FROM SEATS TO INFLUENCE:

Local and National NGOs in OCHA Pooled Fund Advisory Boards

September 2026

ICVA
A GLOBAL NGO NETWORK FOR PRINCIPLED AND EFFECTIVE HUMANITARIAN ACTION



About ICVA

The International Council of Voluntary Agencies (ICVA) is a global network of nearly 200 non-governmental organisations whose mission is to make humanitarian action more principled and effective by working collectively and independently to influence policy and practice.

Acknowledgements

This report was written by Tina Kalamar.

The author sincerely thanks all interviewees and survey respondents who made this study possible.

The author is also grateful to Elise Baudot (Head of Humanitarian Financing, ICVA) and Manon Glaser (Policy Officer, Humanitarian Financing, ICVA) for their guidance and support throughout the research process. Appreciation is also extended to OCHA for its collaboration.

This report was made possible through the generous support of Ireland in its role as Co-Chair of the OCHA Pooled Fund Working Group.

Disclaimer

This report reflects stakeholder perceptions gathered through qualitative interviews and does not constitute an evaluation of OCHA or any one Funds' performance.

Contents

Executive Summary 3

1 Introduction 6

2 Methodology 7

3 Pooled Fund Advisory Boards and Participation 9

4 Key Findings 12

4.1 Institutional arrangements 13

Seats and tenure 13

Onboarding and induction 14

Selection and inclusion 15

4.2 Structural dynamics 16

Representation and the 'unified voice' 16

Substantive participation and engagement timelines 17

Conditions for equal voice 18

Negative perceptions and capacity 19

5 Recommendations 20

6 Conclusion 24

Acronyms & Abbreviations 26

References 27

FROM SEATS TO INFLUENCE

Executive Summary

OCHA-managed Country and Regional Funds (CBPFs) are pivotal to the Humanitarian Reset and have **played a significant role in advancing localisation**. In 2025, as per the CBPF data hub, direct and indirect allocations to local and national NGOs (L/NNGOs) reached a record 54.4% of total CBPF allocations, demonstrating significant progress in channelling funds to local actors.

However, localisation is multifaceted. Progress in funding does not automatically translate into meaningful participation in governance and decision-making. L/NNGOs hold more seats and enjoy greater visibility on CBPF Advisory Boards than at any previous point. Yet, this expansion of representation has not translated consistently into meaningful and equitable influence over pooled fund strategies, allocation decisions, or governance practices. Interviews and survey results across the various funds indicate that L/NNGOs continue to face **institutional, structural, and procedural power-related barriers** that limit their ability to shape CBPF decisions.

Drawing on interviews with Advisory Board members and Pooled Fund stakeholders, as well as a survey of L/NNGO representatives across 15 countries, this study analyses **how and why influence remains constrained**, and identifies **what needs to change**, and **by whom** to ensure that participation is equitable, strategic, and influential.

Strengthening meaningful participation is not only a localisation objective; it is also fundamental to the accountability, governance, effectiveness and efficiency of pooled funds. With humanitarian funding becoming more constrained, meaningful participation by local actors is increasingly important to ensure strategic decisions are informed by contextual knowledge and that available resources are used as effectively and accountably as possible.

Institutional arrangements

1 Limited familiarity with fund governance and inconsistent onboarding constrain effective participation

Across contexts, limited familiarity with CBPF governance frameworks, unclear AB roles, and technical and language barriers continue to limit the ability of many L/NNGO representatives to navigate processes confidently and engage substantively.

Interviews and survey responses consistently highlighted weak or inconsistent onboarding, particularly at the start of mandates, as a key constraint on effective participation. Respondents called for formalised induction and onboarding processes, ideally in-person before the first meeting, alongside targeted training.

2 Institutional arrangements vary significantly across contexts with implementation discretion shaping outcomes

Short tenures and uneven application of CBPF Global Guidelines at country level substantially affect participation quality. While the recent PFWG decision to revise Advisory Board composition to 6 L/NNGOs, 3 donors, 2 UN agencies, and 2 INGOs addresses a key concern raised by respondents, implementation arrangements and supporting guidance are still evolving. Twelve-month terms are widely viewed as insufficient, as much of the first year is spent learning CBPF processes. Selection processes have improved overall but continue to disadvantage smaller, subnational, and women-led organisations where national platforms are weak or contested.

3 Representation gaps persist despite progress in inclusion

Selection processes have become more transparent and merit-based, and the inclusion of WLOs has improved. However, smaller local, frontline, sub-national, and geographically remote organisations remain under-represented on many ABs. Practical barriers such as travel costs, language, connectivity, and unequal access to coordination mechanisms continue to limit participation. As a result, ABs do not always benefit from the full diversity of local humanitarian perspectives.

Structural dynamics

1 Representation has expanded faster than influence; claimed spaces offer partial mitigation

Formal inclusion has not yet translated into consistent leverage over agendas, strategies, access to information, or decisions. Positive developments include the emergence of local "claimed spaces", such as national networks, coordination platforms, and consultation mechanisms that local actors have established or strengthened in response to AB participation. These spaces help L/NNGOs coordinate positions, build collective legitimacy and engage more confidently. However, these gains do not automatically guarantee power redistribution, as hidden barriers, such as agenda-setting and access to information, and invisible barriers, such as perceptions of legitimacy and self-censorship, continue to shape participation and decision-making.

2 Late engagement and lack of feedback mechanisms undermine substantive influence

L/NNGOs are frequently engaged too late in drafting cycles, with key documents circulated shortly before meetings. Critically, the absence of systematic tracking on how comments are incorporated into final documents makes it impossible to assess whether input translates into tangible impact. Weak L/NNGO coordination mechanisms further constrain the development of unified positions.

3 Visible, hidden, and invisible power dynamics interact to restrict meaningful participation

Influence is constrained not only by visible power dynamics, i.e. formal rules including seat allocation, tenure, guidelines, but also by hidden and invisible power dynamics including informal barriers such as agenda-setting, information gatekeeping, and delayed document circulation and internalised perceptions of legitimacy and self-censorship. These power dynamics reinforce each other especially in spaces that operate through consensus.

4 Negative perceptions of L/NNGO capacity persist despite strong performance evidence

L/NNGOs report that narratives around their risk and compliance intensify during periods of funding pressure, often overshadowing evidence of effective and cost-efficient L/NNGO delivery. These perceptions continue to shape participation, legitimacy, and influence within ABs.

Summary of Recommendations

To move from representation to influence, **institutional adjustments must be combined with deliberate efforts to address power dynamics**. Key actions include:

1 Strengthening onboarding and continuity

- Standardise induction packages for all Advisory Board members, delivered before the first meeting.
- Facilitate structured handovers between outgoing and incoming local and national non-governmental organisation (L/NNGO) representatives.
- Extend standard tenures to 24 months, with staggered rotation to retain institutional memory.

2 Standardising the application of CBPF Global Guidelines and reforming AB Terms of Reference (Operational Manuals)

- Introduce explicit diversity category for sub-national and frontline organisations.
- Clarify minimum standards for Global Guidelines application at country level to reduce variability in Humanitarian Coordinator (HC) and Fund Manager implementation discretion.
- Ensure the systematic integration of revised Global Guidelines into Operational Manuals and monitor their alignment across all pooled funds.

