HPG WORKING PAPER

Breaking down the barriers to women-led responses amidst the humanitarian reset

Stepping up, stepping back, making space

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Acronyms

CAFOD	Catholic Agency for Overseas Development
CBPF	country-based pooled fund
CEPAD	Community Empowerment for Peace and Development
CRS	creditor reporting system
DAC	Development Assistance Committee (OECD)
FCDO	Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (United Kingdom)
FHN	Feminist Humanitarian Network
FRF	First Response Fund
FTS	Financial Tracking Service (UN OCHA)
GBV	gender-based violence
GiHA	gender in humanitarian action
HPG	Humanitarian Policy Group
HRP	Humanitarian Response Plan
IASC	Inter-Agency Standing Committee
IATI	International Aid Transparency Initiative
INGO	international non-governmental organisation
IRC	International Rescue Committee
KII	key informant interview
LGBTQI+	lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer/questioning, intersex, asexual/allies and others
MHPSS	mental health and psychosocial support
NGO	non-governmental organisation
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
RLO	refugee-led organisation
SEAH	sexual exploitation, abuse and harassment
UN	United Nations
UNFPA	United Nations Population Fund
UNHCR	United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees
UN OCHA	United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs
WASH	water, sanitation and hygiene
WLO	women-led organisation
WPHF	Women's Peace and Humanitarian Fund
WPS	Women, Peace and Security
WRO	women's rights organisation

Glossary

Women-led organisation (WLO): 'an organisation with a humanitarian mandate and/or mission that is 1) governed or directed by women; or 2) whose leadership is principally made up of women, demonstrated by 50 per cent or more occupying senior leadership positions' (IASC, 2024: 2). Although many WLOs prioritise GBV and the specific needs of women and girls, it should not be assumed that they work exclusively on these issues. In practice, WLOs work on every aspect of humanitarian response.

Women's rights organisation (WRO): '1) an organisation that self-identifies as a woman's rights organisation with primary focus on advancing gender equality, women's empowerment and human rights; or 2) an organisation that has, as part of its mission statement, the advancement of women's/girls' interests and rights (or where "women", "girls", "gender" or local language equivalents are prominent in their mission statement); or 3) an organisation that has, as part of its mission statement or objectives, to challenge and transform gender inequalities (unjust rules), unequal power relations and promoting positive social norms' (Gender in Humanitarian Action Working Group, 2025).

Pooled funds: financial instruments that allow donors to pool contributions under a single fund. Different types of pooled funds exist, according to the entities participating (i.e. inter-agency pooled funds, stand-alone joint programmes, multi-partner trust funds) and the scope of action (i.e. country-level pooled funds, country-based pooled funds) (UN Multi-Partner Trust Fund Office, 2025).

Country-based pooled funds (CBPFs): 'an instrument that allows donors to pool contributions into single, unearmarked funds to support local humanitarian action. These are administered by the MPTF Office or OCHA and managed by OCHA under the leadership of the Humanitarian Coordinator and in close consultation with the humanitarian community' (UN Multi-Partner Trust Fund Office, 2025).

Feminist funds: funds adhering to and supporting organisations and movements that follow feminist principles in their work, namely: fighting to undo patriarchal relations and social structures; raising power and ambition for all women, girls, and trans and non-binary people; pursue truth, reconciliation and decolonising practices; support and build collective action and movements; contribute to gender equality with a strengths-based approach; and reflect on power imbalances in their own lives (Canadian Women's Foundation et al., 2020).

Localisation: 'increasing international investment in the capacity, delivery and leadership of local responders. The text of the Grand Bargain calls for "making principled action as local as possible and as international as necessary" while continuing to recognise the vital role of international actors, in particular in situations of armed conflict' (IFRC, 2021: 1). Localisation is also 'a way of re-thinking the humanitarian sector from the ground up – recognizing that the overwhelming majority of humanitarian assistance is already provided by local actors' (IFRC, n.d.).

Funding quality: 'refers to a range of properties that support more effective and efficient humanitarian action. Quality funding includes multi-year and flexible (unearmarked and softly earmarked) funding. Multi-year funding is defined as funding with a duration of 24 months or more based on the start and end dates of the original funding agreement. Unearmarked funding is defined as contributions that provide humanitarian agencies with the utmost flexibility to implement humanitarian and development programmes. Softly earmarked funding is defined as contributions that are allocated towards 1) specific themes or strategic objectives or programmes; 2) to a geographical region; or 3) contributions to Country-Based Pooled Funds; or 4) restricted resources' (ICVA, 2025).

Executive summary

There is growing consensus that increasing support for women-led organisations (WLOs) will lead to more efficient and effective responses to crises. United Nations (UN) Emergency Relief Coordinator Tom Fletcher has called for the reset to centre WLOs (UN OCHA, 2025a). As anti-gender politics and sweeping cuts threaten many WLOs' very existence, this research reveals a sector preoccupied by wavering commitment to both gender and international assistance. What is needed are straightforward ways to get resources into the hands of the actors already delivering effective solutions to problems, and our evidence suggests that this is what WLOs are doing. Streamlined funding to WLOs therefore offers a solution for humanitarians facing shrinking budgets and increasing pressure.

This project has provided space for stakeholders to think collectively about how to make funding for WLOs simpler and less onerous – for both WLOs and funders. This paper draws on emerging better practices and proposals for transformative change, to spark discussion among funders on the potential for a more accessible funding ecosystem. Funding WLOs is both the right and the smart thing to do for those committed to more efficient, effective and inclusive humanitarian responses.

Who are women-led organisations?

The Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC) defines a WLO by its humanitarian mandate/mission and by its leadership of at least 50% women (IASC, 2024: 2). WLOs are positioned to lead responses in all areas of humanitarian action, including protection, shelter, water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) and food security. They are sustainable, cost-efficient, and are present before, during and after crises, working holistically and intersectionally as natural cross-nexus actors that can bridge formal and informal systems. They have unparalleled access to marginalised communities and hold expertise, monitoring functions and response capacity on gender-based violence (GBV), sexual exploitation, abuse and harassment (SEAH) and other highly sensitive crisis-related risks and harms. They are effective advocates for the rights of marginalised groups and for long-term change in their context, alongside being well-placed for the provision of urgent assistance and protection (Maung et al., 2025).

These facts are well-known by WLOs and their supporters, but it is worth restating them here for two reasons: to dispel the myth that WLOs work only on 'women's issues', and to highlight that it is about supporting (and, more importantly, not undermining) work that is already happening, not starting new initiatives.

This research entailed a survey to which 261 WLOs responded from around the world, as well as interviews with key stakeholders.

Where do women-led organisations get their funding?

WLOs navigate a complex funding landscape made up of different modalities, each offering advantages and disadvantages. Each has also seen progress alongside persistent barriers that prevent WLOs from accessing them or that impede their autonomy, sustainability and visibility within the humanitarian sector.

- **Direct funding from bilateral government donors** represents a relatively small proportion of WLOs' funding due to difficulties in contracting and funding smaller organisations. Nonetheless, survey respondents indicated a strong interest in pursuing direct funding, and a small number of donor governments are now piloting direct models.
- **Pooled funding mechanisms**, such as country-based pooled funds (CBPFs), are a useful instrument for donors that lack capacity or flexibility to fund local organisations directly. They have been used increasingly in the context of the Grand Bargain to prioritise localisation. Despite efforts to make such funds more accessible, respondents reported low levels of funding from this source, which may speak to the administrative burdens that persist for WLOs to qualify.
- **Specialised pooled funds** exist specifically to channel funding to WLOs. Some (such as the Women's Peace and Humanitarian Fund, WPHF) are UN-based, whereas others (such as women's and feminist funds) are independent. However, they constitute a relatively small proportion of available funds, and many WLOs are unaware of how to access them.
- Most typically, **international non-governmental organisations (INGOs) and UN agencies** receive funding from bilateral or multilateral donors and then distribute them to WLOs in smaller grants. Done well, this model can provide great flexibility and visibility. Some, however, noted problems with accountability, recognition of WLOs' role and co-optation of WLOs' priorities.

WLOs also indicated relying on community-based funding, such as memberships, subscriptions and commercial enterprise. Private sector and philanthropic foundations are emerging sources.

How can existing barriers to funding WLOs be reduced and mitigated?

For WLOs, the first and most intractable barrier to their sustainability and full participation in humanitarian response is **insufficient funding**, with 76% of respondents ranking 'not enough funding' in the top three in a list of barriers faced. Other problems relate directly to the conditions under which funding is allocated, including the short-term and projectised nature of grants.

WLOs also face onerous due diligence, reporting and accountability processes, as well as under-reporting and under-monitoring of data on their funding. Political problems such as threats and shrinking civic space in their own settings, alongside colonial North–South power dynamics and inaccurate perceptions of them as risky partners who lack capacity and are unable to conform to humanitarian neutrality, also shape WLOs' access to funding and operational effectiveness. Even within localisation debates and spaces, they are often invisible.

Many funders taking part in this study (including government donors, UN agencies and feminist funds) have taken steps to challenge these barriers and adapt their ways of working accordingly. Notably, two government donors interviewed pointed to their own efforts to **pilot direct funding models**. By starting small and building trust, they were able to learn much more about the actual risks and capacities that come with funding WLO grantees – and ways to mitigate and navigate those risks – than they could have before they had engaged in this type of funding. There are also **promising efforts around indirect funding**: some donors are ringfencing indirect funding for WLOs, requiring that funding pass through just one intermediary before reaching WLOs, and ensuring the flexibility of sub-granted funds. For example, the Resourcing Change project saw unrestricted funding channelled through INGO partners to WLOs in four countries (Women for Women International et al., 2022).

On **reporting and due diligence**, some funders are helping to reduce the burden by adapting reporting requirements to WLOs' situations and accepting reporting in shared or flexible formats, such as the IASC's Harmonized Reporting (or 8+3) Template. Due diligence passporting is also promising for avoiding duplicative processes.

When it comes to questions of **risk and power**, WLOs pointed to funders, such as feminist funds, that allow – and even encourage – core security costs in their grants and budgets. Another highlighted a model trialled by CAFOD (Catholic Agency for Overseas Development) and Trócaire, where WLOs collaboratively mapped their own capacities and any necessary trainings, breaking down assumptions about their existing capacities and avoiding wasted time and resources on unnecessary capacity building.

How can the humanitarian funding ecosystem be transformed?

Against the backdrop of the humanitarian reset, what is needed is a complementary, diversified funding landscape with fewer barriers to entry for organisations led by crisis-affected people, and especially by women, girls and gender-diverse people. The transformative proposals offered by WLOs and their networks are not merely aspirational; they are pivotal shifts towards an ecosystem based on collective action and operational effectiveness.

Creating a culture of trust

Building trust is about more than just funding; it is about breaking down the tendency towards closed-door negotiations, welcoming WLOs into decision-making and coordination, and working with them to design mechanisms and programmes that work. Funders should seek out WLOs to learn about their initiatives, priorities and needs, to set the foundations for efficient and effective interventions. They should also bring WLO leaders into key decision-making bodies and establish formal structured dialogues.

Funding through specialist intermediaries

Although many funders support the WPHF, fewer currently support feminist funds such as the Equality Fund, the African Women's Development Fund, and the four Urgent Action Funds. All of these specialised intermediaries offer flexible and consistent funding to small, grassroots and informal WLOs according to feminist principles, avoiding many of the constraints imposed by other modalities. Increasing the resourcing and visibility of these funds is key.

Piloting WLO-led funding modalities

The Feminist Humanitarian Network (FHN) National Platform – Uganda Pilot Project is led at the national level by Community Empowerment for Peace and Development (CEPAD) West Nile and funded by the Irene M. Staehelin Foundation. The project, which provides funding to a consortium of non-governmental organisations (NGOs) to allocate collaboratively, has already led to further women's organisations joining FHN as members and benefiting from improved access to funding.

A group of more than 50 feminist funds has also set up the First Response Fund (FRF), a global humanitarian pooled fund for diverse WLOs. The FRF benefits from a steering group that includes WLOs, and it has already received GB£2.25 million from the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO), while Global Affairs Canada announced an intention to contribute CA$10 million.

These initiatives offer potential learning, not just for improving funding to WLOs but also for wider agendas around localisation, accountability and aid effectiveness.

Care-centred approaches and transformative recovery

WLOs do not assume, as many humanitarian actors do, that broad-based, blanket initiatives will naturally lead to improvements for women, girls and gender-diverse people. They also do not necessarily aspire to return to the *status quo ante* in the wake of crises. Rather, they are focused on holistic responses that account for the social, political and economic factors that create vulnerability to the impacts of crises in the first place. Funders should therefore seek to support such cross-sectoral, contextualised and holistic approaches centred on rights, resilience, care and transformative recovery. WLOs can provide leadership on what more holistic, sustainable and appropriate responses to crisis could look like, so funders and decision-makers should seek to learn from them on, for example, the nexus and other challenges facing the international humanitarian system.

What actions can funders take?

Reduce the reporting and compliance burden

- Embrace 'compliance minimalism' to reduce the burden of reporting and accountability.
- Reconsider objectives of reporting.
- Accept reporting in flexible formats.
- Deploy reverse monitoring and accountability mechanisms.

Advocate for better practices

- Complement funding with access to decision-making and coordination platforms.
- Advocate to other funders.
- Share best practices among funders.

Allocate funds accordingly

- Pilot direct funding channels.
- Ringfence and ensure better quality of indirect funding.
- Ensure the same level of flexibility for both direct and sub-granted funds.
- Introduce participatory approaches to design of funding mechanisms and grant-making.
- Create funding calls designed specifically for WLOs.

Shift the narrative from hierarchical funding flows to a complementary funding ecosystem

- Resource innovative intermediaries, including feminist funds.
- Shift from intermediary-based funding flows to funding ecosystems.
- Rethink 'capacity-building' approaches.
- Consider the risks that come with failing to engage with WLOs.

1 Introduction: why women-led organisations, and why now?

There is growing consensus among a range of humanitarian donors, networks and other actors that increasing support for women-led organisations (WLOs) will lead to more efficient and effective responses to crises. This consensus is evidenced by convenings hosted by Wilton Park in February 2024 and the Good Humanitarian Donorship Initiative in October 2024, among others.[1] WLOs are uniquely positioned to respond to crises across a wide range of thematics and priorities, and in geographies around the world, thanks to their embeddedness in communities, contextual knowledge, pre-existing networks and ability to act rapidly (Maung et al., 2025). Now, it is more important than ever to find better ways to support WLOs and their work, given the current context of economic and political challenges to humanitarian action.

