

# Localisation in Humanitarian Leadership

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A GLOBAL NGO NETWORK  
FOR PRINCIPLED AND EFFECTIVE  
HUMANITARIAN ACTION

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## Disclaimer

The contents are the sole responsibility of ICVA and do not necessarily reflect the views of USAID or the United States Government.

# Abbreviations

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**AoR** – Area of Responsibility

**CBPF** – Country-Based Pooled Fund

**HC** – Humanitarian Coordinator

**HCT** – Humanitarian Country Team

**IASC** – Inter-Agency Standing Committee

**ICCG** – Inter-Cluster Coordination Group

**ICVA** – International Council of Voluntary Agencies

**IOM** – International Organization for Migration

**INGO** – International NGO

**LNGO** – Local NGO

**L/NNGO** – Local or National NGO

**MoU** – Memorandum of Understanding

**NNGO** – National NGO

**NGO** – Non-Governmental Organization

**OCHA** – UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs

**RCRCM** – Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement

**SAG** – Strategic Advisory Group

**ToR** – Terms of Reference

**UN** – United Nations

**UNCT** – United Nations Country Team

**UNHCR** – United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees



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# Introduction

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# Overview

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In recent years, the presence of local and national NGOs (L/NNGOs) in humanitarian coordination leadership – a stated commitment of the Grand Bargain<sup>1</sup> – has been gradually increasing<sup>2</sup>. This study looked beyond numbers, to try to understand whether this increase in seats is resulting in effective inclusion – or ‘meaningful participation’. Five focus countries were used (Ethiopia, South Sudan, Somalia, Colombia, and Venezuela), to look at inclusion in Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC) coordination mechanism leadership: Humanitarian Country Teams (HCTs), Inter-Cluster Coordination Groups (ICCGs), Country-Based Pooled Fund (CBPF) Advisory Boards, and clusters.

Different levels of participation are identified: presence (e.g. seats in a coordination group), participation (equal space to speak, and being listened to), influence (e.g. on agenda-setting or decision-making), and leadership (defining strategic direction, and leading decision-making). Overall, L/NNGO inclusion was perceived to have improved in recent years, but mostly to still be limited only to presence – aiming toward participation. In discussing inclusion in coordination, the functionality of coordination bodies was also explored.

The report draws together identified good practices, barriers, and recommendations toward improving L/NNGO inclusion in coordination leadership. Findings are set out in three parts: by coordination group, by thematic, and by focus country. Findings and recommendations are practical, for both global and country level.

Topics explored include:

- **Importance of catalysts for change**, highlighting successes of individual efforts and the need for commitment across the coordination system to effect real change toward L/NNGO inclusion.
- **Knowledge, skills, and interest**, discussing the importance of formal and informal knowledge, and capacities, to being able to navigate, participate in, and influence decisions in coordination structures.
- **Power relationships and trust** between coordination body members.
- **Practical barriers** to L/NNGO inclusion: funding, language and jargon, and working modalities.

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1 The third commitment on localisation is to: “Support and complement national coordination mechanisms where they exist and include local and national responders in international coordination mechanisms as appropriate and in keeping with humanitarian principles” See Grand Bargain Workstream 2: Localisation at <https://glocalisation.ifrc.org/>

2 See, IASC, [Note on IASC Coordination Structures at Country Level in 2022](#), 21 December 2023

## Key recommendations are identified on:

### Senior Leadership

- **Humanitarian Coordinators:** to establish regular dialogue with L/NNGO leaders and representatives; set the 'tone' and expectation for the HCT and other response actors for inclusion of L/NNGOs; work with OCHA and advocate with CLAs to promote L/NNGO coordination inclusion.
- **HCTs:** to design collaborative, target-based localisation strategies, with workplans and accountabilities; create inclusive meeting spaces, agendas, and ways of working.

### Funding

- **Country-Based Pooled Fund management:** to meet Grand Bargain and aligned CBPF localisation commitments; promote Principles of Partnership in grant sub-contracts; ensure knowledge & inclusivity of Advisory Board functions
- **Donors:** to utilise components of funding to support L/NNGO coordination capacities.

### Facilitation

- **OCHA and Cluster Coordinators** as facilitators and chairs: to seek opportunities to expand L/NNGO coordination leadership; address barriers to L/NNGO participation including practical barriers, visibility, knowledge transfer.
- **Cluster Lead Agencies:** to promote L/NNGO leadership (co-coordination, co-chairing) in clusters; advocate on resourcing for coordination; be aware of power dynamics generated by funding relationships.

### Inclusive Environment

- **Global Clusters:** to enhance engagement with NGO co-coordinators; support L/NNGO co-coordination setup.
- **UN agencies and INGOs:** to ensure fair and principled partnerships; create space for L/NNGO participation.
- **NGO forums:** in facilitating L/NNGO representation, connection, and knowledge transfer.
- **L/NNGOs:** to advocate for inclusion with adherence to principles; strengthen collective representation.

# Research methodology

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This research consisted of quantitative and qualitative data collection. The five focus countries were selected from targeted regions (Latin America and the Caribbean, and East and Southern Africa) based on presence of activated IASC coordination structures, anticipated availability of representatives to participate in research interviews, and to provide contrasting contexts to study both similarities and differences in experience.

Quantitative data was compiled from existing sources and used to analyse participation in HCTs, ICCGs, Cluster leadership, and CBPF Advisory Boards. Global data was sourced from the Annual Coordination Mapping exercises conducted by OCHA, using reports available online for 2019 to 2022, plus 2022 data shared by OCHA. CBPF allocation data and Advisory Board composition were taken from OCHA's Financial Tracking Service and country Annual Reports online. Data for 2024 for the five focus countries was shared by OCHA country offices.

Qualitative data collection and analysis formed the main part of the research, through a literature review and key informant interviews. A review was conducted of available literature on localisation and coordination. This included published reports from NGO networks, research institutes, and NGOs. It also included IASC guidance and lessons-learned papers, and Global Cluster guidance. For the focus countries, IASC Inter-Agency Humanitarian Evaluation (IAHE) and Peer-2-Peer (P2P) reports were reviewed, along with available country-level localisation strategies and workplans shared by key informants. Some reflections are included from L/NNGO participants in webinars and discussions on localisation<sup>3</sup>.

Key informant interviews were conducted remotely, with participants from the five focus countries plus some regional and global contributors. Key informants were identified through a snowball approach, selected based on their expertise and experience in coordination. Interviews were semi-structured, shaped as conversations, conducted both individually and in small groups of peers.

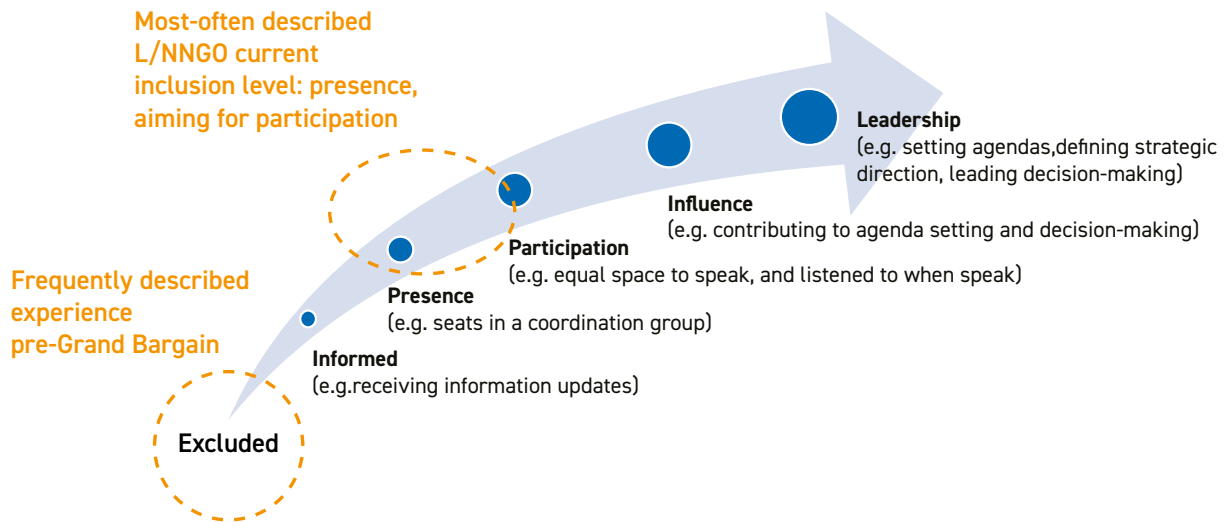
A total of 50 interviews were conducted with 64 participants, 64 per cent of whom were women. Of the total interviews, 11 were with global and regional participants, and 39 with participants in the five focus countries. Country-level interviews were conducted with representatives from INGO forums, mixed NGO forums, and main L/NNGO networks, and with members and facilitators of HCTs, ICCGs, CBPF Advisory Boards, and cluster coordination teams. NGO representatives made up 70 per cent of all participants (45 individuals). Of these, 24 participants were from L/NNGOs, L/NNGO networks, or mixed NGO forums, and the rest from INGOs and INGO forums. The remaining interviews were conducted with representatives from UN agencies (13 participants), donors (2 participants), and researchers (4 participants) focusing on the topic.

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3 Sessions hosted in Humanitarian Networks and Partnerships Week, May 2024. Including: Promoting Local and National Actors' leadership in clusters and AoRs through co-coordination approaches, convened by the Global Education, Global Nutrition Cluster, Global WASH Cluster, and Global Child Protection Area of Responsibility; and Unleashing Local Potential: Shaping the Future of Humanitarian Action - Key Insights & Recommendations from the IASC Localisation Webinars, convened by IASC Taskforce 5 on Localisation. See <https://vosocc.unocha.org/Report.aspx?page=00t9pExuBwMwml9Wkc49cgxxequalxxequal> for outcome reports.



# Considering 'meaningful participation'



Most participants reflected on having seen gradual improvements over the last years in L/NNGO inclusion in humanitarian coordination mechanisms. In all five focus countries, L/NNGOs sit on the HCT and Country-Based Pooled Fund Advisory Board, in line with respective good practices. However, L/NNGO members were not perceived to be as being equally influential in the coordination bodies as their international counterparts.

