



ACBAR

Agency Coordinating Body for
Afghan Relief & Development

Afghanistan — **Emergency Response Coordination System Capacity and Needs Assessment**

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**Agency Coordinating Body for Afghan Relief
and Development (ACBAR)**

Afghanistan —
Emergency Response Coordination System
Capacity and Needs Assessment

Final Report

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List of Acronyms

AA	Anticipatory Action
AAP	Accountability to Affected Populations
AAR	After-Action Review
ABC	Area-Based Coordination
ACBAR	Agency Coordinating Body for Afghan Relief and Development
ADIWG	Accountability to Affected People, Disability Inclusion and Basic Humanitarian Needs Working Group
AHF	Afghanistan Humanitarian Fund
ANDMA	Afghanistan National Disaster Management Authority
ARCS	Afghan Red Crescent Society
BHN	Basic Human Needs
CRNA	Community Rapid Needs Assessment Tool
FGD	Focus Group Discussion
HCT	Humanitarian Country Team
IASC	Inter-Agency Standing Committee
IM	Information Management
INGO	International Non-Governmental Organization
KAQ	Key Assessment Question
KII	Key Informant Interview
LNGO	Local Non-Governmental Organization
LTWG	Localization Technical Working Group
MEAL	Monitoring, Evaluation, Accountability and Learning
MSRAF	Multi-Sector Rapid Assessment Form

NGO	Non-Governmental Organization
NNGO	National Non-Governmental Organization
OCHA	Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs
OCT	Operational Coordination Team
PII	Personally Identifiable Information
RFP	Request for Proposals
RT	Regional Team
UN	United Nations
USAID	United States Agency for International Development
WLO	Women-Led Organization

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Executive Summary

Afghanistan faces recurrent and overlapping emergencies, and the collective emergency response architecture has been reshaped in quick succession by the suspension of USAID funding in 2025 and the Humanitarian Reset. ACBAR commissioned this assessment to examine the capacity, effectiveness, and maturity of Afghanistan's emergency response coordination system and to better inform its own role within it. The findings draw on a desk review, 52 key informant interviews and 14 focus group discussions across eleven provinces, including two with affected communities, and a Likert-style NGO perception survey (n=154). Data was collected between mid-August and late September 2026. The qualitative data is the primary source of the findings, with survey data used complementarily to show how widely a pattern is shared and where groups of respondents diverge.

Overall, the evidence points to a system that is developing, meaning it is established in form but that it remains functionally constrained by an array of internal shortcomings and extraneous pressures. Formal coordination structures exist and are widely known, and the system reliably starts a response. However, the functions that would make it work by design, namely standing capacity between emergencies, collective delivery, operationally useful information and collective accountability, are thin, inconsistent, or even entirely absent. Where these functions do work, they tend to be on an organizational basis, heavily dependent on held resources and proximity to decision-makers.

This assessment was guided by four key assessment questions, which are answered here based on the report's findings.

KAQ 1: What emergency coordination mechanisms exist at national and sub-national levels?

At the provincial level, ANDMA and the governor's office convene the PDMC, while OCHA, or a designated agency where OCHA is no longer present, convenes the OCT. Joint assessment teams, usually led by IOM, verify needs. These mechanisms connect upwards to the ICCT, HCT and ANDMA in Kabul through three largely separate channels: the government channel, the humanitarian channel, and each organization's own reporting line. The Humanitarian Reset has added Regional Teams and Area-Based Coordination alongside OCTs, though respondents remain unclear how these relate to one another. A substantial and growing layer of responders, including the private sector, ARCS and non-traditional donors, operates largely outside this architecture and coordinates mainly through provincial authorities.

KAQ 2: How effectively do these mechanisms function and interact?

Activation is the system's clearest strength. Respondents of every type describe the same sequence, and OCT and PDMC meetings are routinely convened within 24 hours. Between emergencies, though, many OCTs are passive, and arrangements are sometimes improvised once a response begins. While 70% of survey respondents agree that coordination mechanisms were in place before their reference emergency, only 48% agree that dedicated, funded coordination roles exist between emergencies. Information moves quickly, but oftentimes through WhatsApp and personal contacts as opposed to a shared, universally accessible platform, so access often depends on being in the room or being proximate to decision-makers.

Formal products are considered adequate for situational awareness, but far less so for operational allocation, and information flows upwards more reliably than it flows back down. Funding cuts have also hollowed out the coordination infrastructure itself, leaving double-hatted posts, provincial clusters with limited funding and gaps in OCHA's provincial presence. Funding restrictions weakening coordination was the most-agreed statement in the survey (75%).

KAQ 3: To what extent does the system support timely, effective, inclusive and accountable response?

Timely: the system activates quickly, and 64% of survey respondents agree that coordination and response began quickly enough. But speed largely follows resources: actors with pre-positioned stocks and flexible funding move first, while local and national actors, who rarely hold reserves or access fast funding directly, are often the slowest to deliver.

Effective: coordination pools information but not resources. The system works as one during the joint needs assessment, which is described as relatively effective, then separates at delivery, as organizations distribute according to their own funding, plans, and donor requirements. This results in preventable gaps and duplication, and leaves some areas uncovered entirely.

Inclusive: national and local presence in coordination is established, but influence is partial, because decisions tend to follow control of resources. It is widely agreed that national NGOs have meaningful opportunities to participate, but less so that local NGOs can influence decisions, and less still that women-led organizations participate meaningfully. Authorities have often been pragmatic about women's participation in acute response, but women remain largely absent from in-person coordination.

Accountable: feedback mechanisms correct individual programmes, but collective AAP is lacking. Communities lack trust in complaint mechanisms, and hotlines remain inconsistently monitored and inadequately resourced. Both community FGDs said they had not been consulted on what assistance they received, which contrasts with providers' accounts of inclusive assessment. Although a thin sample, this points to a gap between accountability in form and in practice that calls for further study.

KAQ 4: What practical actions and capacity-strengthening measures are needed?

Twelve evidence-based recommendations are set out in Section 10, grouped by theme. Each recommendation specifies the actors to whom it is targeted.

- **Architecture and roles.** Use the light-touch review to give preparedness a standing home within the Regional Teams, with OCTs defined as the activation structure. Establish standing tripartite coordination between OCHA, ACBAR and ANDMA, replacing parallel bilateral engagement with joint engagement.
- **Preparedness.** Make provincial activation protocols executable and keep them under review between emergencies. Prepare in advance for seasonal and localized emergencies that fall below the thresholds of large-scale response. Bring private-sector responders into preparedness, not only response.

- **Response coordination and information.** Co-produce response information tools and test them before emergencies, with products designed around their users. Strengthen OCT capacity during surges and review the role of co-chair. Have ACBAR represent NGOs as users of information and relay it to those outside the room.
- **Inclusion and localization.** Agree a pragmatic joint arrangement with ANDMA to meet the needs of women and girls during response. Target capacity strengthening at the gaps that block local leadership, and fund the co-chair roles for which it prepares people.
- **ACBAR's reach and learning.** Extend ACBAR's provincial presence and reach, including to non-members and women-led organizations, and commission follow-up research on affected communities' experience and on the system's maturity after the nexus architecture review.

Across these recommendations, the evidence points to a consistent space for ACBAR to act as a convener, connector, and broker that complements OCHA's mandate, through its sub-national presence, its reach into national NGOs, and its established credibility with authorities.

1 | Introduction

1.1 | Purpose and questions

Afghanistan faces recurrent, overlapping emergencies: floods, earthquakes, drought, conflict displacement, mass returns from neighbouring Pakistan and Iran, and disease outbreaks. ACBAR commissioned this assessment to examine the capacity, effectiveness and maturity of the emergency response coordination system and to identify practical ways to strengthen it at national and sub-national levels. The assessment was commissioned with two overarching purposes in mind. The first: to generate system-wide evidence-based findings and recommendations for the coordination system as a whole. The second is to inform ACBAR's strategic role within the humanitarian coordination architecture, including to assess where ACBAR currently adds value and to identify where ACBAR can further strengthen its contribution to NGO coordination, localization, information management, preparedness, representation, and engagement within inter-agency coordination mechanisms.

Four key assessment questions (KAQs) guide the work: (1) what emergency coordination mechanisms exist at national and sub-national levels; (2) how effectively they function and interact; (3) to what extent the system supports timely, effective, inclusive and accountable response; and (4) what practical actions and capacity-strengthening measures are needed.

1.2 | What was known before this assessment

Afghanistan's emergency response coordination architecture is rarely an object of study. Most published material is situational reporting about specific events. The last comprehensive review of Afghanistan's coordination architecture dates from 2015 (OCHA 2015). Peer-reviewed literature on the post-2021 system is very thin, so the desk review drew mainly on grey and institutional sources of varying rigour. The most current evaluative source is the after-action review (AAR) of the 2025 eastern region earthquake response. The AAR determined that the response marked an improvement on the response to the Herat earthquake in 2023, but found that “the most significant early constraint was not a lack of humanitarian capacity, but the limited operational readiness of first 72-hour activation and sequencing arrangements” (OCHA 2026a, 1, 8).

Three further developments frame the findings. First, Afghanistan's broader humanitarian architecture is in a state of transition. A UN review process across 2025 produced a new basic human needs (BHN) and nexus coordination architecture that took effect in Afghanistan in 2026. It adds Regional Teams alongside the humanitarian Operational Coordination Teams (OCTs), and a light-touch review is due later in 2026 (UN Afghanistan 2026; Ratwatte 2026). Second, the 2025 suspension of US funding measurably degraded coordination capacity, with an estimated 78% of coordination posts affected and numerous partnerships with local actors suspended (OCHA 2025a). The desk review has identified funding as the seminal cross-cutting pressure on the emergency response system. Third, ACBAR's own recent work found localization in Afghanistan “developing in form but still constrained in function” (ACBAR 2026a, 2).

1.3 | Methodology

This assessment employed a triangulated mixed-methods design, combining a desk review with qualitative key informant interviews (KIIs) and focus group discussions (FGDs), and a quantitative primarily Likert-style NGO perception survey.

Desk Review – The desk review examined institutional and grey literature on Afghanistan's coordination architecture, recent after-action reviews, global benchmarks on coordination, localization and accountability, and ACBAR's own prior commissioned research. It served the joint purpose of mapping the formal architecture as it exists on paper and identifying the gaps the primary data needed to fill.

Data Collection – ACBAR led primary data collection between mid-August and late September 2026, with local enumerators conducting in-person the bulk of the KIIs and FGDs, and the Consultant and Emergency Response Coordination Specialist conducting 6 KIIs with national-level UN agencies and 3 with donors via virtual means, respectively. The survey was administered via the online platform Survey Monkey. Interview and FGD guides and the survey tool were co-designed with the lead consultant during the inception phase; before rollout, the consultant reviewed and revised the draft tools to ensure coverage against the RFP's overarching objectives and key assessment questions (KAQs). To anchor responses in lived experience rather than abstract or theoretical conceptualizations of the emergency response coordination system, every data collection tool asked respondents to reflect on a specific recent emergency response in which they had been involved.

