



**ACBAR**  
Agency Coordinating Body  
for  
Afghan Relief & Development

# **ACBAR LTWG**

# **LOCALIZATION**

# **BASELINE**

# **ASSESSMENT –**

# **FINAL REPORT**

January 2026

# **ACBAR LTWG Localization Baseline Assessment**

Final Report

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## Acronyms & Abbreviations

<b>AAP</b>	Accountability to Affected Populations
<b>ACBAR</b>	Agency Coordinating Body for Afghan Relief & Development
<b>AHF</b>	Afghanistan Humanitarian Fund
<b>CBE</b>	Community-Based Education
<b>CSO</b>	Civil Society Organization
<b>HCT</b>	Humanitarian Country Team
<b>HR</b>	Human Resources
<b>HRP</b>	Humanitarian Response Plan
<b>ICCT</b>	Inter-Cluster Coordination Team
<b>INGO</b>	International Non-Governmental Organization
<b>LTWG</b>	Localization Technical Working Group
<b>MEAL</b>	Monitoring, Evaluation, and Learning
<b>NGO</b>	Non-Governmental Organization
<b>NNGO</b>	National Non-Governmental Organization
<b>TIN</b>	Tax Identification Number
<b>UN</b>	United Nations
<b>WASH</b>	Water, Sanitation, and Hygiene
<b>WG</b>	Working Group

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# Executive Summary

## Purpose

This assessment was commissioned by ACBAR's Localization Technical Working Group (LTWG), a body established in 2023 to promote localization through technical advice, advocacy, and the development of a roadmap for Afghanistan's humanitarian response. Its objective is to ensure that national and local actors are placed at the centre of humanitarian decision-making, planning, coordination, and implementation.

Despite sustained engagement by national NGOs and civil society organizations, persistent challenges continue to limit progress on localization, particularly in relation to equitable partnerships, access to funding, meaningful participation in coordination platforms, leadership, and influence over strategic direction. In Afghanistan's evolving humanitarian context, there is a clear need for context-specific, inclusive, and actionable evidence on the current status of localization.

This baseline study generates evidence-based insights across the seven pillars of localization: Partnerships, Leadership, Coordination and Complementarity, Funding, Capacity, Policy Influence, and Participation, using a contextualised adaptation of the Humanitarian Localization Baseline Framework. The findings are intended to serve as a shared diagnostic and reference point to inform strategy, guide donor and partner investments, and support realistic, incremental progress toward locally led humanitarian responses.

## Data Overview

The dataset for this study comprises quantitative survey responses from NNGOs, INGOs, CSOs, UN agencies, and donors, complemented by regional qualitative group work and targeted open-text responses. Data analysis is based around the seven pillars of localization: Partnerships, Funding, Capacity, Coordination and Complementarity, Leadership, Participation and Accountability, and Policy Influence. Findings are intended to reflect baseline conditions rather than progress over time and should be interpreted as indicative of structural patterns, not reflective of organizational performance.

## Topline Findings

Across pillars, the findings point to a persistent gap between formal inclusion and substantive influence for national and local NGOs. While localization commitments are widely reflected in policy language and coordination architecture, their translation into shifts in authority, access to resources, and decision-making power remains uneven and constrained.

- ★ **Partnerships**, on the whole, are evaluated positively. However, they remain structurally asymmetrical. National NGOs are most often engaged as implementers rather than equal partners in programme design, budgeting, or strategic decision-making, with risk and compliance responsibilities frequently transferred downward without corresponding authority or resourcing. Local involvement in planning and design remains diminished.
- ★ **Funding** remains the most impactfully constrained pillar. Access to direct donor funding for national NGOs is limited and uneven and strongly shapes perceptions of fairness and

transparency. Funding arrangements often inadequately cover core operational costs, reinforcing capacity gaps that donors later cite as barriers to increased funding access. This creates a self-reinforcing cycle that limits institutional strengthening and leadership opportunities. Funding deficiencies permeate every other pillar.

- ⊕ **Capacity strengthening** efforts are widespread but fragmented. Support is commonly short-term and project-linked, focusing on delivery requirements and neglecting the core systems needed for sustainability, compliance, and leadership. As a result, capacity development does not reliably translate into greater funding access or influence.
- ⊕ **Coordination and complementarity** mechanisms are present and active, but engagement by national NGOs is irregular. While local actors participate in coordination forums, influence over agendas and decisions remains closely tied to formal roles and funding access, with coordination functioning more reliably as information-sharing than as shared prioritization. Local knowledge and expertise is overlooked with notable frequency.
- ⊕ **Leadership, participation, and policy influence** show similar patterns. Leadership roles for national NGOs are episodic and often procedural; participation and AAP mechanisms exist but are inconsistently applied due to funding and capacity constraints; and policy influence by local actors is possible but rare and largely mediated through intermediaries.

Together, the findings suggest that localization in Afghanistan is developing in form but still constrained in function. Progress is most visible in participation and partnership mechanisms, while meaningful shifts in power, resources, and decision-making authority remain limited.

## Strategic Implications

At baseline, localization efforts risk reinforcing a system in which national NGOs are present but not empowered, consulted but not decisive, and increasingly relied upon for delivery without corresponding influence over strategy or resources. Improvements in any single pillar are unlikely to be sustained without parallel progress across funding access, coordination authority, and institutional capacity. Without clearer pathways linking participation, leadership, and financing, localization risks remaining aspirational and symbolic.

## Recommendations

Recommendations are presented at the end of each pillar section, aligned directly to the evidence from each respective domain and differentiated by actor type. These recommendations are not panaceas and are not final; on the contrary, they are designed to be accessible, realistic initial steps that each type of actor can take in the interim, while the LTWG conducts further research into localization and develops the localization roadmap.

# Introduction

Afghanistan is currently facing a severe humanitarian crisis, exacerbated by decades of conflict, political instability, and recurrent natural disasters. An estimated 18.9 million people are experiencing acute food insecurity (World Food Programme 2024), while access to healthcare remains critically constrained, with many health facilities non-functional and healthcare workers lacking essential supplies (World Health Organization 2025). More than 3.2 million people remain internally displaced due to conflict and insecurity (UNHCR 2025), and access to safe water and sanitation is limited, with more than a quarter of all households not having access to safe drinking water (UNICEF 2023). Since the return to power of the Taliban government in August 2021, humanitarian actors have been required to fundamentally adapt their operational models, balancing access negotiations, heightened compliance and risk considerations, and increasingly constrained donor budgets.

Within this context, localization has emerged as both a strategic necessity and a normative commitment. In Afghanistan, however, localization is not a new concept. As highlighted by the Localization Technical Working Group (LTWG), principles of Afghan ownership and leadership were embedded in post-2001 recovery and development efforts, long before global commitments such as the Grand Bargain (LTWG 2025). Despite this, progress has been uneven, with rhetoric frequently outpacing meaningful shifts in power and decision-making.

Drawing on extensive consultation with Afghan and international actors, the LTWG in the *Localization Factsheet* (2025) proposed a context-specific working definition of localization in Afghanistan:

**“the purposeful and meaningful transition of power, leadership, decision-making, and resources to Afghan organizations and communities, enabling them to shape and deliver aid in ways that are contextually relevant, inclusive, and sustainable – while navigating a complex and often restrictive operational environment.”** (LTWG, 2025)

This definition frames localization beyond simply partnership and subcontracting, instead emphasizing the need for a structural transformation in how aid is governed, financed, and implemented.

Despite growing international commitments to localization, Afghan organizations continue to face persistent structural barriers. These include inequitable partnerships, limited access to flexible and direct funding, constrained participation in coordination and governance platforms, and limited influence over strategic direction (LTWG 2025). At the same time, international actors have increasingly relied on Afghan organizations for last-mile delivery and access, often without corresponding authority, risk-sharing, or decision-making power. This disconnect has raised critical questions about the depth, intent, and sustainability of localization efforts in Afghanistan.

It is within this context that the LTWG, established by ACBAR in late 2023, has sought to promote localization through technical advice, advocacy, and the development of an evidence-based roadmap for Afghanistan’s humanitarian response. The LTWG aims to ensure that national and local actors are meaningfully positioned at the centre of decision-making, planning, coordination, and implementation.

This study was designed as a baseline assessment of localization practice, power dynamics, and participation within Afghanistan’s humanitarian and development ecosystem. Its purpose is more diagnostic than predictive: to establish current conditions across seven core localization domains,

identify structural patterns and constraints, and generate a reference point against which future progress can be measured. The findings are intended to inform LTWG strategy, support evidence-based advocacy, and guide donors, international actors, and coordination bodies in advancing more principled, context-appropriate, and locally led humanitarian action in Afghanistan.

# Methodology

This baseline study's methodology combines quantitative survey analysis with qualitative thematic analysis, allowing for triangulation between reported perceptions, observed distributions, and lived experience. The study does not seek to establish causal relationships; rather, it aims to highlight systemic relationships, perception gaps, and institutional dynamics that shape localization outcomes in practice.

## Data Sources

### Quantitative Survey Data

The primary quantitative data derive from a structured survey designed by ACBAR's LTWG and administered between September and November 2025 to humanitarian and development organizations operating in Afghanistan. The final cleaned dataset includes responses from 143 organizations, with national NGOs constituting the majority of respondents (n=96). Smaller numbers of international NGOs (n=35), United Nations agencies (n=8), and civil society organizations (n=4) were included to enable comparative analysis where appropriate. A parallel, but not identically mirrored, donor survey was administered using a tailored instrument to capture donor perspectives on localization, partnerships, and participation, enabling structured comparison across selected indicators. Donor responses totalled 9.

Survey questions aligned directly with the seven pillars of localization: Partnerships, Leadership, Coordination and Complementarity, Funding, Capacity, Policy Influence, and Community and AAP participation. Survey instruments are attached to this report as Annexes I and II.

### Qualitative Data

Qualitative data was derived from:

- ◆ 17 semi-structured group workshop sessions with NNGO actors conducted by ACBAR LTWG personnel between October and November 2025.
  - 4 group workshops were conducted in each of the following regions: West, Central and East, Kandahar, and North.
  - Due to constraints, these 16 sessions featured male NNGO representatives.
  - A separate workshop was hosted for female representatives from across Afghanistan, with questions specifically tailored for their contexts.
- ◆ Open-ended survey questions in the NGO dataset.
- ◆ Descriptive examples provided when respondents selected “poor/very poor” partnership quality or “other barriers”.

These textual inputs collectively serve to contextualize and deepen understanding of patterns found in the quantitative data.



*A group workshop session in Kandahar, November 2025*



*A group workshop session in Herat, November 2025*

## **Data Preparation and Coding**

All quantitative data was subjected to systematic cleaning and validation prior to analysis, including the removal of incomplete responses, standardization of response categories, and verification of internal consistency across related variables. “Select-all-that-apply” questions were disaggregated into binary indicators to allow accurate calculation of prevalence and comparison across groups.

Several survey questions used ordinal Likert-type response scales (i.e. *Never* to *Always*; *Not at all* to *Full Control*). For analytical purposes, these responses were numerically coded using consistent ordinal mappings (typically 1-5). This coding was used exclusively to facilitate descriptive comparison, visualization, and the identification of relative differences between groups. Likert-derived means were interpreted cautiously as directional indicators, not as precise measurements, and were not subjected to inferential statistical testing.

## **Quantitative Analysis Approach**

The quantitative analysis prioritised descriptive statistics, cross-tabulations, and comparative visualization. Frequency distributions and percentage breakdowns were used to establish baseline conditions across key localization domains. Cross-tabulation was applied selectively to examine relationships between organizational characteristics (such as leadership roles, access to funding, or women-led status) and localization outcomes (such as perceived influence, capacity gaps, or participation).

Cross-tabulations were interpreted descriptively rather than inferentially. The analysis focused on identifying structural patterns and gradients, rather than statistical significance, in line with the exploratory purpose of a baseline assessment and the non-random nature of the sample. Particular care was taken to ensure that percentages were calculated using appropriate within-group denominators, especially for multi-response questions.

To examine differences between donor and NNGO perspectives, parallel survey items were aligned and compared at the aggregate level. Differences were expressed as perception gaps on shared ordinal scales, enabling clear visualization of divergence without implying causal relationships.

## **Qualitative Analysis**

Qualitative responses were analysed using an inductive thematic approach, with coding focused on power relations, participation, funding constraints, gendered barriers, and the gap between formal localization commitments and operational practice. Themes emerging from qualitative data were then mapped back to quantitative findings to support interpretation and to ensure that statistical patterns were grounded in contextual experience.

Qualitative data were used illustratively, not representationally: quotations and examples are included in the report to deepen understanding of quantitative trends, rather than to generalize beyond the sample.

