Caafimaad+ and IDS
Discussion Note 2
May 2025

The Language of Change

What has language to do with humanitarian access?

Does language have the power to change how we provide humanitarian assistance – and make it more effective? We believe that it can. What if we thought of the people to whom we deliver humanitarian assistance as partners, rather than beneficiaries? What if we talked about them less as individuals and more as part of a community system? It forces us to consider each person receiving aid as someone who lives within their wider community and political system, part of life-sustaining networks as well as being in difficulty. It forces us to think of those people as equals. What if we thought of ourselves, humanitarian actors, as contributors to communities – a part of their plans and strategies for making life better? How would that change the way we act in those communities, or the aid we deliver to them?

Caafimaad+, ASEP and IDS are working on the humanitarian access initiative in Somalia, supported by ECHO. Recognising that our connection to people in need has become geographically limited and transactional, and that this has an impact on humanitarian outcomes, we are exploring how to build better relations and increase collaboration with communities.

We are facilitating dialogues among diverse members of rural communities to give insight into what matters and works for them. We are also facilitating reflection inside our organisations on what we can do differently. Starting the initiative in February 2025, we have already felt the difference. We understand more about how communities are building their strengths and capacities, and how they navigate life-threatening situations together.

During a reflection session, we realised that we are in danger of breaking the humanitarian principle of doing no harm, by using the language that has become our everyday. One person said, 'we are slowly destroying Somali culture by thinking of people as individual beneficiaries…'. To justify our efforts to provide help in this chronic crisis, we have labelled Somalia and Somalis as vulnerable victims, affecting what we think they and we can do. Yet even minority communities have considerable strengths in the form of organisation, innovation and networks.

One more reason to change the language: recent shocks to the aid funding system mean fundamental change in how we work. There are calls for a 'humanitarian reset' in which power relations are transformed and accountability to crisis-affected people increased.[1] We could interpret these calls as rhetoric to keep organisations in business, or we can engage with them as a genuine desire to transform what we say and what we do.

Of course, new words do not instantly translate to good action. We might call a local person a partner, but if we act as if they are a passive beneficiary, the dissonance of the language will do nothing for our relationship with them. That is why local people watch what an organisation does before deciding how to interpret what is said.

In this discussion note we explore some shifts that seem to make sense, beginning with language and connecting it directly to action. We give examples of three language shifts that our group has been discussing and explore a little of what each one means for action on funding, programme planning and evaluation.

1. Funding and Resourcing

Old language:	New language:
Funder	Contributor

What language shift indicates:

A language shift from 'funder' to 'contributor' would recognise how Somali communities raise astonishing amounts of resources for services, emergency and development from a range of contributors. In the past six months we have learned from community conversations that most of these resources come from within the community, as well as from people's connections in Somalia, and from the diaspora. Research indicates diaspora contributions of some USD2 billion every year, possibly much more[2]. Somali communities already have formal and informal mechanisms for identifying priorities, raising and disbursing resources, and holding people accountable for delivery and equity. Their institutions are not without flaws, but their performance is undeniable.

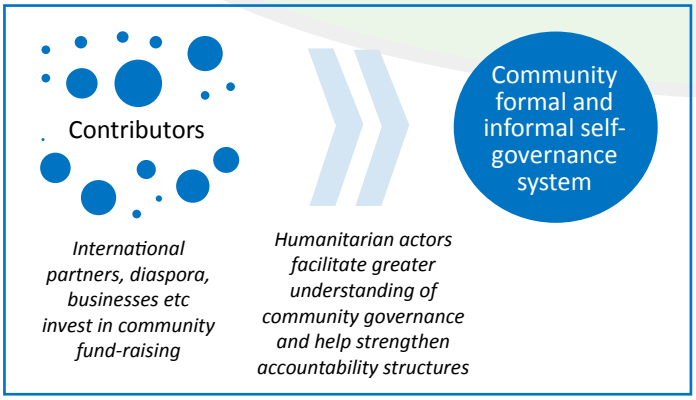
Operational shifts for funding:

A commitment to contributory resourcing would allow us to imagine upending the humanitarian hierarchy. This is not a new idea. Organisations across the globe have championed a community-centred resourcing approach in both acute and chronic emergencies for many years. See, for instance the 'citizen to citizen crisis response' in Ethiopia (**ዜጎች ለዜጎች** *Zegoch Lezegoch*) using a micro-grant system[3]. Well-designed citizen involvement in crisis response can improve not only immediate impact but also the resilience needed to cope with the next crisis.[4]

Moving from funder to contributor suggests we change the metaphors by which we think of our work. We might be shifting from fairy godmother (provider of miraculous solutions) or surgeon (all knowing highly trained professional) to helpful neighbour (readily available to assist with resources and expertise).