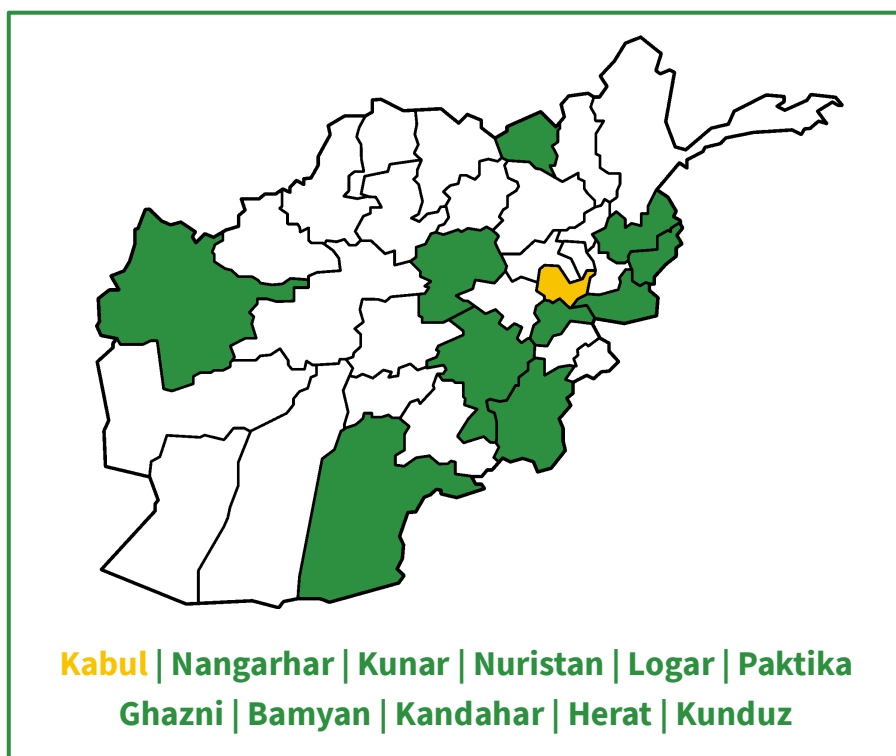


Figure 1: 11 provinces were included in the qualitative data collection

- The **NGO Perception Survey** is a structured questionnaire primarily composed of five-point Likert items, covering preparedness, coordination, authorities, information, localization, capacity, funding, accountability, actors outside the formal system and ACBAR's role. It closed with priority-ranking and open-ended questions, the latter of which were analyzed as qualitative data. It was distributed both to ACBAR members and to ACBAR's wider mailing list (n=154: 116 ACBAR members and 38 non-members).
- **Key informant interviews** took the form of 52 semi-structured interviews with senior and strategic informants, using a core guide plus stakeholder-specific question sets for UN agencies, donors, local actors, private-sector actors, authorities, and ACBAR's regional staff.

- **Practitioner FGDs** comprised 12 group discussions with national NGOs, INGOs and regional partners, women-led organizations and the private sector, focusing on collective and operational experience.
- **Community FGDs** took the form of two discussions with affected communities, one with female participants in Bamyan and one with male participants in Nuristan, chosen to contrast geographic and operational settings. These FGDs used a separate plain-language tool that asked about observable experience (whether help arrived, whether it matched needs, whether people could raise concerns) rather than about coordination mechanisms and technical knowledge.



9 KIIs | 3 FGDs

with **INGOs**



3 KIIs

with **Donors**



12 KIIs | 3 FGDs

with **NNGOs** and **LNGOs**



6 KIIs Provincial

5 KIIs National

with **UN Agencies**



6 KIIs | 2 FGDs

with **Private Sector Actors**



2 KIIs

with **Regional Humanitarian Partners**



3 KIIs | 2 FGDs

with **WLOs**



2 FGDs

with **Affected Communities**



6 KIIs Provincial

1 KII National

with **Authorities**



1 KII

with **ACBAR**

52 KIIs Total

14 FGDs Total

Sampling for the qualitative data collection was designed by ACBAR using a purposive sampling approach. Eleven provinces across Afghanistan, including Kabul, were selected based on their exposure to recent and recurring emergencies and their relevance to understanding emergency response coordination in different contexts. The selection considered a range of emergency profiles, including floods, earthquakes, large-scale returnee movements, prolonged drought, food insecurity, and urban humanitarian pressures. One or more provinces were purposively selected to represent each of these emergency contexts, taking into account recent emergency events and the specific humanitarian challenges experienced in the respective areas. Respondents were then selected based on their direct involvement in, and knowledge of, emergency response and coordination mechanisms in the selected provinces.

Interviews in the provinces were conducted mainly in Dari and Pashto and subsequently translated and transcribed into English by the enumerators, with support from ACBAR's MEAL and Emergency Response (ER) teams.

As part of the data quality assurance process, the ACBAR MEAL team reviewed each transcribed interview and FGD file against available interview records and notes to verify the accuracy and completeness of the documented responses. Where responses appeared irrelevant to the questions asked or did not adequately address the questions, the MEAL team coordinated with the relevant enumerators to clarify and verify the information, as necessary.

Qualitative Analysis – Transcripts were manually coded into Excel by theme: architecture (8 codes); inclusion, accountability and localization (6 codes); function (8 codes); information (4 codes); limitations and challenges (10 codes); recommendations (4 codes); and the community experience. For each theme, the analysis moved from symptoms, or what respondents described happening, to the structural causes that the data suggested are behind them. Accounts were compared systematically across actor types (UN, INGO, NNGO, authorities, donors, private sector, WLOs and communities), as well as between national and provincial levels.

Quantitative Analysis – Survey results are reported as the share of respondents who agreed or strongly agreed with each statement, excluding “not applicable” responses. Because responses showed a strong general tendency towards agreement, care was taken to avoid relying on absolute levels, and the analysis relies mainly on comparisons, including how items rank against one another, and how groups of respondents differ, for example by actor type and ACBAR membership. Open-ended responses were coded thematically alongside the qualitative data. Due to the non-random sample and positivity skew, the survey does not claim to be representative, and it plays a complementary role to the qualitative evidence throughout.

1.4 | Limitations

The findings should be read with the following limitations in mind.

A thin evidence base to build on. Peer-reviewed literature on Afghanistan's coordination system post-2021 was found to be very limited. The last comprehensive review dates from 2015, and recent evaluative evidence comes mainly from single-event after-action reviews. In a sense, this provides a clear justification for this assessment.

Uneven qualitative coverage. The affected-community perspective is captured in only two FGDs. They provide a strong contrast with humanitarian actor accounts, but cannot represent all affected communities. A concerted effort was made to hear women's voices, and these come mainly through the two WLO FGDs, three WLO interviews and the Bamyán community group.

Survey sample and response patterns.

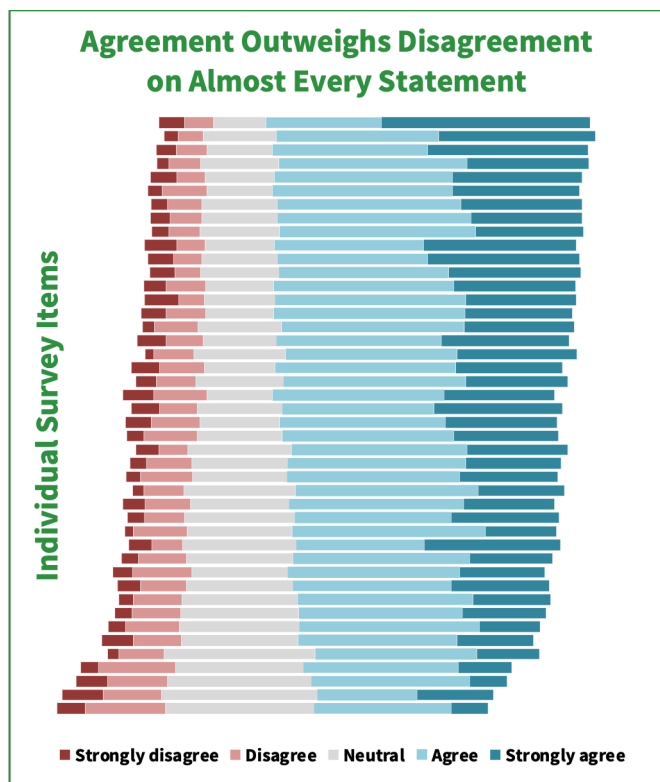


Figure 2: Agreement across all 44 survey statements, ranked

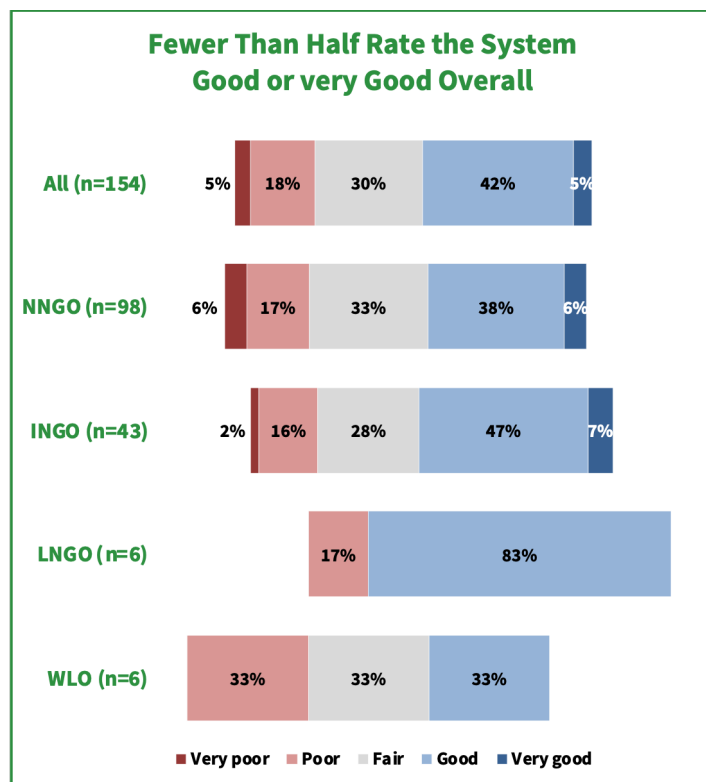


Figure 3: Overall rating of the coordination system, by organization type

The survey sample is not random. It was drawn from ACBAR's membership and mailing list and covers INGOs and NNGOs only, not UN agencies, donors, or disaster authorities. Results describe perceptions of this population and cannot be generalized to all humanitarian actors. Responses also showed a strong general tendency towards agreement: the 44 statements average 63% agreement, yet only 48% of respondents rate the system as Good or Very Good. For this reason, the analysis relies on comparisons rather than absolute levels, and out of caution the survey results take a primarily complementary role throughout. Some subgroups are small, including WLOs (n=6) and several regions (n=8 to 15), and results for them are indicative only.

Translation and transcript depth. Most interviews were conducted in either Dari or Pashto and translated into English. Some meaning and nuance may have been lost during this process, though translation was overseen by a senior member of ACBAR's MEAL staff and specific instructions were provided to translate as faithfully as possible. Transcript depth varied; a small number of transcripts were thin.

Timing and recall. National-level interviews took place while the new Humanitarian Reset nexus architecture was in its infancy and before its scheduled review, so findings on Regional Teams are provisional. Respondents reflected on different emergencies in different years and provinces, though all after 2021. This gives breadth, but means that each account is not necessarily directly comparable with another.

The operating environment. When conducting any research in Afghanistan, the constrained operating environment must be acknowledged for the potential influence it has on respondents' answers. As a result, respondents may have provided certain answers which are at odds with their actual lived experiences, for a number of reasons. This is not to suggest that respondents gave inaccurate information, but rather to acknowledge that some issues are likely under-reported.

Scope. The assessment examines the coordination system and its properties as a whole. It does not evaluate the performance of individual organizations, the technical quality of programming, or the policies of the de facto authorities beyond how their coordination with humanitarian actors works in practice. The maturity scores are a structured judgement based on the available evidence, and not a quantitative measurement. They are offered simply as a baseline for future assessment.

