



ACBAR

Agency Coordinating
Body for Afghan Relief
& development



An Assessment of AAP Coordination in Afghanistan

Exploring ACBAR's future role in strengthening collective Accountability to Affected People (AAP) within Afghanistan's humanitarian response.

March 2026

This assessment was commissioned by the Agency Coordinating Body for Afghan Relief & Development (ACBAR), under the guidance of Dayne Curry, ACBAR Head of Programmes, and funded by Foreign Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO) as part of funding for ACBAR’s SHAPE Twinning Programme Plus. It was conducted by independent consultants Emily Rogers, and Mohammad Amin Waizy.

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ACRONYMS

AAHF - ACBAR's Afghanistan Humanitarian Forum

AAI - Afghanistan Accountability Index

AAP - Accountability to Affected People or Populations

ACBAR - Agency Coordinating Body for Afghan Relief & Development

ADI WG - Accountability and Disability Inclusion Working Group

AHF - Afghanistan Humanitarian Fund

BHN - Basic Human Needs

CBPF - Country-Based Pool Fund

CERF - Central Emergency Response Fund

CFM - Complaint and Feedback Mechanism

CVAP - Community Voices and Accountability Platform

DfA – De-facto Authorities

FCDO - Foreign Commonwealth and Development Office

GiHA - Gender in Humanitarian Action

HCT - Humanitarian Country Team

HNRP - Humanitarian Needs and Response Plan

ICCT - Inter-Cluster Coordination Team

INGO - International NGO

KII – Key Informant Interview

LNGO - Local NGO

NNGO - National NGO

OPD - Organisation led by People/person with Disabilities

PSEA – Protection from Sexual Exploitation and Abuse

PWD - People/person with Disabilities

OCHA - Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs

UNFPA - United Nations Population Fund

UNHCR - United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees

UNOPS - United Nations Office for Project Services.

WG - Working Group

WHO – World Health Organisation

WLO - Women Led Organisation

1. INTRODUCTION

Accountability to Affected People or Populations (AAP) is defined as “an active commitment to use power responsibly by taking account of, giving account to, and being held to account by the people humanitarian organisations seek to assist”.¹ Practically, this entails providing accurate information, listen to and responding to people’s feedback and complaints about humanitarian action, and ensuring people can shape decisions that affect their lives.

The importance of accountability to communities in the operations of individual organisation has been recognised for more than 30 years. However, in more recent decades there has also been recognition of the importance of collective response-wide AAP (see Box 1), in order to:

- Reduce the labyrinth of fragmented systems communities and vulnerable groups face to register feedback or ask questions and reduce the burden of multiple assessment teams asking similar questions. There is evidence that communities themselves appear to prefer collective approaches.²
- Improve how communities experience the humanitarian community as a whole. When individual organisations operate with weak accountability to communities, this risks tainting community experiences and views of the wider humanitarian system.
- Provide decision-makers (Humanitarian Coordinators, Humanitarian Country Teams (HCT), cluster leads and others) with a better understanding of overall needs and preferences of affected people across the response, identifying where gaps exist, and guiding the prioritization of the response. This also recognises that people’s needs and priorities cut across the mandates of individual programmes and organisations.

Box 1: Formal roles and responsibilities for collective AAP

The expectations for collective AAP at the level of response coordination level have been clarified in recent years through the HCT Compact (endorsed in 2019 and included in the Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC) Standard Terms of Reference for HCTs). This sets out four non-negotiable priorities for all HCTs: centrality of protection, Protection from Sexual Exploitation and Abuse (PSEA), gender-based violence, and a collective approach to AAP. The AAP responsibilities of the Resident Coordinator, Humanitarian Coordinator, and HCT are outlined in the Leadership in Humanitarian Action handbook. Further, the IASC Collective AAP Framework (Dec 2023) supports Resident/Humanitarian Coordinators, HCTs, and UN Country Teams to prioritize actions to strengthen response-wide AAP, and sets out six outcomes aligned to different stages of the programme cycle.³

Interagency efforts to strengthen response-wide AAP in different countries have adopted varied strategies, informed by within-country interpretation of collective AAP, available resources (human and financial), and operating space within the humanitarian response system. The barriers faced by those seeking to further collective AAP are multiple. As the recent OCHA AAP Evaluation summarizes, these include:⁴

- A lack of shared understanding of what collective AAP entails and a lack of clarity on its definition.
- Agency mandates taking precedent over collective action, and organizations’ reluctance to share data for fear of criticism and exposure.

¹ Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC)

² Global Public Policy Institute, “Listening to Communities in Insecure Environments” (2016), <https://www.gppi.net/2016/11/09/listening-to-communities-in-insecure-environments>.

³ IASC (Dec 2023). Framework - Collective Accountability to Affected People (AAP) https://interagencystandingcommittee.org/sites/default/files/2024-01/IASC_Collective%20AAP%20Framework.pdf

⁴ OCHA (July 2025). Accountability to Affected People OCHA Evaluation Report. See report for original references and sources of each.

- Insufficient funding and resources to support collective AAP initiatives, as well as an unfit funding environment that is competitive and lacks flexibility to adapt projects to community inputs.
- Bureaucratic systems with heavy processes and sector-based planning with little room or flexibility for community participation.

The role of National NGOs in collective AAP, and overlaps with localisation

The critical role of NGOs – in particular national and local NGOs - as the primary interface with communities, is widely recognised by UN, INGO, and NNGOs alike, both globally and within Afghanistan. As stated by an NNGO: *“NGOs are the primary interface with affected people, especially in rural areas. [We have] insights into aid quality, inclusion, barriers to access, which allows frontline NGOs to ground AAP discussions in realities”.* As such, for both localisation and AAP, NNGOs play a key role in shaping decision-making.

In coordination overall, NNGOs can reflect experiences working with community-level to shape operational and programmatic decisions of donor agencies (UN and beyond) and clusters. This includes Women-led Organisations (WLO), Organisations led by People with Disabilities (OPDs), Refugee led Organisations (RLO), and other organisations led by and working with more marginalised groups.

In AAP coordination, such as in AAP Working Groups, that seek to strengthen collective response-wide AAP national and local NGOs are key for deciding on: i. the priorities for collective AAP efforts (ensuring they meet the needs of different actors within the humanitarian system and respond to critical issues in accountability); ii. ensuring collective approaches for AAP are accessible and culturally appropriate; and iii. as experts with experience in navigating contextual challenges for engaging with communities and more marginalised groups. NNGOs have knowledge of local languages and contexts, and have pioneered practical innovative approaches for working with communities (including reaching women and marginalised groups).

This is not to say collective AAP should rely solely on NNGOs to represent the needs and views of communities – response-wide assessments and complaints and feedback mechanisms, as examples, are vital for direct contact with communities that allow for needs to be systematically understood and in theory hold the humanitarian community to account. However, in the context of voice and representation in coordination and locally-led leadership, NNGOs play a critical role.

Assessment of AAP Coordination

In December 2025, ACBAR commissioned an assessment of AAP Coordination in Afghanistan to explore:⁵

- 1. What has been the role and voice of NGOs (international, national and local) in leading, influencing and participating in coordination and coordinated efforts to towards stronger collective AAP?** Section 3 presents findings against this question.
- 2. What are the critical issues for accountability to affected populations and local communities in Afghanistan?** Section 4 presents findings against this question.

⁵ The presentation of these questions is tweaked from those presented in the Inception report, to reflect the structuring of findings in this report.

3. **What have been the main achievements from collective AAP efforts, and to what extent have these supported NGOs (including National and Local NGOs)?** Section 5 presents findings against this question.
4. **How can the current AAP coordination mechanisms be refreshed or reset to better reflect the needs of the NGOs (including national and local NGOs)?** Including priorities for focus, the potential role of ACBAR in this, and how NGOs could play more of a leadership role. Section 6 presents findings against this question.

While not the primary focus, this assessment also touched on the broader culture of Afghanistan's humanitarian response — specifically, the extent to which National and Local NGOs have a meaningful seat at the table in decision-making, and are therefore able to bring community voices and experiences into those decisions. This wider context shapes whether strong AAP can take root in practice. Simply put, if National and Local NGOs are not shaping decisions, community-driven decision-making is unlikely to follow. As covered above, this is where AAP and localisation intersect.

2. METHODS

The assessment took place between December 2025-Feb 2026 and combined both remote and in-person elements. In total 139 staff (26% women) from 98 organisations were engaged, of which 56% worked for national NGOs (see Figure 1). For robust data triangulation, the assessment adopted a mixed methods approach integrating qualitative and quantitative data collection components including workshops, Key informant Interviews (KIIs), and a national survey (online).

Regional workshops - three ½ day consultation workshops were held between 9–15 February 2026 in the provinces of Kunar, Kandahar, and Herat (see Map 1). Each workshop brought together 6-9 participants from national and international NGOs (invited by ACBAR’s regional offices), allowing for greater discussion around the themes of the assessment.

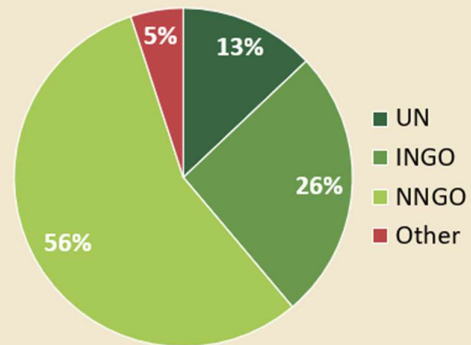
An online survey – was distributed to ACBAR member organizations between 25th Feb – 2nd March 2026, combining quantitative and qualitative questions. This received 70 responses from UN, INGOs, NNGO, and other organisations (Red Crescent and donors) operating across multiple regions of Afghanistan, of which just over half worked for organisations who were members of the AAP WG.

Key Informant Interviews – engaged 47 staff based globally, Kabul, and regional levels between December 2025-February 2026. Discussions followed a semi-structured approach, allowing the conversation to follow the experience and responses of the key informant. An initial list of Key Informants was provided by ACBAR, and additional individuals were identified through snowballing during conversation and where appropriate contacted for calls.

A document review – of documents provided by ACBAR and those found on the internet provided additional content to complement the primary data collection.

Figure 1: Organizations represented in this assessment (n=139)

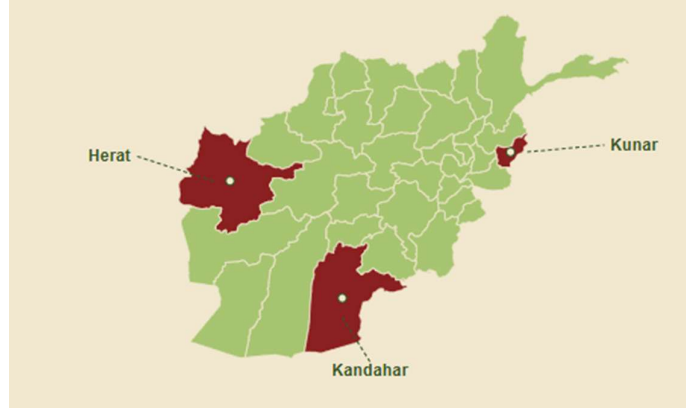
‘Other’ includes donors, the International Federation of the Red Cross (IFRC), and others.



The assessment was guided by an assessment framework, which set out the key questions and contribution of each of the above source of evidence. Data collection was led by an international consultant working in English, and an in-country consultant who was able to lead on the face-to-face elements in Dari and Pashto. Qualitative data analysis was done by coding responses – guided by the assessment framework while also allowing for additional sub-themes to emerge based on the data.

Given the volume of existing research and exercises that have engaged communities to understand their experiences and views of humanitarian assistance and actors it was decided not to engage communities directly in this assessment but instead to draw on what already exists. For example, recent research such as that led by Samuel Hall for the AAP WG, had engaged over 3500 people from communities from five provinces across Afghanistan between Dec 2024 and May 2025 through surveys, focus groups, key informant interviews and validation workshops.⁶

Map 1: Locations of regional visits, where workshops and key informant interviews outside of Kabul took place.



Limitations to note

- **AAP Coordination happens across multiple forums in Afghanistan** – the coordination system in Afghanistan is very full, with aspects of AAP considered in multiple different places (see findings: AAP Coordination). As such, while the assessment did consider the wide variety of places in which AAP Coordination is taking place more attention was given to the efforts of the AAP WG as a specialised forum in exploring the assessment questions.
- **Understanding of collective vs individual AAP** – this assessment focused on an unusual space, interested in coordinated AAP efforts and how these were influencing collective AAP, rather than individual AAP. Conceptually, this distinction was not necessarily familiar to all stakeholders, who had varied exposure to the AAP WG and other relevant coordination forums. The AAP WG had been less active in 2025, with fewer meetings as reference points to anchor conversations.
- **Profile of staff** – For organisations where responsibility for AAP (or AAP related roles) sits with more junior staff it was more challenging to gain perspectives against all question during the KII. Senior staff had more understanding of response coordination and decision-making, but less knowledge of the AAP WG efforts, more junior staff the opposite. However, the assessment team has engaged with different profiles to gather the needed evidence against the key questions.
- **UNFPA⁷ engagement** – the assessment took place at a time of turnover for UNFPA’s AAP Coordinator role, and as such UNFPA engagement shaping and informing the assessment was less than hoped for. Despite this, the assessment was able to engage five current and former staff.

The next Sections present the findings from the assessment.

⁶ Samuel Hall (June 2025). Strengthening Collective Accountability to Affected People in Afghanistan. – Executive Summary

⁷ United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA)

3. THE ROLE OF NGOS IN AAP COORDINATION

i. Where is AAP coordination taking place in Afghanistan?

