

What have we learned about access?

The Humanitarian Access Initiative (HAI) has been promoting community-led humanitarian action across southern Somalia since late 2024. Now, it is time to assess what we have learned about **access**.

Summary

- Our experience has shown that humanitarian agencies gain the greatest access when they build trust with communities and partner with their legitimate local structures.
- We have reported in previous Discussion Notes how community structures are actively negotiating, organising, financing and accounting for countless initiatives. Here we point out that they are doing so particularly strongly in areas that are deemed ‘hard-to-reach’.
- The longer we spend in dialogue with these communities, the better our relations and the wider our access has become. And the better our access, the more HAI partner agencies have been able to co-design and co-deliver programmes which fit with community realities and their trusted structures.
- The result? Better access, better aid.
- Access emerges as a two-way phenomenon that **links community governance to aid governance**.

Background

HAI is a partnership of member organisations from the Caafimaad+ Consortium, the Institute of Development Studies (IDS), and funders ECHO and FCDO. Caafimaad+ is working on health, nutrition, water, sanitation and protection. The Consortium is now committed to doing all of this in partnership with the communities it serves. In January 2025, IDS began testing a new methodology with two Caafimaad members, Action Against Hunger (ACF) and Trócaire in Jubaland, Gedo and Southwest State. Juba Foundation, a national NGO working in Middle Juba, joined in January 2026, followed in June 2026 by Concern Worldwide (an INGO) and ShACDO (a national NGO) working in Lower Shabelle. The Consortium provides the organisational framework.

The INGOs and NNGOs promote partnerships with communities and their trusted structures through a system of local facilitators, organisational focal points and senior staff advocates. IDS advises on strategy and methodology, advocating for the approach at a national and international level, supporting analysis and providing training to the Consortium members.

New politics, new aid?

34 years after the outbreak of Somalia’s civil war, Somalia’s humanitarian aid effort is still largely restricted to towns and cities that are considered secure, neglecting large swathes of the rural countryside. Thousands of densely packed IDP camps in and around the urban areas¹ have attracted

millions of people to locations that international aid can reach. The costs are very high – for those who become caught up in a camp existence, for the evolution of Somalia's rural-urban relations, and for the donors that finance repetitive responses. Citizens outside IDP camps have barely felt the benefits of aid, so much so that the failure of access can be described as marginalisation writ large. It has become increasingly clear that by investing in system that runs counter to Somali's own ways of providing accountable assistance, western aid has been forced down a blind alley.

Meanwhile, Somalia's politics have not stood still. While federal institutions are preoccupied with competitive and at times violent politics, Somali society has strengthened itself at the ground level. It shows an ability to collaborate in remarkable ways, pushing back against both political and material marginalisation. It might be said that society has become stronger because national politics are so fraught and aid provision so distorted. Through a distinctive mix of modern economic openness and traditional and religious moderation, citizens' groups, community structures, religious leaders, businesses, and diaspora work together, often in coordination with local government, to provide aid where and when it is needed, quickly and without fanfare. They also invest in flourishing trade, agricultural production, infrastructure and essential services² and do much to maintain security at a local level. And importantly they have structures that provide for representation, agreement, and

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accountability, all vital mechanisms underpinning their initiatives and investments.³ It is widely accepted that not one cent of diaspora and private sector funding to communities gets lost. These structures are by no means perfect, but they belong to the people and have impressed us with their willingness to promote reliability and inclusion.

HAI field facilitators have helped us understand how this ground level strength is working and the role it plays in access. They often return from their regular visits to communities across their assigned districts telling of schemes led by local people assisted by an impressive range of actors outside the community.

The most common community-led initiatives are water infrastructure (ranging from shallow wells to boreholes with pipes and solar systems), health and education. Team members have also witnessed community members helping one another with food, cash and water, as well as organising road repairs, bridges, grain banks, flood defences, grazing agreements, and environmental protection.

Innovative humanitarian organisations are moving with this new understanding of Somalia's strengths and what it means to have access. Through its emphasis on working in partnership with communities and the structures that they trust, HAI has helped Caafimaad+ managers and departmental heads to begin to shift the locus of decisions from themselves to communities. The result has been exponentially increased access and improved relations with communities.⁴

A new understanding of access

Over the 18 months that HAI has been operating, we have learned more about what access means for humanitarian and resilience work. At first, our focus was on what it would take to extend direct help to people in need in hard-to-reach areas.⁵ We understood that access meant relying on a community's ability to **negotiate agreements** with different authorities. For instance, when community structures play a crucial part in negotiating access for moving vital medical supplies overland, rural clinics in hard-to-reach areas are stocked more consistently and the pressure on urban health centres is reduced.

