The Role of Local Actors in Social Protection in Crisis Contexts

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ACRONYMS

CALP	Cash Learning Partnership
CBO	Community based organisation
CCS	Cash Consortium of Sudan
CDC	Community Development Committees/Councils
CLRP	Community Recovery and Livelihoods Programme
CRGs	Community Resilience Groups
CSOs	Civil society organisations
CT-OCV	Cash Transfer for Orphans and Vulnerable Children
DfA	De facto Authority
ERRs	Emergency Response Rooms
ESSN	Emergency Crisis and COVID-19 Response Social Safety Net Project
EU	European Union
FCDO	Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office
GESI	Gender equality and social inclusion
HAC	Humanitarian Aid Commission
HGSM	Home-Grown School Meals Programme
HH	Household
IDP	Internally displaced persons
IFRC	International Federation of the Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies
ILO	International Labour Organisation
INGO	International non-governmental organisation
KII	Key informant interview
LNGO	Local non-governmental organisation
M&E	Monitoring and evaluation
MCCT+	Mother and Child Cash Transfer Plus (MCCT+) programme
MEAL	Monitoring, evaluation, accountability, and learning
MENA	Middle East and North Africa
MMSP	Mobile money service provider
MoSA	The Ministry of Social Affairs
MOU	Memorandum of understanding
MSP	Money service provider
NDA	National Disability Allowance
NSNP	Kenya National Safety Net Programme
NSPS	The National Social Protection Strategy
NTTP	National Poverty Targeting Programme
OPD	Organisation of persons with disabilities
PWD	Person with disabilities
RBA	Resilience Building Afghanistan Project
RSF	Rapid Support Forces
SAF	Sudanese Armed Forces
SFSP	Sudan Family Support Programme
SHGs	Self Help Groups
SP	Social protection
SSA	Social security allowances
STAAR	Social Protection Technical Assistance, Advice and Resources
UN	United Nations
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
UNICEF	United Nations Children's Fund
UNOCHA	United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs
USAID	United States Agency for International Development
VSLAs	Village Savings and Loan Associations
WB	World Bank
WFP	World Food Programme
WLOs	Women led organisations
WO	Women's organisations

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Study Context

The study examined the role of local actors in social protection systems across four crisis-affected countries - Afghanistan, Lebanon, Myanmar, and Sudan - where ongoing conflict, political instability, and economic crises have significantly weakened formal social protection mechanisms. In **Afghanistan**, social protection has been disrupted by decades of conflict and deteriorated following the Taliban's return to power, which resulted in severe restrictions for women and limited international engagement. **Lebanon** has faced a severe economic crisis since 2019, exacerbating poverty levels and overwhelming a fragmented social protection system. **Myanmar** has experienced growing humanitarian needs since the 2021 military coup, with social protection programmes either suspended or refocused solely on immediate humanitarian assistance. **Sudan**, embroiled in civil war since 2023, has seen the collapse of state-led social protection, with grassroots organisations and humanitarian actors stepping in to provide relief.

Purpose of the Study

The study assessed the current and potential roles of diverse local actors in social protection systems within crisis contexts. It further identified barriers that hinder local actor effectiveness and explored opportunities to strengthen their engagement. By mapping local actor agency across different social protection processes - **framing, design, delivery, and learning** - and by disaggregating and analysing different types of local actors, the study provided evidence-based recommendations for donors and international actors to enhance locally led social protection efforts.

Methodology

The study utilised a mixed-methods approach, including:

- **Desk reviews** of the global literature and the social protection ecosystem in the four deep dive crisis countries including policy frameworks, crisis response mechanisms, programmes and stakeholders.
- **71 key informant interviews (KIIs)** across the four study countries, engaging local non-governmental organisations, community-based organisations, government actors, and international agencies.
- **24 surveys with local** and international actors to assess local actor roles and agency levels in social protection programming, categorised as **primarily responsible, co-responsible, consulted, or omitted.**

Current Roles of Local Actors in Social Protection in Crisis Contexts

- **Government Actors.** In Sudan and Myanmar, government-led social protection has collapsed, leading to **reliance on humanitarian agencies and informal networks.** In Lebanon, the Ministry of Social Affairs (MoSA) plays a role in policy formulation but lacks coordination capacity. In Afghanistan, the *de facto authority* (DfA) has imposed strict controls on assistance**,** limiting international and local actor engagement.
- **Local NGOs (LNGOs).** Frequently act as **implementers rather than decision-makers,** focusing on service delivery, community mobilisation, and beneficiary targeting. In Myanmar, LNGOs play an essential role in delivering cash transfers and advocating for social protection reforms, while in Sudan, they work with diaspora networks to sustain emergency assistance.
- **Community-Based Organisations (CBOs).** Grassroots actors are notably involved in **last-mile delivery**. In Sudan, Emergency Response Rooms have emerged as **self-organised mutual aid networks** supporting conflict-affected populations, while in Myanmar, local Self Help Groups and savings groups act as informal safety nets. However, CBOs are often excluded from programme design and policy discussions.
- **Gender equality and social inclusion (GESI) actors.** Women's organisations (WOs) and organisations of persons with disabilities (OPDs) have **limited influence in policy framing.** In

Lebanon, OPDs were only consulted in disability assistance programmes, while in Afghanistan, women's organisations are largely excluded due to restrictive government policies. The study found that local GESI actors **play an active role in SP programme delivery** as they conduct outreach by organising local forums to raise community awareness on the availability of social protection programmes and benefits, and the application process (e.g., in Myanmar and Sudan).

- **Private sector companies**. In Afghanistan and Sudan LNGO key informants reported that they are increasingly working with private sector companies, and specifically mobile service providers to **deliver** cash transfers.

Potential Roles of Local Actors in Social Protection in Crisis Contexts

Local actors have the potential to take on more substantive roles across social protection programming, particularly in design, governance, and M&E.

- **Government actors.** Despite current challenges, subnational government bodies in Sudan and Afghanistan have demonstrated their **potential to lead in beneficiary identification, programme coordination, and advocacy** if given the necessary resources and autonomy**.**
- **Local NGOs.** LNGOs in Myanmar and Sudan have **proven capacity to take a co-responsible or leading role** in designing targeting criteria, delivering assistance, and ensuring greater community accountability in cash transfer programmes.
- **CBOs and grassroots structures.** Community-based actors, particularly women's Self-Help Groups in Sudan and Myanmar, could **help shape more inclusive targeting mechanisms** and provide crucial local insights on programme effectiveness.
- **GESI actors.** Women's organisations and OPDs could **play a stronger role in designing gender-responsive and disability-inclusive social protection,** ensuring that programmes address gender risks heightened in crisis (including gender-based violence, increased caregiving responsibilities) alongside inclusion barriers.

Barriers to Strengthening the Roles of Local Actors in Social Protection

Despite their potential, local actors face significant barriers to full participation across social protection systems:

- ✓ **Political and governance constraints.** Government restrictions, such as Afghanistan's DfA-imposed project approvals and Myanmar's NGO registration law, limit local actors' ability to operate independently. Unstable governance structures in Sudan and Lebanon create policy fragmentation and weak coordination.
- ✓ **Limited funding access.** Short-term, donor-driven funding cycles prevent local actors from engaging in long-term social protection planning. CBOs and LNGOs further struggle with donor compliance requirements, leading to reliance on international intermediaries (e.g., INGOs/UN).
- ✓ **Capacity gaps.** Many local actors lack technical expertise in programme design, advocacy, and data management. In Afghanistan, capacity loss due to "brain drain" has weakened local NGOs' ability to engage in policy discussions.
- ✓ **Exclusion from decision-making.** Local actors are often consulted late in the process or omitted altogether from social protection governance structures. Women's organisations and OPDs remain marginalised, despite their potential to contribute to inclusive programming.

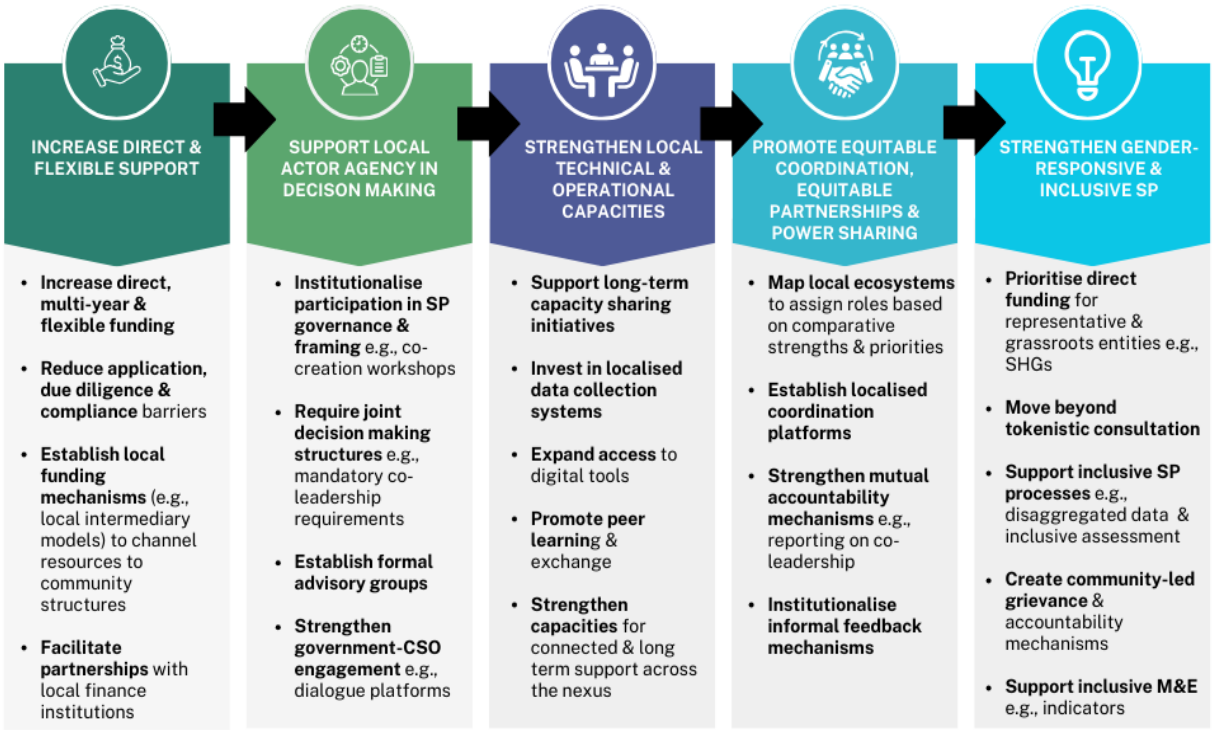
Opportunities to Strengthen the Role of Local Actors

Despite these barriers, several opportunities exist to enhance local actor involvement:

- ✓ **Shift donor priorities toward localisation**. Increasingly, donors recognise the cost-effectiveness and sustainability of locally led programming.
- ✓ **Strengthen government-CSO engagement**. Institutionalising regular dialogue platforms between national and subnational governments, LNGOs, and CBOs could improve policy coherence.