This section starts to pose questions on the role of the AAP WG (recently merged to form the ADI WG) – and potentially ACBAR - in light of where AAP Coordination is taking place across the humanitarian architecture in Afghanistan. The recommendations (Section 6) start to respond to these questions.

The AAP Working Group (WG) in Afghanistan in one of a myriad of sectorial fora, clusters, and working groups that aim to discuss and collectively tackle humanitarian and development issues (see Figure 2).⁸ It was first established in 2018 as a national-level Community Engagement Working Group, before later becoming the AAP WG in July 2020 launched by OCHA⁹ and reporting to the Inter-Cluster Coordination Team (ICCT).¹⁰ The WG is currently chaired by UNFPA and ACBAR, with past co-chairs including UNHCR¹¹, BBC Media Action, CashCap, International Rescue Committee (IRC), Islamic Relief, and UN Women. As of 2026, and as part of the humanitarian reset, the national AAP WG and Disability Inclusion WG have merged forming the Accountability and Disability Inclusion (ADI) WG. The collapsing of cross-cutting working groups is not unique to Afghanistan; in north-east Nigeria AAP and localization WGs are combining, and regional AAP and Protection from Sexual Exploitation and Abuse (PSEA) Working Group at OCHA’s Regional Office for Asia and the Pacific.¹²

The existence of the AAP WG, the inclusion of response-wide commitments to AAP in Afghanistan’s Humanitarian Needs and Response Plans (HNRPs) Commitment, the endorsement of the Afghanistan Collective AAP Strategy 2023-2024, and Minimum Standards for quality inclusive programming (May 2023) are all examples of a level of HCT commitment and endorsement. However, given the complexity and ‘fullness’ of the humanitarian architecture in Afghanistan there are varied strategies the AAP WG (and any WG) could adopt for influencing stronger collective AAP (these choices are explored more in Section 5).

Issues of AAP are central to the response in Afghanistan and discussion on aspects of AAP take place across many coordination forums (although may not be labelled as such). Gender, inclusion, and access to communities and marginalised groups (women, people with disabilities, returnees, remote communities) are recognised as critical issues for the humanitarian response in Afghanistan, with a series of limiting De-facto Authorities (DfA) decrees and cultural factors putting these issues front and centre.

At national levels the Humanitarian Access WG, Gender in Humanitarian Action (GiHA) WG, and the Disability Inclusion WG are forums specifically focused on these issues, with issues pertaining to AAP (but not necessarily labelled as such) reported also discussed on the PSEA WG, Durable Solutions WG, Cash and Voucher WG, Mental Health and Psychosocial

“In Afghanistan there are so many issues with gender, access and inclusion, that this has been a focus at ICCT and leadership levels. Compared to other countries, we don’t face conflict or other issues that might dominate discussions, so everything is linked to quality and how to delivery for people.” – UN staff member

⁸ Afghanistan’s Working Groups Mapping 2020

⁹ <https://www.cdacnetwork.org/afghanistan>

¹⁰ NB: The existence of such WG reporting to ICCT is common in humanitarian operations. Based on “The Pulse of Humanitarian Coordination 2023 - Overview of IASC Structures at the Country Level December 2024”, in 2023 86 per cent of IASC operations (24 out of 28) had a subgroup reporting to either the ICCT or HCT that focused on community engagement, AAP and communication with communities. This was the most common thematic subgroup under HCTs and ICCTs in 2022 and 2023. More than PSEA, gender, disability etc.

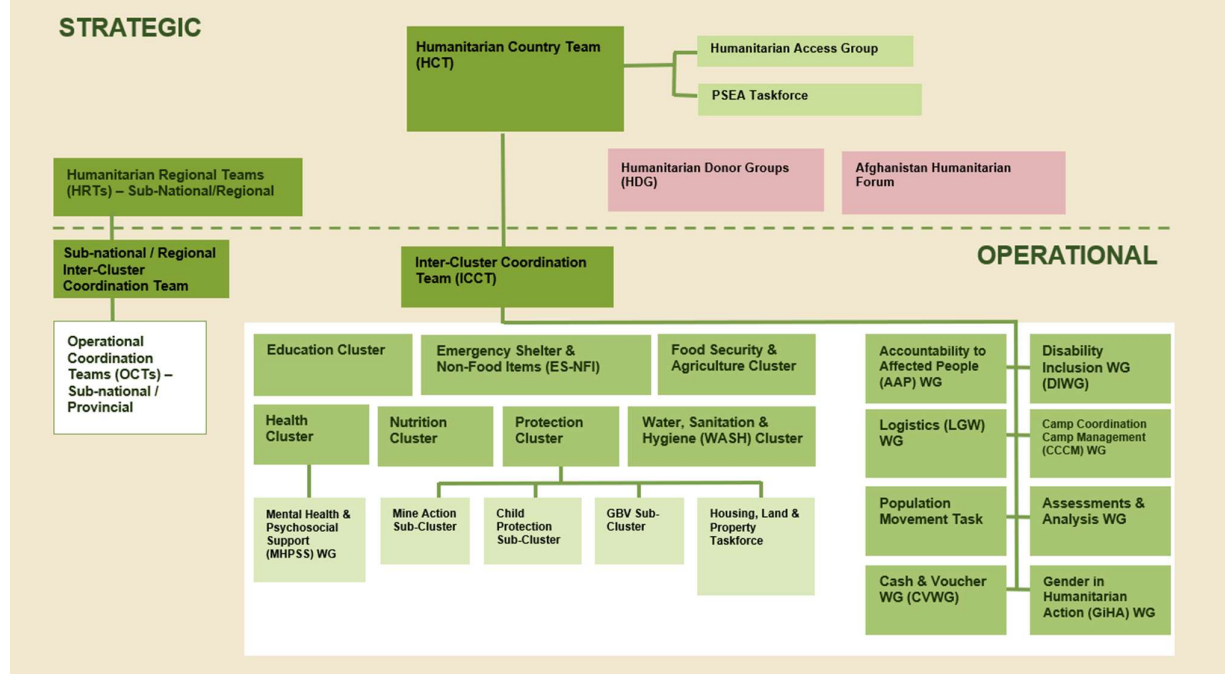
¹¹ United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR)

¹² OCHA AAP Evaluation, 2025

Support (MHPSS) WG, and the Protection Cluster.¹³ Across provinces such as Kandahar, Kunar, and Herat, NGOs and coordination actors participate in a broad ecosystem of formal platforms where AAP is discussed, including clusters, Provincial Development Committees (PDCs), Technical and Sector Working Groups (TWGs/SWGs), Operational Coordination Teams (OCTs), OCHA-led coordination meetings, ACBAR coordination spaces, and engagement forums with provincial and district authorities.

It is positive that components of AAP are present across different coordination structures, and that key informants engaged during this assessment showed a good understanding on a range of critical issues linked to AAP (that extended well beyond CFMs and feedback). Further, there are examples of positive collaboration between these different WG; for example, the Minimum Standards for Quality Programming in Afghanistan (developed by the AAP, GiHA, PSEA and DI WGs) is a good example of collaboration and how these related cross-cutting themes can be framed as programme quality. The associated training on these for Cluster partners is another positive example of WG collaboration. However, there are examples of similar activities implemented by these different WGs (including trainings for Cluster partners, community-level research, emergency insights and alerts, and surveys across humanitarian actors/clusters), and key informants also spoke of siloed working enabled by previous high levels of resourcing available in Afghanistan in 2023-2024 which had funded staff to lead different WGs. Given key components of AAP are led by other WGs, what does this mean for the scope and focus for the AAP WG? Further, how can the connection between AAP, gender, access and inclusion for quality and effective programming be strengthened, both in the understanding across humanitarian actors and in reducing the duplication of efforts? The shrinking funds may force people to collaborate, and the bringing together of the AAP and DI WGs presents an opportunity to carve out key critical issues for focus.

Figure 2: Afghanistan Humanitarian Coordination Architecture (source Inter-Cluster Coordination Team, Afghanistan) – up to the end of 2025¹⁴



¹³ As reported by KIs through KIIs and the workshop

¹⁴ Taken from: Mechanisms for Coordination of Disability Inclusion in Humanitarian Action: A Comparative Case Study Examination of Experiences in Afghanistan, Ukraine, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Bangladesh and Venezuela (Protection and Risk Reduction Division October 2023)

The Health Cluster provides a positive example of a Cluster developing sector-specific approaches and support for partners in AAP. For example, the Health Cluster has appointed AAP staff to lead on AAP for the cluster (and for WHO¹⁵'s own programmes). In 2024, they developed a patient satisfaction tracking tool for health services – tracking 10 factors including information access, safe access, travel safety, facility safety, and allowing the Cluster to see which Health facilities were not meeting the expected standards as the basis for correcting this.¹⁶ External funding also covered awareness raising among the community on the existing local health infrastructure and piloting initiatives to scale best practices.¹⁷ More recently the Health Cluster commissioned research (in collaboration with GiHA and the AAP WG) looking at female access to health services. It was not possible during this assessment to look at the extent to which AAP (labelled or otherwise) is part of the work of different Clusters. What could be the role of the AAP WG in supporting specific Clusters to develop contextualised approaches for AAP in their work with partners (while minimising duplication in common approaches applicable across multiple clusters)?¹⁸

Regional AAP WGs were initiated but could not be sustained given the changing funding landscape. In 2024 steps were taken towards to establish regional AAP-PSEA working groups in four locations financed and led by UNFPA, recognising the importance of reflecting regional variations into AAP efforts (including variations in the levels of restrictions faced by humanitarian actors in accessing and engaging with communities and marginal groups, and the nuances of each location for interpreting and acting on feedback).¹⁹ With the sudden reduction in funding levels in 2025, the UNFPA capacity to lead these regional WG reduced and AAP WG coordination returned to national level. However, other WGs (e.g. GiHA), Clusters (e.g. the Health Cluster), and coordination bodies (e.g. ACBAR) have coordination at regional levels. How could the AAP WG, collaborate, support, and leverage existing forums (rather than aspiring to have their own)? What strategies and scope of work could further AAP through different existing forums?

ii. What has been the role of NGOs in the AAP WG?

AAP WG leadership

The expertise and styles of working of individuals leading the AAP WG, and capacity gaps, has greatly shaped the focus and approach of the WG, including the roles of different actors in determining priorities and as the target audience for collective efforts. The success of any coordination forum is determined by the personality and skills of the persons chairing them. Beyond technical subject-matter knowledge, an understanding of the role of coordination and facilitation skills to engage with multiple varied actors is also critical. The drive of the previous UNFPA AAP WG co-chair has been widely recognised – both by those within Afghanistan and globally – and significant achievements in Collective AAP have been credited to the energy and determination of this individual. This includes regular AAP WG meetings, the vision and creation of the Community Voices and Accountability Platform (CVAP), and launching the Afghanistan Accountability Index (AAI) in Afghanistan (the first country to adopt this). *However*, while it was advantageous that UNFPA as the co-lead had in-depth expertise on the UN coordination system, key UN and INGO stakeholders felt NGO views had been sidelined in the work of the AAP WG with efforts overly focused on the UN as an audience. Further, the level of resources held by UNFPA for

¹⁵ World Health Organisation (WHO)

¹⁶ Health Cluster Afghanistan 2024 Annual Report.

¹⁷ The Health Cluster's work was supported by a USD 625,000 grant from Bureau for Humanitarian Assistance (BHA) covering three AAP initiatives: (1) Comprehensive Research on patient satisfaction, needs and access (2) Evidence-based capacity building and pilot initiatives to scale best practices and (3) Awareness raising among the community on the existing local health infrastructure.

¹⁸ Work from the Central Africa Republic (CAR) provides examples of how the AAP WG might engage and supported individual clusters. See here for initial overview: [Paper](#)

¹⁹ AAP WG meeting minutes (March 2024).

AAP WG activities (see Box 2) led to more unilateral WG decision-making on the priorities and approach of the WG, rather than a collaborative approach that engaged WG members (NGOs and NNGOs alike) and built positive relationships with other WG and Clusters. The approach caused some NGOs to disengage and damaged relationships between the AAP WG and other WGs and clusters, both of which was seen to negatively impact the influence of the AAP WG efforts.

Box 2: Funding for Collective AAP. Afghanistan was one of the countries to receive funds specifically for collective AAP under the 2023 and 2024 Central Emergency Response Fund (CERF) allocation rounds (supporting activities led by the AAP WG and GiHA). This supported more costly activities such as CVAP and community perception monitoring. Globally, this CERF funding for countries to advance collective AAP has been seen as catalytic, allowing agencies to prioritise AAP as a standalone investment. However, the short-term nature of the funding (with a 12-month implementation period) has been recognised as posing a challenge for sustainability of progress,²⁰ and may in Afghanistan have contributed to the intensively driven approach of the AAP WG. The budget required for AAP WG activities in 2024 was USD\$5.45 million.²¹ 80% of the requested USD\$5 million over 2023 and 2024 was secured to support collective initiatives.²²

ACBAR's role, as the other co-chair (with funding from FCDO for a dedicated AAP Coordinator), suffered from the repeated turnover of staff and gaps in capacity. As such their role in the AAP WG has not necessarily been visible to others. The most recent AAP Coordinator (who left in August 2025) focused on providing training on AAP, encouraging members to provide data to the CVAP, and disseminating key messages on AAP with members. However, in contrast to UNFPA's well-funded position, a lack of ACBAR resources to support with community-level data collection reportedly challenged the role the ACBAR AAP Coordinator could play. Further, key informants suggest that within ACBAR, AAP is associated with the AAP Coordinator, rather than something relevant and integrated into the work of all teams engaging with members and other stakeholders. As an example, a review of ACBAR's Afghanistan Humanitarian Form (AAHF) minutes from 2025 found few points on issues relating to AAP (although it is recognised 2025 was dominated by funding cuts and associated 'humanitarian reset').