Despite the critical role of WLOs, we know very little about who they are, how they are funded and what they need to continue delivering support to communities in crisis. Here, we outline the current landscape of insufficient funding and structural barriers, describe the challenges ahead and solutions already being attempted, and present alternative models to combine the strengths of humanitarian priorities and of WLOs.

This paper aims to spark discussion within the humanitarian sector, and especially across a broad range of funders, on the potential to foment a more conducive funding landscape for WLOs. This includes: government donors; United Nations (UN) agencies and international non-governmental organisations (INGOs), which frequently act as funding intermediaries; pooled funds, including those that specifically target WLOs; and funds that prioritise women-led humanitarian action, which have come to be known collectively as 'feminist funds'. Our focus is on humanitarian funding, based on the premise that humanitarian response should be funded by humanitarian envelopes, although complementarity with other types and sources of funding will feature throughout, where appropriate.

The paper begins with new data on the current funding situation of WLOs as a baseline, before embarking on a forward-looking analysis of strategies to mitigate barriers within the current humanitarian funding landscape, including solutions offered by funders already committed to this agenda. Finally, the paper concludes with reflections on transformative and innovative funding models that could build a much-improved – and more inclusive, accessible and effective – funding ecosystem.

1 A summary of discussions at the Wilton Park convening was published shortly afterward. See Wilton Park (2024).

1.1 Women-led organisations and the 'reset': what is at stake?

Against the backdrop of dramatic funding cuts across many key donors, UN Emergency Relief Coordinator Tom Fletcher launched the 'humanitarian reset' – a major reform of the international architecture to make humanitarian action more efficient, effective and accountable (UN OCHA, 2025a). Although Fletcher's latest statement calls for the reset to centre women and girls and support for WLOs (IASC, 2025), interviewees spoke to a lack of clarity on what this will mean in terms of funding and structures. The findings from this research reveal a sector preoccupied by uncertainty and concerns about wavering commitment to gender and international assistance more broadly. Although this stretches across the humanitarian sector, recent months have proven especially difficult for those committed to gender-responsive action, encompassing women's leadership in humanitarian action, gender-based violence (GBV), sexual and reproductive health and rights, and feminist approaches. Anti-gender politics has made gender itself progressively more contentious in recent years, such that one donor reported a 'real risk of many local organisations closing down, many of which work on gender diversity, equality, and inclusion'. This risk is rapidly becoming a reality, with more and more reports of WLOs reducing their programming or shuttering entirely.

In the face of a contracting sector and shrinking funding, there is an urgent need for straightforward ways for funders to get resources into the hands of the actors that are delivering effective solutions to urgent crisis-related risks and needs. Through primary research and convenings, this project has provided a space for participants – WLOs, networks, donors and feminist funds – to express their concerns about the expected collapse of hard-won priorities, including the consolidation of the GBV Area of Responsibility into the wider Global Protection Cluster, which had been a key entry point for WLOs to the humanitarian sphere. More importantly, the project has allowed participants to think collectively about feasible solutions to simplify funding for WLOs and make it less onerous – both for WLOs facing untenable burdens of due diligence and accountability, as well as for funders facing difficult decisions and budget reductions.

Funding WLOs is both an *ethical* and *practical* imperative for actors concerned with effective responses amidst the reset. The practical reasons relate to the role that WLOs already play in frontline crisis response: WLOs are positioned to lead responses in all areas of humanitarian action, including protection, shelter, water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) and food security. They are sustainable and cost-efficient as well as being innovative and agile, making key contributions to coordination and access. Their presence before, during and after crises enables them to cultivate a mutual bond of trust and to work on resilience, prevention and early action. WLOs work holistically and intersectionally, making them natural cross-nexus actors that can bridge formal and informal systems (see Box 1). They have unparalleled access to marginalised communities. They also have expertise, monitoring functions and response capacity on GBV, sexual exploitation, abuse and harassment (SEAH), and other highly sensitive crisis-related risks and harms. They are effective advocates for the rights of marginalised groups and for achieving long-term change in their local context, as well as providing urgent assistance and protection.

Box 1 How do women-led organisations see crises differently?

Women-led organisations and allies who consider themselves feminist have been vocal about supporting a broader, more **nuanced understanding of the term 'crisis'** than that typically favoured by the international humanitarian sector (Feminist Humanitarian Network, 2021; Ahidjo, 2024; Equality Fund, 2024; Martin, forthcoming). This is because what makes marginalised people vulnerable to crises is rarely the crisis itself, but rather the overlapping and compounding forms of social, political and economic exclusion that some marginalised groups experience every day:

> Crisis does not just refer to an acute event like a war or earthquake. Rather, it refers to the complex and interconnected systems and structures that maintain inequities and injustice, which compound the impact of acute events – especially for marginalized and disenfranchised communities. (Feminist Alchemy, 2024: 11)

This also means that many WLOs choose **not to define themselves as 'neutral' in contexts of crisis**, which sets them apart from the majority of humanitarian actors.[i] WLOs, like many local and national organisations, are often founded on the pursuit of social justice and human rights. Given that gender-related issues such as reproductive choice or LGBTQI+ inclusion are often those that are deemed too political or too sensitive for a 'neutral' humanitarian response, humanitarian funders' demand for conformity to a particular reading of neutrality can prove detrimental, forcing WLOs to change how they operate and what they prioritise.[ii] Neutrality does not accurately represent many WLOs' experience of crisis-related vulnerability as being structural and caused by multiple factors.

Finally, the work of WLOs in crisis settings is **holistic and rarely conforms to traditional silos** of humanitarian, development or peace-building, as these do not represent how crises are experienced. WLOs work responsively on the issues that matter to their constituencies, regardless of predetermined budget lines or agendas. Although this approach raises concerns among humanitarians, it is also a key strength: WLOs are particularly well placed to deliver joined-up responses and work across the 'triple nexus'.[iii]

This fluidity can be difficult to reconcile with funder priorities and internal ways of working. However, what appears to be misalignment should actually be cause for introspection and even paradigm shifts for humanitarian funders if they are serious about providing an effective and appropriate response.

[i]For a discussion on humanitarian principles, gender and feminist approaches, see Chatham House (2022) and Daigle (2022).

[ii]For more on how humanitarian funding models can pressure civil society organisations towards depoliticisation or otherwise coopt their priorities, see Moallin et al. (2025).

[iii]The concept of the 'triple nexus' is used to describe the interconnections between the humanitarian, development and peace sectors, as well as an agenda to promote better coordination and coherence across the three.

Many funders have made commitments (through the Grand Bargain, the World Humanitarian Summit and other instruments) to work directly with local partners and make humanitarian action as local as possible. This is especially important as the current funding environment sees a reduction in the scope of international operations. Other funders have made normative commitments to financially support at-risk or marginalised groups – i.e. women, girls and LGBTQI+ individuals. As funding cuts and anti-gender politics impose further barriers to the functioning of WLOs, it is vital to take stock of practical ways to deliver on these commitments.

1.2 About this project

This paper is part of a wider research project commissioned by the UK Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO) and led by the Humanitarian Policy Group (HPG) to examine the financial and decision-making landscape for WLOs active in humanitarian response. Throughout the project, the research team is benefiting from co-convening and consultation with the Feminist Humanitarian Network (FHN, a global collective of feminist leaders working together to transform the humanitarian system into one guided by feminist principles) and its members.

The objective of the project is to contribute to building a consensus across multiple stakeholders for new ways of working as humanitarians. The research will offer a springboard for international actors to begin reframing the humanitarian system to better leverage the strengths and expertise of WLOs. Our intention is to create an open and hopeful space to imagine collectively what a better future for WLOs could look like, bringing together, building on and appreciating existing visions and the work already happening during challenging times.

This discussion paper follows on from an evidence synthesis on WLOs as humanitarian responders (Maung et al., 2025). It is framed around a series of strategic questions to invite discussion and to query assumptions among funders – donor governments, pooled funds, intermediaries, feminist funds – to reflect on how current ways of working can be transformed to make the most of ever more scarce resources in challenging times.

1.3 Methodology and limitations

This paper is based on a mixed research methodology, drawing on key informant interviews (KIIs) with 20 representatives of donor governments, INGOs, UN agencies and feminist funds; two virtual stakeholder events that engaged more than 50 WLOs; a survey that reached 261 WLOs engaged in crisis response efforts; and a review of published academic, grey and policy literature.

The survey was conducted over a four-month period and available in English, French, Spanish and Arabic. It used a purposive sampling method to access participants through existing WLO networks; its findings are therefore indicative rather than representative given that they pertain to a diverse (rather than defined) set of actors of varying scales, types and locations. The sample represents a wide range of WLOs in terms of geographical location, types of crises confronted and scale of organisation.

There is strong representation from East, Central and West Africa, and significant participation from other regions. Given the compressed nature of this research process, it was not possible to increase participation from other regions. The data represents a snapshot in time, rather than a longitudinal study. Working through existing networks may also mean that more connected or networked organisations are over-represented, to the detriment of less visible or less formal ones.

Interviewees focused on key funders and intermediaries working with WLOs, and so their locations are skewed towards the Global North, which reflects the state of international humanitarian funding. Domestic sources of funding emerge through the survey, but there remains a major gap in terms of detailed knowledge about these funding flows. The KIIs allowed the research team to gauge the barriers to financial support to WLOs from the funders' own perspectives – a useful starting point to reflect on what alternative practices might be implemented going forwards. The KIIs were transcribed using Microsoft Teams and analysed thematically.

2 The current funding landscape for women-led organisations

Women-led organisations are present in every crisis setting around the world. Many of them existed long before the onset of crises, while others emerged organically in response to crisis-related needs and risks in their communities. To date, there has been no comprehensive or consistent collection of data on WLOs specifically, which has left researchers and policy-makers attempting to triangulate from available data sources on gender in humanitarian action and localisation (Maung et al., 2025).

In this chapter, we share data on the current positionings of WLOs in crisis response with two aims: to dispel the myth that WLOs work only on 'women's issues', and to highlight that supporting WLOs is not a matter of bringing about new initiatives but rather supporting (and, more importantly, not undermining) work that is already happening. We also explore different funding modalities that WLOs access (or strive to access), highlighting their advantages and disadvantages, the progress achieved and the persistent barriers facing WLOs in accessing high-quality funding.

Although policy discourse tends to conflate a diverse range of organisations under the heading of 'women-led organisations', in practice, WLOs are diverse in size and form, ranging from unregistered community-based groups to broad networks and movements, to well-established larger organisations. From our survey sample, most organisations (57.5%) identified themselves as WLOs, although some preferred to refer to themselves as women's rights (25.4%), feminist (13%) or other types of organisation, including disability rights organisations, and LGBTQI+ or youth-led organisations. Some may have ambitions to access direct funding from government donors or country-based pooled funds (CBPFs), whereas others might prefer to remain more informal and therefore seek funding via intermediaries. As we discuss in chapters 3 and 4, this has significant implications for potential pathways towards a more conducive funding landscape, with complementary roles for a range of funders and funding types.

2.1 What is the role of women-led organisations in humanitarian action?

The WLOs participating in our survey reported working across geographies and in settings affected by conflict, displacement (within and across borders), health crises and national hazard-related shocks, often responding to multiple problems in the same emergency setting (see Figures 1 and 2). Almost two-thirds (60%) of respondents identified themselves as 'national' organisations, whereas 34% identified as 'community-based' and the remainder as 'regional'. This breakdown counters the assumption that WLOs are overwhelmingly local. Yet it also raises questions about how the size and location of WLOs (i.e. in capital cities and/or in proximity to donors, versus in rural or active conflict areas) impacts their access to funding.

Figure 1 Geographical setting and self-identified scale of women-led organisations