# Analytical Scope and Constraints

While more advanced inferential techniques (such as regression or ANOVA) were considered, they were not adopted as core analytical tools. Given the baseline nature of the study, the ordinal structure of much of the data, uneven subgroup sizes, and non-probabilistic sampling, the inclusion of such methods risked implying causal inference that the data cannot support. The analytical approach therefore prioritised clarity, transparency, and interpretability over statistical complexity.

## Ethical Considerations

- ◆ Participation was voluntary and informed consent was sought from all participants.
- ◆ The objectives and purpose of the data collection was explained to participants before commencement.
- ◆ Participants were made aware of their right to refuse to answer any question or cease their participation at any time during the process.
- ◆ Responses were confidential and will not be linked to organizational identities in the final report.
- ◆ Sensitive comments have been anonymized.
- ◆ Any photography of workshop sessions was conducted on an opt-in basis, and cultural sensitivities were considered.

## Limitations

These limitations should be considered when interpreting the study's findings:

- ◆ The sample of respondents is not and did not aim to be statistically representative of all organizations operating in Afghanistan. As a result, not all organizations are represented equally in the sample. Some organization types may be under-represented. Donor responses in particular were limited in number (n=9) and should thus be interpreted only as indicative rather than generalisable. Percentages, when mentioned throughout the report, explicitly refer to the share of respondents, and are not intended to imply accurate representation of the whole sector.
- ◆ The survey questions relied heavily on self-reported perceptions, which may be shaped by power asymmetries, organizational context, concerns about speaking openly, or other factors. As a result, reported capacity gaps and influence constraints should be understood as experienced conditions rather than objective institutional assessments.
- ◆ As a baseline, the study captures a zeitgeist. The data cannot and did not aim to establish causal relationships or track changes over time. Some indicators necessarily measure perceptions of influence rather than verified decision-making authority.
- ◆ Due to cultural and political sensitivities in Afghanistan, female participation in all forms of data collection was unavoidably limited. Intentional steps were taken to work around restrictions and to ensure female voices were included in this study as fully as possible, though it is impossible in the current context to guarantee perfect gender balance.

Despite these limitations, the collective data presents a robust and credible foundation for understanding the state of localization Afghanistan, that can be used for informing programmatic, funding, and policy responses in the future.

# Findings by Localization Pillar

The findings in this section are structured around seven pillars identified as critical to meaningful localization by the LTWG: Partnerships; Funding; Capacity Strengthening; Coordination and Complementarity; Leadership; Policy Influence and Advocacy; and Participation and Accountability. These pillars reflect the core domains through which localization is most commonly understood, operationalised, and assessed in humanitarian contexts, and were used consistently to guide survey design, qualitative data collection, and analysis.

Both quantitative and qualitative tools were explicitly aligned to these pillars. Survey questions were organised thematically to capture perceptions, practices, and constraints within each domain, while regional workshops and open-ended responses were structured to elicit lived experience corresponding to the same pillars. Presenting findings in this way therefore allows for direct triangulation between data sources and enables patterns to be traced coherently across domains.

Importantly, the pillars are not independent. Findings repeatedly demonstrate that constraints or progress in one pillar shape outcomes in others. This is most evident in the foundational role of funding access in enabling capacity development, leadership, coordination influence, and accountability. While each pillar is presented separately for analytical clarity, they should be read as interlinked components of a single localization ecosystem.

## Pillar Ratings and Interpretive Scale

Each pillar is accompanied by an indicative rating using a four-point scale: Constrained, Emerging, Developing, and Established. These ratings are not intended as definitive judgements or performance scores, nor do they assess individual organizations. Rather, they serve as an interpretive tool to summarise baseline conditions at a system level, drawing on the convergence of quantitative trends, qualitative evidence, and donor perspectives. The scale is defined as follows:



**Constrained**



**Emerging**



**Developing**



**Established**

**Constrained:** Localization practices are present in limited or symbolic form, with structural barriers significantly restricting meaningful progress.

**Emerging:** Localization mechanisms exist and are recognised, but implementation is uneven, episodic, or weakly institutionalised.

**Developing:** Localization practices are more consistently applied, though still constrained by power asymmetries or resource limitations.

**Established:** Localization is embedded in systems, decision-making, and resource allocation, with sustained and substantive local leadership.

This scale was chosen to allow the baseline to identify nuance between absence and maturity, while providing a common, linear reference point for tracking progress over time. In a context as fluid and constrained as Afghanistan's humanitarian landscape, gradation of this kind helps to avoid binary assessments that obscure incremental change or structural limitations beyond the control of individual actors.

Overall, these pillar-based findings provide a diagnostic snapshot of localization in Afghanistan at this moment in time. They are intended to support reflection, dialogue, and prioritization among national actors, international partners, donors, and coordination bodies, and to inform the eventual development of a realistic, context-appropriate localization roadmap led by the LTWG.

# I. Partnership

## Rating: Developing



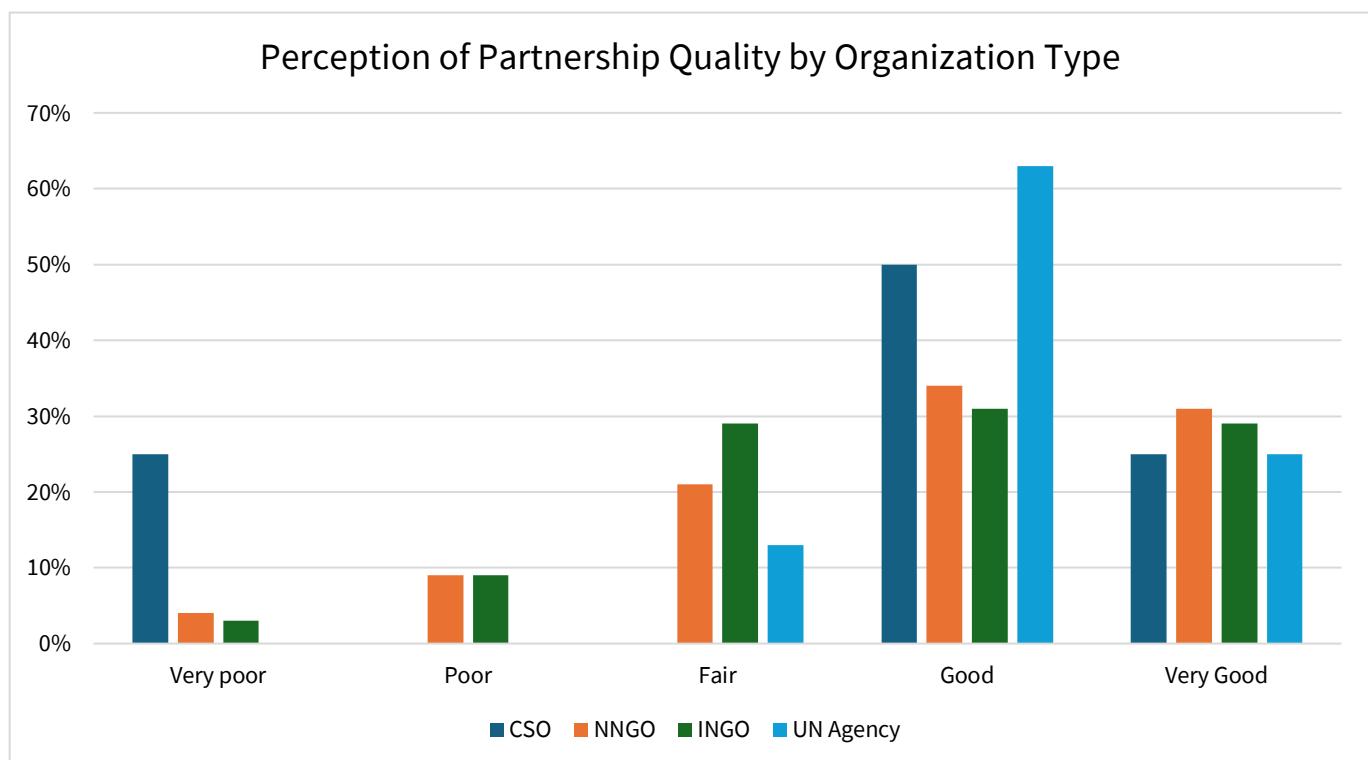
### Overview

Partnerships between national and international actors in Afghanistan are functional but uneven. The quantitative data shows that a majority of organizations describe their partnerships as “good” or “very good,” yet deeper analysis reveals that these positive perceptions often coexist with limited influence, asymmetric decision-making, and constrained co-ownership. At baseline, partnerships between NNGOs and international actors are developing in form but remain structurally imbalanced when it comes to operational realities.

### Perceived Quality of Partnerships

*Figure 1* demonstrates that approximately two-thirds of survey respondents rated their partnership quality as “good” or “very good.” NNGOs reported broadly positive experiences, with roughly 65% falling into these top two categories. INGOs showed a more mixed distribution, while UN agencies reported the highest concentration of positive assessments, with close to 90% rating partnerships as good or very good.

This pattern suggests that partnership quality is perceived differently depending on positional power. Those actors that are closer to funding and decision-making centres tended to assess partnerships more favourably, while those operating primarily as implementers reported more variability, including a non-negligible share of poor or very poor experiences.



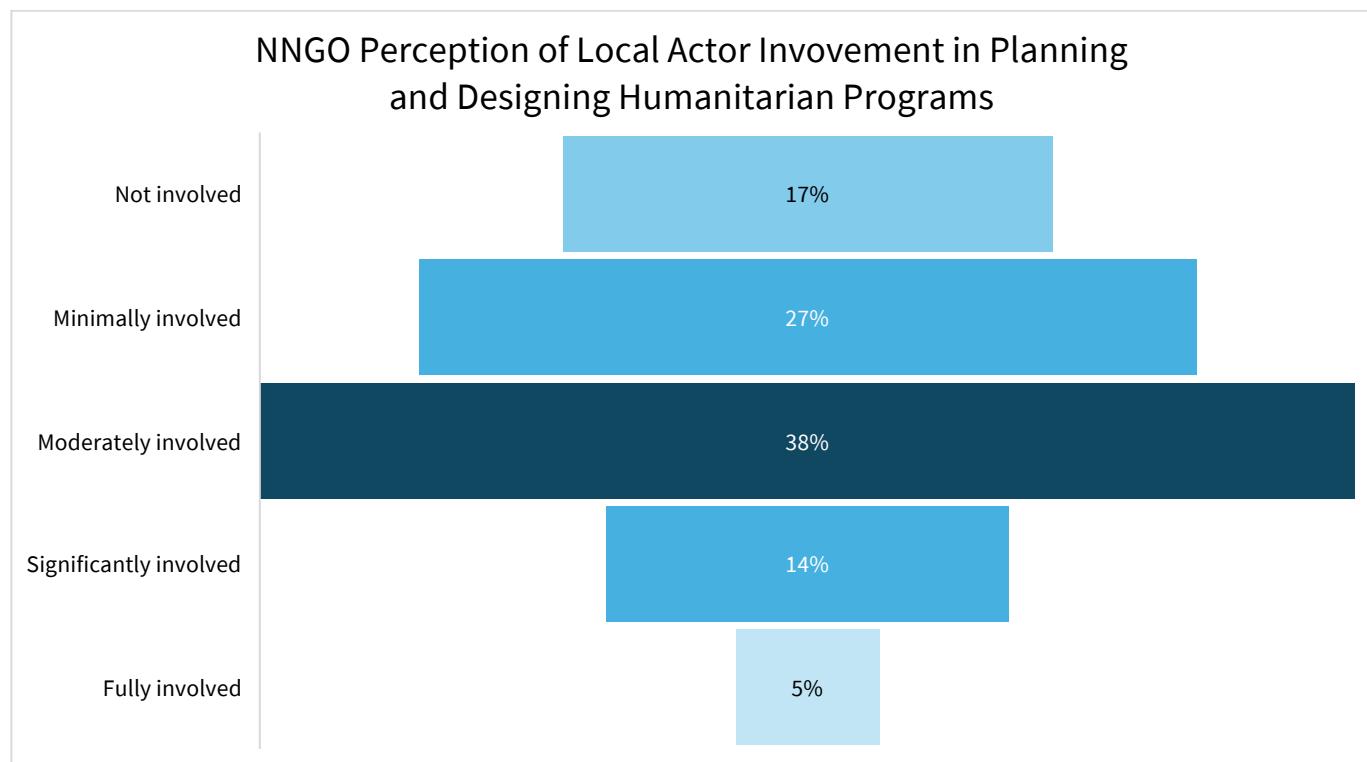
*Figure 1*

Importantly, the presence of negative ratings – around one in eight respondents overall – indicates that partnership challenges are recurring features for a not insignificant subset of local actors.

