

Lessons on Locally-Led Programming

Insights from the Cascading Change Project



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I. Executive Summary

The Cascading Change Project (CCP) demonstrates that effective localisation in high-risk contexts such as Northeast Syria depends on reapproaching how risk, resources, and decision-making are shared. While operating under sanctions, security constraints, and the absence of formal banking, CCP combined hawala-based transfers with local intermediation, adaptive procurement, sequenced disbursements, and continued accompaniment. This approach reduced unnecessary exposure for local organisations while maintaining donor assurance, showing that localisation is possible when decision-making surrounding risk is calibrated to context.

CCP evidence highlights the importance of risk-based financing models. Graduated disbursement arrangements, routed through licensed national intermediaries, enabled protection for emerging CBOs while allowing greater autonomy as capacity was demonstrated. Flexible procurement and tightly timed transfers reduced cash-handling risks and reputational exposure, illustrating that fiduciary controls must account for protection and trust dynamics, not only financial compliance.

Strengthening local leadership required more than training alone. The most meaningful capacity gains occurred where support was grounded in CBO-led capacity needs assessments, reinforced through tailored coaching, and applied in real time through community-led planning and implementation. A core challenge during the period analysed was that many partnerships were newly formed and still in a piloting phase. As a result, the donor and intermediary NGO adopted a more rigid approach, requiring new CBO partners to establish and demonstrate strict quality and accountability controls (e.g., procurement) before funds could be released. While well-intentioned, this created delays in delivery and exposed CBOs to reputational risks within the communities they were supporting. These experiences highlight the need for multi-year, flexible funding that covers core organisational costs and allows for a gradual, risk-aware shift in decision-making power to local actors.

Community participation proved effective when it translated to real influence. Two approaches were used to support participatory design and implementation of funding: the Change-Oriented Approach (COA) and Supporting Community-Led Response (sclr). COA enhanced programme relevance and responsiveness, while sclr enabled communities to design, lead, and sustain initiatives they

valued. However, when delivery was delayed or inclusion mechanisms were weak, trust diminished - underscoring the importance of aligning participatory processes with realistic timelines. A commitment to situating decision-making authority at the community level must be matched by timely fund disbursement and consistent follow-up support; without this, participation becomes a source of frustration rather than empowerment.

Finally, our evaluation of CCP, along with consultations with partners, surfaced issues of broader relevance for supporting locally-led, people-centred programming in Northeast Syria (NES), particularly at a moment of significant political transition in Syria. While CCP fostered strong ownership among participating community members, the long-term sustainability of its outcomes is threatened by deteriorating infrastructure, energy insecurity, and uncertainty over how participatory approaches can be maintained or scaled in the evolving political and aid landscape of both NES and wider Syria.

As Syria enters this transition, donors will need to look beyond project-level localisation and adopt a more systemic approach to resilience. This includes embedding maintenance considerations, energy planning, and coordination with local authorities from the outset, while also protecting and building on locally evolved practices, of which CCP is just one example, as the context shifts.

CCP demonstrates that locally-led, people-centred programming in Northeast Syria is not only possible but effective, provided that investments prioritise risk-sharing, institutional strengthening, and long-term system integration, rather than relying solely on short-term or stand-alone project delivery.

II. Call to Actions

Adopt graduated, risk-based financing to community groups anchored in local intermediaries

Throughout the history of the civil war in Syria, as well as during the response to the earthquake, the role/collaboration of informal, voluntary groups, networks and CBOs has been increasingly recognised. CCP illustrates that in contexts such as NES, support to such CBOs, mutual aid groups and networks works best through sequenced risk transfer, not direct decentralisation. Donors and INGOs should consider formalising risk-based funding tiers that route funds through licensed national intermediaries with deep contextual knowledge (e.g. DARI/B&Z), with instalment size, timing, and documentation calibrated to CBO maturity. This protects emerging CBOs from political, fiduciary, and protection risks while enabling progressive autonomy as capacity is demonstrated.

Retain hawala, but design transfers around protection and reputational risk

In NES, the absence of a functioning banking system means that hawala is not a constraint to localisation, but a structural reality. CCP demonstrates that hawala based transfers can support local operations when carefully designed. Key considerations include disbursement sequencing, phased advances, and intermediary routing that minimise prolonged cash holding and reduce the visibility of funds in ways that can trigger intense observation, questioning, or follow-up from local authorities. Transfer design should explicitly factor in staff safety, office security, authority questioning, and community trust, treating cash exposure as a protection issue rather than an administrative one.

Shift capacity support from training to institutional accompaniment with core cost coverage

CCP confirms that training and workshops alone do not build capacity. Capacity strengthening should prioritise staffing, basic systems (finance, MEAL), and day-to-day decision support, guided by CBO-led programming alongside internationally agreed standards. This requires flexible funding that covers partial salaries and operating costs, allowing CBOs to apply skills, stabilise operations, and engage credibly with communities and authorities.

Align participation with real decision authority and delivery timelines

Participatory processes such as COA and sclr are effective only when matched with honest clarity on influence, timing, and constraints. CCP shows that participation without delivery sequencing exposes CBOs to reputational damage. Programmes could benefit from:

- distinguishing clearly between consultative and decision-making participation,
- establishing representative and inclusive community committees early, and
- linking planning processes to realistic implementation pathways and communication.

Embed sustainability as system integration, not post-project handover

While CCP strengthened community ownership, long-term continuity requires broader system strengthening, including attention to maintenance, energy access, and institutional coordination. This may involve budgeting for routine and emergency repairs, as well as fostering collaboration between CBOs, local authorities, and service providers. The emphasis in this phase was on working with existing local structures to avoid duplication and reinforce what already functions well. Rather than relying solely on organisations to sustain initiatives, the aim was to encourage a collective, “hive” mindset: If this benefits our community, what can we do together to keep it going?

Consistent dialogue, feedback mechanisms, and coordination can help smaller programmes link more effectively to wider systems across NES. In turn, local networks and community ecosystems can grow not in isolation but through collaboration, mutual reinforcement, and long-term integration.

III. Introduction

NES has long operated at the margins of the international humanitarian system, shaped by protracted conflict, political isolation, and fragmented governance that have severely constrained humanitarian engagement. Years of hostilities have repeatedly damaged critical infrastructure such as water, sanitation, and electricity systems, contributing to deep service shortfalls and humanitarian needs (Humanitarian Situation Overview, 2024).

Moreover, the lack of official recognition and consolidated governance structures has complicated sustained support from external actors and limited consistent engagement by humanitarian coordination bodies. In this context, NES evolved largely without the institutional backbone often present in other crises: there was no dedicated OCHA pooled fund for the region, overarching UN coordination remained limited, and many international organisations struggled to develop a nuanced understanding of how institutions functioned on the ground (OCHA CBPF information; ICVA, 2025).

