



Humanitarian governance in the Lake Chad Basin

Who shapes crisis response, and how?

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Key messages

Governments across the Lake Chad Basin are increasingly shaping humanitarian response without fully controlling it. Political and regulatory authority has expanded considerably, but financing, technical expertise and operational delivery remain distributed across governments, international organisations, donors and national and local organisations.

The longer-term objective for all actors should go beyond national management of the existing humanitarian architecture. Transition should progressively connect humanitarian response to domestic systems for social protection, livelihoods, public services, durable solutions and reducing dependence on parallel emergency structures, while preserving humanitarian assistance and protection where needs remain.

State leadership is multidimensional and uneven. Political authority, regulatory authority, fiscal authority and operational capability develop at different paces. Governments may exercise considerable influence over priorities, humanitarian access, the return and resettlement of displaced people and coordination, while remaining dependent on external resources for implementation.

Greater coordination does not necessarily mean greater control. Governments increasingly convene humanitarian actors and shape response priorities, but international organisations and donors continue to exercise substantial influence through financing, technical systems, and implementation. Authority is negotiated, not transferred.

State authority is territorial and selective. The practical reach of government varies considerably across countries, states, provinces and localities. In conflict-affected areas, military and security institutions may exercise substantial authority even where civilian service-delivery capacity remains limited.

State-shaped governance should be understood as a dynamic and potentially transitional configuration, not a fixed endpoint. As international engagement in the region contracts, governments may face greater pressure to assume functions previously performed by external actors. However, withdrawal does not create the fiscal, institutional or technical capabilities required to perform those functions. Movement towards more comprehensive state leadership depends on whether domestic capabilities and resources expand alongside responsibility.

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About this report

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1 Introduction

Stretching across Cameroon, Chad, Niger and Nigeria, the Lake Chad Basin has experienced more than 15 years of conflict involving Boko Haram and its successor factions. Combined with widespread impoverishment, climate volatility, environmental degradation, limited state presence, weak public services and recurrent mass displacement, these dynamics have produced a protracted humanitarian crisis affecting millions across the region. Over the same period, governments have sought to reassert their authority over crisis response, both through efforts to strengthen national coordination systems and through wider political, security, stabilisation and development agendas that place greater emphasis on national ownership and control. As humanitarian response has increasingly intersected with stabilisation, recovery and state-building agendas, the Basin provides an important opportunity to examine how state leadership is evolving in practice.

This paper argues that these developments are producing what it describes as ‘state-shaped humanitarian governance’: a system in which governments increasingly shape the political and regulatory environment of crisis response while financing, technical expertise and operational delivery is distributed across multiple actors. The concept captures a system where state authority is expanding in some ways but is uneven across functions and territory.

Recent HPG case studies illustrate why these distinctions matter. In Indonesia and the Philippines, sustained legislation, capable disaster-management institutions, effective subnational government and active civil society have created substantial foundations for nationally led response, although centralised control and restrictions on civic space can weaken them (see Bryant et al., 2025; Baguios, 2025). In Kenya, devolution has strengthened aspects of subnational crisis response, but entrenched inequality, governance failures and the political economy of aid continue to constrain state leadership (see Moallin et al., 2026). In Somalia and Somaliland, the scale and institutional incentives of the international aid system have made movement from aid-centred to state-led response particularly difficult (see Mohamed and Barter, 2026). Together, these cases demonstrate that state-led response is not a single model. Its prospects depend on how political commitment, public institutions, domestic resources, civil society and international assistance interact within specific political and institutional contexts.

The Lake Chad Basin provides an opportunity to extend this analysis by examining how different forms of authority coexist within a regional humanitarian system and how they change over time. Governments across the Basin increasingly assert ownership of crisis response, convene coordination structures, regulate humanitarian access and shape policies on stabilisation and return. Yet financing, technical expertise and most operational delivery remains concentrated among international organisations and donors. National and local organisations play increasingly important implementation roles but often exercise limited influence over strategic priorities, while in many conflict-affected areas state authority is exercised most extensively through military and security institutions.

Understanding humanitarian governance in the Lake Chad Basin therefore requires distinguishing between different forms of state authority rather than treating state leadership as a single condition.

Authority is negotiated across multiple institutions, levels of government and territorial scales. These questions have acquired new urgency, particularly in Nigeria, where the international coordination architecture is now undergoing formal transition. From 2027, national and subnational government institutions are expected to assume greater responsibility for humanitarian coordination as the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (UN OCHA) moves towards an advisory role. The transition provides a live test not only of whether greater formal ownership will be matched by the institutional, financial and technical capabilities required to sustain response, but also of how humanitarian performance should be assessed during the potentially turbulent period in which responsibilities and capabilities are being realigned.

The implications extend beyond Nigeria. In other protracted crises across the world, reductions in international engagement will place similar pressure on national institutions to absorb functions previously supported externally. If domestic financing systems and capability do not grow with that responsibility, greater formal ownership may coincide with less assistance and weaker protection.

The concept of state-shaped humanitarian governance therefore extends existing understanding of state-led crisis response, by examining how different forms of authority are distributed across governments and non-state actors operating at national and international levels. Particular attention is paid to the gap between expanding state authority and the fiscal, administrative and technical capacity available to exercise it. The concept examines how authority is distributed across institutions, functions and territorial scales.

