# Crisis-affected people at the centre of humanitarian decision-making:

## Challenges and opportunities from the Central African Republic

March 2025

## Summary


Despite efforts to "improve accountability to affected people" in Central African Republic (CAR), crisis-affected people's perceptions of the quality of the humanitarian response have not improved.

To address this gap between the intentions of the humanitarian system and the perceptions of the community, Ground Truth Solutions (GTS), in collaboration with Humanitarian Data Support (HDS), spoke to over 100 people working for humanitarian organisations in CAR in 2024. Through workshops, bilateral conversations, and an online survey, we sought to understand the barriers to better community involvement in the design and implementation of humanitarian aid, as well as potential solutions.

Humanitarian organisations struggle to involve communities in project design, often conducting this phase alone, with no real participation from members of the communities concerned. This lack of community participation in decision-making hampers the impact and efficiency of interventions. National organisations, in particular, highlight the need for greater resources to sustain ongoing dialogue with communities prior to the development and submission of project proposals.

Although actors seem to put a lot of effort into collecting feedback, it is often not acted upon and rarely leads to improvements. Reasons for this were stated as include funding restrictions and logistical barriers such as poor infrastructure and insecurity. Systematically using feedback and allowing real participation from communities needs more attention. Funding should be flexible, especially for national NGOs, as they must be treated as strategic partners rather than merely implementing organisations. This flexibility would allow national NGOs to make timely, context-specific decisions and adapt programmes based on real-time feedback, ensuring more effective and relevant interventions.

Most actors indicated community engagement as an add-on, citing things deemed to be good practice 'globally' rather than things that made sense for their own communities. This concerning projectisation of accountability may be part of the problem. In times of scarce resources, the only way to maximise the impact and efficiency of limited humanitarian funds is to ensure that aid meets the population's priority needs. This requires genuine community engagement, moving beyond reactive feedback mechanisms to focus on active participation and empowerment.


Reduced humanitarian resources make basing aid programmes on community preferences more important than ever. In practice, however, this is rarely straightforward. In this report, we present the challenges encountered by over 100 humanitarian staff members in the Central African Republic (CAR). We also formulate recommendations for how to address these challenges.

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# Acknowledgements


Ground Truth Solutions and Humanitarian Data Support thank all NGO personnel who shared their challenges with us, particularly ARS, FNOHD, IDEACA, and GADY.

This project was funded by UNICEF Central African Republic with support from the United Kingdom's Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office (FCDO).


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# Persistent gap between humanitarian intentions and people's perceptions

For several years, the humanitarian response in the Central African Republic (CAR) has strived to "enhance accountability to affected people", meaning that **people should be able to participate in decisions that concern them**. There is broad recognition that only by genuinely integrating people into the process can humanitarian interventions effectively meet their needs and sustainably improve their living conditions.

Numerous initiatives have aimed to integrate community participation in CAR, particularly by recognising the role of national organisations to ensure the response is more rooted in local realities and better adapted to needs. The number of national organisations operationally present in CAR has increased by 23% from 2023 to 2024, according to the updated mapping of humanitarian actors conducted by OCHA.[1] The funds allocated to them have also increased. A collective mechanism for collecting community feedback has been implemented. Community consultations to identify humanitarian needs and priorities have occurred in several regions, and several regional working groups now address accountability issues. These efforts aim to ensure that they are accountable to the people they seek to assist.[2]

Despite these strategic ambitions, **the perceptions of crisis-affected people regarding the quality of humanitarian response have not improved**. Only 39% of households, surveyed as part of the 2024 Multisector Needs Assessment (MSNA), believe that aid meets their essential needs (compared to 44% in 2023); 43% said that aid arrives on time (40% in 2023); and 43% think that assistance reaches those most in need (down from 50% in 2023).[3]

During a qualitative study conducted in early 2024 by Ground Truth Solutions (GTS) and Humanitarian Data Support (HDS), over 100 people emphasised the personal importance of influencing decision-making regarding the aid they receive.[4] Their message is clear: **they want to be involved in every project stage, beginning with design.**