- ✓ **Invest in capacity sharing**. Training local actors in *inter alia* advocacy, financial management, and social protection frameworks can enhance their leadership role.
- ✓ **Provide direct, flexible funding for local actors**. Removing bureaucratic hurdles to funding access can enable local actors to engage in strategic planning rather than short-term service delivery.

Key Recommendations



- ➢ **Increase direct, multi-year, and flexible funding** for local actors to strengthen their leadership in social protection policy dialogues and programming, simplify application and compliance processes, and establish local funding mechanisms.
- ➢ **Institutionalise local actor participation in policy framing and governance** by ensuring co-leadership establishing programme objectives, developing targeting criteria, allocating resources, and by establishing local advisory groups.
- ➢ **Provide long-term tailored capacity-strengthening initiatives,** including through peer-to-peer capacity sharing on financial management, digital applications, monitoring and evaluation.
- ➢ **Enhance coordination between local and international actors** to shift from consultation to shared leadership, including through ecosystem mapping, assigning roles according to comparative strengths and preferences, including mandatory leadership clauses, and establishing localised coordination platforms.
- ➢ **Ensure gender-responsive and disability-inclusive social protection** by integrating representative organisations into programme design, supporting disaggregated data collection and inclusive assessments, and co-creating monitoring processes, tools, and indicators with local gender and social inclusion actors.

In conclusion, local actors are essential yet underutilised in social protection systems within crisis contexts. While they play a critical role in last-mile delivery, their exclusion from policy formulation and decision-making limits the effectiveness and sustainability of social protection interventions. Strengthening their role requires a systemic shift towards locally led governance, direct funding mechanisms, and inclusive decision-making. By addressing political, financial, and capacity-related barriers, international actors can enable local actors to transition from peripheral implementers to key architects of equitable, inclusive, resilient, sustainable, and community-driven social protection systems.

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 Study Context

The overall aim of this study was to appraise the ways in which local actors support social protection systems across different contexts[1], identify the barriers to strengthening their role, and provide recommendations for enhancing their engagement. Specifically, the study helps to build the evidence base for strengthening the role of local actors in social protection systems in diverse contexts (including fragile and crisis contexts) by unpacking their current and potential roles, and their contribution to more effective programming in crisis contexts.

In 2022, over 100 million people were forcibly displaced worldwide, with refugees and internally displaced people living in increasingly protracted crisis contexts. By 2030 nearly half of those living in extreme poverty will live in fragile and conflict affected states (UNHCR, 2022).

Social protection (SP) systems and programmes are designed to provide support to individuals and families who are at risk from poverty, social exclusion, shocks, and stresses. The aim of social protection is to ensure that all members of a society have access to essential services, resources, and opportunities, promoting their well-being and protecting them from poverty and hardship (IDS, 2019).

Social protection is a right and the responsibility of the state, but in many contexts, it is also financed and delivered by non-governmental actors. This is often the case in conflict and fragile settings where social protection systems are nascent or disrupted, and both development and humanitarian focused non-governmental national and international actors play an expanded role in supporting the state to deliver social protection (STAAR, 2024).

Evidence suggests that local actors could potentially help to mitigate risks associated with working in conflict context and engage communities more deeply for more effective, inclusive, equitable, sustainable, and accountable social protection systems. The social protection responses to COVID-19, for example, include many examples where local actors were relied upon to play a critical function across the delivery chain – such as sensitising programmes with local communities, ensuring last mile registration and minimising exclusion errors, providing an accountability mechanism with government social protection (SP) systems, and addressing risks particularly around gender-based violence (GBV); all functions that fundamentally rely on trusted local counterparts (Gerad *et al.,* 2020).

There is also growing evidence that locally led programming could be more cost efficient and effective in both humanitarian and development contexts (Barbelet *et al.,* 2021; Robillard *et al.,* 2021; CALP, 2023). For example, a 2021 study asserted that local actors could respond more effectively and quickly to community needs at a lower operational cost, by drawing upon diverse networks of local trusted community representatives to: minimise exclusion errors; sensitise around assistance packages; deliver transfers; layer support beyond cash; increase accountability and transparency to community actors; ensure responses considers multidimensional needs; and help mitigate potential risks (SPACE, 2021).

Similarly, an Oxfam study noted that local humanitarian responders, embedded in their local communities, also have the capacity to respond to the many small-scale crises that are under the threshold of international interventions (2016). Further, a study by the cash learning partnership (CALP) network noted that local actors could play a critical role in more effective, inclusive, and accountable social protection programmes (2023). The literature does however caution that whilst local actors can significantly improve the quality of programming, the benefits are not systematic and need to be assessed in each context (Cabot Venton, 2023).

[1] This study broadly defines local actors 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.

National governments are identified in the literature as the duty bearers with responsibility for social protection systems. Where possible, it is noted, they should lead discussions on policy, strategy, programme design, and manage coordination platforms (STAAR, 2023). However, in most crisis contexts, where government leadership is weak, local non-government actors can be important partners in influencing governments on social protection programming and building a strong social contract between state and civil society (Cabot Venton, 2023). Non-Government local actors can further empower population groups to express their needs and demands in national social dialogues, campaigns, and advocacy (Schuring, 2021).

To date, however, there remains a gap in knowledge around the actual and potential roles of diverse local actors in supporting social protection systems in crisis contexts. As a result, potential opportunities for engaging local actors in social protection programming in crisis contexts have not yet been realised. Evidence to-date is therefore anecdotal and there has been no systematic review of the role of local actors in social protection systems in fragile and crisis contexts.

1.2 Study Objectives

The objectives of the study were to:

- **Appraise how different local actors engage with social protection systems** in fragile and crisis contexts to improve effectiveness and inclusion;
- **Identify barriers to strengthening the role of different local actors – including gender and social inclusion actors -** in social protection programming in crisis contexts; and
- **Propose recommendations for enhancing the role of local actors** in social protection programming in crisis contexts.

1.3 Study Approach

This section provides a broad overview of the study approach, with more detail on the study conceptual framework and methodology provided in *Annexes A* and *B* respectively. The study employed a phased and conceptually grounded methodology to explore how local actors, engage with social protection systems in crisis contexts.

***The Inception Phase,* between April and August 2024, focused on refining the research scope, clarifying working definitions, and establishing a conceptual framework.** This included a high-level desk review of the global literature, and key informant interviews with international experts to assess the current roles, opportunities, and barriers for local actors in social protection. The conceptual framing highlighted four critical social protection system processes - **framing, design, delivery, and learning** - and introduced a "*Local Actor Agency Spectrum*" to assess the agency of diverse local actors, drawing on the agency levels identified in *Table 1* (see *Annex A* for more details*).*

Table 1: Local Actor Agency Spectrum

Agency Level (& score)	**Level of Agency**	**Explanation**
A (10-12)	**Primarily responsible**	Local actors (including women's organisations & organisations representing diverse identities) lead, take decisions & act independently
B (7-9)	**Co-responsible**	Local actors are part of a formal system and take decisions jointly or independently
C (4-6)	**Consulted**	Local actors receive information on policies, strategies, programmes and engage in dialogue (often after consultation with their own constituents)
D (0-3)	**Omitted**	Local actors are unaware of opportunities for engagement and support

***Phase II,* between September 2024 and February 2025, involved deep dives in four countries: Afghanistan, Lebanon, Myanmar and Sudan.** The countries were selected through a structured

scoping process with selection criteria ensuring contextual diversity, presence of robust SP systems, and partnerships.[2]

The country deep dives were conducted by local researchers and comprised:

- **Country-level desk reviews** to understand the social protection ecosystem in each country (see *Annex C* for contextual overviews) and to identify focus programmes in each country (see *Annex D*);
- **71 key informant interviews** with a diverse mix of actors, including local non-governmental organisations (LNGOs), government representatives, community-based organisations (CBOs), and gender and social inclusion (GESI) actors;
- **24 surveys** with local and international actors (excluding Lebanon due to security issues), which measured the perceived agency of local actors using the established *Local Actor Agency Spectrum*.
- **A mapping of local actors** engaging in social protection programming in each of the deep dive countries.

Stakeholders selected for the key informant interviews and surveying were generally linked to two focus programmes in each country. These programmes were primarily focused on social assistance rather than social security, reflecting the need in these crisis contexts to provide urgent resources and in some cases a response to the collapse of basic services. As a result, there were no key informant interviews with several key social protection stakeholders, for example employers/employee organisations; and the study findings should be interpreted accordingly. Moreover, due to the ongoing conflict in Lebanon at the time of the study, only nine interviews were conducted, whilst security issues and restrictions in the remaining deep dive countries further limited the number of interviews with grassroots organisations.

Individual country reports were prepared and the findings across all four deep dives were then synthesised into this current report and a separate report focusing on the *Role of Local Actors in Gender-Responsive and Inclusive Social Protection.* Shorter more practical thematic policy briefs were also prepared to inform strategic interventions for strengthening the engagement of local actors in social protection.

[2] With the Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office (FCDO), Social Protection Technical Assistance, Advice, and Resources Facility (STAAR), and The Share Trust.

2. THE ROLE OF LOCAL ACTORS IN CRISIS CONTEXTS

This section summarises the current and potential roles of different local actors in crisis contexts. It synthesis the findings from the global literature review and the four country deep dives, notably the country literature reviews, key informant interviews, and surveys. The Local Actor Agency Spectrum, which was used by international and local actors to rate the roles of different local actors across the social protection programming processes (**framing, design, delivery, and learning**) and component building blocks (activities), is referenced throughout.

10-12	**Primarily responsible**	**7-9**	**Co-responsible**	**4-6**	**Consulted**	**0-3**	**Omitted**

2.1 FRAMING

This section summarises the current and potential roles of different local actors in framing social protection programmes, including: i) developing policy and programme objectives; ii) establishing programme governance and coordination; iii) mapping programme locations, risk, and vulnerabilities; and vi) deciding social protection priorities.

Figure 1: FRAMING - International Actor Perceptions



Figure 2: FRAMING - Local Actor Perceptions



2.1.1 Current Roles

Government actors

Government actors[3] in Myanmar, Sudan, and the "*de facto authority*" (DfA) in Afghanistan[4] play a limited role in framing social protection programmes given that government services have been severely curtailed amidst ongoing and overlapping crises. In Afghanistan for example, key informants highlighted that international actors, including donors, are reluctant to work with *DfA* actors due to fear of interference with their programming. Similarly, given the severity of the current crisis in Sudan, with

[3] Government actors in this study included national or federal government actors, sub-national government actors (referred to as local government actors in some contexts) and community government actors where applicable including village-level local authorities.

[4] The Taliban (the *de facto authority* – DfA) is not recognised by the United Nations and most country governments.

government services barely functioning and development assistance significantly reduced, a state-led social protection system remains an aspiration (Birch *et al.*, 2024).

According to the survey findings, government actors at all levels are mostly omitted during the development of social protection programme objectives and establishment of programme governance. The survey findings also show that national and subnational government actors in Afghanistan and Sudan are **omitted** in the mapping of programme locations and vulnerability, signifying a lack of trust with the current regimes by international actors.

In Sudan, participants from sub-national government departments indicated that they played no role in the framing of the social protection programmes. However, they stated that the federal government leads in social protection policy framing. The lack of engagement of sub-national and national government actors more generally was confirmed by international actor key informants. This is attributed to donor policies that prohibit engaging the government in internationally funded programmes due to the political context in the country.