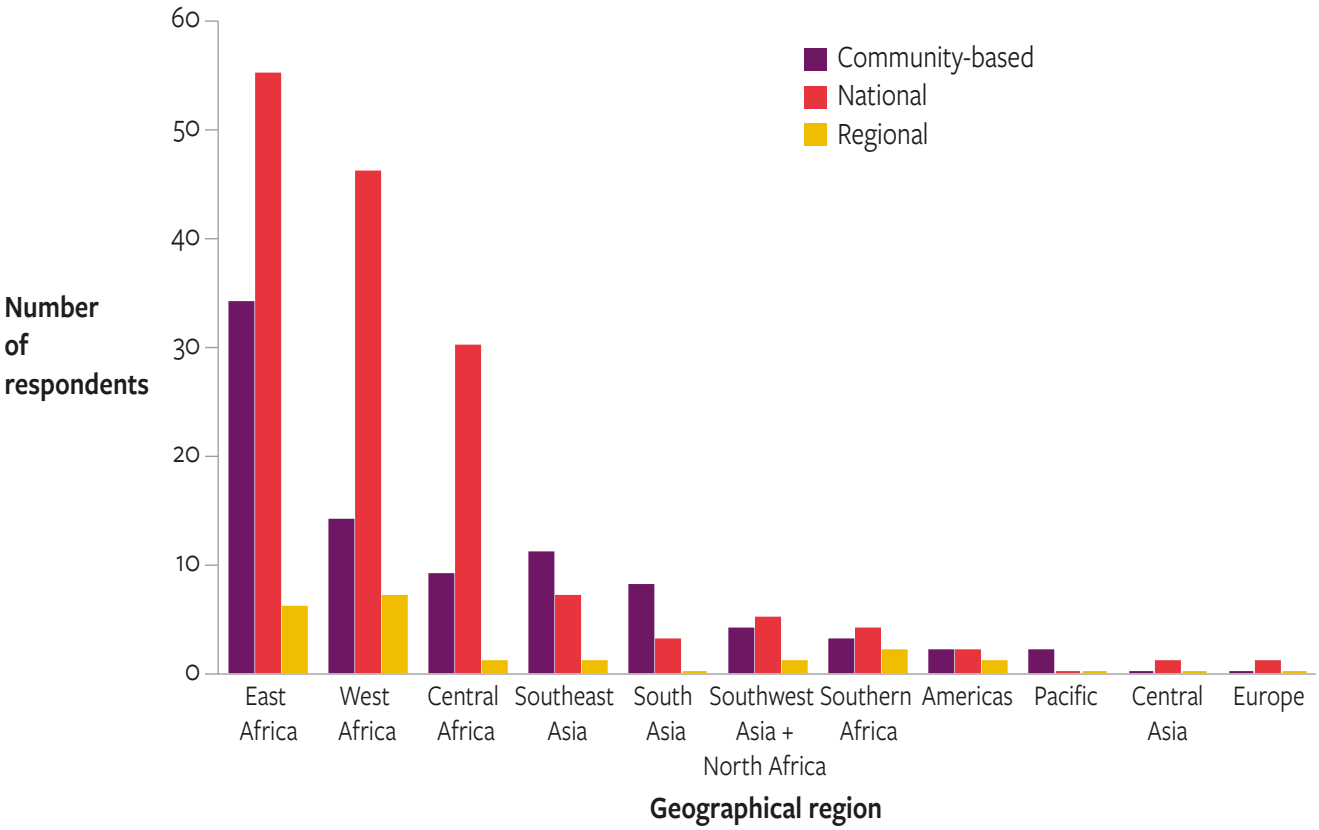
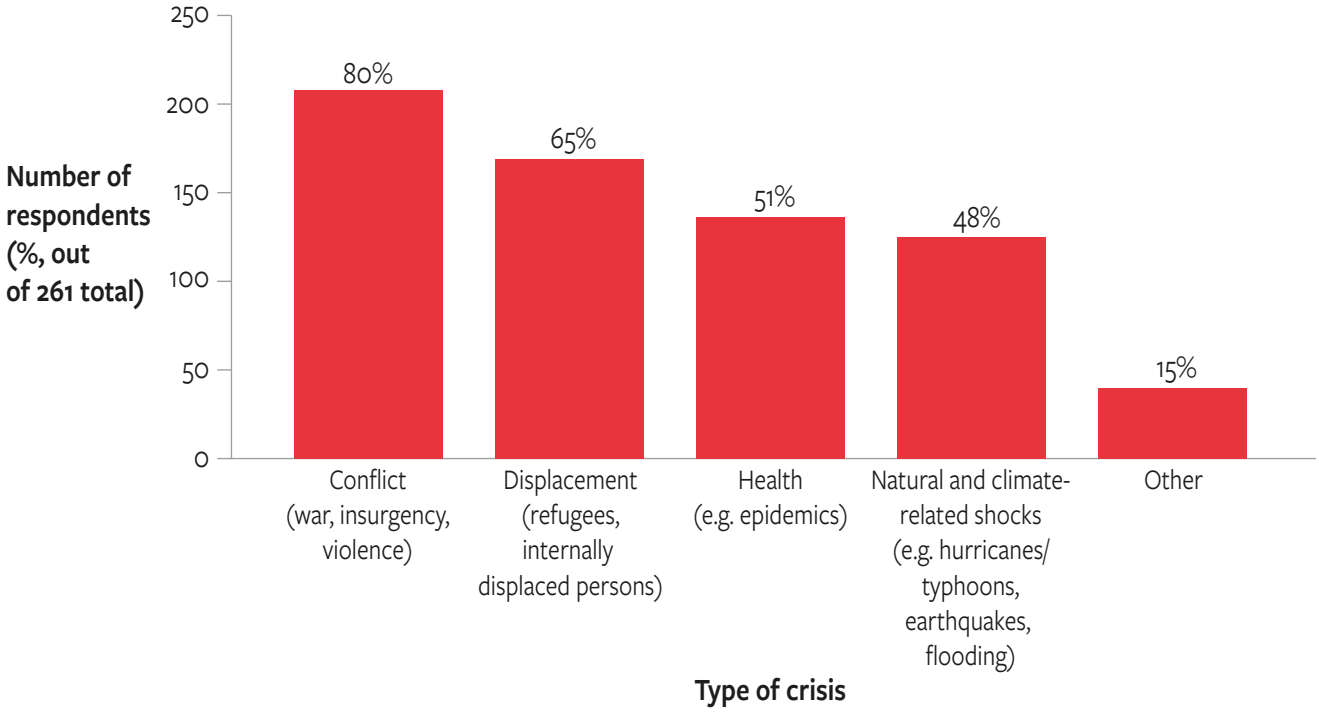
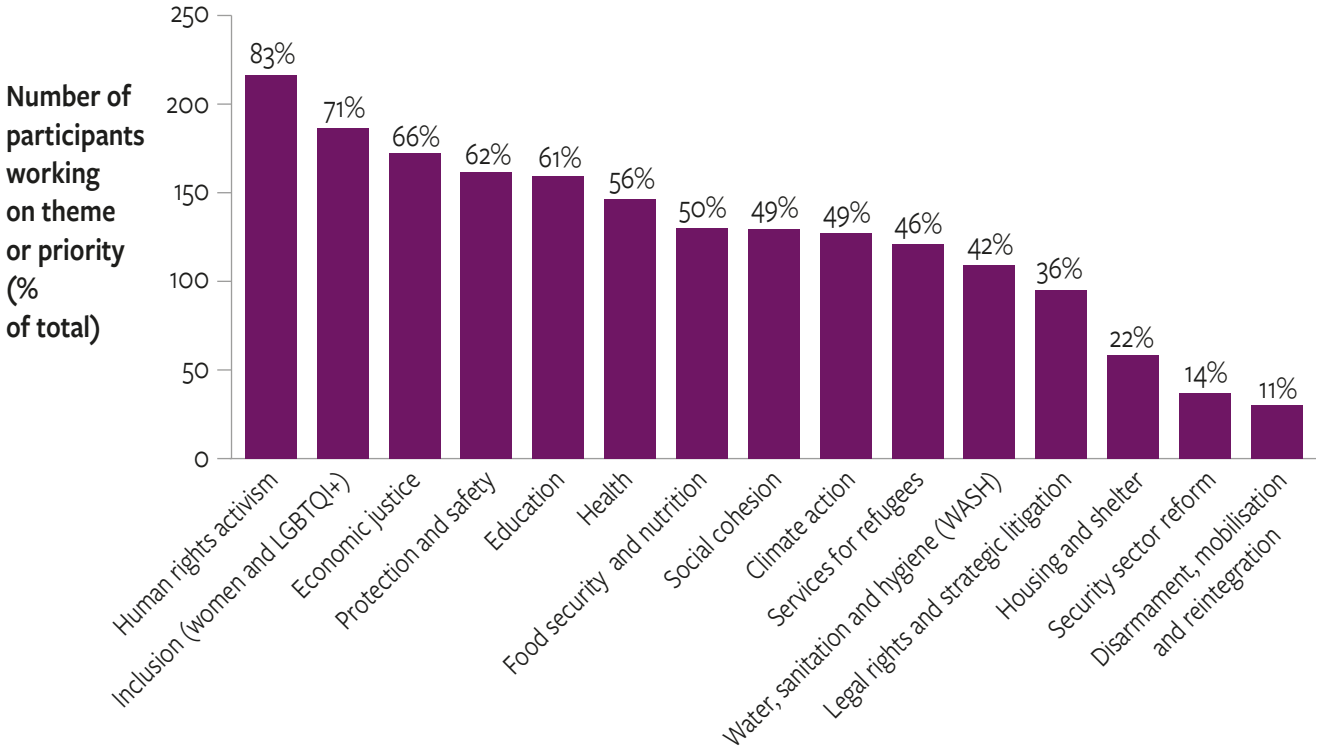


Figure 2 Types of humanitarian crisis to which women-led organisations respond



Respondents also reported working on a wide range of sectors and themes that are core to humanitarian response, reflecting their agility and adaptability in meeting the immediate, crisis-related needs of their communities and constituencies (see Figure 3). These findings effectively challenge assumptions that WLOs work only on 'gender' concerns such as GBV, while acknowledging their considerable expertise and capacity on such issues.

Figure 3 Women-led organisations work on core humanitarian priorities and themes



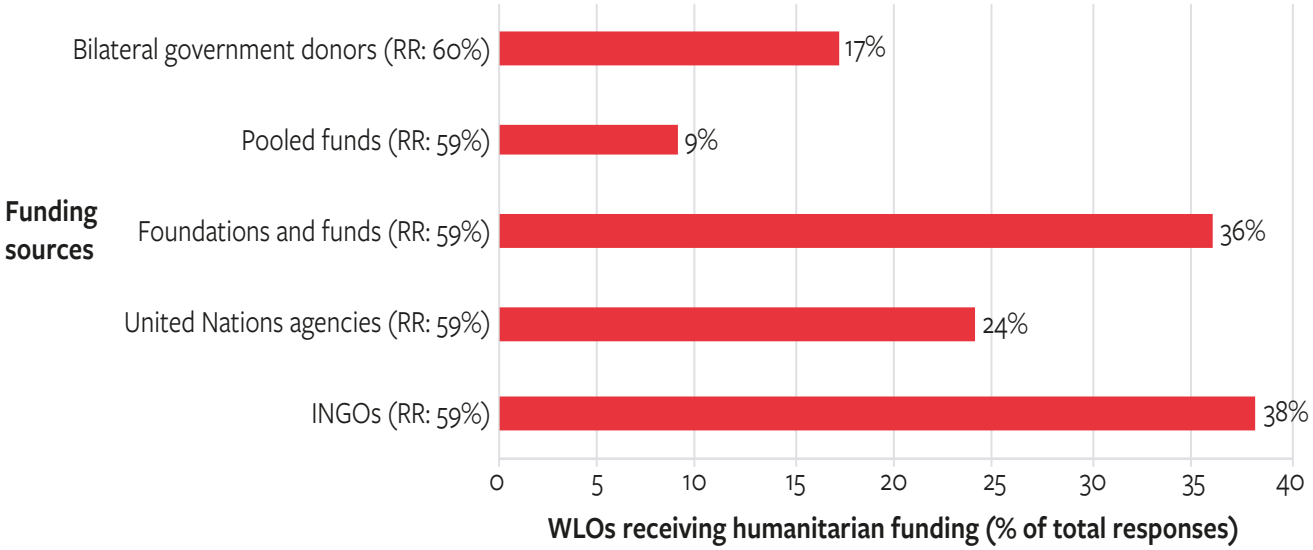
Some WLOs responding to the survey indicated that they wanted to work in other areas but could not, due to limitations on their resources. Given that WLOs are often presumed to be 'gender actors', it is notable that 'gender' appears as an area where WLOs would like to increase engagement. In some cases, this is because funding for gender-focused work has been insufficient, while in others it indicates the narrowness of available support, which has not allowed WLOs to develop programming on (for example) GBV prevention, men and masculinities, economic justice for women and girls, or LGBTQI+ rights and inclusion.

2.2 Where do women-led organisations get their funding from, and under what conditions?

Amid the current global funding crisis, challenges to adequate funding for WLOs will only intensify. Presently, WLOs access donor funding both *directly* and *indirectly*, although access to direct funding is severely limited due to stringent legal and administrative requirements. In general, the majority of WLOs also said their funding was low quality – that is, short term and restricted to a particular

programme or activity, although this varied depending on the type of funding. These funding types are explored in the following subsections (see Figure 4). Many WLOs also reported negative knock-on impacts relating to the sufficiency, sustainability and quality of their funding, including staff retention, ability to plan and lack of support for organisational development or equipment. The data in this chapter illustrates the inadequacy of the current funding environment for WLOs, while the following chapter provides a forward-looking analysis of barriers to funding in both quantity and quality, and efforts to overcome them.

Figure 4 Humanitarian funding source types from survey responses



Response rate (RR) refers to the number of survey participants who chose to answer this question relative to the total number of participants (261).

2.2.1 Direct bilateral funding

Funding that is direct and bilateral indicates funding disbursed by funders without passing through intermediaries, especially by governments under their humanitarian budget.

In total, 26 respondents to the survey (17%) indicated that they had received humanitarian funding directly from government donors in the past year (see Figure 4). However, consistently, WLOs indicated a lower volume of direct funding from any donors, in particular the government of the country (or countries) in which they worked. Similarly, 32 respondents (21%) reported receiving other kinds of funding directly from donor governments, but just 11 (7%) had received any funding directly from the government of the country (or countries) in which they operate. Amounts of direct bilateral funding varied widely, from US$500 to US$2 million.[2]

2 Response rate (RR): 59%–60% for these questions.

In terms of eligibility, donor government interviewees spoke to the legal difficulty of contracting and/or funding smaller and unregistered organisations. They acknowledged how these legal restrictions become an issue in contexts where it is not easy for local organisations to register due to discriminatory legal frameworks or non-democratic regimes, such as in Myanmar.

Two governments indicated that they provide direct funding to WLOs, with one of these government schemes still in the pilot phase. One donor government reported that despite having what they described as above-average flexibility in terms of legal and reporting requirements to provide funding, they prefer to co-fund humanitarian assistance with other donors in order to enable faster disbursement and lighter reporting requirements. This preference for co-funding also speaks to the contention that funding WLOs is risky, and that shared approaches help to lower the risk burden shouldered by any one donor (see Section 3.5 on perceptions of risk).

Overall, the volume of indirect funding (via pooled funds or other intermediaries) is noticeably higher than that of direct funding. These intermediaries, including pooled funds, other funds, UN agencies and INGOs, are discussed in the next subsections.

2.2.2 Humanitarian pooled funds

Humanitarian pooled funds are multi-donor mechanisms that seek to provide flexible, predictable and rapid funding for humanitarian response (ICVA, 2025).

Some pooled funds – for example, the Aid Fund for Syria – are independently managed by INGOs and donors. Others, such as CBPFs, are managed by the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (UN OCHA) under the leadership of humanitarian coordinators at country level, providing funds for high-priority projects to be implemented by those deemed best placed to respond in line with priorities set out in humanitarian response plans. Pooled funds, including the CBPFs, are a useful instrument for donors who do not have enough capacity or flexibility to fund local organisations directly. They have been used increasingly in the context of the Grand Bargain to prioritise localisation through additional support and funding allocated to local and national crisis response (Sturridge, forthcoming). In 2025, the Global Humanitarian Assistance report noted that CBPFs are a 'key vehicle' for localisation with an increasing proportion of funds allocated directly to local and national actors (ALNAP, 2025a: 24).

Around 9% of survey respondents said they had received funding from humanitarian pooled funding streams. The low percentage can likely be explained by the administrative burdens placed on WLOs to qualify for and access funding, including from CBPFs. Those funds also tend to prefer organisations with a track record of partnership with UN agencies, yet WLOs struggle to meet these application requirements (IRC, 2023). Finally, CBPFs tend to offer short-term, project-based and earmarked funding, which is not in line with the systemic change for which many local organisations, including WLOs and refugee-led organisations (RLOs), aim (Sturridge, forthcoming).