For those NGOs that reported partnership quality of “poor” or “very poor,” the reasons “lack of meaningful engagement,” “lack of equality and equity,” and “imbalance in power dynamics and decision making” were selected in combination in near-equal measure, suggesting that each issue plays a significant role when partnership quality is perceived poorly.

## Partnership Quality vs. Partnership Substance

While the immediate perceptions of partnership quality appear positive, they are not matched by equivalent levels of involvement in programme planning, design, and strategic decision-making. *Figure 2* shows that fewer than one in five respondents reported that local partners are “significantly” or “fully” involved in programme design, while nearly half described their involvement as minimal or non-existent. Only “moderate” involvement was reported by the plurality of respondents. This suggests that local actors are often engaged after key strategic and technical decisions have already been made.



*Figure 2*

Qualitative data across regions reinforces that, in practice, partnerships are commonly characterised by:

- ◆ International actors retaining control over design and strategic direction
- ◆ Local organizations being brought in post-design
- ◆ Decision-making authority remaining upward, while implementation risk is transferred downward

This discrepancy gives us our first core baseline insight: partnerships are often evaluated positively despite limited power-sharing.

A strong causation for the generally positive evaluation of partnerships despite limited influence on design and planning cannot be sufficiently determined from the data. At baseline, this presents a curious paradox and a starting point for further probing into how NNGOs evaluate partnerships. It is worth investigating further whether NNGOs are more likely to evaluate partnerships positively purely because of their financial benefits in an increasingly competitive funding landscape.

## Structural Drivers of Limited Design Influence

While the cause of limited NNGO influence in design and planning is multivariate, NNGO workshops yielded several recurring contributing factors, including:

- ◆ Rigid donor objectives and requirements, even when ground realities differ
- ◆ International actors favouring large NNGOs with whom they already have an existing relationship
- ◆ Limited faith in the capacity of NNGOs to adequately design large programs

The cyclical and financially-dependent nature of organizational capacity is discussed further in Pillar V. These constraints are augmented for smaller and women-led organizations, who are less likely to be included in early design discussions and more likely to be engaged as downstream partners.

## Power Dynamics and Risk Transfer

Qualitative data consistently indicate that partnerships often function more as mechanisms for risk transfer from international actors to local actors and less as power sharing instruments. Local organizations frequently assume operational, reputational, and security risks for insufficient return both financially and in terms of institutional capacity development, while strategic and financial control remains with international partners and donors. One workshop participant noted:

**“Donors and UN do not account for security risks or access limitations, and local NGOs must manage these challenges without adequate support or flexible arrangements.”**

Accountability within partnerships also flows primarily upward (toward donors) instead of downward (toward communities), as is explored further in Pillar VII. These dynamics limit local autonomy and reinforce a status quo in which NNGOs are treated as service providers rather than co-owners of programmes. The cyclical implications of this are further evident in Pillars II and V.

## Donor Intent vs. Operational Reality – The Perception Gap

Donor survey responses indicated a strong formal commitment to localization, with the majority of donors reporting that partnership principles such as equity, responsibility, transparency and mutual accountability are “consistently” embedded in their partnership frameworks. However, *Figure 2* and qualitative NNGO responses show that this requirement does not reliably translate into meaningful involvement in program design or decision-making. Here, a stark contrast between NNGO operational realities and donor intent emerges, highlighting perhaps the most salient baseline insight: a significant perception gap; tenets of true localization are often vocalized or enshrined on paper, but do not eventuate in function. Addressing this gap represents a critical entry point for improving partnership quality beyond surface-level indicators.

In response to the question of whether they *require* the inclusion of NNGO partners in programs that they fund, six donors from a sample of nine reported that they either “never” or only “sometimes” require the involvement of NNGOs. Elaborating on the Likert selection, one donor noted that they required a meaningful NNGO presence in terms of funding and leadership in two newly issued RFPs. Outside of this example, though, two overarching trends emerged. The first was donors funding INGO and UN projects and assuming the subsequent engagement of NNGOs while not requiring it as a matter of policy; the second was the use of non-committal language in response to how the programs they fund might promote partnerships with local actors. Several donors responded that they “typically take into consideration,” “encourage,” and “prefer” partnerships with local actors, but did not indicate that such partnerships were necessitated by internal policy.

## **Gendered Dimensions of Partnership Access**

Women-led organizations face compounded barriers within partnership systems. While, quantitatively, WLOs did not noticeably differ in how they perceived the quality of their partnerships, qualitative workshop data elucidates that they are frequently excluded from partnership negotiations, coordination spaces, and informal networks where partnerships are formed. Partnership models rarely account for gender-specific operational constraints, and WLOs reported being overlooked by international actors entirely on account of constraints on the ground. One WLO representative said that

“[there is a] lack of trust of women-led organizations because of recent context changes, [there is a lack of trust] that they will be able to implement on the ground.”

While broader operating constraints have significantly affected women’s participation across the humanitarian landscape, the above suggests that international actors are insufficiently adapting their partnership policies to ensure WLO inclusion, instead favouring implementing partners that are less likely to run into obstacles during the project cycle. There is a clear need here for international actors to devise creative ways to partner with WLOs that mitigate their on-ground marginalization.

## **Recommendations for Strengthening Partnerships**

- ◆ The data shows donor intent to ensure that projects they fund engage local actors, but not consistent policy-level requirements. Donors should take intentional steps to ensure that each project funded ultimately includes at minimum one local actor, and preferably more.
- ◆ In response to the asymmetries highlighted in the findings, particularly around risk and cost coverage, donors should also provide clearer guidance for partnership models that promote meaningful local empowerment. These models might include expectations around shared decision-making and adequate coverage of overhead costs for national partners. If risk is cited as a constraint, encourage proportionate risk-sharing instead of a default downward transfer of risk.
- ◆ INGOs and project leads should identify and adopt context-appropriate partnership modalities that enable meaningful engagement with women-led organizations even where on-ground constraints may be limiting. These may include indirect partnership models, remote arrangements, or intermediary mechanisms that allow WLO perspectives to shape programme priorities without increasing risk for either party.

- ❖ In response to the discrepancy of positive partnership evaluation despite limited power sharing, ACBAR and the LTWG should seek to standardize and promote a set of sufficient and necessary criteria for partnership quality evaluation and subsequently re-evaluate.
- ❖ There is an opening for coordination platforms should facilitate experimentation with funding mechanisms that balance risk with capacity-building, such as:
  - Pooled or intermediary-managed funds with clearly defined capacity transfer milestones.
  - Progressive funding models, where NNGOs transition from sub-granting arrangements to shared financial authority over time.

# II. Funding

## Rating: Constrained



### Overview

Access to direct donor funding remains the most binding structural constraint on localization at baseline. The data shows that only a small minority of NNGOs have full and consistent access to direct funding, while the majority rely on partial, occasional, or indirect funding arrangements. These access patterns are closely associated with perceptions of fairness and transparency and with persistent institutional capacity gaps, underscoring the systemic impact of funding exclusion on true localization.

### Access to Direct Funding

As shown in *Figure 3*, access to funding directly from donors overwhelmingly remains the exception and not the rule. Only 10% of respondents reported that local actors have full and consistent access, while a sizable minority identified that they have no such access whatsoever.

Perhaps counterintuitively, small organizations were slightly more likely to report full and consistent access to direct funding than large organizations, and likewise large organizations led the sample in reporting no access. This variance is too slight to imply a causative effect, though, and should not obscure the key fact that lack of consistent access persists irrespective of organization size.

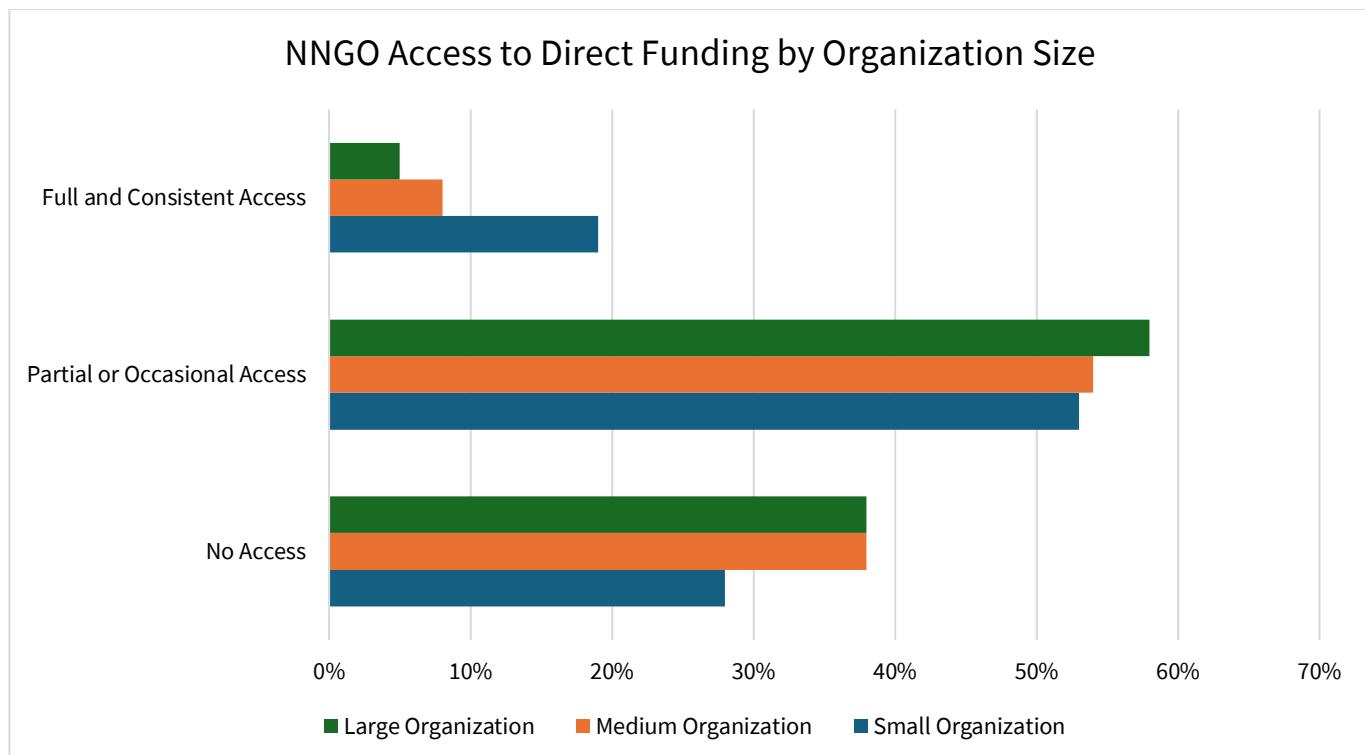


Figure 3

Across all organization sizes, partial or occasional access is the dominant experience, indicating that most NNGOs operate within short-term, uncertain, and intermediary-dependent funding arrangements. Funding arrangements with these characteristics were consistently identified by workshop participants across regions as a primary driver of reduced local actor input, inability to retain skilled staff, and a lack of institutional capacity. This reinforces a funding landscape characterised by volatility and limited planning horizons, and deficient of sustained institutional investment. This lack of investment emerges as the single most pressing deficiency to address in order to promote true localization in Afghanistan.

## Insufficient Cost Coverage: The Cycle Begins

Figure 4 demonstrates a clear and consistent trend of NNGO frustration with funding arrangements insufficiently covering overhead and operational costs. Responses are concentrated at lower levels of perceived fairness, with a substantial share reporting arrangements as only “slightly fair” or “moderately fair,” and a full one in five rating them as “not fair at all.” Combined perceptions among INGOs and UN agencies skew more positively, with a plurality rating cost coverage as “mostly fair”; these international actors were also more than twice as likely to rate funding arrangements as “completely fair.”

