

A week in the life of an HAI community facilitator

Summary

12 community facilitators, working with Juba Foundation, Trócaire and ACF on the Humanitarian Access Initiative (HAI) operate across six districts of southern Somalia: Wajid, Luuq, Dollow, Afmadow, Jamame and Kismayo. Their number is expected to increase to 30 across 16 districts by the end of 2026. Local to each area, and selected for their energy, commitment, listening skills and ability to convene, HAI facilitators have brought vital knowledge into the aid sector, demonstrating the strength and resilience of communities

‘the HAI effort to build bridges between two contrasting systems of humanitarian action’

and showing how residents of Somalia’s rural areas draw on extensive networks of local, private-sector and diaspora support to raise substantial funds and organise remarkable initiatives. The facilitators are key players in the HAI effort to build bridges between two contrasting systems of humanitarian action: the internationally led aid system and the community system whose core decisions are led by community members and their institutions. This discussion note details the role and activities of HAI community facilitators. It responds to requests for a better understanding of our facilitation methodology, particularly among humanitarian agencies wanting to take up the idea.

Before the HAI facilitators began work in early 2025, few actors in Somalia’s humanitarian sector focused exclusively on strengthening relationships between community structures and humanitarian organisations. Yet we argue that this connection is essential in a context where prolonged, highly politicised conflict has distanced agencies from affected populations. HAI is one of the country’s most comprehensive efforts to promote community leadership of humanitarian action: its work with communities and aid managers informs its strategic engagement with donors and the leadership of Somalia’s humanitarian system.

What do communities want to see?

Yussuf (Kismayo) kicks off the discussion. “As someone who works closely with communities, my role is to listen and understand what people are doing, saying and feeling, and how they would like to engage with the aid system that is meant to support them. We hear that community structures (trusted leaders, and active community groups) would be happy to partner with humanitarian agencies, but they want them to move beyond office settings and urban centres and build good trust by having open, honest conversations and coming to agreements.

Many community members have shared that they are tired of approaches that feel one-sided—where strangers come with forms and questions, asking about needs and gaps, but without really taking time to listen or build relationships. Some have described it as feeling more like being interrogated than being treated with respect.

“Our work addresses a problem common to humanitarian action in Somalia: the distance and mistrust between rural communities and the aid agencies seeking to assist them. Community members welcome useful contributions, but they do not want assistance based on priorities set by outsiders or interventions that disturb their own ways of protecting and developing their

‘People want humanitarian agencies to recognise and work with legitimate local structures’

communities. They are asking for an opportunity to host and invite people from aid agencies to listen to what communities are already doing to strengthen resilience and respond to crisis. Then the discussions can focus on what the agencies could do to work in partnership with them.

“Of course, we understand that reaching every community is not easy for NGOs and donors. Communities recognize this. That is why many are emphasizing the importance of existing representative structures that are legitimate to the community (not invented by outsiders), and forums that can help connect community voices to the people making decisions about humanitarian assistance.

“As facilitators, we are still learning alongside communities and do not claim to have all the answers. What we do know is that accountability procedures and relationships should be shaped with communities, and we should be listening carefully and supporting the forms of engagement they trust and value. Humanitarian aid agencies say they wish to work with everyone who needs the assistance they offer. We facilitators want to see the agencies innovating to make this happen. If the assistance is timely and useful, it will help strengthen communities whose focus is on how to stop the crisis mode we have been living with for so long.”

Our working week

The following account illustrates a typical working week for an HAI facilitator and shows how she or he builds relationships, convenes community-led discussions, engages with managers, and lays foundations for partnership between the local and international aid system.



Sunday

Hamdi (Luuq) – “We begin by making calls to our contacts in the villages, arranging convenient timing for them, sorting out our transport and getting ready to go. We also organise any meetings we may be having later in the week with community leaders, NGOs, government, or with different departments of our own organisation.”



Monday & Tuesday

Ahmed (Afmadow) – “We set out for our first community, which might be fifteen or fifty kilometres from the town where we are based. We meet up with around ten people under a shade tree, sometimes for one long meeting, sometimes for shorter meetings on consecutive days. The basic numbers are five people from one village and five from a neighbouring village. While the core group is ten, meetings are open to whoever wants to attend.”

Getting started

Muna (Kismayo) – “Muna (Kismayo) – “Building trust in the early days is a cautious issue. When we first went to Bula Gadud in Kismayo District, we introduced ourselves to elders, religious leaders, women leaders and active young people and we also met the chief of that area and other respected members of the village. To each of them we explained, ‘We are young people from this area, let us explain why we have come here. We are not bringing any projects, nor are we selecting beneficiaries, we are here to learn with you. People did not believe us. They

‘Building trust in the early days is a cautious issue’

wanted to know more. We spent time answering their questions honestly. Then we asked them whether there was another community that aid agencies don't reach with whom they would like to hold a conversation. They suggested their neighbours in Koban village who would not have to come far. The village leader said, 'I have a team here who will tell them what you have told us and can invite them.'

