

The Humanitarian Reset Phase 2

How to get a locally led response?

In his statement of 19th July on Phase 2 of the Humanitarian Reset, Tom Fletcher, the UN's Emergency Response Coordinator, promised a new approach to humanitarianism that is 'locally led and globally supported'.¹ 'Locally led' suggests that decisions are made with people and their structures on the ground. That's very different from where we are today. The term 'globally supported' indicates a commitment to spending the major proportion of what money is available (and we know it is a lot less) in partnership with local structures. But what does it mean in practice?

The Humanitarian Access Initiative (HAI) is a collaboration between two INGOs, one LNGO, two international donors, a think tank² and 30 communities in Somalia's Jubaland State.³ Our work aims to highlight how locally led humanitarian responses can be done, building on an existing norm of community self-help and cross-community coordination for crisis management. After just a few months of transforming their relationship with communities, HAI partner organisations are gaining access into hard-to-reach areas that has eluded them for many years. They are changing their ways of working, including making changes to district level coordination, needs assessment and funds disbursement. Our initiative hopes to offer a path by which humanitarian agencies may work with this system, aligning with its strengths and adding value where it can.

Ours is just one part of the collaborative effort needed to make the ambitious changes demanded by the humanitarian reset. It's a big task, and while easy enough in small doses, it is difficult to coordinate at scale. Our first Discussion Note⁴ posed challenges that humanitarian agencies may meet in innovating for the reset. In Discussion Note #2⁵, we

explored the language of change, focusing on the organisational implications of the new orientation. Now, in Discussion Note #3, we share details of a community engagement method, how it works and how it might be useful to the reset.

Community engagement: a method to transform relations

In February 2025 nine field facilitators from our partner organisations began a series of visits to villages in rural areas of Gedo and Lower Juba. They invited community members to form discussion groups of 10 people, creating a mix from villages that were more and less accessible to external agencies. In a careful process by which local people decided how to create groups that were balanced and inclusive, the initiators invited women and men, young and old, of different livelihoods and social statuses to join. They meet monthly for one to three days at a time. They choose what to share with one another, telling stories of problems and their solutions and exploring dilemmas and their resolution. Their stories clarify not only the

priority issues they are dealing with, but also the mechanisms they use to address them.

We have already seen how well this method of community engagement is working for changing relations between the facilitators, their organisations and the villagers. We are also learning that in a region of Somalia famous for its insecurity and lack of humanitarian access, communities are doing well. It seems that the less aid access, the better organised and more resilient people are. Communities emerge as well organised and they often express frustration over the lack of opportunities to establish more equitable collaborative partnerships with humanitarian actors.

Here are two of the many stories told by community members that we have their permission to share. They illustrate patterns of strength and entry points for action:

Story 1: Networking across continents, negotiating across the lines

A young woman in Gedo, who has just earned a secondary school leaving certificate, asked the discussion group if they could talk about how her school came to be. A young man from a neighbouring village seconded her idea, because, he said, he wanted to see if he could do something similar in his place. The group settled down to telling the story. Different members filled in different parts of the tale:

Several years ago, an NGO helped the community by building, equipping and financing the operations of a primary school. When the NGO funding finished the community kept the school going. The village became hard to reach. The school continued to function, but its standards declined and many children were leaving primary and joining up with the various militias that operated across the territory. Only a few had relatives who provided the finance and connections to allow them to go on to higher education. One of these graduated from secondary school in Mogadishu. He went on to start a successful private school there. Deciding to help others from his village get a high quality education, he contacted his peers who had formed a professional association. The peer group agreed to work on upgrading the primary school and getting a secondary school going in the village. They approached parents and elders; they

contacted a woman in the diaspora famous for her support to schooling; they lobbied local and national politicians who had roots in the village. Elders approached authorities, both government and AS, and negotiated permissions for the school to offer secondary education to both girls and boys, for qualified teachers to be employed from neighbouring countries and for the classes to follow the national curriculum. Funding rallies among the diaspora, contributions from politicians, and donations from the youth raised substantial sums of money. Parents agreed on affordable fees and a way of subsidising the less well-off. The young professionals recruited teachers from Ethiopia and Kenya. The elders negotiated guarantees for the teachers to work safely in this hard-to-reach area. The institution continues to this day. In 2023, four years after the school opened its doors, it came second in the state exams.

It is an example of how a community meets a collective priority. Most Somalis will have heard similar stories about how communities are running water, health, environmental protection schemes and more, protecting life and enhancing resilience. In the example above, the network of contribution spanned from the village to the town, to cities in Somalia and communities in the diaspora. Making it work depended on prodigious capacities: forging agreement on priorities, negotiating in political circumstances that straddle government and non-government control, accounting to a range of different interest groups, dealing with misdemeanour, and administering and funding an institution.

Story 2: Trees and Vegetables: bylaws and neighbours

An elder in a discussion group in lower Juba began the topic by talking about the origins of the village, as they often like to do. He set the scene for an energetic conversation with the older men talking about bylaws and the younger women and men bringing the conversation up to date with a discussion about growing, selling and buying vegetables.

Some distance from Kismayo town is a village whose elders agreed many years back on a large fine that would be levied on anybody who cut a tree in the

village. Years went by. The village flourished. The trees flourished. One day a man cut a tree because it was shedding leaves on his compound. His neighbour said, 'you were one of the people who agreed the byelaw for tree cutting; now you will have to pay the fine.' He paid. The elders called the villagers together and they decided to invest in clearing an access road to the highway. One of the group members from the village across the river, an area outside of government control, began talking about their vegetable production. He explained how they transport them to Kismayo town by a roundabout route. One of the women from the village of the trees mentioned that there were people in a third village nearby who were travelling all the way to Kismayo to buy vegetables. The speakers looked at one another. 'Why don't we help you negotiate for access?' asked the woman. 'And why don't we negotiate to allow us to bring our vegetables across the river?' asked the grower from the village of the vegetables. In the following weeks, they got agreement from security forces on both sides, giving information and providing guarantees. Now a weekly supply of vegetables crosses the river, passes through checkpoints, and supplies access to essential nutrition at a better price to the people of the third village.