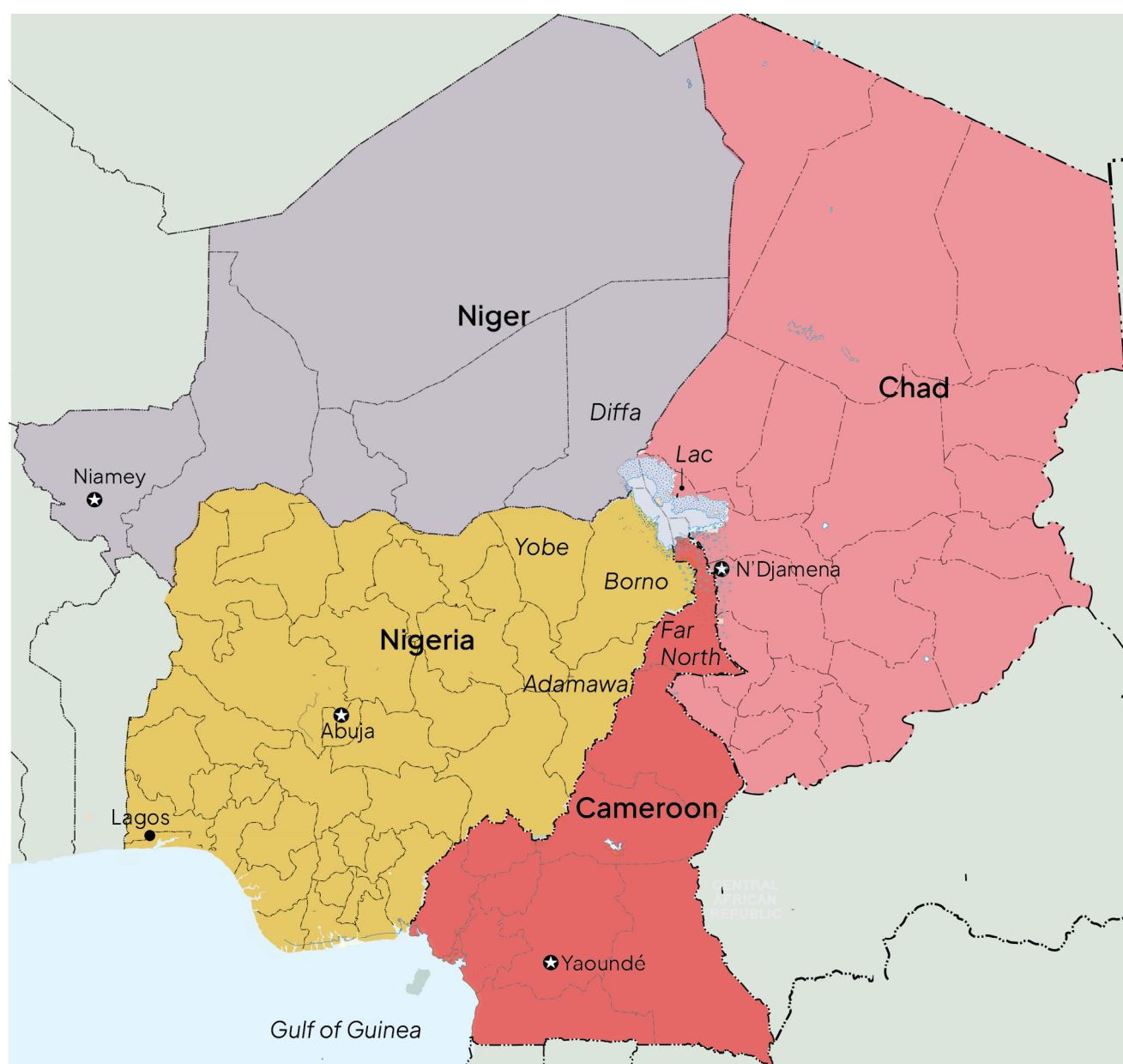
The ensuing analysis draws on humanitarian policy documents, operational reports, regional strategies and 14 semi-structured expert interviews conducted between May and August 2026 with government officials, UN and international humanitarian practitioners, local and national civil society organisations, policy specialists and researchers working across the Lake Chad Basin. While the Basin is treated as a connected regional crisis, particular attention is paid to subnational variation. Borno, Adamawa and Yobe in Nigeria, Diffa in Niger, Lac in Chad and the Far North Region of Cameroon differ considerably in institutional capabilities, security environment, and their political relationships with humanitarian actors. Humanitarian governance may appear nationally coherent in its formal architecture while remaining profoundly subnational in its everyday operation.

The paper proceeds in four parts. It first examines the literature on state-led crisis response and develops the analytical framework that guides the study. It then examines the evolving humanitarian architecture of the Lake Chad Basin and the recurring tensions that characterise contemporary humanitarian governance in the region. The final sections assess what these findings imply for existing understandings of state-led crisis response, refine the concept of state-shaped humanitarian governance, and conclude with implications for governments, humanitarian organisations, donors and regional institutions.

2 State-led response in a protracted crisis

The Lake Chad Basin (see Figure 1) is one of the world's largest protracted humanitarian crises yet remains comparatively neglected internationally. Spanning the borderlands of Cameroon, Chad, Niger and Nigeria, the crisis originated with the Boko Haram insurgency that escalated from 2009 and has since fragmented into competing armed factions, sustaining more than 15 years of violence, mass displacement and disrupted livelihoods. Across the four countries, an estimated 8.2 million people require humanitarian assistance, and around 3.5 million remain displaced, the majority of them women and children (OCHA, 2026a; UNHCR, 2026).