In Myanmar, the two parallel governments hinder strategic development and harmonised framing of social protection policies and resulting initiatives.

In Myanmar, different government agencies emerged in the context of the ongoing conflict crisis. At the national level, two different governments are at play. The *Department of Social Welfare* (DSW) under the *Ministry of Social Welfare, Relief and Resettlement* (MSWR) represents the *de facto* government, known as the *State Administration Council* (SAC). Some INGOs formally or informally engage with this entity to facilitate in-country operations and secure permissions for disbursing funding through formal channels, while many local organisations refuse to directly engage with them. In parallel, the *National Unity Government* (NUG) administers social protection (SP) initiatives through its *Ministry of Women, Youth, and Children Affairs*. They largely rely on public's donations and diaspora funding. The NUG focuses on providing protection for women and children through both advocacy efforts and direct financial support for communities in certain areas of the country, refugees in border areas, and former civil servants participating in the *Civil Disobedience Movement* (CDM). At the local level, particularly in ethnic regions, SP programmes are predominantly managed by the social development wings of ethnic armed organisations. These groups often receive official aid funding to support their initiatives, while diaspora networks also play a significant role in operating and funding such programmes.

Non- Government actors

LNGOs are generally omitted in framing national social protection policies. For example, key informants highlighted that LNGOs were not engaged during the initial framing of the *National Social Protection System* (NSPS). Instead, they were invited to consultations after key framing decisions were already made for validation. Consultation workshops were dominated by presentations from a multinational consulting firm commissioned by the organising bodies, leaving limited time for meaningful input from local participants. One key informant indicated that most organisations involved in consultations were research-focused or elite institutions, not necessarily the ones who work directly with vulnerable groups.

Local NGOs (LNGOs) in crisis contexts generally also play a limited role in framing social protection programmes, primarily serving as consultees with limited influence, and their involvement, dependent on individual programme donors. This can lead to programmes prioritising external agendas over locally identified needs. LNGOs are often consulted or involved only in specific project components, primarily to reach last-mile beneficiaries.

In Sudan, local NGOs indicated that their role in framing social protection programmes depends on who they partner with and who funds them. They indicated that some donors and international partners involve LNGOs in programme framing and see LNGOs as **co-responsible** or allow them to take a **leading** role.
LNGOs key informants implementing the cash transfer programme however, reported that they were **omitted** in framing the programme particularly in developing programme objectives and deciding on social protection priorities.

Whilst LNGO key informants reported that they generally play limited roles or are sometimes excluded in framing, survey findings showed that they see themselves as co-responsible in conceptualising and framing the study focus programmes.[5] However, international actors generally perceived local NGO agency as more limited - **consulted** rather than co-responsible, while they consistently rated themselves as "**primarily responsible**" across all areas of the programme framing in Myanmar, Afghanistan, and Sudan. While local actors in Myanmar are sometimes **consulted** during the objective-setting phase, they felt that their input is not meaningfully integrated. This can result in programme objectives misaligned with local needs and priorities, potentially hindering effectiveness and sustainability.

> *"Local actors possess invaluable contextual knowledge but are often confined to advisory roles. For the few programmes where they are consulted on programme locations, risk assessments, and vulnerability mapping; their input is not fully incorporated into decision-making processes. This can result in programmes that are not adequately tailored to the specific risks and vulnerabilities faced by local communities."*
>
> **Local NGO key informant, Myanmar**

The study found that in crisis contexts, CBOs are incredibly valuable in accessing communities that are in hard-to-reach areas especially during active conflict. However, in Afghanistan, they are completely **omitted** in framing social protection programmes while these community groups currently play only a **consultative** role in Myanmar. In Sudan however, community structures such as the Emergency Response Rooms (ERRs) often play a leading role in deciding social protection priorities and developing programme objectives for their own self-funded initiatives. Key CBO informants indicated that they frame their own social protection initiatives based on their own analysis and understanding of the needs of the vulnerable communities they serve.

GESI actors[6] including women's grassroots organisations reported that they were excluded in deciding priorities for gender-related SP programmes and their contextual knowledge was not being leveraged. Survey findings corroborate this by demonstrating that local GESI actors, for example in Sudan, play a more limited role in deciding social protection priorities and are only consulted.

2.1.2 Potential Roles

Government Actors

Survey findings from international and local actors in Afghanistan and Sudan show that government actors demonstrate potential to take primary responsibility across all areas of social protection programme framing. This includes developing programme objectives, deciding social protection priorities and establishing programme governance and coordination. Key LNGO informants substantiate this finding, noting that in Afghanistan subnational government actors have the **potential to**

[5] This disparity is attributed to the KII questions more generically asking about local actor roles whereas the survey data rated local actors *only* for the focus SP programmes.

[6] These include women's organisations (WOs) such as Women's Rights Organisations (WRO) and Women-led Organisations (WLO), youth organisations, and people with disabilities organisations (PDOs).

be co-responsible in programme framing if relationships and partnerships are strengthened with international NGOs. They further highlighted that if there is a change in government in the near future then both national hand subnational government should be leading on programme framing given that *"ownership of the government is essential in this sector."* Moreover, key informants in Lebanon highlighted the importance of institutionalising the role of technical units.

For example, in Lebanon, the *Ministry of Social Affairs* (MoSA) could institutionalise its technical and subnational units (e.g., gender, disability, social development centres) into future framing processes, ensuring that thematic expertise informs policy framing and the ministry transitions from procedural convener to substantive leader, embedding local needs and realities directly into the framing from the outset rather than depending on donor-supported frameworks.

Subnational government actors were also identified as having the potential to take co-responsibility for framing. For example, in Sudan, subnational government key informants stressed that their in-depth knowledge of the local context allows them to support programmes in overcoming operational challenges at the local level. They added that the exclusion of government from framing social protection programmes has not always been the case, and during more stable political times, both the federal government and the sub-national government actors were involved in framing social protection programmes and have experience that can be leveraged. In Lebanon, key informants highlighted that international actors could transition from leading the framing process to supporting a locally owned process led by MoSA and a formalised advisory body including national NGOs, OPDs, and WOs.

> *"International organisations like the international labour organisation (ILO) and the European union (EU) need to play a bigger role in bridging gaps between the government and local actors"*
>
> **Local NGO key informant, Lebanon**

Non-Government Actors

Overall, local NGOs are viewed by international actors as having significant potential to play a co-responsible role in programme framing. This perception is largely shared by local actors themselves in Afghanistan and Sudan, while in Myanmar, they see their potential role as slightly less significant, potentially linked to contextual restrictions. Supporting local NGOs to increase their agency in policy and programme framing, and **moving beyond consultation to co-ownership of decision-making**, particularly in governance and priority setting, is essential.

For example, in Myanmar, following the Cyclone Mocha disaster, local NGOs, with support from international organisations, played a crucial role in identifying the specific needs of affected communities, particularly women and girls. They conducted rapid needs assessments and participatory consultations, which informed the development of programme objectives focused on shelter, food security, and psychosocial support tailored to the unique challenges faced by women in the crisis context.

> *"NGOs could play a more structured facilitation role, supporting local actors to translate grassroots realities into technically sound policy proposals. They could convene pre-framing consultations with diverse local actors and package recommendations for direct submission to MoSA and donors. This would reduce reliance on ad hoc advocacy and instead create a structured flow of evidence and proposals into official framing processes."*
>
> **Local NGO key informant, Lebanon**

Whereas survey findings show that CBOs view themselves as potentially playing a co-responsible role in programme framing, key informants indicated that there is a growing recognition of the role that these community structures can play in taking **primary responsibility** during some aspects of programme design. This highlights the importance of identifying modalities to support these critical community-based actors - including those that are not registered – thereby leveraging their intimate community knowledge and capacities to shape social protection priorities.

Both international and local actors highlighted the potential for GESI actors to assuming co-responsibility for developing programme objectives. Notably in Myanmar, international actors perceive GESI actors as potentially playing a **primary role** in shaping SP programmes demonstrating high trust in these organisations. Similarly, women's organisations, for example in Sudan, identified that they can play a role in galvanising community actors, including women volunteers, to help develop programme objectives for framing social protection programmes to ensure community centred programming.

In Sudan, a key informant from a grassroots women's organisation indicated that there is a considerable number of women volunteers enthusiastic about voluntarism, with the knowledge and understanding to participate in framing social protection programmes to ensure gender-responsive social protection. She added that some international organisations that thematically focus on gender are willing to collaborate with grassroots women organisations.

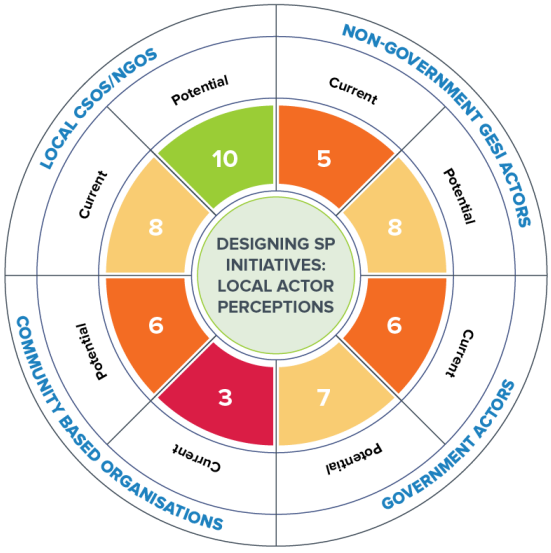
2.2 DESIGN

This section provides a summary of the roles of local actors in designing social protection programmes in crisis contexts including: i) developing targeting criteria**;** ii) deciding on how assistance will be delivered; iii) deciding beneficiary entitlement; and iv) making decisions on transfer processes (e.g., approach, frequency and duration).

Figure 3: DESIGN - International Actor Perceptions



Figure 4: DESIGN - Local Actor Perceptions



2.2.1 Current Roles

Government Actors

For government funded social protection programmes, key informants reported that the national governments are primarily responsible for their design while subnational government actors are

co-responsible as seen in Sudan and Afghanistan. Subnational government actors in Sudan and Afghanistan are however **primarily responsible** for specific activities including making decisions on transfer processes whilst national governments **lead** in deciding targeting criteria and deciding how the assistance will be delivered to beneficiaries. For consortium-based projects, in Sudan and Afghanistan, especially those primarily implemented by international actors, both national and subnational government actors play only a **consultative role** in programme design.

In Lebanon, MoSA's role in designing social protection programme varies. For the emergency social safety net (ESSN) programme, its involvement was **mainly administrative**, acting as a counterpart to the World Bank rather than a co-designer. In contrast, for the *National Disability Allowance* (NDA) programme, MoSA had **greater agency**, contributing to eligibility criteria decisions while still having limited technical influence. MoSA chaired consultations and formally approved the programme design to ensure alignment with national priorities.