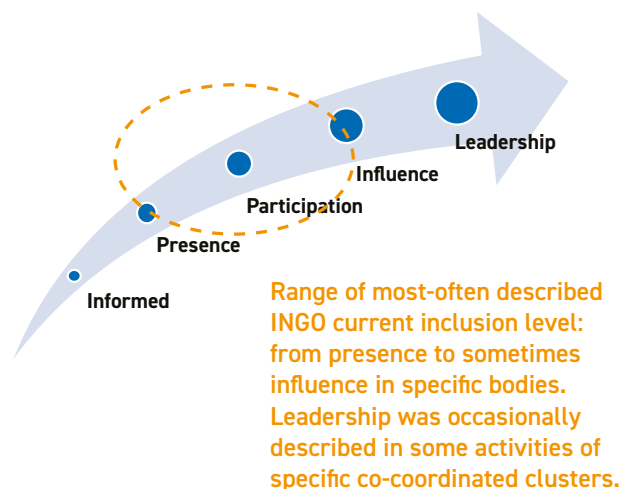
The phrase 'meaningful participation' is often used to describe local and national organization engagement in the humanitarian coordination system. This study did not set out to define or measure this, but it did consider different types of participation. Firstly, whether L/NNGOs have seats in coordination mechanisms (*presence*), and, when they do, if they feel they can speak and if they are listened to (*participation*), and if they influence decision-making. And, if in any humanitarian coordination bodies, L/NNGOs are fully in a leadership role.

For most of the coordination groups discussed with interviewees, L/NNGO inclusion was described as between '*presence*' and '*participation*' – often with achieving '*participation*' being a source of frustration and a goal.

The highest levels of inclusion described were for L/NNGOs co-chairing issue-based working groups. However, this was always alongside UN agencies, and their role – in the most inclusive examples – was described as influence, rather than leadership.

INGO members of the coordination bodies were also invited to reflect on *their* inclusion, as well as coordination body dynamics and functionality. As for L/NNGOs, this varied between countries and coordination bodies, with the personality of individuals (UN counterparts and INGO representatives) being a significant factor in creating inclusive spaces.

INGO members usually described being more included than L/NNGO members of the same bodies. However, most often this was described as '*participation*', aiming towards '*influence*'. In some cases, INGOs did not feel like they even had equal '*participation*' to UN members.

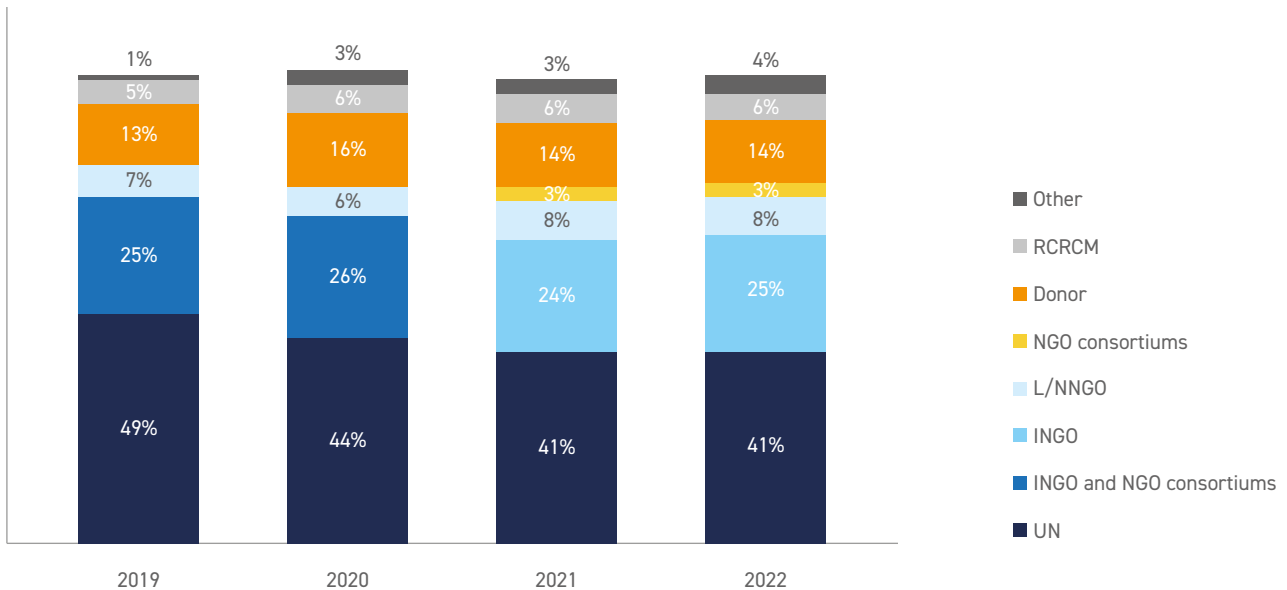


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## Coordination bodies

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Membership of all HCTs (globally)



Source: Notes on IASC Coordination Structures at Country Level 2019-2022

At global level, data can be used to look at changes in HCT membership. Over the last four years (for which data is available), overall composition of members has changed a little<sup>4</sup>. The notable change was the reduction of UN from 49 to 41 percent of all HCT members. For other members, changes were marginal. Overall NGO representation in HCTs increased slightly, from 32 to 36 percent of all members globally. At the same time, average size of HCTs increased (from 25 to 32 members).

However, for L/NNGOs, representation remained about the same: 7 percent of all HCT members in 2019, and 8 percent by 2022. Further, as of 2022, while all HCTs had INGO or INGO forum members, one in every five (20 percent) did not have any L/NNGO members – the same proportion as four years earlier in 2019<sup>5</sup>.

The five focus countries did all have L/NNGO representation within the Humanitarian Country Team (HCT) as of 2024, which was unanimously seen as positive – and sometimes a long-sought advocacy achievement. However, HCTs were generally seen as dominated by the UN – not just in numbers of seats, but in who sets agendas, is confident to speak, gets listened to and influences decisions, and in power dynamics – limiting inclusion of NGO members (dynamics also noted by INGO members, but amplified for L/NNGOs).

HC leadership and OCHA facilitation of the HCT were described repeatedly as critical to both creating inclusive space for NGO members, and for HCT functionality – which were often inter-linked. Tied to these was the importance of trust and relationships in enabling open discussion between HCT members. These issues were most often raised when discussing catalysts for change – with several participants describing the positive influence a new HC or head of OCHA had made on HCT dynamics and L/NNGO inclusion.

4 Data from the annual coordination mapping exercise conducted by OCHA, from which the latest data at time of writing in mid-2024 was from 2022. See IASC, [Note on IASC Coordination Structures at Country Level in 2022](#), 21 December 2023 and for [2021, published 14 February 2023](#), [2020, published 16 July 2021](#), and [2019, published 23 March 2020](#).

5 In 2019, six out of 28 HCTs (21%), and in 2022, six out of 30 HCTs (20%) were reported to not have any L/NNGO or L/NNGO consortium members.

Perceptions of functionality and effectiveness of the HCTs varied. Some were described as information-sharing rather than decision-making forums. Others, as having limited time in agendas or appetite of members to fully discuss issues. Even where participants felt an HCT did have open space for discussion, one described a “decision-making ceiling” for NGOs – where some issues, but not others, were decided on within the HCT. While mandated responsibilities within the IASC system can mean decisions on some issues sit with specific bodies or individuals, this does have transparency and accountability implications. When asked where decisions were made, if not in the HCT, more than one HCT-member participant replied that they didn’t know.



*“The UN representatives don’t come [to the HCT] and say – we have these dilemmas, or these choices, and how do we collectively move on this? It’s the NGOs that bring the questions. The UN reps don’t bring questions, they bring their own agendas.”*

A couple of participants commented that they see the HCT as more important for NGOs than for the UN, noting the UN Country Team as an alternate decision-making forum. Others felt that difficult issues were more likely to be tabled by NGO than UN members: “The UN representatives don’t come [to the HCT] and say – we have these dilemmas, or these choices, and how do we collectively move on this? It’s the NGOs that bring the questions. The UN reps don’t bring questions, they bring their own agendas.”<sup>6</sup> Presence, or absence, of UN representatives was raised as a concern elsewhere: “It’s something that worries us. It shows that they are not so interested in the discussion, or that they know that the HCT isn’t the place where decisions are made.”

Presence and capacities of L/NNGO members were also discussed. In some focus countries L/NNGO HCT members were seen as strong and were highly regarded. In others, concerns were raised on some L/NNGO members’ limited attendance or preparation, capacities for representation, and engagement only on issues of direct concern to their organizations – described as undermining L/NNGO voices in the HCT. Participants were also asked what could be done to address this; their suggestions are noted in the ‘Key Findings’ section below.

## HCT co-chairing

In Myanmar, a co-chairing arrangement for the HCT was introduced several years ago, with an NGO co-chairing alongside the HC’s leadership. This has so far been performed by an INGO, selected from among the INGO representatives sitting in the HCT.

The co-chair works with the HC and head of OCHA to set the agenda and objectives for HCT meetings, to prepare and follow up on decisions and actions, and on liaison including with the humanitarian donor group.

The co-chairing role – held up by Myanmar HCT INGO members as a good practice to replicate – is noted to have helped increase dialogue among HCT members, inclusion of NGOs, and accountability of the body.

Power imbalances within HCTs were often described. These related to system knowledge, inter-personal relationships, (international system) cultural familiarity, relative organizational size, and funding. Some participants reflected on the importance of pre-existing knowledge on humanitarian system ways of working, and informal inter-personal relationships, in easing HCT discussions of sensitive issues and in accessing avenues to influence decisions. These were noted to benefit, but perhaps not be noticed by, UN and INGO representatives, and as forming barriers to L/NNGO inclusion. Others described feeling power imbalances due to financial relationships: “Three or four national NGOs, with much less resources, are sitting in front of 12 UN agencies which are your donors... do you really have a voice?”<sup>7</sup>

Some practical issues affecting NGO ability to equally participate in HCTs were described. INGO and L/NNGO HCT members ordinarily perform a representative function for other NGOs, rather than for their own organization as for UN members, requiring time to consult on inputs and decisions. Simple actions such as scheduling meetings and sharing agendas well in advance were noted to be important to enable this.