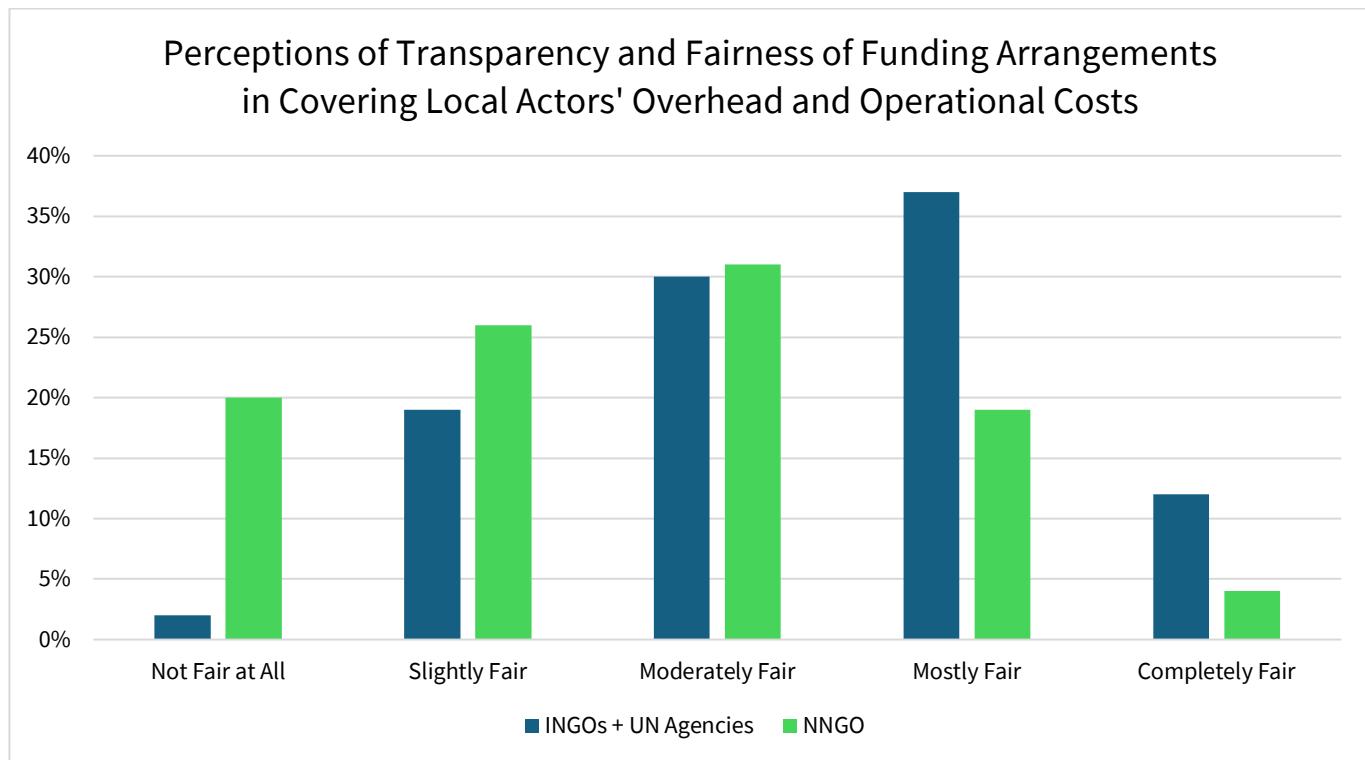
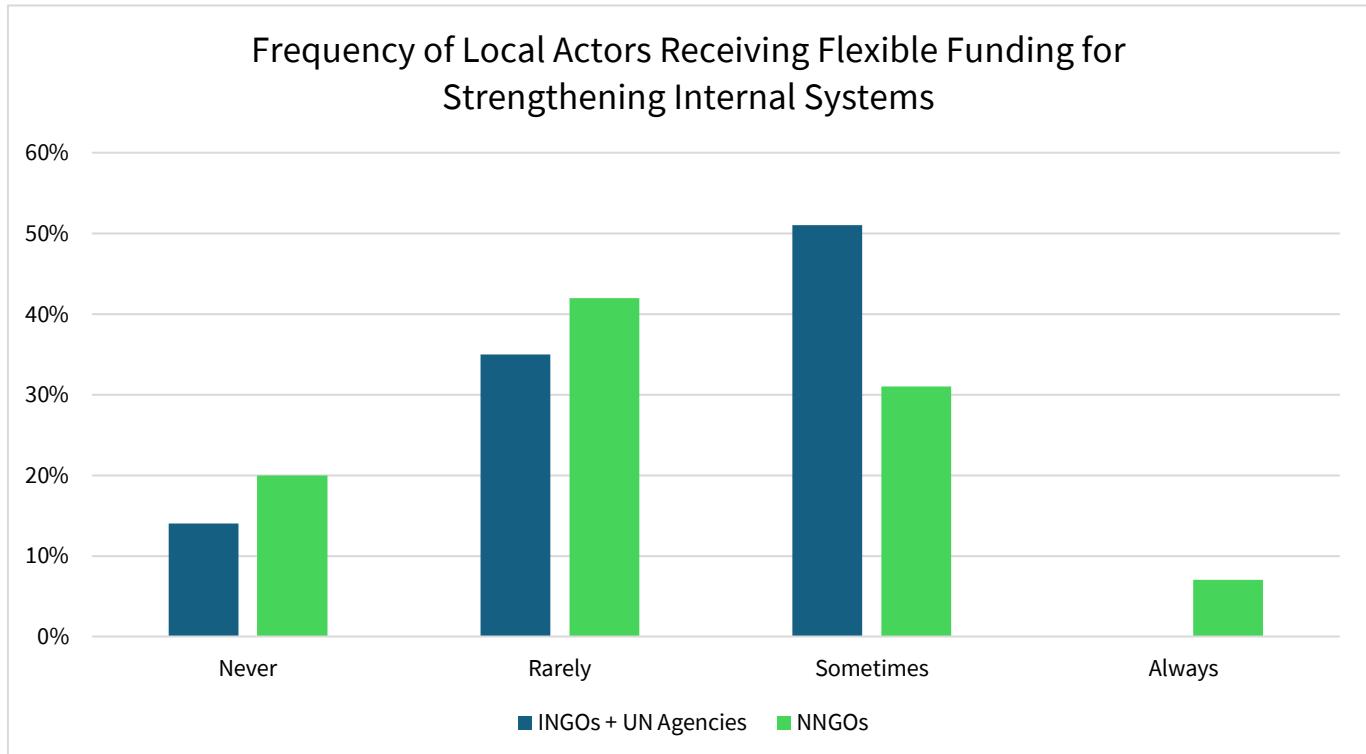


Figure 4

This divergence reveals a gap in how cost coverage is experienced across organizational types. For INGOs and UN agencies, which the qualitative data shows retain overwhelming control over budgeting, indirect cost recovery, and donor engagement, funding arrangements are more likely to be perceived as transparent and fair. For NNGOs, by contrast, workshop responses show that funding arrangements are often inflexible, with overheads capped, negotiated downward, or absorbed informally, limiting local actors’ abilities to cover core operational functions such as finance, compliance, staff retention, security, and systems development.

## (In)flexible Funding for Institutional Development

Additionally, survey response data shows local actors reporting the perception that they are not allocated nearly enough long-term or flexible funding specifically aimed at strengthening internal systems such as HR, finance, MEAL, or governance. *Figure 5* shows that more than two thirds of NNGO respondents feel that they “rarely” or “never” receive it, while more than half of international respondents say that local actors are “sometimes” allocated this kind of funding.



*Figure 5*

The implications of this pattern extend beyond financial dissatisfaction and form the beginnings of a financially-driven cycle of organizational disadvantage that is explored in the following pillars. By not having their operations costs covered reliably and by not receiving flexible funding designed to strengthen their internal systems, local actors fall into a cycle of limited institutional capacity and reliance on competing for project-based funding just to stay afloat.

This ultimately reinforces the very capacity gaps, particularly in financial management, procurement, MEAL, and fundraising, that donors later cite as barriers to providing direct funding. In this way, funding is by far the most salient pillar of localization as it enables the others. Thus, funding discrepancies are the most pressing to address if tangible progress towards a truly localized Afghan humanitarian and development sector are to be achieved.

## Unrealistic Expectations?

Direct access to donor funding by NNGOs was a near-unanimous aspiration raised during workshops in response to the question of what a more localized Afghan humanitarian system should look like in three years’ time. However, this aspiration was rarely accompanied by explicit recognition of the significant fiduciary, political, and operational risks faced by donors when transferring and managing funds in Afghanistan, nor by detailed proposals for how real risks should be mitigated at an organizational level.

It is critical to acknowledge that donors operate in an environment characterised by compliance requirements, heightened scrutiny, restricted oversight, and reputational risk. Within this context, concerns around financial management capacity, internal controls, compliance systems, and potential interference by sanctioned entities or individuals are central to funding decisions. While many NNGOs expressed frustration at limited access to direct funding, qualitative responses suggest that expectations of rapid or large-scale direct funding might be misaligned with current organizational readiness, particularly for smaller organizations with limited financial systems or governance structures.

Donors reported “policy/legal restrictions” in particular as one barrier to funding local actors directly – predictable, given the risk of financial interference by sanctioned groups or individuals within Afghanistan. However, they also consistently cited “limited capacity of local actors” and “fiduciary risk,” which will be explored further in Pillar V.

This misalignment contributes to a cycle of mutual frustration and deadlock, in which local actors perceive donor funding systems as opaque or exclusionary, while donors remain cautious about expanding direct funding pathways in the absence of demonstrated risk management capacity. At baseline, this indicates that the challenge is not solely one of donor reluctance, but also of insufficient convergence between aspirations for direct funding and realistic, staged pathways to achieve it. One donor, in response to the frequent calls for direct access, suggested:

“Given the current risk environment and the need for such close monitoring... it may be worth focusing less on "direct funding" and more on the concrete ways NNGOs add value and help secure efficiencies in the current funding context... maybe a fund manager role, with specific capacity building functions, and clear outcomes that suit the needs of local organizations, would still be a solid localization step in the current context?”

## Gendered Dimensions of Funding Access

Women-led organizations face compounded funding barriers. Qualitative data indicates that women-led NNGOs are less likely to be known to donors, less present in informal funding networks, and more affected by compliance requirements that assume unrestricted mobility and access. As a result, women-led organizations are disproportionately concentrated among those reporting no or partial access to direct funding, further entrenching inequality within the localization ecosystem.

## Recommendations for Strengthening Funding

- ◆ The data in this and subsequent pillars is clear: organizations, as a matter of survival, desperately need their overheads and operational costs covered and their institutional capacity built by funding arrangements. International actors should mandate and fund a significant percentage of overheads for NNGOs, particularly WLOs, within grants to ensure they can invest in their own institutional infrastructure, retain skilled staff, and build sustainable systems beyond short-term project cycles.
- ◆ UN leadership in Afghanistan should clearly articulate how UN-managed pooled funding mechanisms, including the Afghanistan Humanitarian Fund (AHF), can be used more deliberately to advance localization objectives, including increasing the proportion of funding directly and equitably accessed by local actors.
- ◆ In response to concerns about “limited capacity of local actors” and “fiduciary risk,” NNGOs should proactively address these concerns wherever possible. Invest time non-negotiably and

money where possible into internal financial systems and controls and be prepared to showcase them.

- ◆ Unrealistic funding perceptions and expectations on both sides need to be tempered. Umbrella and coordination groups like ACBAR should host recurring discussions on this topic, encouraging all stakeholders to speak freely and equally, and to seek actionable common ground where possible. Communication keeps all possibilities on the table.

# III. Coordination & Complementarity



Rating: Emerging

## Overview

At baseline, coordination mechanisms in Afghanistan are present and operational, with NGOs present across clusters and working groups but engaged inconsistently. The data indicates that engagement by local actors remains irregular. Qualitative findings further suggest that access to coordination spaces does not consistently translate into meaningful influence, as decision-making authority remains largely centralized among international actors.

As a result, coordination systems function more reliably as platforms for information exchange than as mechanisms for shared agenda-setting or complementarity, with local knowledge often being ignored. This gap mirrors patterns identified in the Leadership and Policy Influence pillars and underscores the distinction between formal inclusion in coordination structures and substantive authority within them.