It is an example of how neighbouring communities can negotiate for mutual benefits. The villagers are keen to emphasise that they operate under a set of norms and capable organisation that transcends the lines of conflict and the boundaries of one village and another. They share capacities not only for themselves, but across multiple communities and multiple clans.

Relevance to a humanitarian response

The engagement methodology and the content of the discussions provide pointers on how to move forward in collaboration with communities. Below we list five key points for consideration, echoing those listed in Tom Fletcher's statement under his call to devolve humanitarian aid:

Community engagement and equitable partnerships:

The facilitator's method of not imposing questions but rather listening to whatever community

members want to discuss is a vital first step. It builds trust, giving the participants time and space to work one another out. It develops everyone's understanding about where strengths lie and where problems need to be addressed. The partners to the HAI have already noted how relations with the communities have changed. Facilitators report an ease of engagement, no expectations of aid supplies, and a new sense of mutual respect. The same model of trust and understanding first, collaboration second also goes for working with local organisations, whether it is a group of young professionals, or a team of elders.

Prioritisation:

The stories that are shared in these conversations give insight about how each community works – who does what, how priorities are agreed, how accountability is maintained, and to whom. When the story of the school was being told, group members probed for details of decisions and inclusion. Some decisions, like those relating to the school curriculum, fees and policies, were taken by the whole community in big meetings. Others, like the negotiations for permissions and guarantees, were made by delegated groups.

In the community engagement method, the facilitators often encourage smaller groups to have separate discussions, so that, for instance, women can speak in private with other women, or young people with their peers. In these groups different priority topics emerge than those discussed in the mixed group where concerns about village governance and external relations can take up more of the group's attention. For instance, we have heard women talking about how to solve issues of dangerous childbirth or protection. This process of safe spaces can allow the community members and partner agencies to witness and engage as their own priorities dictate. It gives room for a negotiation in ways that are appropriate to community members. It also lays the groundwork for deepening learning as a collaborative exercise by which community and agencies inquire together.

Coordination:

The formation and development of discussion groups and the matters they discuss illustrate community capacity for coordination. The organised effort of the young professionals in the education story comes across as a feat of vertical coordination

by which resources from far-flung locations and powerful people are pulled together to contribute to resolving local needs. The collaboration of the three villages on negotiating the vegetable marketing offers an example of horizontal coordination, showing how cross-community spaces are places in which ideas can emerge, and action be coordinated. These spaces are not only face-to-face, but also commonly online, in WhatsApp groups and other web-based communication systems that link people in large networks. Together the vertical and horizontal coordination mechanisms suggest that a networked form of coordination is in action. We have learned that cooperative decisions crossing clan and other boundaries function because they are well networked and openly accessible for people to get information, share ideas and generate consensus. People are also able to create more bounded spaces in which tasks and responsibilities are delegated to small groups and individuals.

One of the HAI partners has drawn on these insights to review the district coordination model they have been working with. We suggest that seeing an ABC district forum as a 'community of communities' might be a good way of thinking about it. Parts of the forum should be open to everyone and anyone in the district, a 'Davos forum' where people share information and ideas, and set priorities. At the same time, the ABC would have task groups with more specific boundaries and duties, one of which will be to provide feedback to the larger forum.

Access:

The stories illustrate how we have learned that community members and local groups are negotiating for permissions to develop initiatives across political and security lines. It is helping HAI partners to find new ways to offer services to people who were previously considered out of reach while maintaining strict adherence to humanitarian principles. We have also understood that when a community has a genuine need, and takes initiative to meet it, its members can negotiate with different authorities and get permissions. It offers a prospect of a much-improved level of equity in humanitarian

and resilience activities. It means working with community members to agree on how and where access might be facilitated in a collaborative way to allow humanitarian assistance to flow accountably to areas that are hard to reach.

Accountability:

The communities we have engaged with have shown how they manage and account for significant donations over extended periods. It indicates that agencies can confidently support community-led initiatives while aligning with their established systems for oversight and accountability. HAI agencies are looking at how they can make contributions in support of community initiatives and work out ways to align with communities' own capacities for assessing need, providing systematic oversight and being accountable. While community systems are quite different from those in the humanitarian system, it is crucial to explore how both can complement and strengthen each other.

Conclusion

Tom Fletcher, talking about this global reset, asks, 'can what we are doing be better done by the communities we are serving?' The answer is 'yes' for a lot of it. But it may also not be quite the right question. Perhaps we should be asking 'how can we be better contributors to the strengths of the communities we are serving?' We need to locate and deliver our value added, no more, no less.

Notes

1. Statement by the Humanitarian Coordinator on Phase 2 of the Humanitarian Reset
2. INGOs from the Caafimaad+ consortium, Institute of Development Studies (UK) and local NGO partner, ECHO and FCDO
3. Soon to be expanded, including into Southwest State
4. Caafimaad+ and Institute of Development Studies, Discussion Note 1: Humanitarian Access in Somalia. For what? For whom? How?, February 2025
5. Caafimaad+ and institute of Development Studies.

Caafimaad+ and IDS

Discussion Note 3: The Humanitarian Reset Phase 2

How to get a locally led response?

June 2025

This discussion note forms part of a series produced by the Humanitarian Access Initiative:

1. Humanitarian Access in Somalia - For whom? For what? How?
2. The Language of Change: What has language to do with humanitarian access?

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