Why it Matters

Fragile systems in crisis settings. In crisis contexts, social protection systems are often disrupted, underdeveloped, or politicised. In such contexts, **international actors often step in to fund and deliver assistance**, but their influence and reach can be limited.

The need for systematic evidence. Recent research suggests that locally led approaches can be **cost-efficient**. Moreover, during the COVID-19 pandemic, local actors played a pivotal role in responding to the crisis: leading early response, bridging information gaps, and complementing overstretched government systems. Yet, discussions around local actor effectiveness remain largely anecdotal, generally take place outside the social protection discourse, and the sector lacks robust evidence.

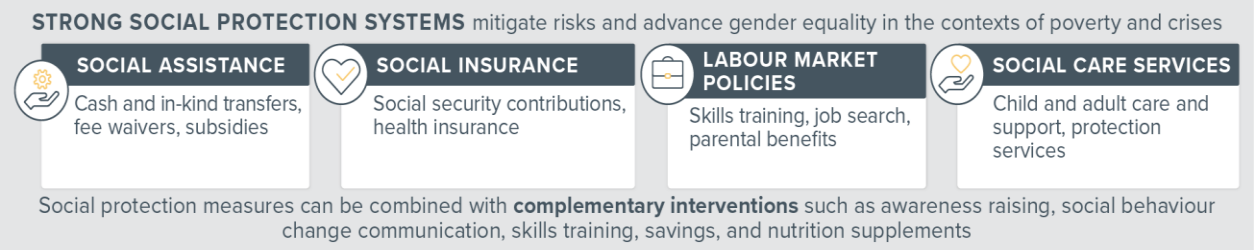
First responders and last-mile connectors. Local actors are on the frontline. Embedded in their communities, local actors are often the **first responders to small-scale or chronic crisis** that fall below the threshold for international assistance. Their trusted and diverse networks allow for rapid mobilisation, context-specific priorities, stronger accountability, and better alignment with community. Yet, they are too often **treated as implementers, and not strategic decision makers.** Elevating their role from peripheral implementers to central leaders and architects of social protection is essential for creating more effective, and sustainable social protection.

Unlocking transformative potential. Deep dive research across four conflict contexts found that systematic shifts are needed to unlock the potential of local actors. Several barriers, including restrictive political environments, limited direct funding, weak institutional and coordination frameworks and mechanisms limit the potential of local actors, including grassroots groups, NGOs, GESI specialists, and subnational government to **expand outreach, and address structural equalities** driving inequality and exclusion. Increasing their agency and leadership in framing, design, delivery, and learning would ensure that policies and programmes are grounded in local realities, responsive to local needs, reach excluded populations, facilitate uptake and equitable distribution, and strengthen accountability mechanisms.

Recognising informal social protection. The research also shows that crisis contexts have **catalysed community-driven social protection models**, notably where state systems have collapsed. In Sudan, Emergency Response Rooms have become a vital lifeline for many citizens. In Myanmar and Afghanistan, women's Self Help Groups are emerging informal providers, sharing information and resources. These grassroots efforts must be recognised, legitimised, and resourced at scale alongside broader support to realise the potential of diverse local actors for more effective and sustainable protection in crisis contexts.

What is Social Protection

Social protection is both a fundamental right and a core responsibility of the state. It is designed to support individuals and families at risk of poverty, social exclusion, shocks, and crisis. By facilitating access to essential services, resources, and opportunities, social protection builds resilience before crisis and delivers vital assistance in the aftermath of a shock or protracted crisis.



Who are the Local Actors

Local actors are broadly defined as: individuals, community-based organisations (CBOs) or structures (e.g., Self Help Groups), businesses, institutions, networks, local non-governmental organisations (LNGOs) including gender and social inclusion (GESI) representative organisations, and national and subnational governments; based, leading and operating from within the local context of reference, subject to local laws, and whose origins are in the Global South and activities centred on local communities

What are Local Actor Roles

CURRENT ROLES	POTENTIAL ROLES
NATIONAL GOVERNMENTS: in some settings, state-led systems have collapsed; in others, national authorities lead policy formulation but lack coordination capacity. **Subnational governments are mainly implementers** with limited decision-making power to shape priorities.	With resources and autonomy, subnational governments could **lead in beneficiary identification, programme coordination, and advocacy**.
LOCAL NGOs: often limited to **implementers** - focusing on service delivery, community mobilisation, targeting and advocating – despite their critical role in delivering cash transfers & sustaining emergency assistance.	Proven ability to take a **co-design role in** targeting criteria, delivering assistance & strengthening community accountability if political restrictions limiting local actor ability to operate and funding shortfalls are removed.
PRIVATE SECTOR: primarily facilitate payments including in areas with limited government or NGO reach.	Can expand role to provide **innovative, accessible, and digitised solutions** in areas with limited access and formal banking.
CBOs: active in **last-mile delivery and informal safety nets** (e.g., Emergency Response Rooms, Self Help Groups) but excluded from policy and programme design.	Can inform **inclusive targeting, enhance access** through information distribution and **share local feedback** on programme effectiveness.
GESI ACTORS: limited influence in policy framing, typically only consulted for GESI-focused programmes, play an active role in outreach and awareness raising, but restricted roles in contexts such as Afghanistan.	Should play a leading role in **designing gender-responsive and inclusive social protection** that respond to priorities and reaches the most marginalised.

Policy and Practice Tips



- **Increase direct, flexible funding.** Enhance funding quality and quantity whilst simplifying application and compliance requirements; channel resources through local intermediaries (e.g., coalitions and pooled funds); invest in community-driven initiatives (e.g., Self Help Groups); and strengthen partnerships with local financial institutions.
- **Strengthen local leadership.** Institutionalise local actor co-leadership in policy and programme decision making from the onset; establish local actor advisory groups and regular dialogue platforms.
- **Support capacity sharing.** Prioritise long-term, peer-to-peer capacity exchanges; develop localised data systems; enhance digital tool usage; and support capacities to expand from social assistance to broader social security systems ensuring support across the nexus.
- **Enhance coordination and power sharing.** Map local ecosystems and align roles with capacities and preferences; introduce mandatory co-leadership clauses; establish localised coordination platforms; support equitable partnerships; and institutionalise informal feedback mechanisms to strengthen accountability.
- **Advance gender-responsive and inclusive social protection.** Directly funding representative entities; integrate disaggregated data, inclusive assessments, participatory monitoring and evaluation; and invest in the leadership and capacities of GESI actors to ensure systems are responsive and reach marginalised populations.

Key References

- **Synthesis Report:** The Role of Local Actors in Social Protection in Crisis Contexts
- **Synthesis Report:** The Role of Local actors in Gender-Responsive and Inclusive Social Protection
- **Country Reports:** Afghanistan, Lebanon, Myanmar, Sudan [unpublished]