> "I propose that the community be genuinely involved so that we move away from dependence towards development. Dependence is not a sustainable form of support."
>
> *Resident of Bangui*

Even when it comes to merely reactive feedback, **opportunities for dialogue remain limited**. Only 19% of affected households surveyed in the 2024 MSNA know how to file a complaint or make a suggestion to a humanitarian organisation, and of these, only one third have ever actually done so. Even with so few people reaching out, less than half (43%) of people who submitted a complaint or suggestion received a response. This low response rate – including feedback collected through recently established collective mechanisms – undermines credibility and trust in the humanitarian system.

> "We would like complaints to be addressed, and an appropriate response given. If humanitarian actors took complaints submitted via suggestion boxes into account, the quality of their interventions and collaboration with the community would be much better."
>
> *Resident of Ndélé*

1 OCHA. December 2024. "Central African Republic. Humanitarian needs and response plan.".

2 IASC. No date. "Strengthening Accountability to Affected People."

3 REACH. November 2024. "2024 Multi-Sectoral Needs Assessment (MSNA) in the Central African Republic (CAR): AAP Results Presentation."

4 We conducted a qualitative study in collaboration with UNICEF CAR in Bangui, Ndélé, and Bambari with community members, key informants from communities, and humanitarian staff. In total, we held 15 focus group discussions and 22 individual interviews, involving 160 people, including 87 men and 73 women.

**Feedback channels are often poorly adapted** to local contexts and people's preferences. For example, suggestion boxes are the most commonly used method for collecting feedback (available to 71% of surveyed households according to the MSNA), but they are not able to use them. Only 26% of women and 50% of men over the age of 15 in CAR are literate and as such only 10% of households prefer suggestion boxes over other feedback mechanisms, according to the 2024 MSNA, highlighting the gap between proposed solutions and community realities.

Many affected people **prefer direct exchanges with humanitarian staff** rather than communicating through authorities or community leaders. According to GTS studies and data from the 2024 MSNA, households prefer these exchanges during community meetings (57%), home visits (47%), or directly at organisation offices (39%). These interactions provide direct access to humanitarian personnel and immediate answers to some concerns.

When intermediaries are involved, communication between communities and humanitarian organisations relies heavily on trust, motivation, and key individual efforts. These discussions must represent diverse voices within the community to ensure inclusion and effectiveness; this requires multiple discussions with different social groups.

> "We shouldn't have to go through the prefect and mayor to deliver aid to the community. Instead, neighbourhood or village chiefs should be directly engaged. Each entity has representatives, such as the complaints committee, the youth president, the women's president, etc. We should engage with them instead of always relying on administrative authorities!"
>
> *Resident of Ndélé*

**Carefully considering power dynamics** is necessary when organising community discussions. During our focus groups with humanitarian staff and community members in early 2024, some community members expressed difficulties in speaking freely and making suggestions to adapt activities. This challenge is also present within communities, where power imbalances between authorities, community leaders, and the general population can hinder open discussions. Barriers such as language differences and gender norms further amplify these tensions; for example, women can feel unable to express themselves in front of men. In a recent workshop organised by GTS for community members and humanitarian organisations, community members wanted to discuss topics among themselves first before meeting with organisations. Preliminary discussions like these allow them to better understand the issues and barriers to overcoming them, and reach consensus on key points to raise with humanitarian organisations. Meetings with humanitarian staff should only take place after these internal discussions to ensure more open and constructive exchanges that lead to concrete, adapted, and representative recommendations.

A lack of meaningful engagement with communities can lead to **conflicts and a loss of trust in humanitarian organisations. It can also compromise the effectiveness of their interventions.** A resident of Ndélé shared a striking example: "In my village, an NGO had a latrine construction project. Instead of informing the population and gathering their input, they started building the latrines. However, the population needed schools to be rebuilt, as they had been destroyed during the crisis. As a result, the community opposed the project, and the NGO was forced to halt construction and leave the village."