1.5 | Structure of the report

Sections 2 to 8 present findings in the order of the assessment's thematic analysis: the architecture (Section 2); inclusion, accountability and localization (Section 3); how coordination functions in preparedness and response (Section 4); information (Section 5); limitations and challenges, including funding and the authorities (Section 6); how money moves in emergencies (Section 7); and ACBAR's role (Section 8). Section 9 acts as a conclusion, rating the system against the six-dimension maturity model set out in the inception report. Section 10 sets out recommendations for the system and for ACBAR.

2 | The Coordination Architecture

2.1 | Respondents of every type describe the same activation sequence

The dataset's clearest point of convergence is the sequence that immediately follows an emergency. UN, INGO, NNGO, government and private-sector respondents across all eleven provinces identified, broadly, the immediate steps. First, authorities and organizations are alerted of an emergency through official letters, emails, and existing WhatsApp groups. Following this, ANDMA and the provincial governor's office convene a Provincial Disaster Management Committee (PDMC) meeting while OCHA (or in some cases another designated agency) convenes the provincial Operational Coordination Team (OCT) meeting. Both of these meetings tend to be held within 24 hours of the emergency coming to light. Joint assessment teams are then mobilized, usually led by IOM and supported by line departments and partners, to verify needs.

Overall, field respondents credit provincial OCT meetings and joint assessments with being the animating forces behind an initial response, acknowledging their efficacy in convening actors and defining roles. A national-level UN agency described the local system as one that “works really well” at deploying teams and gathering information. At the national level, however, the same actor noted that larger agencies tend to coordinate among themselves “outside of the formal mechanisms.” The formal mechanisms, therefore, work best as tools for starting a response in the field.

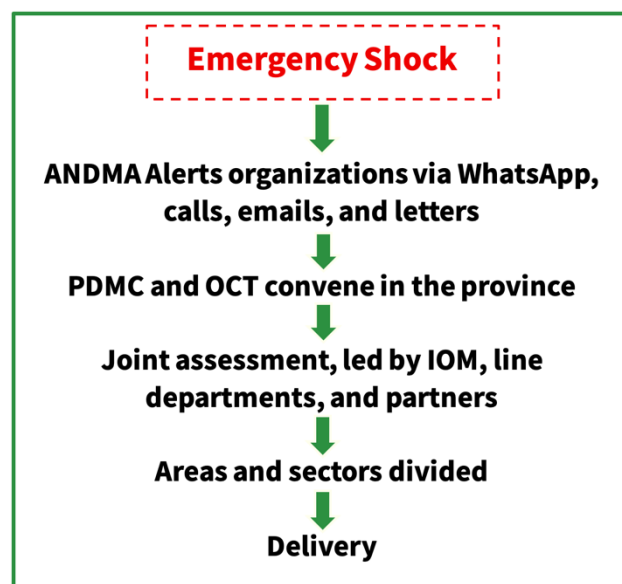


Figure 4: The response activation sequence identified by respondents

2.2 | Mechanisms are often activated by emergencies rather than standing ready

While coordination structures exist on paper everywhere, the evidence suggests that ground realities vary by province. A national-level UN representative said that co-chairs are formally assigned to OCTs in every province, but without an emergency they can be “quite passive... they don’t meet.” A donor drew the same distinction between OCTs that are “much more structured” and others that are “much more passive.” The difference seems, at least partially, to follow caseload; provinces with continuous emergency pressure, such as Nangarhar with its returnee flows, hold monthly cluster meetings. In Logar, by contrast, a national NGO reported “no permanent coordination committee,” with ad-hoc arrangements convened after the event.

Where formal coordination mechanisms are missing for large emergencies, sometimes they are improvised. A national-level UN respondent noted that “cash coordination was not very good” in the early days of the Kunar earthquake response since the region did not have its own cash working group; an ad-hoc cash coordination working group had to be convened on the spot. This is validated by the AAR, which

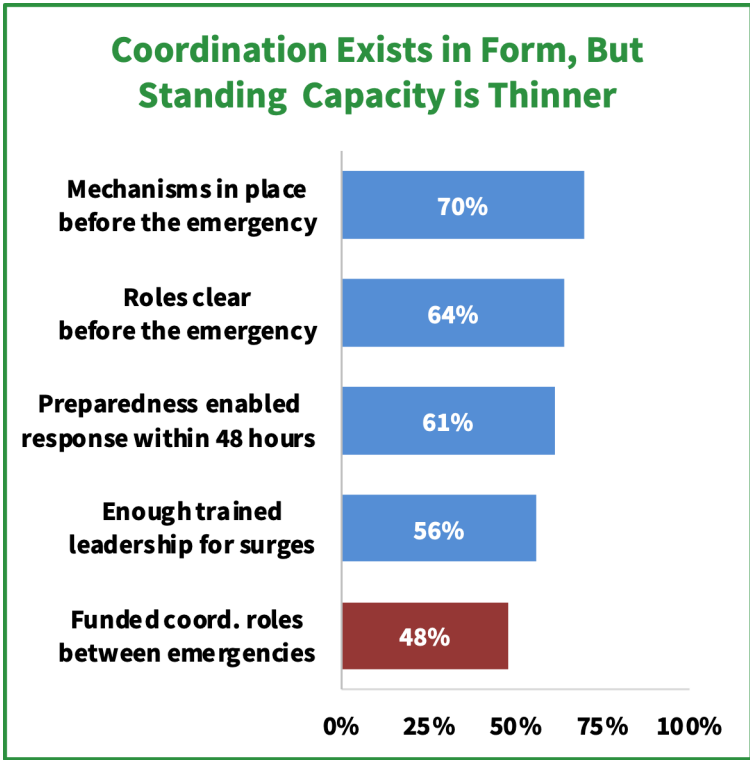


Figure 5: % of respondents who agreed or strongly agreed with each statement

found that the lack of pre-defined sub-national arrangements caused early problems with geographic delineation and partner coverage, and that the cash working group was only streamlined more than two months later (OCHA 2026a, 16).

Survey results similarly demonstrate the gap between form and standing capacity. Whereas 70% of respondents agreed that coordination mechanisms were in place before their reference emergency, fewer than half (48%) agreed that the system has dedicated, funded coordination roles that exist between emergencies, making the latter the survey’s lowest-rated capacity question.

The evidence points clearly to mechanisms that exist pre-emergency but face distinct

funding and personnel shortages which constrain their ability to actually continue operation during quiet periods of the emergency cycle.

2.3 | It is clear who leads, but less clear who does what, where and with what

Prior to an emergency, it is widely understood who will fill leadership roles when the coordination system is activated. Respondents are aware ahead of time that OCHA convenes the OCT, that ANDMA convenes the PDMC, that IOM mobilizes joint assessment teams, and which NGO co-chairs their provincial OCT. Far less clear prior to an emergency, though, is the division of roles between implementing NGOs, the majority of whom are local and national actors. Several local actors reported that their part to play only became clear “once the response was activated,” or noted that they didn’t know if “resources [had] been identified in advance.” One exception to this was health sector actors, some of whom had mobile health teams ready and knew what was expected of them in emergency situations.

This has very clear knock-on implications for local and national actors’ ability to adequately prepare; if an organization is unaware ahead of time of what role they will play during an emergency response, they are unlikely to be able to plan and train staff in a relevant way, which in turn will increase their likelihood of exclusion from meaningful coordination participation.

After the initial OCT meeting, respondents indicated that roles become clearer. However, they are set on an organizational basis, according to each actor’s resources, mandate, and available expertise, rather than through a collective plan agreed upon in advance (Section 4.1).

2.4 | The sub-national to national link runs through three channels, and bidirectionality is questioned

Below the national level, coordination mechanisms exist at district, provincial and regional levels, and information seemingly moves between levels through at least three separate, largely distinct channels. The first is the government channel: in the words of a UN respondent in the north-east, “provincial needs are communicated” to ANDMA and ministries in Kabul, and “guidance and support” comes back down. The second is the humanitarian channel, which runs from the OCT to the ICCT, HCT and OCHA, in which, according to a national-level UN respondent, “information flows from one another continuously.” The third is each organization’s own reporting line, from field office to head office, and ultimately to their donors.

Respondents disagree about the bidirectionality of the second channel. Consensus shows that information flows upwards by design, but evidence of how and if it flows downwards is thin in the dataset. An INGO in Ghazni described delay from the national level, saying that response was slowed “when information and decision-making from the national level were delayed,” which fits with findings in Section 7.3 that information can often take too long to be prepared. An INGO in Bamyan also criticized what they perceived as “most of the decisions [being] made at the centre level,” resulting in sub-par response at the provincial level.

The desk review referred to the 2015 review of coordination architecture, which found cluster coordination “sporadic at the sub-national level” (OCHA 2015, 8); this is now formally obsolete, as clusters at the regional level have ostensibly been abolished by the Humanitarian Reset in favour of channelling all regional sub-national coordination through the OCT (UN Afghanistan 2026, 4).

2.5 | The new nexus aid coordination architecture remains an open question

2025’s Humanitarian Reset has considerably revised Afghanistan’s overall coordination architecture, particularly at the sub-national levels. Aimed ostensibly at streamlining service delivery, the Reset and corresponding aid architecture review have introduced Regional Teams, a new regional coordination layer which has evolved from the regional Durable Solutions Working Groups (DSWGs); provincial OCTs remain operational (UN Afghanistan 2026, 10). When asked about the inaugural phase of these new structures, national and donor responses were characterized by uncertainty as to how the mechanisms relate to one another; one donor said that the delineation of responsibilities “wasn’t very clear,” and expressed confusion as to whether ACBAR’s role in supporting RTs suggests the beginning of coordination responsibility being transferred from OCHA.

Another donor shared that they had initially hoped that RTs would fully replace OCTs; ultimately, they noted a “lack of consensus... in terms of what sits with the RTs and what sits with the OCTs when it comes to response coordination.” They added that RTs having a Basic Human Needs (BHN) remit is at odds with the initial goals of the Reset, and that they hoped that the RTs would have at least a partial humanitarian remit, particularly for crises spanning several provinces.

Further, the Reset has also aimed to increase area-based coordination (ABC), a “light, operational coordination and response structure or mechanism focused on a distinct subnational geographic area” (IASC 2026, 2). IASC documents present this, ostensibly, as a shift towards the increased involvement of local actors. Little mention of ABC was made by respondents.

The desk review flagged the efficacy of the new architecture as an open question, noting the need for evidence as to whether it reduces fragmentation and duplication; the data remains inconclusive, but the lack of certainty on the part of respondents points to an urgent need to clarify the mandates and reporting realities of the new architecture's coordination mechanisms. An upcoming light-touch review of the architecture's implementation in Afghanistan will be highly useful in understanding its role and value.

2.6 | A growing share of assistance is invisible to the formal system

Respondents across the dataset describe private-sector actors, charities, the Afghan Red Crescent Society (ARCS) and non-traditional donors as working in parallel to the humanitarian system. In line with the literature review, which points to a layer of responders working largely outside the system (Mercy Corps 2025; ACBAR 2026c), private-sector actors describe themselves as not included in OCTs and other humanitarian coordination mechanisms. This is not to say that the private sector does not coordinate;

“We were not usually invited to the general coordination meetings, we coordinated directly with the relevant government department through separate meetings.”

— A private-sector actor

rather, in line with the eastern earthquake after-action review (AAR) (OCHA 2026a, 11), they coordinate almost entirely through governors' offices, line departments and chambers of commerce rather than humanitarian mechanisms; a disaster management authority representative also stated that private-sector actors do not coordinate with ANDMA.