It seems obvious now, but it took us a little time to notice that access is not just reaching somewhere, but must involve **collaborating with a community's strengths**, its ability to negotiate, organise, direct, resource and monitor its activities and its ability to integrate external help. We heard, for example, that in every village visited by our facilitators during the recent severe drought, religious leaders, youth and female and male elders were collaborating to confront hunger, water shortage and displacement.⁶ What were they doing? Individuals were putting forward ideas in weekly councils or in the mosque, leaders were meeting and agreeing strategy and negotiating agreements, groups and sub-groups were forming to organise fundraising and accounting, encourage contributions and get things done, and religious leaders were promoting cooperation, defusing conflict and ensuring

inclusion. This was happening at an individual community level, but also more broadly across entire districts. Local and state governments were also involved in the community-led effort, facilitating and making connections. We saw how networks of productive activity were sparked into life that stretched from the hardest-to-reach area all the way to regional state capitals and beyond.

To collaborate is quite different than to impose oneself. It dawned on us that to align ourselves with community strengths our own organisations needed to **adjust organisational systems**.⁷ When communities in hard-to-reach areas initiate water, education, or livelihood activities, negotiate all required agreements, and come to the partner agencies to request a contribution, the co-design and co-financing approach produces better, more sustainable results – water systems are maintained, and education and health staff keep on working with or without the help of the NGO. The approach helps to dilute the attraction of services that were once only available in town and IDP camps and reduce incidences of aid diversion.

To make these system changes work, agencies realise a need to relinquish and share powers that they had assumed belonged only to them, such as designing interventions or defining success. In one case an elder dropped in on a conversation between field facilitators and community members under a tree in a village not far from his own. He listened. He went back to his place in a hard-to-reach area and called the people. “We want a water supply,” he said to them. “We’ve raised money. This organisation is talking about partnership with communities. We should ask them for some help with the technical design.” ACF checked its systems. The head of WASH programmes negotiated a change to the WASH plan (locations and specifications laid out for the year ahead) and the organisation supported the community with technical design and some temporary water bladders. The community financed, organised and accounted for a borehole. Co-design had meant working out a **partnership strategy**, agreeing who would take responsibility for what and how they accounted to each other. ACF listened to how the community managed inclusion and fairness and agreed with how community systems could respond if things went awry.

Access is not only about individual connections, but also about scale. This is where **resourcing** comes in. While many material inputs cost far less when community helps to negotiate prices, staff time

devoted to building trust and making agreements can increase, at least in the short term. Caafimaad+ organisations began to rethink budgets and write proposals for new forms of flexible finance that would allow them to enter repeatedly into community partnerships.⁸ Their agreements with donors needed to include new ways of **accounting** for funds contributed to community-led initiatives, and appropriate M&E and reporting formats to account for activities and ethics.

The organisations began to report success with donors agreeing to provide flexible finance for community-led initiatives. These successes notwithstanding, in our regular analysis sessions together the organisations also reported challenges. Ongoing programmes might be bound by agreements and systems that hold to a course agreed months or even years ago. How to honour old agreements when lines of accountability have expanded to include community? The organisations realised that they must talk in new ways to their donors and forge new agreements with them. **The trust relationships they had built with communities that were facilitating the new access would not survive a failure to keep promises.**

As our conversations continued and deepened at every level, we grasped another vital point about access: it cannot be achieved through half measures. It requires changes in the **humanitarian architecture** that mirror what communities are already doing to set local priorities, co-design workable responses and share out responsibilities.⁹ Although some humanitarian actors remain cautious about giving communities a stronger role in decisions, preferring to retain established methods of controlled needs assessment, prioritisation and design, others, like Caafimaad+, are innovating. Access is something that communities choose, and invite the humanitarian architecture to join, rather than the other way around.