3 Bridging the gap between representation and influence

- Support the implementation of the revised AB composition and ensure that increased L/NNGO representation translates into meaningful participation and influence, including flexibility for country adaptation.
- Formally recognise and resource national NGO platforms and coordination networks catalysed through AB processes as critical mechanisms for consolidating L/NNGO positions.
- Ensure that participation opportunities extend beyond allocation decisions to include strategic governance issues such as HC vision papers, risk management frameworks, and operational modalities.

4 Enabling earlier and more transparent engagement

- Involve L/NNGOs at the **earliest conceptual stages** of strategy and policy development.
- Circulate full meeting materials at least 7–10 days in advance, with clear indication of decision points.
- Establish a **systematic mechanism to track** how L/NNGO inputs are reflected in strategic and allocation documents and provide feedback on how their contributions were incorporated.

5 Addressing power dynamics and creating safer participation spaces

- Introduce preparatory technical sessions, bilateral briefings, and written Q&A windows prior to meetings.
- Support or temporarily substitute for weak national NGO platforms to enable coordination and consultation.
- Purposefully place relevant items on the board agenda to trigger L/NNGO participation where they have the most expertise.

6 Challenging negative perceptions through visibility and performance measurement

- Publish evidence-based performance comparisons between L/NNGOs and international non-governmental organisations (INGOs).
- Invest in **communication strategies** and visibility, highlighting L/NNGO achievements, quality of implementation, and contextual expertise.
- Actively challenge negative narratives, including those related to lack of capacity.

Full recommendations by actor are available in Section 5.

SECTION 1

Introduction

Background and rationale

OCHA-managed Country and Regional Funds (CBPFs) are pivotal to the Humanitarian Reset and have **played a significant role in advancing localisation**. In 2025, 54.4% of CBPF allocations went to local and national non-governmental organisations[*] (L/NNGOs), marking notable progress in channelling funds to local actors.

Yet localisation is multifaceted, and **increased funding does not automatically translate into meaningful participation in governance**. While representation of L/NNGOs on Advisory Boards has grown in recent years, evidence continues to show persistent structural barriers that limit the substantive influence of these L/NNGO representatives.[1]

This study explores how L/NNGOs experience participation within CBPF ABs, moving beyond quantitative representation to examine the deeper underlying issues that shape influence, such as institutional arrangements, power dynamics, and perceptions of legitimacy. It aims to identify **practical actions** that the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), L/NNGOs, international non-governmental organisations (INGOs), and donors can take to ensure that local voices meaningfully shape and strengthen pooled fund governance in a coordinated, substantive, and sustained manner.

The research focuses on the central question: **What are the main obstacles to meaningful participation of L/NNGOs in ABs, and what actions, by whom are needed to improve their ability to exercise influence within CBPF ABs?**

Structure of the report

The report is organised as follows. Section 2 sets out the methodology, before Section 3 provides an overview of the CBPF AB mandate, structure, and current L/NNGO inclusion efforts. Section 4 then presents the key findings, grouped around institutional arrangements (4.1) and structural dynamics (4.2). This is followed by Section 5, which sets out recommendations for strengthening meaningful L/NNGO participation, and Section 6, which concludes the report. The report is accompanied by a list of acronyms and references.

[*] IASC, Grand Bargain Localisation Definitions, 2017, p.2. National NGOs/CSOs: National NGOs/CSOs operating in the aid recipient country in which they are headquartered, working in multiple subnational regions, and not affiliated to an international NGO. Local NGOs/CSOs: operating in a specific, geographically defined, subnational area of an aid recipient country, without affiliation to an international NGO/CSO.

SECTION 2

Methodology

Methods overview

This study used a mixed-methods approach with a strong emphasis on qualitative data, combining a desk review, key informant interviews (KIIs), and a targeted survey to examine how local and national non-governmental organisations (L/NNGOs) experience participation in CBPF Advisory Boards beyond numerical representation.

Data collection took place between **November 2025 and January 2026** and focused on governance processes, participation quality, and influence across pooled fund contexts. Qualitative data from interviews was analysed thematically to identify recurring patterns and underlying structural issues. For the survey questionnaire, closed-ended responses were summarised using descriptive statistics, while open-ended items underwent content analysis for triangulation.

Literature review

A desk review was conducted to inform research design and the development of the interview and survey tools. The desk review covered relevant studies, including ICVA reports[2, 3], CBPF online and offline resources, and academic literature[4–7] **on participation, power, and governance, including the Power Cube analytical framework developed** by Gaventa[8]. Literature findings were used to refine interview and survey tools and identify relevant conceptual frameworks. The review also revealed persistent gaps in existing evidence, particularly regarding how L/NNGOs experience participation and influence within pooled fund governance across contexts.

Key Informant Interviews

A total of **30 interviews** were conducted with:

- **20 current and former L/NNGO AB members** across 10 CBPFs and one Regional Humanitarian Pooled Fund. This included 10 women-led organisations (WLOs), one disability expert, six gender experts, and three network representatives.
- **Nine OCHA Headquarters and Country Office staff,** including seven Fund Managers, one Deputy Fund Manager, and one programme staff member across nine countries.
- **One civil society coordination platform representative.**

Given the study's focus of examining L/NNGO experiences of participation and influence within ABs, the interview sample prioritised L/NNGO representatives and stakeholders directly involved in supporting or facilitating their participation.

Interviewees were drawn from 10 CBPFs and one Regional Humanitarian Pooled Fund, representing East, Central, and West Africa, the Middle East and North Africa (MENA), Latin America and the Caribbean (LAC), Southeast Asia, and Eastern Europe. Interviews were conducted online and focused on institutional arrangements, decision-making processes, information access, and power dynamics within ABs.

Survey

A complementary survey was administered via **Kobo Toolbox** to current and former L/NNGO AB members, generating **30 responses across 15 countries**, representing a 39.5% response rate. Respondents primarily identified as national NGOs (60%), WLOs (17%), local NGOs (10%), NGO networks (10%), and other (3%).

Closed questions provided descriptive insights, while open-ended responses were analysed using content analysis to corroborate and deepen qualitative interview findings.

Ethical considerations

All data were collected in line with standard ethical principles. Participation was voluntary, information was treated confidentially, and findings presented in aggregated or anonymised form to prevent identification of individuals or organisations.

Limitations

While the methodology is robust, several limitations should be noted.

- **Digital access and connectivity**: Exclusive reliance on online data collection may have excluded individuals with poor internet access and limited participation from remote or under-resourced organisations. In a few interviews, poor audio quality affected the completeness of data.
- **Language**: The survey was conducted in English only, which may have reduced participation or depth of responses in some regions, although respondents could submit open-ended answers in other languages.
- **Sampling and response bias**: Purposive sampling and a 39.5% survey response rate introduce potential selection bias, likely favouring participants with stronger views on participation or higher engagement levels. Additionally, the predominance of national NGO survey respondents compared to local NGOs means the findings might reflect the perspectives of larger national entities.
- **Contextual diversity**: The global scope of the sample spans different governance environments and political realities, making direct cross-country comparison difficult.
- **Interpretive analysis**: As with any qualitative research, the findings reflect researcher interpretation, mitigated through triangulation across data sources and constituencies.

Despite these limitations, the consistency of findings across regions and stakeholder groups provides confidence in the robustness of the analysis.