Key informants point to a previous tumultuous relationship between UNFPA and ACBAR, with past power-struggles over AAP WG 'lead' vs 'co-lead' roles (in part initiated by ACBAR's previous leadership) and a perceived need for ACBAR's AAP Coordinators to have the skill needed to 'challenge' UNFPA. The AAP WG meetings have been led by UNFPA, and it is noticeable that AAP WG materials are often branded as UNFPA. UNFPA had significant resources to implement collective AAP efforts (under the AAP WG), and so was able to 'set the agenda' for collective AAP efforts. The contributions of ACBAR when an AAP Coordinator was in place – for example training of NGOs – were not recognised by UNFPA co-chair as contributing to the efforts of the AAP WG. The more independent UNFPA vs ACBAR workstreams as part of the AAP WG, as opposed to a collaborative co-led approach, seems to continue today. This assessment on AAP Coordination has been commissioned and led by ACBAR (with limited UNFPA engagement), similarly an assessment of the CVAP has been led by UNFPA (with the draft report not accessible for ACBAR).

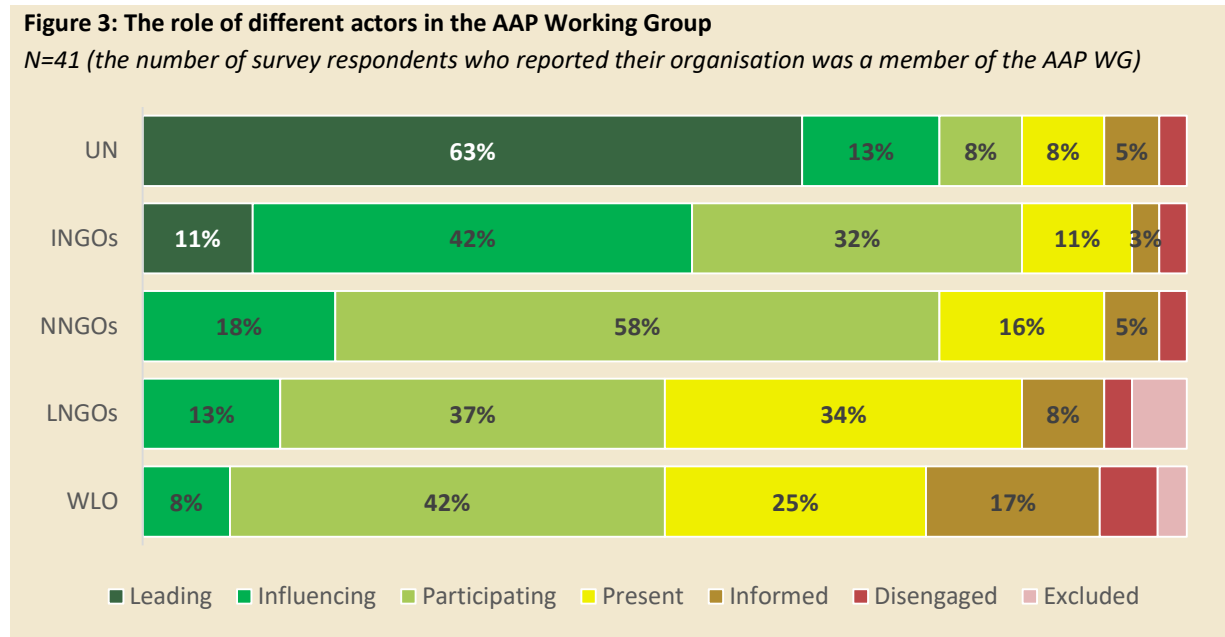
²⁰ Review of CERF and CBPF efforts in support of AAP Key findings and recommendations – A summary 20 November 2025

²¹ AAP WG meeting minutes (March 2024).

²² AAP WG meeting minutes (December 2024).

The role of NGOs in the AAP WG

Within the AAP WG, international actors are more able to shape the groups work than national and local actors. UN actors followed by INGO actors are seen as higher up the scale of participation – “leading” and “influencing”. NNGOs, LNGOs and WLO are lower down the scale of participation within the WG (despite being closer to communities (see figure 3). Interestingly, despite ACBAR being the co-chair of the AAP WG, no respondent rated NNGOs as leading the AAP WG (although this may also reflect how others view ACBAR as a coordinating body rather than an NGO).



During the assessment, different actors commonly talked about the role of NGOs in the AAP WG, commonly NNGOs, as *collecting* and *providing* community-level data rather than in shaping or leading efforts.²³ Further, multiple key informants (UN and INGO) saw the WG as shaped and orientated towards the UN system rather than NGOs, with a ‘top-down approach’, and the WG efforts more geared towards the UN as an audience. (See Section 5). Again, the levels of resourcing held by UNFPA for Collective AAP was reportedly why they could decide on the priorities for how this was used.

“ AAP Coordination has laid important foundations, now there is a need to deepen NGO linkages” – NNGO staff member

“What [the AAP WG was doing was] technically interesting but did not reflect the values of local partners. All need to work together for this to be sustainable.” – Staff member previously engaged with the AAP WG

“There was a clear approach taken to get [collective AAP efforts led by the AAP WG] pushed through, with clear preferences for UN agencies. A side lining of NGOs was very clear and because of that the approach was not inclusive and not fully embraced by the humanitarian community”. – UN staff member

²³ Other research (e.g. ACBAR (Dec 2025). Afghanistan Localisation Technical Working Group (LTWG) Localization Baseline Assessment – Final Report (DRAFT SHARED)) has found a similar trend. Regional level local actors play a role in contributing to assessments, community insights, and technical inputs, but the decision-making based on this rests with international actors.

The AAP WG operates within the wider humanitarian architecture in Afghanistan, where local actors hold less influence than international ones in coordination forums. Triangulated sources reveal that NGOs experience leadership and decision-making within coordination forums as largely controlled by UN agencies, INGOs, and donors, with LNGOs, NNGOs, and women-led organisations primarily confined to supportive or consultative roles. Further, suggestions provided through the survey for enabling NNGOs to play a more active role indicate that currently not all coordination spaces recognise NNGOs as equal partners or give all organisations equal opportunity to speak. Access is also uneven; disability-inclusive coordination practices remain limited, so while the inclusion of PWD is a critical issue for humanitarian action (see Section 4), organisations best placed to represent the needs of PWD are less able to participate.

Beyond who is at the table, there are also concerns about what coordination forums actually achieve for local actors and the communities they represent. In the western region, NNGOs who actively participated in ACBAR forums, cluster meetings, and UN workshops, contributed field insights and community perspectives but found that strategic decisions on priorities and resource allocation remain led by larger actors. While local organizations bring critical contextual knowledge, and frontline community experience, their influence on collective decision-making tends to be informal, project-specific, and rarely influential in structured coordination mechanisms. As one WLO respondent explained, engagement “facilitates awareness but remains largely transactional and issue specific.” Coordination forums tend to focus on information exchange and updates rather than structured decision-making. The absence of systematic processes for translating discussion points into operational actions—such as defined responsibilities, action tracking, or feedback integration mechanisms—limits the ability of coordination forums to function as effective instruments for strengthening accountability outcomes.

Outside of UN coordination structures, NNGOs exercise leadership in other places.

In the southern region, key informants reported INGOs participated across broader coordination platforms, whereas local NGOs relied primarily on internal meetings or limited external forums. In western provinces (Herat, Ghor), smaller NGOs rely on internal leadership and local problem-solving, while women-led organizations leverage donor trust and incremental responsibilities to assert influence. Local actors have legitimacy and practical leadership at the community level. A positive example was provided, of NGO collective action in negotiating with DfA for border restrictions to be lifted for humanitarian assistance to returnees on behalf of the wider humanitarian community. In this instance NGOs were a more accepted voice for the DfA.



What would enable NNGOs to play a more active role in coordination forums?

“NNGOs become more active in coordination when they are recognised as equal partners” – NNGO survey respondent

“Give all organisations equal chances on presenting their updates” – INGO survey respondent

“Most importantly create inclusive spaces where national NGOs feel heard and valued encourages more active and meaningful engagement” – INGO survey respondent

Barriers to greater NNGO engagement

Multiple barriers affect national NGOs' ability to consistently attend, share, be heard, and lead or influence coordination. Many of these factors are not specific to the AAP WG but speak more broadly to formal coordination structures. The below combines triangulated findings from this assessment with findings from other recent research.

- **Membership conditions, regulatory restrictions, and access to meetings exclude certain organisations.** Organisations who do not meet eligibility criteria of coordination forums are excluded from UN and ACBAR forums. This affects smaller organisations – including WLO and OPDs whose registration have been revoked by the authorities – but not exclusively. Two NGOs (an INGO and NNGO) had tried unsuccessfully to join the AAP WG without a response. Another INGO had prioritised other coordination forums to attend but felt sharing the work of the AAP WG more widely would facilitate stronger linkages with across other WGs. Regulatory restrictions, security limitations, and limited access to central coordination hubs and UN compounds prevent some local organisations from participating fully in decision-making spaces, while connectivity issues also limit engagement in online meetings.²⁵
- **Understanding of collective AAP (as opposed to individual organisation's AAP) and the role of the AAP WG.** Some NGOs did not see the AAP WG meetings as relevant for their organisation, given they had their own organisational approaches and mechanisms for hearing from communities. This misses the importance of collective action for response wide AAP as opposed to individual NGO practice and speaks to how the AAP WG positions and communicates its role.
- **The cost-benefits of attending coordination meetings are higher and less favourable for local organisations.** The cost of attending is higher for smaller organisations, who face greater challenges resourcing the staff needed to actively participate and do not have the luxury of core funding. For NNGOs in western provinces (Herat, Ghor), limited access to independent budgets and donor resources restricted engagement to formal forums. Resource constraints, short-term contracts, and competing operational demands also means NNGO presence in coordination forums is more inconsistent rather than routine.²⁶ These challenges are exacerbated for WLOs and OPDs, who are also facing shrinking civil society space.

Further, while coordination mechanisms provide platforms for information sharing, tangible outcomes are limited for smaller local NGOs and WLOs. Analysis from this assessment shows that coordination forums play a critical role in facilitating discussion, information exchange, and in places collaborative problem-solving among humanitarian actors. In western provinces (Herat, Ghor), organizations reported that forums are largely discussion-oriented, with limited follow-up and few

“ “[We want] meaningful inclusion in decision-making within clusters and the HCT, beyond information sharing”. – NNGO staff member

“NNGOs are essential contributors, yet their participation in coordination is often irregular due to limited resources and influence. Currently, local knowledge is frequently “heard but not fully integrated” with final decisions remaining centralised with international actors.” - Localisation Working Group Baseline Assessment (2025)²⁴

“ These sessions have no outcome... we are mostly consulted for needs assessments,” – local NGO staff member

²⁴ ACBAR (Dec 2025). Afghanistan Localisation Technical Working Group (LTWG) Localization Baseline Assessment – Final Report (DRAFT SHARED)

²⁵ Workshop participants

²⁶ ACBAR (Dec 2025). Afghanistan Localisation Technical Working Group (LTWG) Localization Baseline Assessment – Final Report (DRAFT SHARED)

operational improvements for smaller local NGOs and WLOs. Positively, in southern provinces (Kandahar, Farah), INGOs, alongside local actors including, reported experiencing greater operational value through structured platforms such as AAP working groups and ACBAR meetings, which support joint problem-solving, reduce duplication, and strengthen collaboration. However, the limited tangible benefits for smaller NGOs, including WLO, means costs of attending outweigh benefits. Further, local NGO and WLOs experienced limited formal recognition of their contributions in these forums. Thinking explicitly about what local organisations can expect from engaging in the AAP WG (meetings and efforts), and benefits for them in addition to their contributions to wider collective AAP, is important to ensure their role goes beyond the provision of information.

- **The approach and formats of meetings themselves can also discourage NNGO engagement, and top-down approaches mean NNGO contributions can be less valued.** Access to coordination spaces does not necessarily translate into NNGO contributions or influence. Key informants reported coordination forums tended to be UN focused with international actors being more active compared with NNGOs who have contributed less. This was also reported to be the case in ACBAR’s NGO Directors meetings, a non-UN forum. Further, the assessment heard experiences of NNGO inputs being less valued and considered in discussions compared to international voices, so that even if NNGOs propose something it is rarely considered. This mirrors a recent survey of NNGOs conducted by the Afghanistan Localisation Technical Working Group (LTWG) which found the majority had experienced local knowledge either “partially acknowledged and occasionally integrated” or “minimally acknowledged and rarely integrated”.²⁷ Intolerance to different styles of communication, and a lack of patience towards national actors, was also reported as a challenge.

The use of English language (and absence of translation) in coordination forums also discourage active participation (speaking and sharing) of those less confident in their language skills. Outdated or last-minute meeting agendas do not allow NNGOs to prepare, and unfamiliar subject matter (that assumes technical or humanitarian system knowledge) also precludes local organisations from speaking-up. Further, power dynamic within the room – with donor agencies sitting alongside ‘implementing partners’ – was seen to suppress honest conversations. As a result, operational insights from organisations closest to communities are not fully reflected in coordination discussions.²⁸

- **High meeting attendance levels and attendance by more junior staff presents challenges for the role of coordination forums in decision-making.** The attendance levels of Cluster and WG meetings in Afghanistan is extraordinarily high, the AAP WG as an example reported 350 members from which ~120 people would participate in WG meetings. This influences the nature of meetings, which commonly focus on information exchange and updates as opposed to collaborating for joint action, and requires a strong chair to manage. As such, WG meetings may not be an effective forum for decision-making, but other options could be used for making decisions in collaboration with different stakeholders.

