

REIMAGINING HUMANITARIAN LEADERSHIP

STRENGTHENING EMERGENCY RESPONSE
THROUGH LOCALLY LED PEER MENTORING

Humanitarian Networks and Partnerships Week (HNPW) 2026

Session 2 | 12 March 2026 | Geneva & Online | Summary

SESSION OVERVIEW

As part of the 2026 HNPW, the ToGETHER Program hosted a second session to deepen the discussion on how locally led peer mentoring can contribute to localization and support the ongoing reform of the humanitarian system. Building on the first online session, this exchange focused more explicitly on the relationship between peer mentoring, local leadership, and the Humanitarian Reset. The session combined presentations with participant reflections and questions, creating space for dialogue on both the practical application and the wider strategic relevance of the approach.

The discussion highlighted peer mentoring not only as a capacity sharing mechanism, but as a practical pathway for shifting power, strengthening collaboration among local actors, and supporting more effective, accountable, and locally led humanitarian response.

SPEAKERS

Moderator:

- Nazish Samo – Project Coordinator, FRDP (Pakistan)

Speakers:

- Exode Malengani – Project Manager, ADSSE (DR Congo)
- Abdikafi Mohamud Ali – MEAL Specialist, CPD (Somalia)
- Zaw Linn Oo – CEO, SMDO (Myanmar)

KEY MESSAGES

The session reaffirmed that local actors already possess significant knowledge, experience, and operational capacity, but that humanitarian systems still do not consistently enable them to lead, shape decisions, and access resources on equitable terms. In this context, locally led peer mentoring was presented as a constructive and practical approach to strengthening local leadership, improving representation in coordination spaces, and supporting more meaningful power shift.

A strong message throughout the session was that peer mentoring should not be understood as a one-off training model. Instead, it is a longer-term process of mutual learning, accompaniment, problem-solving, and institutional strengthening, rooted in context and operational reality. Speakers emphasized that this makes it particularly relevant to current debates on localization and the Humanitarian Reset.

KEY INSIGHTS FROM PRACTICE

The session revisited the core elements of ToGETHER's locally led peer mentoring approach. 130 humanitarian peer partners were selected by 40 local partners through a transparent process based on sector relevance, geography, complementary strengths, and inclusion criteria, including support for women-led organizations. This was followed by a joint capacity self-assessment and the development of a context-specific capacity sharing plan with clear milestones, roles, and alignment to real humanitarian operations.

Examples shared during the session illustrated how this approach has already contributed to concrete changes across different country contexts:

- In Indonesia, a peer partner became part of the LokaNusa's Steering Committee.
- In Bangladesh, two peer partners partnered with UN agencies and INGOs.
- In the Democratic Republic of the Congo, peer partners jointly developed a proposal and one organization received external funding for the first time.
- In Colombia, peer partners reported increased confidence to lead.
- In Ethiopia local partners highlighted stronger expertise through mutual capacity sharing.

Speakers also highlighted the main areas of change observed through the approach. At organizational level, peer mentoring strengthened preparedness structures and clarified governance and roles. At coordination level, it contributed to increased participation in coordination spaces and improved negotiation and representation capacity. At ecosystem level, it strengthened collaboration among local and national actors and reduced dependency on external control.

PEER MENTORING, LOCALIZATION, AND THE HUMANITARIAN RESET

A central part of the session focused on the links between peer mentoring and the Humanitarian Reset. The Reset vision was presented as one that calls for a humanitarian system that is locally led and globally supported, rooted in communities and driven by greatest need, while shifting power closer to in-country leaders and affected people.

At the same time, the session underscored that significant gaps remain. Although local actors are increasingly present in humanitarian structures, they remain underrepresented in leadership and decision-making spaces. For example, while 93% of Humanitarian Country Teams include local actors, local actors represent only 11% of total membership, and only 19% of clusters are co-led by local actors. Funding, compliance systems, and coordination support continue to favor international actors, while local knowledge and community practice still do not sufficiently shape system decisions.

Within this context, peer mentoring was proposed as one practical way to help close the gap between policy commitments and operational change. The experience of the ToGETHER Program suggests that locally led peer mentoring can strengthen collaboration among local organizations, build more resilient and connected local networks, recognize and share local knowledge, create complementary partnerships, increase confidence in leadership roles, and reduce dependency on external input and control.

EXCHANGE AND DISCUSSIONS

The interactive discussion added an important layer to the session by bringing in participant experiences from other contexts. Contributions from participants from Ukraine, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Turkey/Syria, and Zimbabwe showed that locally led peer-to-peer learning, accompaniment, and capacity exchange are already being used in different ways by local actors and networks. These reflections reinforced the relevance of the approach beyond the ToGETHER countries and program and highlighted its potential as a broader model for localization in practice.

Questions from participants focused particular on evaluation, sustainability, documentation, and the practicalities of capacity exchange. Speakers explained that the mentoring process is guided by self-assessment, jointly agreed plans, milestones, periodic review, and feedback mechanisms. They also underlined that the focus is on strengthening institutional capacity rather than only individual skills, so that knowledge is embedded in structures, systems, and procedures.

Another important point raised during the discussion was that peer mentoring is designed to remain cost-effective and sustainable. Local partners share expertise without consultancy-style payments, while program support mainly covers enabling logistics.

LESSONS LEARNED

The session generated several important lessons. First, the experience of the ToGETHER Program suggests that the main barrier to localization is not the absence of local capacity, but the lack of systems that recognize, connect, and support that capacity. Second, real capacity sharing happens through long-term collaboration, accompaniment, and practical engagement rather than isolated trainings. Third, peer mentoring works best when it strengthens institutions as a whole, including governance, systems, and procedures, rather than focusing only on individuals. Finally, sustainability depends not only on funding, but also on building networks, creating shared ownership, and embedding learning within local ecosystems.

The second session demonstrated that locally led peer mentoring is not only a programmatic tool but also a practical and adaptable approach to strengthening local leadership and advancing localization in concrete ways. By supporting collaboration, confidence, representation, and institutional development among local actors, it offers a constructive contribution to the wider reform of the humanitarian system.

The discussion also made clear that this agenda is no longer optional. In a context of growing humanitarian needs and shrinking funding, strengthening the role of local actors is not simply a matter of principle, but a necessity for more effective, accountable, and sustainable humanitarian action.

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