Figure 1 The Lake Chad Basin region



Although it is often described as a single regional emergency, the crisis is experienced unevenly. The overwhelming majority of humanitarian need is concentrated in north-east Nigeria, particularly Borno, Adamawa and Yobe states, where displacement, food insecurity and the erosion of public services are most acute. Cameroon's Far North, Chad's Lac Province and Niger's Diffa Region face related but smaller-scale emergencies, shaped by cross-border displacement, localised conflict and the same underlying dynamics of climate stress and state fragility. This unevenness matters for any analysis of state-led response: the four states differ markedly in their fiscal capacity, institutional reach and exposure to humanitarian need, and a transition model calibrated to the comparatively extensive humanitarian architecture of north-east Nigeria may translate poorly to contexts elsewhere in the Basin where coverage is thinner.

The drivers of need are shared even though their intensity is varied. Protracted conflict interacts with deepening poverty, and the shrinking of Lake Chad itself, which has undermined the fishing, farming and herding economies on which the region's population historically depended. Recurrent displacement and restricted humanitarian access compound these pressures, particularly in rural areas where insecurity is concentrated. This need is increasingly met by a contracting international response. Humanitarian funding for the region has fallen sharply, with the humanitarian funding to Chad severely declining from \$935 million in 2024 to \$583 million in 2025 and standing at \$423 million for 2026 (as of October 2026) (OCHA, 2026b).

UN General Assembly Resolution 46/182 gives affected states the primary role in initiating, organising and coordinating humanitarian assistance within their territories. The principle offers less guidance, however, on what state leadership means where government institutions are fragmented, under-resourced or unable to operate consistently across the territory they formally govern. In practice, the broad category of state-led response can encompass several different functions, such as setting national policy, chairing coordination meetings, approving programmes, controlling access, financing assistance, delivering services and accepting accountability for outcomes. These functions are related but do not necessarily sit within the same institution or develop at the same pace. A government may be highly visible in the political direction of a response while contributing little of its financing; a state emergency-management agency may chair coordination arrangements while UN agencies control the information and expertise on which decisions depend; a civilian ministry may hold the legal mandate while the military determines whether organisations can enter particular areas.

Understanding how these different dimensions intersect is therefore essential to analysing how state leadership operates in practice. HPG's wider research shows that that state-led response is not a single institutional model, asking when, where and how humanitarian actors should work more coherently with affected states while accounting for civil society, subnational authorities and contested or de facto governments.¹ This paper builds on that work by distinguishing different dimensions of state authority and how they are distributed within humanitarian systems.

1 See the project landing page for all outputs: <https://odi.org/en/about/our-work/ip-state-led-crisis-response/>.

1. The first of these dimensions is political authority, which refers to the ability to claim ownership of crisis response, establish public priorities and present government as responsible for affected populations. It includes the symbolic dimensions of leadership: who announces policy, convenes high-level decision-making and defines when an emergency is ending or when displaced people who wish to return can and should be supported in doing so.
2. The second dimension is regulatory authority, which refers to the power to establish and enforce the conditions under which humanitarian action occurs, including registration, programme approval, taxation, data requirements and access permissions. It is distributed across levels of government: governors, provincial administrations, security agencies and technical ministries may exercise overlapping or competing forms of regulatory power.
3. The third dimension is fiscal capacity, referring to the domestic resources available to finance humanitarian and transition functions and the budgetary systems through which those resources are allocated and released. Formal provision does not necessarily translate into usable resources: approved allocations, actual releases and expenditure may diverge substantially.
4. Lastly is operational capability, which deals with the personnel, logistics, information systems, technical expertise and territorial reach required to translate policy and resources into action. Political commitment or formal responsibility do not necessarily imply an ability to perform the corresponding function consistently across affected territory. Capacity is uneven within the state itself. An institution may have a clear legal mandate but lack predictable budget releases, specialist staff, information systems or the administrative reach needed to carry it out.

These capabilities are also distributed differently across civilian and security institutions and between national and subnational government. These dimensions can reinforce one another, but they frequently diverge. A state may possess strong political and regulatory authority while depending on international actors for funding and implementation. This uneven distribution is described here as ‘selective state power’, and it should not be confused with state weakness. A government may struggle to provide healthcare or shelter while retaining considerable ability to regulate non-governmental organisations (NGOs), restrict movement, close camps or determine return policy. This is particularly relevant in conflict settings, where military and security institutions may possess considerably greater territorial reach than civilian authorities. The dimensions are also experienced unevenly by affected populations. Authority exercised over registration, movement, camp closure or return can have different consequences for women and men and for groups whose marginalisation predates the crisis. Asking who can decide and who can restrict is therefore inseparable from asking on whom the consequences of those decisions fall. Selective state power shifts the analytical focus away from aggregate judgements about whether a state is strong or weak. What matters for humanitarian governance is which institutions can decide, regulate, finance and deliver particular functions, at what territorial level, and under what forms of accountability.

3 Humanitarian governance in the Lake Chad Basin

The Lake Chad crisis is regional; however, the humanitarian response remains organised primarily through national systems. Countries in the Basin retain their own individual legal framework, humanitarian coordination structures, security institutions, funding appeals and policies. This creates a fundamental tension: while the crisis demands cross-border cooperation, most decisions that shape humanitarian action continue to be made at national and subnational levels. The scale of displacement reinforces this dynamic. As of April 2026, the four affected countries hosted approximately 6.5 million internally displaced people, returnees and refugees. Nigeria accounted for nearly three-quarters of the internally displaced population, but significant displacement and return dynamics also persisted in Cameroon's Far North, Chad's Lac Province and Niger's Diffa Region (IOM DTM, 2026; OCHA, 2026a). These differences influence the scale of international humanitarian engagement, as well as the resources available to state institutions and the political importance attached to the crisis within each country.