## Participation in Coordination Structures

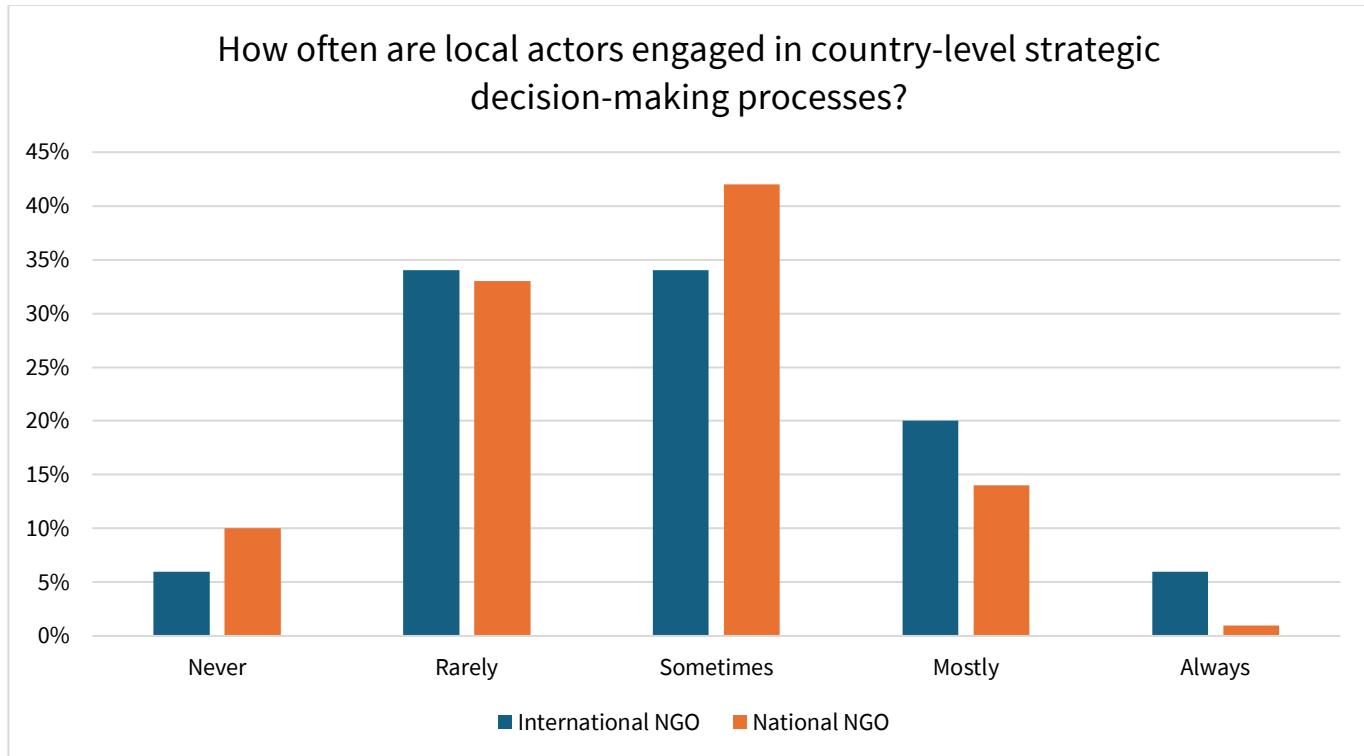


Figure 6

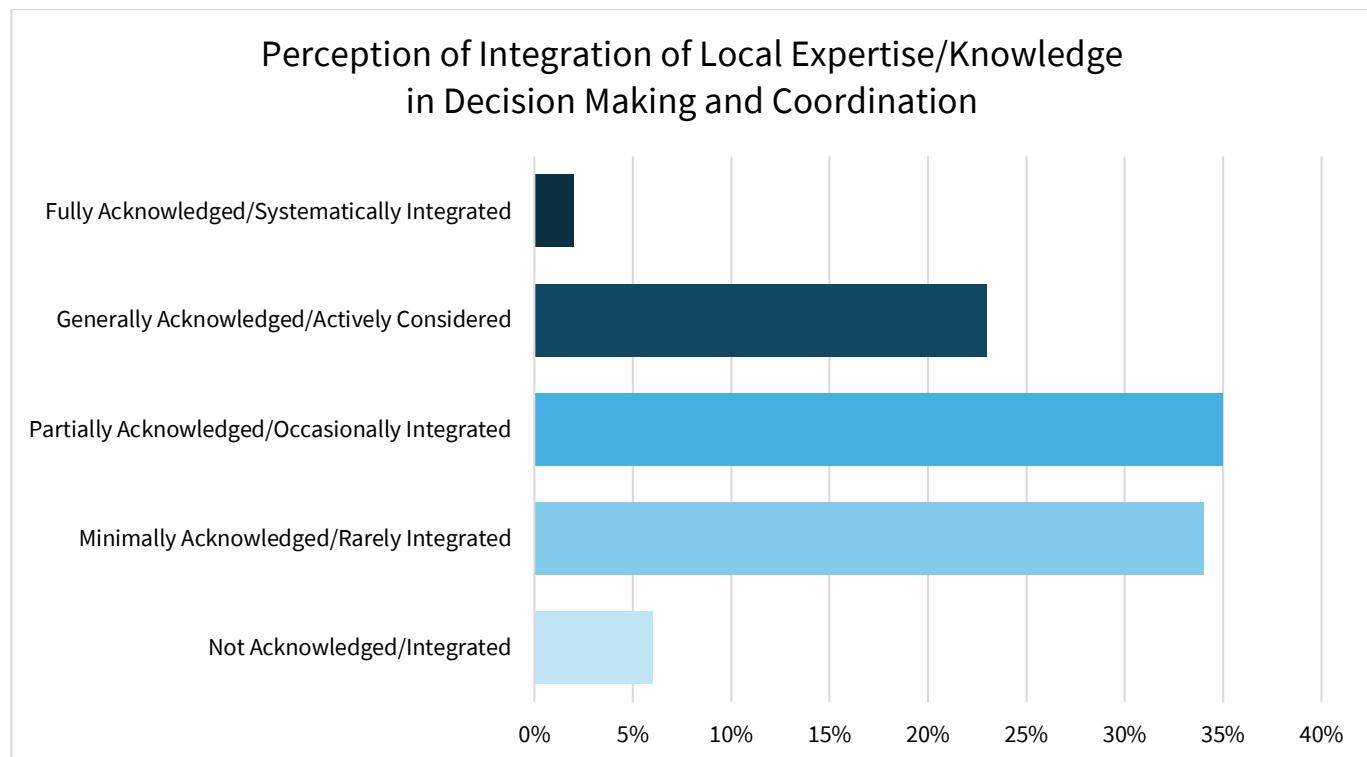
Figure 6 shows how often local actors are engaged in country-level strategic decision-making processes, including forums such as the HCT, clusters, coordination meetings, ACBAR fora, ICCT, and working

groups. The data indicates that NNGOs are most commonly engaged on a “sometimes” or only “rarely” basis, with only a small proportion reporting that they are “always” engaged. Engagement levels reported by NNGOs broadly mirror those of international NGOs; however, the data indicate that participation is irregular rather than routine, with most respondents reporting engagement only ‘sometimes’ or ‘rarely’.

Qualitative findings elucidate the manifestations and causes of this irregular participation. In the Central and South regions, group work participants reported that only a limited number of local actors regularly attend coordination meetings, often due to resource constraints, short-term contracts, or competing operational demands. Participants in the Women’s workshop similarly noted that women-led organizations frequently lack the financial and logistical capacity to attend coordination meetings, particularly at national level.

## Influence and Integration of Local Knowledge

While local actors do participate in coordination structures, engagement is inconsistent, and perceptions of influence remain limited. *Figure 7* illustrates perceptions of how local expertise and knowledge are integrated into decision-making and coordination processes, perhaps the most confronting finding of this baseline. The majority of NNGO respondents report that local knowledge is either “partially acknowledged and occasionally integrated” or “minimally acknowledged and rarely integrated,” with only a very small proportion indicating that local expertise is “fully acknowledged and systematically integrated.”



*Figure 7*

Regional qualitative data reinforces this finding. Across regions, participants described coordination processes in which local actors contribute assessments, community insights, and technical inputs, but final decisions remain centralized and dominated by international actors. In the North, participants noted that UN agencies hold a dominant position in coordination mechanisms, with international and

national NGOs participating largely as members without a great deal of decision-making power. In the West, group work participants highlighted reluctance to change existing coordination arrangements due to concerns over loss of power among international actors.

These patterns are consistent with findings in the following section (Pillar IV - Leadership), which notes that local actors' influence increases with formal roles but rarely extends to full decision-making authority, even where local actors hold chairing or co-chairing positions.

## Complementarity and Role Clarity

Qualitative evidence suggests that coordination platforms support information-sharing but do not consistently result in effective complementarity or clear role delineation. In the Central region, participants reported that donors rarely provide core or coordination funding to local NGOs, limiting their ability to independently design or align programming and reinforcing reliance on INGOs and UN agencies. In the North, group work discussions similarly highlighted that funding flows through international actors constrain local organizations' ability to shape coordination outcomes.

As a result, coordination often functions as a procedural requirement rather than a strategic tool, constraining complementarity and reinforcing dynamics identified in the Funding pillar, where limited access to resources undermines both autonomy and influence.

## Donor Support to Coordination Capacity

Donor responses provide additional context to these findings. In response to the question "*In what ways do you as a donor contribute to strengthening the ability of local and national actors to effectively engage in, influence, and lead coordination structures?*" most donors indicate that their primary contributions are through project-tied capacity strengthening and "knowledge sharing," with fewer reporting institutional support for local actors or the empowerment of national actors to lead coordination mechanisms.

This pattern suggests that donor engagement with coordination tends to prioritise participation and activity-relevant capacity over addressing the structural conditions required for local leadership and influence within coordination systems. This finding aligns with NNGO perceptions that donor support, while present, does not sufficiently shift power dynamics within coordination fora, as well as the cyclical impact of funding deficiencies identified throughout this baseline report.

## Recommendations for Strengthening Coordination and Complementarity

- ◆ The overlooking of local knowledge and expertise is perhaps the most stark and solvable finding in this report. International actors in positions of power should immediately rethink how they listen and respond to local input. Not every piece of input has to be agreed to or implemented, but every piece should be actively heard and acknowledged.
- ◆ Local actors should prioritise consistent engagement in selected coordination platforms that align with their technical expertise and strategic priorities; avoid spreading limited capacity across multiple fora.
- ◆ Coordination bodies should strengthen mechanisms that enable regular and predictable local participation, particularly for organizations with limited resources or restricted mobility,

including consolidating meeting structures, improving information flow, and systematically tracking how local inputs are reflected in coordination outcomes.

- ◆ Donor responses acknowledged that capacity and risk considerations are key constraints on supporting local leadership. The findings suggest that leadership roles remain episodic without resources. Donors should thus recognise engagement and leadership in coordination structures as a legitimate and resourced component of humanitarian delivery. This includes allowing budgeted time and cost coverage for participation, leadership roles, and follow-up, particularly where national actors are expected to chair, co-chair, or substantively contribute to coordination mechanisms.
  - Where concerns about fiduciary risk or organizational systems limit support for local leadership, consider targeted, role-linked capacity investments to replace generalised capacity-building approaches.

# IV. Leadership

## Rating: Emerging

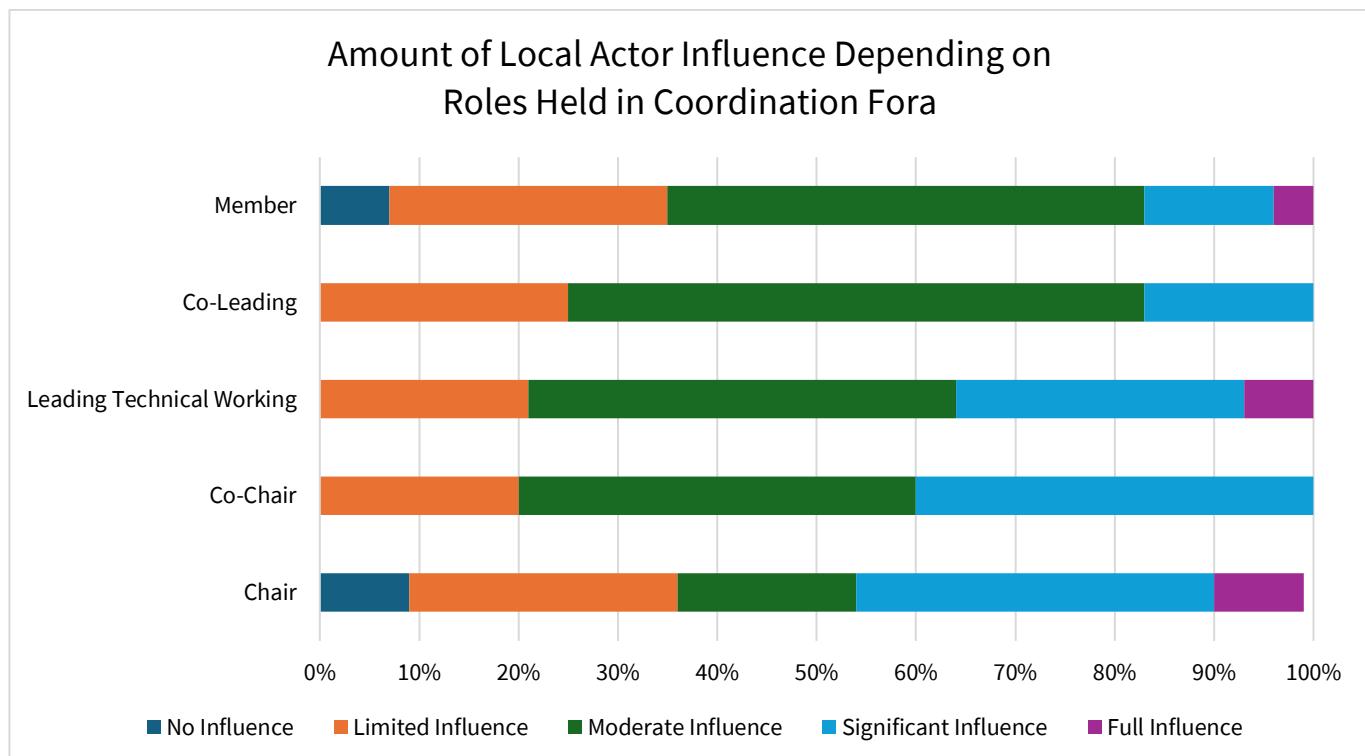


### Overview

Leadership among national actors is present but constrained. While NNGOs participate in coordination structures and, in some cases, hold formal leadership or co-leadership roles, these positions do not consistently translate into substantive authority over agendas and decisions. At baseline, leadership exists in form but remains procedurally bounded within broader coordination and funding architectures.