In Lebanon, the national government has made notable strides in advancing its social protection landscape, particularly amid the crisis sparked by the October 2024 conflict. The Government responded swiftly by leveraging and expanding its existing social safety nets - most notably through the *National Poverty Targeting Programme* (NPTP) and *Emergency Social Safety Net* (ESSN) - to provide emergency cash assistance to over 263,000 conflict-affected individuals. Simultaneously, a key milestone was reached with the launch of a disability allowance under the *National Disability Allowance* (NDA) programme, offering a targeted monthly cash transfer to nearly 4,000 individuals with disabilities, including both Lebanese and refugee populations. This disability allowance served as a shock-responsive tool during the crisis and reflects the broader implementation of the country's *National Social Protection Strategy*, which is supported by international donors and agencies. Importantly, the government extended the NDA in September 2025, reinforcing the institutionalisation of long-term social assistance mechanisms amid Lebanon's ongoing socio-economic challenges.

In Afghanistan, national and sub-national *DfA* actors play a limited role in programme design for international led social protection programmes. Survey findings demonstrated that subnational government actors in Afghanistan are sometimes **consulted** in deciding how assistance will be delivered to beneficiaries and deciding on transfer processes.

In Afghanistan, a subnational government key informant reported that at times, they are consulted during the design of social protection programmes implemented by non-government actors especially in departments of education and health. Mainly, they are consulted on priority locations when targeting criteria is being developed.

Non-Government Actors.

In designing social protection programmes, local NGOs tend to take responsibility and lead on activities that require logistical or community-based operational inputs, such as deciding on how assistance can be delivered and developing targeting criteria. Survey findings show that international actors see LNGOs in Sudan and Afghanistan as jointly taking decisions (**co-responsible**) on the design of social protection programmes, particularly in areas such as beneficiary targeting, assistance design, and establishing transfer processes. Local NGOs in Myanmar self-rated their agency as taking **primary responsibility** in programme design, particularly in developing targeting criteria.

In Lebanon, the design of the ESSN was largely led by international actors, particularly the World Bank, which determined the targeting mechanism, eligibility framework, and delivery structure, while local NGOs were only consulted. However, for the NDA programme, LNGOs played a leading role in decision making to ensure accessibility and inclusivity of the target group by providing feedback on

the NDA programme design. Although the programme supports universal access for people with disabilities, LNGOs expressed the concern that if appropriate verification or awareness mechanisms were lacking, family members (such as parents or guardians) might collect benefits on behalf of children with disabilities without ensuring that the funds are actually used to support the children's needs or improve their wellbeing.

The study found that CBOs are either only consulted (e.g., in Sudan and Myanmar) or omitted (e.g., in Afghanistan) during the design of social protection programmes rather than taking a co-responsible or leading role. This signifies a missed opportunity for leveraging their local knowledge, capacities, and networks. For example, in Myanmar, international key informants stated that at times, they collaborate closely and consult with CBOs to adapt programme design to local contexts and to address community-specific challenges, given varying interpretations of vulnerability and eligibility criteria. In some rare cases (e.g. in Myanmar), international actors work directly with CBOs to implement social protection programmes in communities

For example, in Myanmar, an international actor KI reported that there is a UN agency that supports capacity strengthening and resource scaling for approximately 25 CBOs through sub-grants. The agency utilises mobile outreach and remote case management through CBOs to expand service access, particularly for women-led organisations and remote communities. The CBOs are able to conduct individual case management activities using their own local case management strategies and do not use the donor's strategy.

Countries vary in terms of GESI actor involvement in design processes. Stakeholders in Afghanistan, Lebanon, and Sudan given restrictive norms were found to rarely engage GESI actors compared with Myanmar. Yet, strengthening local GESI actors' leadership could enhance the effectiveness, inclusivity, and responsiveness of social protection programmes, ensuring they better address the needs of marginalised populations. On average, survey findings from international actors and local GESI actors themselves place GESI actors at the "**consulted**" level on the spectrum in relation to developing target criteria for social protection programmes. Similarly, it was reported that local GESI actors are mostly **consulted** in the design of distribution mechanisms in order to help address local barriers. However, the ratings varied among different countries, with GESI actors in Afghanistan indicating total omission of local actors, while those in Myanmar rating themselves as co-responsible.

2.2.2 Potential Roles

Government Actors

Limited or no feedback was provided by key informants on the potential role of government actors in the design of SP programmes in crisis contexts. This is most likely a reflection of the complex contexts for the deep dive countries in crisis contexts and difficulties working with *de facto authorities.*

Non-Government Actors

International actors (e.g. in Sudan) recognise the potential of local NGOs to take responsibility/lead in deciding how assistance will be delivered, deciding beneficiary entitlements and deciding on transfer processes (e.g. frequency, duration etc). Similarly, local NGOs in Afghanistan identified significant potential for themselves to **lead/have prime responsibility** for programme design, which aligned with other local key informants, who reported the potential for local NGOs to take primary responsibility.

In Sudan, local NGOs key informants consistently stated the need for international actors and donors to allow LNGOs and community structures/groups to take a leading role in various aspects pf programme design including designing targeting criteria. They reported that community structures such as women's Self Help Groups are well placed to support beneficiary selection for social protection programmes.

CBOs demonstrate potential for leadership in designing social protection programmes, particularly in creating locally adaptive conditionalities. Findings from the survey show that this potential is currently under-recognised by international actors in Myanmar and Afghanistan, who rated **CBOs**, including community structures, as potentially being **consulted** in all areas of design. This indicates a need to shift focus and empower grassroots organisations **to take a more central role in shaping social protection design features**. With their deep understanding of community dynamics, they can help design social protection features that are not only relevant but also culturally acceptable and promote positive behavioural change.

In Afghanistan, it was highlighted that CBOs "*know better how the local structures work, and how to better work and communicate with them* (i.e., group members and the wider community)." In Lebanon, key informants indicated that CBOs could serve as conveners, ensuring that local evidence, particularly from marginalised groups, is systematically integrated into design processes. This is particularly relevant for programmes like the NDA and ESSN, which target high risk populations. CBOs could take on a more prominent role in co-designing the NDA and other similar programmes. Instead of only offering feedback during workshops, they should be actively involved in drafting key elements of the programme, especially around eligibility criteria and delivery mechanisms, ensuring that the programmes are both inclusive and practical.

In Myanmar, especially in remote areas with limited access to banking infrastructure, key informants indicated that CBOs could play a vital role in determining the most effective transfer methods, whether through mobile money, cash transfers via trusted community leaders, or in-kind distributions. They could also provide valuable insights into appropriate transfer frequency and duration based on local economic cycles and seasonal vulnerabilities.

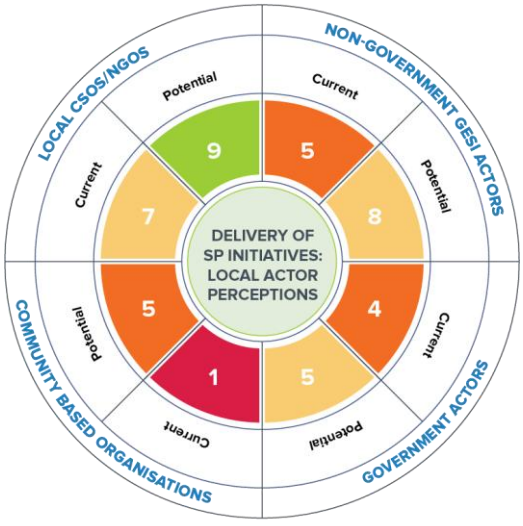
2.3 DELIVERY

This section provides a summary of the current and potential roles of different local actors in the delivery of social protection programmes in crisis contexts, including: i) awareness raising and advocacy; ii) beneficiary registration and verification; iii), service delivery; iv) managing and setting up digital transfers; and v) implementing case management.

Figure 5: DELIVERY - International Actor Perceptions



Figure 6: DELIVERY - Local Actor Perceptions



2.3.1 Current Roles

Government Actors.

In Afghanistan, the DfA delivers small aid programmes[7] directly through their own local offices and with the assistance of local community leaders. Conversely, the military government in Myanmar **does not play any role in delivery of social protection** programmes. In Lebanon, delivery is dominated by MoSA and international actors through cash transfers dispersed via contracted financial service providers. This includes beneficiary verification and ensuring programmes reach the intended individuals. In **Sudan**, the national government plays more of a **supervisory role** in the delivery of assistance. Subnational government actors are involved in targeted activities, notably actual beneficiary registration or supervising the registration process in Sudan, Afghanistan, and Lebanon.

Non-Government Actors.

Key informants from local NGOs in Sudan reported that they are increasingly leading/primarily responsible for the delivery of social protection assistance. In Lebanon however, key informants indicated that LNGOs do not directly deliver assistance but monitor delivery processes and document challenges faced by marginalised groups in accessing/receiving SP benefits. For example, for the NDA programme in Lebanon, LNGOs are engaged in awareness and outreach but have no formal service delivery authority.

The survey findings highlighted a potential disconnect between international perceptions and the on-the-ground reality, where local NGOs may take more ownership in delivery roles recognised by external actors. Local NGOs have the potential to be **primarily responsible** for beneficiary registration and verification across all the study countries. Whereas LNGOs rated their agency as potentially being primarily responsible, survey findings show a disconnect between their own view and international actor's view, who see them as taking a **consultative role.**

The survey data confirm that local NGOs in Lebanon, Myanmar, and Sudan are seen as pivotal in advocacy and creating awareness efforts, playing a leading role with grassroots organisations assuming a co-responsible role.

In Lebanon, OPDs were not only advising on the communication campaign but were actively involved in spreading awareness about the NDA programme and instrumental in ensuring the NDA reached its intended recipients by providing feedback on how to best deliver the support. They worked to ensure that individuals with disability, particularly those without a disability card, were informed about the possibility of issuing or renewing a card to ensure eligibility for support. OPDs also collaborated with MoSA to improve outreach and ensure that the programme targeted the right beneficiaries.

LNGOs as well as international actors also reported increasingly working with the private sector companies, specifically, mobile service providers to deliver cash transfers. For example, in Afghanistan LNGOs reported that in many parts of the country, the banking system is unable to provide full services, especially in deep rural areas; hence reliance on private sector distribution mechanisms. This is also true for Sudan, where local NGOs reported that they contract private sector companies to distribute funds to beneficiaries.

The study found that in fragile and crisis contexts, CBOs are increasingly taking a lead role in the delivery of social protection assistance. International actors in Myanmar and in Afghanistan view these community structures as taking a **co-responsible** role in delivery while the community structures

[7] Funded by neighbouring countries or Islamic countries, given sanctions imposed by other countries.

consistently rated their agency as **primarily responsible**. Local NGOs key informants stated that due to the conflict, there are hard-to-reach locations that they are usually not able to access, hence the reason for working with CBOs, who have direct access to these communities.

In Myanmar, ownership of beneficiary registration and verification processes by women's village savings groups in Rakhine State was highlighted. These groups leverage established trust to provide financial support and flexible loans to community members, effectively acting as a localised social safety net. Furthermore, the reliance of INGO disability-focused programmes on local Persons with Disabilities (PWD) organisations for beneficiary identification and verification shows the significant role of local actors in these processes.

> *"Many national NGOs are seeking to work with us to deliver humanitarian assistance, and the implementation from national NGOs is better than that of international actors."*
>
> **Women-led CBO Key Informant, Sudan**

Informal social safety nets are deeply rooted in Sudanese cultural norms. Community-based structures that facilitate these safety nets have shown significant capacity to assist those affected by conflict, helped by the trust they enjoy at local level, their flexibility, and their intimate understanding of conflict dynamics.