6 NGO HCT member

7 L/NNGO representative

# Country-Based Pooled Fund Advisory Boards

In all five countries studied, the Country-Based Pooled Fund (CBPF) Advisory Boards had at least equal numbers of seats for L/NNGOs as to other (UN, INGO, donor) members. Who was sitting on Advisory Boards seemed to be the least well-known out of the four types of coordination mechanism studied here. In some countries, Advisory Board members are elected by NGO forums, and in others asked to participate based on technical specialism. Members do not perform a representation function in the same way as for HCTs, so communication back to other NGOs on Advisory Board topics seemed to be mostly on the initiation of individuals.

In one country studied, where NGO Advisory Board members are selected based on technical specialism (there, expertise in people with disabilities and women-led organizations), the L/NNGO members positively recounted their inputs being explicitly sought as technical local actors. This included to review strategic priorities, and to share methodologies with all CBPF applicants to strengthen programme planning.

Levels of understanding of the Advisory Board's role varied among wider interviewees who mentioned it, and even among some L/NNGO members, suggesting that better communication on the Advisory Board role (and limitations – being an advisory, not decision-making, body) could be helpful. As well as impeding their own ability to perform their roles, not fully understanding the intended role of the Advisory Board also means that, in cases where the body may not be functioning as intended, members are unable to push for change.

Perceptions of functionality of the Advisory Boards varied. This was mostly based on the extent that INGO and L/NNGO members felt that their inputs and recommendations were listened to, and whether they felt that decisions were made prior to, or disregarding, Advisory Board recommendations. Where this was the case, there was mistrust in the CBPF allocation processes overall more than just the Advisory Board function.

# ICCGs

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L/NNGO membership of ICCGs is largely determined by the number of L/NNGO cluster co-coordinators. In the countries studied, the ICCGs were still mostly described as having majority UN membership. Some L/NNGO Cluster Co-ordinators described being the only, or one of few, country nationals in the ICCG, sometimes feeling pressure of being the person looked to for a 'local' perspective.

Some countries studied include other participants in ICCGs, including INGO and L/NNGO representatives selected through an NGO forum<sup>8</sup>. Some participants reflected positively on this increased representation. Others noted that meetings had become overly large; one participant commented that with many ICCG members they are not all known to each other, describing the ICCG as like a public meeting.

Issues of inclusive spaces in the HCT section above and described in the 'Key Findings' section below were also noted for ICCGs. This included ways of working, use of jargon, and inviting inputs to agendas. Participants noted that responsibility for creating inclusive spaces sat with all members.

Some participants also reflected on how critical the chairing and facilitation role is, performed by OCHA. This made a substantial difference in whether ICCGs were described as open and productive forums that were seen as important for decision-making and inclusive of L/NNGO members, or whether they were perceived, variously, as process-heavy, non-inclusive, or focused on information-sharing. Mindful meeting chairing can also be important in how empowered NGO co-coordinators feel to equally represent their clusters.

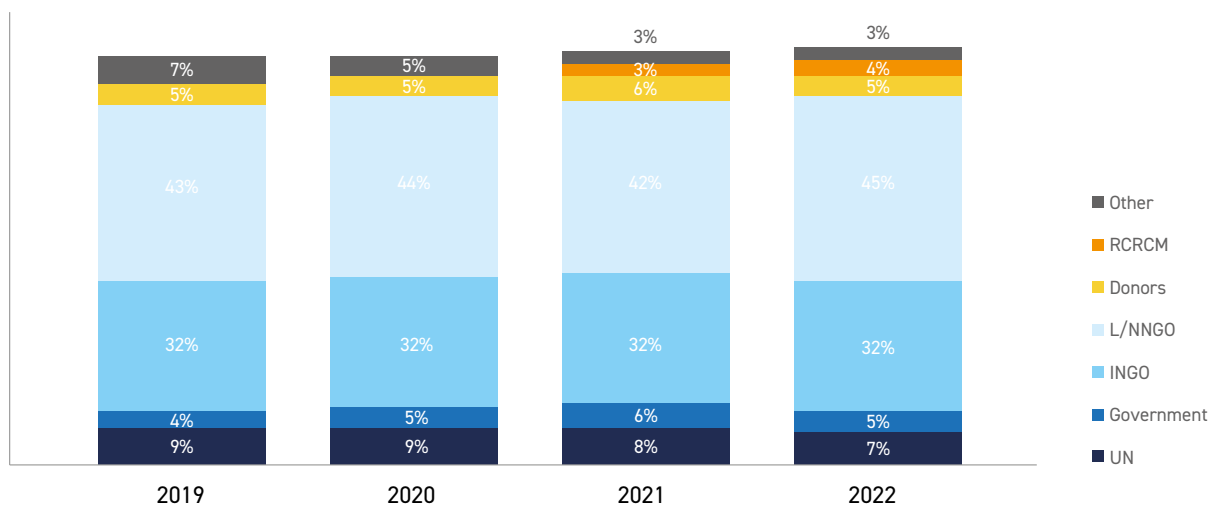
When asked whether and how NGO representation and issues in different coordination bodies were linked together – ICCGs with HCTs and sub-national structures – most participants described the connections between the bodies as going through the UN (OCHA and Cluster Lead Agencies). While these are the formal mechanisms, opportunities to capitalise on NGO representation could be taken, such as NGO forums facilitating meetings between NGO cluster co-coordinators and NGO HCT members.

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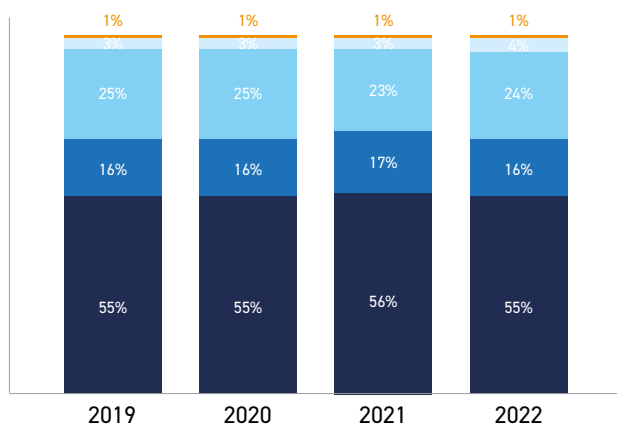
8 The standard ICCG ToR (2017) recommends inclusion of NGO forum representatives: "It is also highly recommended that ICCGs include representatives of INGO and national NGO forums in order to strengthen the link with operational actors and, in the case of national NGOs, to enhance the role of local actors in coordination." See: <https://reliefweb.int/report/world/standard-terms-reference-inter-cluster-sector-coordination-groups-0>

# Clusters

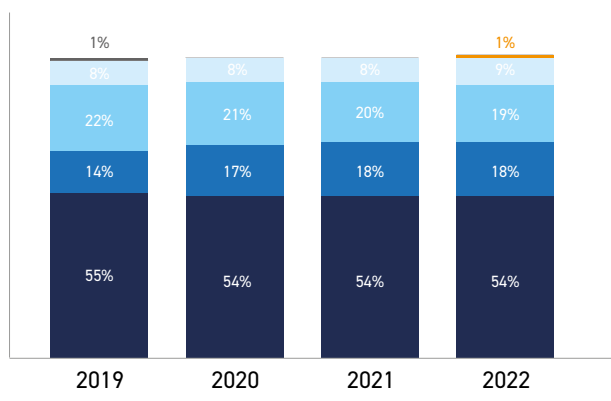
Membership Of All Clusters (Globally)



Leadership Of All National-Level Clusters (Coordinators & Co-ordinators) (Globally)



Leadership Of All Sub-National Clusters (Globally)



■ RRCRCM ■ L/NNGO ■ INGO ■ Government ■ UN

■ Other ■ RRCRCM ■ L/NNGO ■ INGO ■ Government ■ UN

The global proportions of overall cluster, sector, and AoR<sup>9</sup> membership remained constant between 2019 and 2022. As of 2022, around three-quarters of all cluster members were NGOs, and just under half were L/NNGOs. Cluster leadership looks quite different to membership. While cluster leadership is mostly performed by UN and government, cluster co-ordination, providing support to strengthen overall leadership<sup>10</sup>, is often performed by NGOs. However, as of 2022, only half of all national clusters had co-ordination arrangements, and only 13 per cent of these were with L/NNGOs.<sup>11</sup>

L/NNGO representation in other cluster structures is considered good practice<sup>12</sup> but is generally also lower than for other types of organization. In sub-national clusters, only 9 per cent of all chairs and co-chairs were L/NNGOs, and in Technical Working Groups, 10 per cent of all focal points were L/NNGOs. Strategic Advisory Groups (SAGs) are an important mechanism for inclusion, intended to make cluster governance more accountable to its membership, and where SAGs were in place, 95 per cent had L/NNGO members. However, nearly half of all clusters did not have a SAG as of 2022.<sup>13</sup>

For this study, focus was primarily on national-level cluster co-ordination, although some discussions included reflections on L/NNGO leadership elsewhere in the cluster structures. The proportions of L/NNGO global inclusion in cluster leadership was also largely reflected in the five focus countries, with L/NNGO national co-ordination ranging from one cluster/Area of Responsibility (AoR) (Colombia) to six (South Sudan). Participants discussed both benefits of and barriers to L/NNGO co-ordination, and cluster participation.

Potential benefits of having L/NNGO cluster co-ordinators were highlighted by some participants. These included a perception that having a national staff member from a national organization has made cluster work move faster and more efficiently. Their pre-existing knowledge was highlighted as particularly important: understanding nuances and sensitivities of government institutions and communities, and crisis dynamics.