Globally, frameworks such as the Grand Bargain (2016) have called for more equitable priority-setting, shifts in decision-making power, and stronger organisational systems for local actors (Barbelet, 2018; Roepstorff, 2020; Khoury & Scott, 2024; Scott, 2022; Hielscher et al. 2017). Yet in Northeast Syria, where INGOs were often able to move and operate with comparatively fewer access restrictions, there were limited incentives to invest in long-term partnerships with local organisations. As a result, local actors shouldered much of the responsibility for service provision but received little sustained investment in their own institutional systems and capacities.

Yet NES's isolation also shaped something unique. CBOs and community structures in NES developed forms of organising and problem-solving, grounded in intimate knowledge of local politics, social dynamics, and the practical realities of service delivery. These practices emerged not from external design but from daily necessity. They now stand as an important counterpoint to the more widely recognised localisation models that took shape elsewhere in Syria.

The recent political transition following the fall of Assad has opened a new chapter one filled with both possibility and uncertainty. A more unified aid architecture across NES, NWS, and government-controlled areas could in

principle bring resources and coordination mechanisms that NES actors have long lacked (OCHA, 2023; HNAP, 2024). Yet the re-centralisation of humanitarian decision-making through Damascus also carries significant risks. Evidence from previous years shows that centralised approval systems and access controls often constrained humanitarian flexibility and overshadowed locally developed service-delivery systems (ICVA, 2021; COAR, 2020). These local structures, built through years of necessity and exclusion, kept essential services running in the absence of formal support. The central question now is how new political openings can be leveraged without weakening the community-rooted leadership models that have sustained local resilience (Hassanet al., 2019, Hielscher et al., 2017, Hilhorst et al., 2020; Howe, 2019).

Against this backdrop, NES offers a rare learning environment, one that shows how localisation can evolve when formal investment has been limited but local systems have remained resilient, adaptive, and imaginative. The Cascading Change Project sits within this landscape, providing concrete examples of how capacity strengthening, planning approaches such as COA, and community-led modalities like sclr can be designed and implemented in ways that reinforce, rather than replace, local leadership.

IV. Cascade Changing Project Overview

The Cascading Change project is a 30-month initiative aimed at promoting equitable, peaceful, dignified, and sustainable access to water in NES, specifically in Raqqa, Al-Hasakah, and Deir ez-Zor. Supported by a budget of one million euros, the project was delivered through a consortium composed of Secours Catholique Caritas France (SCCF), the Catholic Agency for Overseas Development (CAFOD), and the Syrian organisation Basmeh & Zeitooneh (B&Z). As the national partner, B&Z led day-to-day implementation and engagement with local actors, including CBOs and communities across all three governorates, with international partners providing operational support in addition to technical assistance, training, and strategic accompaniment.

The project began with the selection of six CBOs across the three governorates. This process was led by B&Z and initiated with a widely disseminated Call for Participation across northeast Syria. Because NES continues to face chronic and politically contested barriers to safe and reliable water access, the project deliberately focused on WASH, prioritising CBOs with relevant experience in this sector. Applicants submitted detailed information on their institutional

structure, WASH background, governance, and motivation to join capacity-strengthening initiatives. Selection was based on a scoring system that assessed community relevance, technical potential, inclusion, and willingness to engage in collective learning—demonstrated through openness to cross-organisational dialogue, collaboration with diverse actors, and active participation in shared reflection and networking activities.

Following the selection of the six CBOs, the project moved into its core methodology, applying cascading approaches to deepening local leadership, expanding institutional capacity, and embedding community-led decision-making:

1. Training and Coaching for CBOs

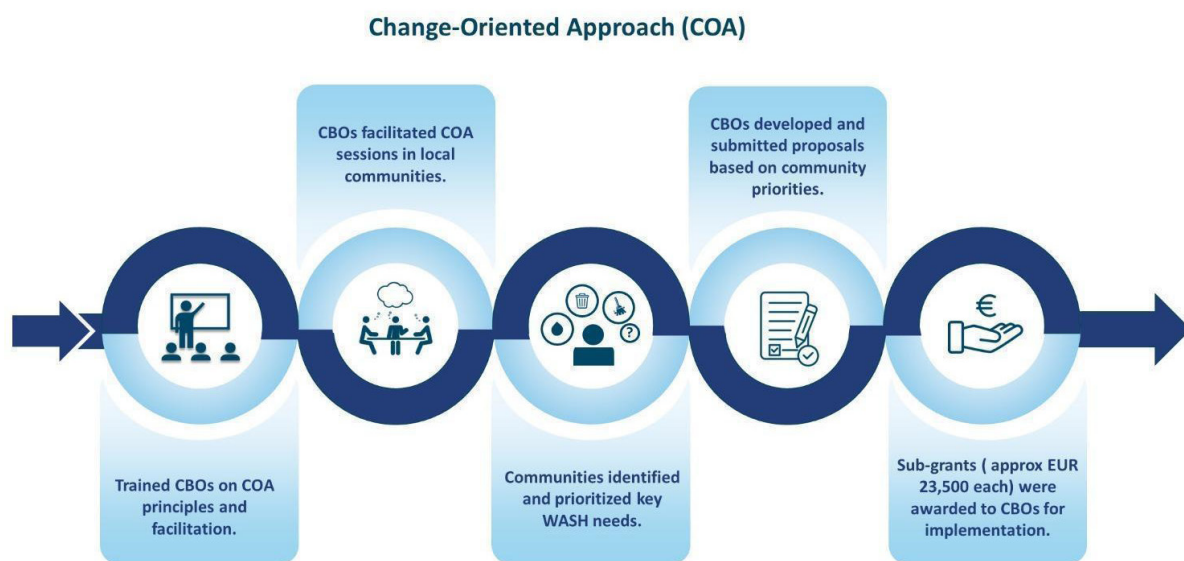
The first strand focused on strengthening the institutional and technical capacities of Syrian CBOs. The six selected CBOs underwent an Organisational Capacity Assessment Tool (OCAT) to identify needs across key domains: vision and strategy, governance, preparedness, assessment and design, and MEAL. In parallel, a technical capacity assessment evaluated their ability to implement WASH interventions, including water supply, sanitation systems, and hygiene promotion. Based on these assessments, each CBO received tailored training and coaching, delivered through basic and advanced modules. Topics included MEAL, financial and project management, advocacy, safeguarding, proposal writing, and fundraising. During implementation, CBOs also benefited from ongoing technical support from WASH experts to improve service delivery.