We have been discussing with communities whether and how they may wish to link with the district level aid coordination system. Area-based coordination aid platforms (ABCs) are mechanisms through which national and international agencies coordinate emergency assistance in districts where needs are

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considered high. While the Somalia Humanitarian Country Team has instructed ABCs to coordinate with communities in hard-to-reach areas, and most NGOs doing humanitarian work in a district are members of the ABC, the majority have yet to extend services beyond the main towns and IDP camps. In recent months, several agencies have indicated that they now have access to hard-to-reach areas, but there is little evidence that it is extensive or consistent. 'Community engagement' expertise has recently become a common claim, though we would ask community engagement for whom and for what? Community engagement needs to aim towards partnership, not extraction of information. Now that communities are recovering from nine months of severe drought and before the next climatic or conflict phenomenon hit, they have time to turn their attention to strengthening resilience again. As part of this, many have decided to engage ABCs on their own terms.

Conclusion

In this note, we've traced humanitarian access through its simplest definition to an ever more ambitious level of cooperation between communities and humanitarian aid bodies. As we noted at the beginning of this note, access has emerged as a two-way phenomenon linking **community governance to aid governance**. When the cooperation is working well, vulnerable people are better helped in more reliable ways, mostly by their own communities and trusted leaders, with vital contributions from the aid system and government. Those who govern are already seeing tangible benefits from facilitating access, whether they are in a community, a district, a municipality or an aid agency. Members of the HAI are coming to realise that access is not only making aid fairer, but it is also playing a non-negligible part in the solution to Somalia's long running governance crisis.

The HAI may appear at first sight to be a method for fieldworkers and a way of delivering aid to hard-to-reach areas. Look twice and you will find that it is much more than this. By catalysing better, more impartial aid governance it is strengthening society's ability to find its own solutions.

For HAI going forward there are three tasks:

1. Extend the partnership with community members and their legitimate structures,

understand and respect their ways of working, across existing and new areas and districts. In this way make it possible for communities to lead on ever greater access.

2. Learn from communities how they would like to see their representative structures coordinating with aid coordination platforms like ABCs. Give ABC facilitators an opportunity to see how community-led access works and the improvements that it can bring.
3. Continue to promote recognition with donors and senior agency staff of how access works and how it can help in untangling aid distortions and limitations. Provide a continuous feed of evidence of the changes that are coming about, the challenges that are faced and the solutions that communities are helping us to find.

Notes

1. Halakhe, A.B., No going back: The new urban face of internal displacement in Somalia, Refugees International, 2023 and Somalia CCCM IDP site master list 2024.
2. See for example Jethro Norman, Platform kinship and the reshaping of political order in the Somali territories, *International Affairs*, Volume 100, Issue 4, July 2024, Pages 1431–1450,
3. See for example, Edle, A., Albrecht, P., & Kanyinga, K. (2025). Beyond war and politics: Somali kinship and everyday service delivery. *Journal of Eastern African Studies*, 19(3), 368–389.
4. The change in relations has allowed the Caafimaad organisations to explore what it would mean for a community or multiple communities to be in partnership with them, co-financing and co-designing interventions and sharing responsibilities. HAI facilitators help make the connections. HAI focal points bring learning from the ground to all the organisation's departments, whether country director, fund-raisers, programme coordinators, finance and HR officers or the M&E team. Country Directors oversee organisational adaptation to the demands of co-design and co-finance and take an active part in advocating within Somalia's humanitarian system.
5. We define hard-to-reach areas as areas under control of Al-Shabaab or clan militias, geographically distant, or a combination of all three.
6. See HAI Discussion Note 8 'When the rains failed: Community response to drought'.
7. See HAI Discussion Note 4 'The organisational reset'
8. We will issue a discussion note soon explaining how the organisations changed their approach to fundraising.
9. See HAI Discussion Note 6 'Building bridges: Towards community-centred humanitarian coordination' and HAI Discussion Note 7 'Bringing community into area-based coordination in Somalia'.

Caafimaad+ and IDS

Discussion Note 9: What have we learned about access?

July 2026

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

1. Humanitarian Access in Somalia - For whom? For what? How?
2. The Language of Change: What has language to do with humanitarian access?
3. The Humanitarian Reset Phase 2: How to get a locally led response?
4. The Organisational Reset
5. Four Principles of Community Engagement for Humanitarian Access
6. Building Bridges: Towards Community-centred Humanitarian Coordination
7. Bringing community into area-based coordination in Somalia
8. When the rains failed: Community response to drought (also available in Somali language)

For further information, please contact

Caafimaad+: info@caafimaad-plus.org | <https://caafimaad-plus.org/>

Institute of Development Studies: scottvilliers@gmail.com | www.ids.ac.uk



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