Further, the requirement for organisations to be active members of certain clusters and WG is a prerequisite for Afghanistan Humanitarian Fund (AHF) funding, drives attendance but not necessarily by the most appropriate staff. Some participants are attending meetings in order for their organisation to meet this requirement are not necessarily able to speak on behalf of their organisation. AAP WG meetings, are often attended by more junior (AAP focal points, MEAL²⁹ officers, comms officers) rather than senior staff. This

²⁷ ACBAR (Dec 2025). Afghanistan Localisation Technical Working Group (LTWG) Localization Baseline Assessment – Final Report (DRAFT SHARED)

²⁸ Workshop finding.

²⁹ Monitoring, Evaluation, Accountability and Learning

influences the nature of discussions (towards more operational rather than strategic thinking), and also the level of influence attendees have within their own organisations to use and internalise learning shared via the AAP WG. The constant churn of people responsible for AAP is also a challenge for sustained engagement.

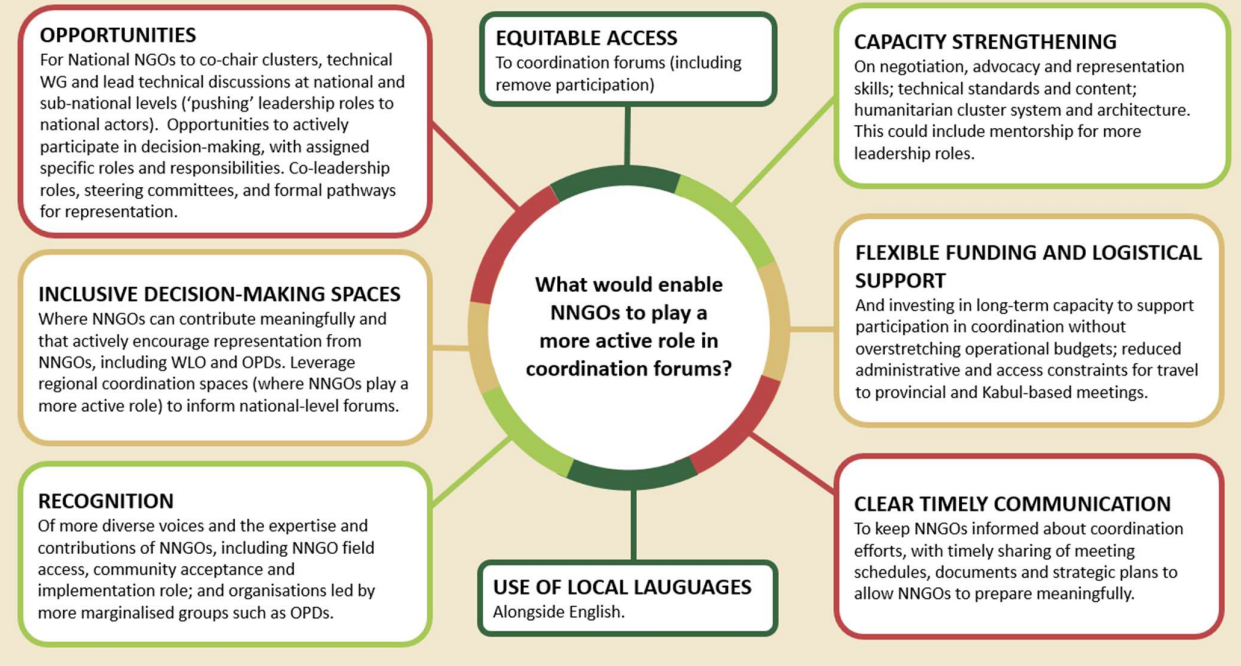
- **NNGO leadership in coordination forums does not equate to authority or influence.** While Clusters tend to be co-led by a UN agency and an INGO, there are examples of NNGOs within coordination leadership roles. The AHF advisory board for 2025 aimed for six INGOs and six NNGO; and HCT includes positions for NNGOs (including WLO and representative from women’s advisory group). However, past research has found where NNGOs hold formal leadership or co-leadership roles (e.g. at regional levels) these positions do not consistently translate into substantive authority over agendas and decisions.³⁰ The need for an understanding of humanitarian coordination architecture was also identified as a barrier to NNGOs playing more of a leadership role in shaping coordination forums.

The role of National and Local NGOs in coordination is an area where AAP and localisation intersect. Analysis shows that while NGOs—including LNGOs, NNGOs, and women-led organizations—actively gather community feedback, their ability to reflect this input into coordination-level decisions and for this to be used to shape decisions is uneven. National NGOs (including WLO and OPDs) potentially play a pivotal role in linking community voices and experiences to coordination and decision-making, leveraging proximity, contextual knowledge, and operational flexibility to implement interventions that international actors cannot. Figure 4 summarises the support and adaptations recommended by survey respondents to enable NGOs to play a more active role in coordination forums, allowing community level experiences to inform direction and activities. These have been previously well documented in literature on localisation of coordination forums.

Further, opportunities exist for forums to better incorporate feedback from L/NNGOs. Suggested mechanisms provided by workshop participants include dedicated agenda items for L/NNGO input, periodic “coordination user experience” surveys, establishing community advisory panels linked to clusters or AAP forums, rotating representatives to present “Community Signals,” and providing micro-grants for participation costs like transport and translation.

³⁰ ACBAR (Dec 2025). Afghanistan Localisation Technical Working Group (LTWG) Localization Baseline Assessment – Final Report (DRAFT SHARED)

Figure 4: Summary of support and adaptations that would enable NNGOs to play a more active role in coordination forms. (Source: AAP coordination assessment survey)



4. WHAT ARE THE CRITICAL ISSUES FOR AAP IN AFGHANISTAN?

There has been much research and activities engaging communities in recent years to understand their experiences and perspectives on humanitarian activities and actors (see Section 5 for examples). These have highlighted recurring accountability issues, that have remained remarkably constant over time. Drawing from existing documents, the survey findings, and KIIs this section presents the key issues and barriers for AAP in Afghanistan (as experienced by communities and faced by humanitarian actors). This points to different areas of focus the AAP WG, and ACBAR as part of this, could choose to give emphasis to in order to advance the accountability of individual organisations and so the humanitarian community as a whole.

Community leaders are serving as the dominant access points for aid information, consultation, and complaint resolution.³¹

The inclusion of women and persons with disabilities (PWD) remains a critical challenge. For organisations, inabilities to reach and meaningfully engage women, PWD and those living in remote areas represent one of the main barriers to AAP, resulting in an incomplete representation of community priorities and the inability to adapt programmes based on the needs of different groups (see figure 5 and 6). Past community-level research has found, faced with challenges of accessing different groups, organisations overly rely on community leaders which results in an “illusion of inclusion”, that sees youth, women (especially married women), female headed households, and PwD underrepresented in consultation processes.³² Multiple community consultations initiated by the AAP WG following emergencies in different parts of the countries have highlighted the specific needs of women were not being adequately addressed (with basic items such as sanitary kits, clothes, psychological support services being insufficient or missing).^{33, 34} For community members, local leaders are commonly their primary source of information, and while leaders may be trusted and embedded in communities they are also acting as gatekeepers controlling access to aid, shaping perceptions of fairness, and in some cases reenforcing gender and social hierarchies.³⁵ Communities commonly view selection processes and the targeting of assistance as unfair (with bias towards relatives and friends of community focal points). PWD and women, in particular married women and female headed households, often do not have access to the same key information as others (e.g. about available services and aid distribution details). Further, options for raising feedback with humanitarian actors are more likely to exclude women and PWD, where literacy or access to a telephone is a prerequisite.³⁶

The role of DfA restrictions, security and logistical constraints, and cultural norms as barriers to reaching and engaging women, PWD, and more remote areas are well recognised. However, different sources suggest there are actions more within the sphere of control of humanitarian actors. For example past cross-cluster discussions reviewing existing community-data have identified practical solutions, that indicate despite the tight restrictions and difficult operating environment, there is more that can be done.³⁷ Samuel Hall research also presented practical community solutions to reaching beyond community leaders, for example using mosque loudspeakers and illustrated posters for information dissemination; introducing female focal points and mobile helpdesks at distribution sites; publicly displaying aid selection criteria; and ensuring feedback mechanisms are safe, confidential, and physically accessible. Survey respondents highlighted that stigma, lack of awareness, or fear of

³¹ Samuel Hall (June 2025). Executive Summary - Strengthening Collective Accountability to Affected People in Afghanistan.

³² Samuel Hall (June 2025). Executive Summary - Strengthening Collective Accountability to Affected People in Afghanistan.

³³ Community Voices Bulletin North Region, Afghanistan. Flood response Edition #1 May-June 2024

³⁴ Community Voices Bulletin Western Region, Afghanistan. Flood response Edition #1 May-June 2024

³⁵ Samuel Hall (June 2025). Executive Summary - Strengthening Collective Accountability to Affected People in Afghanistan.

³⁶ A report of Community Voices Workshop: A systematic approach to people-centred response in Afghanistan. In preparation for the 2025 HNRP.

³⁷ A report of Community Voices Workshop: A systematic approach to people-centred response in Afghanistan. In preparation for the 2025 HNRP.

discrimination discourages PWD from reporting their disabilities and the specific challenges PWDs face inhibits engagement and feedback. As such, meaningfully engaging PWD requires different methods for inclusive engagement and time. 50% of survey respondents reported their organisation was strong at engaging women – and while this is unverified – KII discussions also suggest some organisations are finding different ways to navigate restrictions. Samuel Hall research speaks to the need for greater interrogation by humanitarian actors of how this reliance on community leaders can marginalise women, people with disabilities and those outside kinship or patronage networks.³⁸ Past work from Haiti, intentionally exploring the role and representativeness of camp committees as the basis for deciding how to engage with these self-appointed leaders and developing strategies for engaging wider community members, may provide relevant thinking.³⁹ Further, organisations reported that a lack of reliable, disaggregated data currently makes it difficult to fully understand and respond to the specific needs of women, persons with disabilities, minorities, and other at-risk groups.

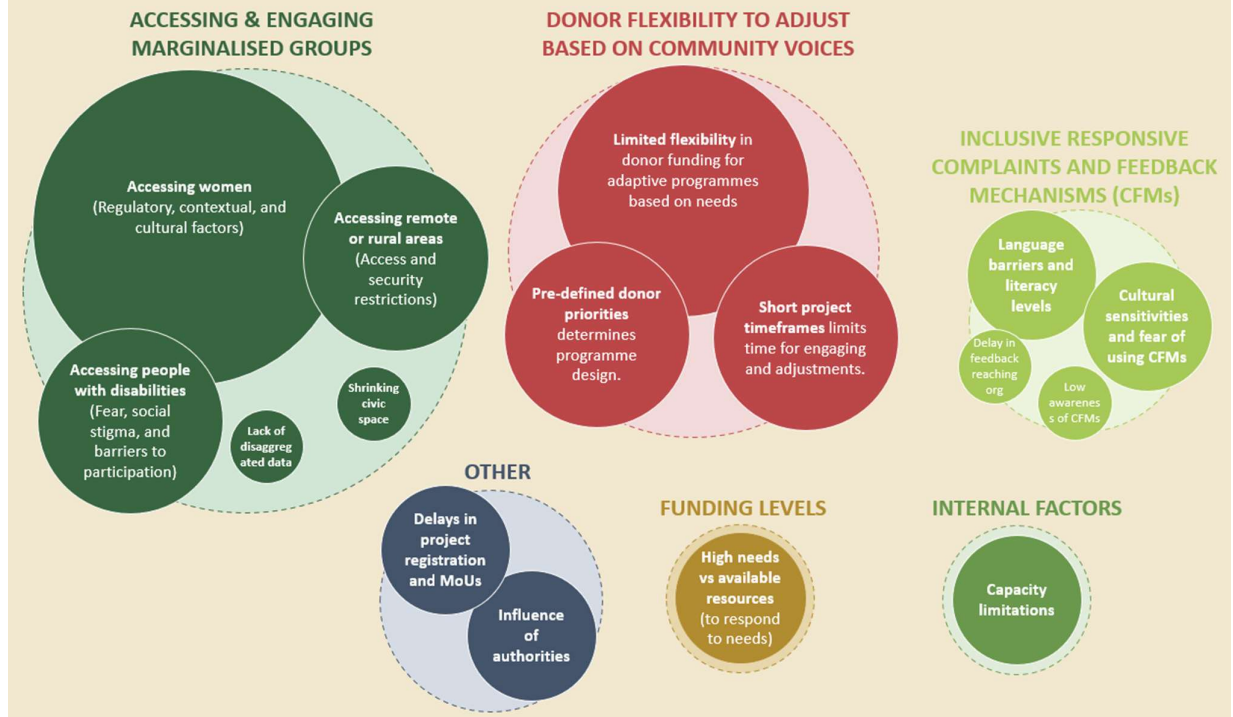


³⁸ Samuel Hall (June 2025). Executive Summary - Strengthening Collective Accountability to Affected People in Afghanistan.