Capacities and continuity were described as critical for success. Multiple participants pointed to funding as a barrier to L/NNGOs taking on co-ordination roles. INGO coordination positions are often funded by institutional donors, which are much less accessible to L/NNGOs. Options for capacity-building and knowledge transfer (relating to undertaking coordination roles) were also discussed – important when an organization is new to coordination leadership. These are elaborated in the 'Key Findings' section below. In situations where resourcing and experience do vary between coordinators, then a careful sharing of responsibilities may be needed, to avoid ending up with the L/NNGO co-ordinator only having remit for 'L/NNGO issues' or perceived to be a 'deputy' to a UN coordinator.

The role of the Co-Coordinating Partner organization was also reflected on by some participants. Theoretically, a cluster co-ordination arrangement is not about hiring one individual, but also about the role the organization plays in supporting (and sometimes, balancing) sectoral coordination. This requires institutional coordination knowledge and capacities, and continuity. For INGOs who often take on co-ordination, participants noted that they benefit from strong institutional capacities and global presence and are immediately perceived as capable and influential by other international actors at country level. Knowledge transfer to L/NNGO organizational senior leadership, and reinforcement of their co-ordination position, may also therefore be important for success.

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9 Data cited is from the annual coordination mapping exercise conducted by OCHA, covering clusters, sectors, and areas of responsibility (AoR). The term 'cluster' is used here for brevity.

10 See: GCCG, [Country-level Cluster Terms and Definitions](#), 24 March 2023

11 IASC, [Note on IASC Coordination Structures at Country Level in 2022](#), 21 December 2023, and for [2021, published 14 February 2023](#), [2020, published 16 July 2021](#), and [2019, published 23 March 2020](#).

12 Such as Strategic Advisory Group membership, co-chairing sub-national clusters, chairing or co-chairing Technical Working Groups. See IASC, [Strengthening Participation, Representation and Leadership of Local and National Actors In IASC Humanitarian Coordination Mechanisms](#), IASC Results Group 1 on Operational Response, July 2021

13 OCHA, [Note on IASC Coordination Structures at Country Level, 2022](#). Published December 2023.



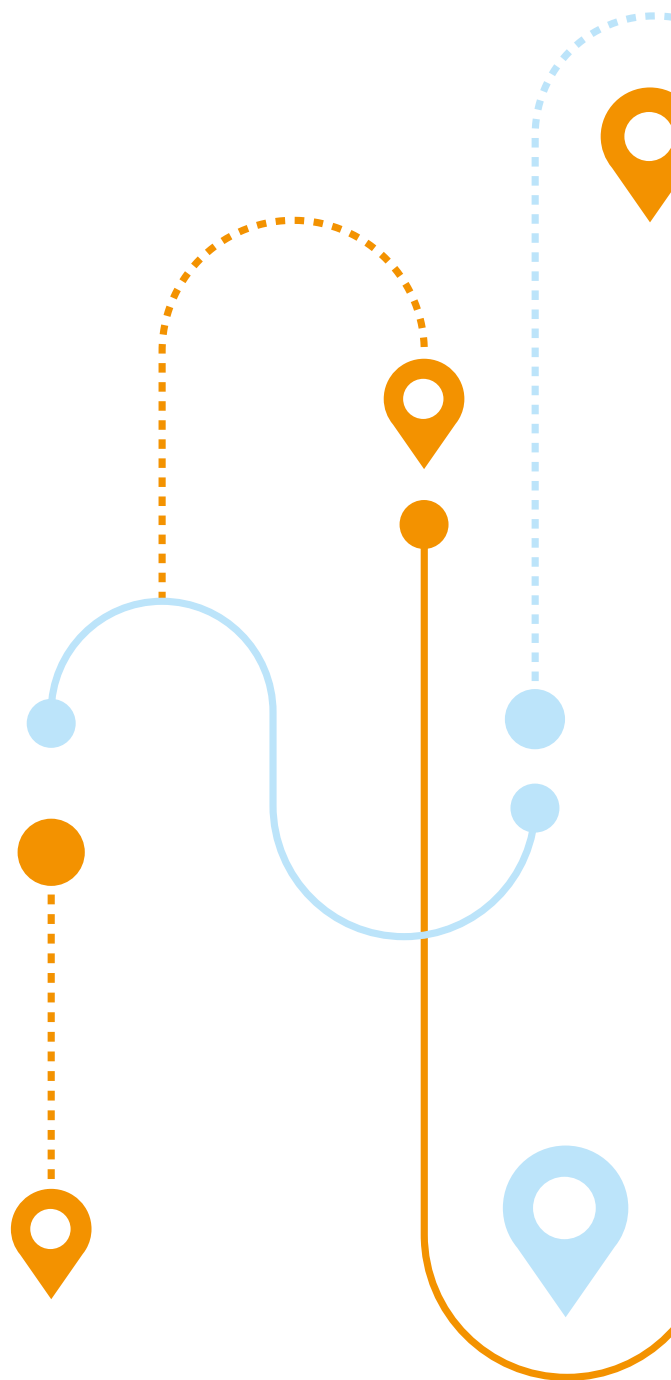
Sub-national cluster co-chairing by L/NNGOs was mentioned by multiple participants as desirable, but that expanding this would require both deliberate opening of space – and resourcing. Some participants were very positive about sub-national co-chairing: one L/NNGO representative described how this built their experience to then later take on national co-ordination. Others were more doubtful, stating that they felt that decisions were still made only by the CLA, not cooperatively.

Some participants also discussed L/NNGO participation as cluster members. Issues described included: relevance of cluster agendas and priorities (linked to functionality of individual clusters, and whether they were seen as process- and information-sharing oriented, or operational- and discussion-oriented) and inclusivity and accessibility – topics explored in the Key Findings section below. One topic specific to clusters, however, was reporting. A few participants noted cluster and response-wide products not including implementing partner reach. This meant visibility of L/NNGOs, receiving passthrough funding from UN or INGOs, was low, in turn affecting their credibility as response actors and fundraising efforts. Others described reporting tools being difficult for smaller organizations to input to, meaning the cluster lacked data on response coverage.

The role of Global Clusters and AoRs in supporting L/NNGO co-ordination was discussed by a few participants. This included two examples of direct support for co-ordination setup, described as having catalysed change<sup>14</sup>. Recognising that in-depth support is not likely to be feasible for all clusters, some aspects could be more easily replicable, such as supporting advocacy or even sharing good examples. Other discussions included the importance of Global Cluster focal points being equally in touch with NGO co-ordinators as their UN counterparts, to provide support and ensure equal information flow. Additionally, some participants reflected on a potential important role of Global Clusters in supporting induction of new L/NNGO coordination staff, who may have limited coordination experience. They noted that otherwise all on-boarding is likely to come from a UN coordinator – both a significant undertaking for the person, and potentially risking reinforcing unequal power dynamics.

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14 The Global Child Protection AoR in Colombia, supported by the AoR Spanish Helpdesk hosted by an NNGO, and the Global Education Cluster in South Sudan, which has since published guidelines for clusters based on this work. See Global Education Cluster and South Sudan Education Cluster, [Case Study on Local Leadership in South Sudan's Education Cluster](#), 2024



# Area-level coordination

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While not a focus of this study, area-level or area-based coordination mechanisms were discussed for some of the focus countries where they form all or part of the sub-national coordination structure. Generally, participants who discussed these considered them to be important spaces for participation of L/NNGOs in coordination, given that many operate at regional or local levels without capital-level representation. They were also noted by some participants to be more efficient for small actors, where staff are more likely to work in multiple sectors, than attending multiple sectoral meetings.

However, they were largely perceived to be UN-led and dominated by UN agendas. A couple of participants, in different countries, referred to area-level groups as “OCHA structures”. Few co-chairing arrangements, let alone leadership, by NGOs – whether international or national – were described. For clusters, their established governance structures have associated good practice for NGO inclusion, making it straightforward for NGOs to advocate for this to be fulfilled – for example, co-ordination establishment or SAG membership. For the area-based mechanisms, the flexibility in setup – of benefit on the one hand to design coordination mechanisms for the context – seemed to not necessarily be enabling both the envisioning of and advocacy for co-leadership (noting also the need for resourcing for coordination).

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## Key findings

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# Catalysts for change

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When asked to reflect on what had worked in their contexts to promote L/NNGOs taking on coordination leadership roles, participants described both **efforts by individual entities**, and the **need for commitment across the coordination system to effect real change** – including an openness to changing ways of working.

## Individual efforts

Individual efforts can act as ‘proof of concept’, encouraging others to follow. Efforts highlighted included:

- **INGO commitment:** In one country, the efforts of an INGO with an institutional, multi-year, focus on localisation were emphasized. The INGO complemented their programmatic strategy of funding L/NNGOs (giving overheads and phasing out direct implementation) with both institutional and personal commitments to promoting L/NNGO membership in coordination structures. This included paying the initial years of NGO forum membership fees for their partner L/NNGOs, advocating for HCT and other coordination body seats, and supporting new HCT members – from informal conversations on how the system works, to encouraging representatives to speak in the meetings.
- **NGO forum representation:** In another, the work of the (mixed) NGO forum was mentioned by all interviewees from the country. NGO representatives in the HCT are elected through the NGO coordination bodies, increasing the perceived legitimacy of the L/NNGO representatives. The forum is active, and trusted, in advocating and promoting for L/NNGOs in both national and international spaces. It has also set its own localisation agenda, encouraging INGO members, supporting capacity-building for L/NNGO members, and bringing localisation objectives into the wider coordination space.
- **Global Cluster support:** the work of the Global Child Protection Area of Responsibility through its Helpdesks and of the Global Education Cluster were highlighted as having tangibly supported the establishment of cluster co-ordination arrangements with L/NNGOs. This included

advocating for the idea of selecting an L/NNGO and for funding, and support to onboarding a new co-coordinator. Some participants noted that one cluster establishing co-chairing with an L/NNGO could or did act as proof of concept, encouraging others to follow and L/NNGOs to advocate to other clusters.

