



## MFA's “Project Turning Point”: Submission from NEAR

### Who is NEAR?

Established in 2016, the Network for Empowered Aid Response (NEAR) is a Global South membership-based organisation with over 350 members across 40+ countries in Africa, Asia and the Pacific, Latin America and the Caribbean, and the Middle East. NEAR's work reaches and is shaped by its members and the communities they serve. Members include community based, non-governmental, and civil society organisations that work at the cross-section of humanitarian aid, development, and peacebuilding.

NEAR's bold ambition is to reshape the top-down humanitarian and development system to one that is locally driven and owned, and is built around equitable, dignified and accountable partnerships.

Members are committed to transforming humanitarian and development aid architecture, and they represent and work closely within their communities, including marginalised and vulnerable populations, such as children, women, persons with disabilities, minorities, elderly, refugees, and those internally displaced.

### Diagnosing the problem the sector faces today: a crisis of not only funding but legitimacy

What is defined by many as a funding crisis is, in NEAR's eyes, also a crisis of legitimacy.

Consider that most of the largest global humanitarian responses have been running for decades. These responses save many lives, but they are also buckling under unresolved conflict, exclusion, displacement, climate stress, and violations of international humanitarian law. More broadly across the aid sector, debt, weak social protection systems, and political choices for which too few actors are held accountable shape decision-making and the daily lived realities of people living in crises or poverty.

This matters because aid must also confront why people remain trapped in crisis or poverty, why the systems they previously relied on have failed or become overwhelmed, and what would allow those systems to function again. Those questions are political. They are shaped by who holds power, who is excluded, who is protected, who is targeted, who controls resources, and who is able to demand accountability.

The current humanitarian and development architecture is poorly equipped to answer those questions because its accountability structures too often run in the wrong direction. These



systems are more responsive to donors, headquarters, mandates and institutional survival than to communities they are meant to serve.

What this looks like in practice, from the perspective of local and national civil society in the Global South, is a series of contradictions. Strong rhetoric on humanitarian principles and humanitarian law sit alongside double standards in their application. Strict demands on upwards reporting sit alongside the abrupt withdrawal of resourcing, as seen in 2025, which left organisations and communities to absorb the consequences.

In sum, international aid systems have repeatedly understood crises and service provision through categories and incentives of those financing and managing response, rather than through the lived realities of communities. These challenges are at the heart of the legitimacy crisis.

Historical approaches have not proven to be as effective as needed, nor does it appear to be sustainable from a future-proofing perspective. Creating new realities will require change on behalf of many actors, including governments like Norway.

## What can Norway do differently?

At a moment in the aid sector when so many actors are turning inwards and are focused on institutional survival, NEAR strongly welcomes the Ministry of Foreign Affairs' "Project Turning Point" and appreciates the invitation to make a submission to this process. We share Norway's perspective for this review, that the world has fundamentally changed, that policy must be adapted to a new reality, and that those of us who care about international cooperation and solidarity must be the first to change.

Project Turning Point sets out to make Norwegian aid more efficient, more accountable to/for results, and better able to contribute to stability. NEAR shares those aims and offers that the locally led ecosystems approach set out below is the most credible route to them.

On efficiency, the layers of international intermediation that sit between Norwegian funding and the communities it is meant to reach are themselves a source of cost and lost value. Resourcing local systems that already exist, through fewer and better channels, directs resources closer to where response actually happens.

On results and accountability, local and national civil society are present before, during, and after a crisis. The institutions they sustain are what allow gains to hold once a project cycle ends. A results framework that more narrowly values short-term, attributable outputs will systematically under-reward exactly the institution-building that makes results durable and accountable.

On stability, the case is the strongest, and also the most easily misread. Local institutions are what hold communities together through and beyond crisis, and supporting them is a genuine



contribution to the stability Norway rightly values. But that logic only holds if support follows need and local capability. An approach that concentrates resources on contexts proximate to donor interest will, over time, defund the fragile and less strategically visible places where local response is often the only response there is. We would caution against any reading of ‘concentration’ that narrows the geography of solidarity.

Norway has a unique opportunity to be bold and set the tone, including for other donor governments, while creating stronger and more sustainable systems fit for the complex geopolitical realities of today. We have three core actions to recommend:

### **I. Adopt an ecosystems approach to aid**

The way that aid has historically operated, and continues to operate, is through centring international structures and resources, in analysis, implementation, and politics.