This leaves them virtually invisible to humanitarian actors. An INGO in Nuristan reported that “NGOs were not aware of the assistance provided by private-sector actors.” The evidence suggests that this lack of

coordination contributes to field-level issues, including sub-standard beneficiary identification; a national NGO described private distributions in which “the people were not properly verified.” Several other actors commented on the trend of individuals falsely presenting themselves as in need, which presents an enhanced risk to those responders who do not operate with the humanitarian beneficiary identification standards.

While generally acknowledging that private-sector help was valuable – 57% of survey respondents agreed that informal responders strengthened the response – they also consistently stressed the need for a formal link that integrates private sector actors in traditional coordination mechanisms.

Among non-traditional actors, the Afghan Red Crescent Society (ARCS) is particularly notable. One donor described it as a large responder with “a huge response capacity” of which “nobody speaks”; it does not coordinate with the humanitarian system consistently, and when it does it coordinates “more like as a courtesy,” and always conducts its own assessments. Another recalled that at the Islam Qala border crossing, ARCS was able to keep on working with female staff when other NGOs could not. A UN respondent said its attempts to coordinate through the relevant line authorities had not succeeded.

The survey data confirms that outside actors prove a considerable blind spot for the system, with the two lowest-rated items in the whole survey concerning them. Only 40% agreed that actors outside the formal system were identified and understood, and 45% that they had opportunities to share information. For the

traditional humanitarian coordination system as a whole, this represents a concerning pattern of a large portion of assistance being distributed outside its view.

A UN respondent also raised the need for safeguarding oversight of private-sector distributions, citing reports of harassment during the Herat earthquake response.

3 | Inclusion, Accountability, and Localization

The literature suggests that global benchmarks for localization and accountability in emergency response are not particularly high. As of 2023, local and national actors make up 49% of cluster members worldwide but lead only 37% of clusters (OCHA 2023a, 1), and only about one in three aid recipients can give feedback, while collective feedback mechanisms are “not yet well-established” (ALNAP 2022, 221, 223). In Afghanistan, ACBAR’s localization baseline study found national NGOs are “present but not empowered, consulted but not decisive” (ACBAR 2026a, 1–2). The findings from the dataset largely align with this characterization.

3.1 | National and local presence is established, but influence is partial and women-led organizations are largely absent

National NGOs describe a common ceiling in relation to decision-making and leadership. Almost all acknowledge that they have the opportunity to participate in formal coordination mechanisms, but fewer believe that they meaningfully influence decisions. Though they are able to share opinions, local and national organizations commonly describe their influence as “limited,” and say their recommendations are taken into consideration “to some extent.” A Ghazni-based NNGO was **more direct**:

“In practice, my experience in the coordination system was mainly as an implementer rather than a genuine decision-maker.”

— Ghazni NNGO

The disparity between presence and influence is visible in the survey data, in which two-thirds of respondents agreed that national NGOs had meaningful opportunities to participate, just over half agreed that local NGOs could influence decisions, and fewer still that women-led organizations (WLOs)

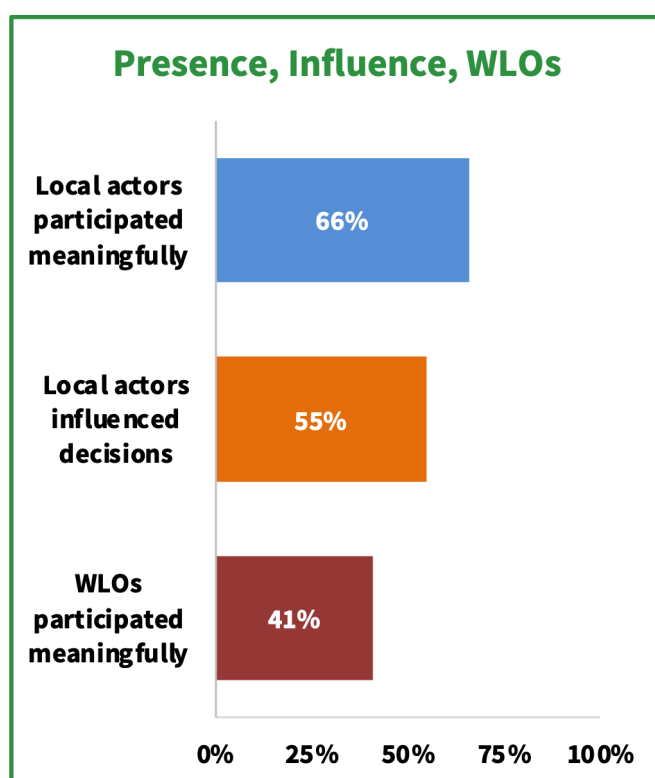


Figure 6: Declining % of respondents who agreed or strongly agreed with each statement

were able to participate with material impact. This is discussed further in Section 3.4.

A clear difference in perspective is evident in the qualitative data; while UN and many international actors readily acknowledge that local organizations face barriers, they tended to describe decision-making broadly as more of a joint and equal process. One UN respondent noted that the HCT includes equal numbers of national and international NGOs; practically, though, this represents only four organizations at the national level (OCHA n.d.). Influence in provincial structures, in which the largest number of organizations participate, remains slim. This echoes findings of ACBAR’s localization baseline study, which rated the coordination pillar “emerging” (ACBAR 2026a, 20).

3.2 | Decisions follow resources

Respondents were very clear about the structural cause to which they attribute this ceiling: simply, influence over decisions follows control over resources.

Funding primarily reaches national and local NGOs through UN agencies or INGOs as intermediaries. A donor described local NGOs as being reached “at the third level,” meaning that INGOs with stronger capacity receive preferential funding, and that when “[funders] do not find anyone else, then they call for the local NGOs.” The implication here for local actors is a constant chronic funding shortage, meaning that LNGOs and NNGOs are unable to build reserve funds and suffer when funding cycles end.

Organizations that cannot bring resources to the table have little to allocate, and consequently very little say in allocation itself.

Moreover, exclusion from one response cycle means missing out on experience that would enable a local actor to eventually feel confident raising their voice in, or indeed even co-chairing, a coordination mechanism, as explored further in Section 6.3.

Donors recognized that funding-side rules contribute to this issue, with one noting the difficulty that proposal formats pose to local actors, and another explaining that they are legally unable to partner directly with local organizations in Afghanistan.

...the INGOs have more power in decision making, they can provide more tools and budgets compared to NNGOs.

— *Bamyan NNGO*

3.3 | Authorities can be pragmatic about women’s participation in response, but gender still heavily shapes access

Respondents tended to agree that the authorities are open to pragmatic solutions during acute emergency response, including allowing female staff to work in the field. A UN agency recounted how readily permission to deploy additional female staff was granted after the Kunar earthquake, compared with the obstacles they face during routine BHN programming. A Kabul-based WLO reported distributing food packages directly after floods in Paktika, and an INGO in Kabul described female staff becoming “an integral part of the response teams” in recent emergencies.

Gender nonetheless remains a defining constraint in emergency response, particularly from the beneficiary side. Respondents reported restrictions on recording women beneficiaries’ names. Women

were often not present at distribution sites, which can put implementing partners at odds with donor requirements. Women's needs often had to be identified through male staff. A national NGO in Nangarhar **summarized** the consequence of these restrictions.

During an incident, men and children are assisted, but women are not... due to some cultural and current circumstances.

— *Nangarhar NNGO*

Unsurprisingly, in Afghanistan gender restrictions continue to be a compounding pressure that shapes affected people's ability to access assistance safely and have their needs met. While it is positive that female staff are often permitted in the field in emergencies, this is still very much an exception to an overarching rule, and women's participation in emergency response remains tenuously balanced rather than institutionalized.

3.4 | Women-led organizations are almost entirely absent from in-person coordination

Despite noting a relative pragmatism in the field, it is overwhelmingly clear that women still face systematic exclusion from coordination spaces. In line with the eastern-region earthquake AAR, which recorded that female staff were barred from UN premises in September 2025 (OCHA 2026a, 13–14), INGO, NNGO and government respondents agree that women cannot attend most coordination meetings in person. A Kandahar NNGO observed that WLOs “don't have their women present in the meetings, though sometimes their male representative is there.” Respondents from other provinces and a government official in the south-east voiced a similar sentiment.

WLOs themselves describe a total lack of representation: a Herat-based WLO reported that no coordination mechanism was led or co-led by local NGOs and that WLOs were not invited to participate. In Bamyan, a WLO linked the loss of their main inclusive channel to OCHA's departure from the province.

This illustrates the trickle-down nature of the effects that the constricting funding landscape is continuing to cause, and how it disproportionately compounds the pressure on local and women-led organizations.

The only contrary evidence to this trend comes from two UN respondents, one at the national level and one in Nangarhar, who described WLO staff participating in HCT and provincial meetings. It is worth asking whether these conflicting reports can be accounted for by provincial discrepancies or inconsistencies in restrictions on female actors, though they certainly do not serve to disprove the overwhelming evidence to the contrary.

Though a small sample size (n=6), it is also illustrative of this exclusionary experience that WLOs rated the system lower than other groups on 42 of 44 survey items. Alternative means for women's participation in formal coordination spaces need to be prioritized; this is addressed further in Recommendation 9.

Before, we had the coordination meetings with OCHA and they hear[d] us and the opinion[s] were from both side[s].

— *A WLO focus group, Bamyan*

3.5 | “Inclusive” assessment is not necessarily inclusive enough

Communities are often *involved* in needs assessments, but there exists a need for coordination mechanisms and joint assessment teams to standardize *how* communities are involved. Nearly two-thirds of survey respondents agree that needs assessments are inclusive and consultative; this characterization persists in the qualitative data too. However, “inclusive” and “consultative” can often be limited to speaking to community elders and local religious leaders to identify who is affected.

There is certainly value in this local knowledge, but it has limits. For example, in Bamyan, women in the community FGD said that when assistance was distributed according to elders’ decisions, “sometimes the most vulnerable families did not receive assistance.” A Kunar NNGO said communities “only passively participate in the needs assessment,” which suggests that communities were not actively listened to, but instead consulted as a form of tokenism.

A UN agency at the national level reflected that during immediate responses, it engages elders “but not in a as documented or as systematic way as we do for our longer-term assistance;” this is to be expected to a degree, given the urgency and fog of emergency assistance delivery, but minimum standards need to be developed to ensure that affected individuals are centred.

3.6 | Providers and affected communities describe response differently

The two community FGDs are of vital importance in centring local voices and understanding emergency response from the recipient side. While a thin sample, both largely contradict providers’ accounts of consultation in Section 3.5. In Nuristan, the male FGD group **said:**

We were neither consulted nor involved in deciding how the assistance would be provided or what type of assistance should be provided.

— Community FGD, Nuristan

Both the Nuristan and Bamyan communities described organizations working on separate plans and did not perceive the overall response as coordinated. Neither group described meaningful consultation beyond the assessment stage, and the Nuristan group even recalled that “Nobody asked our community about [what it needed].”

Subsequently, the same group said it had not considered using complaint mechanisms “because [they] were not consulted in the first place.” This, along with findings in Sections 3.3 and 3.7, validates recent Accountability to Affected People, Disability Inclusion

and Basic Humanitarian Needs Working Group (ADIWG) work referenced in the literature review, which found low trust in feedback mechanisms and participation barriers for women and persons with disabilities (ADIWG 2026a).

These two FGDs cannot be said to be representative of all affected communities, and Nuristan and Bamyan were chosen for contrast rather than representativeness; however, their accounts alone demonstrate at the very least severe shortcomings in how AAP is approached in some cases. This is an area worthy of more detailed study with a larger sample, as outlined in Recommendation 12.

3.7 | Feedback mechanisms correct individual programmes, but collective AAP remains inconsistent

The KII and FGD set contains many examples of feedback leading to change across surveyed provinces. These included missed households added to lists, distribution times and sites moved, and poor-quality food assistance replaced. Communities confirmed some of these too; in Bamyan, women described calling a complaint line about sick poultry, after which the organization investigated and redistributed.