If a community contributory model is pursued in Somalia, humanitarian action could serve three functions: 1) as one of multiple contributors to resources mobilised at community level; 2) to support communities to reinforce structures of accountability and inclusivity/representation; and 3) to help build coordination, collaboration and learning for further fund-raising and response.

Our fund-raising efforts could be dovetailed with fund-sharing efforts. We would need to better understand how community works (to learn how best to contribute to fund-raising efforts in a positive way); to facilitate community reflection on how priorities are set (to strengthen accountability and representation); and to make proposals and report back to donors on our role as contributors.



2. Programming

Old language:	New language:
Vulnerability	Capability

What language shift indicates:

Humanitarian efforts historically have focused on delivering aid to those most in need, a priority that makes sense intuitively. Unfortunately, this profoundly moral portrayal of the victim has evolved into a narrative that can suggest that entire communities are vulnerable. In some cases, and at some moments, this is going to be true. Yet, communities in Somalia have demonstrated over time how resilient they are, and how they use their self-governance structures to reduce vulnerability. These structures are not a myriad of ad hoc arrangements, but a system whose roots in traditional norms recognised by all Somalis give the formal and informal institutions a recognisable and engageable shape. The language shift from vulnerable to capable indicates that humanitarian services can help support the capabilities of these institutions, as well as saving individual lives.

Equally important is an understanding of how people network within their community and across neighbouring and diaspora communities, to share information, facilitate trade and movement of goods and people, and influence decision-makers. Given the ubiquity of social media in even remote areas of Somalia, humanitarian actors should also seek to understand the political economy of networks, including how influence wielded online can impact upon offline realities for everyone.

Leaning into the mechanisms and networks that enable communities to respond is central to a transformative humanitarian reset. Aid would be about engaging existing strengths, while working collaboratively on the more difficult challenges that affect the less powerful in society. We might use a metaphor of diplomatic engagement with capable entities rather than a metaphor of saviourism. It is a perspective that already has widespread support among civil society groups worldwide. Shivangi Chavdaa at the Global Network of Civil Society Organisations for Disaster Reduction, recently argued for instance, 'in fragile and disaster-prone settings, the most impactful humanitarian-development-peace nexus responses are those grounded in local leadership and cooperation. It's not about imposing frameworks from the top down. It's about recognising the expertise that already exists at the grass-roots and enabling it to flourish through strong, equitable partnerships.'[5]

Operational shifts for planning and programming

A vulnerability-based approach usually starts with a needs assessment. From this, access is negotiated, and aid is delivered and monitored. It requires prodigious capacity for logistics and tracking by humanitarian actors.

A capability-based approach starts by developing a deep understanding of how communities operate (who holds influence, how institutions work, what networks exist for sharing information, mobilising community responses, and facilitating movement, access and oversight). It requires us to consider how we are positioned in relation to these communities and within the political economy.[6] From this understanding, humanitarian actors can develop support packages that include direct and indirect contributions including finance, infrastructure, training as well as support to community networks, accountability mechanisms, and information sharing. This approach might mean a shift away from sectoral clusters – such as WASH, food aid, disaster relief, etc. – towards an integrated, pool-fund model based on contributing to community priorities and needs via existing community mechanisms.

Internally this implies changing what we do on the ground. Field-workers do fewer needs assessments and more context and community analysis with community members, exploring strengths, and inquiring together into inclusivity and accountability.[7] Managers need to be on hand to help interpret and act directly on the programmatic implications and translate local configurations into generalisable readiness to assist at scale. One example comes from Bangladesh where a civil engagement platform brought displaced people, host communities and local government officials into dialogue to make joint risk reduction plans and promote greater acceptance of community leadership. The result? 'More resilient communities who are not just surviving but shaping their own futures.'[8]

3. Monitoring and Evaluating

Old language:	New language:
Beneficiaries	Community System

What language shift indicates:

Aid recipients are often referred to as beneficiaries. The term risks dividing members of Somali communities from the people and institutions that hold them to account in their own families, and communities. 'Beneficiary' reinforces a top-down dynamic within the humanitarian system, with community members at the receiving end of a long line of aid delivery whose results are often perplexing or even infuriating to local people. The word also can oversimplify complex community dynamics, as individuals and groups will have varying degrees of need, power, and capacity to organise.