What is often overlooked within these internationally dominated systems is what happens when they are not there. The IFRC, for example, has estimated that over 90 percent of the world's disasters pass without any international intervention at all.<sup>1</sup> In those crises, though, there is a response – in the form of remittances, mutual aid, through the state’s response mechanisms, and through civil society. These are networks and relationships built over generations. This is a community's nationally- and locally-led systems of response. (See NEAR’s [Locally-led Ecosystems report](#) for examples of locally led response in practice).

Evidence shows that aid operates through a dense web of actors, relationships, power dynamics, and incentives – at local, national, and regional level, in addition to the international level. National and local actors are not waiting to be invited into humanitarian action and development. They already govern, finance, organise and sustain responses. The “ecosystems approach” adopts this understanding of the plurality of aid.

It is also important to be equally clear about what an ecosystems approach does *not* imply. Firstly, the approach is not anti-international – it is anti-monopoly. International solidarity, political leverage, financing, technical expertise and surge capacity remain indispensable. What the approach challenges is any arrangement in which a single set of institutions – international, state, donor, commercial or otherwise – defines legitimacy, controls resources and knowledge, and decides who is authorised to act.

Secondly, an ecosystems approach does not propose moving control from one centre to another. It distributes authority across institutions with different forms of legitimacy, capability and responsibility, while making all of them more open to scrutiny and challenge.

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<sup>1</sup> IFRC, 2026. Viewable online [here](#).



The ecosystems approach challenges the assumption that aid can be reformed through a single blueprint, centre of coordination, or linear transition from one model to another.

➔ **What does this mean for Norway?**

- Adopting an ecosystems approach is foundational to unlocking the kind of shift that the sector desperately needs. It is through the understanding, uptake, and defence of this approach that it will be possible for governments such as Norway to make subsequent changes in diplomacy, aid reform, partnerships, and funding allocations.

## **II. Re-focus international actors, including United Nations agencies and International NGOs, on their distinctive role**

In recent consultations, NEAR members described the UN as increasingly distant from communities, reluctant to share power, and prioritising institutional continuity over reform. Within the humanitarian sector specifically, they also do not see evidence of reforms, such as The Humanitarian Reset, at country level. These are the perspectives of leaders with decades of experience working alongside, within, and around UN systems.

They also articulated, however, the value in the UN's role in defending human rights, upholding international norms, convening across global divides, sharing technical standards, and providing time-bound coordination and logistics where states and communities cannot. Members stressed, for example, that humanitarian crises are often deeply political in origin, and that the UN's role in conflict prevention, diplomacy, and protection of international norms remains important to reducing human suffering. (See NEAR's Position Paper [\*"Redefining the Role: What NEAR members need from the UN"\*](#) for more).

Regarding INGOs, we see that cuts are driving changes, and many INGOs are reviewing their governance models, organisational structures, and country presences. For some, the moment has catalysed deeper reflections on their roles and value add within the sector, but for others the moment is manifesting in institutional self-preservation and survival tactics that often go against former commitments to shift power and transform partnerships. Through ongoing consultations, NEAR is in the process of developing a network position paper on the future role of INGOs.

The funding and legitimacy crisis is deeply challenging, including for these international institutions, but the crisis also provides a concrete opportunity to re-think roles and responsibilities of actors within the aid ecosystem.

The ecosystems approach acknowledges that the future cannot be built on the assumption that international actors will lead by default while local actors, including local civil society, remain at the margins. Local and national organisations are central to the systems that sustain response over time. A future system must be built around that reality.

Local and national civil society envision a future where the burden of proof is reversed: rather than assuming an internationally led response, international actors should need to justify their

value add and presence to existing local, sub-national, and national systems. They also want to see international actors move away from direct implementation and towards the roles of convening, enabling, upholding norms, and advocating where ecosystems at the local level cannot.

➔ **What does this mean for Norway?**

- De-couple support to multilateralism and unconditional support to the UN. This distinction is critical in preserving multilateralism as a key value of future aid systems, while also being able to bring actors to the table to discuss a re-focused role of the UN and other international actors like INGOs.
- Use funding agreements, diplomatic engagement and governing-board decisions to support government-led, regional, civil society-led and hybrid governance arrangements where these are appropriate to the context. This is a concrete example of how Norway can exercise its influence in ways that do not require money, but rather political will.

*(To read more on how to move from monopolised aid to a more pluralistic structure, see the recommendations to donors within the [“Delivering an ecosystem approach to humanitarian action”](#), published by ODI & NEAR).*

### **III. Support and invest in a diversity of local ecosystems that are closer and more accountable to communities**

Local actors, including local civil society, are increasingly recognised as the actors who are present before, during, and after conflict or crises, the actors who understand the context best, and the actors who stay as communities re-build and develop.