The study found that local GESI actors conduct outreach and awareness by organising local forums to educate the community about the availability of social protection programmes, their benefits, and how to apply for them. This includes ensuring that high risk groups, especially women and children, are aware of their rights.

In Myanmar, a local CSO in the Ayeyarwady region conducted awareness-raising sessions on women's protection, reaching 1100 men and women in 2018, using a one-year sub-grant given by an INGO. They also facilitated workshops with INGOs, local NGOs, administrators, and the *Department of Social Welfare*, demonstrating collaboration and knowledge sharing among diverse stakeholders.

2.3.2 Potential Roles

Government Actors

Subnational government actors in Sudan and Afghanistan reported confidence in their potential to lead in the delivery of cash transfers in remote and hard-to reach areas. They consistently reported that they have the experience and local community knowledge to handle social protection programmes led by international actors and in the case of Sudan, played an active role in delivery prior to the conflict. In Lebanon however, key informants indicated that MoSA needs to better coordinate with local government units and empower social development centres to take a more active role in delivery coordination.

In Sudan, International actors implementing the *Mother and Child Cash Transfer Plus (MCCT+)* programme reported that when the programme started, prior to the conflict, the subnational government actors played an active role in the delivery of the assistance. As part of the MCCT+ programme, the subnational government actors mobilised the communities in collaboration with religious and community leaders.

Study findings demonstrate the untapped potential of subnational government actors in Afghanistan and Sudan to lead in advocacy, raising awareness, and mobilising community members for social protection programmes in the communities they serve. However, international actors demonstrated a lower confidence in the potential of subnational government actors in Afghanistan, most likely given reluctance to work with the DfA, and scored their potential role as primarily **consultative** rather than co-leading.

In Afghanistan, a local CSO key informant indicated that the government had sufficient capacity to lead in delivery of social protection programmes until 2021. It was reported that previous projects such as pension schemes, monthly funds for the disabled persons, and monthly funds to the families of soldiers and officers that were killed during fighting (Martyrs family fund) were implemented by the government in the previous regime. This demonstrates the potential to deliver social protection programmes during crisis but would need for a substantive shift in government policies.

Non-Government Actors

Local NGOs in Sudan and Afghanistan reported their continued presence amongst communities despite the ongoing crises. This is an opportunity for further involvement in the **delivery** of social protection programmes, and key informants consistently cited direct funding from donors as an enabler for LNGOs to enhance delivery of assistance. Another important reason for increasing the agency of LNGOs reported by key informants, is their **capacity to coordinate and work with community-based structures**. Many LNGOs key informants further confirmed that they could expand their current delivery of assistance in hard-to-reach areas that international actors cannot.

In Lebanon, several key informants demonstrated that donors and UN agencies can shift into "building the capacity of local organisations for meaningful participation in delivery" to better represent and integrate marginalised groups into the delivery process. They could embed local actors directly into delivery consortia rather than limiting them to advisory or outreach roles.

Survey findings show that LNGOs, including GESI actors, are recognised as key players in beneficiary registration and verification. Whilst local actors themselves acknowledge their potential central role, they note that international actors may overestimate their current capacity. This suggests the potential for local NGOs to take an even greater responsibility, but with a need for realistic assessment and potential capacity strengthening.

For example, in Lebanon, grassroots OPDs are expected to play an increasingly central role in the delivery phase of the NDA programme and similar initiatives by acting as primary communicators of programme objectives and requirements. Their responsibilities could include training local service providers and managing communication channels, ensuring effective outreach and implementation.

The study shows that CBOs in fragile and crisis contexts, have significant potential to deliver social protection assistance to hard-to- reach areas, especially during active conflict. Similarly, there is growing recognition among both local NGOs and international actors of the vital role that informal structures – such as Self-Help Groups and Mutual aid groups – can play as integral components in the social protection delivery chain. Most notably, the survey findings show that grassroots organisations express a **strong desire and potential to take a leading role** in service delivery, indicating a significant opportunity to further localise programmes and leverage their community-level expertise.

For example, in Sudan, a leader of a CBO in eastern Sudan indicated that some donors have started moving towards reducing the financial and due diligence requirements in order to work with community-based structures. The key informant reported that such donors are slowly moving to *compliance trust-based approach* rather than *a process-based approach.* This

presents an opportunity for community structures to expand their leading role in the delivery of social protection programs.

Community-based women-led organisations reported that they can utilise existing women's collective groups in the communities or form new ones to promote gender equality (e.g., Myanmar). These women's groups serve as platforms for empowerment, advocacy, and action at the grassroots level. In Myanmar for example, LNGO key informants reported that they can work with such groups to leverage on gender advocacy by integrating discussions on women's rights, leadership, and economic empowerment into their regular activities. Moreover, LNGO key informants in Lebanon implementing the National Disability Allowance (NDA) programme, highlighted that community-based OPDs could formally lead awareness and communication to ensure outreach reaches all eligible individuals, especially those without disability cards.

2.4 MONITORING AND EVALUATION (LEARNING)

This section provides a summary of the current and potential roles of different local actors in social protection programme monitoring, evaluation, and learning in crisis contexts including: i) designing monitoring tools and indicators; ii) data collection and analysis; and iii) reporting and collecting beneficiary feedback.

Figure 7: LEARNING - Local Actor Perceptions

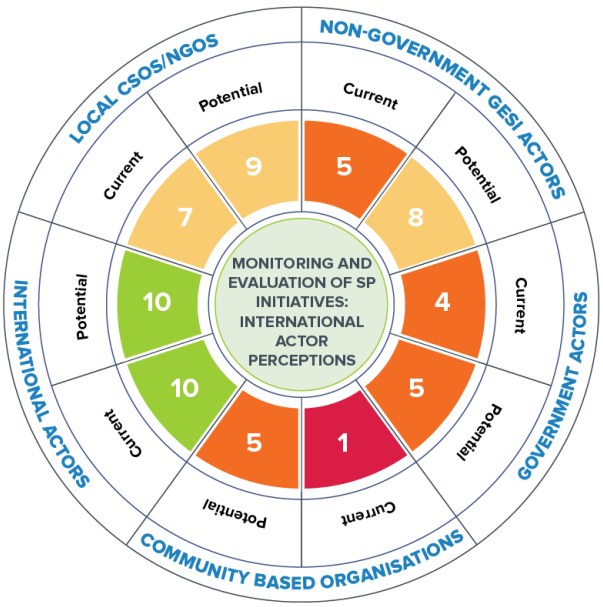


Figure 8: LEARNING - Local Actor Perceptions



2.4.1 Current Roles

Government Actors.

For government-led social protection programmes, national government actors are generally leading M&E, but this is reportedly not always a rigorous and often lacking meaningful community engagement. National government actors primarily focus on ensuring compliance with programme policies and guidelines, and at times M&E can be very basic. For example, in Lebanon, LNGO key informants reported that MoSA is focusing on beneficiary verification, updating expiry records,

communicating updated data to international actors, and ensuring the programme's reach and accuracy. Yet, these key informants identified that MoSA has limited capacity for M&E, lacking the necessary systems for tracking social protection outcomes. They further highlighted that the government's involvement is often motivated by short-term political interests rather than long-term programme learning.

In Sudan, government line ministries such as ministries of health and education lead M&E of government led social protection programmes. For example, the *State Ministry of Health* in the Red Sea State, monitors the performance of the health centres where the MCCT+ programme is being implemented. Key subnational government actor informants additionally indicated that they manage complaint and feedback mechanisms for these programmes to ensure accountability.

In Afghanistan, subnational DfA actors stated that they are primarily responsible for ensuring that the implementation of social protection programmes is timely and transparent. LNGO key informants however highlight that they have never seen any monitoring data or reports and dispute that the DfA does any meaningful monitoring of social protection programmes. Similarly, the DfA in Afghanistan, through the sectoral ministries and the Ministry of Economy, are responsible for ensuring projects are implemented accurately and transparently but without community engagement.

Non-Government Actors.

International actors (donors and INGOs), especially in crisis contexts, often control data collection and M&E processes. In some complex contexts such as Afghanistan they have hired third party monitors (consultants), which is costly, but one of the only reliable options for carrying out M&E. In Myanmar, LNGOs are seen as having *ad hoc* involvement in programme monitoring and generally implement pre-defined frameworks when involved. Similarly, in Lebanon, LNGO key informants demonstrated that M&E is donor-driven, with UNICEF, ILO, and other agencies designing indicators, templates, and reporting processes. These are shared with MoSA, but final frameworks follow donor requirements, especially for programs funded by the World Bank and EU.

In some contexts, where LNGOs and in some instances CBOs are implementing their own self-funded SP programmes (e.g., in Sudan), they carry out their own monitoring including designing tools, indicators and data collection. However, key informants noted that these actors struggle with reporting of monitoring findings as they lack capacity. Conversely, key informants in Sudan reported that CBOs often informally collect feedback and complaints from beneficiaries of internationally led SP programmes in the form of observations and taking notes and then report to the relevant INGO/national NGO and/or share complaints with the DFA/governments as needed.

2.4.2 Potential Roles

Government Actors

Key informants highlighted that national government should leverage the potential of CBOs and institutionalise community-led M&E for greater accountability. For example, in Lebanon, international actor key informants indicated that MoSA could work with OPDs and other CBOs in the NDA programme to create regular feedback loops and improve the tracking of how funds are used, and OPDs could help design better verification systems to ensure allowances directly reach individuals with disability.

Subnational government actors were identified by key informants as having the potential to lead localised impact assessments, ensuring timely adaptations. The findings also identified the potential for more participatory M&E approaches that actively engage local actors in all stages of the process for more contextually relevant, credible, and impactful evaluations.

Non-Government Actors

In Afghanistan, LNGOs highlighted their potential to take the lead in designing M & E indicators and tools. However, international actors emphasised their own leadership role and consistently rate LNGOs as having the potential for a consultative M & E role only. In Sudan, LNGOs indicated that they have well-established relationships with communities hence their potential to take **prime responsibility** in all aspects of monitoring and evaluation of social protection programmes.

In Lebanon, **key informant from LNGOs indicated that donors should prioritise capacity strengthening for local actors to facilitate their active participation in M & E.** They noted that this would ensure that data collection methods are inclusive and comprehensive. They further emphasised that greater involvement of LNGOs in evaluation processes is essential, allowing them to provide feedback and shape M&E systems to better address the needs of the communities they serve. This includes creating opportunities for local actors to contribute to defining indicators, developing methodologies, and analysing data. Investing in targeted capacity strengthening will enable local organisations to take greater responsibility in shaping M & E; enhancing the overall effectiveness of social protection programmes.

In Myanmar, the survey data suggests that LNGOs are ready and willing to take on greater responsibility in M & E. The findings also show the potential for more participatory approaches, where LNGOs actively engage in defining indicators, developing methodologies, and analysing data. This can lead to more contextually relevant and impactful evaluations.

CBOs in all the four countries report great potential to take a leading role in collecting beneficiary feedback due to their community connections. However, survey findings show that international actors perceive themselves as retaining **primary responsibility**, and view CBOs as potentially **co-responsible**.