Communities are complex political systems that include a mix of formal governance structures, traditional, religious or cultural structures, non-state armed group structures, and informal community self-governance structures. Using the language of 'community systems' recognises that humanitarian aid is not just being delivered to beneficiaries in a vacuum but enters an arena of complex systems, whether the aid is channelled to IDP camps or villages. A language shift from beneficiary to community system can also help us reflect on our own role within these systems, that can be disruptive and harmful if not properly understood.

Operational shifts for monitoring and evaluation:

Such a language shift urges humanitarians to hold themselves to account. This means taking a politically savvy approach to accountability. It reinforces the need to deeply understand the system and its various mechanisms and forms of influence and power. It suggests increasing the time

and attention we pay to our effect on community systems, through supporting our field-workers and changing the way we approach dialogue, learning and M&E with them. Many good examples of how local organisations and community members in several countries have worked on locally led protection are documented on the Local to Global Protection website. Protection activities, such as those led by women in the hard-to-reach Nuba Mountains of Sudan, rely on local knowledge of the micro-politics of community to make it possible for danger to be navigated and safety to be negotiated.[9]

New language could trigger a reframing of how international partners understand and act on political access and influence. Access to and legitimacy with these community systems should be understood as equally important and valuable as access to and legitimacy with political actors within federal and state governance structures. The power of social media means that government no longer holds the monopoly of narrative – instead, narrative is being set by those with influence online, including actors like al-Shabaab. Earning a reputation for partnering with local communities' own political systems and asking our M&E questions with this in mind will create much greater legitimacy and space for external agencies to operate effectively.

These considerations mean that we need to rethink our ideas of accountability - documenting the actions and measuring the changes coming about:

- What new understanding of community do we have? Who has it?
- How much do we understand the politics of our own and communities' situation and factor it into our decisions? Are we speaking new words while still clinging to business-as-usual? Are we helping community institutions be inclusive and accountable?
- How are we adjusting the way we work? E.g. in how we accept and give out funding, conduct assessments, deploy and manage field-workers, and develop and implement M&E systems? Do communities feel able to challenge us?
- What is our influence in the humanitarian system?
- Can we document real change, not only to how lives are saved, but how people are protected and how their resilience builds?

Conclusion

NGOs participating in the Humanitarian Access Initiative generated these language shifts. Now they are exploring how they change what they do, as well as what they say. One organisation has shifted from carrying out 'needs assessments' to 'understanding and learning with the community, then planning together how we can contribute'. Another is looking at how to support communities to hold their organisation to account. 'How can they advocate for themselves? How can we ensure they know their right to do this?' We approach work with communities and the bridge to programmatic change as follows:

1. Work in community deepens understanding, improves relations and builds collaboration.
2. INGOs increase work with local organisations (particularly with those trusted by communities, including CBOs, women's groups, herder associations, trader networks, school boards etc.,) creating stronger bridges between community and international humanitarian systems.
3. Learning about community strengths changes the way organisations fundraise, plan, implement and evaluate.

The humanitarian reset means a new mindset. We can change things with the right attitude and the right actions.

Notes

1. https://reliefweb.int/report/world/humanitarian-reset-call-transformative-change; and

   The IASC Humanitarian Reset examined: A strategic briefing for NGOs
2. https://www.diis.dk/en/research/diaspora-aid-is-crucial-emergency-relief-in-the-somali-regions
3. https://c2cethiopia.org/ | https://www.christianaid.org.uk/sites/default/files/2024-04/sclr-2-pager.pdf | https://oxfamlocalhumanitarianleadership.exposure.co/locally-led-emergency-response-fund-project
4. Sahani, M.K., Maat, H., Balabanova, D. et al. Engaging communities as partners in health crisis response: a realist-informed scoping review for research and policy. Health Res Policy Sys 22, 56 (2024). https://doi.org/10.1186/s12961-024-01139-1
5. https://www.gndr.org/local-collaboration-is-the-key-to-unlocking-the-hdp-nexus/
6. Hailey, P. et al: Somali capacities to respond to crisis are changing; how are humanitarian actors responding? Humanitarian Outcomes. 2023.
7. Corbett J., Carstensen N., Di Vicenz S., Survivor- and community-led crisis response: Practical experience and learning. Network Paper 84. Humanitarian Practice Network. 2021.
8. https://www.gndr.org/local-collaboration-is-the-key-to-unlocking-the-hdp-nexus/
9. https://www.local2global.info/countries/sudan/

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