This testimony underscores an urgent need: Good intentions are not enough, and well-meaning projects can fail when people are not given the opportunity to have a say. But what are the obstacles to achieving community participation? And what are the experiences of humanitarian organisations in overcoming them?

# Exploring the challenges and experiences of humanitarian organisations

Between May 2024 and January 2025, Ground Truth Solutions (GTS), in partnership with UNICEF and Humanitarian Data Support (HDS), engaged with over 100 humanitarian organisations in CAR to better understand the challenges of involving communities in their interventions:

> An online survey among NGOs highlighted many obstacles to involving people in decisions, acting on feedback received, and addressing differences between the realities of field staff, coordination teams, and national and international organisations.

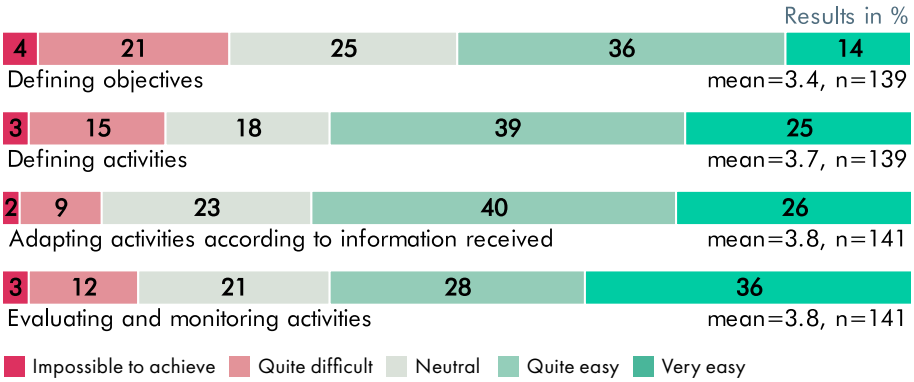
> Workshops held in Bangui and Bria discussed solutions.

> In-depth interviews with Central African NGOs enabled deeper understanding of the barriers and helped identify opportunities to overcome them.

# Co-designing interventions: Putting community voices at the heart of project development

According to the 2024 online survey with humanitarian staff, a large majority recognise the importance of involving community members in aid programmes. Comparing the different stages of the project cycle, respondents seem to feel that the most difficult aspect is to **involve community members in the very definition of the project's objective.**

**How easy or difficult is it for you and your team members to involve the community in the following steps?**




*The data presented in this graph is taken from the online survey conducted in July and August 2024.*

Indeed, our discussions with humanitarian staff revealed several recurring observations. It seems difficult to involve the community when defining objectives and activities. Humanitarian organisations still mainly conduct this phase alone, with no real participation from members of the communities concerned.

## Online survey conducted with humanitarian personnel

GTS distributed a survey among all humanitarian partners in CAR through cluster coordinators. The survey was open from 24 July to 5 August 2024, and received 142 responses from representatives of 116 organisations. The distribution of respondents is as follows:

International NGOs: 41%
- 67% in coordination roles
- 33% in field roles

National NGOs: 59%
- 90% in coordination roles
- 10% in field roles

Limitations: The number of respondents per category is not fully representative, and international NGOs are overrepresented compared to the total number of national NGOs mapped by OCHA. Self-selection bias may be present, as organisations with strong accountability practices may have been more likely to participate.

Nevertheless, the results provide valuable insights into the importance of community engagement and the challenges it presents.

**Donor requirements** are cited as the main obstacle here. The majority of staff (77% of field staff and 57% of coordination staff) feel that donor constraints complicate the definition of objectives with the community. When it comes to defining activities with the population, 65% of field staff and 52% of coordination staff see donor requirements as a challenge. For international NGOs, this is a major challenge, cited by 84% of field staff respondents.