## Leadership and facilitation matters

A common thread throughout interviews was that: personality matters. Even more so – in effecting positive change – when coupled with genuine commitment toward localisation goals.

Multiple participants reflected that significant progress towards coordination space being opened to L/NNGOs had been catalysed by a new humanitarian senior leader, particularly an HC or head of OCHA. The HC has a vital role to play in signalling commitment from the top down: setting out visions that UN agencies then follow, setting (and expecting action on) HCT agendas, and in actions as simple as meeting with and being open to inputs from L/NNGO senior leadership.

The roles of meeting facilitators and chairs were also highlighted, in making coordination spaces feel accessible to L/NNGOs to participate on an equal basis (and, to then build toward taking on leadership positions) rather than feeling UN- or international staff- dominated. This included the skills of Cluster Coordinators and OCHA coordination staff in chairing inclusive meetings, creating agendas incorporating L/NNGO priorities, and in facilitating discussion that invites L/NNGO input. It also included their follow-up and support when needed to share knowledge, onboard new members, and build confidence to participate.

## Localisation strategies

All the countries studied had some form of localisation working group and/or strategy in place. Strategies were perceived to be most useful when their design had been inclusive, and when end goals had been clearly defined. They were seen to be most effective when they set out specific actions with targets, identifying who was responsible for delivery and with defined accountability (e.g. set timeframes for reporting back to the HCT on progress). And, when these commitments were transparently and widely communicated.

Not having a clear vision on what localisation efforts aimed to achieve was noted to result in inconsistency. Strategies were deemed to be most effective when they set out a clear vision, rolled out in different structures.

Some participants voiced frustration with localisation strategies containing vague commitments rather than actions – perceiving this to delay progress, as a strategy may be ‘in place’ but not effective. Others commented on localisation working groups spending prolonged time on process: revising a ToR or agreeing definitions. Other frustration was voiced at perceived lack of follow-up on localisation commitments, including in a couple of instances on recommendations made by previous IASC IAHE and Peer-2-Peer reports toward localisation in coordination. This was sometimes linked with a perception that international humanitarian actors were uncommitted to localisation goals.



# Knowledge, skills, and interest

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## Formal and informal knowledge

Knowledge of the humanitarian system and the functions of coordination structures was consistently highlighted as a necessity for equal and inclusive participation.

- Firstly, to encourage L/NNGO staff to join coordination mechanisms, and to want to put themselves forward for leadership positions: *“people have to know why it might be helpful for them to participate, and why what they can contribute is important”*.
- Secondly, for L/NNGO representatives in coordination leadership roles to have the confidence to participate, and ability to exert influence and hold other actors to account: *“it’s really important to know why the system functions as it does, so you know how to interact with it.”*
- Thirdly, for other L/NNGOs: *“organizations need to know what is usually discussed at the HCT, what decisions are made there, and why this has relevance for their organization, to be motivated to hold their [HCT] representatives to account”*.

Understanding the limitations of coordination bodies was also noted as important. An example was given of L/NNGO HCT members requesting an HC to support on issues and advocacy beyond their remit. When this request was not fulfilled (or adequately and transparently explained) this led to frustration and deterioration of trust.

Participants spoke about the importance of formal and informal knowledge for coordination body members.

**Formal knowledge** might include the functions of the coordination body, humanitarian system structures, where accountabilities sit, and members’ own responsibilities.

**Informal knowledge** was also emphasized – often taken for granted by international staff with senior experience in multiple country contexts, but not obvious to new members. Examples included understanding UN system hierarchies, communication norms, and how consensus around decisions is formed and can be influenced (often, outside meetings). **Soft skills** were also highlighted by some participants – including NNGO HCT members – as important, such as, advocacy, strategic engagement, and performing a representation function for other L/NNGOs. While the absence of knowledge should not be presumed, its presence was strongly felt to be necessary for equity of participation.

Methods discussed and suggested for effective knowledge transfer included:

- **Onboarding and trainings.** These varied significantly between contexts studied. In some, OCHA holds briefings for new HCT and CBPF Advisory Board members, which were noted as helpful (particularly, joint orientations for all members). A few participants, national and international, who had attended global trainings spoke highly of their usefulness. Cluster training and onboarding varies. For Co- Coordinators, onboarding is sometimes solely at country level, sometimes supported by Global Clusters (which was particularly appreciated). Sub-national onboarding is almost exclusively done by the country cluster. While some online trainings are available, contextualised trainings were seen as most useful. Generally, participants were keen to see more consistent and robust approaches.
- **Mentoring** was discussed by a few participants as having been important to the uptake of HCT membership or new cluster co-ordination positions, most often in informal arrangements. However, this requires the mentor to have the right skills and knowledge, to be considerate of the power dynamics generated by a mentoring relationship, and to be able and willing to dedicate time.
- **Pre-meetings** between NGO representatives can be particularly supportive for new members, focusing not only on agreeing positions and talking points as is usually the case, but also in explaining the context of agenda items.
- **Organizational knowledge** was also highlighted as important, for coordination continuity. For NGOs taking on cluster co-ordination, ensuring knowledge is transferred to the organization not just the individual coordinator is important to be able to fulfil the Co- Coordinating Partner function.

When asked to identify which bodies they thought should be responsible for supporting onboarding and training, participants suggested joint responsibilities between OCHA and NGO forums, and supportive relationships from outgoing NNGO representatives or from INGO to NNGO members.

Lastly, a few NNGO participants reflected on the importance of information about the Grand Bargain, and IASC localisation indicators and targets, being widely shared to and among L/ NNGOs. One participant recalled learning about the Grand Bargain commitments, and the feeling of legitimacy it gave them to push for representation in the NGO forum, then for seats in the HCT, and then to start to hold humanitarian leadership to account: "Sharing information is power. Information gives you power to negotiate."<sup>15</sup>

## L/NNGO representative interest and capacity

A perception of L/NNGOs tending to engage in coordination forums only on issues of direct interest to them was discussed by several interviewees in some of the contexts studied. Participants variously reflected on the need for a more nuanced understanding, and, in some cases, more honesty, on these issues.

Some participants reflected on the relevancy of some of the aspects of the international humanitarian system to L/NNGOs: "NNGO [HCT members] don't always talk about topics that don't concern them immediately... [But] they tend to be more involved and engaged on the operational rather than strategic issues. How much should we be expecting NNGOs to engage in issues relevant to international actors and the international coordination mechanism?"<sup>16</sup>

However, single-issue engagement was generally perceived to be undesirable, and in some contexts, capacities of some L/NNGO actors in coordination positions were noted as a genuine concern. In one context, multiple participants noted that L/NNGOs often seemed singularly motivated by funding when participating in coordination forums – describing L/ NNGOs tending to only engage on this issue. The perception of individual organizations taking on coordination positions was described as primarily motivated by the expectation to then access funding. In another, an NNGO representative described NNGO members of the HCT being often under-prepared for meetings or delegating attendance to more junior staff members.

In both cases, this diminished the L/NNGO voice and representation in the HCT, and negatively affected L/NNGO credibility and other actors' perceptions of L/NNGO capacities to participate.

15 L/NNGO representative  
16 INGO HCT member

A lack of understanding and/or honesty about relative capacities of L/NNGOs between and within contexts was noted by other participants. One participant pointed out that: “All INGOs are not on one level of capacity. Just the same as all NNGOs aren't at the same level of capacity. In terms of internal systems, diversity of programming, [and ability to perform a representative function]”<sup>17</sup>. Another commented that they saw a lack of an honest conversation in their context on relative capacities between NNGOs and their representatives to be ultimately detrimental to localisation goals. This was seen to overload stronger and more prominent NNGOs who were asked to participate in multiple spaces, while not acknowledging that other NNGOs did not (yet) have the same capacities and representative ability, therefore not working to strengthen these.

Some of the recommendations made on both these issues were on process and communication. Including: requiring consistent, senior-level representation in coordination bodies (a recommendation equally made toward UN HCT members); resourcing to ensure senior leaders can take on coordination functions; ensuring sufficient briefings of new members and appropriate capacity-strengthening as needed; and, within NGO networks, promoting the selection and holding to account of individuals who are able and motivated to adequately represent their wider L/NNGO body.

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17 L/NNGO representative



# Power and trust

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## Decision-making and agenda-setting

One of the main threads of discussion with NGO participants across all the mechanisms explored, was on dynamics within the coordination bodies: who sets agendas and where are decisions made.

Almost all L/NNGO and many INGO participants stated that they had a limited ability to set agendas and influence decision-making – compared to the theoretical extent of inclusion as set out in coordination ToRs. Even where decisions were being made within the coordination bodies, L/NNGO participants generally did not feel that they had parity of input to these: “It’s very weird to be sitting in a room where decisions are being made about your people, and to have no voice at all”<sup>18</sup>.

Some HCTs, ICCGs, and Clusters were described as information-sharing rather than decision-making spaces, with decisions being taken ‘elsewhere’. Perceptions of decisions being taken prior to or outside of HCTs by UN representatives, or cluster decision-making sitting only with a UN coordinator, were commonly described. One INGO participant described a ‘decision-making ceiling’ that they felt NGOs had, within an HCT.

Perceptions for sub-national level varied. For sub-national clusters, some participants described co-chairing as opportunities for L/NNGOs to more meaningfully influence. Others stated that they felt that decisions were still only made by UN Cluster Lead Agency representatives and the national coordinator. Where area-level coordination mechanisms were in place, these were referred to by a few participants (in different countries) as “OCHA structures”. The implication being, that although their membership was substantially comprised of L/NNGOs, national-level NGOs at least did not perceive them to be spaces with strong(er) L/NNGO leadership.

How priorities, workplans, and agendas are set was recognized to influence the functioning and inclusiveness of coordination forums – and buy-in of members. Several L/NNGO HCT representatives described agendas as being oriented toward international actors: “The setting of the agenda and the pre-discussions are done by OCHA [and the UN]. By the time it comes to the meeting, the local NGOs don’t know what’s going on. That’s embarrassing.”<sup>19</sup> However, several OCHA staff interviewed (who facilitate different meetings, in different countries) reflected on agenda-setting from a practical angle – stating that they routinely ask for inputs, but rarely receive suggestions from any members. One HCT is attempting to address this by tasking a small group of members to set agendas.