2. Change-Oriented Approach (COA)

The second strand focused on introducing CBOs to the COA as a practical, participatory framework for strengthening community agency across project design, implementation, and monitoring and evaluation. COA is not a stand-alone methodology, but an approach that supports local actors to structure collective reflection, decision-making, and action around locally defined change processes.

As applied in the project, CBOs received Training of Trainers (ToT) on COA, alongside ongoing coaching, to support the facilitation of participatory sessions with community representatives. The ToT equipped CBOs to act as facilitators of COA sessions rather than implementers. In this role, they worked with communities to form representative committees, including members from

vulnerable groups such as women and people with disabilities. These sessions enabled communities to analyse their local context and key challenges, define a shared long-term vision, identify pathways of change through concrete actions, and refine these actions through ongoing reflection and monitoring. The process helped communities move beyond identifying needs alone, toward articulating how change should happen and clarifying the roles different actors should play in bringing it about.



Based on priorities identified through the COA sessions, the table below presents the WASH interventions that were subsequently designed with communities.

The following table provides an overview of the WASH activities implemented by each CBO:

Location of Project	Description of Project
Raqqa	Implemented a water pump installation and conducted awareness sessions in Al-Thawrah.
Deir Ez Zor	Expanded the water network in Hermushia with a new 2400m polyethylene pipeline.
Al Hassakah	Rehabilitated a large tank to increase water supply and extend pumping hours.
Raqqa	Upgraded water and sanitation facilities in several schools.
Hajeen, Deir Ez Zor	Built a solar-powered water filtration station on the Euphrates River.
Jawadiyah, Al Hassakah	Installed a solar power system for two water wells.

3. Supporting Community-Led Response (sclr)

The third strand piloted the sclr model. At its core, the sclr approach is about keeping decision-making power in the hands of communities, enabling them to design, prioritise, and implement actions based on their own analysis and capacities (Mosel & Levine, 2014; START Network, 2021). A defining feature of sclr is its micro-grant mechanism: very small, flexible grants are provided directly to community groups or self-help networks, enabling them to design and implement initiatives that matter most to them.

Unlike conventional small-grant schemes, sclr is not designed simply to fill basic needs gaps; its purpose is to strengthen resilience during crisis and recovery phases. Communities determine priorities, design interventions, implement activities, and monitor outcomes themselves. Because accountability is embedded at the community level, monitoring becomes organic and shared, with communities holding themselves responsible for delivery.

Beyond the cash element, sclr invests in the facilitation of community networks and mutual aid groups. These groups mobilise volunteerism, skills, and local resources, and because they are not dependent on external funding, they can act autonomously in the immediate aftermath of crises. This makes them central to disaster risk reduction and resilience, as they are prepared to act before external actors arrive. Evidence from multiple contexts underscores sclr's potential to foster social cohesion and solidarity: in Northern Shan State, Myanmar, for example, participants in sclr activities rated its impact on collective action and cohesion at 4.8 out of 5 (L2GP, 2021).

Within the Cascading Change project, sclr was piloted and managed by B&Z, and operationalised through community facilitation and direct micro-grants of up to \$5,000 per initiative. A temporary Community Selection Panel composed of local community members reviewed proposals from groups of at least three residents. **Four initiatives** were funded as part of the pilot in Al Raqqa.

- **Mobility support for persons with disabilities:** Provided electric wheelchairs, crutches, and assistive supplies to 44 individuals with mobility impairments, improving access, independence, and social inclusion.

- **School sanitation rehabilitation:** Renovated restrooms in a primary school serving 300 children, enhancing hygiene, accessibility for children with disabilities, and encouraging school attendance.
- **Street lighting installation:** Installed LED lights to improve night-time safety, increase economic activity, and enhance mobility especially for women, children, and the elderly.
- **Neighbourhood cleanliness promotion:** Distributed waste carts and bins and conducted awareness sessions to improve waste management and encourage community responsibility for public spaces.

Each initiative was designed and led by community groups following a consultation process that included meetings, public announcements, and social media outreach. B&Z provided light-touch technical accompaniment and handled documentation, but did not manage implementation.



V. Purpose of the Learning Paper

This learning paper distils evidence from CCP in NES to inform future localisation and community-led programming in Syria and globally. It examines how emerging approaches to capacity strengthening, compliance, and risk management can enhance local ownership, improve service quality, and foster resilience in fragile settings.

Importantly, this learning paper does not propose a one-size-fits-all localisation model. Instead, it presents localisation in practice: the choices made, considerations taken, and lessons learned while implementing a community-centred approach in a highly complex environment. The learning focuses on CCP's three core strands: CBO capacity development, the COA, and community-led programming through sclr. As such, CCP is a particularly relevant case as it unfolded in a context with limited formal coordination and institutional investment, offering insights for similarly constrained environments.

To operationalise this aim, the paper explores localisation approaches across (1) Financing and Risk Mitigation, (2) Capacity strengthening, and (3) Community engagement. Together, these domains illustrate how localisation can strengthen local ownership, enable more meaningful leadership, and support greater sustainability, while also identifying bottlenecks and persistent challenges within NES, across Syria, and within the broader humanitarian system. Through this lens, the paper offers actionable insights for donors, INGOs, policymakers, and local practitioners seeking to embed localisation principles more effectively in humanitarian and recovery responses. As one consortium member expressed: *'How can we make sure that people can still get what they need without relying on humanitarian organisations in general.'* (Consortium KII5)

VI. Methodology

This learning paper draws on multiple sources across the humanitarian–development nexus, combining project-specific evaluation with wider sectoral analysis. The primary evidence base is the Endline study of the Cascading Change Project in NES, which integrated surveys, focus group discussions (FGDs), and key informant interviews (KIIs).

To gauge specific learnings across the project, KIIs were conducted with the project consortium members, including international, national, and local staff, thereby tracing project logic, theory of change, and adaptive decision-making. Additional KIIs with international practitioners and local authorities provided insights into WASH programming patterns in NES, the application of COA and sclr approaches, and broader contextual dynamics following large-scale change as a consequence of the political transition.

FGDs with community members captured perceptions of community involvement, priority-setting, and the practicalities of implementing WASH projects. Direct quotations throughout this paper highlight the lived perspectives of communities and practitioners, illustrating how localisation unfolded on the ground and what remains needed for stronger, more equitable outcomes.

Limitations

Several limitations shape the scope and interpretation of these findings. First, CCP is a multi-phase project, and this learning paper draws primarily on evidence from the first completed phase; subsequent phases may yield additional or different lessons as localisation practices mature. Second, the data may contain elements of desirability bias among community respondents, as well as variation in outcomes across regions and CBO implementers due to contextual diversity, differing governance arrangements, or varying levels of organisational maturity. Third, while the paper highlights pathways observed within CCP, it does not suggest that these are the only, or necessarily the optimal, routes to achieving locally led outcomes. Instead, the analysis aims to stimulate reflection and offer practical entry points for organisations seeking to strengthen locally led programming, particularly through COA and sclr approaches.