The active participation of community members often requires a budget to cover the human and material resources for organising, carrying out, and analysing exchanges. This participation is crucial to ensuring that humanitarian projects meet the needs of the population and maximise their impact and effectiveness. However, **organisations often lack a budget at the project design stage due to a lack of core funding.** Indeed, funding requests are often based on activities and objectives that are already well-defined, which requires organisations to have their own funds to organise these exchanges.

Some NGOs develop project proposals based on data collected during previous activities in the same area. This approach is better than nothing but has limitations, particularly in a constantly changing context.

## Examples of activities to involve the community before funding applications

### Community consultation following a health cluster alert

The NGO African Relief Service (ARS) defined the objectives of its project in Kabo in response to an alert from the health cluster that signalled urgent needs in the locality. To fine-tune its intervention, ARS organised meetings with local authorities (heads of neighbourhoods and groups) and the hospital's chief medical officer. ARS conducted interviews with community leaders (youth and women's representatives, and other local authorities). These consultations fostered a better understanding of the population's health challenges and ARS adapted the project's objectives accordingly.

### Pre-project development survey following a public alert

The Bangui-based NGO IDEACA works with several community focal points. One of the focal points, in Lobaye, reported a deterioration in inter-community relations, a problem that has persisted for several years. To better understand the causes and the local context, IDEACA carried out qualitative interviews. IDEACA agents, each accompanied by a community member to translate, conducted individual interviews and group discussions with people in several villages. IDEACA used the results to draw up a project, which was subsequently funded.

### Community consultation to get an overview of needs

FNOHD has been active in Bakouma for several years and has identified several unmet humanitarian needs. To identify priorities, it financed a survey using its own funds. FNOHD held group discussions with men and women from the community, and conducted individual interviews with neighbourhood and village chiefs, youth and women's representatives, and religious leaders. They identified several essential needs, including drinking water, food, and shelter construction and rehabilitation.

The involvement of community members in new projects **is essentially limited to consultations** about whether the set objectives and activities match their needs, **and information sessions** on the objectives and activities, often organised in the form of kick-off meetings.

## Accountability standards workshops in Bangui and Bria

Three workshops were held in Bangui in August 2024 with partners from the Health, WASH, and CCCM-Shelter-NFI clusters, as well as several community leaders. More than 80 participants attended. During the full-day workshops, participants first discussed challenges they had heard about from communities or experienced in their own work. They then proposed key actions to address these challenges, leading to a definition of minimum accountability standards.

A follow-up workshop was held in Bria in December 2024, bringing together members of the AAP working group and community representatives. The challenges encountered in the field in implementing the minimum accountability standards defined in Bangui were discussed. Based on this, solutions were suggested, leading to the development of an action plan for the following years.

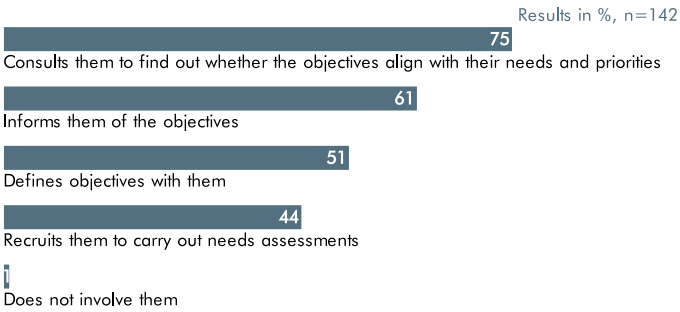
## In-depth interviews with national NGOs

Through multiple interviews conducted by our partner HDS, four NGOs – African Relief Service (ARS); Nations Forces for Humanitarian Works and Sustainable Development (FNOHD); Initiative for the Development of Livestock and Agriculture in Central Africa (IDEACA); and the Agro-Pastoral Development Group for Yongoro (GADY) – shared their experiences of ensuring community participation in their work, as well as their challenges.

[5] WASH (Water, Sanitation and Hygiene).
[6] CCCM (Camp Coordination and Camp Management); NFI (Non Food Items).
[7] AAP (Accountability to Affected Populations).