In other cases, though, these mechanisms were unable to deliver accountable change. An INGO in Nuristan described being contacted via its own complaint mechanism about an issue outside its scope of work; this remained unresolved, “because there was no proper mechanism” to pass it on to an organization with a relevant mandate. This instance demonstrates that tokenistic and box-checking AAP persists. It also supports a finding in ACBAR’s AAP assessment, which concluded that local actors see collective AAP as “UN-driven” with weak follow-up (ACBAR 2026b). A Kandahar NNGO similarly noted that often “no clear changes happen” as a result of complaint calls.

Awaaz is the mechanism most promoted by respondents; posters with Awaaz’s number, 410, are distributed to communities during emergency response. Several success stories were attributed directly to Awaaz, but it is still not accessible to all. The desk review shows that in the eastern earthquake response, more than 96% of 849 calls to the Awaaz hotline came from men (OCHA 2026a, 6), adding to the gender constraints found in Section 3.3.

Recent meeting minutes of ADIWG, which is co-chaired by ACBAR, hint at an upcoming study of feedback mechanisms countrywide, with a participant noting nearly 300 separate AAP hotlines identified across the country (ADIWG 2026a). This is a promising sign, and will ideally highlight the need to consolidate mechanisms and fund the remaining ones sufficiently to boost community trust and adoption.

3.8 | A remote crisis went unseen for weeks

One donor described a case in early 2026 in which a large population in two remote districts of an Eastern province was cut off from assistance for around a month; this has been triangulated with news reports and found to be valid. The donor reported that the first signal came from community calls to the Awaaz hotline, which “reached OCHA after several weeks.”

The donor reported that in the meantime there was “no information coming from local NGOs, no information coming from international NGOs, and no communication was coming from [the] UN.” This instance points to a glaring and overarching structural gap in accountability mechanisms, and is a stark example of the very real threat posed to communities by AAP mechanisms that have weak follow-up or are under-resourced.

4 | How Coordination Functions in Preparedness and Response

4.1 | The system works as one during assessment and separates at delivery

Emergency response coordination in Afghanistan pools information but not resources. Though outliers exist (see Section 5.3) and, with the qualifier that “sleek is a big word... it’s different in different regions,” the bulk of respondents at each level of operation describe the OCT meeting and joint assessment as the point where the system functions most like a single unit. This perception largely ceases post-assessment heading into the delivery phase, though. An INGO in Nuristan **summarized**:

The coordination was very good at the beginning... all the organizations went together to the affected areas. But when the distribution started, the problem started.

— INGO, Nuristan

They diagnosed the issue too: “the coordination became weak because each organization started distributing separately based on its own plan.” A national actor based in Ghazni explained why this tends to be the case, pointing out that organizations “operated separately when arranging assistance” largely due to “limited resources and funding constraints from donors.” This builds on Section 3.2’s findings, and hints at donor inflexibility as an additional cause of local actors being unable to adapt their service delivery based on identified gaps and needs. The

consequence of this is stated plainly by a Ghazni NGO: “organizations often focused on the needs they had the capacity and funding to address, while some needs remained uncovered.”

The male community FGD in Nuristan recounted that those who received assistance “were not given things that could really help them with their needs,” and pointed directly to needs remaining uncovered or improperly met, noting “...many people received more assistance than they needed,” and that some received nothing at all.

The resultant duplication and gaps caused by distribution based on individual plans were attested to by a national NGO in Paktika, who described 10 to 15 organizations providing the same health services in a single camp following the 2022 Gayan earthquake, while other care such as psychosocial services was completely absent. In Herat, WLOs described most partners working in the same or nearby villages, leaving more remote areas uncovered. This was also identified as a recurring issue by a disaster management authority respondent, who noted that “The main challenge [was] that some organizations prefer to deliver assistance to the nearest and easily accessible areas, thus the most hard-to-reach areas remained uncovered.”

4.2 | Preparedness is held by individual actors rather than by the system as a unit

Much like perceptions of influence, positive perceptions of system preparedness tend to follow access to resources. UN agencies and disaster authority representatives were far more likely to describe

preparedness measures as at least partially adequate. While often qualifying their responses by noting that preparedness is by no means perfect, UN respondents pointed to contingency plans, pre-positioned stocks, and regular coordination meetings that took place prior to an emergency happening. A national-level disaster management authority respondent viewed preparedness similarly positively, referring to their own structures, including a standing commission at the national level composed of 19 ministries, to whom roles and responsibilities are pre-assigned. National and local NGOs, though, were **decidedly less positive**.

Our coordination has always taken place after an emergency occurs; never has our coordination happened before an emergency.

— *Kandahar NNGO*

Notably, though, it is not always the case that a negative perception of preparedness stems from a total lack of planning – a Bamyán NNGO stated that they have developed a preparedness plan, but did not have the resources to execute it. Others mirrored this underlying funding issue; an INGO respondent in Nangarhar pointed to the existence of early warning systems (EWS), but noted that they were linked to the duration of individual projects, meaning that they become inactive once the funding cycle concludes.

Respondents reported positive developments in preparedness, too. A recent UNFPA training on emergency preparedness was mentioned multiple times by national actors, and the literature reflects national-level progress being made: contingency plans for conflict displacement and returnee influx have been agreed by the ICCT (OCHA 2026d), and Afghanistan’s first anticipatory action (AA) framework, for drought, was activated in 2025 (OCHA 2026c). However, in line with the preparedness perception gap, these are plans held decidedly at the centre, and they do not necessarily translate into standing capacity or awareness at the provincial and district level, particularly among national and local actors who are disproportionately implementers.

Similarly, a donor and a national-level UN representative noted that El Niño preparedness was currently (as of September 2026) under discussion “at the HCT.” Addressing and closing this preparedness perception gap requires involving local actors in plans and clearly communicating planning information downwards from the strategic level, as well as being contingent on organizations having funds available to execute them when necessary (Sections 4.3 and 6.3).

4.3 | Speed depends on holding resources and being willing to take risk

In line with the formal sequence of response activation, disaster management authority representatives tended to describe themselves as the first to respond. From here, OCT meetings were regularly convened within 24 hours, and UN agencies with pre-positioned stocks and existing logistics chains recounted mobilizing within their respective deadlines. Private-sector actors too reported timely response, as they tend to hold reserve resources. In this sense, the system activates in a timely manner, and 64% of all survey respondents agreed that coordination and response began quickly enough.

However, the data does not support a universally necessary correlation between response activation time and actual delivery time. Implementing organizations that had to request supplies described waiting

“around 10 days.” In some cases, local actors without any budget can begin to help only “after a month, or [maybe] later,” once funding is secured, which contextualizes the drive behind the funding competition described in Section 6.2. This is another instance of formal mechanisms not necessarily enabling ground functionality, particularly for local and national actors.

Community respondents in Nuristan, speaking of a severe emergency, said that assistance “came on the third or fourth day” as neither government authorities nor humanitarian organizations had adequate emergency supplies pre-positioned at the provincial level to respond promptly.

Operational agencies described frequently acting before information is complete. A national UN agency said it would rather “respond on 80% complete data, rather than waiting for a full 100%.” This “no-regrets” approach is rational for actors who can absorb the risk, but it is out of reach for those who cannot (Section 7.1), meaning that local and national actors are often the slowest to begin delivery. This is essentially another perspective on the eastern-region earthquake AAR’s finding of rapid activation that “did not consistently translate into effective first 72-hour field execution” (OCHA 2026a, 8).

4.4 | Routines are institutionalized, but access often depends on personal relationships or proximity

How quickly things move and who gets what information often depends on personal relationships and proximity to decision-makers. An FGD group from Paktika **observed this**.

“ I think the credit largely goes to individual people rather than to the system itself... because there is no stable and institutionalized coordination system in place

— NNGO FGD, Paktika

This is also the case at the national level. A national UN agency described routinely obtaining joint assessment data by phoning OCHA directly, leveraging access that it has through proximity, and that local actors do not have and would be unable to obtain. The same respondent acknowledged that “this is not necessarily the way it should be.” Herat WLOs said that what worked “depended more on individual effort than on an institutionalized system.”

This disparity is not solely contingent on proximity to UN agencies; the survey shows that NNGOs outside

ACBAR’s membership, presumably with fewer formal connections, rated the system significantly lower than member organizations, being far less likely to agree or strongly agree on several survey items.

The largest gaps are:

- roles known before the emergency (44% vs 73%)
- national and local organizations participate meaningfully (47% vs 76%)
- sufficiency of the system's information-management capacity (37% vs 71%)
- communities meaningfully consulted during response (49% vs 72%)
- coordination with authorities functioning well (47% vs 70%)

Further, 39% of these non-members rated the system poor or very poor, against only 16% of members. While the national non-member sample size was notably smaller (n=37) than that of members (n=74), this perception disparity hints at ACBAR’s added coordination value and that connection to ACBAR is a form of being “inside the system.” This supports Recommendation 11.

5 | Information

5.1 | Information moves, but mostly through informal channels

WhatsApp was by far the most frequently named means of coordination and information sharing, both between actors and between levels. ANDMA offices, line departments, NGOs, and chambers of commerce all communicate via existing WhatsApp groups. A local actor in Kunar even reported that it has created a WhatsApp-based EWS for community members, in which it relays meteorology warnings and donor alerts. This is a real strength of the system: information sharing is the strength survey respondents named most often.

Information sharing, however, is also the improvement they named most often. This is not necessarily a discrepancy, though, since qualitative responses report that information does move quickly through informal channels, but also describe an underlying lack of a unified and accessible information management platform. This reflects prior ACBAR research, which noted that “coordination practices are often informal and reliant on ad hoc communication channels rather than institutionalized knowledge sharing platforms” (ACBAR 2026c).

ACBAR regional staff listed “fragmented information channels, different reporting formats, incomplete data and delays in sharing operational information” as persistent coordination gaps.

Further, this informal sharing of information persists partly because formal information products often arrive too slowly for operational decisions in an emergency. A national UN agency said it would “consistently fail” to respond within its deadline of seven days if it were to wait for OCHA’s information, which is corroborated in Section 2.4. Because of this, more often than not information will be shared between individual operational teams rather than waiting for a formal meeting.

	Information Sharing	Convening Speed	Estd. Mechanisms	Coop. w/ Authorities
NNGO	60%	46%	41%	16%
INGO	48%	48%	48%	25%
LNGO	80%	40%	60%	40%
WLO	83%	50%	67%	0%

Figure 7: Greatest strength of the system named by actor type; respondents able to name multiple

5.2 | Access to information can depend on being in the right place at the right time

Without a universal shared information platform, access to information is quite inconsistent, and oftentimes depends on placement, OCT attendance and personal relationships. A national NGO in Paktika recalled a time when they were unable to attend an OCT meeting and were subsequently unable to obtain the information shared in it. An INGO in Nangarhar further observed that organizations at the Torkham zero point during returnee influxes were able to receive daily information, while others were not.

For those who find themselves outside the formal coordination system, such as private-sector actors, emergencies are often first heard of via the radio, television, or social media. These actors also lack access to joint assessment data, meaning they have to identify beneficiaries themselves.

Some organizations do not share information with others at all, and some require donor permission or heavily redacted copies. This approach is warranted for sensitive information; a UN respondent in Kandahar explained that consent and confidentiality rules legitimately restrict sharing personal data. The sharing of sensitive information between actors is also heavily standardized by the Afghanistan Information Sharing Protocol, which only allows information no more specific than needs assessment data aggregated to the district level to be shared within a wider humanitarian community, based on a clearly specified purpose (OCHA 2023b, 4).