³⁹ The Camp Committee Assessment Tool: <https://reliefweb.int/report/haiti/power-committee-tool-agencies-working-camp-committees-haiti>
 Example, findings from using the tool in Haiti: <https://reliefweb.int/report/haiti/role-humanitarian-organizations-when-working-camp-committees-findings-assessments-three>

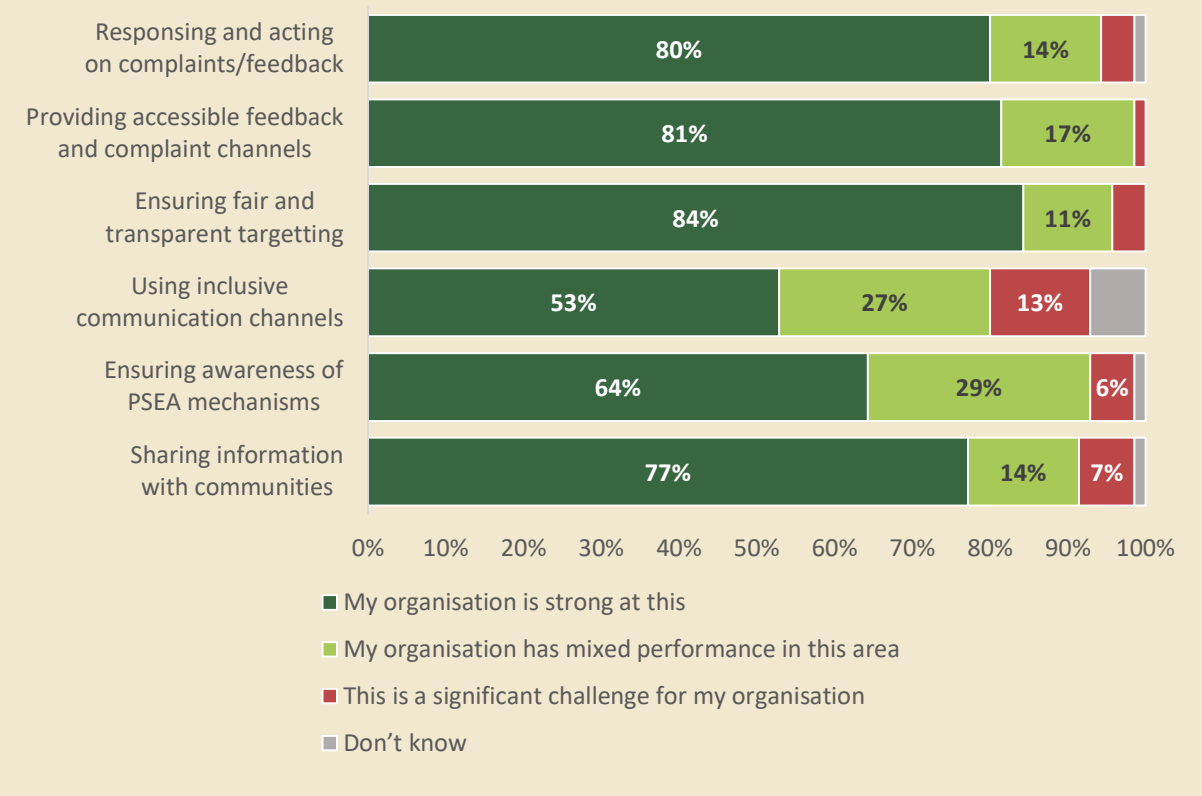
Figure 6: Key barriers faced by organisations with being accountable to communities. (n=70)

The size of the bubbles shows the relative number of respondents who identified each barrier.



Finally, the survey results show stark contrast between organisation’s perception of their performance with community reported experiences. As an example, 84% reported their organisation was strong at ensuring targeting processes are fair and transparent. In contrast, a 2025 community survey found 76% of respondents said aid is not distributed fairly (citing connections, favouritism and nepotism). Reducing this gap – between how organisations understand their practice and community experiences – will be important for driving stronger practice.

Figure 7: Self-rated organisational practice in inclusive communication of information, fair and transparent targeting, and the use of accessible complaints and feedback channels. (n=70)



AAP has become a ‘tick-box’ exercise, with procedural participation rather than working to shift power in decision-making.

Engagement with different actors during this assessment suggests overall knowledge about AAP is comparatively strong – going beyond only CFMs and spanning issues of inclusion and more meaningful participation.⁴⁰ Local and national NGOs based outside of Kabul – including women-led organisations, show growing awareness and practical understanding of AAP. As in other countries, there has been an increased ‘formalisation’ of AAP within organisations. A recent 2024 survey of Health Cluster partners in Afghanistan found 86% had AAP focal points, 63% reported having organisational AAP policies or procedures.^{41,42} However, UN and NNGO key informants engaged through this assessment, saw that AAP had become a ‘tick-box’ exercise with superficial engagement, rather than means by which communities can influence

“Engagement is more symbolic and procedural rather than transformational. AAP is focused on CFM via some tools, indicators, frameworks, reporting templates, but there is not real influence from the communities. We do conduct key informant interviews and focus group discussions, but these are superficial to meet donor requirements and contracts. They are one off consultation rather than proper engagement with community to transform them.” – NNGO staff member

⁴⁰ Based on the consultants experience of working in other locations.

⁴¹ Of 65 Health Cluster partners, 43 responded (24 NNGOs, 17 INGOs, 2 others).

⁴² Afghanistan Health Cluster: Survey for Mapping AAP across the health Cluster – Key Findings (2024?). Accessed here 10th Dec 2025: [Microsoft Power BI](#)

humanitarian action or even communities can be empowered. The increased understanding of AAP is not yet matched by broader institutional buy-in. Regional-level discussions also point to a perception of the need for formalised structured mechanisms, indicators, and new Standard Operating Procedures as a way to reflect AAP in an organisation's work, taking AAP away from being a programming principle. There is a risk that approaches for AAP used by larger organisations (UN and INGOs) are seen as best practice for smaller NGOs to follow. This can give focus to heavy systems, and a compliance approach, which may be less suited to smaller local NGOs. Checklists, procedures, and tools were not seen as the solution for support organisations in strengthening their AAP, but instead NGOs wanted more focus on peer learning and accompanied support.

This is also reflected in the findings of recent community research. Despite the presence of the Awaaz 410 hotline and community consultations, communities have felt their participation as symbolic rather than influential. Communities described a recurring pattern of being consulted, surveyed, or told to submit complaints but without ever seeing change. "This procedural participation risks becoming a "ritual of accountability" that protects organisational legitimacy rather than shifting power".⁴³ Past surveys of NNGO self-reported practice found organisations engage communities "sometimes" during the design of projects with fewer organizations reporting engagement as "mostly" or "always." A non-trivial share report rare or no engagement in designing projects.⁴⁴

While there is now greater awareness of 'AAP-terminology', the connection between AAP and the quality and effectiveness of assistance is missing. Rather than AAP being a core part of how an organisation works (and core to the roles of decision-makers), it is allocated to focal points and seen as an additional burden/ask which requires specific resources (staff and budget) to realise. There was a perception that AAP might be too much for Clusters on top of everything else rather than core to their work in improving the quality and effectiveness of sector-focused programmes. Strengthening the link between AAP and programme quality and effectiveness is key.

Further, regional-level discussions reveal that many Local NGOs (LNGOs) define "affected populations" primarily in the context of major disasters, such as earthquakes, resulting in heightened engagement during crises but limited focus on accountability outside these events. Feedback collection, community consultation and other AAP practices is largely emergency-driven, rather than part of preparedness or longer-term work, in part due to the framing and terminology of AAP. Non-disaster challenges experienced by communities—such as urban municipal reforms affecting livelihoods—receive little attention in formal accountability mechanisms. Widening the understanding and applicability of AAP as a programming principle to all forms of programmes provides opportunities for exploring what practice already exists and may be more feasible outside of emergency response programming (where time is less of a limiting factor). The current short-term nature of funding and power-dynamics between 'funders' and 'implementers', poses barriers to meaningful engagement with communities beyond tokenistic gestures. A lack of time, imposed project designs, and the lack of opportunities for those delivering programmes (commonly NGOs) to inform activities based on their experiences with communities, were all raised as issues. These are covered in more detail below.

Shaping programme design based on community inputs.

Adjusting programmes and acting on community data is commonly recognised as a gap for individual NGOs (covered here) and the UN and humanitarian sector more broadly (covered in the following section). Research by Samuel Hall found while many organisations have made efforts to gather community feedback this is not

⁴³ Samuel Hall (June 2025). Executive Summary - Strengthening Collective Accountability to Affected People in Afghanistan.

⁴⁴ ACBAR (Dec 2025). Afghanistan Localisation Technical Working Group (LTWG) Localization Baseline Assessment – Final Report (DRAFT SHARED)

consistently linked to programmatic adaptation. “Rather than being used to inform adaptive responses, feedback is often absorbed into reporting frameworks without influencing real-time decision-making.”⁴⁵

The nature of funding and dynamics between NGOs and donors in programmatic decision-making is a major barrier here (see figure 6). The dominant mode in Afghanistan continues to see NNGOs as subcontractors (implementing partners) for international funders, rather than equal partners in the design and delivery of programmes, with minimal roles for NNGOs in negotiating the terms of these partnerships, or space for shared decision-making. The experiences expressed in this assessment align with recent research on localisation in Afghanistan.⁴⁶ Agenda setting and strategic decision-making is dominated by international organisations, and opportunities for NNGO to inform decision-making (including project design, targeting and resource allocation) in partnerships remain rare.⁴⁷

Local organisations are brought in post-design (which is set by international actors), and even in responding to calls for proposals, NNGOs are required to implement these without deviation.^{48,49} Programme priority setting, design and planning is based on UN-held information, with donors engaging UN agencies on the needs of affected communities as opposed to the NGOs working directly with communities. In this, key informants felt the voices of NNGOs and communities were not adequately reaching higher levels or places where these decisions are made. For NGOs, the ability to adjust programmes once started was constrained by donor requirements, with any amendments needing to be negotiated with donors. As explained by one INGO: *“Adjustments often need approval from multiple offices or donors, which slows down timely responses to community feedback.”* Survey responses indicated a common perception among NGOs that adjustments to donor-funded activities were not possible once programmes had started. This challenge is not limited to NGOs, UN respondents also indicated that ear-marked funding and donor interests posed barriers to the extent to which they could adjust to community needs.

“Projects often come with strict donor guidelines, predefined activities, and fixed budgets, limiting flexibility to adjust programming based on community feedback” – NNGO staff member

For AAP this is important. The lack of influence NGOs have over programme design, and the lack of flexibility within programmes to adjust activities, deters organisations from engaging communities. Without the ability to influence or change programmes, the act is futile. Inflexibility of programme design and budgets also prevents organisations from acting on feedback received.

The pivot away from medium-long term development funding to short-term humanitarian funding favours international organisations and has reduced opportunities for locally-led programmes and local decision making.⁵⁰ Shorter grants (e.g. 12 months or shorter) and minimal coverage of indirect costs⁵¹ also deters community engagement and sustainable local approaches for AAP. The increase in ear-marked funding for acute emergency purposes also narrows the scope of activities, limiting organisations’ ability to respond to community needs that fall outside of emergency-related programming.

⁴⁵ Samuel Hall (June 2025). Strengthening Collective Accountability to Affected People in Afghanistan - Executive Summary.

⁴⁶ ACAPS (Sept 2025). AFGHANISTAN Localisation and power in humanitarian partnerships.

⁴⁷ HAG (May 2023). Challenges and ways forward in supporting local leadership of crisis response in Afghanistan. Humanitarian Advisory Group (HAG)

⁴⁸ ACAPS (Sept 2025). AFGHANISTAN Localisation and power in humanitarian partnerships.

⁴⁹ ACBAR (Dec 2025). Afghanistan Localisation Technical Working Group (LTWG) Localization Baseline Assessment – Final Report (DRAFT SHARED)

⁵⁰ HAG (May 2023). Challenges and ways forward in supporting local leadership of crisis response in Afghanistan. Humanitarian Advisory Group (HAG)

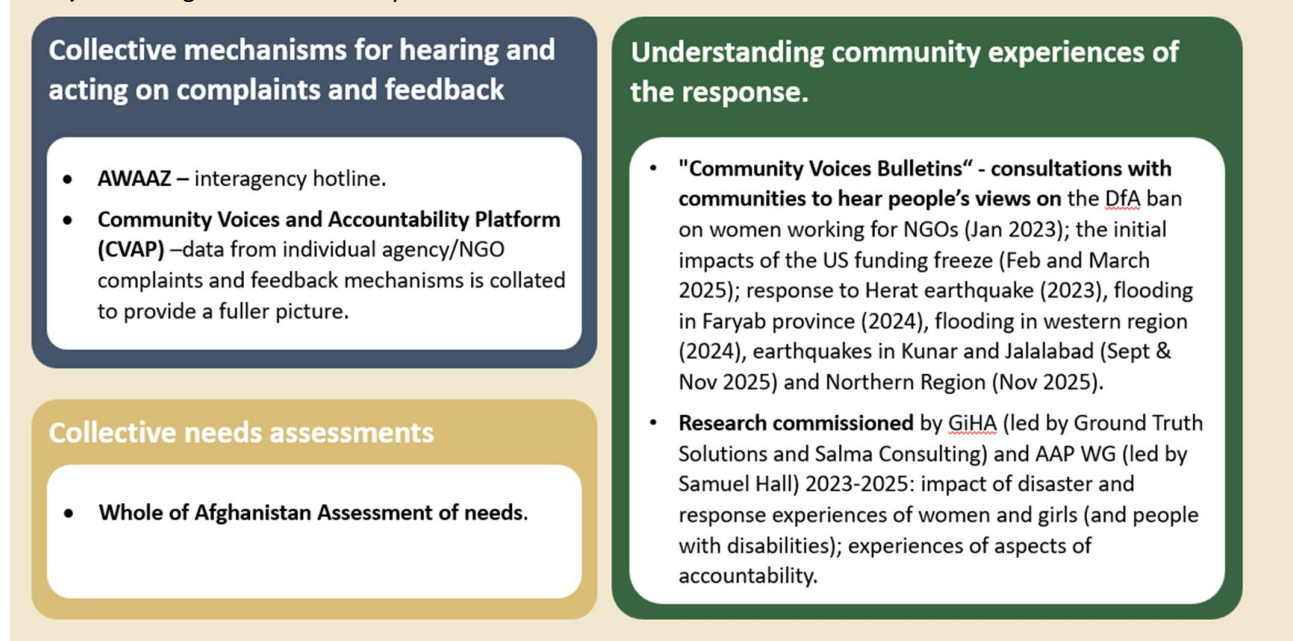
⁵¹ ACAPS (Sept 2025). AFGHANISTAN Localisation and power in humanitarian partnerships.

