



Outcome Document: Complementarity through a Localisation Lens

As part of its ongoing work to advance locally humanitarian leadership and localisation, Charter4Change (C4C) convened a panel during Humanitarian Networks and Partnerships Week 2026 to explore a central question: *What does complementarity mean in practice when viewed from the perspective of local and national actors?*

While complementarity is increasingly referenced in humanitarian policy discussions, it is too often defined by international actors. This session therefore deliberately centred the experiences of local and national organisations to:

- understand how complementarity is currently experienced in practice;
- identify where it is working and where it is falling short; and
- surface the structural changes required to make it meaningful.

The panel discussion highlighted the fact that complementarity is **not simply about dividing roles across actors**. Rather, it is about **organising humanitarian action so that leadership sits with those closest to affected communities**, with others playing roles that reinforce – rather than displace – that leadership. At its core, complementarity requires that international humanitarian action is designed to support and reinforce - rather than substitute or compete with - the efforts of local and national actors, including governments, civil society, and communities.

For the C4C network, complementarity is therefore inseparable from the broader objective of **rebalancing power in the humanitarian system**.

Summary of the Panel Discussion

This panel brought together perspectives from Sudan, Burkina Faso, and Myanmar to explore what complementarity looks like in practice, particularly when grounded in the realities of local and national actors.

Opening the discussion, **Nadine Saba** (C4C Secretariat) framed complementarity as more than a technical concept. At its core, complementarity is about organising humanitarian action so that different actors contribute according to their comparative advantages, with **leadership sitting with those closest to affected communities**. She stressed that for those working on localisation, complementarity is fundamentally about **rebalancing power within the humanitarian system**, so that international actors reinforce – rather than replace – local leadership.

Across the panel, speakers illustrated both the **potential and the limits of complementarity in practice**.

From **Sudan**, Hanin Ahmed described how Emergency Response Rooms (ERRs) emerged from community-led traditions of solidarity in a context where the formal system had largely collapsed. In

this model, complementarity was not externally designed but organically built around **proximity, trust, and accountability to communities**. Crucially, she highlighted a reversal of traditional hierarchies: rather than local actors implementing externally designed programmes, **local actors led, and others were called to support**. Complementarity, in this sense, requires recognising existing capacities and, at times, for international actors to ‘get out of the way’.

From **Myanmar**, a representative from a local actor network pointed to the persistent gap between localisation rhetoric and practice. While some positive examples exist, including emerging accountability on equitable partnerships and innovative intermediary roles, she emphasised that systems remain largely **top-down and compliance-driven**. Her intervention highlighted the importance of **investing in local actors to lead** (not just comply), diversifying funding streams, and developing locally led mechanisms that complement – rather than compete with – existing structures.

From **Burkina Faso**, Aminata Diallo Boly provided a nuanced picture of complementarity in practice. She highlighted encouraging examples, such as the Regional Humanitarian Fund, where **inclusive governance, consortium approaches, and shared roles between national and international actors** have enabled more grounded and collaborative responses. At the same time, she underscored persistent limitations in coordination systems, where **leadership remains concentrated among international actors**, and national systems are often bypassed rather than strengthened.

Across all three contexts, it was made clear that complementarity is not an abstract principle but an **operational necessity**, particularly in complex and protracted crises. Yet, while examples of good practice exist, **structural barriers within funding, coordination, and power-sharing arrangements continue to limit the realisation of complementarity in practice**.

This message was further reinforced by participants through an interactive exercise which aimed to capture key barriers to complementarity, as well as enablers and practical shifts that will allow for improved complementarity in practice.

Key barriers identified by participants

Participants overwhelmingly pointed to **systemic constraints** that undermine complementarity:

- **Short-term and rigid funding models** that prioritise delivery over sustainability, limit investment in local capacity, and incentivise competition rather than collaboration
- **Concentration of funding and decision-making power** among a small number of international actors, reinforced by donor practices and compliance requirements
- **Limited inclusion of local actors in decision-making spaces**, with participation often occurring too late or remaining tokenistic
- **Dominance of international coordination structures**, with insufficient recognition or resourcing of local coordination mechanisms
- **Lack of transparency, risk sharing, and trust**, with risk disproportionately transferred to local actors
- **Barriers to pluralism and complementarity**, whereby smaller or community-based actors struggle to access funding and influence

Key enablers and practical shifts

At the same time, participants identified concrete ways forward:

- Expanding **locally led pooled funds** and increasing support to **diverse funding portfolios and mechanisms** which enable multi-year, flexible funding.
- Ensuring **local actors are involved from design through implementation and decision-making**
- Reforming coordination structures to ensure **equitable representation and leadership**
- Moving from **compliance-driven approaches to trust-based and risk-sharing models**
- Strengthening **local alliances and collective platforms**
- Reframing the role of international actors to **add value rather than compete**
- Building on and adapting existing **local accountability and reporting systems**, rather than imposing external frameworks.