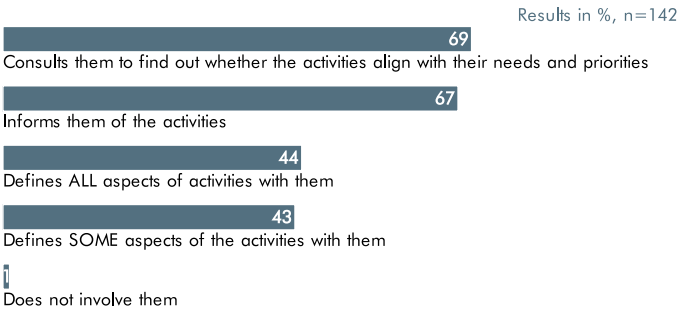
**How are community members involved in defining project objectives?**

The project team:




**How are community members involved in defining project activities?**

The project team:




*The data presented in these two charts comes from the online survey conducted in July and August 2024.*

Kick-off meetings often involve authorities and certain community representatives, although community members demand more direct face-to-face exchanges with humanitarian staff. Humanitarian organisations have told us that extending exchanges to other people in the community requires **an understanding of social dynamics, being able to identify key people, and creating relationships of trust.** Once again, these discussions require time and money.

## Examples of activities to present a project to the community

### Using presentation materials to facilitate exchanges

At the GTS workshops in Bangui and Bria, participants suggested that project presentations should be made to authorities, local associations, and the community via existing and preferred channels. People also recommended using posters in local languages with clear images and key messages, which could remain visible throughout the project to enhance communication. These posters could be placed in accessible locations for the whole community and passed on to community representatives to help them deliver key messages.

### Involving local associations and donors

For several years, the Kabo hospital received support from Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF), which guaranteed completely free care. After MSF's departure, ARS took over certain activities, but with a limited budget, which meant that only some services were covered. When the project was taken over, a kick-off meeting brought together donors and community members. The donors' participation reinforced the NGO's legitimacy and clarified the project's budgetary constraints.

Another key player in the presentation of the project was the Central African Women's Organisation (OFCA). Some activities, previously free but now subject to a charge, faced numerous information and awareness-raising challenges during project implementation. To ensure the entire community understood the objectives and limits of the intervention, and because women were a primary target population for the project, ARS approached OFCA. Through these exchanges, OFCA gained a better understanding of the project and its constraints, and thus was able to raise awareness and temper community expectations.

Another obstacle to involving communities from the project design stage is that funding applications are often based on **priority sectors and localities predefined by donors.** NGOs must therefore align their projects with these priorities. As FNOHD explained, it identified many needs through its community consultations. Following the publication of the Humanitarian Fund's priorities, it then had to design a project limiting itself to just three of the zone's priorities (WASH, Shelter/NFI and CCCM). Previous consultations helped to refine their project proposal.

Once a project is submitted to donors, they sometimes request **budget revisions.** These adjustments must often be made within **very tight deadlines**, leaving no time for organisations to return to communities and fully include them in the whole revision process. FNOHD illustrated this challenge with an example. After submitting a project proposal to the Humanitarian Fund for Bakouma, it received a request to cut its budget by half. The deadline for submitting the new proposal was too soon for FNOHD go return the community and thereby adapt the project in consultation:

> "Based on community assessments and consultations, we had drawn up a project proposal with a budget in line with identified needs. The donor's decision to halve funding, and the deadline for submitting the project proposal meant that we couldn't go back to the community to discuss the changes. For scheduling reasons, we refined and finalised the proposal and submitted it. So it's up to us to find ways of explaining the changes to the community during the project launch and implementation sessions."
>
> *FNOHD staff, Bangui*

In this context, **the launch meetings when the final project is validated become key moments to ensure acceptance** by the community:

> "During the presentation, FNOHD discussed the changes caused by budget constraints in order to raise awareness within the community about the realities inherent to the project, which led to limitations in the assistance that could be provided."
>
> *FNOHD staff, Bangui*

# Turning feedback into action

Collecting feedback, sharing it within organisations, responding, and adapting activities accordingly are essential to ensuring that people have real decision-making power over interventions in their communities. However, these processes present challenges, as humanitarian staff reported through the online survey.