3.1 Multi-level humanitarian governance

Formal responsibility for humanitarian response rests with national governments, yet humanitarian governance is multi-layered. National ministries and national disaster-management institutions establish policy, approve humanitarian programmes and represent governments in engagement with donors. However, much of the day-to-day governance of humanitarian response occurs below the national level. Governors, regional and provincial administrations, state emergency-management agencies, local governments and security commanders frequently determine how national policy is interpreted and implemented in affected areas. Their proximity to the crisis often makes them more consequential to humanitarian organisations than national ministries. Nigeria's federal system affords governors and state institutions greater political visibility and administrative autonomy than is generally available to subnational authorities in the more centralised systems of Cameroon and Chad. Niger's Diffa Region has likewise operated within a changing national political and security context. These institutional differences influence the extent to which subnational authorities can negotiate directly with humanitarian organisations, mobilise domestic resources or adapt national priorities to local conditions.

This variation also complicates conventional understandings of national ownership. Policies announced by central governments may be implemented, modified or resisted by subnational authorities. Conversely, governors and local administrations may seek to shape humanitarian priorities despite lacking the financial or technical resources required to address them. Nigeria also highlights fragmentation within subnational government itself. In Borno, humanitarian functions are distributed across the governor's office, specialised coordination bodies, emergency-management institutions and ministries responsible for rehabilitation and reconstruction. Overlapping mandates can create

uncertainty over which institution leads particular elements of response. State leadership therefore depends not only on relations between levels of government, but also on how authority is distributed and negotiated within them.

Borno also demonstrates the significance of political leadership at the subnational level. Governor Babagana Zulum has played an unusually prominent role in setting the direction of the state's humanitarian, recovery and stabilisation agenda, including on camp closures, returns, reconstruction and the expectation that humanitarian programmes align more closely with government priorities. His leadership illustrates how a politically assertive subnational executive can give greater coherence and momentum to state ownership, even where financing and operational delivery remain distributed across international and domestic actors. The Borno experience therefore shows that the effectiveness of state leadership depends on more than the formal institutional architecture. It also depends on whether political leaders are willing and able to use that architecture to set priorities and drive implementation.

The Lake Chad Basin Commission (LCBC)'s Regional Strategy for Stabilization, Recovery and Resilience seeks to connect national, subnational and cross-border interventions across the eight territories most affected by the conflict. The Governors' Forum has become its principal political platform, bringing together governors, national governments, civil society, international partners and traditional authorities to coordinate discussion on security, stabilisation, displacement and regional cooperation (LCBC, 2026; LCBC, African Union and UNDP, 2025). Although these institutions strengthen political coordination, they do not replace the national systems through which humanitarian programmes are authorised, financed and implemented.

These shifts reflect a wider reassertion of sovereignty across the Sahel. The military-led governments of the Alliance of Sahel States (AES), Mali, Niger and Burkina Faso, have framed regional and security cooperation increasingly around greater political, financial and operational autonomy. Chad is also recalibrating its security partnerships and moving away from dependence on France. This matters for humanitarian governance because internationally led arrangements are being scrutinised within a broader political debate about external influence and national control. At the regional level, Cameroon, Chad, Niger and Nigeria retain shared operational interests in the Multinational Joint Task Force (MNJTF); despite Niger's withdrawal from the MNJTF in March 2025, bilateral intelligence sharing and coordinated border-security cooperation between Nigeria and Niger has continued. The result is a more selective form of regional cooperation in which governments can withdraw from formal institutions while retaining particular relationships where national security interests require them. The LCBC, MNJTF and regional actors perform different functions, while national governments retain decisive authority over humanitarian action within their territories.

3.2 Customary authority is central to humanitarian governance and action

Traditional and religious authorities occupy an important position in humanitarian governance across the Basin. They mediate access, verify displaced populations, and influence how communities respond to policy and interventions. According to interviewees, these structures vary across the Basin, from emirate councils, district heads and Bulamas (who serve as community leaders at the village or community level) in north-east Nigeria, to sultanates and cantonal chiefs in Cameroon's Far North and Chad's Lac Province, and customary and religious authorities in Diffa. While they rarely occupy formal positions in humanitarian coordination, decisions often depend on their cooperation and local legitimacy. Their significance extends beyond their role as intermediaries. Decisions on return, resettlement or humanitarian access may originate within government but still depend on traditional and religious authorities for legitimacy, negotiation and implementation. These institutions may sit outside the bureaucracy while remaining embedded in local systems of public authority. A transition towards state-led response can therefore strengthen formal government ownership without consolidating the wider authority through which humanitarian decisions are implemented locally.

3.3 Distribution of governance functions

There is no single command centre governing humanitarian response in the Lake Chad Basin (see Table 1). Governance instead emerges through continual negotiation over policy, funding, access, information, implementation and public legitimacy. These negotiations are inherently unequal. Different actors possess different forms of leverage, while affected populations (the stated targets of humanitarian action) often exercise the least influence over the decisions made in their name.