SECTION 3

Pooled Fund Advisory Boards and Participation

This chapter examines how CBPF Advisory Boards structure participation*, particularly for local and national non-governmental organisations (L/NNGOs). It argues that ABs function as country-level invited spaces, offering formal inclusion mechanisms yet limited members' direct influence over decisions. It begins by outlining the **mandate and role** of ABs within CBPF governance, before tracing the **evolution of L/NNGO representation**, highlighting gains in seat numbers alongside gaps between formal inclusion and meaningful influence. It then introduces Gaventa's Power Cube framework to analyse how power across spaces, forms, and levels continues to shape L/NNGO participation outcomes.

Advisory Boards as invited but constrained spaces

CBPF ABs are formal consultative bodies established to advise the Humanitarian Coordinator (HC) on strategy, risk management, transparency, and performance.[9, 10] While these bodies play a central role in national-level governance, they remain advisory by design, with final decision-making authority retained by the HC.

Advisory Board core functions as per the CBPF Global Guidelines

1 Strategy

- Translating global policies / priorities into country-level strategies (HC vision, Operational Manual).
- Advising on allocation strategies, funding priorities, and resource deployment.
- Supporting strategic resource mobilisation and advocacy.

2 Risk management

- Assist with period risk analyses / development of appropriate risk management plans.

3 Transparency

- Monitoring Fund processes.

4 Performance

- Supporting monitoring and review of operations, offering advice to optimise performance.

Under OCHA's current CBPF Global Guidelines, ABs bring together **four constituencies** (donors, UN agencies, international NGOs, and local/national NGOs), with a maximum of 12 members, normally up to three members per constituency, and an aim of equal gender representation.

Following completion of this research, the PFWG agreed a revised AB composition consisting of six L/NNGOs, three donors, two UN agencies and two INGOs. While revised Global Guidelines have not yet been published at the time of writing, implementation of these arrangements has already begun in some contexts.

* For this report, the concept of 'participation' follows the 2021 IASC Guidance, which distinguishes meaningful participation from mere presence or membership through its operational requirements, including decision-making power, risk-sharing, equitable partnerships, accessibility, and strategic representation in leadership bodies (IASC, 2021, pp. 5–19).

Constituencies nominate their representatives through their own processes, which are then endorsed by the HC. The HC may also invite non-voting observers to the AB meetings, including technical experts.

ABs typically operate by consensus. If a vote is required, observers do not have voting rights. On all matters, the final decision rests with the HC or their designated alternates.

The Global Guidelines also set expectations around inclusion and continuity. ABs should include gender and disability-inclusion expertise, and at least one L/NNGO seat is designated for a national women-led or women's rights organisation, where possible.

Membership is expected to rotate, with tenures normally set at 12 months (renewal stated for only exceptional cases at the HC's discretion). Members should be at a senior leadership level, and suitable handovers must be facilitated. The boards should typically meet on a quarterly basis, while reserving the right to convene ad hoc meetings or use written consultations as needed.

These governance features define how participation is structured in practice. What follows examines how power operates within these arrangements, and how this affects the ability of different actors to participate and exercise influence.

Evolution of L/NNGO participation

Relative to the establishment of CBPFs (first established in 1997), L/NNGO participation on ABs emerged later. Local actors first gained seats around **2018–2019**, and their inclusion was formalised through the **2020 CBPF Global Guidelines**, which introduced a standard allocation of three L/NNGO seats per AB. Prior to that, there was no requirement to have L/NNGO seats on ABs. However, donors, INGOs, and the UN agencies already held seats.

Since 2020, when L/NNGO representation was formally institutionalised through the Global Guidelines, it has become a standard on the ABs. By **2025, L/NNGOs held 82 seats, up from 57 in 2024**.[1] Furthermore, 20 out of the 24 ABs in place in 2025 included representation from women-led organisations (WLOs).

Beyond seat numbers, OCHA in 2025 took steps to proactively broaden L/NNGO engagement in governance processes, including encouraging the Fund Managers to actively engage with L/NNGOs on strategic documents such as HC vision papers, localisation notes, risk management frameworks, allocation reviews, and "ways of working" updates. OCHA has also committed to more predictable AB involvement in governance issues beyond allocation decisions.[11]

Findings from the 2025 CBPF-NGO Dialogue Platform (PAG) survey[12] show that **82% of L/NNGO respondents reported feeling able to speak openly without fear of repercussions**, a notable increase from **63% in earlier surveys**. At the same time, respondents consistently emphasised that feeling able to speak does not equate to meaningful participation.

In response to some of these challenges, the PFWG and its partners have invested in initiatives aimed at strengthening L/NNGO participation in pooled fund governance. Notably, the CBPF Resource Facility, established in 2024, provides learning, mentoring, language support, participation stipends and travel support to L/NNGO Advisory Board and PAG members, helping to strengthen preparedness, confidence, and engagement in governance processes.

Complementary ICVA studies echo these concerns, identifying persistent barriers such as limited familiarity with CBPF governance, ongoing power asymmetries, and weak or fragmented NGO coordination platforms. These perceptions highlight that formal inclusion and meaningful influence, while connected, have progressed at different rates.[2, 3] This study builds on these insights, exploring the identified challenges and gaps in greater detail.

Power Cube Framework

The study applies **the Power Cube framework***, which examines how participation is shaped by power within different decision-making spaces, levels and forms of power.

Firstly, the analytical framework differentiates between three types of spaces: **closed (exclusion), invited, and claimed (created) spaces**. ABs are best understood as an **invited space**: forums formally opened by those in authority, with participation granted under defined rules and conditions. While L/NNGOs are institutionally included through formal seats and consultation requirements, agenda-setting authority, timing of engagement, and final decision-making power sit largely outside the AB, with the HC retaining ultimate authority, as outlined earlier in this chapter.

* The Power Cube methodology was developed by John Gaventa among other theorists in the early 2000s and has since been used widely including as a methodology to assess civil society participation. www.powercube.net.

Secondly, the Power Cube distinguishes between three forms of power:

- **Visible power**: Observable decision-making structures governed by formal rules and procedures. These rules and procedures are codified in instruments such as the AB Terms of Reference, CBPF Global Guidelines, Operational Manuals, Allocation Strategy Papers, Humanitarian Response Plans, and Risk Management Frameworks. They are operationally expressed through seat quotas, consensus-building processes, voting procedures, and the defined relationship between advisory bodies and executive authority.
- **Hidden power**: Institutional practices, both formal and informal, that shape agendas and decisions behind the scenes (gatekeeping), including agenda setting, timing, access to global level processes, information flows, pre-meetings, and prioritisation of issues and voices.
- **Invisible power**: Shaping and internalisation of social norms, perceptions, and narratives that influence how actors perceive their own and others' legitimacy and capacity. This can involve unwritten expectations around roles and influence, cognitive biases regarding local versus international competence, feelings of belonging, norms that discourage challenging established power holders, and preference of technical expertise over local contextual knowledge.

Thirdly, the Power Cube looks at where participation takes place, at the local, national, and/or global levels and whether these levels are interlinked.[8] Pooled Fund ABs primarily operate at the national level as invited spaces where multiple forms of power are exercised. While L/NNGOs gain entry at this level, their access to global governance spaces and the information flows connecting them remains markedly uneven, creating power imbalances that shape their participation.

A comprehensive power analysis requires attention to all three dimensions, spaces, forms, and levels, as each reveals different, yet interconnected, dynamics of how power operates and is contested.