Adan (Luuq) – "At the beginning some community members asked what assistance we were bringing. They associate visitors with aid. We explained we were coming to learn from them, and to create a space for them to share with one another. After a few sessions they began to enjoy the sessions, and they came to trust us."

Muna (Kismayo) - "After several visits to Bula Gadud, the community members who had joined the discussion group realised we were not here to judge them, or collect information and disappear. They started speaking openly. They found we were interested in the ways they solve problems, and in the strength they already have. Our conversations became reflective, honest and forward looking."

'They found we were interested in the way they solved problems'

those who take part. We explained that we were looking for a mixture of people – older and younger, men and women, different ways of making a living and so forth. The village leaders suggested people, and then those people suggested other people."

Abdirahman (Dollow) – "Five people from Abdilohow joined the discussion group and five people came from Dightar which is 12 km away. They walked or used donkey carts. The people of Abdilohow prepared a place for us, a shade under a tree. A mat was spread, tea was brought, they hosted us there. The breeze came in and it was cool. That was where we met most times afterwards. We said, 'we are the youth of Dollow,

and we have helped to raise resources for our community. For example, we set up a library in Dollow town. We each told the name of our father, and grandfather, and great grandfather, and they told us theirs. People try to understand who you are. People need time to get to know one another. When Najma mentioned her father, a well-known vet in Dolo District, they said, 'ah, is that your father who used to treat our animals? We used to sing traditional songs with your father. Everyone made a connection.'

Najma (Dollow) – "Then we explained why we are having the meeting, how the discussions would work, and what people could expect. We explained that this was not a one-off meeting, but a series of conversations that would continue over time. We will meet regularly with the same group so that we can share stories, learn together and become partners. There are no right or wrong answers, everyone is free to speak from their own experience."

Exchanging stories

Adan (Luuq) – "After a few sessions, we ask them to share stories. It becomes our normal way of talking. We start by asking if anyone would like to talk about a success in the village. We are encouraging storytelling about how community members and community structures solve issues. We as facilitators do not need to say much. Mainly our job is to keep discussions open. We might remind them of previous discussions and ask if anything can be added. We might bring news from other villages or from town, feedback about something they asked us to go and do or find out for them."

'The aim is not to interview or extract information but to help them tell the story more fully so everyone can learn from it'

Abdiaziz (Wajid) – "People share stories from one village to another. One of the distinctive skills of an HAI facilitator is to help people deepen stories without our taking ownership of them. The aim is not to interview or extract information but to help them tell the story more fully so everyone

can learn from it. In Bulla Sirat, we were hearing about the initiatives the community had taken. One person began ‘last year our community built a shallow well.’ Then he was quiet. I invited the group to tell the story in more detail. How did it begin?’ I asked. ‘What was happening at the time? Who first suggested it?’ Then after a while I asked, ‘Looking back, what made it successful?’ Different people remembered different details. One elder explained how it started. And then gradually the whole story came out. We learned how they raised and accounted for money from the village, from private sector and diaspora, and we heard how they protected and maintained the well. Before we left the session Nuneh asked, ‘is there anything that you heard today that made you think differently?’ One elder said, ‘we spend a lot of time talking about what we don’t have. But today you reminded us of what we already have.’”

Muna (Kismayo) – “One member of the group in Koban began by saying – ‘we had a problem with water. We built a water point.’ So I asked, who started the idea? She replied, ‘there was a mother whose child became sick from dehydration. She talked about it with other women and they decided to approach the elders.’ One of the elders in the discussion group then added – ‘the elders called a meeting of the whole village, and it was decided they should act on the water supply.’ Then they told us how they organised it all. Our questions helped them to fill in the story.’

‘We encourage women to share about how they contribute to families and communities.’

the same. We don’t ask about problems, we encourage them to share how they contribute to families and communities, challenges they solve and how they organise themselves. For instance, in Surgadud and Unsi the women told a story about giving loans that the men depend on. They made mats and sold them in the market, saving a portion of the income, and pooling it together. They made investments, and they kept

Najma (Dollow) – “We sometimes organise separate conversations with women when we feel that some voices are not fully heard in a mixed group. Smaller discussion can give them a chance to fill out the details of stories more freely. The approach is otherwise

a savings pot. When there was an emergency in the community and money was needed quickly, they let the elders know that they could come to them for loans. Their husbands might have been a challenge, so they didn’t always tell them how much money was in the savings pot. The stories helped us understand the different ways communities organise themselves.”

Building partnership

Hamdi (Luuq) – “Once the stories have helped everyone learn, the discussions turn to partnership. It may be after several months or even a year of visiting. Communities have their own strong structures. They appoint teams to take initiatives forward, with people each having different roles. Everyone is mandated: one person will lead on mobilising resources, there will be people who keep the money in the account, people who make video clips for transparency, people responsible for monitoring and maintenance. Every committee member is entrusted with their role by the whole community. Committee members don’t make decisions. We discuss the potential for our organisations to contribute to community initiative through partnership. We have to be honest about the limitations of our organisations.”

‘We discuss the potential for our organisations to contribute to community initiative through partnerships.’