5. WHAT HAVE BEEN THE RESULTS FROM COLLECTIVE AAP EFFORTS?

Afghanistan has had much investment (both funding, dedicated staff, and international attention) for strengthening collective response-wide AAP, and is recognised at a global level as a positive example of advanced collective AAP in practice, highlighted in the recent OCHA evaluation on AAP.⁵² Efforts led by the AAP WG and others have sought to address globally recognised challenges commonly faced by response-wide collective AAP. The Afghanistan Accountability Index (AAI) and Community Voices and Accountability Platform (CVAP) in particular are recognised as significant achievements (and for some positive ‘best practice’ models) both within Afghanistan and globally. The recent review (November 2025) of Central Emergency Response Fund (CERF) and Country-Based Pool Fund (CBPF) efforts in support of AAP found “Afghanistan stands out as a good example, where CERF- and CBPF-supported platforms informed strategic decisions, increased women’s participation, and integrated community data into HCT level planning.”⁵³

The scale and momentum of progress over the last five years was noted by key informants engaged through this assessment, and the significant achievements in conceptualising, launching and sustaining the range of collective AAP initiatives were recognised. Figure 8 provides a snapshot of *some* of the coordinated efforts identified during this assessment with efforts, grouped by the type of contribution they might make to collective AAP. *While it is recognised that multiple different coordination forums in Afghanistan contribute to strengthening different aspects of collective AAP (as outlined in Section 3), this Section focuses on the efforts of the AAP WG. It focuses on what is understood to be three core strategies for strengthening AAP that centre around how the varied AAP WG efforts might contribute to change.*

Figure 8 - A snapshot of coordinated efforts, grouped by type (i.e. the contribution they might make to collective AAP). It is recognised this summary is not exhaustive.



⁵² OCHA (July 2025). Accountability to Affected People OCHA Evaluation Report.

⁵³ Review of CERF and CBPF efforts in support of AAP Key findings and recommendations – A summary 20 November 2025

Monitoring response-wide performance and status of AAP

- **Afghan Accountability Index (AAI)** – with indicators on AAP, GiHA, PSEA, D&I, localisation for monitoring the operating environment and if needs being met (from 2024).
- **HNRP AAP Indicators** – monitored by clusters (from 2022).
- **Community perception monitoring of systems-wide Accountability** – quantitative survey (from 2025).
- **Community Validation to Strengthen Collective AAP in Afghanistan** – quantitative and qualitative research conducted by Samuel Hall (2025).
- **Patient satisfaction tracking tool for health services** – tracks patient satisfaction over 10 factors (started in 2024).

Other....

- **Efforts to negotiate for greater access to communities and vulnerable groups**

Strengthening individual NGO practice in AAP – raising the bar

- **AAP requirements for AHF proposals.** All proposals to AHF need to be reviewed by the AAP WG.
- **Standards development.** Minimum Standards for Quality Programming (2024)
- **Common messages for aid actors to use with communities:** e.g. on the funding situation following the US funding freeze (2025).
- **Capacity building workshops** on AAP and CFMs (ACBAR 2025; Samuel Hall commissioned by UNOPs 2025; for Health Cluster partners 2024)
- **Assessing partner practice and support needs:** e.g. Mapping Health Cluster partners' AAP practice (2024)

Overall

Survey respondents credited coordination for stronger AAP with the “normalization of accountability as a shared responsibility rather than an individual agency function.” (NNGO) Coordinated efforts had “strengthened the integration of accountability principles across clusters and working groups” (INGO), including health, protection and food security clusters reportedly embedding AAP principles into their work and led to coordination forums at national and regional levels including AAP in discussions. The stronger integration of AAP into the Humanitarian Needs and Response Plan (HNRP) processes, as also seen as a significant contribution. One organisation reported donors were more likely now to accept budget lines for AAP, linked to the increase acceptance of AAP.

The presence of an active AAP WG has kept AAP on the table of the humanitarian response in Afghanistan⁵⁴, and along with other WGs has helped keep a focus on quality programming (an important focus as clusters and organisations navigate the increasingly restrictive environment). For individual organisations the previous regular WG meetings had kept them informed on findings from community research, lessons learnt, recommendations for agencies, and the work others were doing. The elevation of community voices, collective CFM, and capacity improvements were also identified as significant contributions of coordinated AAP in the survey and are covered in turn below.

Elevating community voices to inform response-wide, cluster, and organisational decision-making

The AAP WG is credited - by key informants at Kabul level and those responding to the survey across multiple locations - with making programmes more people-centred through elevating community voices. The AAP WG has given much attention to amplifying community voices not only during implementation but also in planning and design stages (see box 3). Those engaged in the AAP WG felt the scale of evidence collected by the AAP WG gave

⁵⁴ Noting in 2025 the AAP WG meetings were less frequent than in previous years.

the findings weight, more so than if NGOs raised the same points with ICCT or HCT. Further, these efforts provide a means by which, at least in theory, community views can more directly reach interagency decision-making forums. Alternative methods, with community views filtering up from frontline NGOs via multiple layers of coordination to national level HCT, ICCT, and Clusters, risk that locally grounded insights are diluted or selectively incorporated. The frequency of data and feedback collection from communities was seen as a unique role of the AAP WG. This work provides a service for the wider humanitarian community (as noted by a UN staff member the community voices platform “gathers data for the rest of us”) and has positioned the AAP WG as an advocate for communities.

Box 3: Notable approaches led by the AAP WG to elevate community voices to inform decisions

The Community Voices and Accountability Platform (CVAP) first established in 2023, collates feedback and complaints data collected by individual organisations (as well as the interagency Awaaz hotline) as the basis for identifying key themes and corrective action needed at the level of ICCT, Clusters, and individual organisations. This approach recognises that collective action rarely starts from a blank slate but instead must navigate established practices and approaches of individual organisations finding ways to draw these together for more collective aims. Importantly, it also recognises within the context of Afghanistan how important localised channels (run by organisations working at community-level) are for hearing feedback in particular from more marginalised groups. Establishing a process for drawing together the multitude of feedback heard by different organisations, provides the potential for this to inform decision-making at higher levels. The approach has evolved over time – with the frequency of CVAP reports based on feedback received increasing to every 2 months, and themes and corrective action by cluster being presented as a means to encourage use. More recently REACH conducted an assessment of CVAP which led to changes in AAP WG CVAP related tools (reported but report not seen).

At the Kabul level the CVAP work was frequently referenced, and the consistency in how data was collected and presented was viewed as a success.

Community perception monitoring started in 2024 to track community perceptions against AAI indicators, with data collected every six months. Through the harmonisation of data points gathered by partners working at community level, it aimed to provide a country-wide picture of AAP from the perspective of communities, providing the status of collective rather than individual organisational AAP. In 2025, Samuel Hall conducted independent research to validate previous findings, engaging more than 3,500 community members across Afghanistan through a mixed-methods study of their experiences of humanitarian accountability.

Community Voices Bulletins presented community insights following specific emergencies, including Herat Earthquake 2023, floodings in Faryab and western region in 2024, and earthquakes in Kunar and Jalalabad and Northern Region in 2025.

There is a substantial amount of community-level data collected in Afghanistan led by different WG, Clusters, and partners – as commented by one key informant “a lack of data is not the issue.”⁵⁵ However, the assessment findings point to a need to reduce duplication, adapt WG strategies in light of recurring issues, and give more focus to support the use of data collected.

⁵⁵ As examples, in addition to the work of the AAP WG, other WGs also commission community level research (for example the community research commissioned by GiHA to hear the experiences of women and girls that gives focus to accountability, and led by Ground Truth Solutions), as well as the annual REACH Whole of Afghanistan Assessment and quarterly humanitarian assessments.

Siloed working groups, enabled by historically high levels of resources, have contributed to a duplication of assessments, research, and efforts to learn from communities. Differing views on data quality and sustainability reportedly led the AAP WG and GiHA to pursue separate strategies. The AAP WG favoured the CVAP as a more sustainable approach to periodic community feedback, while GiHA — concerned about the underrepresentation of women's voices in NGO-collected data — opted to commission independent community research instead." More could be done to reduce duplication of interagency efforts, and the AAP WG could play a role in this. Positively, examples were given of the coordinated efforts from the AAP WG reducing duplication of efforts by individual organisations. For example, the community insights from the earthquake response in Kunar reported as a positive example of collectively hearing perspectives of communities. In contrast, the response to returnees from Pakistan reportedly saw every organisation applying their own system for hearing from affected people in the absence of a collective approach. As expressed by staff from one INGO: *"Once an assessment [community perceptions monitoring] is led by AAP WG then all can benefit rather than duplicating that work"*.

The document review and key informants working at interagency level, highlighted different outputs from the AAP WG commonly reported the same recurring key issues in accountability. The need for more data at the same levels is questionable, but instead the AAP WG could shift to connecting findings from data to actions. The lack of action based on the wealth of data was recognised as a critical gap by many – donors, UN, INGOs and NNGOs alike



"We are still in a very basic stage of success" – UN staff member

"The CVAP is good at aggregating feedback, but [we are] less good at responding to this" – UN staff member

"Everyone has their own dashboard – data, data, data" But so what? What are the costs of [collecting] this for results?" – INGO staff member

Action at the level of Individual NGOs

Use by individual NGOs relies on AAP WG focal points sharing findings within their organisations. However, the effectiveness of this depends on the internal influence of the focal point — and KIs noted that those attending WGs tend to be relatively junior staff. That said, 40% of survey respondents reported their organisation had "very much" taken action based on CVAP findings, with a number of positive practical examples provided (see Box 4). Barriers posed by inequitable partnerships and lack of funding flexibility (see Section 4 for more on this) remain as challenges for individual NGOs to using this data. Further, a lack of awareness of available data and research (and specifics of how individual organisations should use this) was flagged as an additional barrier to use. Several INGOs and NNGOs were not aware of the CVAP, and as stated by one NNGO: *"There is plenty of data available but [it needs to be] disseminated to a wider audience"*

Box 4: Examples of actions taken by individual organisations based on community voices findings

Triangulate findings with regional teams (INGO); using findings to adjust programme targeting, delivery schedules and emergency response priorities (NNGO); as evidence to inform annual work planning and prioritise areas of investment, and to design the emergency response for returnees (UN); to improve community sensitisation on eligibility criteria and strengthen the organisation's own CFM (INGO); to respond to specific needs (adding community-based classes for girls after learning that parents were concerned about girls access to education) (NNGO); and adjusting shelter design and distribution to better meet the needs of female-headed households and PwD in Kunar (Other); and use of data in donor proposals as evidence to support programme design and as the basis for funding or to advocate for funding for cash vs in-kind assistance.

Action at interagency and donor agency levels

To inform interagency decisions and donor agencies, the findings were presented by the UNFPA AAP WG co-lead to ICCT (and sometimes to HCT). Positively the AAP WG also adapted how findings were communicated, with the main trends summarised by cluster to aide use. However, KIs highlighted some key challenges that posed barriers to using community data at interagency levels to inform response-wide decision-making:

- **A lack of accountability within the system to adapt** and to adjust programmes in line with what people say they want and need.
- **The humanitarian community cannot deliver on what people want** – people want jobs and livelihoods; however humanitarian programming is geared towards more emergency forms of support. Historical legacies of UN agency programming were cited as challenges for making programmatic shifts to align to people’s needs. This challenge is linked to issues of agency mandates and menus of programmes beyond Afghanistan. KIs talked about the tension between wanting to meet people’s preferences and the limited menu of options available to deliver. This was seen to ‘set-up the AAP WG to fail’, by asking about needs when the system cannot respond to these. Interestingly, there seems to be little agreement among staff working at an interagency level on which community-level requests for assistance are ‘humanitarian’ vs ‘Basic Human Needs’ (BHNs), vs both or neither. Many are seen as both humanitarian and BHNs.⁵⁶
- **A need for greater operational relevance of data collected** - there is a tension between advocating on behalf of communities (elevating community voices to ‘hold the humanitarian community to account’) and focusing on evidence that factors in the operational realities (and constraints) faced by humanitarian agencies. Key informants (both those engaged closing in the AAP WG and those working in coordination forums) described the AAP WG in Afghanistan as adopting the former approach, with limited collaboration with intended users of the data to shape activities or the scope. The high-levels of funding for the AAP WG enabled this.