VII. Learning from the Cascading Project

The Cascading Change project surfaced critical lessons across key dimensions of localisation risk sharing, institutional and technical capacity, local ownership, policy space, and transition planning (Barbelet, 2018; Roepstorff, 2020; Wilkinson et al., 2023; Honig 2018; Juliet et al. (2023). The following analysis draws from these insights to inform urgent, practical calls to action for more equitable and sustainable humanitarian practice.

1. Risk and Financial Management

1.1. Working through national and local intermediaries to enable risk-sharing

In Northeast Syria, where sanctions, counter-terrorism regulations, and the absence of formal banking systems severely constrain humanitarian finance, risk is unevenly distributed across the delivery chain. The greatest exposure sits at local level among CBOs managing cash, negotiating with suppliers, and interacting daily with authorities while strategic, legal, and reputational risks are more effectively buffered at higher tiers.

Within this context, the Cascading Change Project illustrates how risk intermediation, rather than risk transfer, can enable localisation. By working through B&Z, a long-term consortium partner to the INGOs involved, and its NES-registered entity DARI, the project established a layered delivery chain that redistributed risk more equitably across actors.

DARI's registration under a locally recognised name, its five-year operational presence in NES, established offices, and locally rooted staff were critical. Unlike international organisations often perceived as external or politically sensitive, DARI was viewed by local authorities as a legitimate Syrian actor. This was particularly important in a context where external funding attracts scrutiny and where local organisations fear that administrative missteps could jeopardise licences or trigger restrictions on their activities.

The shift to channelling funds through DARI responded to an operational reality: when CBOs receive funds directly, questioning and follow-up by local authorities tend to increase, particularly for organisations with newer or incomplete registration status, heightening risk for staff and operations.

Crucially, DARI did not function merely as a pass-through entity. It brought contextual knowledge, language fluency, operational credibility, and established compliance systems, enabling it to absorb and manage risks that CBOs could not reasonably shoulder alone. In doing so, it acted as a fiduciary and reputational buffer, stabilising delivery in a high-risk environment while creating space for CBOs to engage without being overexposed to administrative or political harm.

1.2. Hawala Plus: Managing Fiduciary and Security Risk Through Timing and Trust

In Northeast Syria, the absence of a functioning banking system and the constraints imposed by sanctions mean that hawala remains the only viable mechanism for moving operational funds (IMPACT-CSR, 2020). In CCP, however, hawala was not treated as a simple workaround. Instead, the consortium developed an adapted operational model that combined informal transfer systems with structured controls and deliberate timing, seeking to balance speed, accountability, and partner protection.

The transfer chain was intentionally layered. Funds moved from B&Z outside Syria to DARI inside NES, and then from DARI to CBOs, with grant agreements signed between DARI and the CBOs rather than directly with the international actor. This structure reduced the visibility of international funding flows and limited the scrutiny faced by CBOs. Partners consistently reported that receiving funds through DARI felt safer, as DARI is locally licensed, known to authorities, and has maintained a stable operational presence in Raqqa for several years. At the same time, basic but effective controls were agreed for Hawala transfers. For each transfer from B&Z to DARI in NES, receipts were retained from the Hawala office, and corresponding receipts were matched between DARI and the CBOs to confirm that funds were received and passed on as intended. This approach was applied consistently across all CBOs, with receipts maintained for every transfer.

A further risk-mitigation measure was the tight sequencing of disbursements. Wherever possible, transfers were timed to coincide with procurement decisions, allowing funds to move quickly from DARI to CBOs and on to suppliers often on the same day. This approach deliberately minimised the period during which CBOs held cash, responding to a well-understood risk environment characterised by theft, intimidation, and reported incidents of violence linked to cash storage.

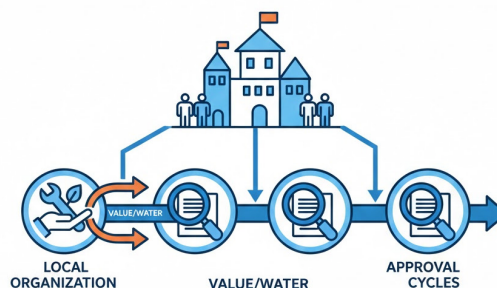
At the same time, this model did not remove risk entirely; it redistributed it in more manageable ways. CBOs continued to face exposure in contexts where offices lacked secure infrastructure, such as safes or guards, and where repeated or regular receipts triggered questioning by authorities, generating fear and uncertainty. While CCP reduced unnecessary exposure through timing and intermediation, local actors still carried a share of residual security and reputational risk inherent to operating in NES.

1.3. Procurement Thresholds, Currency Volatility, and the Limits of Policy Rigidity

Procurement emerged as one of the most acute operational risk areas for CBOs. While B&Z and DARI entered the partnership with established procurement standards, market conditions in NES, marked by currency volatility, limited supplier availability, and largely informal supply chains, quickly tested the practicality of these requirements.

At the outset, it was agreed that B&Z's procurement standards would apply. In practice, however, repeated revisions, supplier withdrawals, and rapidly fluctuating prices made strict compliance both inefficient and, at times, counterproductive. CBOs requested flexibility, and B&Z responded through accompaniment rather than enforcement. This included accepting alternative documentation such as justification letters, validating procurement processes rather than rigid formats, and supporting CBOs to remain compliant without insisting on thresholds that could not realistically be met in local markets.

This approach reflects adaptive risk management in practice, even where formal policies lagged behind operational realities. At the same time, it placed a significant burden on CBOs, who had to manage community expectations while navigating repeated approval cycles linked to procurement verification and donor requirements. In several cases, delays in fund disbursement driven by documentation reviews rather than CBO performance temporarily undermined community confidence, despite the organisations' continued efforts to deliver. Overall, the procurement experience highlights the limits of policy rigidity in volatile contexts and underscores the importance of flexibility that is structured, accompanied, and responsive to local market conditions, rather than applied through uniform compliance controls.



1.4. Trust, Disbursement Sequencing, and Differentiated Risk Appetite

A central lesson from CCP concerns the downstream effects of risk-averse disbursement sequencing on trust and delivery. While delayed disbursement was intended to reduce fiduciary and security exposure, it also had unintended consequences for implementation timelines and community perceptions. In several cases, communities interpreted delays as underperformance by CBOs, even when the causes lay in budget revisions, technical feedback, or donor-facing proposal refinements beyond their control.