Whilst the findings demonstrate that local GESI actors currently play a minimal role in designing M&E tools and indicators, especially in crisis affected contexts, they are seen as having potential for being **co-responsible** in this role in Myanmar and Sudan given recognition of their understanding of local dynamics, cultural nuances, and proximity to the communities. In Afghanistan however, they are perceived as only potentially playing a **consultative** role, linked to the restrictions of women and women's organisations under the current regime.

3. BARRIERS, OPPORTUNITIES AND PRIORITIES

This section unpacks the barriers to strengthening the role of local actors in social protection programming in crisis contexts. If further identifies opportunities and enablers to overcome these barriers and enhance the roles of diverse local actors in social protection systems in crisis contexts including where it is not possible to work with governments or where there is no access for international actors. It concludes with a summary of priorities for support identified by local actors. A summary of the key barriers identified by key informants for each of the deep dive countries is shared in *Annex F.*

3.1 Political and Governance

Government restrictions and interference. In Sudan, Myanmar, and Afghanistan, authorities impose bureaucratic barriers such as registration requirements, approvals for activities, and surveillance of NGO operations.

In Sudan, a key informant from a women's organisation reported that **the government does not have a clear registration policy for civil society organisations, particularly in the aftermath of the ongoing conflict**. She explained that the *Sudan Humanitarian Aid Commission* (HAC) made it difficult for her organisation to register in Omdurman city and continue supporting communities in Khartoum. As a result, the organisation is exploring opportunities to register in other states, even though Omdurman is their priority area.

In Myanmar, the *Organisation Registration Law* (ORL), enacted in 2022, replacing the previous more lenient law, **has significantly impacted local organisations operating within the country**. All CSOs and NGOs are required to register with the military government authorities and once registered they must seek prior approval for activities, funding, and partnerships. Failure to register could result in fines, the suspension of activities, or legal action against the organisation and its members. The law grants broad authority to government and military entities to monitor the activities of registered organisations. NGOs must disclose detailed operational and financial information, raising concerns about data privacy and the risk of misuse of sensitive information. This creates bureaucratic barriers, delays, and potential State control over projects and funding decisions.

In Afghanistan, it is a mandatory requirement for the DfA to review details of every project and sign separate memorandum of understanding (MOUs), making it a time-consuming activity. In some cases, the DfA has tried to force local NGOs to employ DfA fighters, causing delays in signing the MOUs.

Unstable and parallel governance structures. The study shows that in Sudan and Myanmar where multiple governing authorities operate simultaneously, confusion arises over jurisdiction and responsibility. Competing authorities often create overlapping or contradictory social protection policies, leading to inefficiencies in service delivery. The absence of a clear chain of command or a unified social protection strategy undermines the role of local actors, leaving marginalised populations at risk.

> *""We have to navigate different processes across the different regions in Sudan. Generally, we go with humanitarian principles everywhere, but there are different requests coming from different de facto authorities every day, and we need to review our approach and navigate accordingly*
>
> **Local NGO Key Informant, Sudan**

In Lebanon, the *Ministry of Social Affairs* (MoSA)'s leadership in social protection remains constrained by broader governance weaknesses. The absence of a unified understanding of social protection across government institutions, civil society, and even international partners creates a fragmented policy environment. Social protection as a concept was generally poorly understood before the launch of the *National Social Protection Strategy* (NSPS), and there is mixed understanding of the definition and what social protection comprises. This ambiguity is exacerbated by a historical lack of coordination between ministries, leading to isolated actions by individual technical units or donor-supported projects. The lack of an integrated, cabinet-level vision for social protection, further reduces its capacity to drive cross-sectoral coordination.

Centralisation or internationally-led policy framing and programme design. In Lebanon and Myanmar, decision-making on social protection priorities remains centralised within government or is led by international actors and donor agencies. This limits the ability of other local actors to influence policies. When local actors become solely implementers of externally designed projects, they may lose ownership of their work and their ability to represent the interests of their communities. This can undermine their legitimacy and credibility within the local context. In Lebanon, donor-driven priorities were reported to dictate programming based on external interests rather than national needs, leading to interventions that may not align with local realities

In Myanmar, INGOs frequently drive project design, sometimes presenting local organisations with pre-designed projects or "Requests for Proposals" with clear outputs and outcomes that offer minimal opportunity for local input. This top-down approach, while gradually shifting with the increasing emphasis on localisation, primarily neglects localised perspectives and expertise.

Exclusion of local GESI actors from policy framing and decision-making. In Lebanon and Sudan, Women's organisations (WOs) and OPDs were only invited to provide feedback after major policy decisions had already been made, leaving limited room for meaningful input. In Myanmar and Afghanistan, Local NGO key informants stated that GESI actors are not formally recognised as stakeholders in social protection frameworks, effectively sidelining their perspectives. Notably, in Afghanistan, the DFA's policies have systematically excluded women from decision-making spaces, and women's organisations have had to stop operating, affecting their ability to influence or implement GESI-inclusive social protection policies and programmes.

Political clientelism and conflict dynamics. In Lebanon, social protection is reported to at times be manipulated for political gain, while in Afghanistan and Sudan corruption poses a significant risk to social protection programmes. In Afghanistan, local leaders, such as *Wakil-e-Guzar*, were reportedly engaging in favouritism by including friends and family in beneficiary lists. In Sudan, key informants reported that exclusion of women and youth from some government-led social protection programmes still existed, which remains a difficult issue to address due to contextual and social norms dynamics. Similarly, in Myanmar, key informants reported that militias in southern Shan State were involved in diverting humanitarian aid intended for internally displaced people (IDPs). The militias allowed aid distribution only if aid agencies provided a portion of aid to militia members themselves, at times reportedly insisting on leading distribution only to divert goods for themselves. These findings highlight instances where local actors mirror conflict dynamics and potential divert support or exclude certain groups. However, these were reported as isolated instances, rather than the norm.

In Lebanon, a key informant from a local NGO reported that political parties and power-sharing dynamics shape how social protection is perceived, with social protection often seen as a "*tool for political rent rather than a universal right*." This political economy dynamic heavily influenced how the government and local actors approached social protection reform. While MoSA was actively involved, their participation was reportedly primarily driven by financial motivations and interests rather than a commitment to broader social protection reform.

> *"The Ministry of Social Affairs was active but not entirely, in all their institutions. They were involved a lot, but their involvement is mostly motivated by finance, and it's mostly motivated by clientelist and vested interest"*
>
> **International actor Key Informant, Lebanon**

➢ ***In response to these barriers, key informants identified several opportunities including: i) strengthening local leadership in framing and design*** *moving awareness from donor priorities to context-specific priorities**; ii) supporting advocacy for policy reforms*** *including using diplomatic channels, media engagement, and grassroots mobilisation to drive policy improvements; **iii) institutionalising government and NGO engagement*** *to bridge gaps between traditional decision-making and implementation roles, e.g., advisory councils or regular consultation forums; **iv) strengthening crisis-responsive and rights-based social protection systems,*** *moving beyond fragmented emergency response toward more sustainable and inclusive approaches building on good practices that integrate GESI.*

3.2 Institutional and Capacity

Capacity constraints and knowledge gaps. Across Afghanistan, Sudan, Myanmar, and Lebanon, local actors reported facing significant capacity limitations that hinder their leadership, programme implementation and sustainability. In Afghanistan, a "major brain drain" has reportedly left governance and civil society institutions staffed by inexperienced individuals, making effective collaboration difficult. In Sudan, national NGOs struggle with weak communication, fundraising, and contextual analysis skills, reducing their ability to secure funding. Similarly, in Myanmar, many local organisations reported lacking expertise in conducting needs assessments and developing strong, actionable project proposals, which limits their access to financial support. Meanwhile, in Lebanon, LNGO key informants reported limited understanding of social protection systems, undermining their ability to engage effectively in policy discussions. Finally, Afghanistan's governance environment was reported to lacks transparency and technical expertise, making it nearly impossible for organisations to engage effectively with government structures.

Weak institutional structures in Sudan, Myanmar, and Lebanon create significant operational hurdles for local actors. In Sudan, some local authorities prohibit the use of digital data collection tools like Kobo, preventing efficient M&E. In Lebanon, the *Ministry of Social Affairs* (MoSA) lacks structured processes for knowledge transfer, leading to weak institutional memory. Additionally, many government processes remain paper-based, limiting the ability to systematically monitor and evaluate programs.

Capacity to collect gender and disability disaggregated data and gender-responsive and inclusive assessments hinders inclusive social protection. In Afghanistan and Lebanon, the absence of sex-disaggregated and disability-disaggregated data leads to "GESI-blind" policy design, delivery, M & E, excluding the needs of women and persons with disabilities. In Sudan, LNGOs collect data on food insecurity but do not systematically track gender-based vulnerabilities or access barriers for persons with disabilities. In addition, GESI actors have had more limited understanding of social protection programming, hindering their ability to engage effectively in gender responsive and inclusive SP policy discussions.

International actor capacity challenges. In Myanmar, frequent staff rotations among international organisations mean that project leaders often lack firsthand experience in navigating the country's conflict dynamics. This results in unrealistic project designs, inappropriate monitoring and evaluation frameworks, and a lack of adaptability to changing conditions. Similarly, in Sudan, international aid agencies struggle with bureaucratic delays and security concerns when delivering aid in *Rapid Support Forces* (RSF) controlled areas, further limiting the effectiveness of humanitarian interventions.

➢ ***In response to these barriers, key informants identified several opportunities including: i) capacity strengthening tailored to different audiences*** *e.g. financial management and leadership training for CBOs, institutional training on SP frameworks for government actors, and GESI related training for LNGOs;* ***ii) supporting peer-to-peer capacity sharing*** *and exchange; and;* ***iii) integrating GESI indicators into national social protection data systems*** *- particularly in Sudan and Lebanon - to support gender-responsive and inclusive programming and advocacy.*

3.3 Partnership and Coordination

Power imbalances between international and local actors. Local actors in Sudan and Myanmar struggle to influence programme design and decision-making for internationally funded social protection programmes as international intermediaries (INGOs/UN entities) control most of the funding. These dynamic limits local ownership and undermines long-term sustainability, as programmes often end once international actors exit.

In **Sudan,** local NGO key informants indicated that power dynamics affect their partnerships with international agencies leading to unequal partnerships, which limit the capacities of local NGOs to influence decision making on social protection programme framing.

Lack of coordination among local actors. Historical competition for limited donor funding has weakened cooperation among LNGOs in Lebanon, Myanmar, and Sudan. Instead of working collectively, organisations often operate in silos, reducing their collective bargaining power and the effectiveness of advocacy efforts. Similarly, fragmentation among local GESI actors reduces collective bargaining power and prevents them from building a deep understanding of specific GESI issues and limits their ability to design and implement effective, long-term gender-responsive and inclusive interventions.

Lack of structured engagement platforms. Many governments do not have institutionalised mechanisms to engage LNGOs, OPDs, and WOs in social protection strategies. In Lebanon, women organisations were particularly disconnected from social protection discussions. Outside of gender-based violence (GBV) programming, these organisations were rarely involved in broader SP processes, largely due to both their lack of awareness and limited outreach from government and donors.