## Trust and relationships

Trust was a recurring theme throughout interviews, along with the importance of inter-personal relationships in coordination spaces. Building trust between UN, INGO, and L/NNGOs was repeatedly emphasized for coordination success. Breakdown of trust on specific issues (such as funding) affected overall relationships.

A few INGO representatives reflected on the informal relationships they were able to build with UN representatives, compared to L/NNGO counterparts. Others, working in high-security environments, noted that UN agencies being co-located in compounds exacerbated divides between who was included in informal discussions and consensus-building, and who was not. Recommendations included for members and chairs to be mindful of the dynamics this creates, and to be deliberate about opening space in coordination meetings.

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18 NNGO representative

19 NNGO representative

## Funding and fear of backlash

### Building (and, mending) relationships

In one HCT studied, L/NNGOs have dedicated seats to which they are elected through the NGO forum, but generally did not feel confident in speaking, and, when they did, felt that their opinions and recommendations were not heard. The NGO forum set out to facilitate periodic meetings between only the HC and L/NNGO representatives. This intended to bring L/NNGO issues directly to the HC's attention, in a format that invited longer discussion and exploration than an HCT agenda usually allows, creating some of the 'pre-knowledge' that international actors in coordination meetings often benefit from. It was also hoped that this smaller, more informal, modality would start to build familiarity and then trust, and for this to be carried over into the HCT meetings – with L/NNGO members more aware of system functions, less intimidated, and better able to represent in meetings. among HCT members, inclusion of NGOs, and accountability of the body.

ICVA explores HCT dynamics in greater detail in ["Cracks in Coordination: Trust and Engagement in Humanitarian Country Teams"](#) (September 2024)



*"To have an equitable partnership, transparency and accountability should be two ways. But accountability is always asked one-way. When national NGOs start asking for accountability, when you start speaking boldly, you see funding starting to move away from the organization. National NGOs don't want to speak out, because they fear not getting renewed funding."<sup>20</sup>*

Some L/NNGO representatives spoke with concern about the power imbalance – especially in HCTs and cluster coordination teams – generated by funding relationships between L/NNGOs and international actors, particularly UN agencies: "whoever holds the purse holds the power"<sup>21</sup>.

Participants recounted L/NNGO representatives in HCTs not wanting to challenge UN agencies who they were currently funded by or were hopeful to get funding from, or, not wanting to speak out in front of donors. They described fearing that being seen as 'troublesome' would impact their funding access and ability to respond.

Within Clusters, several participants reflected on the power imbalances when L/NNGOs undertaking Cluster Co-Coordination or sub-national chairing were funded by the Cluster Lead Agency. This was most often described as exacerbating the perception of L/NNGO coordinators being more junior than their UN counterparts, and/or reluctance to challenge or disagree with them. One participant described how they thought a previous co-ordination arrangement between an INGO and UN Cluster Lead Agency had broken down in part because of programmatic disagreements.

One NNGO representative also described this dynamic, coupled with competition for funding, as also impacting L/NNGO collective representation. With individual L/NNGOs in the context wanting to impress and 'stay on the right side of' international actors to access funding, "getting harmony and unity of purpose can be hard".

## Principles of partnership

Multiple respondents reflected on what they saw to be weak internalisation of the Principles of Partnership<sup>22</sup> by international actors, both within coordination mechanisms, and in funding relationships between L/NNGOs, INGOs, and UN agencies spilling over into coordination group dynamics. The Principles of Partnership are included in the HCT standard Terms of Reference as guiding HCT functions, but overall reflections from participants did not suggest they are always or often felt to be enacted.

20 NNGO representative

21 NNGO representative

22 The Principles of Partnership are: Equality, Transparency, Results-Oriented Approach, Responsibility and Complementarity. See: <https://www.icvanetwork.org/transforming-our-network-for-impact/principles-of-partnership/>

# Practical barriers

## Language, jargon, and inclusivity

A familiar point from both localisation advocacy<sup>24</sup> and guidance<sup>25</sup> – and one still raised repeatedly by participants – is on the importance of language and generation of inclusive spaces.

Some of the basics were reiterated: making sure ToRs, email invitations, and meeting slides are translated, providing translation in meetings, and holding sub-national coordination meetings in local languages.

Language was noted as an issue even in HCTs and ICCGs, but participants described it as being of particular concern in sub-national coordination: discouraging smaller, local organizations to be able to fully participate, and to then be able to take on leadership roles. One HCT member recounted NNGO second-language speakers being asked to rapidly review long documents in English, presented to the HCT for endorsement without NGOs having been involved in drafting, then being criticised for not fully participating in discussions.



*“I have gotten lost in many spaces because I don't know English”*

- L/NNGO HCT member in a Spanish-speaking country and response

Even where the official country language is also the UN working language, and fluency is not an issue, participants noted that the use of humanitarian jargon, acronyms, and anglicisation of terminology remained a barrier to L/NNGO participation. As well as having practical impact on ability of L/NNGO representatives to fully participate, this impacts the inclusiveness of the spaces – generating an ‘in-group’ of those fluent in the working language and its jargon, and a feeling of outsider status among those who are not.

The role of meeting facilitators and other members in generating inclusive spaces was also noted by some, related to use of language and jargon, and awareness of cultural norms and cross-cultural communication.

## Meeting proliferation and location

In all countries, at least some L/NNGO participants emphasised that they felt stretched to attend many different coordination meetings, at both national and sub-national level. Participants noted that this is a particular challenge for smaller organizations, and those that don't have capital-level representation.

In one country, the shift from a sub-national cluster to area-based coordination structure was reported to be in part motivated by feedback from local NGOs that their staff, often covering multiple sectors, were unable to attend multiple meetings.



*“They defeat you by always having more meetings... They have an endless capacity to have more meetings... to say that everyone's on board, and it's a participatory process”*

- INGO Participant

23 Available at: <https://interagencystandingcommittee.org/emergency-directors-group/iasc-standard-tor-humanitarian-country-teams-hcts-february-2017>  
24 Including: ICVA, [Localisation in Humanitarian Leadership: Profiling National NGO Engagement in International Humanitarian Coordination Structures in the MENA Region](#), January 2021  
25 Including: IASC, [Strengthening Participation, Representation and Leadership of Local and National Actors in IASC Humanitarian Coordination Mechanisms](#), June 2021; and Global CP AoR, Global Education Cluster, Global WASH Cluster, Global Nutrition Cluster, Save the Children, Street Child UK, [Inter-Agency Toolkit on Localisation in Humanitarian Coordination](#), 2021

## Working modalities

How meetings are held, and how communication is done, was perceived to affect accessibility of coordination structures for L/NNGO members, as well as effectiveness of the meetings themselves.

Some participants discussed an increase of online or hybrid coordination meetings, especially after COVID. Some described seeing a benefit of this for L/NNGOs – expanding participation beyond just those in the capital offices. Others noted that this seemed to be driving more ‘passive participation’, recounting people logging in online but rarely speaking, and discouraging discussion. Commenting on the intersection of online meetings with a trend toward increasingly large coordination groups<sup>26</sup>, one Cluster Coordinator noted that they treat the (large, hybrid) ICCG “as a public meeting”. The implication being that sensitive issues are not discussed – a potentially problematic dynamic.

In some contexts, where meetings are held in UN offices, NGOs commented that participating is quite literally more time-consuming for NGOs than their UN counterparts.

Whether online or in-person modalities encourage or discourage L/NNGO participation seemed to be influenced by an intersection of trust and relationships, confidence of representatives, and meeting size.



*“With an NGO car, you can’t drive into the UN compound. So, you drive across town, and maybe get stuck in traffic. You go through a humiliating security check [where] you might get delayed. You are searched and have to leave your phone and laptop. Then you walk, while all the UN heads of agency you are going to sit at the table with are dropped at the door. You are sweating already, annoyed because of security. You don’t have an assistant to help you distil the documents. You come into the meeting with a reduced power perspective. And then, you have to speak up.”*

- INGO Participant

Meetings aside, a few participants also reflected on communication modalities, although more relevant to coordination participation than leadership. Creating inclusive working modalities might also mean using different communication methods. One national NGO platform representative gave the example of using large WhatsApp groups to share information and invite questions from its members. In this context, email is the main coordination system communication method, but is not preferred or even easily accessible locally.

## Time And Resources

Most participants reflected on the demands of coordination positions: requiring individuals to have time and resources to take on these responsibilities.

Multiple participants noted that L/NNGO directors are often stretched across multiple roles – perhaps directly in charge of programming as well as being the external representative. Taking on coordination roles, such as a seat in the HCT, is time-consuming. In an organizational structure with few people to delegate to, meeting preparation or attendance is sometimes deprioritized because of competing organizational demands.

In all countries, at least some L/NNGO participants emphasised that they felt stretched to attend many different coordination meetings, at both national and sub-national level. Participants noted that this is a particular challenge for smaller organizations, and those that don’t have capital-level representation.

Some participants from larger INGOs noted that their organizations were deliberately structured in a way that facilitate senior staff – Country Directors and Area or Technical Managers – to take on coordination responsibilities (being an HCT member, co-chairing sub-national clusters, leading Technical Working Groups). While this external strategic prioritization is likely beyond the organizational capacities of both smaller INGOs and L/NNGOs, the ability of larger NNGOs to perform similar functions remains constrained in part by funding.

26

See IASC, [Note on IASC Coordination Structures at Country Level](#), 2022. Published December 2023

One INGO director described only being able to properly perform their representation role (elected to an NGO forum board, and therefore also to the HCT) as they were able to delegate some internal responsibilities to other senior management staff and draw support from their regional office. They reflected that this structure and support was not available to their L/NNGO director counterparts.

Inequity in funding exacerbates the inequity in capacities to lead and participate, as having a senior leadership structure that incorporates liaison and coordination responsibilities requires sufficient resourcing. This includes receiving both overhead costs and funding for senior management positions (rather than only for programmatic functions, as can often be the case in sub-contracting arrangements).