### Leadership Roles and Decision-Making Influence

As shown in *Figure 8*, which represents only those NNGOs which reported having held any role mentioned, perceived influence over agenda setting and decision-making increases marginally as NNGOs move from member roles into leadership positions such as chair, co-chair, or technical lead. However, this relationship between role and authority is slight, and not as decisive as expected, particularly since more than a third of local actors in Chair roles still reported having “limited” or “no” influence at all.



*Figure 8*

Even among chairs and co-chairs, only a minority of respondents report significant influence, and very few report full control over agendas or decisions. Most leadership role-holders describe their influence as moderate, indicating that leadership positions expand voice but rarely confer final authority. A key

baseline finding is derived here: For local actors, holding a leadership title in a coordination forum does not guarantee agenda-setting power.

Leadership roles often operate within predefined mandates, donor-driven priorities, or UN-led coordination structures that limit the scope of local decision-making. In the Northern Region, NNGO representatives noted that most active Clusters, Working Groups (WGs), and consortia are directly led by UN agencies, and that these agencies hold the primary decision-making authority.

## Leadership as Presence vs Leadership as Authority

The data highlights a persistent gap between formal leadership and substantive leadership. While NNGOs may chair meetings, lead technical working groups, or co-lead coordination fora, strategic decisions frequently remain centralized upstream.

Qualitative findings reinforce this pattern, with respondents describing leadership roles that involve facilitation, reporting, or technical contribution and lacking in decision-making authority. In practice, leadership is often exercised within narrow procedural boundaries, constraining the ability of local actors to shape priorities, allocate resources, or challenge assumptions.

## Consortia Leadership and Structural Barriers

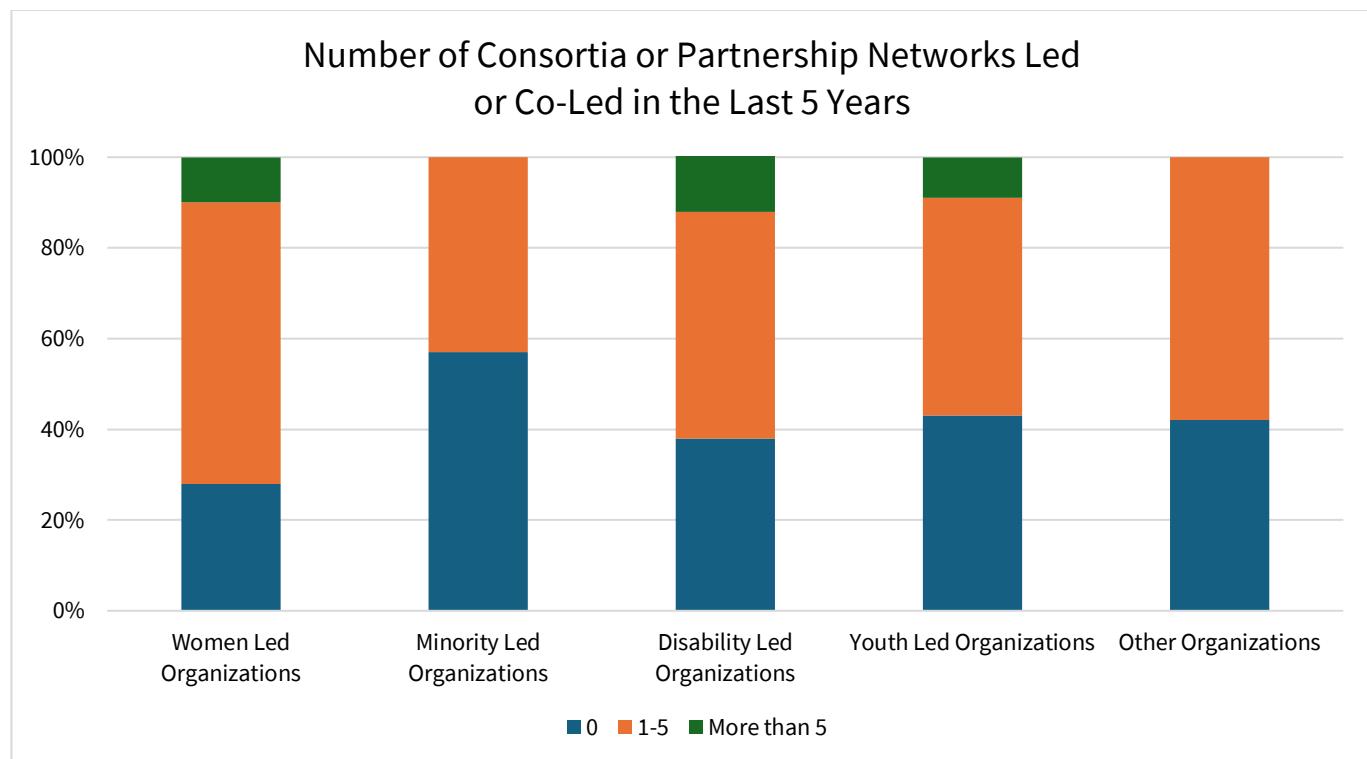


Figure 9

Figure 9 shows that leadership of consortia or partnership networks over the past five years remains uneven across organizational types. While women-led, disability-led, and youth-led organizations do report experience leading or co-leading consortia, the majority fall within the “1–5” range, with very few reporting sustained or repeated leadership.

Notably, a substantial proportion of minority-led organizations report no consortia leadership experience at all, reflecting persistent structural barriers to leadership opportunities. These include a

ubiquitous limited access to funding, but also requirements and systems that specifically disadvantage organizations with restricted mobility or visibility.

Overall, the data strongly suggests that leadership opportunities are episodic rather than institutionalised and consistent, and often dependent on individual relationships rather than systemic efforts to include. This interpretation is further supported by donor data, in which more than half of respondents acknowledged that their funding strategies support local or national organizations to lead consortia and programs to “a limited extent” or “not at all.” While this points, in part, to the need for more intentional donor support for local leadership, expanding formal leadership roles alone will be insufficient unless accompanied by deeper shifts in how authority, decision-making power, and risk are distributed within humanitarian coordination and funding systems. Without such changes, leadership risks remaining a matter of presence and responsibility rather than influence and control.

## **Gendered and Intersectional Dimensions of Leadership**

Leadership constraints are amplified for women-led and marginalised organizations. Qualitative data indicate that gender norms, security restrictions, and male-dominated decision spaces limit both access to leadership roles and the authority associated with them. Where women-led organizations do assume leadership roles, these are often subject to heightened scrutiny and narrower mandates.

As a result, leadership pathways remain structurally unequal, reinforcing concentration of authority among a limited set of actors despite formal localization commitments.

## **Recommendations for Strengthening Leadership**

- ◆ UN agencies and international NGOs, as those identified holding the most power in coordination fora, should prioritize the inclusion of women- and minority-led organizations in leadership positions and, where necessary, adapt their participation infrastructure to ensure accessibility to these organizations. These international organizations should also better clarify to fora members what authority accompanies leadership roles.
- ◆ Donors should more explicitly link investments in coordination and leadership structures to clear, time-bound localization pathways. Where funding is provided to UN agencies or INGOs for the coordination of clusters, working groups, or technical platforms, this support should be contingent on the coordinating body demonstrating a credible plan to progressively transition leadership and decision-making authority to national NGOs.
  - Such plans do not necessarily need to assume immediate transfer of responsibility but should outline sequenced steps and criteria for transition.
- ◆ NNGOs should continue to pursue leadership opportunities that align with their comparative strengths and means. When they hold leadership positions, local actors should take the opportunity to highlight and draw attention to instances of symbolic leadership; advocate collectively and articulate what kinds of authority and resources they feel are necessary for leadership roles to be meaningful and sustainable.
- ◆ Coordination bodies should play a monitoring role by supporting the development of meaningful localization benchmarks for leadership within coordination mechanisms. These could include tracking who holds leadership roles, the authority attached to those roles, and whether transition plans exist.

# V. Capacity Strengthening



Rating: **Emerging**

## Overview

National NGOs demonstrate strong contextual knowledge, community trust, and implementation capacity, yet face persistent gaps in core institutional functions. At baseline, capacity strengthening is uneven and structurally constrained, shaped by limited access to funding, systems, and trust-based relationships. This interpretation is supported by donor self-reporting of limited contributions to NNGO capacity building. Capacity gaps are therefore best understood as systemic outcomes as opposed to isolated organizational deficits.