To date, CBPFs have also tended to prioritise registered organisations, which means that many informal and/or unregistered organisations or groups cannot access those funds. However, there are encouraging signs of change in this regard: in July 2025, UN OCHA introduced procedures to allow CBPFs to fund unregistered organisations under 'exceptional circumstances' (UN OCHA, 2025b). It is too early to know whether and to what extent WLOs will benefit from this clause, but this is nonetheless a practical and sensible step towards greater flexibility and adaptability.

UN OCHA reported that it allocated US$34.8 million of its CBPFs to WLOs in 2021, about 3.5% of its total funding. By contrast, it distributed 27% (US$268 million) of its US$1.01 billion CBPF allocation directly to national and sub-national organisations (including WLOs) in the same year (IRC, 2023). In 2024, the number of WLOs receiving direct or indirect funding from CBPFs or regional pooled funds increased to 148, up from 122 in 2023, and UN OCHA also intensified their efforts to incorporate WLOs into 18 of 21 advisory boards (UN OCHA, 2025c: 42, 36). (See the box in Section 3.7 for examples of improvementsin the specific context of Ukraine.) These efforts, together with the new exceptional procedures, represent positive progress. Yet it is important to acknowledge that many barriers still exist, as the research findings show, and general regression on gender and women's rights strongly suggests that any progress may be fragile.

2.2.3 Specialist pooled funds

A range of pooled funding mechanisms have been set up specifically to channel funding to gendered concerns such as GBV as well as to women's leadership. Some of these, such as the UN Trust Fund to End Violence against Women and the Women's Peace and Humanitarian Fund (WPHF), are seated within UN agencies. Others, such as women's and feminist funds, are managed independently.

Pooled funds of all kinds, and especially those directed towards smaller, grassroots and rights-focused organisations, are perceived by many donors as a 'buffer' actor between donors and grantees, including WLOs. Donors often rely on funds' own due diligence procedures for resource allocation to national and local organisations, which shelters donors from perceived risks of corruption and fraud. Many specialised funds can also rely on a wide network of associated organisations and funds that can vouch for or provide insights into a new organisation seeking funding. Funds can also provide contextual knowledge to donors when they want to identify WLOs to whom they might provide direct funding, and 'support those WLOs that might be hard for bilateral donors to support directly' (interview, feminist fund).

Funds can also act as a buffer for WLOs, absorbing administrative burden and negotiating with donors on acceptable levels of risk assessment and compliance according to circumstances. Our research revealed that feminist funds are perceived to have a better understanding of the needs of WLOs and to disburse more flexible funding and overhead costs accordingly. Our research also revealed instances of funds and UN agencies collaborating to support unregistered organisations, in cases where neither actor could do so directly.

Likely because of these elements, WLOs participating in the survey indicated that they sought to receive funds from foundations and philanthropic funds *before* trying to access (or be awarded) funding from UN agencies. A comparatively higher number of respondents (36%) also indicated having received funding from feminist funds and foundations in the past year.

Nonetheless, feminist funds constitute a comparatively small proportion of the current funding landscape and lack the resourcing to meet demand for their support from WLOs. Survey responses also indicate that many WLOs are unaware of how to seek funding from feminist funds, as they are typically less visible than other funding sources.

2.2.4 United Nations agencies and international non-governmental organisations

Funding to WLOs frequently comes through well-established intermediary organisations such as INGOs and UN agencies, which receive sums of money from bilateral (governments, private foundations, individuals) or multilateral donors (the World Bank) and then distribute them to partners (including WLOs) through smaller grants.

Due to how humanitarian funding is designed – that is, with the goal of moving large amounts of money quickly and through a small number of grants or partnerships, as noted earlier – WLOs mainly access funding via such intermediaries. Among our sample, INGOs were the most significant reported funder, with 38% of WLOs indicating receipt of such funds in the past year. Survey respondents were clear that they do not necessarily regard intermediaries such as these as a barrier to more and better funding. One interviewee representing a fund suggested considering intermediaries as part of an 'ecosystem of support' to highlight their primary role as a main source of funding for local organisations, but also the commitment of many such intermediaries to increasingly support localisation of humanitarian action. Where it is done according to principles of egalitarian partnership, intermediary funding through INGOs and UN agencies could alleviate some of the administrative burden and restrictions that come with direct funding from donors. It could also make WLOs and the work they do more visible to donors and other audiences, circumvent hostile regulatory environments and increase the capacity of small organisations such as WLOs (Sturridge et al., 2023).

However, some survey respondents highlighted problematic relationships with intermediaries, noting 'competition from INGOs' (national WLO, East Africa) and 'poor recognition' by INGOs (community-based WLO, East Africa) as concerns. Some noted that intermediaries bring additional costs, which may reduce the overall amount that reaches WLOs. Thus, a stakeholder consultation participant who works with INGOs noted, 'INGOs get their own percentage fee – it's completely unfair'.

These views are supported by existing research. In Kenya and South Sudan, for example, WLOs reported facing pressure from international organisations to change their priorities to support international initiatives or INGO funding applications without giving them full credit (Njeri and Daigle, 2022). International Alert published research in 2017 that revealed similar dynamics: INGOs were shown to pressure place-based organisations to conform to their priorities and, more troublingly, to consent

to publicity that compromised their own self-defined priorities and even their security (Anderson, 2017). Parallel research shows that intermediary funding for RLOs similarly results in RLOs acting as implementers of programmes established by the intermediaries rather than being able to pursue their own initiatives, as such undermining the effectiveness of humanitarian responses (Sturridge et al., 2025).

2.2.5 Other sources of funding

The categories of funding described here are far from exhaustive. For example, many WLOs – especially informal, unregistered or grassroots entities – report relying heavily on **community-based forms of funding** (such as memberships, monthly subscriptions, commercial enterprise, consultancies, and other forms of localised, collective and ad hoc activities) to deliver their programmes. Community giving creates accountability at the local level, reinforces ties between organisations and the communities they serve, and is often a more sustainable source of funding. However, the funding collected through these modalities is often relatively small and not sufficient to meet the needs of affected communities. This suggests a strong potential role for complementary forms of funding.

Private sector and philanthropic foundations are often dedicated to one or more causes. As they are private entities, their funding allocations and reporting requirements may be much more agile than those of governments or international agencies. These actors did not emerge as key from our research with WLOs, yet it is important to note their existence and role.

There are valuable examples of such foundations providing support to RLOs. One is the Refugee Leadership and Participation Program of Robert Bosch Stiftung, which aims to generate 'systematic evidence' on the role and impact of refugee-led initiatives in East Africa and the Middle East, and to support 'initiatives that work towards more inclusive governance at the global level' (Robert Bosch Stiftung, n.d.). Another example, the Conrad N. Hilton Foundation, funds 'inclusion of refugee voices in the policy and decision-making processes' (Hilton Foundation, 2025). However, our research collected anecdotal evidence that WLOs generally find these types of philanthropic funders difficult to access, although reportedly flexible whenever they have been accessed. Islamic philanthropy may also play a role, whereby Islamic charities offer support to address the needs of Muslim women and girls.

3 How can existing funding barriers be reduced and mitigated?

Although there has not yet been any comprehensive review of funding flows to WLOs, it is widely acknowledged that there is significant systemic inequality in the distribution of funds within the humanitarian sector, with most resources concentrated in large organisations and on themes other than gender (OECD, 2022). In 2022, women's rights organisations (WROs)[3], movements and institutions received only 0.34% of the total global aid flow (Sekyiamah and Provost, 2024). Many WLOs face major disadvantages in the race for funding, having to compete against both international and national organisations, as well as struggling with hierarchical, restrictive and highly bureaucratic donor systems – a challenge shared by other small and grassroots organisations. This problem is especially acute for WLOs that face patriarchal intra-local dynamics, and for those focused on LGBTQI+ rights, reproductive rights and gender justice, as they often lack influential connections and the capacity to overcome these central challenges.

For WLOs, the first and most intractable barrier to their sustainability and full participation in humanitarian response is insufficient funding, a problem that is only likely to intensify given the current geopolitical context. Among survey respondents, 76% ranked 'not enough funding' in the top three barriers facing their organisation as they strive to respond to crises:

> Donors focus on specific organisations only when providing grants, training, or capacity building. (National WLO, Southwest Asia and North Africa)

Many of our respondents, from WLOs and funding entities alike, attributed this problem at least in part to the inaccessibility of spaces where funding decisions are made:

> The first challenge we face is that organisations led by women are not given opportunities. Our opportunities are always directed towards specific groups, and as a result, our role is often excluded from decision-making spaces. Even when a project is submitted [by] our organisation, it doesn't receive attention. (Regional WLO, West Africa)
>
> Trust is about more than funds – it starts with relationships, access, networking. Spaces for direct interaction are key [...] Thus far, cuts have meant that doors have closed, which [our WLO partners] found shocking. Doors must remain open, even when funding is in crisis. (Interview, UN agency)

3 Although there are important semantic differences between WROs and WLOs, the line between these categories is not clear, given that many (if not most) WLOs operating in crisis settings deploy a rights lens and see the pursuit of human rights, including women's rights, as key to their approach. Furthermore, as noted earlier, many WLOs emerge prior to crises as part of social justice movements. Networks such as the Feminist Humanitarian Network (FHN) also frequently use both terms in tandem, if not entirely interchangeably. For this reason, we include limited instances of data relevant to WROs as well as WLOs.

Other problems relate directly to the conditions under which funding is allocated and delivered, as detailed here. These are areas in which funders of all kinds have the opportunity to adapt their ways of working to provide better support for the critical work of WLOs. These obstacles are compounded by norms and perceptions about WLOs' capacities as humanitarian responders, by donors' understanding of risk, and by actors' positioning in international power relations, which are themselves shaped by colonial and patriarchal discourses. Here, we consider barriers not just to the *quantity* of funding that is accessible to WLOs but also the *quality* of that funding, based on the premise that better-quality funding – that is, funding that is longer-term, flexible and core – contributes to WLOs' sustainability, organisational development and autonomy.

Many funders that took part in this study (including government donors, UN agencies and feminist funds) were already committed to supporting WLOs and have taken steps to challenge these barriers and adapt their ways of working accordingly. In this chapter, we explore each of the major barriers to WLOs' ability to access funding, as well as what is already being done by funders that are committed to overcoming those barriers.

3.1 Limited long-term, flexible and core funding

By its very design, humanitarian action is geared towards responding to crisis events that are understood to be acute and time-bound. The immediate necessity to respond tends to turn the focus away from longer-term investments in capacity building, strengthening partnerships, and longer-term resilience and recovery (Dijkzeul, 2021). If crises are understood to be time-bound, then the response will likely be the same, but, as Feminist Alchemy (2024) argues, this type of reactive and short-termist response can fall short in achieving its goals. The Human Rights Funders Network (2023) also identifies that unwillingness to invest in early warning systems and foresighting remains highly problematic; yet providing long-term funding can build women's leadership to mitigate the onset and reduce the impact of humanitarian crises on their communities.

WLOs agree that a lack of long-term investment inhibits swift and strategic responses, as well as WLOs' own ability to be sustainable and undertake organisational development (Feminist Humanitarian Network, 2021). Among survey respondents, 54% indicated that the majority of their funding lasts less than 12 months, and many identified the inflexibility and projectised nature of their funding as a key barrier:

> Without flexible, unrestricted funding, the organisation is unable to pay staff between project cycles. This gap often results in the loss of experienced team members, weakening organisational capacity and continuity. Additionally, in the humanitarian sector, many donors provide only material support, without covering staff costs. This puts a heavy burden on [us]. To maintain quality programming and ensure the well-being of frontline workers, sustainable funding mechanisms – including support for staffing – are urgently needed. (Regional WLO, Southeast Asia)

> We conduct a needs assessment and determine the women's needs, such as rent for a house or tent, underwear and medication, baby milk and pads for women and children, birth control pills, a hearing aid for a child who has lost his hearing aid, food, listening sessions and psychological support. When funding comes in, it is allocated for cleaning supplies, and we cannot change the packages, and this is problematic. We want to distribute according to the families' needs, not according to what the donor has decided. (Community-based WLO, Southwest Asia and North Africa)
>
> Humanitarian assistance shouldn't [be] confined and limited to providing shelter and food to those affected, but is supposed to include the assistance required for victims and survivors of sexual and gender-based violence. (Community-based WLO, East Africa)

Others mentioned staff turnover, exhaustion and unpaid work as outcomes of a lack of core and longer-term funding – a problem that will only intensify with major funding cuts announced since early 2025.

Conversely, flexible funding could support mental health and psychosocial support (MHPSS) for staff and clients, GBV prevention and other areas that WLOs indicate are priorities. However, to date, these have not been widely supported by donor priorities or projectised funding opportunities.

> If we could offer one piece of advice to humanitarian funders and agencies, it would be to focus on providing flexible, long-term funding to local, women-led organisations. This would enable [WLOs] to address urgent community needs while also creating sustainable, tailored solutions. Commitments to long-term funding would allow us to plan ahead and make lasting improvements, instead of always relying on short-term grants. Furthermore, offering unrestricted funding would give us the freedom to direct resources where they are most needed, ensuring we can respond swiftly to the changing demands of the communities we support. (National WLO, East Africa)

The representatives of donors and funds that participated in the interviews for this research were generally aware of WLOs' long-term presence and embeddedness in their community, which allows them not only to respond quickly to crises but also to anticipate hardship and conflict. However, the need for long-term funding emerged only marginally in the discussions, mostly in relation to alternative ways to work with WLOs and other local organisations. One donor stressed the need for WLOs to have access to 'high-quality funding' that is both unrestricted and long term. They specifically referred to the possibility to use unrestricted budget funds for self-care of staff, which can in turn improve an organisation's resilience when crises emerge. They also reflected on self-care being a concept prone to misinterpretation and fear of abuse of the system – a fear that has yet to substantiated with any evidence of such incidences.

Although survey respondents noted a preference for and strong interest in pursuing direct funding, this kind of modality from bilateral government donors remains a major gap. Capacity constraints on the part of donors that prevent them from allocating smaller grants to a larger number of organisations, including WLOs, are due to a combination of factors: budgetary restrictions on staffing capacity; perceptions that smaller organisations are riskier partners (see Section 3.5); and the entrenched narrative that these are unavoidable conditions rather than the result of internal trade-offs and choices.