5.3 | Joint assessment is routine, but tools and standards vary

Although the joint needs assessment is where the system works most cohesively (Section 4.1), tools and formats are not necessarily universally standardized. A Ghazni NNGO said that “there is no standardized assessment tool used by all organizations.” Others described organizations conducting their own assessments in parallel to UN-led joint assessments, causing confusion and duplication. These different sources are prone to producing figures with “big differences,” and as a result, early figures are often rough estimates.

The data also found friction between UN agencies over which tool should be used for needs assessments. While the UN standard needs assessment tool since 2012 has been the community-level Multi-Sector Rapid Assessment Form (MSRAF), more recently there have been efforts to replace it with the Community Rapid Needs Assessment Tool (CRNA), which gauges rapid community-level multi-sector impacts. Opinions are divided on the efficacy of this change, with one UN agency representative calling the CRNA “a disaster for operational agencies... because we don’t need community-level data; we need household-level data.” They added that needs assessments had to be repeated after the CRNA’s first use in the field, which drew frustration from both households and the sub-national authorities.

Agency publications signal that OCHA, along with data actors like REACH, is jointly leading the rollout of the CRNA with the intent of ensuring that the data it produces feeds directly into strategic planning and response tracking, which indicates a divergence in aims between agencies and helps to explain the tension over which tool should be deployed. Whereas OCHA – perceived by the aforementioned UN actor as “redefin[ing] their role” from a coordination body to an information body – relies on needs assessment information for strategic planning and information products like sitreps and dashboards, operational agencies rely on it to target assistance.

5.4 | The utility of national-level information products is contested

Following findings in Section 5.3, multiple respondents questioned how useful OCHA's situation reports and dashboards are for operational agencies. One criticism described products well suited to donor reporting but too slow and too aggregated for actually delivering assistance.

I don't care if there's 2,000 families affected in District A. I need to know *which* 2,000 families.

— *UN agency, national level*

The same agency describes OCHA as “the holder of information,” which “very rarely” sends it back down in a form that is useful to operational work, as well as mentioning a 4W (who is doing what, where, and when) deconfliction tracker that is valuable in theory but does not get updated regularly enough.

Several actors praised OCHA's information products explicitly. A cluster lead described OCHA sitreps as consolidated from cluster data that is “already verified,” and therefore useful. A national disaster management authority respondent described OCHA's data as “mostly

accurate.” These positions can largely be reconciled by examining use cases; for situational awareness, respondents find the products adequate, but far less so for the purposes of operational allocation. Donors agreed on a parallel point, stating that system products by and large did not drive their funding decisions (Section 7.3). Ultimately, as a donor put it, the need is for useful information, not more information.

6 | Funding as a Cross-Cutting Pressure

Funding was identified in the inception report as the principal cross-cutting pressure, as it directly shapes every aspect of emergency response and coordination. The 2025 funding suspension reduced coordination and information-management capacity, suspended partnerships with local actors, and narrowed the 2025 plan to 145 of the country's 401 districts (OCHA 2025a). This added to an already volatile environment, in which border closures and regional conflict cut cross-border trade by more than 90% (ACAPS 2026).

6.1 | Funding is the dominant constraint, and it disproportionately impacts local and national actors

Almost every respondent named funding as the main obstacle to effective coordination. In the survey, the statement that recent funding restrictions have weakened coordination received the highest agreement of all 44 items (75%). For national and local actors, lack of budget affects every part of emergency response coordination. Organizations without funds on hand cannot procure goods to distribute or fund services to deliver, and since coordination largely splits apart at delivery, as in Section 4.1, organizations with nothing to distribute drop out of coordination altogether.

	Funding	Response Timeliness	Info. Gaps/Delays	Localization
NNGO	63%	38%	30%	23%
INGO	67%	29%	21%	12%
LNGO	60%	60%	20%	20%
WLO	83%	50%	33%	33%

A UN respondent described the cyclical effect that this has on leadership capacity: national NGOs cannot sustain co-leadership roles without budgets, and subsequently cannot gain the experience that would qualify them to lead. In response to this, one donor called for at least half of the Afghanistan Humanitarian Fund (AHF) to be apportioned to local NGOs, up from about 35% currently.

Figure 8: Biggest challenge faced by the system named by actor type; respondents able to name multiple

6.2 | The funding model turns each emergency into a competition

Funding constraints proceed to negatively impact every area of coordination, not just delivery. Since few local and national organizations hold reserves, many actors are forced to wait for the results of the needs assessment and then fundraise on its basis. A Kunar-based actor described the resulting competition between NGOs during the response phase, which spills into coordination spaces. An INGO in Kabul **observed:**

This is a reality acknowledged among all actor types; a national-level disaster management authority respondent criticized NGOs for often submitting proposals “without considering the actual needs of the communities.” Local actors described much the same dynamic, but framed as a cycle that is nearly impossible to escape. Taken together, all sides are visibly frustrated by the same overarching problem, but actors are more likely to only see one symptom based on where they sit in the system.

Some partners may view coordination meetings primarily as opportunities to identify potential funding.

— INGO, Kabul

6.3 | Funding gaps erode local capacity over time

Respondents traced a variety of other downstream effects of the shift in the broader funding landscape. A provincial UN respondent in Bamyan said that local enumerators are not adequately trained to run household assessments, which can result in poor quality or inaccurate needs data. In Nangarhar, a UN respondent observed that some NGO directors “may lack the capacity or confidence to effectively express their views during coordination meetings.” This is a visible instance matching the prevailing national NGO view that presence in coordination spaces does not automatically mean influence (Section 3.1).

Given a lack of budget, local actors face severe barriers to retaining trained staff and often have to rely on daily-wage workers. The implication for the system is that experience (and consequently, confidence) is lost at the end of each project cycle, instead of accruing and building an organization’s strength over time.

6.4 | The aid cuts have hollowed out the coordination infrastructure itself

As well as individual actors, the withdrawal of USAID funding has had a vast impact on the shape and scope of formal coordination architecture at all levels. A UN respondent described key coordination positions, including national and Herat cash coordination, as double-hatted. A UN respondent in Kandahar said provincial clusters now have “limited funding.” Multiple respondents confirmed that OCHA no longer maintains a presence in Ghazni, and has designated IOM as lead coordinator in its place, but a local actor reported that this is an arrangement which “is not considered valuable or sufficiently effective by the local authorities.”

These accounts match estimates made by OCHA in publications that 78% of coordination posts have been affected (OCHA 2025a). 70% of survey respondents agreed that structures or support functions had been scaled down or discontinued.

In Bamyan, WLOs described the loss of OCHA’s office as the loss of their main channel through which they were linked to coordination (Section 3.4). Another UN cluster lead described both national and international NGO capacity falling “to minimum level” after the cuts, and said its own share of the Kunar earthquake response exceeded 80% while the share of local organizations was “very, very minim[al].”

This is indicative of a resultant shift in the balance of power, a trend that 68% of survey respondents agreed with. The survey question, however, does not clarify in which direction power may have shifted; there are

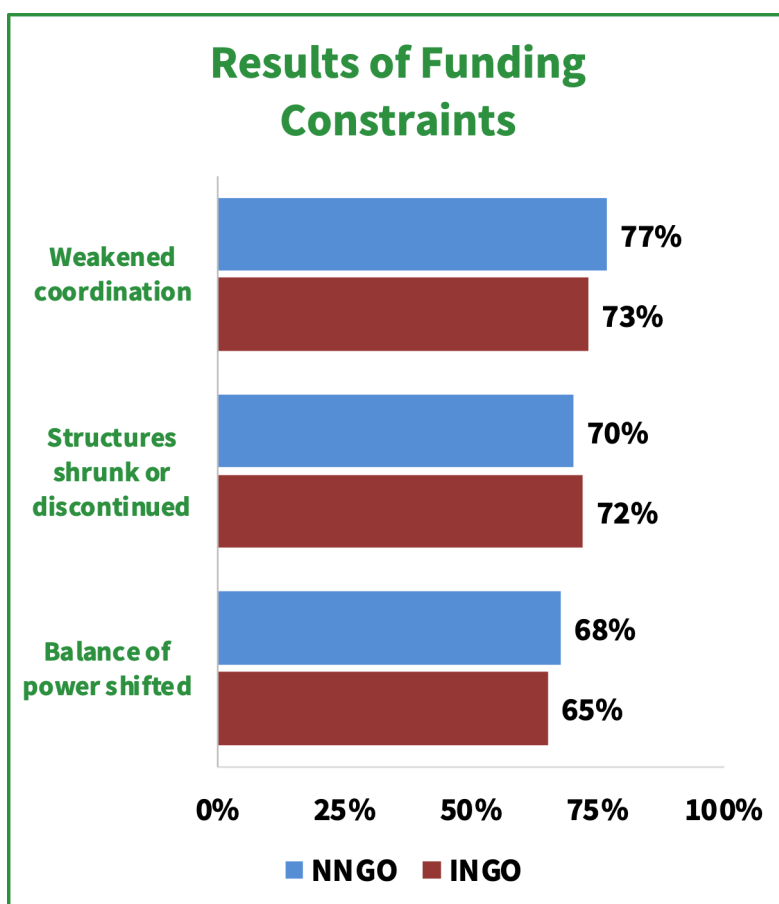


Figure 9: % of respondents who agreed or strongly agreed with each statement

several possibilities. Rather than a simple “local/international” binary, it may be the case that only certain operational UN agencies now hold comparatively more power, while OCHA, INGOs, and local actors alike hold less.

This is an area worthy of further focussed research, particularly as it risks reversing the trend of emerging signals of localization identified in ACBAR’s 2026 localization baseline study.

6.5 | Funding gaps produce duplication and gaps at the point of delivery

Further downstream, funding constraints shape what actually reaches communities during response. Assistance is allocated according to what organizations have funding for rather than what an emergency requires, and since organizations have less funding, there is a higher risk of both gaps and overlap. This lens helps explain the case relayed by a Paktika actor (Section 4.1), in which 10 to 15 actors provided the same health services in one camp with no actor present to provide psychosocial support. Likewise, and although without constituting definitive proof, it hints at the structural causes of a disaster management authority respondent’s description of households receiving food from several organizations at once.

In addition to this, eligibility criteria leave some needs without a responsible actor. Multiple respondents mentioned at least one event that they recall being excluded from assistance, particularly those which affected fewer than ten households, resulted in livelihood losses or only partially affected community members. Of a particular response in Kandahar, a respondent recalled that households had to meet three joint-assessment criteria, and those meeting two were not assisted despite being in acute need. A disaster management authority respondent in Ghazni described a misalignment between donor and authority needs assessments, recounting an event in which authorities verified 101 affected households but organizations assisted 48, “based on their eligibility criteria and organizational policies.”

UN respondents attributed the narrowing to funding shortages that have forced them to cover only the most immediate and severe needs. One UN respondent argued that small events should be the responsibility of the authorities, since humanitarian actors are providers of last resort. That position is defensible. The difficulty is that thresholds are set separately at donor, agency and OCHA level, and the result is a band of small events that no one is clearly responsible for (Section 7.1).

6.6 | Procedural constraints remain, amongst promising instances of pragmatism

In addition to tentatively permitting female staff to participate in emergency response activities (Section 3.3), some other promising signs of pragmatic engagement from the authorities are evident. Some respondents credit ANDMA with being facilitative, and some describe a trend of expedited or waived MoUs in emergency situations. A UN cluster lead described successfully advocating for authorities to waive MoUs for short emergency interventions, as was standard pre-2021. This is by no means a blanket experience, though, and several local accounts challenge the ease of operations. A national NGO in Paktika said authorities often “require a separate official letter for each activity,” and that letters from line departments are not always accepted in the field, causing confusion and costing additional time and resources. One particular local actor perceived the authorities’ coordination requirements as a route for the authorities to intervene in NGO affairs, and one INGO described the possibility of interference in procurement and recruitment.