## 01 Problems related to the means of feedback collection

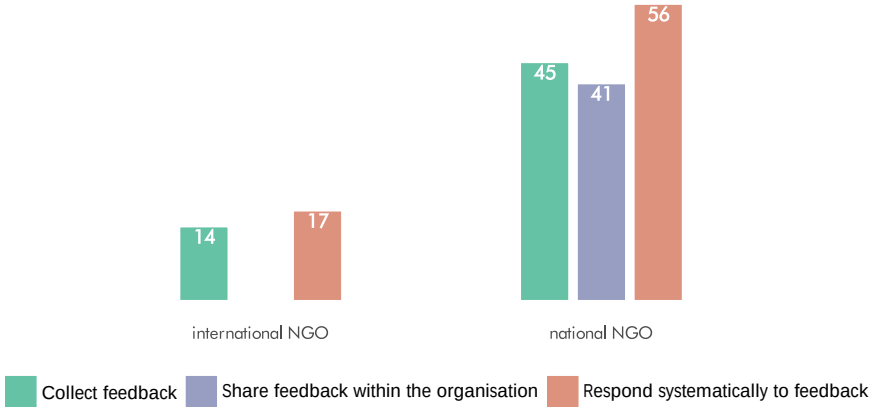
Many humanitarian respondents (44% of national NGO staff and 27% of international NGO staff) indicated that the way information is collected from communities does not always enable an adequate response.

According to the 2024 MSNA results, suggestion boxes are one of the most widely available methods for collecting feedback. However, they rarely guarantee a timely response, notably due to **road insecurity**, which prevents regular emptying, and **limited financial resources** that restrict access to some areas.

## 02 Lack of funding is a major obstacle

Many respondents highlight inadequate funding as a challenge for feedback collection, systematic response, and sharing information within organisations. This problem appears more pronounced among national NGOs than international NGOs.

**Percentage of respondents identifying lack of funding as a challenge to collecting feedback, sharing within organisations and systematically responding**[8]




*The data presented in this graph is taken from the online survey conducted in July and August 2024.*

It has been widely socialised in CAR that engaging communities is a costly, additional activity. 56% of national NGO staff consider lack of funding a barrier, compared to only 17% of international NGO staff. This difference is partly due to national NGOs' more limited and restricted access to funding. For example, the highest funding allocations for national organisations from the Humanitarian Fund are $500,000, far lower than the budgets of some major international organisations who can also sometimes rely on funding from headquarters initiatives for 'AAP' activities.

While financial resources are limited, **it is crucial to appreciate the importance of community participation in humanitarian activities**. Community members and humanitarian personnel have shared examples with GTS and HDS teams of projects halted due to a lack of consultation with the target population. For instance, in Bangui, a humanitarian actor cited an NGO that built boreholes in a village in Kaga-Bandoro without considering local history and customs. The initial borehole was placed on an ancestral burial site, deeply offending residents. After realising their mistake, the organisation engaged with the population. The first borehole was sealed, and a new water source was created at a location agreed with the community.

Investing in early dialogue and community involvement during project design helps ensure that resources are used effectively and appropriately.