Ultimately, providing flexible funding mechanisms that cover both direct and indirect operational costs is a way of recognising the value of WLOs and their work as humanitarian responders. Donors can play a pivotal role in incentivising collective action by investing in WLOs, supporting both programmatic and overhead costs (Women's Refugee Commission, 2021; Chicet et al., 2022; Active in Development Aid and Women for Change, 2023; Pinnington, 2023; Frangieh, 2024).

3.2 Onerous reporting and accountability processes

As mentioned in Section 2.2, legal responsibility for the outcomes of funded projects and the perception of risk in allocating that funding leads many donors to impose burdensome reporting requirements. However, these complex accountability mechanisms constitute a major strain on small organisations that are meant to be agile and fluid first-line responders for urgent humanitarian action (Vera and Brusola-Vera, 2021; Daigle, 2024). In so doing, they endanger objectives around gender-responsive humanitarian action as well as challenging women's individual and collective rights (GAPS UK, n.d.). At a time of limited resources and increased pressure to do more with less, excess time and capacity expended on compliance and reporting can be seen as wasteful and ripe for streamlining.

Survey respondents repeatedly described funders' demands for paperwork and other requirements as putting the brakes on their ability to operate effectively:

> In the race for funding, our NGO must contend with stringent demands that, despite our expertise, place our organisation in an unfavourable position relative to international NGOs and so-called traditional partners. (National WLO, Central Africa)

> Large-scale funding often requires extensive administrative and financial capacity, which favours bigger organisations over grassroots, feminist-led initiatives. The preference for competitive funding models over trust-based partnerships also poses a challenge, as it does not always recognise the value of lived experiences and the deep-rooted impact of locally driven advocacy. (National WLO, East Africa)

The burden of accountability falls hardest on smaller organisations, among which WLOs are disproportionately represented. It also poses an obstacle to organisations that lack the capacity to navigate such bureaucratic processes in major European languages (especially English), as many respondents noted.

Funders interviewed for this research tended to agree with survey respondents. Reporting and accountability mechanisms emerged as a key bureaucratic barrier preventing WLOs from accessing funding, or slowing their capability to respond to humanitarian crises. As a representative from a feminist fund observed, 'You can't consistently be reporting while you're doing your job.' These funders also noted an ethical dimension to mitigating the administrative burden of reporting:

> Organisations that are small [are] bombarded with competing demands and responding to their community needs. (Interview, feminist fund)

3.3 Underreporting and under-monitoring of funding data on WLOs

There are currently three systems for tracking humanitarian funding, none of which reliably or consistently track funding to WLOs. This means that all estimates are based on triangulating available data on funding to local organisations and for gender concerns or GBV specifically. This issue has persisted, with recent estimates showing that funding to women's organisations 'has remained consistently low and well below the 1 per cent target of ODA [official development assistance] to conflict-affected countries' (UN Women, 2024: 6).

The **OECD Development Assistance Committee's (DAC) Creditor Reporting System (CRS)** records transactions reported by donors, typically showing first-level donors (DAC members and some foundations). While purpose code 15170 can be used to track funding to 'women's rights organisations and movements, and governments institutions', this depends on donors consistently reporting it as such, and it also means that funding programmed by WLOs to other sectors (and therefore reported under different purpose codes) is not captured. Furthermore, funds subsequently passed onto downstream partners are not consistently reported, thus further obscuring funding to WLOs. In 2016, an OECD study of donor support to women's organisations in the Global South[4] found that the DAC had no clear way to track funding for WLOs or WROs, including in crisis settings (OECD, 2016). **UN OCHA's Financial Tracking Service (FTS)** specifically tracks humanitarian spending and is able to track sub-flows from intermediaries, but actual reporting on those sub-flows is inconsistent. Similarly, the **International Aid Transparency Initiative (IATI)** has some functionality for tracking implementing partners but also suffers from underreporting generally.

States have consistently failed to provide adequate data tracking improvements in localisation and funding streams, or to require that level of reporting from their intermediaries, with an even poorer track record of gathering data on WLOs. This means that many intermediaries conflate all local and national actors into a single category, which then affects donors' own monitoring of funding distribution, quality and impact. The role of WLOs and women leaders facing intersecting forms of marginalisation, such as girls and younger women, is even less documented and almost untraceable (Sekyiamah and Provost, 2024).

Interviewees reflected on the barriers to efficient tracking, with one UN agency noting a need to reflect on what elements identify a WLO – for example, leadership, focus, internal organisation, and/or aims and scope.[5] Interviewees also called for tracking of not just funding quantities but also how many WLOs

4 The 'Global South' is an increasingly common term used to categorise many countries around the world. Often it is employed as a substitute for referring to nations that have been historically exploited through colonisation. The author acknowledges current international debates on the usefulness of this term, which question whether another generalising and binary framework (Global North–Global South) is productive for reconstituting and challenging global power relations.

5 While we use the Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC) definition for the purposes of this research – see Glossary – this is not universally endorsed, including by networks of WLOs and other local and national organisations.

focus on intersectional themes such as women with disabilities or LGBTQI+ rights. Another donor suggested a perceived trade-off between increased flexibility and rigorous monitoring quality. Moreover, a third donor explained that, although they can assign sector markers to projects (to allow them to track funding for gender equality and GBV, for instance), efficient tracking can be challenging due to inconsistent use of codes by in-country personnel. In some cases, projects are tagged inconsistently because of lack of training or human error.

These problems complicate the picture, but ultimately, measuring funding to WLOs requires better reporting on financial flows past the first recipient, and better data on existing WLOs that could be validated or cross-referenced against that financial data. To mitigate some of these problems and generate a better picture of the funding scene, donors and agencies should advocate for stronger requirements around disaggregated classification within FTS and IATI reporting mechanisms, which can include a new marker for WLOs but could be improved even within current ways of working:

> Whilst a marker for WLOs/ WROs is yet to be defined in the FTS, the system does allow for disaggregated reporting by national and local NGO categories, and fixing the system starts by reporting at this level. (ActionAid et al., n.d.: 9)

This kind of action would facilitate systemic identification and reporting of funding to WLOs (UN Women 2020; 2025, 18).

The lack of sufficient funding to WLOs involved in humanitarian work is mirrored by the persistent underinvestment in gender-inclusive peace and conflict settings: a 2021 UN Women report highlighted huge financing gaps between the plans, aspirations and expenditures of donors despite international commitments to the Women, Peace and Security (WPS) agenda. A dearth of data on the size of financing gaps has made the WPS implementation harder, while gender-inclusive commitments lack budget allocations (UN Women, 2021).

3.4 Problematic North–South funding flows and power dynamics

As already noted, the need to work via intermediaries is often attributed to limited capacity within donor agencies to manage a high number of small grants. Capacity constraints within humanitarian donor agencies are an 'ongoing problem' that affects various donors to different degrees. Researchers from the Berlin-based Centre for Humanitarian Action have noted such capacity constraints for Germany in particular (Hövelmann and Südhoff, 2022, 2023; Kreidler et al., 2023), but this is also true for Canada, the United Kingdom and other funders that regularly point to their own limited capacity as a barrier to providing small grants to local organisations of all kinds, including WLOs (Daigle, 2024).[6]

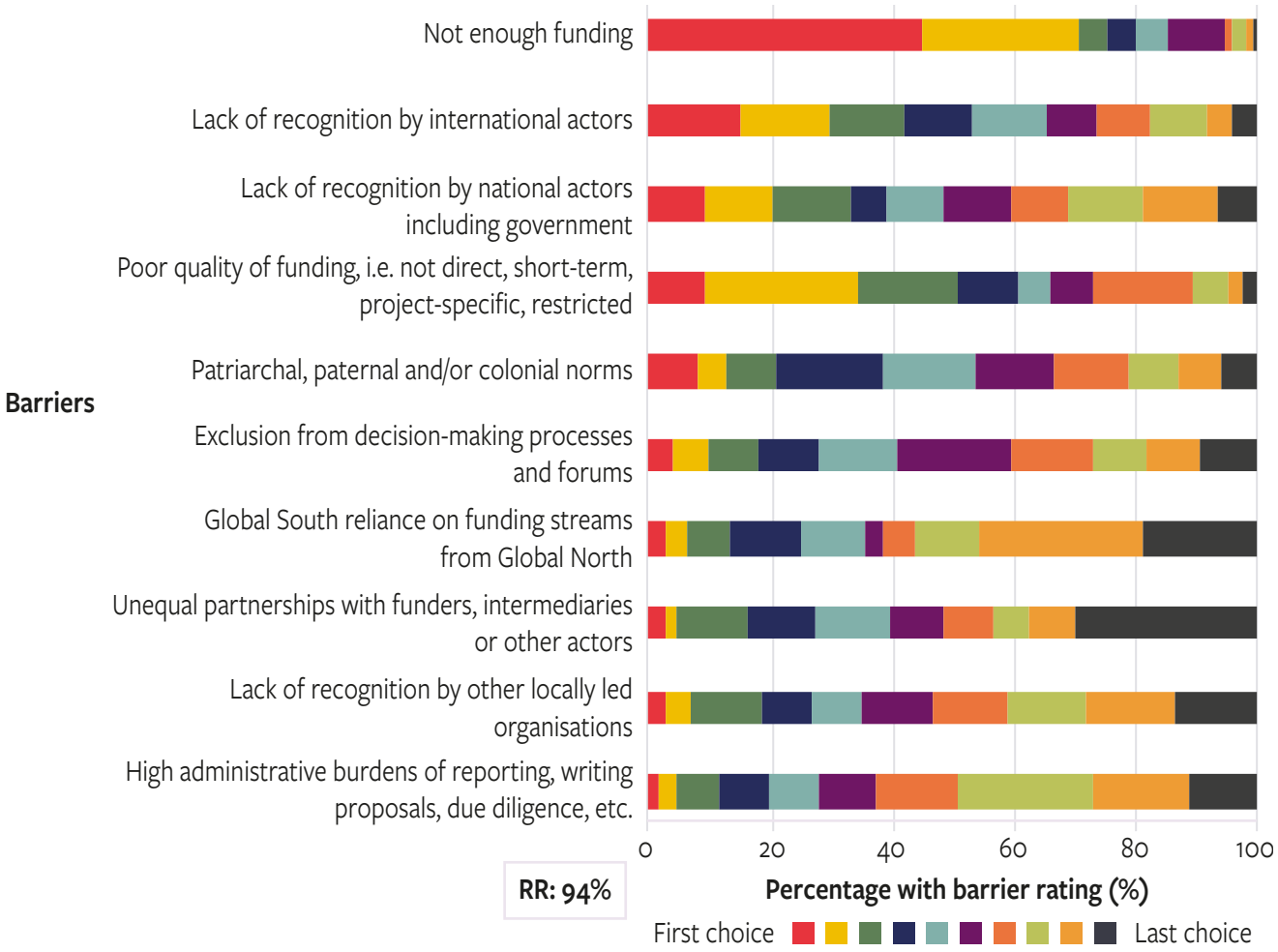
6 According to Hövelmann and Südhoff (2022: 4), 'Sweden employs three times as much staff per Euro/US dollar spent as Germany, the USA four times as much and DG ECHO [Directorate-General for European Civil Protection and Humanitarian Aid Operations] nine times more staff.'

Capacity limitations may be especially pertinent for themes relating to gender, as expertise on GBV, sexual and reproductive health and rights, LGBTQI+ concerns and other issues are often rolled into a single portfolio (Daigle, 2024: 31).

Survey respondents welcomed partnerships with INGOs, UN agencies and other intermediaries, and it was notable that they ranked unequal partnerships with funders and reliance on funding streams from the Global North relatively low among the barriers they faced (see Figure 5). That said, respondents also qualified these choices by describing problems that they encounter within these funding channels:

> We often receive funding through local networks or partner organisations, which results in smaller, sub-grant amounts with strict restrictions and limited control over how funds are used. (Regional WLO, Southeast Asia)
>
> Whilst many quote 'more women work in humanitarianism', actually women are still mis/underrepresented in coordination. Out of 200 registered INGOs in [my country], only 20 are women-led (10 officially and 10 acting), meaning we still have to push for our voices to be heard and not tokenistically. (Community-based WLO, East Africa)

Figure 5 Barriers that women-led organisations n face as responders to crises



Another respondent referenced how they are forced to defend their own priorities to INGOs and other Global North-based actors in order to access funding:

> The question of real development must be debated with partners in the North. (Regional WLO, West Africa)

As with the administrative barriers imposed by government donors, INGOs, UN agencies and other intermediaries tend to create bureaucratic and administrative hurdles. Funders of all kinds tend to fund the organisations that are already familiar to them, fuelling reliance and mistrust, and disincentivising some local organisations in the Global South. Concerns over perceived risk (financial or reputational), which often explain why donors avoid funding WLOs and other local groups directly (see Section 3.5), have only widened the gulf of mistrust between Global North donors and their Global South partners and grantees (OECD, 2016; 2022; GAPS UK, n.d.).

To date, INGOs and UN agencies have not always been held to account for how and according to which principles they distribute funds, although efforts such as the Pledge for Change and Shifting the Power Project (led by ActionAid and Catholic Agency for Overseas Development, CAFOD) are attempting to shift this dynamic. In an interview, one WLO also noted a promising model called Resourcing Change, funded by the UK FCDO's Conflict, Stability and Security Fund, in which funding was channelled through INGO partners to WROs in Afghanistan, Nigeria, South Sudan and Yemen. The funding was unrestricted, flexible and geared towards the priorities of the WROs rather than the funders' priorities (see also Women for Women International et al., 2022).

3.5 Perceptions of risk, capacity and neutrality

Across the existing literature, as well as interviews and survey responses collected for this research, it is clear that WLOs encounter low levels of trust, unequal power dynamics and misconceptions about their legitimacy as humanitarian responders, especially with regard to their perceived low levels of capacity. They also encounter assumptions that working with them is a high-risk endeavour, and that WLOs do not (or cannot) conform to humanitarian expectations around humanitarian principles, especially neutrality and impartiality. These perceptions tend to prevent humanitarian agencies and donors from viewing WLOs as capable of delivering the kinds of responses that (as earlier sections of this paper have shown) they are already delivering. Survey respondents attributed these concerns to an uncritical lack of confidence in their abilities, and called for what a national WLO based in East Africa called 'trust-based relationships between donors and local organisations'.