In response to these barriers, key informants identified a few opportunities including: i) strengthen multi-stakeholder collaboration and equitable partnerships *e.g., multi-stakeholder working groups, local actor, networks, and platforms;* ***and ii) support a shift in INGO dominance*** *prioritising the leadership to local actors for more community-centred programmes.*

3.4 Financial

Short-term, project-based funding. In Myanmar, Afghanistan, Sudan, and Lebanon, social protection programmes focus on emergency relief funding rather than sustained financial support, hindering long-term planning. The focus is more on social assistance rather than social security geared toward saving lives and responding to immediate needs. This limits the ability of local actors to engage in strategic planning and forces them to operate in reactive rather than proactive ways rather than long-term planning across the humanitarian, peace, development nexus. Additionally, this creates persistent financial insecurity for local actors, hindering their ability to sustain consistent and strategic engagement in policy processes and programmes. For example, in Myanmar, gaps in long-term planning or follow-up programmes result in community structures (e.g., SHGs) disbanding after initial funding ends, with international actors prioritising short-term project completion over meaningful, long-term investment.

Reliance on indirect funding and lack of autonomy. In all four countries, local organisations lack direct access to funding, as donors often channel resources through international intermediaries (UN agencies and INGOs) who do not always transfer costs for overheads or provide flexible funding. This dependency limits their ability to build institutional resilience, deepen expertise, offer competitive salaries, and develop

long-term strategies. This dependency can also undermine local ownership and leadership in programme design and implementation.

Low funding levels compounded by rising costs resulting from inflation and economic instability. In Myanmar and Sudan, local actor key informants consistently highlighted that severe currency devaluation has eroded the value of donor funds, making it difficult to maintain service levels. Rising operational costs and fluctuating exchange rates create financial instability for local actors given already constrained local project budgets, which do not provide flexibility to respond to these changes.

In Myanmar, the ongoing civil war is reported to be disrupting supply chains, reducing production, and increasing the cost of essential goods. The Myanmar *kyat* has experienced substantial depreciation against the US dollar, losing nearly 70% of its value since the military coup in February 2021. This instability fuels inflation and makes it difficult for local organisations to operate effectively within allocated budgets.

Financial and banking constraints. Local actors in Sudan and Myanmar face significant financial challenges due to weak banking systems and restrictive financial regulations. In Sudan, the financial system does not support digital cash transfers, limiting transparency in aid distribution. Additionally, cash liquidity shortages mean that recipients using mobile banking applications, such as the *Bank of Khartoum application*, which incur high withdrawal fees of up to 25% of the transferred amount. The situation is exacerbated by the financial strain on Sudanese diaspora members, who traditionally supported women's grassroots groups and structures but are now struggling due to increased personal financial burdens.

➢ ***In response to these barriers, key informants identified several opportunities including:*** *i)* ***providing flexible, multi-year funding directly to local actors*** *alongside donor streamlining of application/proposal, compliance, and reporting requirements to improve access and autonomy;* ***ii) shifting from short-term emergency funding to longer-term support*** *to enable local actors to build robust social protection systems;* ***iii) supporting partnerships with banks and mobile money providers*** *to make financial transactions safer and more accessible for informal or unregistered community groups and structures, especially in Sudan and Myanmar;* ***iv) tapping into diaspora communities to leverage crucial financial resources*** *and technical support that can help sustain local initiatives before gaining broader international recognition; and* ***v) supporting advocacy to promote recognition and reduce barriers for grassroots organisations****, improving their access to humanitarian funding.*

3.5 Socio-Cultural

Gender and social exclusion. Social and gender-based discrimination remains a major barrier in Afghanistan and Lebanon. In Afghanistan, the DfA's strict policies have rolled back women's rights entirely, banning them from education, employment, and public spaces while imposing extreme restrictions on media and social life. Women-led initiatives and youth engagement efforts are nearly impossible under the current regime. In Lebanon, gender norms restrict women with disabilities from accessing social protection services, reflected in the disproportionately low number of women holding disability cards. Cultural biases prevent them from registering as persons with disabilities, further marginalising them from government assistance programmes.

➢ ***In response to these barriers, key informants identified several opportunities including:*** ***i) support gender and social inclusion advocacy*** *(e.g., Afghanistan, Lebanon) including on women's rights, alternative education methods, and addressing stigma linked to women with disabilities, to further enhance equitable access to social protection;* ***ii) supporting local actors to advocate and lobby for rights-based approaches*** *and involvement in framing SP policies. This would help shape more inclusive and effective social protection frameworks.*

3.6 Priorities for Support

In addition to identifying challenges and opportunities, key informants across the four countries were asked to identify specific priorities for support. These are summarised in *Table 2* and inform the recommendations in Section *4*

Table 2: Local Actor Specific Priorities

National government	• **Support the establishment & implementation of accessible digital systems** for SP programming e.g., mobile applications for service delivery & collecting beneficiary satisfaction feedback • **Provide technical support** in areas such as advocacy, fundraising, monitoring & evaluation • **Support coordination across ministries** ensuring engagement of all technical units • **Support dedicated budgets in all projects** for LGO actor engagement & leadership enhancement
Subnational government	• **Provide capacity strengthening on**: i) SP approaches; ii) implementing responsive & inclusive programmes; and iii) conducting monitoring effectively • **Support access to technological tools** e.g., beneficiary tracking systems, digitised payment platforms, and mobile-based data collection • **Support nationwide consultations** with different stakeholders to redesign programmes to ensure effectiveness (i.e., inclusion, equality, responsiveness & sustainability)
Local NGOs	• **Institutionalise local NGO roles** in policy frameworks • **Provide access to technology tools** that facilitate remote working, collaboration, and minimise physical risks • **Invest in longer project cycles** to ensure staff retention & commitment • **Support engagement with banks and financial institutions** to facilitate safer and more accessible financial channels for unregistered CSOs, including mobile banking/offshore accounts
GESI actors	• **Use diplomatic leverage** to push for greater civil space including protection for actors facing restrictions (e.g., women's organisations) • **Provide advisory support** for incorporating GESI perspectives into technical interventions
Community-based organisations (CBOs)	• **Help CBOs attain legal status** to strengthen their roles in SP programming, especially in crisis contexts where international actors have limited access • **Recognise the role of community-based informal social protection structures** (e.g., SHGs, ERR) and include them in the design of SP programmes

Finally, country-specific priorities for support are summarised in *Table 3.* Further detail is shared in *Annex F.*

Table 3: Country-Specific Priorities

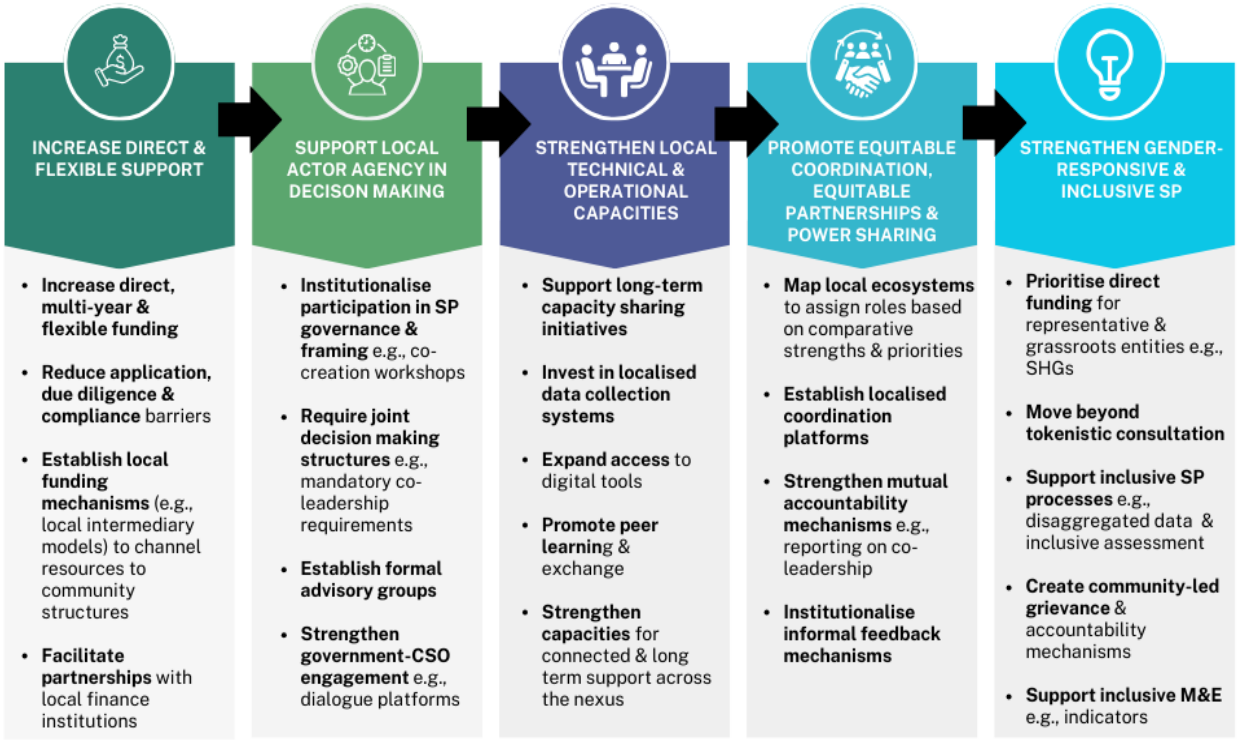
AFGHANISTAN
LNGOs: awareness & capacity strengthening (e.g., policy advocacy, project management, delivery, monitoring) including online options given women's mobility restrictions
Youth Organisations: SP awareness raising & training to increase skills & agency across programming
LEBANON
National government (MoSa): **capacity strengthening for units** (e.g., gender/disability); **support to establish regular consultation platforms** (e.g., with CSOs/WOs/OPDs) across all stages; **support to strengthen coordination with Social Development Centres** (to improve outreach, beneficiary engagement & localise SP delivery); **support to develop a national M&E and data system** that captures data & input from local actors and allows real-time programme tracking & adaptive management
Subnational government (SDC): **capacity strengthening on SP programming** (e.g., outreach, local coordination & programme delivery); **capacity strengthening on applying GESI approaches** in outreach, targeting & grievance handling to ensure responsiveness to women/PWD priorities; **provision of operational tools & resources** to fulfil roles in facilitating beneficiary engagement, community awareness & grievance readdress

LNGOs: technical capacity strengthening on SP policy analysis, participatory programme design & monitoring, ensuring both disability & gender inclusion are fully embedded
MYANMAR
LNGOs: access to technology and tools that facilitate remote work and collaboration; **dedicated project budgets** for organisational development & access to flexible funding; **emergency funding for relocation; digital security training & remote operational support** for CSOs at risk of asset confiscation or persecution; **support to engage with banks/financial institutions** to facilitate safer and more accessible financial channels for unregistered CSOs; **assistance to navigate restrictive legal frameworks** by funding legal aid; **diplomatic leverage** to push for greater civic space
CBOs (including SHGs & VSLAs): help attaining legal status to facilitate access to funding opportunities and resources; **flexible funding** to support immediate needs & long-term organisational strengthening; **capital injections** to enable internal group loans & support group enterprises (e.g., poultry, cooperative framing of cash crops; **help developing user-friendly disability registration systems** for cash transfer/SP programmes; **training programmes** (e.g., financial management, leadership, conflict resolution, project management) including remote training to help adapt to displacement challenges; **technical assistance** for vocational income opportunities; **guidance on personal safety/conflict de-escalation,** psychosocial support, conflict-responsive approaches & emergency preparedness; **help investing in communications tools & technologies** to support cohesion/coordination given infrastructure challenges; **support with crisis-responsive savings mechanisms** (e.g., mobile banking, pooled fund); **support implementing community-led mental health & psychosocial support services** to address conflict impacts conflict
SUDAN
Subnational government: involvement in decision making forums of international SP programmes
LNGOs: a capacity strengthening plan on fundraising, reporting, financial management, context analysis, presentation skills, M&E, outreach & public relations; **support to strengthen internal governance and capacity** to increase funding eligibility; **help institutionalising roles** in national SP policies
CBOs (women's networks): **support formalising grassroots women's organisations roles** and attaining legal status to operate freely including in hard-to-reach areas

4. RECOMMENDATIONS

This section builds upon the local and international actor identified opportunities for enhancing the role of local actors *and* the priorities for support identified by local actors. It shares practical recommendations for enhancing the role of local actors in social protection approaches in crisis contexts.