In response to these risks, the project applied a differentiated disbursement approach. Larger amounts required full documentation prior to release, while smaller advances allowed documentation to follow. In practice, this often meant that large disbursements were tied to tender completion, with transfers timed so that funds moved quickly to suppliers rather than being held by CBOs. This reduced fiduciary and security risks associated with cash handling, but it did not eliminate the reputational consequences of delayed implementation at community level.

The experience highlights a broader localisation challenge: risk management strategies tend to prioritise fiduciary assurance while underestimating the reputational risks borne by local partners. In CCP, CBOs absorbed the immediate impact of delays on community trust, despite limited control over upstream review and approval processes.

The project also points to the need for differentiated risk appetites across partners. Newer CBOs may require smaller tranches and closer accompaniment, while more established organisations can responsibly manage earlier disbursement and greater autonomy. In CCP, agreed instalment structures typically included an advance of approximately USD 6,700 (around 30%), followed by a larger implementation tranche of up to USD 20,000 (around 70%), with variations reflecting CBO preferences and capacity, subject to completion of required documentation.

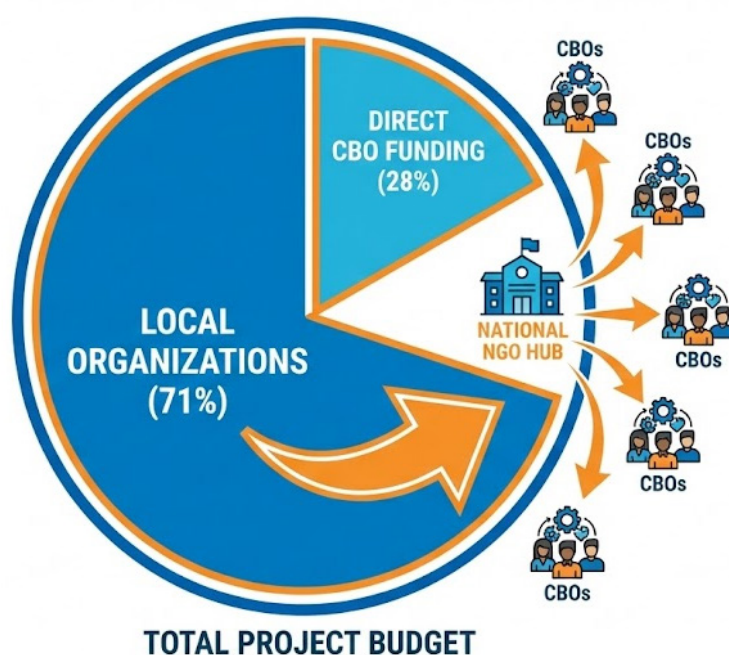
Experience from other scale initiatives in Syria suggests that average CBO grants of around USD 10,000 are common, indicating that CCP's funding levels were not unusually high. What proved decisive was not the size of grants, but the timing and conditions of disbursement. This underscores the importance of risk-based funding tiers, where trust is demonstrated through performance and partnership history, and where disbursement models reflect differentiated risk appetites rather than uniform controls.

1.5. Budget Flexibility: Strong at Consortium Level, Uneven at CBO Level

The CCP benefitted from a high degree of budget flexibility at consortium level, which proved critical in a volatile operating environment. Funding was not fully pre-restricted, allowing the consortium to adapt activities in response to real-time political, economic, and community dynamics. This flexibility enabled the introduction of the sclr approach as a late-stage pilot, shifts between budget lines, and the provision of small-scale sclr grants—averaging approximately USD 5,000—to support community-identified priorities. Partners consistently noted that without this flexibility, the project would have stalled under inflation, price volatility, and shifting local conditions. As such, the fact that the funding came from the INGOs' own flexible supporter raised funds was vital; and contrasts with the inflexible approach experienced by the partners involved with most funding from institutional donor governments and UN agencies.

From a resource-flow perspective, approximately 71% of the total project budget was channelled to local organisations, comprising the national NGO DARI/B&Z and six local CBOs/CSOs. Within this, 28% of the total budget was channelled directly to CBOs for activity costs, training, limited salaries, and running costs. Of this CBO-managed share, 16% supported WASH interventions and the piloting of community-led projects, including sclr initiatives. Presenting the combined share channelled through local organisations offers a more accurate picture of localisation financing in NES, where national intermediaries play a critical operational and fiduciary role in enabling delivery.

At the same time, financial flexibility was not evenly experienced across local actors. While the consortium could revise budgets and absorb market volatility, CBOs faced repeated proposal revisions, extensive tender documentation requirements, and approval delays that disrupted implementation timelines and, in some cases, affected community trust. Although modest allocations were made for institutional support such as partial salaries, utilities, and connectivity these were limited in scale and duration. As one consortium member observed, *“Salaries of CBO staff would help to structure themselves and to be more sustainable in time.”* (Consortium, KII)



This uneven distribution of flexibility needs to be understood within the NES localisation context, which remains relatively young and uneven. Many CBOs are newly formalised organisations with recent registration, evolving governance systems, and limited exposure to donor-facing compliance environments. Throughout much of the conflict, local actors have primarily operated as implementers rather than autonomous decision-makers, delivering activities designed, funded, and overseen by international or national intermediaries. In this context, an abrupt shift to full financial discretion at CBO level would have carried significant operational, fiduciary, and protection risks.

The CCP approach therefore reflects a gradual and risk-aware localisation pathway, rather than a lack of ambition. Concentrating greater flexibility at consortium and national NGO level where compliance capacity, fiduciary safeguards, and contextual navigation were already established helped stabilise delivery in a high-risk environment while creating protected space for CBOs to build experience. At the same time, CBOs were progressively entrusted with managing activities, procurement processes, and community engagement, even as procedural safeguards remained in place.

This reveals a core tension in localisation financing: resources may flow through local organisations, but discretion and operational autonomy remain unevenly distributed. While DARI/B&Z had the capacity to manage larger, more flexible envelopes, CBOs operated within tighter procedural constraints despite carrying significant delivery, reputational, and community-facing risks. In NES, this asymmetry can be understood as a transitional arrangement that balances protection with learning in a context where premature decentralisation could expose emerging organisations to harm. Budget flexibility thus functioned both as an enabler of adaptation at consortium level and as a partial constraint on deeper institutional strengthening at CBO level, underscoring the importance of sequenced trust-building, differentiated risk appetites, and time-bound pathways toward greater CBO autonomy.