Table 1 Distribution of humanitarian governance functions

Humanitarian governance function	Actors with the greatest influence
Political ownership and public direction	National governments, governors and regional authorities
Regulation and legal authorisation	Central and subnational government institutions
Territorial access and movement	National security forces, local commanders, vigilantes and administrative authorities
Needs analysis and formal response planning	OCHA, Humanitarian Country Teams, clusters, government counterparts and operational agencies
International financing	Bilateral donors, multilateral institutions and pooled funds
Technical standards and sector coordination	UN agencies, cluster leads, specialist NGOs and government ministries
Operational delivery	UN agencies, international NGOs, local/national NGOs and public-service institutions
Community access and mediation	Local NGOs, traditional authorities, religious leaders and community organisations

Humanitarian governance function	Actors with the greatest influence
Regional political coordination	LCBC, Governors' Forum, African Union and national governments
Regional security coordination	MNJTF, LCBC and national security institutions
Accountability for outcomes	Dispersed among governments, donors and implementing organisations

This fragmented distribution of authority is the source of the tensions in humanitarian governance in the Lake Chad Basin:

1. Governments claim political ownership without controlling sufficient resources.
2. Governments coordinate humanitarian actors without directing the entire response.
3. State power is increasingly reasserted through security and stabilisation institutions.

4 State-shaped humanitarian governance in practice

Across the Lake Chad Basin, a number of recurring tensions shape how humanitarian action is governed, financed, coordinated and implemented. These tensions are mutually reinforcing; greater government authority over priorities, coordination and access does not necessarily bring equivalent control over financing or delivery, while fragmented responsibilities for implementation and accountability can in turn constrain effective state leadership. Together, they demonstrate how governments increasingly shape the political and regulatory environment of humanitarian response while authority over finance, operational delivery and accountability remains distributed across multiple actors.

4.1 Ownership without resources

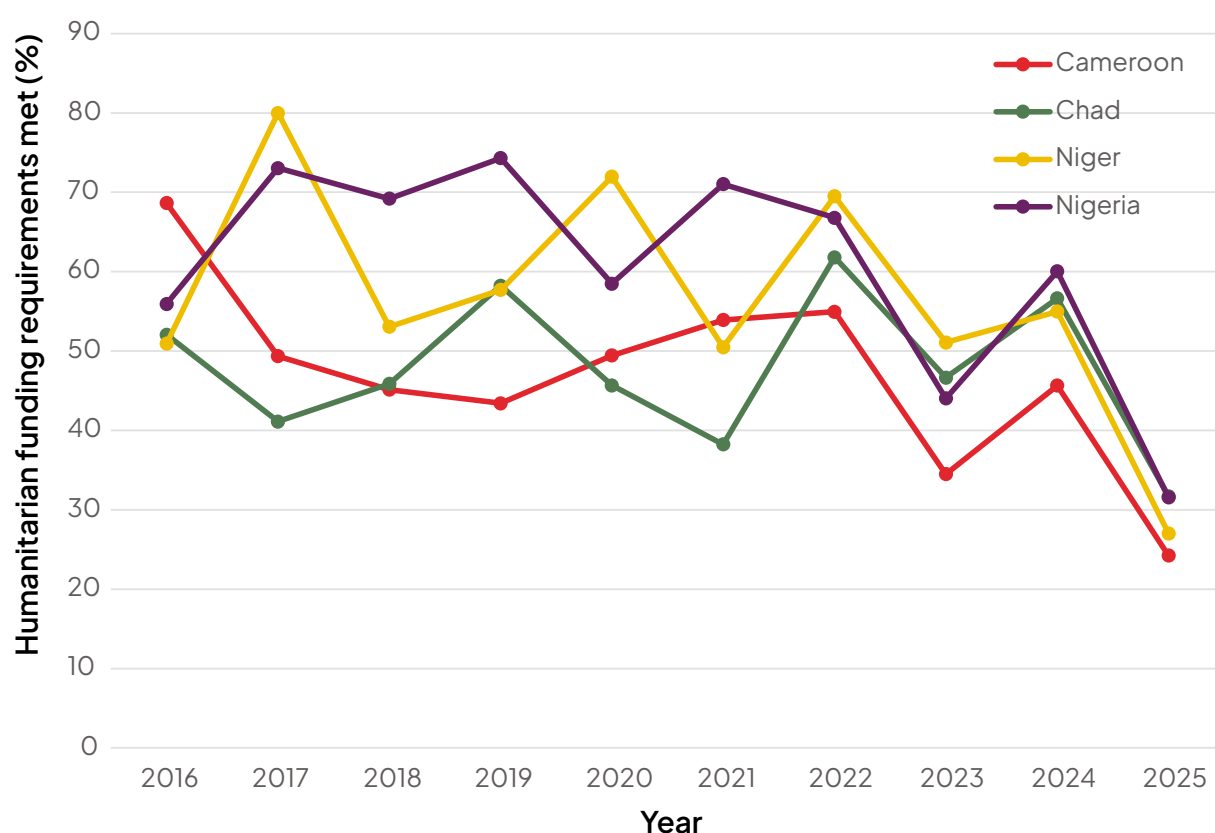
Ownership of humanitarian response has both a political and a financial dimension, and in the Lake Chad Basin the two are diverging: governments are taking on the political direction of response considerably faster than its financing. National and subnational authorities increasingly set humanitarian priorities, convene partners, endorse response plans and expect programmes to align with government agendas on recovery, stabilisation and durable solutions.

The financing architecture reflects this tension. The Humanitarian Response Plan provides governments with opportunities to influence strategic priorities, but the formal planning and resource-mobilisation architecture remains centred on the Humanitarian Coordinator and Humanitarian Country Team. National authorities participate in the process but do not themselves appeal for funding through the mechanism (OCHA, 2025a; 2025b). The implications of this arrangement are evident across the Basin. Chad's 2026 Humanitarian Needs and Response Plan, for example, is presented jointly by the government and the humanitarian community, yet its implementation depends overwhelmingly on continued international financing (Government of Chad and Humanitarian Country Team, 2026). The scale of this dependence varies considerably across the Basin. In 2024, international humanitarian funding was equivalent to around 30% of non-grant government revenue in Chad and 29% in Niger, compared with about 2% in Cameroon and Nigeria (OCHA, 2026b). This makes the fiscal challenge of assuming a larger share of humanitarian response very different across the four countries.