## Critical Capacity Gaps

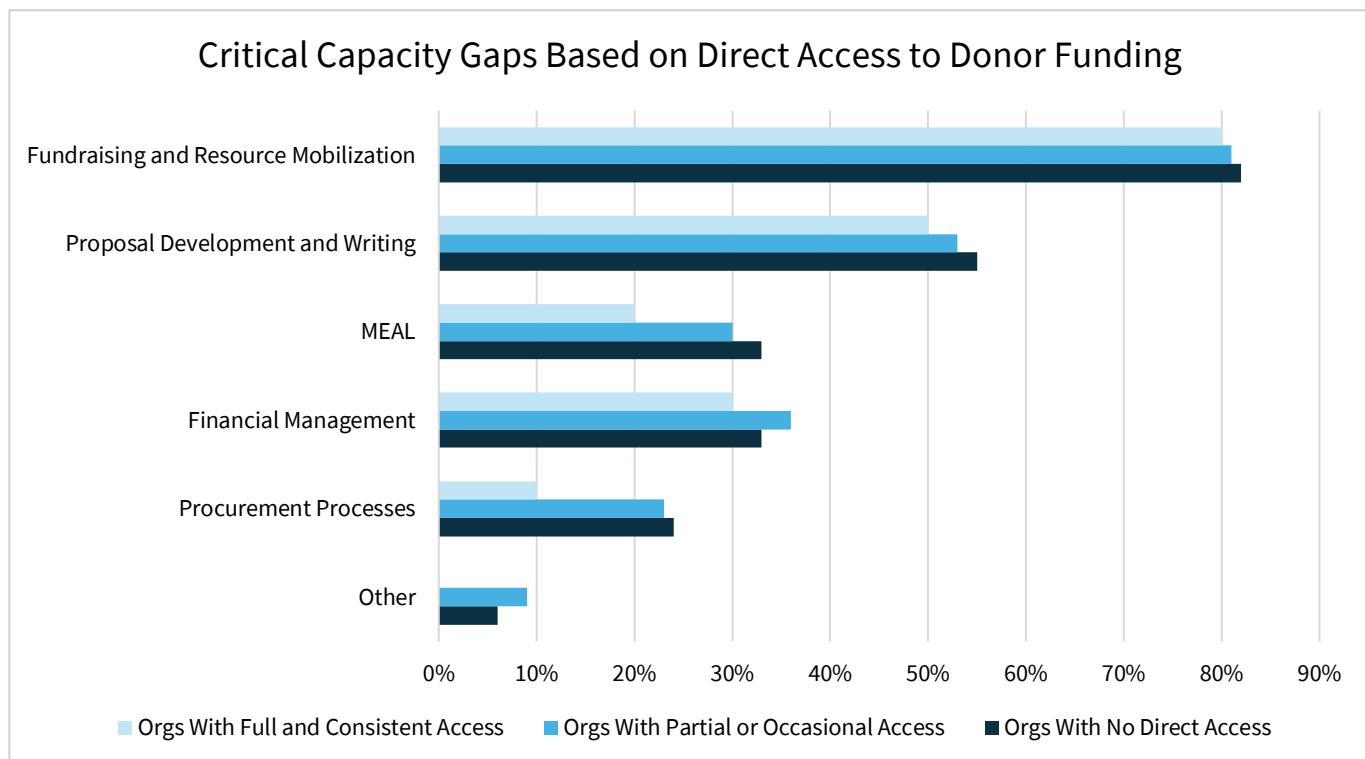


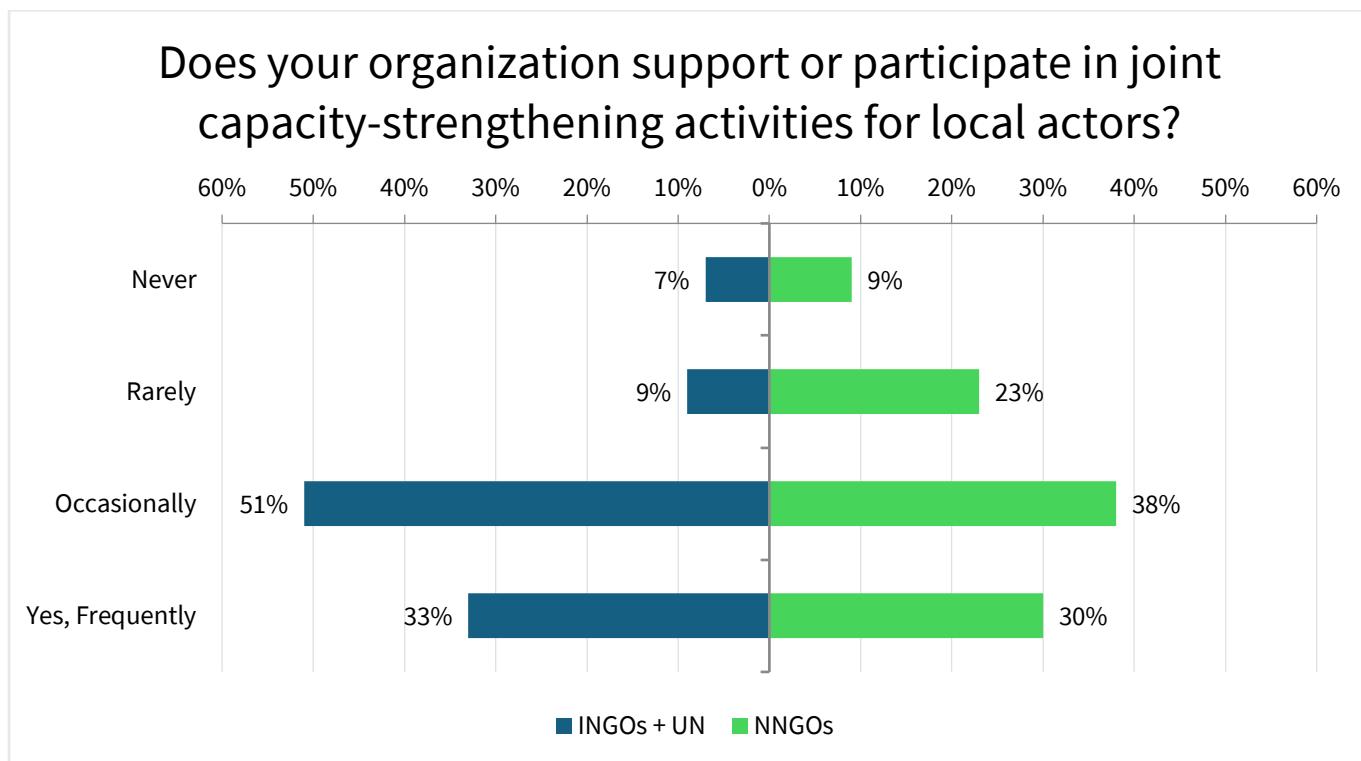
Figure 10

As shown in *Figure 10*, the most frequently reported capacity gaps across organizations relate to fundraising and resource mobilization, proposal development and writing, and financial management. These are foundational capacities required to access, manage, and sustain funding, rather than technical delivery skills.

Unsurprisingly, the prevalence of these gaps varies somewhat by access to direct donor funding. Organizations with no direct access to funding reported the highest levels of foundational capacity gaps across nearly all categories, while organizations with full and consistent access report substantially fewer gaps. Organizations with partial access, predictably, fall in the middle. This pattern again highlights the self-reinforcing cycle identified in Pillar II, in which limited funding access constrains institutional development, while capacity gaps are then cited as justification for continued exclusion.

## The Joint Capacity Strengthening Activity Gap

A discrepancy emerges when interpreting responses to the question “does your organization support or participate in joint capacity-strengthening activities for local actors? (e.g., joint training, mentoring, or joint planning)?” *Figure 11* shows that, on one hand, the vast majority of international actors report “occasionally” or “frequently” supporting or participating in such initiatives; a third of NNGOs, however, reported they “never” or “rarely” engage. Assuming both groups reported accurately, this divergence points to an important interpretive challenge.



*Figure 11*

One explanation is that joint capacity-strengthening initiatives do indeed exist, but international actors are more likely to define activities such as training provision, mentoring, or technical accompaniment as “joint capacity-strengthening activities,” while local actors experience these engagements as episodic, top-down, or insufficiently collaborative to warrant the same classification. An alternative explanation is that international actors may be reporting instances of support, such as funding, technical advice, or indirect facilitation, while NNGOs are reporting on direct participation, resulting in fundamentally different reference points for the same question.

The question’s combined phrasing of “support or participate” therefore limits the precision of interpretation, as it conflates two distinct roles within capacity-strengthening processes – a limitation of the survey. What the data nevertheless suggests, though, is a misalignment in how joint capacity strengthening is understood and experienced: while international actors perceive such activities as

relatively frequent, a substantial share of local actors do not experience them as consistent, reciprocal, or meaningfully joint.

## Funding as a Cyclical Constraint on Capacity

The relationship between funding access and capacity gaps indicates that capacity strengthening efforts cannot be separated from funding architecture. Short-term, project-based, and intermediary-managed funding limits organizations' ability to invest in systems, retain skilled staff, and develop institutional processes. This cycle is borne out in donor response data too:

4/9

- Donors who reported that the extent to which they provide or promote multi-year or flexible funding to local actors to strengthen their institutional capacity was “limited” or “very limited”.*

Not only did 4/9 donors self-report that they provide “limited” or “very limited” flexible funding to local actors to strengthen their institutional capacity, but no donor reported that they provide this kind of funding to a “significant” extent. However, two thirds of donor respondents subsequently identified “capacity gaps” as a primary barrier to local actors accessing direct funding.

6/9

- Donors who identified “capacity gaps” as a primary barrier to local actors accessing direct funding.*

Qualitative findings reinforce this interpretation, with respondents noting that capacity development is often donor-driven, fragmented, and insufficiently resourced to support long-term organizational strengthening.

## Recommendations for Strengthening Capacity

- ★ Findings show that capacity support is occurring but not consistently enabling the outcomes donors or NNGOs expect. Donors should work more closely with international partners to clarify what constitutes meaningful capacity strengthening, particularly in relation to the systems and capabilities donors themselves identify as prerequisites for increased responsibility, leadership, or funding access. Further, in order to avoid capacity support being treated as implicit or secondary, donors should encourage support that is explicitly linked to pre-agreed outcomes, such as improved compliance or financial management.

- ◆ Institutional capacity is not just an asset for local actors, but a vital organ. Without strong institutional capability, an organization fails. Thus, donors and INGOs need to allocate, without exception, flexible portions of funding agreements solely for institutional, not operational, capacity strengthening.
- ◆ In response to an apparent misalignment on what constitutes joint capacity-strengthening activities, local actors should vocalize considered, relevant institutional capacity support expectations from the inception of a partnership and, where possible, insist that they are mentioned in formal agreements.
- ◆ The LTWG should reformulate the joint capacity question and re-survey respondents. From here, the LTWG could create and promote shared points of reference or minimum standards for capacity strengthening.

# VI. Policy Influence and Advocacy



Rating: **Emerging**

## Overview

At baseline, national NGOs report limited and uneven influence over humanitarian policy and strategic decision-making, despite possessing strong contextual knowledge and evidence from frontline implementation. While local actors are frequently consulted through clusters, coordination fora, and ad hoc consultations, translation of local input into formal policy or strategy remains the exception rather than the rule.

Quantitative findings show low perceived influence over decision-making, a pattern strongly reinforced by qualitative evidence across all regions.

## Representation of Local Perspectives

How well are local perspectives represented in national and international advocacy platforms?

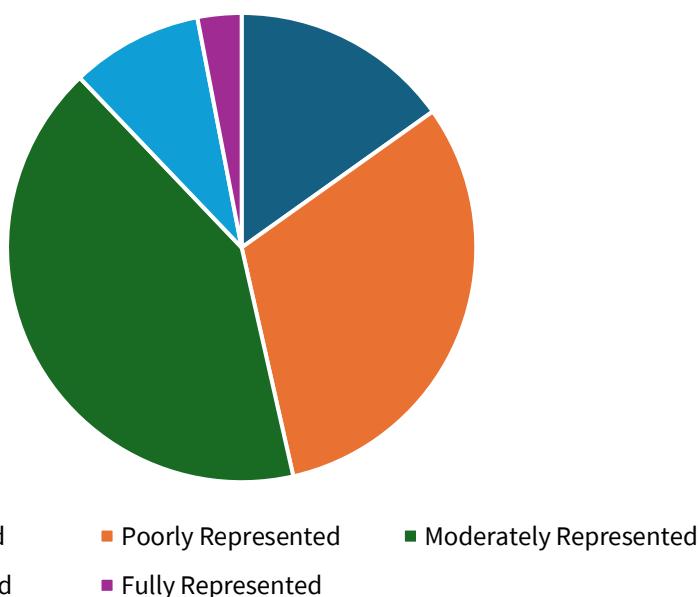


Figure 12

Figure 12 shows that nearly three quarters of survey respondents thought local actors to be either “poorly represented” or “not represented” at all in national and international advocacy platforms, with no meaningful differences in responses by organization type. This shows an acute awareness across actors of the lack of influence that local actors have over policy and advocacy in contemporary Afghanistan. Only one in eight thought local voices were “well” or “fully” represented.

# Forms of Policy Engagement

Qualitative responses indicate that local actors most commonly engage in policy processes through:

- ❖ Cluster and sector coordination meetings
- ❖ Humanitarian Response Plan (HRP) consultations and provincial planning exercises
- ❖ Thematic working groups (e.g. health, protection, mine action)
- ❖ Umbrella and coordination bodies such as ACBAR

Engagement is largely consultative, with local actors providing data, assessments, and recommendations. However, respondents repeatedly noted that final decisions are typically made upstream, and local inputs are not consistently reflected in official policy documents, as discussed above.

## When Local Input Does Influence Policy

Although rare, the open-ended survey questions in the NNGO dataset included credible examples in which local input shaped national or sectoral strategy.

Local actors reported influencing:

- ❖ **Humanitarian Response Plan priorities**, including the inclusion of mobile health teams for hard-to-reach populations following evidence shared through Health Cluster and HCT discussions. Locally articulated disability and rehabilitation needs also resulted in the formal inclusion of victim assistance as a life-saving intervention in Baghlan.
- ❖ **Mine action clearance policy**, where community-identified priorities reshaped national clearance sequencing to focus on schools, clinics, and access routes.
- ❖ **Education policy**, where sustained advocacy by local CSOs and community elders contributed to the institutionalization of Community-Based Education (CBE) within provincial and national education strategies.

Most interestingly, one CSO also reported that female employees of WLOs were initially unable to obtain tax identification numbers (TINs), but after several advocacy meetings with officials in relevant departments, eligibility requirements were eventually changed. Without calling into question the credibility of these instances, they are undeniably anecdotal and are not reflective of the norm. These cases demonstrate that local policy influence is not impossible, but typically requires:

- ❖ Access to formal coordination or planning processes
- ❖ Alignment with donor or UN priorities
- ❖ Sustained engagement, not one-off consultation

# Structural Constraints on Policy Influence

Across regions, respondents identified systemic barriers that constrain policy influence, including:

- ◆ Decision-making centralization, with policies shaped by donors, UN agencies, or headquarters-level actors
- ◆ Political and civic space restrictions, limiting open advocacy and debate
- ◆ Resource constraints, with advocacy deprioritised in favour of service delivery
- ◆ Language, access, and platform barriers, excluding smaller and women-led organizations

Several respondents explicitly stated that local inputs are heard but not reflected in official decision records, reinforcing the perception that consultation does not equate to influence.