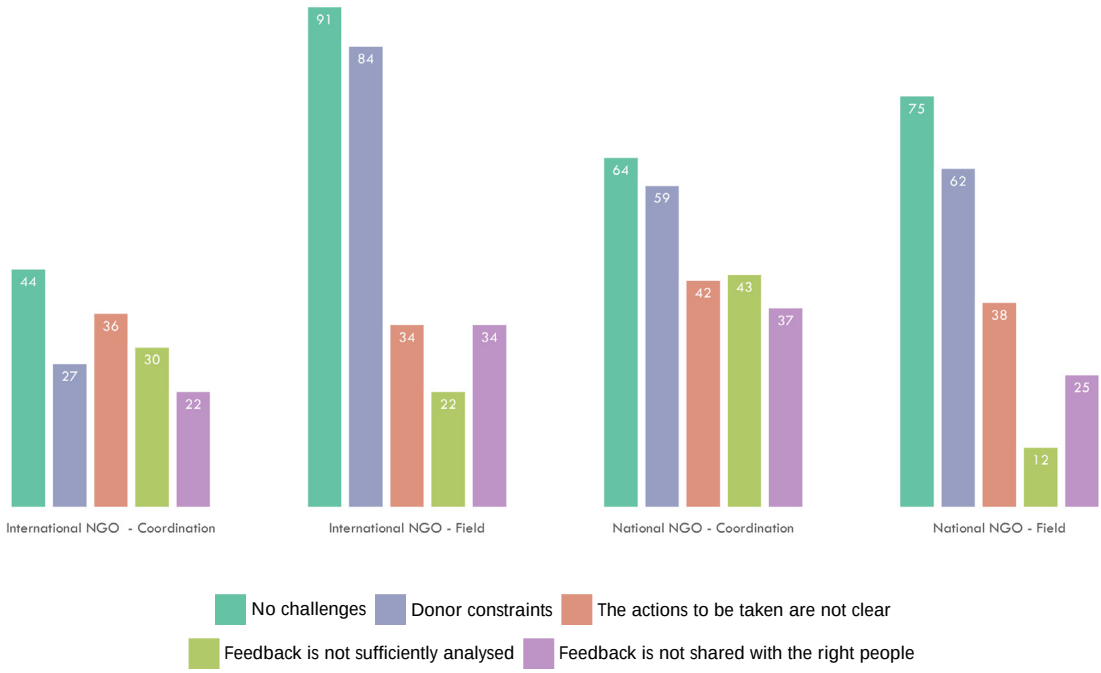
[8] Questions asked: What are the main challenges in getting feedback and/or opinions from community members on the activities implemented? What are the main challenges in sharing information received from community members within your organisation? What are the main challenges in systematically responding to community members' questions and concerns?

# 03 Constraints imposed by donors

Beyond financial constraints, people say that donor-imposed limitations are a major challenge to adapting activities based on feedback. In international NGOs, these constraints seem to be felt more by field staff than coordination teams.

This challenge is especially apparent for **national NGOs.** A similar trend is observed in feedback collection: 32% of national NGO staff cite donor constraints as a challenge, compared to only 10% of international NGO staff.

**What are the main challenges in adapting activities based on information received from community members?**




*The data presented in this graph is taken from the online survey conducted in July and August 2024.*

For national organisations, donor-related constraints included **administrative burdens** related to modifying activities, and **limited decision-making power.** This lack of autonomy is often linked to national NGOs' treatment as implementing partners – responsible for executing field activities – rather than strategic partners involved in project design and orientation who are trusted to operate with more flexible funds.

# 04 Uncertainty about how to act on feedback

Another major challenge in responding to feedback is the **lack of clarity on the necessary actions.** While communities are providing feedback, it is not always immediately clear how best to act on it. For international NGO coordination staff, this is the main obstacle to adapting activities. Field staff from national and international NGOs also mention this. In many cases, feedback points to broad concerns or complex problems that cannot be quickly or easily resolved. As a result, more discussions are needed — both internally within organisations and with community members — to better interpret the feedback, prioritise issues, and jointly identify what can realistically and meaningfully be addressed.

## 05 Logistical constraints

Several structural challenges further complicate feedback integration. Among these are **mobile and internet network issues,** which make sharing information within organisations difficult. **Road insecurity** prevents rapid responses to community feedback, often linked to inadequate collection methods that do not enable prompt responses.

### Example of an initiative ensuring continuous field presence

IDEACA has several community-based focal points to ensure a continuous field presence. To select focal points, IDEACA contacted partners in different localities to identify available individuals with good knowledge of their environment. These volunteers receive a quarterly stipend that covers defined expenses, such as communication costs. When implementing a project, these focal points are in direct contact with the project manager. Their presence within the population enables a faster response and more effective intervention monitoring.