Figure 1: Summary of Recommendations



Increase Direct and Flexible Funding for Local Actors

Across all crisis contexts studied - Afghanistan, Sudan, Myanmar, and Lebanon - local actors lack direct funding access and are heavily reliant on international intermediaries. Short-term, project-based funding limits their ability to plan long-term social protection interventions. In Sudan, community-based organisations such as Mutual Aid Groups rely on diaspora funding due to limited donor engagement, while in Myanmar, local organisations struggle with donor compliance requirements. In response to these challenges, it is recommended to:

» **Shift to direct, multi-year, and flexible funding** for local actors to strengthen their leadership in social protection programming.
» **Reduce bureaucratic barriers to funding** by simplifying application processes, due diligence and compliance requirements for local NGOs and grassroots organisations.
» **Establish local funding mechanisms** including local intermediary models to channel resources directly to local actors including community structures such as Sudan's Emergency Response Rooms and Mutual Aid/Self Help Groups.
» **Facilitate partnerships with local financial institutions** to improve cash transfer mechanisms, especially in Afghanistan and Sudan, where formal banking systems are restricted.

Strengthen Local Actor Agency in Policy Framing, Programming and Decision Making

The study found that in Lebanon, Myanmar, and Sudan, local actors are largely excluded from social protection policy framing, programme design, monitoring and evaluation, with decisions driven by international actors and donors. In Lebanon, local NGOs were only consulted after major policy decisions were made for the *National Social Protection Strategy* (NSPS). In response to these challenges, it is recommended to:

- **Institutionalise local actor participation in social protection governance**, ensuring they contribute to programme objectives, targeting criteria, and resource allocation.
- **Support local NGOs to take a co-responsible role in programme framing**, for example through facilitating structured co-creation workshops with government and local NGOs to jointly design social protection frameworks, ensuring shared accountability and decision-making.
- **Require joint decision-making structures in donor-funded programmes** where local actors are not just implementers but co-leaders in planning and governance e.g., via mandatory co-leadership clauses.
- **Establish formal advisory groups** where local NGOs, CBOs, and women's organisations play a structured role in policy discussions, rather than being consulted retrospectively.
- **Strengthen government-CSO engagement** by creating dialogue platforms (e.g., local actor advisory councils) that facilitate collaboration, as seen in Sudan where local actors previously played a stronger role in policy discussions before the conflict.

Strengthen the Technical and Operational Capacity of Local Actors

Capacity gaps in financial management, policy advocacy, data collection, monitoring and evaluation (M&E) limit the ability of local actors to take leadership roles. In Afghanistan, many NGOs lack technical expertise following the departure of skilled professionals. In Myanmar and Sudan, weak data systems make it difficult to track social protection beneficiaries effectively. In response to these challenges, it is recommended to:

- **Support long-term capacity-sharing initiatives**, including capacity strengthening on: i) policy framing, advocacy and SP systems for LNGOs; ii) outreach and local coordination for government actors iii) financial management and leadership for CBOs; iii) gender-responsive and inclusive programming including adapting existing programmes; and iv) financial management and M&E
- **Expand access to digital tools** including for digital payments and social protection monitoring.
- **Invest in localised data collection systems** that empower local actors to manage social protection registries, particularly in Lebanon, where disability inclusion data are weak.
- **Promote peer learning and exchange programmes** where local actors from different crisis contexts share strategies for managing social protection delivery under complex conditions. For example Lebanon's recent positive progress including its launch of the disability allowance and its use as a shock responsive tool.
- **Strengthen capacities to connect social assistance to longer term social protection support** including social security, given the focus on humanitarian cash transfers in crisis contexts.

Enhance Coordination, Equitable Partnerships and Power-Sharing

The study highlights that local actors often act as subcontractors for international agencies, limiting their influence over programme decisions. In Sudan, Myanmar, and Lebanon, INGOs dominate the design of social protection initiatives, while local NGOs remain implementers with little decision-making authority. Moreover, parallel INGO-dominated systems and limited coordination across actors hinders coherent, community-centred approaches. In response to these challenges, it is recommended to:

- **Map local ecosystems**[8]**,** including CBOs and private sector actors, to better leverage their unique capacities, expand their roles, ensure equitable partnerships, and assign programming roles according to comparative strengths and preferences.
- **Establish localised coordination platforms** where INGOs and donors work alongside local actors to ensure social protection programmes reflect local needs.
- **Move beyond consultation to co-ownership**, ensuring that local actors can influence programme priorities, as seen in Sudan, where some local NGOs are pushing for greater control over cash transfer programmes.
- **Strengthen mutual accountability mechanisms**, requiring international actors to report on how they integrate local actors into social protection decision-making.
- **Institutionalise informal feedback mechanisms** to ensure inclusive feedback and identify where local actors might mirror conflict dynamics and exclude certain groups.

Strengthen Gender-Responsive and Inclusive Social Protection

The study found that gender equality and disability inclusion are often overlooked in crisis social protection programmes. In Afghanistan, women's organisations have been systematically excluded under the *de facto* authorities. In Lebanon, women with disabilities face barriers in accessing cash assistance, as many do not have official disability cards. In response to these challenges, it is recommended to:

- **Prioritise direct funding for GESI focused organisations** (e.g., OPDs, WOs, youth organisations) ensuring they have the resources to engage in policy dialogues and co-lead the framing and design of gender-responsive and disability inclusive social protection programmes.
- **Move beyond tokenistic consultation** by formally recognising local GESI actors as co-decision-makers in shaping all SP programme objectives and not only GESI-focused programmes.
- **Support inclusive social protection processes** that integrate gender-responsive and disability-inclusive data, assessments, and analysis; ensuring marginalised groups are not excluded.
- **Strengthen support for grassroots GESI structures** including women-led Mutual Aid Groups or Self Help Groups, given their critical role in providing support in crisis contexts.
- **Create community-led grievance and accountability mechanisms** to enable women and marginalised groups to report discrimination in social protection access.
- **Invest in strengthening the capacity of GESI actors** to co-develop and implement context-responsive targeting criteria and distribution mechanisms.
- **Include GESI actors in the co-creation of M&E tools and indicators** to ensure learning reflects local gender and social inclusion priorities.

[8] This can build on the high-level mapping of local actors carried out in each deep dive country.

5. CONCLUSION AND NEXT STEPS

Local actors play a pivotal role in delivering social protection within crisis contexts, yet their effectiveness is frequently constrained by systemic barriers. Too often, they are sidelined in the framing, governance, and design of policies and programmes despite being embedded within their communities. In Afghanistan, Sudan, Myanmar, and Lebanon, local NGOs, community-based organisations, and subnational government bodies are primarily involved in last-mile delivery, beneficiary registration, community sensitisation, and advocacy. However, their roles remain largely consultative, with strategic decision-making concentrated in the hands of international donors and national governments. This imbalance is particularly evident in Lebanon, where donor-driven strategies dominate, and in Sudan, where international humanitarian actors have stepped in to fill the vacuum left by government inaction.

Yet, the potential contributions of local actors, go beyond service delivery. In Sudan, grassroots women's Self Help Groups and Emergency Response Rooms have shown significant leadership in mobilising community resources and designing localised social protection solutions. In Myanmar, CBOs such as Self-Help Groups provide vital social assistance to communities affected by the conflict, especially in hard-to reach locations. In Afghanistan, subnational government entities have the potential to coordinate social protection interventions, particularly in remote areas where state reach is limited. These examples highlight the existing capacities of local actors to design and lead social protection initiatives, with opportunity for scaling, given the right conditions and support.

Political and governance-related constraints remain one of the most significant barriers to enhancing the role of local actors. In Myanmar, restrictive registration laws force many local civil society organisations to operate informally or under constant risk of government interference. Fragmented governance structures in Sudan and Lebanon create ambiguity around institutional mandates, resulting in policy inefficiencies and weak accountability. In Afghanistan, bureaucratic controls imposed by *de facto* authorities hinder programme approvals and limit the autonomy of local NGOs. Additionally, political clientelism in Lebanon compromises the integrity of social protection efforts, prioritising political interests over community needs, and further marginalising grassroots voices.

Financial and technical constraints compound these governance challenges. Local actors often lack financial independence due to the short-term, donor-driven nature of social protection programming, with indirect funding pathways (via international intermediaries) leaving local actors with little financial autonomy, flexibility, nor multi-year support. Economic instability in countries such as Myanmar and Sudan exacerbate these challenges by eroding the real value of social transfers. In Lebanon, many local actors lack the technical expertise to engage in policy formulation, resulting in their exclusion from national social protection dialogues. Additionally, weak monitoring and evaluation frameworks, particularly in Afghanistan and Myanmar, further limits local actors' ability to assess programme impact and advocate for evidence-based reforms.

Despite these obstacles, there are clear opportunities for strengthening the role of local actors in social protection systems. The growing emphasis on locally led action amongst funding partners, opens space for channelling funding directly to local actors, enabling them to take on leadership roles in programme design and implementation. In Sudan, flexible, trust-based compliance mechanisms, are beginning to facilitate more adaptive partnerships with community-based structures. In Lebanon, formalised platforms between government and civil society could improve policy coherence and inclusion. Tailored capacity-sharing initiatives – focused on social protection frameworks, advocacy skills, and financial management - could further equip local actors to meaningfully engage in policy dialogues. Moreover, the integration of gender and disability-inclusive data, assessment, and analysis into national social protection systems led by GESI local actors, as seen in Myanmar's disability-focused beneficiary verification, could improve programme equity and responsiveness.

Localising social protection demands a systemic shift: one that positions local actors as not merely implementers but as core decision-makers. The findings from Afghanistan, Sudan, Myanmar, and Lebanon demonstrate that local actors possess the contextual knowledge, trust, and operational agility to shape effective social protection in crisis response. To fully harness this potential, systematic

barriers related to governance, funding, and capacity, must be addressed. Only then can local actors transition from peripheral participants to central architects of social protection systems that are more equitable, inclusive, effective, and sustainable in the face of crisis and conflict.

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