Literal costs of participation were also noted by some, particularly for smaller organizations: transport to meetings, or IT equipment and expensive data plans to attend remotely.

## Funding full-time roles

Funding was also described as a barrier to L/NNGOs taking on cluster co-ordination roles, at national and sub-national level. For INGOs, funding for these positions often comes from institutional donors who also fund their programming in the same sector – channels which are not directly accessible to many L/NNGOs. As one participant described: financing is required to pay competitive salaries to hire experienced, competent staff into dedicated coordination positions – and, to then retain them.

Lack of access to or knowledge of funding options for co-ordination positions was mentioned as a disincentive to L/NNGOs even putting themselves forward for these leadership roles.

In some responses, Cluster Lead Agencies (CLAs) have undertaken to fund co-ordination positions. While a commitment to promoting L/NNGO co-ordination was warmly welcomed by interviewees, concern was expressed about the power dynamics that result from this funding. Even though unintended, the grantee relationship was described as inhibiting willingness of the Co-Coordinator to challenge the donor/CLA, and in a perceived unequal relationship between coordinators. This was not a preferred solution for funding access.

The support provided by some Global Clusters/AoRs in advocating for funding for NNGO positions was described as critically important for the setup of some co-ordination arrangements.

This has included securing multi-year funding for positions ahead of the selection of the co-ordinating NGO, removing the financing barrier and ensuring continuity of coordination.

## Operational funding and ‘the 7%’

While the focus of this study was not on operational delivery, L/NNGO access to funding, and calls to uphold Grand Bargain commitments and global recommendations<sup>27</sup>, were an often-mentioned topic. In the context of coordination, many L/NNGO participants pointed out that being seen as a strong actor in coordination spaces required large/larger operational footprints. Many also noted the importance of receiving overhead costs, at a minimum of 7 per cent per the Grand Bargain guidance, to help support staffing structures for management, liaison, and external representation.

27

See IASC, [Guidance on the Provision of Overheads to Local and National Partners](#), 7 November 2022

# Representation

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## NGO networks and representation

The role of NGO networks in facilitating NGO representation in coordination mechanisms was repeatedly emphasised. NGO representatives in HCTs and CBPF Advisory Boards are often selected from NGO forums or networks, and perceived legitimacy of their positions often derives from this representation function. This also requires NGO forum or network members to be well-acquainted with the coordination system, how it can benefit them, and what they can expect or ask from it, in order to hold their representatives to account.

Some L/NNGOs sitting in coordination bodies, especially in HCTs, were seen as less legitimate when they were not perceived to be representing a larger group – for example, where NGO networks did not have large memberships. Some participants from large L/NNGOs reported feeling criticised for not being representative of small, local actors. One suggested that international actors' programmatic localisation efforts could be better oriented to reinforce these links. They described larger national NGOs as often being 'jumped over', with some international actors choosing to partner only with small, local civil society organizations – describing this as perpetuating transactional relationships. They suggested that a more inclusive programmatic localisation approach could help strengthen L/NGO networks and capacities, and therefore representation.

NGO representatives, especially those in HCTs, reflected that providing this representation function requires time, skills, and resources. It also requires extra preparation to UN counterparts sitting in the same bodies: having to consult NGO constituents, agree talking points or positions beforehand, and report back after. Some spoke about ways of working making this more difficult, when meetings are often scheduled, or agendas shared at short notice.

The role of NGO networks was also discussed in providing representation and support functions. In some contexts studied, L/NNGOs were represented in the humanitarian system by mixed NGO forums. In others, multiple L/NNGO networks were active, including faith-based and issue-based networks. Some of these had notably strong member structures and capacities, established well before humanitarian system activation. Some participants felt the humanitarian system had not adequately engaged with civil society networks, particularly in recognising existing coordination structures and seeking out opportunities to interface with the networks, instead of only expecting participation in humanitarian structures. Other participants noted challenges in ensuring elected representatives in humanitarian structures were not only from single constituencies.

Finally, funding was raised multiple times, with participants noting the struggle some national NGO networks faced in trying to support members and provide representation without funded secretariats, which is an area of common concern for L/NNGO Fora.

## Politicisation and humanitarian principles

Perceived 'politicisation' of L/NNGOs, and adherence to humanitarian principle, was discussed by some participants regarding coordination participation and leadership.

A few international interviewees noted that in some coordination forums in their context, actors (both local and international) are concerned about affiliation of other actors and individuals in the space and potential repercussions of discussion of sensitive topics. Some described this as stifling discussion within meetings, and shifting decision-making to informal, closed-door small (usually international) groups. Others described frustration with some L/NNGO representatives advocating along political lines in humanitarian forums.

Other participants (L/NNGO as well as INGO and UN) discussed the extent to which some L/NNGOs in their context who deliver humanitarian assistance can be perceived – and define themselves – as 'humanitarian' actors. This was particularly relevant to the contexts where existing human rights, peace, or development organizations started delivering humanitarian assistance in response to a crisis. Participants discussed both adherence to humanitarian principles and self-definition, and raised questions about whether these organizations should be (or would want to be) included within humanitarian coordination bodies, and, if not, options or extent to which the coordination system might engage with them.

In both situations, L/NNGO participants were concerned about blanket exclusion of L/NNGOs from coordination spaces because of these concerns about some actors. They, and some INGO representatives, recommended instead better contextual and civil society analysis, and strategic approaches to managing these risks – as well as better understanding of humanitarian principles for humanitarian NGOs.



# Alternatives and looking forward



*“You didn’t even ask how we would have gone about this”<sup>28</sup>*

In a global humanitarian context of resource constraints and growing number of crises, interests in strengthening national systems for humanitarian response are high. However, perceptions among L/NNGO participants of international commitments to, and progress toward, localisation were limited: “It’s still transactional partnerships. It’s not the transformative, equitable partnership that it’s meant to be.”<sup>29</sup>

Coupled with this, some participants perceived the international humanitarian system as having a limited understanding of contextual national civil society structures, capacities, and limitations – and therefore unable to organise itself to think differently about how to engage. *“Many UN agencies and INGOs started working in Latin America with a very colonialistic point of view, not understanding the capacities of civil society”<sup>30</sup>.*

It was noted that civil society structures and capacities vary hugely between countries where the humanitarian coordination structures are activated, but that modalities of engagement do not vary accordingly. Some have strong civil society networks with established roles within or advocating towards governance and policy systems; others have many recently established L/NNGOs whose primary function and source of funding is humanitarian response. One L/NNGO representative (from a country not studied here) described frustration that international coordination spaces did not reflect their national ways of working, and that they saw international response and coordination as having supplanted rather than reinforcing or drawing experience from civil society response.

When asked, participants were generally positive about the concept of adjusting ways of working to be more inclusive or in complement of existing national structures, and this could be an interesting area of focus for future work.

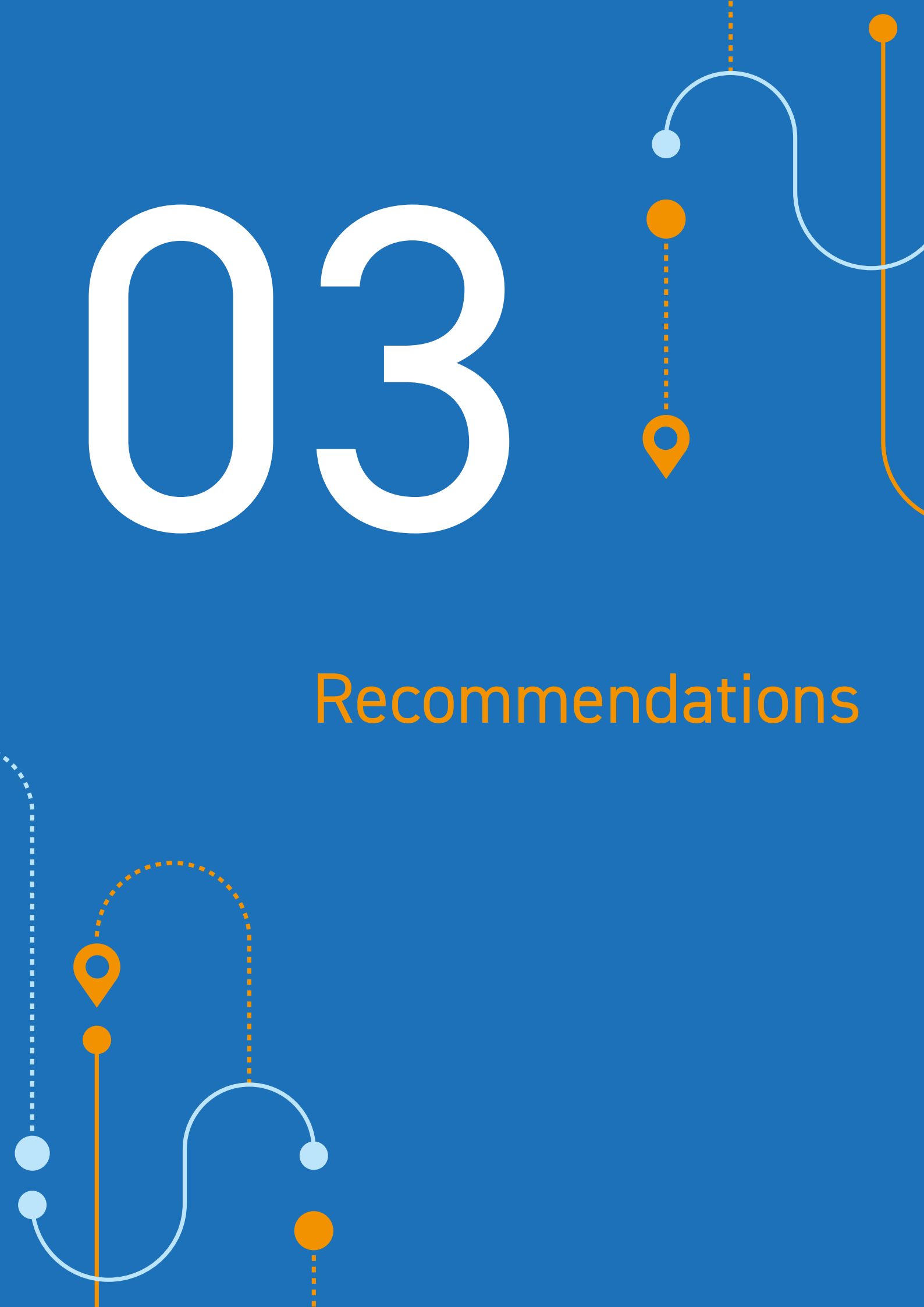
Questions to L/NNGO participants in the five countries about their engagement in durable solutions and nexus mechanisms, and if they had any reflections for humanitarian coordination systems largely did not draw any specific recommendations. Pragmatically, some participants commented that they would have to attend even more meetings. Others felt themselves well-positioned to contribute, commenting that their organizations worked on both emergency and long-term objectives and did not struggle with conceptual separations: “we’ve been nexus-ing forever!”.