Authorities' expectations also create friction: authorities' assessments do not always match NGO and donor eligibility criteria, as in the case in Section 6.5, and local actors are often expected to do a great deal with few resources. This is the same problem as in Section 6.2, this time described from the NGO perspective.

7 | How Money Moves in Emergencies

7.1 | Fast money rarely reaches local actors directly

Options exist to access funds both quickly and directly, but local and national actors – who arguably need them most, as per Sections 3.2 and 6.3 – are largely precluded. One donor described a flexible funding model for emergency shocks that is pre-agreed in contracts. The same donor, however, explained that “according to our legal rules, we are not able to fund local NGOs directly.”

A second donor observed that “most funding continues to be channelled through a few UN agencies, so that’s the bottleneck,” leaving the response dependent on those agencies’ capacity and on how flexible they are with their downstream partners. A third noted that the pooled fund available to local actors “often takes a couple weeks to mobilize resources.”

These accounts together offer a convincing explanation as to why local actors are often the slowest to respond (Section 4.3) and why they cannot take the risks that pre-funded agencies can. It also helps to understand the chronic and harmful dependence on post-assessment fundraising identified in Section 6.2.

7.2 | Donors deconflict within their funding streams during delivery

Whereas avoiding duplication in the field is spotty, donors deconflict their own partners. One reported that overlap between partners’ plans happens “very often,” with “areas and villages that have been targeted with same kind of support,” and that it contacts partners to resolve it. This is effective within a single donor’s portfolio, but it highlights that deconfliction happens inside funding streams rather than across the response. This is in keeping with the pattern of coordination splitting apart at delivery (Section 4.1).

7.3 | System information products rarely drive funding decisions

Donors struggle to obtain reliable figures and accurate information on coverage and gaps, and existing forms of system information do not fill this gap particularly well. One international donor responded that coordination products tend not to “[play] a massive role in terms of our actual mobilization.” It added that during the Kunar earthquake, it continued a recent practice of making no-regrets-style commitments within the first 24 hours, rather than waiting for a joint assessment report to come out “a week later... or in some cases even longer.” Another agreed, saying that it took “too long” to receive consolidated information after a conflict-related crisis.

One donor offered a diagnosis of these issues that resembles the findings of the eastern-region AAR, describing “too many coordination meetings, too many coordination groups,” concluding that the problem is “too much coordination and not too little.” This is the same core issue described by the national-level UN respondent in Section 5.4, now evidently experienced from the funding side too.

8 | ACBAR's Roles

One of this assessment's two overarching objectives was to inform ACBAR's strategic role within the humanitarian coordination architecture, both by evaluating where it currently adds value and by assessing where it can further strengthen its contribution to NGO coordination and fill unmet coordination needs. Its documented contributions include the Twinning Programme which has been “overwhelmingly considered helpful and successful” in bringing national NGOs to AHF eligibility (ACAPS 2023); the Localization Technical Working Group and the national localization baseline (ACBAR 2026a); and co-chairing the ADIWG. ACBAR does conduct annual member satisfaction surveys in order to gauge perception by members on ACBAR's contribution to coordination.

8.1 | ACBAR is valued most where it is present

Assessments of ACBAR's emergency response value are noticeably strongest where it has a physical presence. Disaster management authority respondents in Kandahar and Kunduz – provinces in which ACBAR has offices – praised the regional managers by name. The Kandahar respondent expressed particular appreciation for ACBAR's neutrality, opining that it “presents facts and realities rather than simply taking the side of NGOs” and helps to resolve disputes. However, in Paktika, where ACBAR does not have an office, another authority representative was completely unaware of ACBAR's work: “if any coordination has taken place between ACBAR and the organizations, I am not aware of it.” A Paktika NGO similarly noted ACBAR's absence, and called for it to increase its provincial presence in response to OCHA's shrinking field presence. Similarly, in both Logar and Nuristan – provinces in which ACBAR does not have an office – local actors noted that they were unfamiliar with ACBAR's activities.

This dependence on presence and relationships maintained by individual staff members is itself an iteration of the relationship-based coordination described in Section 4.4.

8.2 | Respondents want more from ACBAR in emergencies, but disagree about what

Respondents broadly expressed a desire for ACBAR to be more involved in emergency response, but differed quite considerably on what its specific role should be.

Lead – A Kandahar authority representative recommended that ACBAR “establish an Emergency Coordination Committee and take the lead in it,” inviting “executive-level and highly authorized

representatives” from NGOs. The same respondent said ACBAR is not very active during emergencies. A national NGO in Kabul similarly called for a national-level coordination committee.

Complement – A national UN agency saw OCHA's recently appearing gaps as “ACBAR could slide into or support at least.”

A donor further noted that ACBAR's sub-national presence is wider than OCHA's, but at the same time stressed complementarity, recognizing that OCHA retains the coordination mandate. ACBAR's own staff

I don't understand why ACBAR and OCHA are so separate... at the end of the day we're coordinating the same emergency.

— UN agency, national level

concurred here, envisioning a regional mechanism that “would complement existing humanitarian coordination structures rather than duplicate them.”

Not coordinate – Another donor argued that coordinating emergencies is not ACBAR’s mandate, and pointed instead to training, preparedness and capacity strengthening. In the survey, “strengthening coordination among NGOs” was the most-selected priority for ACBAR moving forward (67%), followed by emergency preparedness (62%). These two together, coupled with ACBAR’s existing reach and credibility with providers, point to a role within the NGO community and on preparedness, rather than a lead role in the response itself. Several local actors asked for more frequent meetings, but this read alongside a donor’s view hints that there are already too many meetings, and that the stronger case is for existing NGO coordination to be more efficient and effective, rather than adding more of it.

8.3 | Capacity strengthening is the most-requested activity, and it is tied to resources

In the qualitative data, capacity building was the activity most often requested of ACBAR. National respondents in the survey chose localization as a priority twice as often as international respondents (50% versus 23%). Requests were often general, but where specific they included:

- training on preparedness, information management, needs assessment (including enumerators) and humanitarian standards;
- leadership capacity for coordination co-chairs;
- helping NGOs meet eligibility criteria to become implementing partners and take part in decisions; and
- training for ministry and district authority staff.

One donor acknowledged the need for capacity building activities, but with the caveat that capacity is ultimately linked to resources without changes to funding arrangements, and that training alone will not last (as reflected in Section 6.3). Correspondingly, an INGO in Kabul suggested that “small grants” could help local actors build coordination capacity and respond more effectively. This is reflected in Recommendation 10 and supports the wider finding that resources come before influence (Section 3.2).

8.4 | Advocacy is requested in both directions

UN agencies asked ACBAR to advocate for “clearer, faster, and more consistent coordination procedures” between authorities and humanitarian organizations, and for governors’ offices to treat it as the “representative body and collective voice of NGOs.” Local actors asked for help with MoU delays and friction with line departments, and a UN respondent in Nangarhar described ACBAR already advocating for smoother procedures when an NGO faces MoU problems.

In the other direction, a national-level authority representative requested that ACBAR relay authorities’ concerns to NGOs by “identifying the challenges faced by sectoral departments and communicating these challenges to the relevant humanitarian organizations.” Authorities’ praise for a representative’s neutrality and dispute resolution ability (Section 8.1), as well as the overall requests from local and national actors for enhanced presence, suggests that ACBAR already has the requisite credibility with both sides to scale up its advocacy work and expand it more consistently to an increased number of provinces (Recommendation 11).

9 | Conclusion: Capacity and Maturity of the System

The inception report set out a six-dimension maturity model to assess capacity from the evidence generated by this assessment. It proposed four possible levels in ascending order: **Ad-hoc**, meaning no standing arrangements exist, mechanisms are largely improvised, and the system is near-entirely dependent on individuals; **Developing**, meaning arrangements exist in part but are inconsistently used, under-resourced or not widely known; **Established**, meaning that arrangements exist, are known and used as intended, and the function works by design; and **Optimized**, meaning routinely reviewed, resourced and improved, and resilient to the loss of key people. The table below scores each dimension at the national level drawing on the evidence in Sections 2 to 8, while also identifying the actions that would move each dimension’s score up.

9.1 | Afghanistan’s emergency response coordination system is developing

The only dimension approaching a rating of “established” at the national level is coordination structures. Structures exist and are widely known, so the system is clearly beyond ad-hoc in form, but the functions that would make it work by design are thin or absent, including standing capacity between emergencies, collective delivery, operational information, and collective accountability. Where these functions do work, they are often inconsistent or depend on held resources or proximity.



Dimension	Rating at the National Level	Evidence Base	What Moves It Up?
1. Preparedness and contingency planning	Developing	Some evidence of national-level contingency plans and a drought anticipatory-action framework; individual agencies have stocks and budgets. Provincially, coordination “after an emergency,” plans without resources, and arrangements tied to projects. Absence of funded coordination roles between emergencies.	Systematic sub-national preparedness action during non-emergency periods; enhanced NNGO/LNGO awareness of provincial activation protocols; capacity registers opened and consistently reviewed before hazard seasons; pre-season sessions for predictable emergencies; private-sector reserves mapped in advance (Rec. 1, 3, 4, 5)
2. Coordination leadership and structures	Developing (approaching established)	HCT, ICCT, clusters and OCTs exist and are known; OCTs convene within about 24 hours. Larger agencies often coordinate outside formal mechanisms; OCTs passive between emergencies; double-hatted coordination roles; OCHA withdrawal from some provinces.	Clear OCT–Regional Team division of labour; consolidated and streamlined meeting schedules; re-evaluated roles of OCT co-chairs during response; enhanced support from ACBAR in gaps (Rec. 1, 2, 7)

3. Information management	Developing	Information moves quickly but through informal channels; access often depends on OCT attendance or relationships; no universal shared information management platform. Joint assessment is routine, but tools caught between iterations. System information products lack operational use.	Response tools (4W trackers, dashboards, SMS alert channels, templates) co-developed and tested before emergencies; agreed data-sharing rules; information products informed by NGO user feedback post-response (Rec. 6, 8)
4. National-sub-national linkage	Developing	Upward reporting reliable; decisions and resources slower to come down; three parallel channels; Regional Team role unsettled; shrinking OCHA presence precludes some organizations from participating in coordination.	Consolidated meetings mirrored at provincial level; enhanced integration of government and humanitarian channels; national information flows down quickly and in a useful form; provinces with shrinking coordination presence served by other actors (Rec. 2, 8, 11)
5. Localization and participation	Developing	National and local actors present in coordination; but lack influence; influence follows resources; WLOs less able still to participate meaningfully. NNGOs cannot sustain co-leadership without budgets; direct and quick funding nearly impossible. WLOs are largely absent in person; authorities are often pragmatic about female staff in acute response.	Funded co-chair roles alongside targeted capacity strengthening linked to small grants; pragmatic joint arrangements for women and girls; information, preparedness, and capacity support extended to non-members and WLOs (Rec. 9, 10, 11)
6. Accountability to affected populations	Developing	Organization-level feedback corrects individual programmes; nearly 300 hotlines exist. Collective AAP seen as UN-driven; feedback outside an agency's scope risks going nowhere. NGOs agree assessments are "inclusive;" this often means elders and religious leaders only. Both community groups reported no consultation. Women face greater obstacles to accessing assistance.	Required, non-tokenistic consultation of a representative group of community members in all stages of response; fewer, better-known complaint channels; further research into how affected communities experience emergency response (Rec. 12)

Maturity of the emergency response coordination system by dimension

10 | Recommendations

The following recommendations align with the inception report's commitment to a prioritized set of actions informed directly by the evidence generated by this research. Care has been taken to ensure that the recommendations presented here are feasible based on current capacity and operational realities.