SECTION 4

Key Findings

Building on the analytical framework set out in Section 3, this chapter examines how multiple dimensions of power shape local and national non-governmental organisation (L/NNGO) participation in Advisory Boards (ABs). It organises findings across two analytical domains:

1 Institutional arrangements

How AB seats are allocated and distributed across constituencies, the length of tenure served by L/NNGO representatives, how new members are inducted and prepared to participate effectively, and how representatives are nominated and selected for AB membership.

2 Structural dynamics

The barriers that limit consistent and diverse L/NNGO representation, when and how L/NNGOs are brought into decision-making processes, the conditions that shape whether they can speak and be heard on equal terms, and the perceptions of L/NNGO capacity that continue to influence their standing.

While visible, hidden, and invisible power intersect throughout both domains, this structure helps identify which constraints emerge as most salient across contexts.

KEY FINDING 4.1

Institutional arrangements

Seats and tenure

Across contexts, the number of local and national non-governmental organisation (L/NNGO) seats and the length of tenure vary considerably. At the time the research was conducted, Advisory Board composition varied across contexts, with some Boards remaining at the minimum requirement of three L/NNGO representatives while others had expanded local representation. Since then, the PFWG has agreed an increase in L/NNGO representation across Advisory Boards.* While there was a recognised need to retain flexibility across the various Boards, in general L/NNGO informants called for increased L/NNGO representation. At the very least, in case of a vote, L/NNGOs were keen to ensure at least the same number of votes for themselves as for other constituencies. While some L/NNGOs felt that the numbers of the United Nations (UN) and international non-governmental organisation (INGO) seats should be reduced, most L/NNGO respondents were in favour of maintaining the current number of donor representatives on the ABs.

In terms of tenure, L/NNGO informants consistently indicated that 12-month tenures proved insufficient. Both L/NNGO representatives and Fund Managers reported that much of the first year is spent understanding OCHA Country and Regional Funds (CBPF) governance, with effectiveness and confidence typically increasing only toward the end of a mandate.

- **L/NNGOs** emphasised frustration with learning curves that outlast mandates.
- **Fund Managers** broadly agreed that 12-month terms are too short, noting that effectiveness often increases near the end of a mandate.

Why this matters for influence

Short tenures and limited seats weaken continuity, institutional memory, and the ability of L/NNGO representatives to assert influence on equal footing with longer-tenured constituencies. However, both L/NNGOs and Fund Managers noted that only increasing the number of seats and tenure is not in itself enough to ensure greater influence.

Notably, while seat allocation and tenure are visible power mechanisms codified in the CBPF Global Guidelines, their inconsistent application reflects substantial implementation discretion held by Humanitarian Coordinators (HCs) and United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) at country level. Consequently, L/NNGO influence remains dependent on how these discretionary powers are exercised, making formal inclusion vulnerable to variability in practice.

The revised composition to six L/NNGO seats represents an important step towards addressing concerns raised by respondents regarding representation. However, interviewees consistently emphasised that influence depends not only on seat allocation but also on onboarding, access to information, engagement timelines, and broader power dynamics.

> *"We advocated to increase the number of national NGOs to have a balance in representation, because sometimes decisions are taken by voting.*
>
> **Anonymous L/NNGO Advisory Board Member**

* Since conducting this research, the Pooled Fund Working Group (PFWG) has adopted OCHA's recommendation to move L/NNGO representation on Advisory Board to six L/NNGOs per Board.

Identified good practices

- Prior to the recent PFWG decision on Advisory Board composition, several CBPFs had already taken steps to expand L/NNGO representation beyond minimum requirements, including one Fund that had reached 50% L/NNGO representation on its AB. These experiences provide useful lessons for implementation of the revised governance arrangements.
- In a small number of contexts, **longer or staggered tenures** have helped retain institutional memory and enabled newer representatives to learn CBPF systems before assuming full responsibilities.
- Where Fund Managers **actively facilitated overlap between outgoing and incoming L/NNGO** members, representatives reported greater confidence and earlier engagement.
- Some CBPFs enabled **hybrid participation**, **alternate members, and observer roles** to broaden inclusion and continuity. These approaches helped reduce travel and cost barriers, allowed sub-national or frontline organisations to engage, and supported learning and handover without increasing formal seat numbers.

Onboarding and induction

Onboarding quality varies sharply across countries. Survey findings show a clear split in perceptions: half of L/NNGO respondents rated their induction experience as only average or poor, reporting that onboarding often consisted of receiving documents with little or no guided orientation, structured briefing, or handover from outgoing members. Many new members described entering AB meetings without a clear understanding of their roles, responsibilities, or how to engage strategically within CBPF governance structures.

Local and national actors (L/NA) informants consistently emphasised the need for improving the current onboarding practices. They also highlighted the practical barriers to effective induction, including the heavy use of technical language and acronyms, assumptions of prior CBPF knowledge, and the absence of materials adapted to different experience levels.

Language barriers and inaccessible documentation further limited comprehension for some representatives, particularly those with less prior exposure to humanitarian coordination fora.

Delays in the formal confirmation of appointments and immediate immersion into substantive agendas and regular AB meetings without preparatory support also weakened early participation.

- **L/NNGOs** frequently described feeling under-prepared and hesitant during their initial AB meetings, leading to limited interventions, and reduced confidence to challenge or shape discussions in early stages of their mandates.
- **Fund Managers** largely recognised these gaps and that inconsistent induction practices contribute to unequal participation dynamics and expressed support for more structured, standardised onboarding approaches. Several noted that while experienced representatives may require light orientation, others need more comprehensive induction paired with practical guidance to engage effectively from the outset. The absence of routing handover arrangements was also seen as a risk to institutional memory, particularly given short board tenures and high turnover.

Why this matters for influence

Without effective onboarding, L/NNGO representatives' ability to participate on equal footing with other AB constituencies that benefit from longer institutional memory and prior exposure to CBPF processes is significantly weakened. Weak onboarding contributes directly to early-stage silence, reduced confidence to contribute and voice opinions, and delayed strategic engagement, reinforcing existing power asymmetries.

While onboarding is a formal procedure (visible power) intended to equip all members equally, its implementation reveals how hidden power operates through unequal access to information and institutional knowledge. Where structured induction is absent, institutional knowledge remains effectively gatekept by those who already possess it, meaning that formal seat allocation grants L/NNGOs access to the space, but not to the knowledge needed to exercise influence within it.

> *"We just joined the meeting with the existing Advisory Board on the regular agenda and participated on that agenda for the first day. We were quite silent because we didn't know the norms, we didn't know the ethic… the informal meeting with the outgoing members would have been very essential and that is a missed opportunity to learn from the experience.*
>
> **Anonymous L/NNGO Advisory Board Member**

Identified good practices

- Some Humanitarian Financing Units (HFUs) have implemented **structured induction packages**, including simplified governance overviews, glossaries, and bilateral briefings ahead of first regular board meetings.
- In contexts where **outgoing representatives were supported to provide informal handovers**, L/NNGOs described entering AB spaces with clearer understanding of board dynamics, norms, and strategic opportunities, resulting in greater confidence and earlier participation.
- In a small number of contexts, L/NNGO AB members were invited to participate in **Strategic Review Committees** (SRCs) or similar mechanisms. This helped strengthen feedback loops between governance discussions and operational decision-making, increased understanding of allocation trade-offs, and enhanced L/NNGO representatives' ability to influence priorities beyond formal AB meetings.

Selection and inclusion

The survey responses from L/NNGO board members indicated a **largely positive perception of L/NNGO selection processes**. The structural shifts towards **merit-based criteria** (highlighting operational experience and humanitarian capacity) and standardised procedures were recognised and welcomed by respondents. The use of **verified voter lists and secure online voting systems** for election processes was widely noted as a good practice.