And yet, the reliance on international intermediaries has reduced many civil society organisations in the Global South to implementers, as opposed to strategic partners. Local civil society are not adequately included in project decision-making, and cycles of top-down, projectised funding (particularly humanitarian funding which is usually short-term) have created precarious working conditions and an environment of competition over collaboration. On top of this, the capacities of local civil society are continuously called into question.

In spite of these challenges, local civil society ecosystems prove to be resilient and innovative in the face of challenges. This is not to be romanticised and does not indicate that local civil society does not need support. What it reflects is the rootedness, collective action, and staying power of local organisations. This includes a rich variety of actors: national networks and networks organised around thematic priorities, human rights organisations, grassroots organisations, and – increasingly – locally led pooled funds.

Pooled funds are particularly interesting to donors due to absorption and compliance factors, but awareness of locally led pooled funds – how many exist, how they function, where they work – has been low. NEAR spent time in 2026 mapping out locally led pooled funds across the Global South to shine light on this part of local ecosystems. The resulting Policy Brief and database –

which maps 63 locally led pooled funds – illustrate that the locally led financing landscape is larger and more robust than what is often assumed. We found that:

- Locally led pooled funds exist at scale, across geographies, and operate across sectors rather than siloes (humanitarian, development, peacebuilding).
- The funds do more than move money – they operate as bridges between international financing systems and local ecosystems of response and solidarity.
- They perform institutional functions that internationally-led pooled funds often cannot. Many reach different constituencies, operate through different and often stronger accountability relationships due to their local governance structures, and they provide organisational strengthening, peer learning, advocacy support, and ecosystem-building alongside grants. Pooled funds offer a unique opportunity to invest in local ecosystems, due to donors' own capacity issues regarding grant management.
- Locally-led pooled funds are significantly underfinanced relative to their scale, capability, and the demand they serve. What funding they do receive is often short-term, compliance-heavy, and predominately from the Global North – structured for a different kind of institution.
- They are a functioning answer to a question that has occupied humanitarian financing debates for over a decade: how to shift power and resources to local actors. The 63 funds documented in this mapping are not a proposal. The task for funders and investors is not to design something new, but to resource what already exists.

➔ **What does this mean for Norway?**

- Building on the previous two sections, Norway should diversify its supports, moving from concentrating its support to international actors to distributing its support more evenly across the aid ecosystem. This will require reviewing partnership approaches and comprehensively reviewing how Norway supports local civil society, as well as establishing new partnerships and investing more directly in local ecosystems.
- This also resolves an apparent tension in the review. Supporting local organisations need not mean managing many small bilateral relationships. Locally led pooled funds allow a donor to concentrate funding through a small number of channels while still reaching a wide and diverse set of local responders.

#### **IV. Bring other governments along with you in shifting policies and practices**

As a generous donor committed to foreign aid, Norway itself has the power and resources to make decisions that will lead to a more legitimate and sustainable aid system. While Norway's own policies and practices will be central to the Policy Review, Norway should also consider where and in what spaces it could have an impact on donors around it.

Several of the shifts set out above, in particular the re-focusing of the UN's role, cannot be delivered by any one government. These decisions are made in multilateral governing bodies and depend on a critical mass of member states moving together. This is where Norway's convening



power matters most. As one of the few donors holding its ODA commitment while others retreat, its highest-leverage move on structural reform is coalition-building. Much of this depends on political signalling rather than spending.

➔ **What does this mean for Norway?**

- Use the forthcoming white paper itself, and Norway's position in pooled fund boards, the OECD DAC and UN governing bodies, to make the ecosystems and localisation case to peers.
- Coordinate with like-minded European donors so that demands for direct funding and reformed intermediation are made collectively.
- Protect, in diplomatic terms, the civic and operating space that local and national civil society needs to function – a contribution that requires political will over funding.

## Further reading & supporting documents:

*This submission and the views within are supported by participatory research, mapping, and thought leadership conducted in 2025 and 2026, among local civil society and in collaboration with think tanks:*

- 1) Building more locally-led aid ecosystems: 2025 insights from Global South civil society. Viswanathan, Vijayalakshmi et al (2026). Network for Empowered Aid Response (NEAR).
  - Synthesis document [here](#)
  - Full report [here](#)
- 2) Locally-led Pooled Funds in the Global South: What the evidence shows. NEAR, 2026. Viewable on NEAR's website [here](#).
- 3) Redefining the Role: What NEAR Members Need from the UN. NEAR, 2026. Viewable on NEAR's website [here](#).
- 4) Delivering an ecosystem approach to humanitarian action: Proposals from the Advisory Panel on the Future of Humanitarian Action. ODI & NEAR, 2026. Full paper available [here](#).