10.1 | Architecture and Roles

Recommendation 1: Assign standing preparedness to Regional Teams and define OCTs as the activation structure. The passive nature of OCTs between emergencies (Section 2.2) and the noted lack of preparedness (Section 4.2) present a clear opportunity for Regional Teams to assume a mandated and leading preparedness role during non-emergency periods. In the upcoming light-touch review, a division of labour should be set out in order to recalibrate the expectation that every provincial OCT sustains standing activity for which it lacks the resources. Instead, OCTs should be defined specifically as structures that activate when an emergency occurs, over which OCHA retains the activation mandate and the mandate to coordinate responses directly. During non-emergency periods, Regional Teams should take on a defined humanitarian preparedness function via a dedicated action group, whose remit should cover preparedness and contingency planning, emergency response capacity strengthening, and the emergencies that rarely trigger a large-scale response, such as winterization, drought and small-scale flooding (Sections 3.8 and 6.5). OCHA, currently an observer in the Regional Teams, should take part in the action group as a full member, so that preparedness work feeds directly into activation.

Who: RT leads, OCHA, and the HCT and ICCT; ACBAR as the secretariat of RTs.

Recommendation 2: Streamline coordination and establish a joint standing mechanism between OCHA, ACBAR, and ANDMA. Information currently moves between levels through separate government and humanitarian channels (Section 2.4), and an uncertainty prevails surrounding how ACBAR's role relates to OCHA's (Sections 2.5 and 8.2). OCHA, ACBAR, and ANDMA should establish a standing tripartite arrangement that replaces as many bilateral meetings as possible with joint ones. Where ACBAR or OCHA plans to engage ANDMA on a coordination matter, the default should be to attend together.

At the national level, the three should meet regularly around a short standing agenda, which could include preparedness priorities ahead of hazard seasons, procedural constraints such as MoU delays and per-activity letters (Section 6.6), access for women staff (Recommendation 9), engagement with the private sector (Recommendation 5), and how decisions flow down to OCTs, the RTs, and Area-Based Coordination mechanisms. At the regional and provincial level, this arrangement should be mirrored where possible, including OCHA where it is present, ACBAR's regional managers and focal points, and ANDMA's provincial offices. One donor already describes "too many coordination meetings, too many coordination groups" (Section 7.3), so this recommendation serves to consolidate and streamline.

Who: OCHA, ACBAR and ANDMA at national level; OCHA field presence, ACBAR regional offices, and ANDMA provincial offices and PDMCs at sub-national level.

10.2 | Preparedness

Recommendation 3: Make provincial activation executable and keep it under review between emergencies.

For each priority province, the heads of sub-national humanitarian and disaster management authority coordination mechanisms should co-produce a short, written activation protocol that sets out who convenes, who assesses, and how areas and sectors will be divided. Alongside it, they should establish a provincial register of which organizations hold which stocks, expertise and personnel in which districts, including private-sector actors and others who hold reserves (Recommendation 5). The protocol and register should be reviewed at least once a year and before each hazard season through the Regional Team preparedness action group (Recommendation 1), so that they do not lapse while the OCT itself is inactive. This aims to address the lack of clarity surrounding who does what, where, and with what resources until after the first meeting described in Section 2.3.

Who: OCT co-chairs and PDMCs, with OCHA; RT preparedness action group.

Recommendation 4: Prepare for seasonal and localized emergencies before they arrive. Seasonal shocks such as winter hardship, avalanches, spring flash floods and summer drought are largely predictable, yet small or remote events often fall below the eligibility thresholds of donors, agencies, and the system (Section 6.5). As the changing of seasons approaches, Regional Teams should convene sessions in provinces most historically prone to more predictable seasonal emergencies such as drought (summer), avalanches (winter), and flash flooding (spring). These sessions should aim to update the capacity register established in Recommendation 3, ascertain who has what stocks positioned where, brief members on existing contingency plans where available, and maintain a roster of emergency-ready national NGOs.

Who: RT preparedness action group with OCHA, ANDMA, PDMCs, and NGOs.

Recommendation 5: Bring private-sector responders into preparedness. The private sector's contribution to emergency response is valued and, particularly as funding contracts, valuable. However, the data points to concerns from humanitarian actors surrounding discrepancies caused by the lack of proper coordination with traditional actors. In response to this, three steps should be taken.

First, PDMCs should be invited to bring chambers of commerce and major private donors into PDMC sessions where RT and OCHA representatives are present, and to add private-sector actors' reserves to the provincial register established in Recommendation 3. These sessions should offer a space for humanitarian and private-sector actors to share where and what they plan to distribute, and for established INGOs and NNGOs to share the importance of reaching the right households and avoiding duplication.

Second, where both sides are willing, local NGOs and private-sector actors should agree distribution partnerships before an emergency, in which private actors contribute resources while NGOs support targeting, distribution, and protection standards, helping private assistance reach those most in need and

reducing waste. ACBAR should play a supporting role here, facilitating the linkage between actors. This is particularly appropriate for predictable emergencies, such as winterization, drought, or returnee influxes. These partnerships should be entirely voluntary and should not compromise the independence or standards of humanitarian assistance.

Third, humanitarian actors and ACBAR should open relevant response and preparedness trainings to private-sector responders, and consider designing a short training tailored to them, covering needs assessment, targeting, and protection standards.

Who: RT representatives and OCHA, INGOs and established national NGOs; PDMCs and provincial authorities; chambers of commerce and private donors; ACBAR.

10.3 | Response coordination and information

Recommendation 6: Co-develop more formal communication mechanisms and have them ready for use during emergencies. OCHA and the clusters, with the support of ACBAR, should, between emergencies, co-develop and test the core information tools needed during response, so that they are ready immediately and do not need to be built with the added pressure of an active emergency. These should include a shared 4W tracker (who is delivering what, where, and when), a response dashboard, SMS and messaging alert channels with up-to-date contact lists that reach provincial NGOs, including those that do not attend the OCT, and standardized templates for situation updates and OCT decisions. Data-sharing rules consistent with IASC data-responsibility guidance (IASC 2023) and the Afghanistan Information Sharing Protocol (OCHA 2023b) should be agreed concurrently. NGO feedback gathered by ACBAR after each response (Recommendation 8) should serve to revise and update these tools during the next preparedness phase.

Who: OCHA and the ICCT, cluster IM units, operational UN agencies, ACBAR.

Recommendation 7: Strengthen OCT coordination capacity during emergency response. OCT NGO co-chairs usually have response duties during an emergency, which limits their capacity to coordinate during emergency response periods. On top of this, funding cuts have left many coordination posts double-hatted. Here, the co-chair arrangement would benefit from review, with room for greater flexibility in who fills the role during a response and how it is supported. Leading coordination actors should engage and take forward discussions to this end, with the aim of strengthening the co-chair's role during emergency response.

Who: OCHA and OCT co-chairs; ACBAR as a dialogue partner.

Recommendation 8: ACBAR to represent NGOs as users of information and relay information to those outside the room. Information management ranked low on the survey as a future priority for ACBAR, yet information sharing was named as the most-needed improvement overall. Thus, instead of expanding its remit towards information production and management, ACBAR is better situated to add value by improving the flow and fit of existing system information. After each major response, ACBAR should gather members' feedback on which system products they used, what was missing and what arrived too late, and

consolidate it into a short brief directed to OCHA, the ICCT, and relevant working groups. ACBAR should also offer itself as an additional channel through which OCHA updates, OCT decisions, and assessment results can be relayed to members, non-members, and women-led organizations that face barriers to in-person coordination participation.

Who: ACBAR, OCHA, the ICCT, and cluster IM units.

10.4 | Inclusion and localization

Recommendation 9: Agree a pragmatic joint arrangement to meet the needs of women and girls during emergency response. Notable gaps remain in how emergency response reaches women and girls, and WLOs are almost completely excluded from in-person coordination. However, authorities have shown a willingness to adopt pragmatic solutions during emergency periods. ACBAR, OCHA, UN agencies, and NGOs should work jointly with ANDMA and provincial and community stakeholders to agree, ahead of emergencies, pragmatic means by which women and girls will have access to humanitarian assistance. At the national level, this should be taken forward through the joint ACBAR-ANDMA-OCHA meetings set out in Recommendation 2. These agreements should set out how humanitarian actors, including women staff, will maintain a presence during an emergency response, particularly where their absence would significantly reduce the ability of women and girls to receive life-saving assistance. All actors should also improve consultation with Afghan women from affected communities themselves, giving them a voice in how emergency humanitarian assistance is delivered, since both community groups in this assessment reported not being consulted. No arrangement should expose women to increased risk.

Who: ACBAR, OCHA, UN agencies, NGOs, ANDMA, community stakeholders.

Recommendation 10: Target capacity strengthening at the gaps that block local leadership and fund the roles for which it prepares people. Building on the Twinning Programme, ACBAR should continue to pursue programme activities that boost local and national actors' ability to participate confidently and project meaningful influence in formal emergency response coordination forums. These should include training sessions with the express goal of empowering local actors to lead at their respective levels of operation, initiatives to capacitate local enumerators in needs assessments, and continued support to increase local eligibility and readiness for partnerships and pooled funding. Capacity building ought to be linked to small grants where possible, as the evidence suggests that capacity too is ultimately reliant on sustained funding in order for it to be executable.

A co-chair role is difficult to sustain during an emergency, as an organization will often be preoccupied with response. Donors and the AHF should fund dedicated co-chair staff time for national NGOs, at least for the duration of an emergency response, and ACBAR should explore avenues through which it can help support staff shortages during response to ensure that national and local organizations do not have to forgo gaining coordination leadership experience.

Who: ACBAR, with donors, the AHF, and UN and INGO partners.

10.5 | ACBAR's reach and learning

Recommendation 11: Extend ACBAR's provincial presence and reach. While ACBAR technically already has coverage across all 34 provinces through its office in Kabul and seven regional offices, the evidence suggests that lacking an actual physical presence in a province translates to a lack of visibility and awareness, and potentially leaves response actors underserved, particularly given the shrinking presence of other actors. ACBAR should establish new focal points, even if they are part-time or member-hosted, in provinces where it is currently invisible and where respondents reported a lack of coordination support, such as Paktika, Logar, and Nuristan. Additionally, ACBAR can make greater use of their current Advocacy and Liaison Officers within their regional offices to be specifically tasked with better engagement in harder-to-reach provinces and districts, planning at the district level, and ensuring access for members in the event of emergency response.

National organizations outside ACBAR's membership rate the system markedly lower than members, so ACBAR should deliberately extend information, preparedness sessions, and capacity strengthening to non-members and women-led organizations where practical. ACBAR should also document its existing regional staff's roles and responsibilities so that value is not just held in individuals but is transferable when personnel change.

Who: ACBAR, with members and donors.

Recommendation 12: Commission targeted follow-up research on the gaps this assessment could not fully address. Two findings rest on a narrow evidence base and would benefit from closer study. First, affected communities' experience of emergency response was explored through only two FGDs, and their accounts diverged sharply from providers'. A fuller study across more provinces and emergency types would show how wide that gap really is. Second, following the light-touch nexus architecture review, ACBAR is well positioned to commission a follow-up maturity assessment in 12 to 18 months, using the same six dimensions and core survey items, to track change in the architecture and progress on these recommendations, including the Regional Team preparedness function proposed in Recommendation 1.

Who: ACBAR, with donors.

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