In a 2023 report by the International Rescue Committee (IRC), the authors pointed out that international donors appear hesitant to engage directly with partners perceived to lack clear and measurable capacity. Survey respondents repeatedly noted a lack of recognition of their expertise and capacities on the part of funders and intermediaries. Yet these perceptions do not necessarily reflect reality: a 2019 study of perceptions around capacity and complementarity among international and local humanitarian actors, stated that:

> A lack of recognition of existing local capacity is the main obstacle to more complementarity between local and international actors. This stems from how capacity is understood and assessed – actors tend to define capacity in the way that best matches their own interests and perceptions of their own strengths. (Barbelet, 2019: 1)

One WLO participant in a stakeholder workshop noted that this may have a particular impact on WLOs representing groups facing multiple forms of discrimination:

> We have an issue of attitudes toward our grant applications and other opportunities. Number one, they always think organisations of women with disabilities don't have the capacity to implement those requirements in the grant application. Attitudinal barriers are a big challenge for us.

The assumption that WLOs require upskilling is a problematic one that funders of all kinds can and should question. One feminist fund noted in an interview, 'I also heard from lots of groups that said, "for the love of God, don't make us go to another humanitarian training".' Another interviewee, representing a WLO, noted a new model being trialled by CAFOD and Trócaire, whereby the INGOs allocated funds for WLOs to collaboratively map their own capacity gaps for an upcoming partnership and then fill those gaps with any necessary trainings. This approach helped to break down assumptions about what capacities the WLOs already had, while also allowing the INGOs to avoid wasting time and resources on duplicative or unnecessary capacity-building efforts.

Conceptions of financial and reputational risk are also paramount for donors when working with local actors – although, as we discuss in Section 3.6, concern for the risks faced by WLOs or their communities during a humanitarian emergency are notably lacking. Barbelet (2019) argues that responsible funders should work to mitigate risks rather than treat them as reasons to avoid or stop partnerships. In our interviews, representatives from feminist funds spoke of assuming the risks associated with new partnerships with less established WLOs in order to ensure that funding could be allocated. They could also then demonstrate to their own funders (including governments) that it was worth taking on or mitigating risks, rather than seeing risk as an obstacle.

Although risk is often cited as a reason not to fund WLOs and other local actors, our research suggests that the best way to learn how to fund such actors is to learn by doing exactly that – funding them. Notably, two government donors interviewed for this research pointed to their own efforts to pilot direct funding models, which included funding for WLO grantees. By starting small and building trust, they were able to learn much more about the actual risks and capacities that come with these funding relationships – and ways to mitigate and navigate those risks – than they could have before they had engaged in this type of funding.

Too frequently, the role of local actors is undermined by INGOs' doubts about their capacity to remain neutral and impartial, which fail to address the prevalent and systemic inequalities that raise those doubts in the first place (Chatham House, 2022; Pinnington, 2023). Such expectations are an even greater barrier in the current geopolitical context, which positions gender as a contentious topic.

Double standards in the application of these principles also means that WLOs and other local actors are more intensely scrutinised, positioning Western leadership as preferable and working on the implicit assumption that only 'the foreign is neutral' (James, 2022; Moallin et al., 2025). In interviews and survey responses alike, WLOs based in conflict settings in particular noted that this pressure to conform to externally imposed notions of neutrality can alienate them from their communities and the key questions that shape humanitarian needs in their contexts.

Whether WLOs see conformity to humanitarian principles as desirable or feasible is an open question and one that merits much further engagement. In recent years, humanitarian dilemmas in crisis settings such as Gaza and Ukraine are creating mistrust in what agencies mean by 'humanitarian principles' and how they are applied to local, national and international actors respectively (Daigle, 2024; Moallin et al., 2025). Yet this lack of confidence in WLOs' capacities to operate effectively is not just a question of foreclosing potential partnerships between international actors and WLOs; it also threatens the ability of women leaders to feel safe and continue to live or work in their communities:

> Despite being essential to the humanitarian sector and bringing unique insights, WLOs often experience low psychological safety when faced with scepticism from agencies about our capabilities, which can hinder open communication. For instance, in South Sudan, WLOs working on [GBV] prevention in protection-of-civilian sites have repeatedly proposed community-led initiatives for GBV prevention that were initially dismissed by a leading international agency as too 'unstructured' and 'informal'. In this case, the leaders of the [WLO] felt that their insights, rooted in cultural understanding, expertise and a community-based approach, were not taken seriously. (Ramirez, 2024)

As the FHN (2023) highlights, these narratives around capacity, risk and neutrality are born of and reinforce colonial and patriarchal dynamics within the international humanitarian system. Importantly, some funders and intermediaries concurred with this assertion:

> It's not only about the language – it's also a colonial heritage. We don't want to shift power, and frontline responders bear the burden of risk. (Stakeholder consultation, INGO)
>
> [There's] colonialism. There's a lot of patriarchism [sic]. There's a lot of ways that we see ourselves as the owners, and we are. We don't trust the local organisations. We always think that they will be fraudulent. (Interview, donor government)

Ultimately, shifting thinking on capacity, risk and neutrality is a question of challenging entrenched and limiting narratives about who WLOs are and what they offer. Although this is not an easy task, it is also not without precedent (see Box 2 on the narratives underpinning the rise of cash-based assistance) and it can be facilitated with reference to evidence on the impact, unique positioning and capacities of WLOs themselves (Maung et al., 2025).

Box 2 Cash and narratives

In any kind of policy-making, narratives (i.e. the stories we tell about problems, actors and concrete pieces of evidence) help to legitimise and build support for particular courses of action. Problematic narratives around risk, capacity and neutrality can hamper the introduction of specific mechanisms of humanitarian response and/or of support to local actors, including WLOs. Yet narratives can be shifted to change perceptions and promote acceptance of new approaches, agendas and mechanisms. Cash assistance is an excellent example of how this kind of change can be achieved (Bryant and Fouad, 2024).

Over the past 15 years, the use of cash assistance in humanitarian response has grown from less than 1% to nearly 20% of total humanitarian aid, marking a success story in a traditionally resistant sector. Where donors initially saw cash as risky and liable to be misspent, change was achieved through advocates deploying narratives that positioned cash as more efficient and flexible for aid users than in-kind assistance – a key selling point for donors amidst speculation about the sustainability of humanitarian funding.

A second important narrative focused on the potential for increased choice and dignity through cash, suggesting that people who receive cash support are better able to participate in community life, make decisions and act autonomously. Although counter-narratives persist, especially relating to fears of misuse and corruption, these have been partly mitigated by the humanitarian sector's focus on quantifying impact and reporting outcomes, as well as a large third-party monitoring industry (Diepeveen et al., 2022).

Although cash assistance has arguably fallen short of its potential to meaningfully transform how humanitarian action is conducted, it nonetheless offers an instructive example for challenging narratives around risk, capacity and neutrality – and thereby improving support.

3.6 Shrinking civic space and risks to women-led organisations

Although funding-related barriers were mentioned often, survey respondents also reported a range of other barriers that affect their ability to operate, including accessing funding and being present in decision-making forums. Other obstacles include the following:

- Safety and security concerns, both directly (risks to WLOs' staff, clients and premises) and indirectly (mobility restrictions, supply chain issues, infrastructural damage).
- Restrictions imposed by governments or other authorities (including armed actors) such as discriminatory legal frameworks, instrumentalised regulatory hurdles, restrictions on freedom of assembly or speech, and harassment – all of which limit WLOs' freedom to operate.
- Infrastructural limitations, such as poor internet connectivity and power outages.
- Discriminatory cultural norms that target and stigmatise women, girls, LGBTQI+ communities, sex workers and other marginalised groups.

Many of these concerns can be classed under 'shrinking civic space'. Even before the Covid-19 pandemic, civic spaces were steadily tightening worldwide, with authorities clamping down on civil society organisations, media and activists critical of state power (Anderson et al., 2021). This erosion of civic space has led to a sharp regression of women's rights, LGBTQI+ rights and bodily autonomy. Attacks on activists and organisations have become more frequent, especially during conflicts, crises and the pandemic (FHN, 2021; Myrttinen, 2023). Local patriarchal power dynamics may exclude WLOs from accessing resources such as spaces, funding pots and mechanisms aimed at place-based actors (Njeri and Daigle, 2022).

These patterns deeply impair WLOs' ability to work effectively or seek support, and funders should consider how their grant-making and partnerships can work with WLOs to alleviate rather than exacerbate these problems. In interviews and stakeholder consultations, WLOs noted the cost burden of added security precautions, which (along with other overhead costs) is not normally covered by government donors, INGOs or UN agencies: 'They want updates, focal points, policies on security but don't support it' (interview, WLO representative).

As well as giving WLOs the resources they need to mitigate the risks they face, funding can also confer external legitimacy and even a degree of protection in some cases. Conversely, an interviewee from a UN agency noted that funding WLOs can also increase their levels of risk (by asking them to undertake particular kinds of programming), and so resourcing their security should be (although it is not currently) a core priority for funders of all kinds in the name of risk-sharing.

3.7 Localisation and women-led organisations

Despite commitments at the World Humanitarian Summit in 2016 and successive iterations of the Grand Bargain, localisation remains stalled. Although localisation is meant to create a process that 'empower[s] instead of commanding' local organisations (Moshtari et al., 2024: 2), humanitarians working in local and place-based organisations have warned that current efforts by international agencies to prioritise local responses do not truly equate to 'localisation' (Lynch, 2019; Dijkzeul, 2021). Not only is localisation still unrealised, but incomplete efforts may pose additional obstacles to WLOs' work, as one interviewee from a feminist fund noted:

> One of the things I've learned through doing this work is just how far away we are from meeting the commitments that donors have made, both around localisation and about funding WROs, and that there's definitely a concern around [the humanitarian reset] having the potential to move folks even further away.

Funding for and commitment to long-term investment in WLOs within the localisation agenda both remain low, with limited redistribution and minimal attention to gender. This risks reinforcing existing inequalities in local contexts. For example, in Syria, most 'localised' funding went to 'larger, male-dominated NGOs' that were able to leverage connections and conservative positions, leaving WLOs at a disadvantage (Pinnington, 2023: 14; see also Latimir and Mollett, 2018). In Ukraine, WLOs faced patriarchal norms, structural exclusion due to poverty and unemployment, and harms related to the gendered nature of conflict (Al Oraimi and Antwi-Boateng, 2023; see also Box 3). Overall, despite some recognition of the value of WLOs in understanding local culture and delivering services, they still struggle to compete with better-resourced actors.

Gendered inequalities intensify around decision-making. WLOs often have the *capacity* for decision-making, yet they lack meaningful *opportunities* to hold humanitarian leadership positions (Patel et al., 2020). Efforts to close funding gaps are often held in international headquarters, excluding WLOs from participation and failing to address the specific barriers they face, thus deepening disparities (Frangieh, 2024). Notably, research by the Women's Refugee Commission questioned the overuse of terms such as 'inclusivity' and 'localisation', stressing that real progress depends on shifting from rhetoric to ensuring genuine decision-making power for local communities (Hart, 2021).

Box 3 Flexibility and rapid action in Ukraine

In the fourth year of Russia's invasion of Ukraine, 12.7 million Ukrainians (36% of the population) are in need of humanitarian assistance – a slight decrease from 2024 but nonetheless a staggering number (UN OCHA, 2025d). According to the UN OCHA, response priorities include food security, healthcare, shelter, cash assistance, education and protection. In the first months of the war, civil society and volunteer organisations took on the bulk of humanitarian response, but they faced significant obstacles in accessing funding from institutional donors. In fact, in 2022, less than 1% of the total funding (US$3.9 billion) went directly to local actors (Ukraine Humanitarian Fund, 2024).

In response, the Ukraine Humanitarian Fund has made significant efforts to be more accessible to local actors, including to WLOs and other local actors representing marginalised groups. Established in 2019, the Ukraine Humanitarian Fund is a rapid and flexible pooled fund mechanism supporting international and national NGOs and UN agencies operating in Ukraine. It is the largest pooled fund in the world: in 2023, it received nearly 17% of the total contributions for all CBPFs globally (UN OCHA, n.d.). The Fund's budget for 2023 was part of a broader Humanitarian Response Plan (HRP) with a total funding request of approximately US$3.9 billion (Ukraine Humanitarian Fund, 2023).

In order to reach WLOs more effectively, the Ukraine Humanitarian Fund's team worked with a GenCap advisor[i] and the Gender in Humanitarian Action (GiHA) Working Group to make it more accessible. Actions included: providing training for more than 50 WLOs on its eligibility and allocation systems; identifying more than 100 WLOs that could be encouraged to apply for funding; restructuring the Fund's scorecard allowing cross-cutting priorities to be evaluated independently and formulating a guidance tool to support review of applications for funding; forming a Gender Review Committee; and other activities (Ukraine Humanitarian Fund, 2022).

As a result, in 2022, the Ukraine Humanitarian Fund made grants of US$9.6 million to seven recipients for work on GBV prevention and response (Ukraine Humanitarian Fund, 2022); this rose to US$18.6 million in 2024 (UN OCHA, 2024). The impact of these efforts on support for WLOs was also becoming evident: the Fund provided US$9 million in grants to Ukrainian WLOs, accounting for nearly 5% of total Fund allocations (Ukraine Humanitarian Fund, 2023). In addition, Outright International, supported by the Centre for Disaster Philanthropy, has worked with Ukrainian LGBTQI+ organisations to promote inclusion (ALNAPb, 2025).

[i]The Gender Standby Capacity Project (GenCap), managed by OCHA and the Norwegian Refugee Council, was founded in 2007 as an independent, inter-agency tool to support humanitarian coordinators and humanitarian country teams with technical expertise on gender. GenCap advisors are selected from a roster and deployed to provide strategic leadership and support on gender concerns within a humanitarian response for a predetermined period of time.

4 How can the humanitarian funding ecosystem be transformed?

Women-led organisations and their networks have long argued for a more equitable, accessible and inclusive humanitarian funding and decision-making landscape, and have raised solutions in pursuit of these goals. Here, we identify learning from practice and alternative proposals that offer potential ways forward. Given the diversity of WLOs in terms of their size, location, priorities and ways of working, no 'one-size-fits-all' solution is possible, or desirable. What is needed is a complementary, diversified funding landscape, with fewer barriers to entry for organisations led by crisis-affected people, and especially by women, girls and gender-diverse people. This summary is neither definitive nor all-encompassing; rather, these models serve as a reminder for all stakeholders engaged in humanitarian assistance, especially donors, of the wealth of knowledge and solutions that WLOs and their networks offer on the nature of humanitarian crises, the sector they work in and their own communities' needs.

