust will build when agencies use the data and find it trustworthy, for example Trócaire has been working with communities to do needs assessment differently, using narrative and dialogue as a central plank of the methodology. The ABCs could become the places where data from communities is triangulated.
- **Entrenched systems:** Working fast in an emergency does not feel like the moment for changing complex planning, fundraising and delivery modalities. We need to make operational changes that add value where it is needed: in the form of technical expertise, resources, and advocacy to reinforce—not override—community-led action.
- **Power dynamics:** Often, ABC members are appealing for and simultaneously benefiting from the aid they coordinate. Communities may propose different solutions. Mediating these different points of view and power dynamics is a difficult task for the ABC lead agency, especially if that agency also has a programme that they want to see funded.[6] Addressing power requires reconsidering how coordination bodies are chaired. It also suggests

that communities need to do more to create powerful voices that can argue for their status within the international system..

An example from Sudan

Sudan received USD 1.6 billion through the HRP in 2024. Only a tiny proportion went to local groups and organisations. But Sudanese community groups have built a national coordination structure, the Localization Coordination Council to redress the balance.

In the first days of the war, community members organised Emergency Response Rooms (ERRs) where they lived. Neighbourhood by neighbourhood, individuals responded with 'a call to collective action'. The ERRs include youth activists, professionals, women's leaders. When the war started in 2023, they set up committees of doctors, nurses and engineers who could help run emergency services.

They formed WhatsApp groups and created Facebook pages. The page for one locality in Khartoum was created 3 days after the outbreak of war, and today has approximately 13,000 followers, with posts going up almost daily. Some are funding appeals and calls for volunteers, while others contain information about where violence is happening. Nearly three years after the war started, the everyday work and daily coordination between volunteers continues. Activity on Facebook groups remains strong, speaking directly to their communities about actions taken, funds received, challenges faced and lessons learned – a public form of accountability built on public validation. The pages unite Sudanese communities and link this multiplicity of small voluntary groups with one another and the global community.

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Some of the volunteers formed the Localisation Coordination Council (LCC) to link groups across the country. Hanin, one of the LCC representatives explained that it started with the aim of getting and sharing funds. As it coalesced, it became a platform for learning. Today, weekly calls connect representatives from ERRs in 13 states, 9 Sudanese organisations, and a few INGO observers. Ibrahim, a Darfur Region Coordinator for a local health NGO, describes how they share and aggregate information. It is a web of connections that enables support to one another. 'We are more resilient to solve problems when we have all these diverse solutions,' said Ibrahim. Hanin elaborates, 'in October 2024, volunteers in one location helped in an evacuation of thousands of families, and we learned how to navigate checkpoints, what cars where lower risk for looting, and the supplies required for after civilians flee. We shared these lessons with volunteers on the ground when similar evacuations where needed in other parts of Sudan. Now, as conflict intensifies in South Kordofan, we are supporting volunteers there.'

Communication and compromise with the international system

For Hanin and Ibrahim, another of the functions of the LCC is a way of standardising and channelling information to and from international partners, tackling the problem of **data commensurability and trustworthiness**. The council has agreed on a series of written forms that are shared on WhatsApp.[7] ERRs fill them when they apply and account for funds, make assessments, and report on project progress. While critics argue that the LCC is allowing donors and INGOs to turn a community system into an NGO system, LCC members claim that the forms and the councils facilitate community leadership. 'We keep a good level of autonomy with the groups, so people can do their job in their own way and for the people of their community.' One representative of an international NGO reflects 'they have built a structure that pushes decisions to the most localised level, standardising where needed, but resisting adjusting to an externally driven system'.

Another INGO focal point confronts the problem of **resistant NGO and donor systems**. 'Changes expected of local responders are framed as neutral, or merely technical conditions, but it creates an expectation that they must conform to be deemed "fundable." It reinforces power imbalances and favours compliance over sustainability or locally grounded effectiveness.' Sudan's UNOCHA representative labels it 'an exchange'. 'We have had conversations, and we have been testing different ways of working. A large entity coming in and promising things in exchange for changes risks fragmenting their structure. Area-based allocations

to joint initiatives from NGOs and ERRs through country-based pooled funds are an example of how the formal system has adapted.'

Ibrahim details how managing the **power dynamics** is a major topic of debate in the LCC. Members are asking what compromises are acceptable, and how to avoid turning those that represent the ERRs or the LCC into gatekeepers. Wider representation is also a consideration – the LCC does not represent all of Sudan's active civil society groups, yet its innovations make it popular among donors and aid agencies. To maintain neutrality, the LCC and many ERRs are not registered with the warring authorities, but as its profile builds, so does its visibility. 'National and international partners receive a call where they are told that supporting unregistered groups puts their own legal status at risk. In some cases, the caller may ask for sensitive information about volunteer groups in exchange for permission continue operating'

Dialogue with direction

Despite the many challenges, Sudan and Somalia are already showing what can be achieved. A concerted effort to give direction to the new agenda could revolutionise humanitarian aid coordination:

- **Community-led coordination** can be relevant and accountable. The HAI and LCC have both shown how continuous dialogue offers accurate situation analysis and prioritisation, though it can be politically sensitive to collaborate with community in active war zones.
- The system needs **interlocutors** to facilitate. They help the two systems to work across the differences of their data, their culture and their different strengths. Interlocutors can have a seat in both community and international structures and be answerable to both.
- International humanitarian actors could increase the accuracy and relevance of **prioritisation and planning** by working with community systems and paring down the number and scope of redundant needs assessments.
- Agencies should be **redesigning accountability systems** to work better with trustworthy community structures, avoiding placing excessive demands that require too many intermediary layers between donor and community. Some intermediation is essential, too much distances us from the reality.

Notes

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4. https://www.ipcinfo.org/fileadmin/user_upload/ipcinfo/docs/IPC_Somalia_Acute_Food_Insecurity_Malnutrition_Jul_Dec2025_Report.pdf
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This discussion note forms part of a series produced by the Humanitarian Access Initiative:

1. Humanitarian Access in Somalia - For whom? For what? How?
2. The Language of Change: What has language to do with humanitarian access?
3. The Humanitarian Reset Phase 2: How to get a locally led response?
4. The Organisational Reset
5. Four Prinicples of Community Engagement for Humanitarian Access
6. Building Bridges: Community-led Humanitarian Coordination
7. Bringing Community into Area-based Coordination in Somalia

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