Adamawa in north-east Nigeria illustrates what this separation can mean. Following the OCHA drawdown, coordination responsibilities passed to state institutions without an equivalent transfer of personnel, information systems or financial resources. State institutions were expected to assume greater responsibilities amid delayed recurrent expenditure, limited capital releases and predominantly reactive financing. Responsibilities were shifting faster than the resources and administrative systems needed to support them.

All four Basin states face significant fiscal constraints. In Nigeria, debt servicing consumed more than two-thirds of the federal government revenue in the first three quarters of 2025 (Budget office of the Federation, 2025). At the same time, the international funding available to sustain the response is shrinking. In 2025, only 24% of identified humanitarian requirements were funded in Cameroon, 32% in Chad, 27% in Niger and 32% in Nigeria, down from 46%, 57%, 55% and 60% respectively in 2024 (HPG calculations based on OCHA Financial Tracking Service data; see also Figure 2).

Figure 2 Percentage of humanitarian funding requirements met in Lake Chad Basin countries, 2016–2025



Donor concerns over fiduciary oversight and political neutrality also limit the extent to which humanitarian financing can be channelled to public institutions. International financing will therefore remain important even as governments assume more responsibility, but it is becoming less predictable at precisely the point when domestic institutions are being asked to do more.

4.2 Coordination without control

Government responsibility for coordination does not necessarily confer authority over financing, programme design, or operational delivery. As a form of authority, coordination is distinct from comprehensive control. This distinction constitutes the second defining feature of state-shaped humanitarian governance. Borno, Adamawa and Yobe states have established institutions to strengthen

government oversight of humanitarian action and alignment with state priorities. These structures increasingly convene partners, collect programme information and shape priorities. But they do not necessarily control the technical systems, financing or implementation through which response occurs.

Information management shows this quite clearly. In Nigeria, government, donors and NGOs maintain separate data and reporting systems, with limited harmonisation of indicators and no consolidated platform linking humanitarian financing to results (dRPC, 2026). Coordination within government can also be fragmented, with ministries, agencies and security institutions holding overlapping mandates and competing priorities. Coordination can therefore become more state-led while the wider humanitarian system remains fragmented across institutions.

The Borno State Government's camp closure and return agenda demonstrates this. While humanitarian organisations retained responsibility for programme implementation, decisions regarding where displaced populations could remain, where assistance could continue and how return processes should be managed were largely determined through government policy. Operational autonomy existed within boundaries established by political authority.

Chad shows a more established model of joint coordination. Government ministries, provincial authorities and humanitarian organisations work through shared coordination structures in which governments provide political leadership while international actors contribute technical expertise, information management and implementation capacity. In practice, much of the response is still delivered outside government. This distribution of authority also affects accountability: governments have limited control over resources; humanitarian organisations operate within restrictions set by government; and donors influence priorities through funding. Where coordination fails, responsibility can therefore be easily deflected.

The same distinction between participation and authority is visible in localisation. National and local organisations increasingly take on implementation responsibilities and have gained greater representation in coordination structures, but this has not necessarily been matched by equivalent influence over funding, programme design or strategic decision-making. In Nigeria, local actors have demonstrated significant delivery capacity and, in some cases, greater cost efficiency, while funding and compliance arrangements continue to be largely controlled by international intermediaries (Venton, 2024; Pearson and Rieger, 2026). Greater participation and implementation responsibility therefore do not automatically translate into greater control over the response.

4.3 State reassertion of authority through security and stabilisation

The reassertion of state authority across the Lake Chad Basin is most visible not through humanitarian financing or civilian coordination, but through security, territorial control and stabilisation. Military and security institutions have become central to the governance system within which humanitarian action takes place. In areas where civilian administration remains weak, security institutions often determine where humanitarian organisations can operate, which communities are accessible and when displaced

populations can return (UNDP, LCBC and Institute for Security Studies, 2021). Their role extends into logistics, infrastructure rehabilitation, emergency response and the restoration of public authority in areas emerging from insurgent control. Humanitarian organisations are consequently working within an environment shaped by both civilian and security institutions.

Security institutions influence humanitarian response primarily by determining the conditions under which it can occur. Access depends not only on administrative approval but also on military assessments, checkpoints, security clearances and negotiations with commanders and local authorities. Communities deemed inaccessible may receive little assistance regardless of humanitarian need, while areas prioritised for stabilisation or return often attract greater political attention and investment.

4.3.1 Stabilisation and state authority: blurring lines with humanitarian response

The Lake Chad Basin Regional Strategy for Stabilization, Recovery and Resilience and the Regional Stabilisation Facility bring together security, governance, recovery and development, with the restoration of state presence an important part of the approach. They respond to problems that humanitarian assistance alone cannot address, including damaged infrastructure, weak local government, disrupted livelihoods and the absence of basic services. For communities affected by prolonged conflict, such interventions are both necessary and legitimate (LCBC, 2026; LCBC, African Union and UNDP, 2025).

A major challenge is that humanitarian response and stabilisation do not begin from the same place. Humanitarian action is intended to be organised around need, protection and impartiality. Stabilisation is particularly concerned with restoring government authority and territorial control. As the two become more closely connected through recovery and return programmes, the line between them becomes blurred. Greater government control over access and stabilisation also places more weight on how needs are assessed and which populations are selected for assistance. Where access, return or programme priorities follow security classifications or political objectives, people facing comparable levels of need may not have comparable access to assistance.