Against the backdrop of the humanitarian reset, these transformative proposals are not merely aspirational; they are pivotal shifts towards a funding ecosystem based on collective action – one that can achieve inclusive local leadership, value for money and operational effectiveness in humanitarian action.

4.1 Creating a culture of trust

The current humanitarian funding landscape can be drastically improved from the perspective of diverse WLOs by creating a culture of trust between WLOs and humanitarian funders of all kinds. Funders, including government donors, can seek out the grassroots and frontline WLO responders who are already delivering critical support to affected communities, to learn about their initiatives, priorities and needs. They should also bring WLO leaders into key decision-making bodies where they do not already have a presence, as well as consider establishing formal structured dialogues to facilitate regular interaction between various types of funders and WLO leaders. This is important not only to ensure inclusive and gender-responsive action, but also to set the foundations for efficient and effective interventions, as highlighted by Women Now for Development, a Syrian WLO (2024). In practice, a culture of trust may mean reducing reporting and accountability burdens on WLO grantees, substantively engaging WLOs in the design of funding mechanisms or interventions from the outset, or simply providing unrestricted and longer-term resourcing as a recognition that WLOs are best placed to define priorities and allocate those resources. It is also about breaking down the tendency towards closed-door negotiations on funding, and welcoming WLOs into humanitarian decision-making and coordination spaces.

The work of feminist funds is already instructive here: one interviewee reported providing 'holistic' support, focusing on crisis response as well as preparation and care, looking at the 'broader

intersectionalities that might lead to a crisis eventually occurring'. Another indicated that their funding covers core costs and sustainability support, which WLOs can use to improve their facilities, strengthen IT systems or update their policies.

This kind of culture shift works against the paternalism and colonial dynamics described earlier, but by focusing on relationship-building and collaboration, it can also help to reduce the resources and capacity spent on excess due diligence and unneeded capacity-building activities in the long term.

4.2 Funding through specialist intermediaries

In general, **pooled funding** has been held up as a mechanism for achieving commitments on localisation and accessibility of funding for a diversity of local actors, but this will not necessarily become a reality without deliberate efforts to make it so. For this reason, funds such as the UN Trust Fund to End Violence against Women and the WPHF were created – the former to channel funding towards initiatives that prevent and mitigate the impacts of GBV, the latter to support women's leadership and WLOs in conflict and crisis settings around the world.

WPHF has also collaborated with UN Women and the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), and more recently the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), to allocate funding to unregistered WROs and WLOs, which is key to ensuring accessibility of funding to groups that are marginalised in their own national contexts.[7] Cumulatively, 23% of all WPHF grants have focused on strengthening institutional capacity and covering core costs, which sets it apart from many of the other funders active in supporting WLOs.[8] Innovative funds such as these also stand out for their more agile and flexible approach to risk management compared with traditional donors, which can be partly attributed to their distinct accountability structures (Sturridge et al., 2023).

Moreover, feminist funds such as the Equality Fund, the African Women's Development Fund and the four Urgent Action Funds[9] operate at the regional and international levels, working hand-in-hand with dozens of more localised funds such as Le Fonds pour les Femmes Congolaises (Democratic Republic of Congo), Women's Fund Fiji, and Fondo Lunaria Mujer (Colombia). In general, they offer flexible and consistent funding to small, grassroots and informal WLOs according to feminist principles, and they are able to work more responsively and collaboratively with those WLOs, avoiding many of the constraints imposed on direct funding from government donors or via other intermediaries.

7 This information was provided directly by WPHF in an interview.

8 This information is based on the WPHF Management Information System (STELLA) and accurate as of 1 September 2025.

9 Also known as the Sister Funds, these exist to provide rapid and flexible funding to women's organisations and feminist movements. They include UAF-Africa, UAF-Latin America and the Caribbean, UAF-Asia and Pacific, and the Urgent Action Fund for Feminist Activism, which provides grants in Southwest Asia and North Africa, Europe, the Balkans, the Caucasus, Turkey, Central Asia, Russia, Canada and the United States. For more information, see: https://urgentactionfund.org/sister-funds/

Recent policy conversations about funding for WLOs have therefore focused heavily on positioning women's and feminist funds as potential channels for more flexible and effective funding to WLOs, and the need for government donors to allocate a greater proportion of their humanitarian budgets towards them (Wilton Park, 2024). However, women's and feminist funds lack the resources to meet demand for their support, and some WLOs are unaware of the existence of these funds or how to apply for them.

Although many donors note their support for the WPHF in interviews and elsewhere, resourcing through feminist funds for humanitarian response is more nascent and merits further attention. Channelling a greater portion of humanitarian resources through innovative funding mechanisms such as these, which are focused explicitly on inclusive and accessible funding models, shows considerable promise for more accessible and effective funding modalities.

4.3 Piloting funding modalities driven by women-led organisations

Funding modalities that are designed with and for WLOs, and that engage WLOs in their governance, are an important – and, to date, largely overlooked – pathway for transformative funding. These models position WLOs, which represent diverse women, girls and gender-diverse people, as 'by and for' organisations. This makes them uniquely positioned to understand, mitigate and support the needs of marginalised groups, and operate with an ethos of solidarity-building, collective action and 'power with' (Pansardi and Bindi, 2021). This is a question not just of representation but also of operational effectiveness, directing funding towards actors with the experience, positioning and capacity to deliver solutions.

An instructive example here is the FHN National Platform – Uganda Pilot Project, which is led at the national level by CEPAD (Community Empowerment for Peace and Development) West Nile and funded by the Irene M. Staehelin Foundation. The project, which provides funding to a consortium of NGOs that then collaboratively designs priorities and allocates that funding accordingly, is described as:

> A new way of delivering humanitarian assistance: one where frontline women's rights organisations define and lead humanitarian action on their own terms, with the financial backing of global donors. (FHN, forthcoming)

The initiative has already led to other women's organisations joining FHN as members and benefiting from improved access to funding.

In response to the perceived need for a mechanism that could channel donor funds rapidly to WLOs in crisis settings, a group of feminist funds has also set up the FRF. With a secretariat hosted by the Equality Fund, the FRF is branded as a global humanitarian pooled fund for diverse WLOs. It has the capacity to engage more than 50 women's and feminist funds to act as intermediaries, using their own networks and anticipatory due diligence to achieve rapid disbursal of funds, preparedness work and

capacity-sharing with WLOs. The FRF benefits from a steering group that includes WLOs, women's and feminist funds and humanitarian sector representatives, and it has already received GB£2.25 million from FCDO, while Global Affairs Canada announced an intention to contribution CA$10 million.

This is also an opportunity for learning across parallel efforts for more inclusive, accessible and effective responses: new research from HPG on funding for RLOs argues cogently for more funding to be directed via modalities that are led by or designed with and for RLOs themselves, such as the Collective for Refugee Leadership in the Middle East and North Africa, the Refugee Leadership Alliance, and the Resourcing Refugee Leadership Initiative (Sturridge, forthcoming).

These initiatives offer potential learning, not just for funding for WLOs but also for wider localisation, accountability and aid effectiveness agendas.

4.4 Resourcing care-centred approaches and transformative recovery from crises

People's vulnerabilities are intrinsically connected to systemic oppression and discrimination. Simply investing in needs-based emergency response measures – efforts aimed at restoring the *status quo ante* – will not automatically rebalance the situation of those experiencing discrimination and structural exclusion. WLOs and WROs in general, and feminist organisations in particular, work not just to restore pre-crisis conditions but also to dismantle the structural inequalities that cause crises to disproportionately affect women. They do not assume, as many humanitarian actors do, that broad-based, blanket initiatives will naturally lead to improvements for women, girls and gender-diverse people.

Speaking about their humanitarian work, WLOs and their networks refer to collective care as a motivator and an organising principle. Humanitarianism is widely understood as a moral or ethical imperative to provide care to people living through crises, even across great distances, as codified in the core principle of humanity. The reality of immediate, crisis-related needs also cannot be neatly disentangled from power relations or the political, social and economic context that underpins those needs (Cañete and Hilhorst, 2023). For humanitarian purposes, this means attention to comprehensive safety, security and wellbeing of both crisis-affected people and responders. It also means moving beyond narrow, results-based funding approaches towards those that recognise the complexity of needs and begin from the priorities of communities in crisis, rather than the priorities of funders (Equality Fund, 2024). Shifting towards this way of conceptualising humanitarian action also speaks to imperatives around cross-sectoral approaches, coordination and locally led action. Funders should therefore seek to support such contextualised and holistic approaches centred on rights, resilience, care and transformative recovery. WLOs can provide leadership on what more holistic, sustainable and appropriate responses to crisis could look like, so funders and decision-makers should seek to learn from them on, for example, the nexus and other challenges facing the international humanitarian system.

Transformative recovery that is based on cross-sectoral and holistic approaches, and that embeds an awareness of the structural nature of risks and vulnerabilities amidst crises, is not straightforward to capture using standard indicators and measures. In response, funders and other actors concerned with pursuing transformative recovery are also interested in transformative – or feminist – monitoring, evaluation and learning approaches. These can include longitudinal, participatory and rights-based methods for capturing data on programme effectiveness, which focus on the 'why' of observed changes, enable learning from both mistakes and achievements, and ground themselves in power analysis from the beginning (see Wakefield and Koerppen, 2017; Kelly and Stillo, 2024). These approaches are useful for capturing non-linear and complex change over time, demonstrating the real impact and effectiveness of these kinds of programmes and approaches in the lives of people at risk.

5 What actions can funders take for a more accessible and effective humanitarian funding ecosystem?

In this chapter, we describe shifts and changes that would bring about a more fundamentally inclusive and accessible funding ecosystem for WLOs. The following practices were shared by governments, feminist funds, WLOs and others about their own funding relationships as examples of work they are undertaking. Some funders are already making changes, setting precedents and shifting narratives around what is possible. These efforts are presented as examples to show the potential for learning and replication within the current humanitarian funding landscape.

5.1 Reduce the reporting and compliance burden

- **Embrace 'compliance minimalism' to reduce the burden of reporting and accountability**. Without compromising due diligence and legal compliance standards, some funders are finding ways to reduce burdens by pursuing what a feminist fund called 'compliance minimalism' and 'working in a way that is suitable to local organisations'. An interviewee from another fund pointed out that adapting reporting requirements to WLOs' situations can also help to overcome structural barriers such as power cuts or understaffing. These funds reported pushing back against government donors' demands on behalf of WLO grantees, querying what information was truly needed to reliably establish the absence of fraud and to measure performance against agreed objectives.
- **Reconsider objectives of reporting**. A feminist fund shared that they monitor whether and how their grantees' work has become more sustainable following receipt of financial support, rather than just measuring performance against indicators or objectives.
- **Accept reporting in flexible formats**. In cases where funding is allocated indirectly, either through a fund, UN agency or INGO, a few donors reported being able to relax their reporting requirements – for instance, by accepting reports prepared for other co-funders, rather than insisting on their own forms or templates. Another potential mechanism here is the IASC's Harmonized Reporting Template (also known as the 8+3 Template), which has been piloted as a way of reducing the reporting burden across the humanitarian system in line with Grand Bargain commitments. Similarly, another feminist fund shared that they allow reporting via email, phone call or WhatsApp, emphasising that these alternatives allow for a deeper understanding of how funding was used, and can be useful to work around low connectivity or power cuts. Due diligence passporting is another key strategy here.[10]

10 Due diligence passporting allows grantees to circumvent the need for multiple and repetitive compliance processes with numerous donors. For more information, see the Charter for Change Due Diligence Passporting Tool: https://humentum.org/charter-for-change-due-diligence-passporting-tool/.

- **Deploy reverse monitoring and accountability mechanisms**. These approaches turn accountability and due diligence on their head by inviting grantees to assess donors and decision-makers, reporting back on the effects of their practices on effectiveness, accessibility and quality.
- **Deploy transformative and/or feminist monitoring, evaluation and learning models**. Efforts by Oxfam, CARE, WPHF and others provide useful models here (Kelly and Stillo, 2024; Wakefield and Koerppen, 2017).

5.2 Advocate for better practices

- **Complement funding with access to decision-making and coordination platforms**. Survey respondents challenged funders' treatment of them as implementing partners rather than decision-makers in their own right. One UN agency official stressed during the interview that they are actively trying to respond to WLOs' demands to be admitted to decision-making arenas, noting that, 'WLOs want to have their own decision-making spaces, to shape their own research, and to manage their own funds.'
- **Advocate to other funders**. Fund representatives reported doing advocacy work with government donors – for instance, asking them to waive certain requirements for WLOs in conflict areas, sharing their own positive experiences and best practices, or even assuming responsibility for unexpected expenses incurred in the process of funding WLOs.
- **Share best practices among funders**. Feminist funds in particular reported that besides supporting WLOs financially, they also aim to inform government donors and other funders about how their bureaucratic restrictions can constrain WLOs instead of benefiting them, and about what type of support WLOs need – and, importantly, what they do not need.

5.3 Allocate funds accordingly

- **Pilot direct funding channels**. One donor reported having launched a small number of pilot projects allocating direct funding to WLOs in response to one of their pledges to support locally led action. These pilots offer useful learning to inform further direct funding to local organisations. Other participants representing a UN agency also noted commitments to more direct funding, which they see as a means to acknowledge that WLOs 'have the skills, capacities, and knowledge needed'.
- **Ringfence and ensure better quality of indirect funding**. Another donor has committed to allocating at least 10% of funding to local actors and ensuring that 80% of funding passes through no more than one intermediary, although this is difficult to monitor.
- **Ensure the same level of flexibility for both direct and sub-granted funds** (IRC, 2023), enabling all grantees and sub-grantees to change the focus of their work, adapt to the context and respond to emerging needs.
- **Introduce participatory approaches to design of funding mechanisms and grant-making**. These can help ensure alignment with WLOs' own priorities, allowing flexibility according to the context and local specificities. Other actions include making processes more user-friendly, designing forms and portals with low technological requirements, adopting multilingual ways of working and embracing proportionate reporting.

- **Create funding calls designed specifically for WLOs**. Managing such grants involves significant time and energy, which can be challenging for agencies with depleted humanitarian coordination teams due to recent budget cuts. However, this can be mitigated by working with or through innovative intermediaries.