# Overcoming challenges in implementing engagement policies

Through discussions with hundreds of humanitarian workers and community members in CAR, we have learned that despite efforts to the contrary, **decision-making power remains unequally distributed among international organisations, national organisations, and the population.** These differences in realities and priorities are not unique to CAR but reflect broader imbalances in the global humanitarian system.[9]

We have observed that humanitarian field and coordination teams face challenges in meaningfully engaging communities – an essential condition for the desired power transfer.

Although "accountability" and "localisation" are central to humanitarian discussions, these concepts often remain vague and poorly understood in practice.[10] Many obstacles still hinder their effective implementation. Our exchanges with national organisations highlight these difficulties. The use of technical terminology in the international humanitarian system – terms like "accountability", "community engagement", or "feedback mechanism" – can hinder relevant discussions with local actors. As observed throughout this report, national organisations are already implementing numerous initiatives to engage communities without necessarily using these terms. It is essential that these concepts do not become barriers to collaboration.

In times of scarce resources, the only way to maximise the impact and efficiency of limited humanitarian funds is to ensure that aid meets the population's priority needs. This requires genuine and meaningful community involvement at every stage of humanitarian action – from defining priorities to project implementation and then adapting activities based on feedback.

To achieve this, the humanitarian system must change. It is crucial to reflect on the challenges identified in this report to better understand them and find appropriate solutions, particularly by fostering ongoing exchanges of experiences and best practice among organisations.

[9] Ground Truth Solutions. January 2023. "Systems change, inside and out."

[10] IASC. July 2024. "Exploring the linkages between AAP, Localisation and the HDP Nexus."

# Recommendations

These recommendations are addressed to humanitarian organisations, donors, and humanitarian coordination entities. They are based on the experiences shared by humanitarian staff, including the challenges outlined in this document, and draw from numerous activities conducted in 2024 and years of GTS and HDS experience in the Central African Republic..

1. Ensure that funding for national NGOs includes sufficient overheads, and allows them to **meaningfully and continuously engage communities.** This requires allocating resources for:
    - **Community engagement from the project's conception**.
    - **Staff,** including field personnel, to enable ongoing face-to-face engagement, proactive feedback collection, systematic analysis, and response.
    - **Sustainable and participatory communication channels** that encourage community participation, such as committees.
2. **Guarantee funding flexibility** to allow organisations and humanitarian personnel to adjust programmes in real-time based on community feedback, which includes choosing communication channels. Ensure that national NGOs have the autonomy to make these decisions – ultimately treating them more as strategic partners rather than merely implementing organisations.
3. **Enable field personnel to act on feedback** within reasonable timeframes.
4. **Promote proactive engagement with communities** to build trust, rather than treating "accountability" as a checkbox exercise. This involves:
    - Moving from information collection through "mechanisms" to **genuine community participation and using feedback in decision-making.** Feedback mechanisms should be recognised as just one tool among many.[11]
    - Giving communities the opportunity to **monitor activities and hold humanitarian personnel and organisations accountable.**
    - Investing in the **empowerment of local organisations** and learning from their best practices, which may not carry the labels "AAP" or "community engagement". Some national NGOs **fully engage with communities without following standardised processes,** systematically documenting them, or using the "accountability" terminology of the international humanitarian system.
5. **Improve understanding of challenges** and share solutions among humanitarian organisations and within organisations.
6. Support coordination efforts to **address systemic issues** that affect community engagement, such as infrastructure, network connectivity, security, and education.
7. Avoid activities that train local organisations on 'AAP' or accountability standards developed globally. Instead, **enable local actors to take a more holistic approach** by trusting them with more flexible resources, and highlighting good practice aligned with local norms.

[11] Ground Truth Solutions. June 2024. "We might need to calm down about reactive feedback mechanisms."