However, respondents also highlighted persistent challenges. Multiple respondents and informants noted that **political or funding pressures might influence nominations**, and that in some contexts **dominant consortia or forum leadership may limit alternative voices**. There were calls for **greater transparency and more formal oversight from OCHA** when the selection processes were delegated to networks. A recurring concern was the **lack of formal feedback to unsuccessful candidates**, which was seen as undermining trust and accountability.

Progress on inclusion was most visible in relation to **women-led organisations (WLOs)**, which respondents broadly welcomed. Despite this, the findings point to ongoing **under-representation of local, frontline, and sub-national organisations**, especially those operating outside capital cities. Barriers to their participation include the design of the selection processes, as well as practical constraints such as travel costs, language barriers, limited connectivity, and access to information and coordination platforms, which were felt to disproportionately affect smaller and more remote local actors.

- **L/NNGOs** have called for inclusion of frontline and sub-national organisations to strengthen field-level input, while reporting persistent barriers for smaller, remote, or sub-national organisations due to cost, language, access and connectivity constraints, as well as limited feedback for unsuccessful candidates.
- **Fund Managers** acknowledged inclusion and selection challenges, in the context of broader coordination challenges.

Why this matters for influence

When selection processes are perceived as opaque or dominated by a few actors, representatives may struggle to claim legitimacy as voices of a broader constituency. This weakens their ability to articulate consolidated constituency positions and to influence strategic discussions.

Similarly, limited inclusion of local, frontline, and sub-national organisations, including WLOs and organisations of persons with disabilities (OPDs), reduces the diversity and operational relevance of perspectives informing AB deliberations, undermining the depth and quality of local influence in pooled fund governance.

Identified good practices

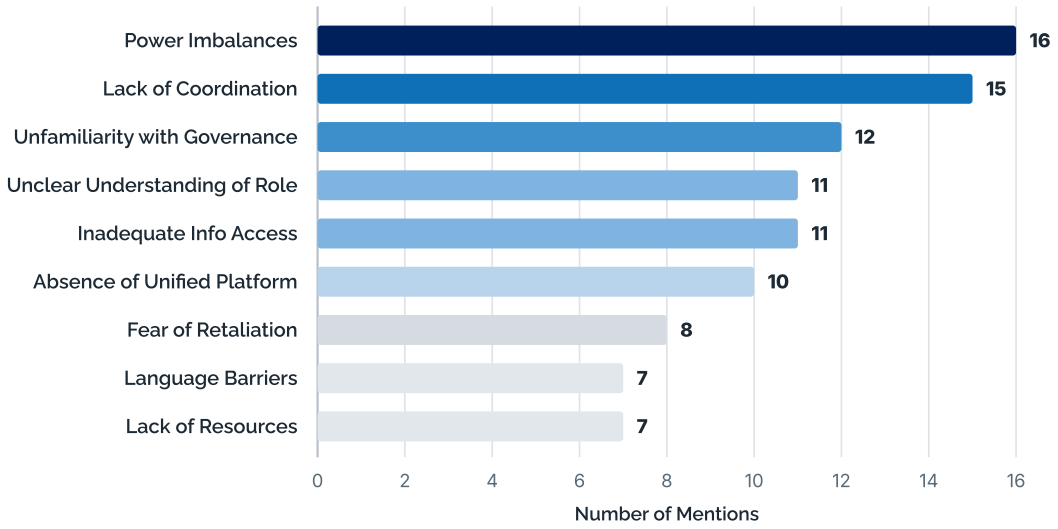
The following practices were reported in a small number of CBPFs:

- Utilising open calls for AB membership within national networks and clusters to prioritise operational experience, capacity and humanitarian expertise.
- Ensuring fairness and transparency through clear eligibility criteria, published timelines, verified voter lists and use of trusted forums.
- Using timely announcements and secure online voting systems with built-in safeguards.
- Actively ensuring the inclusion of WLOs and OPDs, local/frontline organisations and youth representatives. Some funds have enabled flexible attendance, including hybrid participation to allow multiple members to join remotely.

KEY FINDING 4.2

Structural dynamics

FIGURE 1: TOP BARRIERS TO L/NNGO PARTICIPATION



The graph illustrates the main barriers to local and national non-governmental organisation (L/NNGO) participation in Advisory Boards (ABs), as reported by survey respondents. Power imbalances emerged as the primary barrier. The second most identified challenge was weak coordination among L/NNGOs, often linked to the absence of a unified NGO platform, resulting in representatives lacking a clear collective mandate and limited ability to represent a broader local constituency. A further significant obstacle is limited familiarity with fund governance and unclear understanding of AB roles: without sufficient knowledge of OCHA Country and Regional Funds (CBPF) rules and processes, members cannot effectively navigate the system or exercise their role, a gap compounded by language barriers and technical jargon. The following thematic sections examine these and other interconnected barriers in greater detail.

Representation and the 'unified voice'

Representation challenges stem not only from fragmentation among L/NNGOs, but also from the absence of resourcing, time, and formal mandates for constituency consultation. Many L/NNGO representatives struggle to present consolidated positions at the board meetings due to sector fragmentation, group heterogeneity, geographic dispersion, weak coordination platforms, and ambiguity around whom they represent. A few emphasised that L/NNGOs are not a homogeneous group, making the aggregation of diverse views difficult. Furthermore, power dynamics within the local landscape, such as dominant consortia blocking new platforms, government bans undermining forum legitimacy, and regional dominance where NGOs from capital cities sideline sub-national actors, complicate consolidation efforts. Where local platforms/networks exist, representation strengthens. However, when platforms are absent or non-functional, individual L/NNGO representatives bear the heavy burden of independent consultation.

Respondents emphasised that the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) should share documents with sufficient lead time for input consolidation. Fund Managers generally attributed representation gaps to weak internal coordination among L/NNGOs, although to note that some noted instances where representatives seemed to prioritise organisational interests over broader constituency concerns.

- **L/NNGOs** often shoulder consultation responsibilities individually, without support, and have to represent the most heterogenous constituency.
- **Fund Managers** noted that fragmentation limits influence and can undermine legitimacy at the Board.

Why this matters for influence

Formal L/NNGO representation does not translate into influence when the structural conditions for consolidating and articulating collective positions are absent. This gap reveals how hidden power operates: other constituencies, benefiting from established coordination structures and institutional resources, retain an implicit advantage in shaping discussions. L/NNGOs on the other hand, are placed in an invited space without the collective leverage to shape its outcomes.

> *"There are too many national NGOs. They speak different languages. It's much easier for international NGOs because they have one forum. For the national NGOs, it's much more complicated.*
>
> **Anonymous Pooled Fund Manager**

Identified good practice

- In contexts where national NGO platforms were absent, contested, or non-functional, L/NNGO representatives used **informal coordination mechanisms (such as WhatsApp groups or ad-hoc calls** among eligible partners) to gather inputs and align positions ahead of AB discussions.
- Targeted participation support (including travel stipends, "clinic hours," and dedicated preparatory calls) was enabled alongside constituency communication channels to reduce barriers to effective engagement.
- OCHA maintained close collaboration with existing national NGO forums and facilitated the establishment of platforms where they were previously lacking. Consistent with Gaventa's argument that spaces are dynamic, findings demonstrate that OCHA-invited AB processes have catalysed the creation of local claimed spaces, such as national networks established by L/NNGOs on their own terms. This represents a meaningful positive development: claimed spaces enable local actors to set their own agendas, consolidate positions independently, and challenge existing power asymmetries.