## Gendered Dimensions of Policy Influence

Women-led and women-focused organizations face compounded exclusion from policy spaces. Restrictions on mobility, office attendance, and participation in mixed-gender meetings severely limit women's access to advocacy platforms. Even where women's organizations contribute evidence, their inputs are less likely to be institutionalised. As one respondent noted:

*“In the current circumstances, the influence at the national level policy or strategy involvement of the local actors are zero...”*

## Recommendations for Strengthening Policy Influence and Advocacy

- ◆ Given the demonstrable high barrier to spotlighting individual local voices, NNGOs should prioritise collective and evidence-based advocacy through trusted networks in place of pursuing individual organizational representation in high-risk policy spaces. Where possible, this could include consolidating field evidence, documenting operational constraints, and feeding inputs through coordination bodies that can safely elevate local perspectives.
- ◆ Donors should support clearer, more transparent feedback mechanisms that explain how local inputs provided through consultations and coordination forums inform policy or strategic decisions. Where policy influence is constrained, recognise indirect contributions, such as shaping operational guidelines or programmatic priorities, as legitimate localization outcomes.
- ◆ INGOs and UN agencies should distinguish more clearly between consultation and influence when engaging local actors, and articulate upfront how and where local inputs can realistically shape decisions. Strengthening internal processes to document, reference, and acknowledge local contributions can help reduce perceptions of symbolic participation.
- ◆ Coordination bodies should continue to act as intermediaries for local advocacy by consolidating local inputs and presenting them in spaces that are difficult for local actors to access, such as government meetings and high-level donor forums.

# VII. Participation and Accountability

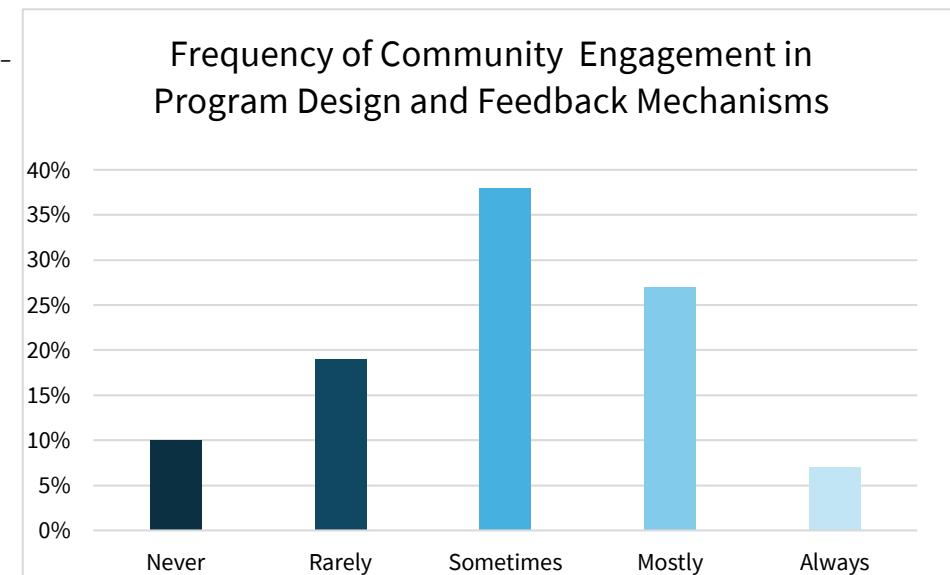
Rating: **Developing**

## Overview

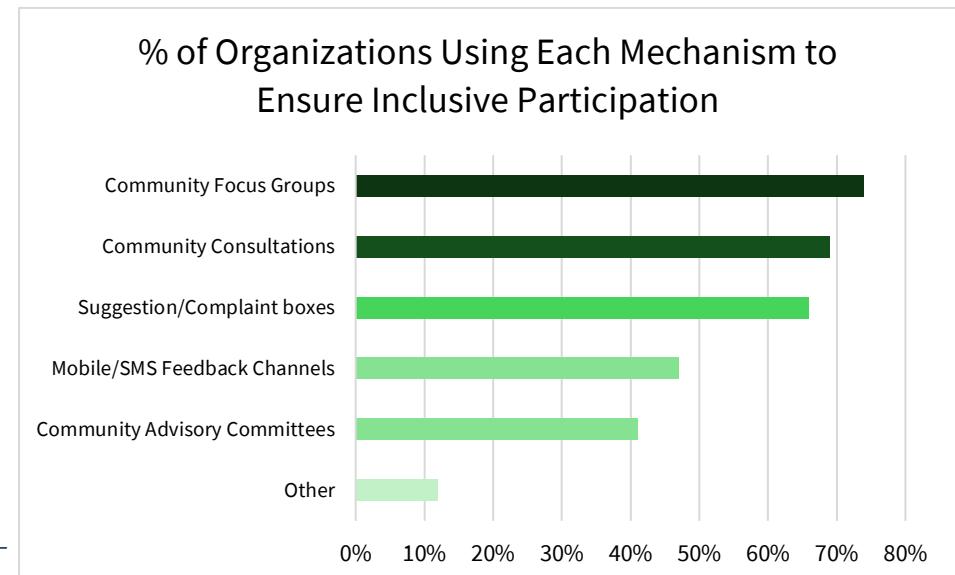
Participation and accountability mechanisms are widely present among national NGOs but remain inconsistently applied and weakly institutionalised. At baseline, participation is better understood as a set of practices and tools than as a fully embedded system that shapes programme design, implementation, and learning. While technical knowledge of accountability approaches is strong, structural constraint limit their consistent and meaningful implementation, continuing the cyclical pattern described in earlier Pillars.



### Community Engagement in Practice: Frequency Versus Form



- Figure 13 -



## Frequency of Community Engagement in Practice

As shown in *Figure 13 (left panel)*, community engagement in programme design and feedback occurs irregularly. The largest proportion of NNGOs reported engaging communities “sometimes,” with fewer organizations reporting engagement as “mostly” or “always.” A non-trivial share reported rare or no engagement.

This distribution indicates that participation is not continuous and remains sporadic and episodic, often concentrated at specific moments in the programme cycle and far less likely to be embedded throughout. Engagement is more likely to occur during needs assessments or reporting stages than during programme design, adaptation, or decision-making.

At baseline, this suggests that community participation has presence but remains uneven, shaped by project timelines and donor requirements as opposed to being driven by institutional practice.

## Participation Mechanisms: Presence Without Institutionalization

In contrast to engagement frequency, *Figure 13 (right panel)* shows widespread adoption and use of standard accountability and participation mechanisms. Most NNGOs reported using community consultations, focus group discussions, suggestion or complaint boxes, and, to a lesser extent, mobile or SMS-based feedback channels and advisory committees as mechanisms to ensure inclusive participation. Some NNGOs even reported using additional means, such as surveys.

This contrast is noteworthy, as it demonstrates that the primary constraint is not a lack of technical knowledge or tools, but rather the absence of enabling conditions that allow these mechanisms to be used consistently, early, and meaningfully. As a comparative figure, the two panels illustrate another core baseline finding: community participation exists in form, but not yet as an institutionalised practice.

Mechanisms are often activated to meet compliance requirements, but infrequently to support co-creation, accountability, or adaptive programming.

## Barriers to Effective Accountability

The heatmap in *Figure 14* highlights the structural barriers that limit effective and institutionalized accountability to affected populations. Again, the cyclical impact of funding architecture is visible here. The most commonly reported constraint regardless of organization type is a lack of funding and resources, followed by weak systems and institutional capacity gaps. Trust-related concerns and confidentiality issues further shape the feasibility of safe and effective feedback mechanisms.

These barriers align closely with findings in the Funding (Pillar II) and Capacity (Pillar V) sections. Accountability systems require sustained resourcing, staff time, safe reporting channels, and feedback-to-action processes. Where funding is short-term, inflexible, or tightly earmarked, participation mechanisms are often reduced to minimal or symbolic forms.

Importantly, these barriers are far more systemic than reflecting on individual organizations. They reflect the conditions under which NNGOs operate, not a lack of commitment to accountability principles.

## Barriers That Local Partners Face in Ensuring Effective Accountability Systems, Disaggregated by Organization Type



Figure 14

## Accountability as a Systemic, Not Technical, Challenge

Qualitative findings reinforce the quantitative patterns. Respondents frequently described situations in which community feedback is collected but not acted upon, either because programme parameters are fixed, donor approval is required for changes, or resources are insufficient to respond meaningfully.

In such contexts, participation risks becoming an extractive practice through which communities are consulted but their input does not shape outcomes. This undermines trust and weakens accountability over time.

## Gendered and Contextual Dimensions of Participation

Participation and accountability are further shaped by gendered and contextual constraints. Women's participation is often limited by mobility restrictions, social norms, and safety concerns, particularly in conservative or conflict-affected areas such as Southern Afghanistan. Where participation mechanisms are not explicitly designed to account for these constraints, they risk excluding the perspectives of women and other marginalised groups.

## Recommendations for Strengthening Participation and Accountability

- ◆ The data clearly demonstrates that local actors have a firm understanding and high uptake rates of best-practice community accountability and feedback mechanisms but are inconsistently able to deploy them effectively due to funding constraints. From the outset, international and local partners should jointly identify necessary mechanisms, and funding arrangements should invariably cover the cost of their deployment.
- ◆ Local actors should continue to be proactive in providing and explaining the importance of community feedback to international partners. The most likely way to convince an international partner to fund AAP mechanisms is by demonstrating their effectiveness and benefit. Where participation is constrained by time, resources, or access, documenting these limits and their implications for programme quality can support collective advocacy for more realistic participation expectations.
- ◆ Coordination bodies should promote shared expectations around participation and accountability by supporting guidance on minimum standards, good practice, and feasible approaches in dynamic field contexts. Coordination bodies should also leverage their position to elevate AAP from a project-basis concern to a systems-level issue that is inseparable from quality, trust, and true localization.

# Conclusion: From Diagnosis to Collective Action

This baseline assessment provides a grounded, system-level diagnosis of localization practice in Afghanistan at a critical moment. Across all seven pillars, the findings point not to an absence of localization effort, but to its partial, uneven, and structurally constrained realization. In Afghanistan, localization exists in form through policies, mechanisms, and stated commitments, but remains inconsistently embedded in decision-making authority, resource control, and institutional practice.

The most persistent finding across pillars is the gap between participation and power. Local actors are present in coordination spaces, consulted in program design, and increasingly visible in leadership roles, yet continue to face structural limits in shaping priorities, influencing strategy, and accessing flexible, predictable funding. This gap is reinforced by funding architectures, coordination norms, and risk management practices that remain largely upstream, even where intent to localize is evident.

## Implications for the Localization Charter

The findings offer a clear evidence base to inform the LTWG's development of a Localization Charter. Rather than introducing new principles, the Charter can refer to this baseline to translate existing commitments into clearer expectations, particularly around:

- ◆ What constitutes meaningful leadership versus symbolic roles
- ◆ What minimum standards of partnership equity and cost coverage should look like in practice
- ◆ What donors, international actors, and coordination bodies can reasonably commit to changing within existing constraints

The forthcoming Charter presents an opportunity for the LTWG to shift localization discourse from aspiration to mutual accountability, grounded in the realities identified in this report. By anchoring commitments in documented barriers and feasible enablers, the Charter can function as a shared reference point against which progress can be tracked.

## Implications for the Strategic Action Plan

The baseline findings also point to where tangible, immediate action is both necessary and realistic. The Strategic Action Plan can draw directly on this evidence to prioritise actions that address systemic bottlenecks. In particular, the data suggest the value of focusing on:

- ◆ Shifting how coordination functions, not only who participates – clarifying pathways from consultation to influence
- ◆ Targeted capacity investments linked to access, especially in areas donors themselves cite as constraints
- ◆ Piloting differentiated funding and leadership models, and moving away from assuming a one-size-fits-all localization pathway
- ◆ Strengthening intermediary and collective mechanisms, including the role of ACBAR and the LTWG, as vehicles for shared advocacy and negotiation

Crucially, the SAP can use this baseline to sequence actions and highlight that progress in leadership, policy influence, and accountability is contingent on parallel movement in funding and coordination practices.

## **Moving Forward**

This assessment is intentionally diagnostic, and its recommendations are designed to be realistic, initial steps that all actors can take while the LTWG conducts further research and facilitates greater discussions surrounding localization. Its value lies in providing a shared, evidence-based understanding of where localization in Afghanistan currently stands, where it is constrained, and where promising momentum exists. The findings offer a foundation for deliberate, negotiated change that future work can reference and build on.

Localization in Afghanistan will continue to be shaped by political, financial, and operational constraints beyond the control of any single actor or organization. Within these limits though, this baseline demonstrates that there is significant scope for more intentional practice, clearer commitments, and better alignment between rhetoric and reality. The task ahead is not to redefine localization, but for all parties to operationalize it more honestly, incrementally, and collectively.

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