Finally, these dynamics cannot be separated from donor behaviour, which ultimately shapes how far localisation can move from rhetoric to practice. Rigid administrative processes and lengthy approval cycles frequently slow local actors and undermine adaptive responses. As one cluster representative noted, “Give them money and they’ll be able to figure it out, but ask them to drag themselves through a bureaucratic administrative process ... that’s going to be harder.” Conversely, more flexible funding environments enable responsiveness: “Somehow the flexibility in this funding environment allowed them to be more adaptive and responsive,” observed one NGO interviewee. Donor requirements also shape implementer behaviour upstream, reinforcing compliance-heavy models even where they constrain delivery: “If the person with the money says we want a project in this place with 33 rainbows and two unicorns, an INGO will go find a way to create 33 rainbows and two unicorns.” (Cluster Representatives Interview).

2. Institutional and Technical Capacity

Strengthening institutional and technical capacity proved both necessary and challenging. Differences in access, experience, and expectations across partners made alignment uneven, while promoting genuine ownership required a shift in mindset. As one consortium member reflected, many actors – both in the national NGO intermediary and the CBOs – initially equated capacity strengthening with training alone, despite efforts to frame it more broadly around policies, systems, and ways of working.

“We tried to redefine it to include policy development, systems strengthening, and ways of working. Still, in practice, capacity building often leaned toward training... Bridging that gap remains a work in progress.” (Consortium, KI3)

The CCP experience suggests that capacity strengthening is most effective when treated as a locally led, adaptive process grounded in CBO priorities, rather than as a predefined package of activities. This approach requires not only technical support, but also donor and intermediary willingness to support flexibility, sequencing, and learning over time. In CCP, capacity strengthening combined diagnostic tools, tailored training, and coaching with opportunities for real-time application across areas such as MEAL, advocacy, planning, and safeguarding. These channels supported learning by doing, rather than isolated skill transfer.

2.1. Joint Capacity Assessment

CCP applied a joint diagnostic approach using the Organisational Capacity Assessment Tool (OCAT) to identify institutional strengths and gaps across leadership, preparedness and response, external engagement, and resource management. This helped move away from a one-size-fits-all model and informed more tailored support pathways based on actual readiness and context. Evidence from FGDs and post-training reflections indicates that CBOs used the assessment process to improve project design, financial planning, internal coordination, and engagement with donors' key foundations for organisational development.

Although the OCAT was initially envisioned as a self-assessment tool, B&Z the local consortium partner adapted it into a facilitated scoring and feedback process aligned with its existing organisational approach to capacity strengthening. This method enabled quicker, on-the-spot discussions and allowed facilitators to clarify questions where organisations struggled with terminology or interpretation. Importantly, the process was not fully top-down: CBOs participated in workshop-based discussions, contributed directly to scoring, and later reviewed and revised the completed assessment.

A key learning concerns ownership of the process. Because the assessment was facilitated by B&Z in Phase I, CBOs were active participants but not the primary drivers. Future iterations would likely benefit from shifting toward a full self-assessment model, where CBOs initiate the diagnostic independently and then engage B&Z or other partners for reflection and support. Allowing CBOs to hold their own training budgets, define learning objectives, and select trainers directly could further strengthen local ownership and relevance.

Overall, CCP highlights that capacity assessment tools are most effective when they reinforce rather than substitute local leadership. When initiated and owned by CBOs while still allowing space for joint reflection such tools can support institutional development without imposing rigid formalisation requirements that smaller or emerging organisations may struggle to meet.

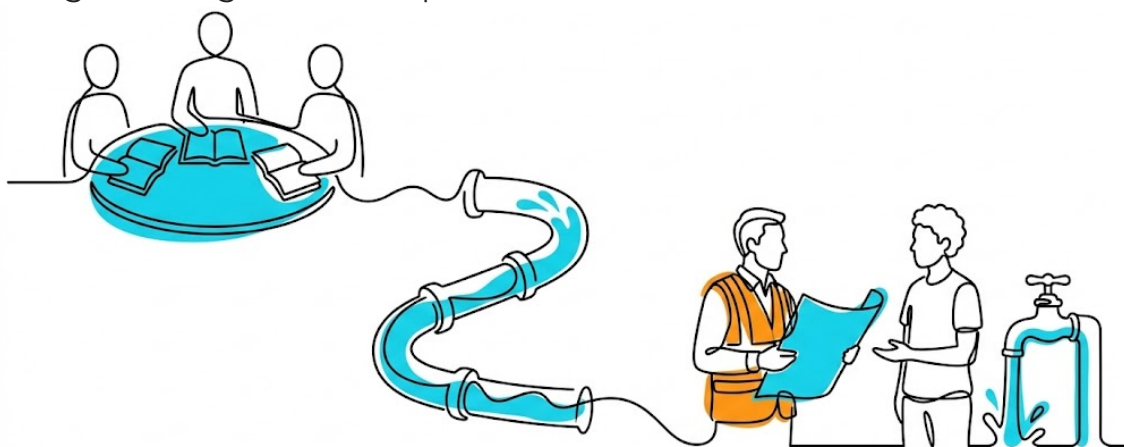
2.2. Tailored Training and Coaching: From Skills to Practice

Insights from the OCAT informed the design of tailored training and coaching that responded to the specific institutional and technical needs of each CBO, rather than applying a standard package. Training sessions were followed by coaching support that enabled CBOs to apply learning in real time across areas such as MEAL, advocacy, planning, and safeguarding.

CBOs consistently valued this approach because it linked skills development to everyday practice. Several reported integrating new ways of working as a direct result of the training and coaching, including co-designing hygiene campaigns with local authorities, establishing feedback loops with communities, and piloting simple planning tools such as SWOT analysis. These changes strengthened community engagement and increased confidence in navigating donor requirements and funding discussions.

The COA Training of Trainers (ToT) sessions further reinforced this shift from training to practice. Delivered jointly to B&Z (DARI) and CBOs, the sessions established a shared methodology for community-led planning and marked a departure from more conventional, top-down delivery models. CBOs applied the approach directly through engagement with communities, embedding learning into project design rather than treating it as a standalone exercise. As one CBO staff member explained, *“We discussed water challenges directly with residents; this helped ensure the intervention met real needs.”* Others noted that the approach *“made the community feel like true partners, not just beneficiaries.”*

Beyond external engagement, the process also reshaped internal roles within CBOs. Several staff described moving from implementation-focused tasks toward facilitation and dialogue. As one participant reflected, *“My ability to identify community needs improved significantly after the training... we identified water shortages as a priority and worked to provide a practical solution.”* This illustrates how community-led tools functioned not only as planning mechanisms, but as practical ways to embed accountability and local knowledge into organisational practice.



The process also strengthened B&Z's (DARI's) own institutional capacity. Staff participated in the same training as CBOs and applied learning to improve internal systems and facilitation practices, supported by a dedicated budget line for organisational development. This reinforced B&Z's role as a technical and accompaniment partner and helped anchor capacity strengthening as a shared, locally rooted process rather than a one-directional transfer of skills.