Substantive participation and engagement timelines

Nearly half of surveyed L/NNGOs were unsure whether their participation had influenced allocations or other strategic CBPFs' decisions. Several respondents noted receiving draft agendas too late for substantive engagement and called for more formalised opportunities to set or add agenda items. Interview and survey data further indicate that this uncertainty coincides with patterns of late-stage engagement, when documents are shared shortly before meetings and time for reflection is limited.

Why this matters for influence

Interview and survey findings indicate that engagement occurring late in drafting cycles is consistently associated with reduced influence. Respondents across multiple contexts described participation at this stage as reactive rather than shaping initial priorities, suggesting that influence is more feasible earlier in decision-making processes.

- **L/NNGOs** consistently cited late document circulation, limited consultation time, no prior consultations and lack of feedback on how inputs were used.
- **Some Fund Managers** suggested that L/NNGOs could be more assertive and engaged in decision making.

Findings consistently show that the absence of opportunities to engage in the conceptual phase, late access to documents, and unclear feedback mechanisms structurally limit opportunities for upstream influence. Critically, there is no systematic tracking of how and if L/NNGO comments are incorporated into final documents, making it difficult to assess whether their input translates into tangible impact.

Late-stage engagement and very limited time for review reflect how hidden power can operate through agenda-setting and information access even when L/NNGOs are formally invited to participate. Upstream decision-making often occurs outside the board, which may constrain substantive influence regardless of seat presence.

> *"They could influence the agenda, but very often they don't. I want them to be more pushy and hold me to account.*
>
> **Anonymous Pooled Fund Manager**

Identified good practices

A limited number of Funds were reported to **engage L/NNGOs at concept stage**, including through early consultations on allocation priorities or strategy drafts. Where documents were shared at least one week in advance, representatives reported being better able to consult constituencies, formulate positions, and engage substantively, shifting participation from endorsement to co-creation.

Conditions for equal voice

Most survey respondents reported that they can speak freely and are encouraged to raise concerns. However, a sizable minority expressed fear that speaking out could prompt negative consequences for their organisations. Many respondents noted that the dominance of donors, international non-governmental organisations (INGOs), and the United Nations (UN) on the board makes some representatives reluctant to be openly critical. Several cited that limited meeting frequency and short notice reduce the time for reflection and follow-up, which undermines full openness for a notable number of participants.

- **L/NNGOs** described withholding comments or softening positions to avoid perceived risk. To challenge this, the pivotal role of Fund Managers in being proactive and inviting was strongly emphasised.
- **Fund Managers** acknowledged these dynamics and noted that key discussions often occur informally outside meetings.

Both informants and respondents emphasised that the inherent power imbalances impact participation, especially since other board constituencies (donors, UN, and INGOs) are often the direct funders of L/NNGO members. Because of this dynamic, informants stressed that personality traits of selected local representatives are as critical as their experience. The ability to be proactive and vocal was highlighted as essential for effectively challenging the status quo. Survey respondents were divided on whether L/NNGOs are listened to equally compared with INGOs, the UN, and donors. While a number reported fair speaking time, particularly where Fund Managers actively facilitate participation, several noted that donors clearly maintain greater influence and are more prominently heard in key strategic discussions. Many participants also identified a significant gap in access to detailed information for local representatives, which effectively limits their ability to engage on equal terms with better-resourced actors.

Why this matters for influence

In consensus-based forums, reluctance to express disagreements, often linked to funding dependency or reputational risk, constrains influence, as positions that are not voiced cannot shape outcomes. When some actors self-censor, consensus masks underlying power imbalances. From the perspective of local and national actors (L/NA) members, all representatives of other constituencies at the Board are potential donors, which impacts their participation.

This dynamic reflects how invisible power operates: funding dependency and reputational risk lead L/NNGO representatives to internalise constraints on their own participation, self-censoring even in formally open spaces. The perception of other constituencies as potential funders further reinforces these invisible boundaries.

Identified good practices

- In some contexts, Fund Managers intentionally created **safer participation conditions**, including preparatory technical sessions, bilateral briefings with L/NNGO representatives, and dedicated spaces for written feedback ahead of meetings.
- Likewise, in several contexts, Fund Managers instituted open clinic hours or informal bilateral check-ins with L/NNGO representatives, allowing for clarification of technical issues, rehearsal of positions, and follow-up on concerns outside formal meetings, reducing information asymmetries and lowering the perceived risk of speaking openly during AB sessions.
- Where Chairs/Fund Managers actively invited divergent views and followed up on dissenting inputs, L/NNGOs reported greater willingness to challenge and contribute openly.
- Some funds facilitated bilateral briefings between Fund Managers and L/NNGO representatives outside formal meetings, used confidential written input windows or proactively invited dissenting views and documented follow-up.

> *"They [L/NAs] just feel that they cannot say much because of (…) the UN being there and the donors. So, these power dynamics are there…*
>
> **Anonymous L/NNGO Advisory Board Member**

Negative perceptions and capacity

Findings indicate that persistent negative perceptions often associated with capacity, constrain L/NNGO influence. Interview and survey data also emphasised that negative narratives about L/NNGO capacity often persist despite evidence of strong performance and compliance. Several informants pointed to a visibility problem: limited donor-facing communication and scarce accessible evidence mean that successes go unseen, while failures are often attributed to local actors. Several participants also argued that limited trust, rather than technical capacity alone, constrains funding access and representation. Concern was expressed that, despite some recent progress in shifting the narrative, recent funding cuts have led to the resurgence of negative perceptions in certain contexts.

- **Most L/NNGOs** viewed the capacity narratives as outdated and driven by trust deficits rather than evidence.
- **Fund Managers** emphasised the need for sustained capacity strengthening and more active challenge of negative narratives.

Why this matters for influence

Narratives shape legitimacy. When assumptions about capacity are internalised or unchallenged, they influence whose inputs are taken seriously. Invisible power operates here through norms that influence whose expertise is recognised. Some interview data indicated that although perceptions in some contexts have improved recently, historically negative views are deeply ingrained in the system despite not reflecting reality in many cases. Staff turnover was identified as a systemic concern, with trained staff frequently moving to INGO or UN roles, reducing local retention of skills and institutional capacity and further reinforcing negative capacity narratives.

Identified good practices

- Several L/NNGO representatives reported that exposure to regional and global humanitarian fora, trainings, and peer-learning platforms strengthened their confidence and perceived legitimacy within ABs. These experiences helped counter internalised narratives of inferiority and enabled representatives to engage more assertively in governance discussions.
- Some Funds undertook assessments to validate national actors' quality and performance evidence. Some Funds invested in communication efforts that highlighted local achievements to showcase quality work and counter stereotypes.
- Several Fund Managers actively challenged negative perceptions and advocated for local actors' capacities to international stakeholders, reducing stigma.

> *"So little by little, you know, changing the narrative. Making it way more positive for the national NGOs. […] It's a shame to say that, but at the beginning when I arrived in country, it was really, really bad, the perception that the internationals had of the national NGOs.*
>
> **Anonymous Pooled Fund Manager**

SECTION 5

Recommendations

The following recommendations build directly on the findings identified in Section 4. They aim to strengthen the quality, consistency, equity, and influence of local and national non-governmental organisation (L/NNGO) participation in OCHA Country and Regional Funds (CBPF) Advisory Boards (ABs).