Abdirahman (Dollow) – “We do not promise projects or resources, but we do promise to get community voices heard by our agencies, and we commit to working with our managers to explore opportunities and to bring the feedback. Maintaining this trust is one of the most important parts of our work. Our managers have already visited many villages and begun to make partnership agreements.”

Abdiaziz (Wajid) – “There was an elder from Gomoro village, in Wajid district, who had attended a dialogue between the communities of Garasmaamow and Dhatow. The group was talking about how communities work together and use their existing capacities to solve challenges. They

discussed how an aid agency could contribute without taking over. The elder returned to Gomoro, called the village together and told them what he had heard. In Gomoro the water pump had not functioned for years. The elders called the community and they agreed to drill a borehole and install a water tank. The villagers each contributed what they could, including camels, goats, and chickens. A committee appointed by the village raised funds from the diaspora business leaders. They opened a community bank account. They contracted a company from Mogadishu to drill the borehole. They asked ACF if they could contribute the water tank. ACF said it was not in their budget, but they agreed to provide bladders for temporary water storage. The community raised more money themselves and built a permanent tank. ACF programme managers are increasingly making partnership agreements like this with communities.”



Wednesday & Thursday **Organisational and coordination work**

Later in the week, the focus is usually on coordination work. The facilitators meet managers, religious and other leaders, government representatives and members of other organisations, to explain HAI’s approach and discuss how to bridge the systems of aid and community.

Buraale (Luuq) – “We found that a good way to help people understand HAI is to explain our four principles: (1) focus on strength, (2) assume community should be in the lead (3) make partnerships and (4) respect the culture. We have found that when we discuss these principles with people in NGOs, they grasp the idea and begin asking questions about how they could do something similar.”

Adan (Luuq) – “We went to the area-based aid coordination group (ABC) in Luuq and explained the HAI. A few weeks later we took a group of ten organisations from the ABC to meet the community in Wad Jirta IDP camp. The people there asked them a lot of questions and gave them feedback. One elder said: ‘you people come, you ask questions, take photos, take the

names of everyone in each family and then go away. We learn later that it was an ‘assessment’. Then you send hygiene kits.’ Some of the NGOs defended themselves. Some were thoughtful. We think that the best way to understand HAI is to take everyone to the community and let the community explain.”

Yussuf (Kismayo) – “On Wednesday evenings the HAI facilitators from the different organisations and districts all meet online. We support one another.

“On Thursdays, we meet the IDS team online. Then we meet with our respective managers. We select the stories we think are most relevant for sharing. We choose stories where many community members have contributed to the initiative, where it is something that the organisation needs to hear (like a story about health or water), where the story helps them understand community structure and capacity for locally led solutions.

‘The best way to understand HAI is to take everyone to the community and let the community explain.’

Najma (Dollow) – “The managers write a weekly report. They take notes, make videos and reports, and prepare presentations for high level meetings. We expect feedback from them about what the organisation will do. For us it is challenging because we want to see the organisations being responsive to the learning we bring them.”

Isaak (Luuq) – “We told our managers about initiatives taken by Luuq Godey village during the last floods. Shortly afterwards, they brought the Trócaire Global Humanitarian Manager to visit the village. He asked the community members if they were satisfied with NGOs. They replied, ‘no! You only come when you want information.’ One woman advised the visitors: ‘come here, be with us, be present, understand the situation and how the community want to work with you.’ Our field manager promised that he would work in partnership with them from now on. Luuq Godey is now watching to see how the promise is kept.”



Friday and Saturday.

Days of prayer and rest

Yussuf (Kismayo) – “We reflect. We want the NGOs to wake up from their slumbers.”

Amina (Afmadaw) – “The communities are already organised, some less, some more. We should not assume they need NGOs to organise for them. We should accept community leadership of humanitarian action.”

Conclusion

Discussion Note 9 (‘What have we learned about access’) concluded that for access to be equitable and effective, there needs to be a bridge between aid governance and community governance. This note has shown the role that HAI facilitators play in making that link. They build bridges between community governance and multiple levels of the aid system. They listen to community members, recognise local strengths and convey what they are hearing. They support their managers to negotiate community partnerships, promote system change, and advocate for enabling conditions with donors and coordination bodies. And by taking information and learning back to communities, they strengthen accountability to communities and build their own capacity as young Somali leaders.

The HAI process is helping humanitarian leaders in Somalia to clarify what real localisation and genuine community-led humanitarianism could look like. HAI facilitators are filling in the details of how true partnership between the local and international systems could work to the satisfaction of both sides. In showing how communities act responsibly and equitably for themselves in emergencies, and how they coordinate and regulate contributions from their own members and their diaspora and private sector networks, they are helping the international system work out how it too could take a part in community-led humanitarian action.

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Caafimaad+ and IDS

Discussion Note 10: A week in the life of an HAI community facilitator

August 2026

The Humanitarian Access Initiative is a partnership of member organisations from the Caafimaad+ Consortium, the Institute of Development Studies (IDS), and funders ECHO and FCDO.

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)
9. What we have Learned about Access

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