These capacity and risk arrangements directly shaped where and how local

ownership was possible in practice, particularly at community level.

3. Participation and Decision Making

3.1. Participation Through COA

A core pillar of the COA is the active engagement of CBOs with communities across all project stages, beginning with consultations on needs and extending through implementation and monitoring. This participatory planning strengthened community perceptions of the response. According to the endline survey, 97% of participants described the experience as positive, citing improved communication, stronger alignment with local priorities, and a sense of shared vision. As one community member explained: *“We talked about the difficulty of fetching water, especially in the summer, and our voices were conveyed to the entity implementing the project.”*

Endline findings further highlight the cascading impact:

- 99.7% of surveyed respondents said WASH activities addressed community needs; and
- 91% reported improved access to water, with benefits including reduced water-fetching time, lower costs, and better hygiene.
- Early signs of sustainability included: communities reported renewed household gardening and local authorities observed reductions in waterborne diseases—indicators of improved well-being and community resilience.

At the same time, CCP highlighted the limits of participation when structural constraints disrupt delivery. CBOs reported that the implementation of WASH activities began almost a year after the COA sessions. This long gap—caused by delays in funding disbursement, procurement processes, and coordination with multiple stakeholders—strained community trust. As one CBO staff member explained: *“People kept asking when the water would come. We had to explain again and again, and some stopped believing us.”* This experience underscores that participation raises expectations; when timelines are misaligned, reputational risk is borne locally by CBOs and communities, even when delays originate elsewhere.

Some community participants highlighted gaps in inclusion such as limited involvement of marginalised groups, the absence of representative community committees. Local authorities echoed these concerns, stressing the need for more consistent and structured mechanisms for community input.

Community members made suggestions to strengthen the model going forward, including:

- Establishing permanent, representative community committees across all locations;
- Enhancing outreach to underrepresented and marginalised groups;
- Scheduling consultation sessions outside working hours to increase accessibility; and,
- Improving two-way communication throughout the project cycle.

As one participant noted, *“The community can play a stronger role at all stages—if they are properly supported, they can help ensure the project’s sustainability.”* *Community member*

The establishment of representative community committees was a clear demand from communities themselves, because they believed this could strengthen their ongoing engagement, ensure their priorities are meaningfully reflected in project decisions, and enable them to take a more active role in shaping and sustaining interventions. In the endline survey, 55% of respondents indicated that such structures would improve the relevance of interventions. However, 93% confirmed that no such committees currently exist across Raqqa, Deir Ezzor, and Al Hasakeh.

3.2. The Cascading Effect Through sclr

While COA strengthened participation through CBO-facilitated processes, the sclr approach enabled a deeper shift by placing decision-making authority directly with community groups. Under sclr, priorities were discussed in open meetings, responsibilities were shared, and informal feedback shaped implementation. Community members consistently contrasted this with more conventional programming. As one participant explained, *“With other projects, the NGO comes, decides everything, and we just receive. This time, we were the ones planning and doing the work—we had a say.”*



Outcomes under sclr were described not only in functional terms, but also in social and relational terms. Street lighting initiatives were associated with improved safety and extended economic activity; mobility support was described as restoring independence and visibility for individuals previously excluded from public life; and school hygiene improvements strengthened both health conditions and parental engagement. As one participant put it, *“It wasn’t just a wheelchair. It gave me back my independence.”* These examples illustrate how decision-making power at community level can generate outcomes that are socially embedded and locally valued.

However, intent alone is insufficient. Community members themselves highlighted the need for stronger and continuous technical support, particularly in financial management, project planning, and stakeholder coordination. For sclr to be sustained or scaled, such accompaniment is essential. Sclr is not a silver bullet, but it addresses a persistent shortcoming in conventional models: the lack of meaningful alignment with local realities. In contexts where formal systems are limited or absent, early experience suggests that enabling communities to lead with modest resources can offer a more grounded and responsive form of recovery. The approach has shown potential to generate initiatives that are relevant, socially embedded, and delivered with a high degree of ownership.

4. Transition Readiness and Sustainability in a Changing Humanitarian Landscape

The preceding sections illustrate how financial arrangements, capacity strengthening, and participatory approaches interacted to enable local ownership and leadership where possible. Building on these insights, this section examines: to what extent did these approaches support the continuity of outcomes and the exercise of local leadership beyond the immediate project cycle, particularly in a context of political and humanitarian transition?

4.1. Sustainability and Local Leadership in Transition

In Northeast Syria, sustainability is inseparable from wider structural conditions. Sanctions, fragmented governance, degraded infrastructure, and limited access to long-term financing all shape what communities and CBOs can realistically sustain (OECD, 2020; Khoury & Scott, 2024). These constraints influence not only the continuity of services but also the scope of local leadership during periods of political and humanitarian transition.

CCP operated within these realities. Its experience shows how locally led approaches can strengthen foundations for continuity, through community ownership, organisational capacity, and context-rooted practices, while also revealing the limits of project-based localisation. Without supportive financing, maintenance pathways, and alignment with broader governance systems, even strong local initiatives remain vulnerable to external pressures. As such, sustainability in NES requires both empowered local leadership and the systemic conditions that allow that leadership to endure.

4.2. Laying Foundations for Sustainability Through Local Ownership

Evidence from surveys, FGDs, and KIIs indicates that CCP contributed to sustainability primarily by reinforcing local ownership, social accountability, and community responsibility for WASH outcomes. Endline data showing that 73% of respondents considered improvements in water access somewhat likely to be sustained reflects confidence rooted in community engagement and locally driven implementation, rather than expectations of ongoing external support.

Community-led planning through the COA, complemented by sclr initiatives, fostered a sense of shared responsibility that extended beyond project delivery. Awareness-raising activities, especially those engaging students and youth, were repeatedly cited by community members and local authorities as strengthening stewardship over water resources. In Deir-ez-Zor and Hasakah, these efforts were associated with continued behavioural change and collective approaches to maintenance.

Sustainability appeared strongest where decision-making authority and responsibility were genuinely shared, rather than limited to consultation. In several locations, CBOs supported informal but functional arrangements such as rotational monitoring, small, pooled contributions for repairs, and coordination with schools or neighbourhood groups. In some cases, CBOs continued engaging with international partners, such as large international NGOs, after CCP to support water facilities, suggesting that where ownership was embedded early, outcomes were more likely to extend beyond the project period.