Recommendation 1: Onboarding

Inadequate onboarding remains one of the most significant barriers to effective participation. Many L/NNGOs begin their term with limited knowledge of CBPF governance, unclear role expectations, ambiguous opportunities for influence, and no or limited handover, placing them at a disadvantage compared to historically more experienced constituencies.

Recommended actions

OCHA / HUMANITARIAN FINANCING UNITS (HFUs)

- Institutionalise a **standardised induction package** for all AB members, including:
  - Concise role descriptions;
  - CBPF governance architecture and decision-making processes;
  - Specific responsibilities regarding constituency consultation, information-sharing, and feedback mechanisms;
  - Glossary of CBPF terminology and acronyms.
- Organise and facilitate **in-person structured handovers and briefings** between the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) and outgoing and incoming L/NNGO representatives.
- Offer **differentiated briefings** for representatives with less CBPF experience.
- Guarantee onboarding timelines are communicated early, with prompt confirmation of new appointments.
- Build the CBPF Resource Facility learning and mentoring programme into a formalised induction process.

L/NNGOs, NETWORKS, CONSORTIA, AND/OR CLUSTERS

- Facilitate structured handovers between outgoing and incoming L/NNGO board representatives.
- Organise briefings for incoming L/NNGO members on their roles and responsibilities and constituency consultation requirements.

CBPF RESOURCE FACILITY

- Support and monitor the induction process and the analysis of its effectiveness.
- Ensure all new L/NNGO members are informed of immediate eligibility for **learning, mentoring, stipends**, and global travel support.

Recommendation 2: CBPF Global Guidelines and AB Terms of Reference (Operational Manuals)

The CBPF Global Guidelines/AB Terms of Reference, while standardised globally, are applied unevenly at country-level and no longer fully reflect the expectations placed on L/NNGO participation. Short tenure, insufficient representation, and lack of clarity on responsibilities all emerged as barriers.

Recommended actions

OCHA/HFUs

- Amend the Global Guidelines and Operational Manuals to:
  - Reflect agreed governance reforms in the revised Global Guidelines and Operating Manuals, including higher minimum L/NNGO seat allocations (from three to six) and related governance arrangements, and flexibility for country-level adaptation;
  - Introduce an explicit **diversity category** for local, sub-national, and frontline organisations;
  - Extend the **standard tenure to 24 months**, with staggered rotation to preserve institutional memory;
  - Institutionalise **observer and alternate membership** to widen L/NAs exposure and continuity;
  - Include detailed guidance on **governance responsibilities**, including board members' **roles and responsibilities;**
  - Apply the revised **Global Guidelines and Operational Manuals consistently** and transparently at the regional and country levels, documenting any contextual deviations.

Recommendation 3: Selection process

Although selection processes have improved, inconsistencies and political gatekeeping persist, especially where national NGO platforms are weak or contested. Respondents noted difficulties for smaller and sub-national organisations to participate due to cost, language, and connectivity barriers.

Recommended actions

NGO PLATFORMS, NETWORKS, CONSORTIA, AND CLUSTERS

- Establish a **transparent, published selection protocol** in advance of each election cycle, covering:
  - Eligibility rules, including minimum standards for technical capacity and local presence;
  - Gender and diversity requirements, including mandatory women-led organisation (WLO) representation;
  - Geographic representation targets (including sub-national organisations);
  - Clear timelines and nomination windows;
  - Validated voter lists and verification methods.
- Adopt **multi-stage nomination models** to balance inclusiveness with technical credibility (e.g. open call, vetting by forum/cluster, peer voting).
- Provide **written feedback** to unsuccessful candidates, particularly where criteria are technical or new.
- Publish post-selection reports, including anonymised scoring/rationale.

Recommendation 4: Substantive participation and engagement timelines

L/NNGO influence remains limited partly because engagement often begins too late in the drafting cycle. There is an absence of systematic tracking on how L/NNGOs' comments are incorporated, which makes it impossible to assess whether input translates into tangible impact. Weak L/NNGO coordination mechanisms further constrain the development of unified positions.

Recommended actions

OCHA / HFUs

- Engage L/NNGOs at the **earliest conceptual stage** of drafting/revising:
  - Allocation strategies;
  - Localisation strategies/notes;
  - Operational manuals;
  - Humanitarian Coordinator (HC) vision papers and other annual priorities.

- Hold **in-person consultations with L/NAs** for strategic documents, reflecting the depth of engagement usually offered to donors.
- Circulate **full meeting materials at least seven days in advance**, with 10 days as the preferred standard, including annotated agendas to allow internal L/NNGO coordination, preparation, and timely input.
- Establish a **systematic mechanism to track** how L/NNGO inputs are reflected in strategic and allocation documents and provide feedback on how their contributions were incorporated.
- Issue short **post-meeting notes** summarising how inputs from all constituencies, including L/NNGOs, were considered and incorporated.
- Facilitate and support the emergence of L/NNGO-led coordination spaces that enable consolidated positions independent of formal AB structures.

L/NNGOs/NGO PLATFORMS

- Organise **timely constituency consultations** to develop unified positions ahead of meetings and written submissions.

Recommendation 5: Conditions for equal voice

L/NNGOs note persistent self-censorship due to funding dependencies and perceived reputational risk. Proactive facilitation needed to challenge this and to create engagement opportunities for L/NAs is crucial for advancing participation.

Recommended actions

OCHA / HFUs / HCs AT (COUNTRY-LEVEL)

- **Proactively** facilitate L/NAs engagement at the AB meetings and beyond.
- **Proactively** include AB agenda items where local actors hold **unique contextual expertise** (e.g., sub-national response dynamics, access constraints, local risk profiles).
- Provide localisation support or temporarily substitute for national NGO platforms that are weak or nonfunctional, ensuring L/NNGOs can coordinate safely.
- Introduce **advance engagement opportunities**, such as:
  - Preparatory technical sessions;
  - Bilateral briefings with Fund Manager teams;
  - Windows for written Q&A prior to meetings.
- Track follow-up actions and commitments transparently using a simple log shared with AB members.
- Participate in **local and national-led events** to **contribute to shifting the usual top-down approach**.
- Schedule periodic in-person briefings with L/NAs beyond AB meetings and monitor participation outcomes through specific indicators.

L/NNGOs/ NGO PLATFORMS

- Provide representatives with safe spaces to rehearse positions, review documents, and test arguments before formal AB meetings.

DONORS

- Proactively engage with L/NNGOs outside of formal AB meetings to create confidential space for dialogue.

Recommendation 6: Negative perceptions and capacity

Although evidence of strong L/NNGO operational performance exists, negative perceptions around risk, quality, and capacity persist, especially in contexts experiencing funding cuts.

Recommended actions

OCHA / HFUs

- Conduct **evidence-based performance assessments** comparing L/NNGO and INGO delivery; publish results widely.
- Invest in **communication strategies** highlighting L/NNGO achievements, quality of implementation, and contextual expertise.
- Actively challenge negative narratives, including those linking funding reductions to "capacity gaps."
- Support **long-term capacity strengthening**, including:
  - Leadership, negotiation, and governance skills;
  - Compliance and risk management capabilities;
  - Participation in regional and global platforms for visibility and influence.