As covered in Section 3, the efforts of the AAP WG were more geared towards a UN-audience; however, some felt the outputs that sought to elevate community voices did not consider the types of decisions (and connected to these forms of data) the UN or interagency bodies might make based on this. UN key informants in particular spoke about the need for a greater focus on connecting the work of the AAP WG (evidence collected from communities) with operational needs. Moving from findings for ‘information purposes’ to findings that can directly shape operational choices, focusing on the influence they are seeking to see rather than the products produced. Specifically, considering:

- The specific audience, and associated decisions. Communication of findings should be more tailored to different audiences. Moving away from reporting ‘this is what communities tell us’, to linking findings to decisions tailored to the audience (be this HCT, ICCT, clusters, and/or individual organisations).

“If there was accountability to people we would have changed their programmes by now, but this has not transpired in practice” – UN staff member

“There is a fundamental disconnect in asking people what they want, when we can’t deliver what they want and need” – UN staff member

“Think: what information do we want? We cannot keep asking [communities] what they need but need to think what

⁵⁶ A report of Community Voices Workshop - A systematic approach to people-centred response in Afghanistan. In preparation for 2025 HNRP

- The forms and methodology of evidence best suited to drive action. Data collection should be shaped by the decisions humanitarian actors can realistically make. Identifying what evidence would help align these decisions more closely with community preferences and the forms of evidence that would speak to relevant actors (be this representative quantitative samples, qualitative insights, synthesised dashboards, or other forms). Some cautioned against the over-reliance on dashboards, questioning their effectiveness for HCT audiences, while others raised concerns about the representativeness of qualitative data. Both have value, but the preferences of intended users' needs to shape methodological choices.
- Fostering more collaborative working relationships with intended users. The working relationships with clusters was provided as a reason that suggested course correction from the AAP WG was not taken on board.
- Community research as part of a planned process rather than event, with greater follow-up. The 2024 community voices workshop provides a positive example of bringing together cluster coordinators, regional ICCTs and WG chairs to review key findings from the CVAP, partner community engagement, AWAAZ and the Whole of Afghanistan assessment to inform the 2025 HNRP. The five provincial level workshops conducted by Samuel Hall, to discuss practical actions organisations might take based on findings from recent community research, provides another positive example. However, continued follow-up to give focus and support in taking forward discussions was missing in both cases.

information we can use" – INGO staff member

"The AAP WG has not taken a programmatic approach. Lots of workstreams are defined by what produce and not what influence" – UN staff member

"It is so dehumanising to think about how many interviews have been done and to think of the years of conversations that have happened to make a dashboard, for one talking point in one meeting, to tick a box to saying 'we're doing AAP in Afghanistan'. It takes away from communities and what they have to say" - UN staff member

"There are lots of audiences, but we don't follow through to see if it's making a difference. Built a massive dashboard, cost lots of money but do HCT use this? Have they asked HCT how easiest to receive the information and if a dashboard is the best form?" - UN staff member

Linked to this, but from the perspective of communities, key informants saw a need to improve how decisions based on feedback/views are communicated back to communities, even if no action can be taken due to funding challenges or other restrictions.

Figure 9: To what extent has your organisation used and taken action based on each of the following AAP WG efforts? (N=70)

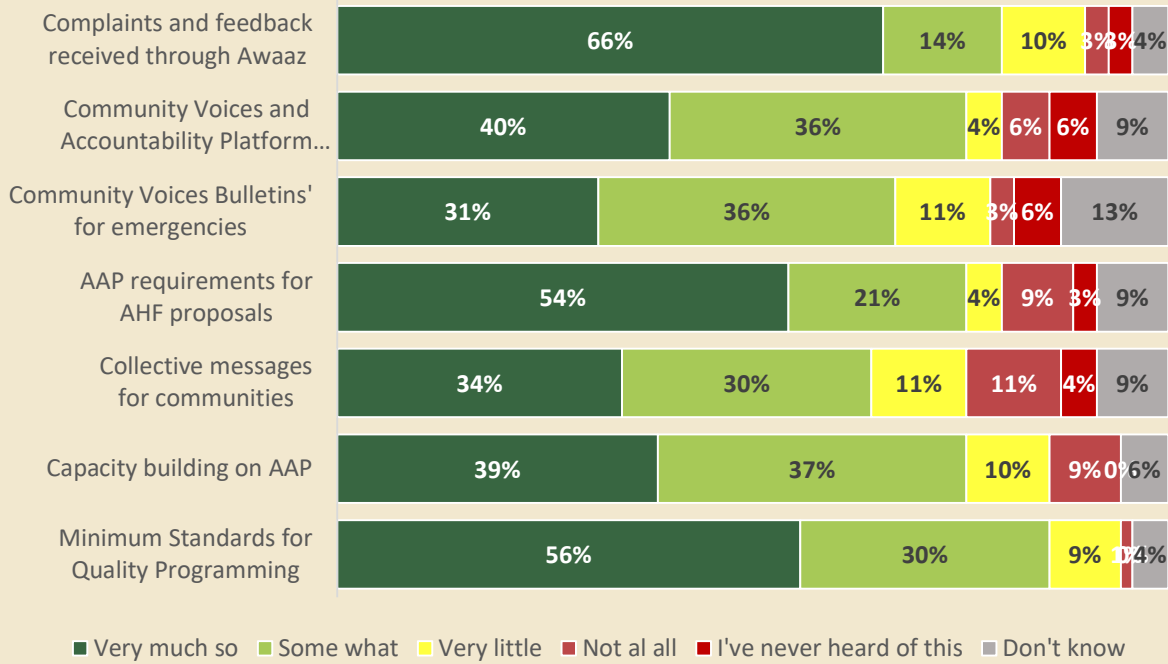
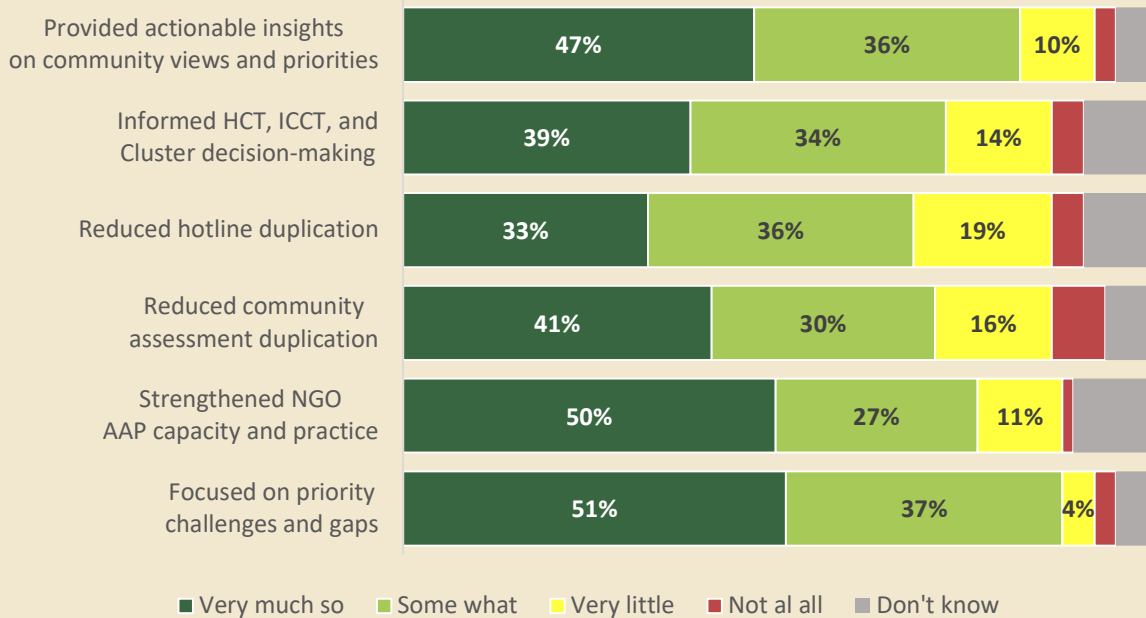


Figure 10: To what extent have coordinated efforts for AAP in Afghanistan achieved the following outcomes? (N=70)



Hearing and responding to complaints

Awaaz is Afghanistan’s inter-agency complaints and feedback mechanisms established in 2018 by UNOPS, that provides a hotline covering all 34 provinces. It provides callers with information about assistance, and a channel for providing feedback or complaints about humanitarian aid. In 2025, the hotline handled 146,988 calls, of which 6,682 cases were referred to 185 organisations. 87.4% of callers are men, and nearly 50% are returnees to Afghanistan. Calls related to cash were by far the most common topic across all months.⁵⁷

Awaaz was commonly cited in the assessment as a significant contribution to collective AAP. Of all the AAP WG efforts that sought to elevate community feedback, most action reported by survey respondents was linked to the Awaaz hotline: 66% of respondents reported they “very much” had taking action linked to Awaaz, compared with 40% based on consolidated CVAP findings was lower, and 31% based on emergency community voices bullets (although potentially reflecting the fact these were focused on specific emergency response situations rather than country-wide) (see Figure 9). Multiple NGOs reported taking action based on complaints referred to them via Awaaz, but details on the specific action were commonly not given. A few exceptions stand out from two NNGOs: based on this feedback via Awaaz, one NNGO revised beneficiary selection criteria and coordinated with the donors so that service delivery reached women and persons with disabilities. Another addressed gaps in beneficiary targeting and distribution processes, and strengthen their safeguarding measures following concerns raised about staff conduct.

A common aim of an interagency CFM is to reduce duplication and the proliferation of hotlines in this case. Triangulated data found multiple examples of organisations putting in place their own hotlines (as one channel among others they offer to communities to raise feedback and complaints) in recent years. Only 33% of respondents felt coordinated efforts had reduced the duplication of hotlines, with the biggest proportion of all outcomes (39%) reporting very little, not at all or don’t know. (See Figure 10)

Reasons provided by NGOs for setting up their own hotlines included: wanting more oversight and a better feel for feedback and complaints coming from communities where they are working; the desire to offer a few options (reportedly Awaaz is not free on all networks) ; a lack of trust in Awaaz, and perception it is a UN approach; to address community reports that Awaaz was not available or busy when they call. NGO KIs referred to Awaaz as a ‘back-up’ for NGOs who do not have the resources to set-up their own CFM and as additional cover for NGOs who do.⁵⁸

Driving practice of individual NGOs and agencies

The AAP WG and others have supported a range of activities designed to ‘raise the bar’ among individual NGOs and UN Agencies (see Box 5).

Box 5: A summary of collective activities aimed at raising the bar of AAP among individual organisations.

In 2024, Minimum Standards for Quality Inclusive Programming were developed and rolled out, as a collaboration between AAP, PSEA, GiHA, and Disability and Inclusion Working Groups. As of December 2024, over 3,000 partners, including 30% women humanitarian teams, were engaged in these efforts.⁵⁹ Sets of common messages were developed for aid actors to use. For example, in early 2025 messages on current funding issues in Afghanistan following the United States of America funding freeze were developed.

⁵⁷ <https://awaazaf.org/>

⁵⁸ Learning from Venezuela’s interagency contact line may provide valuable for thinking through approaches to minimise/reduce duplication from new hotlines.

⁵⁹ AAP WG meeting minutes (December 2024)

The Health Cluster conducted a mapping of Health Cluster partner practice in AAP (with responses from 43 out of 65 partners) in 2024.⁶⁰ Interagency training and peer learning workshops specifically on AAP have been conducted by ACBAR, who trained 250 staff from international and national NGOs via a series of 2-day hybrid trainings.⁶¹ Samuel Hall also conducting five peer-learning workshops in early 2025, building on the findings from their research on community experiences of humanitarian organisations commissioned by UNOPs⁶², in Kabul, Herat, Nangarhar, Badakhshan and Baghlan provinces.⁶³

From 2018/2019 it became a requirement for all proposals to the Afghanistan Humanitarian Fund (AHF) to set out their approach to AAP, and be reviewed by a member of the AAP WG.⁶⁴ An AAP Rapid Guide for the integration of AAP principles into AHF proposals was also developed and shared with AHF partners.

Survey respondents viewed efforts to strengthen the practice of individual organisations as making a positive contribution. 50% felt AAP coordinated efforts had “very much” strengthened NGO capacity and practice in AAP (a further 27% said this had happened “somewhat”). Specific efforts, such as the AAP requirements in AHF proposals, and Minimum Standards for Quality Programming were both rated highly by survey respondents (54% and 56% respectively had “very much” taken action based on each). Respondents provided examples of: integrating the Minimum Standards for Quality Programming into project design and proposal development (thus ensuring complaint and feedback channels and community consultations in project implementation); setting up their own CFM approaches; updating internal Standard Operating Procedures; and training staff in key topics including AAP, CFMs, protection and safeguarding. More specifically one NNGO reported: *“Using the Minimum Standards for Quality Programming, our organization recognized areas needing improvement in gender and disability inclusion. As a result, we updated teacher training to promote inclusive practices and modified learning resources to better support children with disabilities.”*

The requirement for AAP in AHF proposals provides a ‘stick’, that has driven practice. As noted by an INGO in Herat: *“Since donors require it, organisations are increasingly integrating AAP principles into programme design.”*, and other NNGO commented *“AAP is now a fixed element in all proposals, all AHF proposals must include AAP conditions”*. While proposals are reviewed for AAP, key informants reported after this there is little follow-up or review on if and how planned approaches for AAP as set out in the proposal are being reflected in project implementation (and the inclusiveness and effectiveness of these approaches). Similarly, the need for some form of monitoring to assess how Minimum Standards for Quality Programming are being applied (and including common gaps) has been previously noted.⁶⁵

6. RECOMMENDATIONS

The following recommendations draw from findings in Sections 3, 4 and 5 of this report. These are proposed as a starting point, for ACBAR and others to elaborate on. As a first step, these will be discussed with stakeholders during the presentation of the assessment findings (planned for April 2026).