Neutrality and operational independence also become harder to maintain where humanitarian programmes are expected to contribute directly to restoring state authority. Niger is a practical example. Security measures in Diffa and Tillabéri restricted both humanitarian access and civilian movement, while requirements governing NGO operations gave the state greater oversight over where and with whom organisations worked. The same measures affected access to health services and livelihoods: motorcycle restrictions impeded health workers and patients, while restrictions on farming and fishing removed important sources of income. The study concluded that the military component of stabilisation had direct and indirect effects on humanitarian access and livelihoods, while arguing for greater attention to governance, justice and the underlying drivers of insecurity (Oxfam, 2024).

4.3.2 Securitised government and humanitarian space

In parts of the Basin, military-led governments have tightened regulation of humanitarian and civil-society activity. In Diffa, for example, this has included restrictions on international organisations and, in some cases, suspensions or expulsions (International IDEA, 2025). Greater state authority under these conditions does not always bring greater accountability to affected populations. Where civic space is restricted and civil society has limited room to challenge government decisions, government control over humanitarian response increases and communities' influence over how the response is organised is reduced. Security-led governments may also have considerably more capacity to regulate humanitarian action than to deliver assistance themselves. They can determine which organisations operate, where they travel and the conditions under which assistance is delivered, while still depending on international actors for funding and implementation.

Vigilante and community-security groups complicate the boundaries of state authority. Across the Basin, these groups work alongside security forces, provide intelligence, monitor movement and support counter-insurgency operations, while also helping humanitarian actors with access, crowd management and local security. Over time, the distinction between a community security actor and an auxiliary of the state becomes increasingly difficult to draw. Coercive authority can therefore extend beyond formal security institutions without clear lines of command and accountability.

Humanitarian space has narrowed alongside this expansion of state and security authority. Organisations may still decide what assistance to provide, but not always where they can provide it. Where access depends on security clearance or assessments of stability, humanitarian need is often filtered through judgements about where operations are considered 'safe' and feasible. Access can also become politicised where communities are judged according to their perceived relationship with armed groups. Areas suspected of harbouring or supporting combatants may face tighter restrictions, meaning humanitarian need is weighed alongside security assessments of the population itself. This creates a particular tension with impartiality where assistance is restricted on the basis of presumed affiliation rather than need.

4.3.3 Returns as an exercise of state authority

Policies governing displacement and return provide a clear illustration of how security, stabilisation and humanitarian governance converge in the exercise of state authority. In Borno, the camp-closure programme has progressively dismantled formal displacement sites and encouraged return or resettlement. Humanitarian organisations may remain responsible for implementing assistance, but government decisions dictate where displaced people can remain, where they are expected to move and, in some cases, whether assistance continues after relocation. Where return areas remain insecure or basic services are weak, some families have moved again towards Maiduguri and other urban centres (OCHA, 2025c). Displacement-tracking data confirms that large returnee and displaced populations remain in and around Bama and other closure-affected areas, frequently without sustained assistance (IOM DTM, 2026). These dynamics carry a longer history that current policy tends to overlook. In

the wider Kanem–Borno region, populations displaced by conflict have historically dispersed and established new communities rather than returning to their places of origin, and available evidence suggests that a substantial proportion of those displaced in the present crisis do not return to their original locations (IDMC, 2025). Return policy framed primarily around the restoration of state authority over territory therefore risks working against the established social patterns according to which affected populations themselves respond to displacement, including migrating to urban areas.

In Diffa and Lac, security institutions play a prominent role in determining territorial access; in Cameroon’s Far North, access is negotiated among administrative authorities, security actors and humanitarian organisations; and in Borno, state regulation extends deeply into the operating environment. Humanitarian assessments of need are only one factor determining where assistance should reach. These differences show how humanitarian space is being shaped through different combinations of security, administrative and regulatory authority across the Basin.

5 Conclusions and policy implications

HPG's recent work has made a strong case for moving away from internationally dominated crisis response while paying closer attention to accountability, civil society, subnational governments and the political context under which such state leadership develops. The Lake Chad Basin adds the question: what happens when state authority grows faster than the capacity to finance and deliver response?

5.1 Conclusions

Across the Basin, dependence on international financing and delivery does not prevent governments from acquiring greater influence over humanitarian action. Some of the most consequential levers (access, regulation, policy, coordination and territorial control) already sit with the state. Governments can therefore remain operationally dependent while becoming politically more decisive. International actors retain considerable leverage through financing, technical systems and implementation, but they operate within parameters set by the state. Operational dependence and political authority can therefore coexist. The result is that state power can deepen even where the resources and systems sustaining the response remain largely external.

Security and stabilisation structures often have greater reach, resources and political backing than civilian humanitarian institutions. Where that is the case, state authority can deepen through institutions that are better equipped to control territory, movement and return than to finance or deliver assistance. State leadership can therefore become stronger in practice without a comparable expansion in civilian capacity. This leaves a significant imbalance. Governments may become more influential over where and how humanitarian action takes place while emergency agencies, local administrations and public services remain comparatively weak. The shift towards greater state leadership can therefore be driven by the parts of the state that are already strongest, rather than by the institutions expected to sustain humanitarian response over time.

Nigeria provides an indication of what a reduction in international influence may look like in practice. OCHA's changing role shifts more responsibility for coordination towards government, but it does not transfer the capacities of the humanitarian system. Financing, information management, technical expertise and operational delivery remain spread across government and international actors. The transition will therefore take place function by function. Government may take over coordination while continuing to depend on external financing; technical support may remain after formal international leadership has receded; some functions may be absorbed into existing institutions while others are reduced or lost. This is already visible in Adamawa, where greater government responsibility after OCHA's departure also exposed weaknesses in the systems that had supported coordination.