DONORS

- Advocate for and fund **L/NNGO performance assessments.**
- Promote balanced risk perspectives by acknowledging evidence that L/NNGOs often deliver cost-effective, high-quality programming.
- Support and invest in initiatives that **increase the visibility** of L/NNGO achievements and operational contributions.

SECTION 6

Conclusion

This study demonstrates that while local and national actors (L/NA) representation in pooled fund governance has expanded rapidly since 2020, influence has not kept pace. Representation on Advisory Boards (ABs) and funding shares have both increased, and procedural consultation has improved, marking welcome gains for localisation. However, these advances have not yet translated consistently into equal influence over priorities, strategies, or decisions compared with other constituencies. Applying Gaventa's Power Cube provides insight into some of the reasons why.

This study identified the following areas that impact the quality of local and national non-governmental organisation (L/NNGO) participation, structured around the three dimensions of power from Gaventa's Power Cube:

Visible power: formal rules and arrangements

Formal governance structures significantly shape L/NNGOs' participation. Short twelve-month tenures limit continuity, as new actors spend much of their first year learning Pooled Fund processes rather than influencing decisions. Historically limited seats restrict representation diversity, particularly for sub-national and smaller organisations. The recent Pooled Fund Working Group (PFWG) decision to increase L/NNGO representation addresses one of the concerns raised by respondents, although the findings suggest that representation alone is insufficient without complementary changes relating to continuity, onboarding, engagement and influence. Uneven implementation of the Global Guidelines and Operational Manuals across contexts stems from implementation discretion held by Humanitarian Coordinators (HCs) and Fund Managers, meaning that while formal rules apply universally, actors with greater institutional memory and resourcing navigate them more effectively, reproducing existing asymmetries within formally inclusive structures.

Hidden power: access, timing, and agenda setting

Influence is also constrained by informal practices. Late engagement in drafting cycles leaves L/NNGOs without time to consolidate positions, resulting in reactive rather than strategic participation. Weak onboarding means institutional knowledge remains gatekept by established constituencies granting formal access but not the knowledge needed to exercise influence. Similarly, the absence of systematic tracking obscures whether input translates into tangible impact, while asymmetric access to detailed information limits equal engagement with better-resourced actors.

Invisible power: narratives, legitimacy, and self-censorship

Internalised dynamics and perceptions operate beneath procedural surfaces and are difficult to detect. Persistent narratives questioning L/NNGO capacity often detached from performance evidence shape whose expertise is recognised. These assumptions narrow cognitive frameworks around what is perceived as achievable, reinforcing confidence gaps and limiting willingness to challenge dominant positions. Despite growing confidence to speak, many representatives report self-censorship driven by funding dependencies and reputational concerns. A visibility problem intensifies these dynamics: limited donor-facing communication ensures successes go unseen while failures are attributed locally. Consequently, the burden falls disproportionately on individual L/NNGO representatives to compensate for structural gaps through personal proactivity, an unequal demand not placed on other constituencies.

However, emerging good practices across several OCHA Country and Regional Funds (CBPFs) demonstrate that these constraints are not inevitable and that improvements are possible within the ABs. Where L/NNGOs were engaged upstream, where continuity was deliberately supported, and where Fund Managers proactively created safer spaces and encouraged participation, local actors contributed more confidently and strategically. Findings also indicate that some Funds have catalysed the creation of local claimed spaces enabling greater consolidation of positions and power redistribution.

Based on these research findings, action is recommended across six interconnected areas:

1. Strengthening onboarding and institutional continuity;
2. Standardising the application of Global Guidelines and reforming Operational Manuals/ AB Terms of Reference;
3. Bridging the gap between representation and influence by strengthening national platforms/networks;
4. Enabling earlier and more transparent engagement;
5. Creating safer participation spaces that mitigate power asymmetries;
6. Challenging persistent negative capacity narratives through visibility and performance measurement.

Taken together, these actions shift the focus from discretionary inclusion to institutionalised practice ensuring that local and national actors are not only present at the table but informed and empowered to shape outcomes.

Strengthening participation is therefore both a political and an operational imperative. This requires moving beyond discretionary inclusion toward institutionalised practices that rebalance power dynamics. Given the centrality of OCHA-managed CBPFs to the humanitarian system, addressing both procedural and deeper power-related dynamics is essential for CBPFs to continue leading in localisation efforts.

ANNEX

Acronyms & Abbreviations

ACRONYM	DEFINITION
AB	Advisory Board
CBPF	OCHA Country and Regional Funds (formerly Country-Based Pooled Funds, CBPFs)
CSO	Civil Society Organisation
HC	Humanitarian Coordinator
HCT	Humanitarian Country Team
HFU	Humanitarian Financing Unit
HQ	Headquarters
ICVA	International Council of Voluntary Agencies
INGO	International Non-Governmental Organisation
KIIs	Key Informant Interviews
LAC	Latin America and the Caribbean
L/NNGO	Local and National Non-Governmental Organisations
L/NA	Local and National Actors
MENA	Middle East and North Africa
OCHA	United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs
OPD	Organisation of Persons with Disabilities
PAG	CBPF-NGO Dialogue Platform Advisory Group
PFWG	Pooled Fund Working Group
UN	United Nations
WLO	Women-led Organisation

References

1. **OCHA** (n.d.). *CBPF Data Hub*. cbpf.data.unocha.org
2. **ICVA** (2024). *Localisation in Humanitarian Leadership*. icvanetwork.org
3. **ICVA** (2026). *Review of CBPF Resource Facility*.
4. **Arnstein, S. R.** (1969). *A ladder of citizen participation*. Journal of the American Institute of Planners, 35(4), 216–222.
5. **Cornwall, A.** (2002). *Making space, changing places: situating participation in development*. IDS Working Paper 170.
6. **Cornwall, A. & Coelho, V.S. (Eds.)** (2004). *New Democratic Spaces?* Zed Books, London.
7. **Lukes, S.** (1974). *Power: A Radical View*. Macmillan, London.
8. **Gaventa, J.** (2006). *Finding the spaces for change: A power analysis*. IDS Bulletin, 37(6), 23–31.
9. **OCHA** (2022a). *CBPF Global Guidelines*. unocha.org
10. **OCHA** (2022b). *Global Guidelines—Annex 1: Advisory Board Terms of Reference*. unocha.org
11. **OCHA** (2025a). *Widening Country and Regional Funds Governance and Strengthening Checks and Balances on Decision-Making Background*. November.
12. **PAG** (2025). *4th OCHA CBPF-NGO Dialogue Platform Survey*.
13. **OCHA** (2025b). *Localisation and the Humanitarian Reset across the Funds Background Note* — Session 3 — PFWG Bi-Annual Meeting.
14. **OCHA** (n.d.). *CBPF Annual Reports*. unocha.org
15. **IASC** (2017). *Grand Bargain Localisation Definitions*.
16. **IASC** (2021). *Guidance: Strengthening participation, representation and leadership of local and national actors in IASC humanitarian coordination mechanisms*. p.5.



A GLOBAL NGO NETWORK
FOR PRINCIPLED AND EFFECTIVE
HUMANITARIAN ACTION

Regional Presence

Africa

Nairobi, Kenya
Yaoundé, Cameroon

Asia-Pacific

Bangkok, Thailand

MENA

Amman, Jordan

Americas

Bogotá, Colombia

Geneva Office

Humanitarian Hub, La Voie-Creuse 16, 1202 Geneva

secretariat@icvanetwork.org

www.icvanetwork.org