5.4 Shift the narrative from hierarchical funding flows to a funding ecosystem

- **Resource innovative intermediaries, including feminist funds**. Feminist funds can quickly and effectively get needed funds to frontline WLOs. Several feminist funds are also currently collaborating on a pilot global pooled fund (see Section 4.3 about the FRF). As one interviewee noted, '[There has been a] sharp increase in demand for feminist movement funding, with grant requests and disbursements nearly doubling from 2023 to 2024, from just over US$11 million to US$20 million [overall].' Funders can help fill this gap and ensure that innovative intermediaries are prepared to meet this demand.
- **Shift from intermediary-based funding flows to funding ecosystems**. Interviewees from feminist funds noted the need to view funding as an ecosystem rather than a hierarchical relationship, emphasising the social movement component of many WLOs. This must go beyond mere language to critically assessing funders' own power over grantees, and pursuit of strategies to rebalance these relationships.
- **Rethink 'capacity-building' approaches**. Rather than starting from the assumption that WLOs lack capacity, or applying blanket trainings and capacity-building approaches, funders should engage with WLOs on capacity in order to collaboratively identify gaps and provide relevant support. As noted in Section 3.5, recent efforts by CAFOD and Trócaire to create opportunities for WLOs to identify their own capacity gaps and design strategies to address them provide an instructive model.
- **Consider the risks that come with failing to engage with WLOs**. Reflecting on donors' assumptions that funding WLOs is too risky, an interviewee from a UN agency invited funders to ask themselves what would be the risk of not funding WLOs. This includes risks to WLOs themselves – another UN agency representative noted that women in WLOs are typically most exposed to risks during crises, due to the crisis itself and to pre-existing structural factors such as gendered discrimination and violence.

6 Conclusion: building a blueprint

> My organisation and I have never stopped working; however, we have had to slow down despite the high demand for our efforts due to limited funding and security challenges. Nonetheless, we remain committed and continue to persevere. (Community-based WLO, Southeast Asia)

Although recent months have presented challenges without precedent for the international humanitarian sector, most WLOs operating in crisis settings have never known anything other than uphill struggles for recognition, funding, and decision-making power. They and their networks are witnesses and first responders in crises of all kinds, and they are accustomed to confronting overlapping crises. As high-level discussions continue, the humanitarian reset should be used as an opportunity to break through impasses and hurdles that have impeded more locally led, inclusive and accessible humanitarian action to date. A more conducive funding ecosystem for WLOs is both a practical and an ethical imperative, which speaks to global commitments around effectiveness, localisation and inclusion.

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Annex 1: Survey questionnaire

Background and consent

Explanation of the survey

Women-led organisations (WLOs) play a critical role in meeting the needs of the most marginalised in humanitarian crises, but they remain chronically underfunded and excluded from decision-making. This is particularly challenging for WLOs led by and working with and for people experiencing intersecting forms of marginalisation based on their gender, ethnicity, age, sexuality, disability and other factors.

With support from the UK's Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO), the Humanitarian Policy Group (HPG) at ODI Global is conducting research on the role of WLOs in crisis and response. This project aims to increase awareness across a range of humanitarian actors of the crucial work of WLOs, as well as the need and potential for a funding and coordination ecosystem that appropriately centres and resources these organisations, ultimately strengthening inclusive, locally led humanitarian action.

This survey should take no longer than 30 minutes and consists of 57 questions. You will need information about your organisation's finances to hand to complete the survey. If you have a Microsoft account, you can save your answers and return to complete the survey later.

Key terms

The Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC) defines a 'humanitarian crisis' as any circumstance where humanitarian needs are sufficiently large and complex to require significant external assistance and resources, and where a multi-sectoral response is needed, with the engagement of a wide range of international humanitarian actors.

Similarly, the IASC defines 'WLO' as an organisation with a humanitarian mandate and/or mission that is: 1) governed or directed by women; or 2) whose leadership is principally made up of women, demonstrated by 50% or more occupying senior leadership positions.

While we will apply a critical perspective to these definitions over the course of this research, these definitions are a useful starting point.

Research ethics and use of data

Participation in this survey and other research activities is voluntary.

Participants may choose not to answer any question, and they may exit the survey at any time prior to submission of their responses.

All responses will be kept confidential and stored on a secure server for a period of one year, after which they will be destroyed. Collected responses will be analysed as part of the research process and may be quoted in project outputs (working papers, policy briefings, blog posts, scholarly articles). Any identifying details will be removed or changed prior to publication of the research outputs, although type of organisation (WLO, UN agency, international NGO, etc.) may be referenced.

At the end of the survey, participants will have the option to share their contact details if they want to continue to participate in the project, if they so choose. This will not affect the anonymity of their survey responses.

For more information about this project and related activities, or for questions about this survey and your rights as a participant, please contact Dr Megan Daigle, Senior Research Fellow, Humanitarian Policy Group at ODI Global (m.daigle@odi.org).

To submit concerns confidentially, please contact the project ombud, Dr Carmen Leon-Himmelstine, Research Fellow, Gender Equality and Social Inclusion at ODI Global (c.leon-himmelstine@odi.org).

Consent

I understand that my participation in this project is voluntary. I am free to withdraw from the project at any time, without reason, and I understand how my responses will be used.

- ☐ I agree to participate.
- ☐ I do not agree and will now exit the survey.

Questionnaire

Where you work

1. In what region is your organisation located (or headquartered, if you have multiple offices)?
   - ☐ North America
   - ☐ Central America and the Caribbean
   - ☐ South America
   - ☐ Europe
   - ☐ Southwest Asia and North Africa
   - ☐ West Africa
   - ☐ Central Africa
   - ☐ East Africa
   - ☐ Southern Africa
   - ☐ Central Asia
   - ☐ South Asia
   - ☐ Southeast Asia
   - ☐ Pacific

2. In what region(s) does your organisation work? Tick all that apply.
   - ☐ North America
   - ☐ Central America and the Caribbean
   - ☐ South America
   - ☐ Europe
   - ☐ Southwest Asia and North Africa
   - ☐ West Africa
   - ☐ Central Africa
   - ☐ East Africa
   - ☐ Southern Africa
   - ☐ Central Asia
   - ☐ South Asia
   - ☐ Southeast Asia
   - ☐ Pacific

3. Do you consider you organisation to be...
   - ☐ Community-based
   - ☐ National
   - ☐ Regional

What you work on

4. What types of crises affect your organisation and the people you serve? Tick all that apply.
   - ☐ Conflict (war, insurgency, violence)
   - ☐ Natural and climate-related shocks (hurricanes/typhoons, flooding, earthquakes, etc.)
   - ☐ Displacement (of refugees or internally displaced people)
   - ☐ Health crises (epidemics)
   - ☐ Other: _____

5. Do you work on any of the following issues? Tick all that apply.
   - ☐ Services for people in refugee or displacement camps
   - ☐ Climate action
   - ☐ Education
   - ☐ Food security and nutrition
   - ☐ Human rights
   - ☐ Security sector reform
   - ☐ Inclusion (e.g., of women, girls, LGBTQIA+ people, people with disabilities, other groups)
   - ☐ Economic justice and livelihoods
   - ☐ Social cohesion
   - ☐ Health
   - ☐ Protection
   - ☐ Housing and shelter
   - ☐ Water, sanitation and hygiene
   - ☐ Legal rights and strategic litigation
   - ☐ Disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration
   - ☐ Other: _____

6. Do you work on issues related to any of the following topics? Tick all that apply.
   - ☐ Gender equality
   - ☐ Protection of women and girls
   - ☐ Inclusion of women and girls
   - ☐ LGBTQIA+ inclusion and rights
   - ☐ Gender-based violence
   - ☐ Sexual and reproductive health and rights
   - ☐ Men, boys and masculinities

7. What other areas would you like to work on?

8. What is stopping you from working on those areas now?

About your organisation

9. What are your strengths as responders to crises? Please rank these choices from most (top) to least (bottom) important.
   - ☐ Locally embedded, culturally aware and accountable to their communities
   - ☐ Sustainable and cost effective
   - ☐ Access to people and places that other actors lack
   - ☐ Adaptable, innovative and agile when responding to changing circumstances or context
   - ☐ Able to address gender-specific needs, risks and priorities
   - ☐ Long-term presence that garners more trust among the community

10. Are there any other important things that your organisation can do that others cannot do? Why is that?

11. What barriers does your organisation face as responders to crises? Please rank these choices from most (top) to least (bottom) important.
   - ☐ Lack of recognition by international actors
   - ☐ Lack of recognition by national actors including government
   - ☐ Lack of recognition by other locally-led organisations
   - ☐ Patriarchal, paternal and/or colonial norms
   - ☐ Exclusion from decision-making processes and forums
   - ☐ Not enough funding
   - ☐ Poor quality of funding, i.e., not direct, short-term, project-specific, restricted
   - ☐ High administrative burdens of reporting, writing proposals, due diligence, etc.
   - ☐ Global South reliance on funding streams from Global North
   - ☐ Unequal partnerships with funders, intermediaries or other actors

12. Are there any other barriers you would like to add?

13. Does your organisation consider itself to be any of the following? Rank the options below or add your own.
   - ☐ Women-led organisation
   - ☐ Women's rights organisation
   - ☐ Feminist organisation
   - ☐ Other

14. Please tell us why you made your choice(s) above. If you put "other" first, please explain how your organisation describes itself.

15. What are your organisation's guiding values or mission?

16. What does being women-led mean to you and/or your organisation?

Your organisation's networks

17. What networks are you part of?
    - ☐ Grand Bargain's Community of Practice on Gender (formerly known as the Grand Bargain Friends of Gender Group, or FoGG)
    - ☐ Feminist Humanitarian Network
    - ☐ Women Peace and Security-Humanitarian Action Compact
    - ☐ NEAR Network
    - ☐ Start Network
    - ☐ Gender-Based Violence Area of Responsibility (GBV AoR)
    - ☐ GBV AoR Community of Practice
    - ☐ Association for Women's Rights in Development (AWID)
    - ☐ Humanitarian Practice Network (HPN)
    - ☐ Global Network of Women Peacebuilders (GNWP)
    - ☐ Other: _____

18. Are you part of any decision-making processes or forums within these networks?
    - ☐ Yes.
    - ☐ No.
    - ☐ Unsure.

19. If yes, please provide more detail about these decision-making processes or forums.

20. Do these networks assist you in accessing funding, decision-making spaces and/or in any other aspect of your work?
    - ☐ Yes.
    - ☐ No.
    - ☐ Unsure.

21. If yes, please provide more details about this assistance.

How your work is funded

The following questions deal with your organisation's finances in the last year. You can choose to enter information about your funding (sources and amounts) in the survey, or you can email us a document (like an annual financial statement) that contains the same information at m.daigle@odi.org.

All financial information will be managed carefully and only used anonymously.

22. I choose to:
    - ☐ Enter my own financial information into the survey
    - ☐ Send a financial statement by email

23. Have you received humanitarian funding from bilateral government donors in the last year?
    - ☐ Yes
    - ☐ No

24. If yes, how much funding?

25. Have you received other types of funding from bilateral government donors in the last year? E.g., development, peacebuilding, human rights, etc.
    - ☐ Yes
    - ☐ No

26. If yes, how much funding?

27. Have you received funding from the government of the country where you operate in the last year?
    - ☐ Yes
    - ☐ No

28. If yes, how much funding?

29. Have you received funding from foundations and philanthropic funds in the last year?
    - ☐ Yes
    - ☐ No

30. If yes, how much funding?

31. Have you received funding from United Nations agencies in the last year?
    - ☐ Yes
    - ☐ No

32. If yes, how much funding?

33. Have you received funding from international non-governmental organisations (INGOs) in the last year? E.g., CARE, Oxfam, ActionAid, etc.
    - ☐ Yes
    - ☐ No

34. If yes, how much funding?

35. Have you received funding from humanitarian pooled funds in the last year?
    - ☐ Yes
    - ☐ No

36. If yes, how much funding?

37. Have you received funding from networks of which you are a member in the last year? E.g., NEAR Network, Start Network, AWID.
    - ☐ Yes
    - ☐ No

38. If yes, how much funding?

39. Have you received funding from crowd funding in the last year? E.g., GoFundMe, Kickstarter, IndieGoGo, mightycause, etc.
    - ☐ Yes
    - ☐ No

40. If yes, how much funding?

41. Have you received funding from commercial enterprise in the last year? E.g., selling goods and services, ticketed events, etc.
    - ☐ Yes
    - ☐ No

42. If yes, how much funding?

43. Do you have any other sources of funding to make up your organisation's entire income?
    - ☐ Yes
    - ☐ No

44. If yes, how much funding have you received from these other sources in the last year?

45. In general, is the funding you receive mostly short-term, long-term or multi-year? Drag and drop these options into the right order from top to bottom.
    - ☐ Short-term (less than 12 months)
    - ☐ Long-term (12 to 18 months)
    - ☐ Multi-year (18 months or more)

46. In general, is the funding you receive mostly...
    - ☐ Flexible – my organisation can allocate it how we choose
    - ☐ Restricted to specific projects or functions

47. Thinking about any humanitarian funding that you receive, is that funding mostly short-term, long-term or multi-year? Drag and drop these options into the right order from top to bottom.
    - ☐ Short-term (less than 12 months)
    - ☐ Long-term (12 to 18 months)
    - ☐ Multi-year (18 months or more)

48. Thinking about any humanitarian funding that you receive, is that funding...
    - ☐ Flexible – my organisation can allocate it how we choose
    - ☐ Restricted to specific projects or functions

49. Is there any funding you would like to access but cannot? If so, why?

50. What are the barriers you face in accessing funding?

51. How do you think funding should be provided? What steps or changes would make this possible?

52. Is there anything else you would like to share about the funding landscape from your perspective?

Conclusion and further participation

53. If you could make one recommendation to humanitarian funders and agencies, what would it be?

54. If you would like your contact details to be retained so that you can further in this research project, please tick the appropriate box below. Further participation may entail an interview with researchers lasting approximately 60 minutes and/or participation in a stakeholder roundtable to share the research findings.
    - ☐ Yes, I consent to be contacted in this way.
    - ☐ No, I would not like to be contacted.

55. If yes, please provide your name, organisation, and email address:

The Humanitarian Policy Group (HPG) is one of the world's leading teams of independent researchers and communications professionals working on humanitarian issues. It is dedicated to improving humanitarian policy and practice through a combination of high-quality analysis, dialogue and debate.

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