These patterns align with wider evidence from community-led programming: when communities experience themselves as co-owners rather than recipients, they are more likely to protect and maintain investments (Barbelet, 2018; L2GP, 2021; Pellowska, 2023). As one advisor observed, *“When communities lead, they maintain investments because they see them as their own” (KII, advisor).*

4.3. The Role of Capacity Strengthening in Sustaining Local Leadership

The durability of these outcomes was closely linked to the institutional and technical capacities developed through CCP. As described earlier, capacity strengthening was most effective where it was treated as an adaptive, locally grounded process rather than a predefined set of training. Diagnostic tools such as the OCAT, combined with tailored training and coaching, enabled CBOs to apply learning directly to real-time challenges in planning, financial management, community engagement, and safeguarding (Valters et al., 2016; Featherstone et al., 2022).

Importantly, these processes also reshaped roles and relationships. CBO staff described shifts from implementation-focused tasks toward facilitation, dialogue, and coordination with communities and local authorities. This evolution supported not only project delivery, but also CBOs’ confidence in navigating donor expectations and external engagement—an important dimension of leadership beyond the immediate scope of CCP.

At the same time, the evaluation suggests that capacity strengthening alone cannot compensate for the absence of enabling systems. While CBOs improved internal practices and community engagement, financial and institutional continuity remained constrained. Consortium members and CBOs consistently highlighted the need for maintenance budgets, emergency repair funds, and ongoing technical support, elements recognised as critical for sustaining gains, yet largely outside the remit of a time-bound project (OECD, 2024).

4.4. Structural Conditions Shaping Long-Term Continuity

Despite strengthened ownership and capacity, sustainability remained conditional, shaped by factors beyond the control of communities or CBOs. Infrastructure degradation and energy insecurity were recurring concerns. Aging networks, irregular pump function, and limited coverage, particularly in peri-urban and rural areas, posed ongoing risks. Only 15% of survey respondents reported success in conserving water resources post-implementation, underscoring the limits of behaviour change where systems remain unreliable.

Institutional coordination further influenced outcomes. KIIs pointed to gaps in clearly defined roles for monitoring, maintenance, and coordination among humanitarian actors, water departments, schools, and local authorities. In several areas, infrastructure improvements were not matched with formal governance arrangements for upkeep, resulting in responsibility falling informally to under-resourced actors. This dynamic highlights a recurring tension: community leadership can strengthen sustainability, but without institutional anchoring, it remains vulnerable.

These findings reflect a broader political economy challenge. While CCP prioritised community engagement and local delivery, it had limited scope to address how water systems are governed, financed, and maintained at scale in NES. As one expert noted:

“The donor community has not responded to the water crisis in northeast Syria with comprehensive, long-term solutions. Most focus on short-term measures like water trucking. The sustainable solutions were political, and therefore largely avoided” (KII, Advisor).

4.5. Local Leadership Amid Syria’s Transition

CCP was implemented during a period when NES operated in relative isolation, with limited international presence and restricted access to donor pathways and banking systems. In this context, reliance on local intermediaries, informal financial systems, and community-led delivery was both pragmatic and necessary.

Syria is now entering a period of transition. Changes in governance arrangements, evolving sanctions regimes, and renewed donor engagement through Damascus are likely to reshape humanitarian and early recovery responses. This shift creates both opportunities and risks for locally led approaches.

Improved financial infrastructure and coordination could enable longer-term investment in systems, maintenance, and institutional capacity—areas that CCP could only partially address. At the same time, there is a risk that locally evolved practices in NES are sidelined as assistance recentres through actors with stronger donor access and compliance capacity. Without deliberate safeguards, this transition could reproduce centre–periphery dynamics and weaken gains in community leadership (Khoury & Scott, 2024; Scott 2022).

CCP anticipated aspects of this challenge by strengthening local operational capacity and embedding learning across phases. However, the evaluation suggests that sustainability could be further supported by treating transition as a design consideration from the outset, rather than as a future handover. As one humanitarian advisor reflected:

“There is a need to think about transition at the design stage. To ask: what is left behind and who continues to benefit.” (KII, advisor)

Future phases and similar programmes may therefore benefit from earlier integration with local authorities, community governance mechanisms, and CBO networks, clarifying maintenance responsibilities, aligning financing arrangements, and embedding coordination structures that extend beyond individual project cycles (Corbett et al., 2021).

4.6. From Project Sustainability to Ecosystem Resilience

CCP’s experience suggests that sustainability in NES is not the product of any single intervention, but of the interaction between community ownership, institutional capacity, functional infrastructure, energy access, coordination, and predictable financing. Where these elements aligned, outcomes showed early signs of continuity. Where they did not, progress remained exposed to disruption.

This reinforces a broader lesson for localisation in Syria: sustainability depends less on transferring tasks and more on cultivating a resilient local ecosystem: one in which communities, CBOs, authorities, and intermediaries are collectively able to plan, finance, govern, and maintain services over time (Mulder, 2023; OECD, 2024). CCP contributed to this ecosystem by strengthening community agency and local delivery capacity. The remaining challenge lies in aligning political, financial, and institutional systems to support these actors as Syria moves through a period of profound transition.

As one advisor noted, *“Maybe not every CBO will be sustainable alone, but together they might form a strong ecosystem.” (KII, advisor).* CCP contributed to this ecosystem by strengthening community agency and local delivery capacity. The remaining challenge lies in aligning political, financial, and institutional systems to support these actors as Syria moves through a period of profound transition.

VIII. Conclusion

Evidence from the Cascading Change Project and the wider literature underscores a consistent message: localisation is not primarily about transferring funds, but about redesigning how power, risk, and accountability are shared. Where risk is managed collectively rather than pushed downward, where capacity strengthening is grounded in long-term accompaniment rather than short-term training, and where accountability flows toward communities as well as donors, locally led action becomes more adaptive and sustainable. These are not end-stage considerations, but design principles that shape outcomes from the outset.

In Northeast Syria, this agenda is particularly urgent. Years of conflict, sanctions, and restricted access have required local organisations and communities to lead in the absence of stable international systems, often without adequate resources or decision-making authority. As political transitions and renewed international engagement reshape the humanitarian landscape, there is a real risk that these locally evolved practices are overshadowed by centralised funding and coordination structures. At the same time, this moment offers a rare opportunity to embed localisation more deliberately, recognising and strengthening local leadership as systems evolve

The findings of CCP point to a clear trajectory: localisation advances when donors and international actors invest in graduated, risk-informed financing; institutional accompaniment with core cost coverage; participatory approaches linked to real decision authority; and sustainability framed as system integration rather than project handover. The question is no longer whether localisation is feasible in high-risk contexts, but whether international actors are prepared to stand alongside local leaders sharing risk, responsibility, and learning to support resilient, locally governed responses in Syria and beyond.

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Lessons on Locally-Led Programming