Overall, the panel highlighted that while complementarity is widely endorsed, it remains **unevenly realised** and requires deliberate structural change to become meaningful in practice.

What is Complementarity?

Complementarity can be understood as **“the deliberate and equitable collaboration between diverse actors to ensure that assistance and protection are provided by those who are best placed in each context.”**¹

It is both a **process** through which roles, resources, and responsibilities are organised, and an **outcome**, where humanitarian action becomes more effective, inclusive, and sustainable.

At its core lies the principle of the **“well-placed actor”**, meaning that responses should be led by those with the strongest proximity, legitimacy, contextual knowledge, and access to affected communities, and who are therefore best positioned to understand and respond to people’s needs.

Importantly, complementarity is not simply about efficiency or division of labour. It represents a **broader cultural and systemic shift from competition to collaboration**.

In practice, complementarity recognises the value of a **diverse humanitarian ecosystem** where roles are **intentionally organised, mutually reinforcing, and grounded in shared decision-making and accountability**.

Why Complementarity Must Be Seen Through a Localisation Lens

The idea of complementary is not neutral. **How complementarity is defined and operationalised depends on where power sits in the system**.

A localisation lens is therefore essential when thinking about complementary for three reasons:

¹ [International Council of Voluntary Agencies \(2025\) Humanitarian Complementarity: Rebalancing Power for a People-Centred System – “As Local as Possible, as International as Necessary” \(Think Piece\).](#)

1. Complementarity is about power

Without a localisation lens, **complementarity risks being interpreted as a technical exercise in coordination, while leaving underlying power dynamics unchanged**. The panel made clear that current systems often define roles from the top down, assigning leadership by default to international actors and involving local actors late or superficially in decision-making. In such contexts, complementarity can become **performative rather than transformative**. A localisation lens re-centres complementarity around a different starting point which sees local actors leading by default and international actors organising themselves in support of that leadership. Such roles are based on context and added value, not hierarchy. This aligns directly with ambition to move from a system which emphasises international leadership, to one that prioritises **local leadership with international support**.

2. Complementarity must be grounded in community realities

Across the panel, it was emphasised that complementarity cannot be designed in abstract terms — it must be grounded in **how communities organise, respond, and sustain themselves**. The experience of Sudan’s Emergency Response Rooms, for instance, illustrated that complementary can emerge organically from community solidarity systems and extend beyond immediate response to **long-term resilience and social cohesion**. Similarly, discussions highlighted that current funding and coordination systems often fail to recognise existing community capacities or invest in long-term, locally led responses. A localisation lens ensures that complementarity starts from **what exists on the ground**, rather than fitting actors into pre-defined external models.

3. Complementarity requires structural change to the system

Complementarity requires deliberate changes to how the humanitarian system is funded, governed, and incentivised. At present, however, existing structures often work against it by reinforcing competition through funding mechanisms, concentrating decision-making power in the hands of a few actors, transferring disproportionate levels of risk to local organisations, and limiting their access to leadership roles.

A localisation lens highlights that enabling complementarity requires:

- **reforming funding flows** to support direct, flexible, and long-term financing for local actors;
- **rebalancing decision-making spaces** to ensure meaningful local leadership;
- **shifting risk and accountability frameworks** toward shared responsibility;
- **recognising and resourcing local coordination mechanisms**.

Complementarity is therefore not only about better coordination — it is about **system transformation**. Seeing complementarity through a localisation lens shifts the question from “how can actors work together more efficiently?” to “how can the system shift so that those closest to communities can lead?”

Ultimately, complementarity will only become meaningful when it is reflected not just in discourse, but in **who holds power, who makes decisions, and how resources flow**. This

requires immediate and deliberate action from donors, UN agencies, and international NGOs to shift power, resources, and decision-making to those closest to affected communities.