28 NNGO representative  
29 NNGO representative  
30 International researcher



# 03

## Recommendations



The IASC [Guidance on Strengthening Participation, Representation, and Leadership of Local Actors in IASC Humanitarian Coordination Mechanisms](#) (2021) outlines concrete actions, and indicators to track progress, that can be used to support local actor inclusion in line with these recommendations. The [Inter-Agency Toolkit on Localisation in Humanitarian Coordination](#) (2021) contains further practical resources.

## Senior leadership

### Humanitarian coordinators

- Establish regular dialogues with L/NNGO leaders and representatives (in spaces all are comfortable in)
- Set the 'tone' and expectation for the HCT and other response actors for inclusion of L/NNGOs. Such as creation of inclusive spaces including through culturally sensitive ways of working and holding others to a high standard on commitments to localisation and the Principles of Partnership.
- Work with OCHA / advocate with CLAs to promote L/ NNGO coordination co-chairing and participation.

### HCTs

- Ensure any localisation strategies:
  - Are designed collaboratively with local and national actors
  - Define both specific actions and over-arching goals.
  - Are accompanied by workplans with clear targets and responsible parties, defining how and when follow-up will be done to hold to account its delivery.
- Ensure meeting agendas reflect priorities of, and can be input to by, all members, and that meeting scheduling allows sufficient time for NGO representatives to consult their constituents ahead of time.
- Be mindful to create inclusive spaces in meetings, including through use of jargon and ways of working, and openness to discussion, and follow the Principles of Partnership.

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31 Advancing localisation is a stated aim of CBPFs (second to the primary goal of addressing humanitarian needs). See: <https://www.unocha.org/publications/report/world/country-based-pooled-funds-global-guidelines-enar>

## Funding

### Country-based pooled fund management

- Ensure all Advisory Board members have knowledge of the board's function in relation to overall decision-making processes, and their own and others' responsibilities relating to the fulfilment of its role.
- Support existing initiatives and take further steps to create inclusive spaces for Advisory Board meetings.
- Where Grand Bargain, and aligned CBPF, commitments on localisation are not already met, take concrete steps (e.g., set out in action plans with timed, measurable targets) to reach these.
- Promote the Principles of Partnership in sub-contracting arrangements for pooled fund grants.

### Donors

- Provide funding to L/NNGOs to support co-ordination and coordination leadership positions, ideally multi-year, to ensure stability of coordination.
- Provide funding for L/NNGO and mixed NGO forums, including for secretariat staff, to strengthen their support and representation abilities.
- Support costs for L/NNGO liaison and senior staff structures, and overheads, either directly or in requirements for UN and INGO partners using pass-through funding to sub-contract L/NNGOs.
- Enhance visibility of L/NNGO sub-contracted partners, such as requiring them to be named in reporting, and inclusion in some donor-partner meetings.

## Facilitation

### Cluster lead agencies

- Promote L/NNGO leadership in clusters (e.g. co-chairing at different levels). Ensure co-ordination MoUs and ToRs reflect feasible and equitable responsibilities.
- Advocate for funding for co-ordination arrangements, especially for L/NNGOs.
  - Where NGOs' funding for co-ordination is limited (e.g. limited to salary only) consider supporting co-ordinators' internal travel or training attendance, equal to the UN coordinator
  - To avoid conflict of interest and creation of power imbalance in coordination teams, CLA direct funding of co-ordination positions is not recommended .
- When a Cluster Co-Coordinating Partner is also an implementing partner of the CLA, take special care to keep this funding relationship separate from the cluster.
- Allocate sufficient resources for clusters to allow for basics such as translation into local languages.

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32 If a CLA does fund a cluster co-ordination position, it is recommended that the CLA and Cluster Co-Coordinating Partner discuss any potential implications and agree measures to ensure this does not impact working relationships or balance of power, e.g., ensuring grant management is conducted by separate staff.

33 Consider simple actions such as creating an easily available abbreviation list for new cluster members.

## OCHA & cluster coordinators

### [as facilitators or chairs of HCTs, ICCGs, clusters, sub-national coordination]

- Define goals and any actions for promoting L/NNGO inclusion in coordination.
  - If any risks are identified in the context around inclusion of (some) L/NNGOs in humanitarian coordination, work to understand and address these, aiming to maximise not minimise principled inclusion.
  - Promote inclusion of L/NNGOs in all aspects of the coordination work, not only, for example, as a medium for community engagement
- Seek out opportunities to expand L/NNGO coordination leadership
  - E.g. working group or sub-national (co)-chairing, cluster co-coordination or SAG membership.
  - Advocate with donors for sufficient funding for L/NNGO full- and part-time coordination roles.
- As necessary, work with the co-coordinating organization to design on-boarding for new L/NNGO coordination staff, such as briefings, training access, and ongoing knowledge transfer.
- Work with L/NNGO members to identify and resolve any barriers to their inclusion, such as to:
  - Limit use of humanitarian jargon , and be mindful of how ways of working and communication styles can impact who feels included.
  - Where there are language barriers: translate key documents, including meeting invites and slides, and hold sub-national meetings in local languages.
  - Ask members about their preferred ways to receive communications and information, introducing any strongly preferred options.
  - Request inputs for and design meeting agendas to reflect members' priorities. Consider including fixed agenda items for updates from L/NNGO representatives.
  - Hold meetings in locations easily accessible for NGOs (e.g., if UN premises are difficult to access, consider rotating meetings between UN and an NGO or NGO forum offices)
- Conduct briefings for new L/NNGO members, to ensure they have sufficient knowledge of the coordination system, its potential benefits, and respective responsibilities, to fully participate.
- Design reporting systems to minimise reporting burden and to benefit all response actors, such as:
  - Design indicators and data collection tools with cluster members, so it is easy for all to report.
  - Reflect L/NNGO (implementing partner) contribution in response-wide and cluster products.
- Consider how to strengthen links between the coordination body and any relevant existing L/NNGO and civil society platforms and structures.

## Inclusive environment

### Global clusters

- Ensure global focal points are equally accessible to, and in touch with, NGO cluster co-coordinators as for UN cluster coordinators.
- Take steps to ensure focal points are available that speak the main UN working languages, and work in similar time-zones to country clusters. Consider options for NGO hosting or contribution.
- Support on-boarding and briefing for new NGO – especially L/NNGO – cluster coordination staff.
- Set expectations of and support cluster coordination teams to promote L/NNGO inclusion in clusters.

### UN agencies and INGOs

- Adhere to and promote the Principles of Partnership in engagement with L/NNGOs.
- Ensure partners are provided sufficient overhead and staff costs in project budgets.
- Where not already met, take steps towards meeting Grand Bargain commitments on localisation. Ensure country staff are well briefed on commitments on localisation pledged at global level.
- Reflect on how UN / INGO power and influence in coordination forums could be utilised to create more space for L/NNGO inclusion. For INGOs, consider opportunities for joint advocacy on NGO inclusion.

### NGO forums

- Establish clear processes and criteria for the selection of NGO representatives into coordination bodies, defining and communicating their responsibilities and accountabilities back to members (in doing so, ensuring NGO representatives in coordination bodies have a clear representative mandate, and can be held to account for their function by those they are representing).
- Facilitate the processes of consultation before meetings, and feedback after meetings, from NGOs that are selected to represent NGO forum members.
- For international NGO forums, seek opportunities to link with and strengthen national NGO platforms.
- Facilitate connections between NGO Cluster Co-coordinators and NGO HCT members to help amplify key issues or messages.
- Provide regular briefings and inductions for L/NNGOs, to ensure they have sufficient knowledge of the coordination system, its potential benefits, and respective responsibilities to fully participate.

## L/NNGOs

- Advocate for inclusion in humanitarian coordination forums.
  - Explore (and advocate for) funding options for liaison and coordination functions.
  - Advocate with other humanitarian actors (e.g. INGOs, NGO forums, and other actors listed here) for their support to L/NNGOs to explore funding options and advocacy aims.
- Join or strengthen L/NNGO or mixed networks and platforms, using these to strengthen collective voice. Consider linking with mixed or INGO forums, identifying opportunities for mutual support.
- Seek opportunities to exchange knowledge, such as: to better understand the IASC coordination system, or to share information on existing local networks and how the international coordination system can link with these (e.g., through engagement with a mixed/INGO forum or OCHA).
- Identify and uphold expectations and responsibilities for L/NNGO representatives in coordination:
  - For L/NNGOs in a representative role: ensure coordination and transparent information-sharing with the wider group of L/NNGOs, to represent collective not individual interests.
  - For all: support and hold L/NNGO representatives to account, for their agreed role and function.
  - For all: discuss collectively and within organizations how to emphasize and uphold humanitarian principles in both participating in, and representing other organizations in, humanitarian coordination bodies.

# 04

## Country profiles

Country profiles are available to view on our website at:  
[icvanetwork.org/resource/localization-in-humanitarian-leadership-country-profiles/](http://icvanetwork.org/resource/localization-in-humanitarian-leadership-country-profiles/)



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