5.2 Policy implications

After nearly two decades of crisis, governments in the Lake Chad Basin are taking a firmer hold of humanitarian response. This is visible in coordination, access, return policy, stabilisation and the

growing expectation that humanitarian action should sit within wider national priorities. International organisations remain deeply embedded in financing and delivery, but they operate in a political environment increasingly shaped by more assertive, but financially constrained, governments.

The difficulty is that the institutions through which state authority is growing are not always the institutions best equipped to sustain humanitarian response. Security and stabilisation structures often have greater state resources and reach than civilian emergency institutions. Subnational authorities carry substantial responsibilities with limited budgets. International organisations continue to hold technical systems and financing that governments increasingly depend on, even while those same governments seek greater control over the response. These arrangements can persist for some time, but declining aid makes them harder to sustain. It can also contribute to a vicious cycle of states prioritising security and stabilisation, while unmet humanitarian needs can fuel discontent that leads to further violence and insecurity.

As authority shifts, a critical question is if and how affected populations will receive better support. If responsibility moves faster to state institutions than the resources and systems needed to carry it, needs may go unmet and accountability may become less clear. Greater state leadership also requires continued attention to impartiality, neutrality and protection, particularly where political or security priorities shape access and targeting. Distinguishing between different forms of authority helps show which functions governments can already sustain, where outside support is still needed and where important gaps remain.

Financing is only one part of this dependence. Information management, technical expertise, coordination systems and administrative processes also need to move closer to the institutions expected to sustain them over time. The following are key policy implications.

Strengthen the institutions behind state leadership

Governments across the Lake Chad Basin have made significant progress in asserting political ownership of humanitarian response. Sustaining this progress requires greater investment in institutional capability. Strengthening emergency-management agencies, disaster legislation, preparedness systems, contingency financing, humanitarian information management and professional public administration is essential if political authority is to translate into effective humanitarian governance. Equally important is coordination within government. Fragmentation between ministries, emergency-management agencies, governors' offices and security institutions can weaken implementation even where political commitment is strong.

Finance transition as an institutional process

Humanitarian transition requires sustained investment in the institutions expected to carry out response over time. Funding contraction without corresponding investment in domestic systems can create protection and other gaps, particularly where assistance is already being narrowed to

populations facing the most severe needs. National and subnational public budgets should reflect the functions governments are increasingly expected to perform. Coordination, preparedness, emergency response and information management should not depend indefinitely on ad hoc releases or partner resources but should progressively enter regular budget planning and medium-term expenditure frameworks. Clearer budget lines, more predictable allocations and transparent reporting would make it easier to see what governments themselves are financing and where external support remains essential. International financing will still be needed, particularly where fiscal space is narrow. Predictable, multi-year support can give governments time to absorb these functions while maintaining assistance where needs remain acute. Abrupt contraction risks shifting responsibility faster than the institutions needed to carry it.

Embed technical capacity in government systems

Some of the functions currently sustained by international organisations will continue to require outside support even after formal leadership shifts. That support should sit as close as possible to the institutions expected eventually to carry out those functions themselves. Sustained technical secondment is one practical option. Embedded personnel can work alongside national and subnational counterparts, adapt coordination and analytical systems to existing administrative structures, and leave behind working relationships and institutional knowledge. This is likely to offer more continuity than repeated short-term training where the underlying systems, staff positions or budgets remain weak. Partnerships should also extend beyond central ministries to include emergency-management agencies, subnational governments and local administrative institutions while maintaining humanitarian principles and operational independence where protection concerns require it. However, it is important that secondments are time-bound and focused on institutional strengthening to avoid creating new forms of dependence.

Connect humanitarian transition to domestic systems

Transition should not simply reproduce an internationally constructed humanitarian architecture under national management. In a crisis entering its second decade, humanitarian response should connect more deliberately with the domestic systems expected to sustain affected populations over time. This includes social protection, livelihoods, education and public services, durable solutions and peacebuilding. This does not mean subsuming humanitarian action within development or stabilisation agendas, particularly where acute needs and protection concerns remain. Livelihood recovery, safe and voluntary resettlement, functioning public services and local economic recovery should form part of a planned transition from prolonged humanitarian dependence, rather than being treated as activities that begin only after humanitarian assistance withdraws.

Strengthen capacity where responses are operational

Much humanitarian governance in the Basin is exercised below the national level. State, provincial and local institutions often manage coordination, access, implementation and relations with affected

communities more directly than central ministries. Transition planning should therefore follow where responsibility actually sits. Strengthening national institutions while subnational emergency agencies, local administrations and service providers remain weak will reproduce the same gap between formal authority and operational capacity identified throughout this paper. Regional institutions also have a role where risks cross national borders. The Lake Chad Basin Commission and Governors' Forum can support preparedness, early warning, displacement policy and cross-border coordination, particularly as the wider regional political architecture continues to change.

Measure what governments can sustain

Government participation in coordination structures or formal ownership of response plans provides only a partial picture of state leadership. Assessment should also capture the functions governments can finance, manage and sustain. This should include the predictability of domestic budget releases, the share of response costs financed through public expenditure, staffing and technical capability within emergency institutions, control and maintenance of humanitarian information systems, and the reach of subnational structures. Political and regulatory authority should be assessed alongside these measures rather than treated as evidence of institutional capability in their own right.

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