⁶⁰ Afghanistan Health Cluster: Survey for Mapping AAP across the Health Cluster – Key Findings (2024?). Accessed 10th Dec 2025: [Microsoft Power BI](#)

⁶¹ ACBAR training report: AAP and Community Feedback and Response Mechanism Training Kunduz, 16-17 February 2025

⁶² United Nations Office for Project Services (UNOPs)

⁶³ Samuel Hall (June 2025). Strengthening Collective Accountability to Affected People in Afghanistan - Executive Summary.

⁶⁴ AAP WG meeting minutes (May 2025)

⁶⁵ AAP WG meeting minutes (Dec 2024)

Internal integration of AAP (and DI as part of this) within ACBAR's work

- 1. INTEGRATE AAP ACROSS ACBAR'S WORK: In order to lead on accountability to communities, ACBAR should integrate and embed AAP across all teams, workstreams and activities (rather than AAP being the responsibility of the AAP Coordinator).** Engaging staff across ACBAR, to identify what this means in practice will be important for contextualising AAP to ACBAR's work (ensuring integration goes beyond 'AAP as a standard agenda item'). This may require supporting internal understanding of AAP, including among ACBAR's regional leads, who have the potential to play a key role in advancing collective AAP through ACBAR and other forums at regional levels.
- 2. EXPLICITLY CONNECT AAP AND LOCALISATION EFFORTS: ACBAR's work on AAP and localisation should be explicitly linked.** The two agendas are deeply connected, particularly around NNGO voice and decision-making power in coordination and partnerships (and so the space and agency of NNGOs to reflect community-level experiences into response-wide decisions).
- 3. CONSIDER THE IMPLICATIONS OF ACBAR MEMBERSHIP ON FURTHERING AAP: ACBAR should consider if and how the organisation is engaging NGOs beyond ACBAR's current members as part of efforts to strengthen response-wide AAP.** ACBAR's current membership criteria exclude certain types of NGO from joining. In thinking through the organisations role in strengthening collective AAP, ACBAR should consider the implications of not including these NGOs in discussions, communications and other activities.

Greater L/NNGO voice and influence across coordination forums and within partnerships

- 4. REDUCE BARRIERS TO L/NNGO VOICE AND INFLUENCE ACROSS COORDINATION FORUMS: ACBAR should identify strategies to support and influence the conditions needed for more inclusive coordination forums.** This may already form part of ACBAR's localisation efforts, but moving the needle on the voice and influence of L/NNGO in coordination forums has the *potential* (if attention is given to this) to also root discussions and decision-making in community experiences and voices. As examples, ACBAR could:
 - Run periodic "coordination user experience" surveys/reviews to assess how well different forums in Afghanistan are doing. Key national and regional coordination forums could be benchmarked against coordination and localisation standards/indicators.
 - Identify positive practice and examples from coordination forums, or measures taken to increase/ensure diversity of voices and influence.
 - Engage with/support specific coordination forum leads to implement practical measures to 'create more space and influence' for diverse voices. This might include:
 - Dedicated space for NNGO contributions beyond information provision in meetings, piloting L/NNGO community advisory panels or rotating representatives to present "Community Signals for specific clusters or other forums.
 - Giving greater recognition of the contributions of L/NNGOs.
 - Adjusting communication styles methods so that are more accessible, inclusive, and tolerant; including accessible formats, translation/language support, timely agenda sharing.
 - Engage with cohorts of L/NNGOs to support them in 'claiming the space' in coordination forums. This might include building knowledge on humanitarian coordination system and technical standards, strengthening negotiation, advocacy and representation skills, providing on-going mentoring for L/NNGO to taken on greater leadership roles.
 - Identify / providing / leveraging existing budgets to provide micro-grants to cover costs of transportation and translation, and other barriers to participation.

- Engage with others – for example GiHA WG and DI leads - who also want to increase diversity of voices in coordination forums for a collaborative approach (and to ensure the barriers and support needs specific to WLO and OPD are considered).
5. **MODEL INCLUSIVE PRACTICE: ACBAR should model good practice in L/NNGO voice and influence in the NGO Directors meeting and other meetings hosted by ACBAR.**
 6. **AMPLIFY NGO VOICES: ACBAR should continue to amplify L/NNGOs voices within the wider humanitarian system in Afghanistan, including (alongside other issues) on challenges and barriers L/NNGOs are facing with delivering quality and effective assistance to communities and marginalised groups.**

ACBAR-UNFPA as co-chairs

7. **RESET THE UNFPA-ACBAR CO-CHAIRING RELATIONSHIP: The working relationship between ACBAR and UNFPA as co-chairs of the ADI WG needs resetting for more respectful and productive collaboration.** In this the strengths of both organisations should be recognised, allowing for joint planning on the roles each organisation will play in the AAP WG. Commitments and approaches for strengthening local leadership in Coordination structures should be the basis for agreeing how ACBAR’s role as co-chair can be supported for a more collaborative unified working relationship. Greater cooperation between ACBAR and UNFPA, will also start to address the perception that collective AAP efforts are more UN driven.

The ADI WG itself

8. **KEEPING THE DISCUSSION GOING AT NATIONAL AND REGIONAL LEVELS: ACBAR with UNFPA should ensure there are regular forums where AAP-DI is discussed at national and regional levels, be this in the national ADI WG or as part of existing national and regional level forums.** The previous AAP WG has been credited with providing a space for regular discussion on AAP, normalizing both collective and individual AAP across programming cycles, keeping this going is important.

However, rather than creating its own sub-national structures, the WG should identify how it can collaborate with and leverage existing regional forums (clusters, ACBAR regional offices, etc.). While there were previous aspirations for dedicated regional AAP WGs, given shrinking resources, the assessment team would suggest it may be more efficient and effective to engage with the plethora of existing regional forums.

9. **ADI WG DECISION MAKING: ACBAR and UNFPA should explore different approaches for decision-making as part of the ADI WG, recognising WG meetings with large number of participants currently pose a challenge.** Options to consider include a reference group to provide a steer on prioritisation and strategy setting; using online platforms to elicit input or prioritisation from across the ADI WG membership.⁶⁶ This could be part of an annual or six-monthly process of wider engagement to inform the strategy and direction of the ADI WG, and ensure decision-making goes beyond the co-chairs.
10. **NGOS AS PART OF THE ADI WG: ACBAR and UNFPA should clarifying the 'offer', smoothing the joining process, expanding communications of the ADI WG.** Specifically, the ‘offer’ NGOs can expect from engaging in the ADI WG should be clarified, ensuring this goes go beyond what L/NNGO might contribute but also consider the benefits to them, recognising the cost of participation is greater for L/NNGOs. The joining process for prospective members should be clear, proactively following up with interested NGOs, and key

⁶⁶ For example, online platforms such as ‘Miro’ provide collaborative whiteboards allowing for a wide range of stakeholders to share views. Menti and others provide an option for voting against pre-defined lists. Other platforms are available with a range of functions.

communication on activities should be expanded to non-members. Finally, action should be taken to reduce the barriers to L/NNGO voice and influence in the ADI WG as set out in recommendation 4.

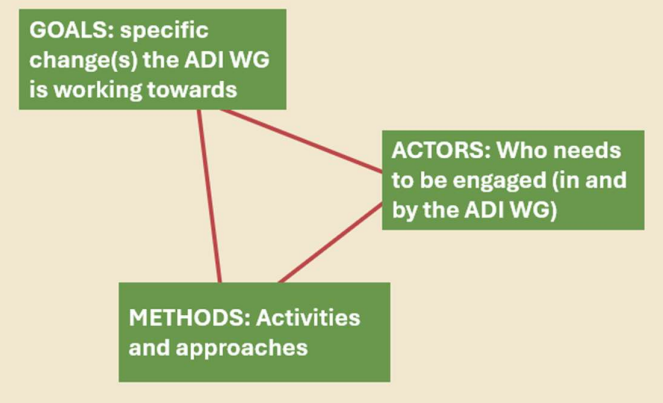
- 11. ENGAGING SENIOR NGO STAFF IN THE ADI WG: Accepting the ADI WG (if this is similar to the AAP WG) may be attended most frequently by more junior NGO staff members, the new ADI WG should identify specific approaches for periodically engaging with senior staff members (e.g. NGO country and executive directors).** This would provide both a strategic steer on the priorities and direction of the ADI WG, and/or provide a means for the ADI WG to influence at a more strategic level. Options for this include six-monthly ADI WG meetings designed/targeted at more senior staff, using ACBAR’s NGO directors meeting, and/or identifying other existing forums.

The focus of the ADI WG

The new Accountability and Disability Inclusion (ADI) WG should revisit what strategies it wants to adopt to influence the most change within the complex humanitarian coordination architecture and individual actors within this. This needs to define the combination of goals, actors and methods (shown visually in Figure 11) that informs the ADI WG’s direction.

The following recommendations based on the assessment findings, focus more on the role ACBAR could play in the ADI WG, and in strengthening collective AAP. **However, ACBAR’s role in furthering AAP (strengthening response-wide AAP) should play to the skills of the new AAP Coordinator.**

Figure 11: The role of the ADI WG will be defined by a combination of three inter-connected strategic choices.



Finally, these recommendations need to be considered as part of wider planning with UNFPA as the co-chair (and in charting the way forward as a newly merged WG), as well as in collaboration with other WGs (such as humanitarian access and GiHA) to identify synergies, complementarity and potential overlap. They also need to be considered alongside other assessment findings (e.g. the assessment of the CVAP led by REACH).

- 12. FRAMING OF AAP: Across all recommendations AAP the connection between AAP and programme quality and effectiveness should be reinforced.** This should extend to all forms of programming, including those beyond emergency response. This may involve identifying complementary terms or using more specific language (e.g. community influence over programme design), given the term ‘affected populations’ is more connected to humanitarian action. Unpacking how AAP connects with Islamic beliefs, may provide a useful framing for AAP within the Afghanistan context.

- 13. FOCUS ON CRITICAL ISSUES IMPACTING AAP: ACBAR and the ADI WG more broadly, should adopt a more ‘critical issues’ approach to AAP (and DI as part of this), collaborating with other WG to design different workstreams that respond to the prioritised aspect or barriers to AAP in Afghanistan.** This could also help move away from talking about AAP as a catch-all term. As examples, drawing from Section 4:

- A lack of donor flexibility is currently a core barrier preventing NGOs from reflecting strong AAP in their programmes. ACBAR could engage different types of donors to advocate for greater flexibility (for example, the inclusion of micro-amendment clauses in contracts).

- Reaching and engaging with people with disabilities PWD is also a key challenge. ACBAR, and the ADI WG, could play a key role in supporting peer learning, exchange, show casing of existing practice, and supporting/piloting innovative practice with NGO members that reduces this barrier.
- A lack of disaggregated data was also flagged by a few NGOs as problematic for knowing which groups are being excluded. The ADI WG could seek to influence data collection processes to address this.

14. COLLABORATE WITH CLUSTERS: The ADI WG, and ACBAR as part of this, should look to support a selected number of clusters, to identify practical means to contextualise approaches for AAP within their work. Through this, the ADI WG will be better placed to explicitly link AAP efforts with operational issues and cycles.

15. CAPACITY EXCHANGE: ACBAR is well placed, through its network of regional offices, to facilitate capacity strengthening and exchange for L/NNGOs that combines training, space for practical application, peer exchange, and ongoing technical support (via coaching, AAP clinics, mentorship). These processes should recognise the expertise of engaged NGO, allowing for mutual exchange, and focus on approaches for AAP adapted to local and national NGOs. They should give focus to peer learning and exchange over time (rather than the use of one-off workshops), allowing organisations to accompany each other in strengthening practice. As part of this consider how:

- The gap between self-reported views of practice and community experiences can be bridged.
- Innovative and pragmatic approaches used by local and national NGOs to work with communities despite the complex operating environment, could spark further practice among others.
- The Minimum Standards in Quality Programming should be continued to be used as part of this, building on existing awareness of these and linking with the work of other WGs.

16. LINKING COMMUNITY DATA WITH OPERATIONAL DECISIONS: Recognising the significant levels of community data already collected, the ADI WG (and ACBAR as part of this), should give focus to reducing duplication, connecting community data collection design and findings more explicitly to operational decisions, and planning for data collection as part of a wider process. Specifically:

- **Reduce the duplication of community-level data collection across WGs and strengthen their dissemination.** The ADI WG can play a coordinating role: identifying synergies between planned and existing community-level research, assessments and reviews (led by clusters and WG) as a means to reduce duplication; identifying re-occurring themes and key finding from across community-level data collected by others (interagency and individual organizations) and over time; promoting the dissemination and use of existing community level data (commissioned by clusters and WG).
- **Connect community data collection design and findings more explicitly to operational decisions.** The ADI WG should collaborate closely with HCT, ICCT, Clusters to understand the operational issues and decisions they can make linked to the quality and effectiveness of assistance, as the basis for shaping what data is collected and concretely how it can be used. Further, the ADI WG, should more explicitly outline how NGOS can use collective community data.
- **All community research should be part of a planned process with structured follow-up, rather than a one-off event,** providing as much focus on how findings can be used as data collected.

17. COMMUNICATING DECISIONS BACK TO COMMUNITIES: The ADI WG, with members, should explore how key findings and associated decisions can be communicated back to communities, even where no action can be taken the reason for this should be explained.