



Why the Community Must Lead

Reimagining Humanitarian Action from the Ground Up



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About iACT

iACT is a Los Angeles-based humanitarian action organization with a mission to resource and partner with people affected by war and conflict, to amplify their voices and create opportunities for them to thrive.

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Cover photo: Community training session for girls in sport in Bangui, Central African Republic.

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Photo: Refugee-led expansion team in eastern Chad

Executive Summary

*At the heart of this paper is a simple but important argument: **community members are not beneficiaries of humanitarian response — they are agents of it.***

Rather than positioning communities as passive recipients of aid, humanitarian organizations should partner with and resource the people already leading and shaping responses to challenges they face. This paper introduces iACT's model as an alternative to traditional, top-down aid delivery, shifting leadership, decision-making, and ownership toward communities themselves.

Bangui United Soccer Academy (BUSA), an iACT sport program, offers a powerful case of this approach in practice. It demonstrates what is possible when a community's agency is placed at the center of humanitarian response, rather than simply consulting the community or incorporating its ideas into a pre-existing program-implementation structure. Drawing from the example of BUSA, this paper identifies key findings and offers sector-wide recommendations for how humanitarian organizations can adopt similar approaches — moving from delivering *for* communities toward partnering *with* them and investing in their leadership, priorities, and capacity.

The hope is that you will come away from this paper with a deeper understanding of our belief that if we want children and families affected by conflict to thrive, then the best way to achieve that is to listen to, partner with, and resource their communities to lead their own responses. We have been leading with this long-term, relational approach since our earliest years working in eastern Chad with the Sudanese refugee community. It can be seen in our current work there and in Cameroon, Mexico, and the Central African Republic (CAR), and in every country where we have previously worked — including Greece, Tanzania, and Armenia — and is explicitly designed to reduce our involvement in a program, over time, rather than maintain or expand it.

The Problem

The humanitarian system as it stands today is in dire need of a radical shift toward humanitarian approaches that recognize crisis-affected communities not as simply beneficiaries, but as capable leaders and partners in shaping lasting solutions.

Too often, humanitarian aid providers still depend on a top-down approach with pre-determined solutions to what they think the community lacks, rather than asking the community what it needs. This system reinforces a cycle of dependency.

This dependency cycle, perpetuated despite good intentions, is not the result of individual actions or individual organizations, but the structural outcome of humanitarian systems and institutional habits built over decades. International aid frequently sidelines local leadership and reinforces unequal power dynamics, even as agreements such as the Grand Bargain — endorsed by major donors and humanitarian organizations alike — recognize the need to shift decision-making and resources to local actors.¹ Still, despite global commitments to localization, funding and decision-making remain overwhelmingly concentrated with international organizations.²

There are unintended impacts and harm made to displaced communities as a result of this traditional top-down humanitarian response, including gradual erosion of confidence, dignity, power, and humanity. When humanitarian organizations respond to people in their most vulnerable moments in this way, it sends a message that they cannot help themselves and that they need external expertise to show them how to help their own community. It tells them that their community's priorities must be translated into donor language before they can become legitimate, and that they must focus on being the grateful recipients rather than leaders and whole people with ideas and expectations, standing in their own power.

The Current Landscape

Local and national organizations have irreplaceable knowledge, community trust, and operational agility. For example, as Sudan faces the world's largest humanitarian crisis, it has been community-based Sudanese organizations that have been responding and taking care of people through local health clinics and food delivery. The COVID-19 pandemic offered a global test during which foreign staff of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) were evacuated and community-led responses became the only solution.

70%

of refugees in the world live in protracted displacement situations.

1 in 70

people in the world are currently forcibly displaced.

At the same time, global advocacy such as the Grand Bargain, Charter for Change, the NEAR Network, and a growing coalition of advocacy organizations are moving the debate from “Shouldn’t locals lead?” to “What structural changes need to happen to actually shift power and resources?” Major international NGOs have published localization strategies and have been hiring “localization consultants,” a role designed to advance those strategies. Bilateral donors have introduced financing targets aimed at funding local actors and country-based pooled funds meant to move and allocate more money to local actors.³ Yet consensus has not translated to practice.

Today, one in every 70 people, or 1.4 percent of the entire planet’s population, is forcibly displaced.⁴ With 70 percent of refugees in the world currently living in protracted displacement situations (five to 20 years long, and in some situations even longer), it is not practical for large international NGOs to come into a crisis for a short period and then leave when their funding runs out; or for external organizations to simply implement pre-determined or pre-designed programs that are intended to operate in the same way no matter the cultural context.⁵ Communities need local and long-term solutions. They need partnership, and the opportunity to take ownership of their humanitarian support from the outset.

There is currently a renewed urgency in the localization discussion, due to the reduction of government funding — most acutely the suspension and restructuring of the US Agency for International Development (USAID) in the beginning of 2025 — and also the declining official assistance commitments from country donors.⁶ As global humanitarian finance shifts, the case for channeling more resources, decision-making, and trust directly to those most affected — locals hosting displaced communities and the displaced communities/people themselves — becomes stronger.

That said, there has always been an urgency for the people forced to adapt to life in a refugee camp or displaced within their own country. While it might feel more pronounced now to humanitarian organizations that are feeling the impact of funding cuts, the need and desire, by the people most affected by conflict, for humanitarian aid to be more community- and locally driven has been well documented for decades.

iACT's Solution: A Community-led Approach

What “Community-led” actually means

"Community-led" is used widely across the humanitarian sector. For iACT, it has a specific operational meaning: **a community-led approach is a process whereby members of a community conceive of, design, implement, evaluate, and scale programs and initiatives in their community.**

It is an approach built on trust and mutuality, and recognizes the entrenched power imbalances within the global humanitarian system. It is an approach that makes intentional changes in our individual and interpersonal behaviors and organizational processes, in order to shift power and ownership to the people directly affected by war and conflict. Most importantly, it is a process. It is not a switch that can simply be flipped, nor is it without its setbacks and challenges. iACT itself is constantly learning, evolving, and adapting to successes and failures in our approach.

iACT's process begins with listening and relationship building. We see each person in their full humanity, and our relationships with people are as important to us as the end goal of creating a program. This focus on people and relationships first is what we have seen as pivotal in driving key outcomes such as dignity and self-confidence, as well as impact and longevity of programs.

Core Pillars of iACT's Community-led Process

- **Mutual Trust and Respect:** Humanitarian action begins with building mutual trust and with an understanding that a community can lead when its ideas, abilities, and humanity are recognized, respected, and resourced.
- **Listening and Hearing:** We believe in coming to the table with an attitude of learning and care; and taking the time to quiet our voices and truly listen to others, with an open mind and without an agenda.
- **Knowledge Sharing:** An equitable partnership will foster continual and consistent sharing of knowledge between parties, which will in turn strengthen and improve programs and processes.
- **Shared Vision:** A shared understanding of the program, processes, and intended outcomes and impact must be had right from the beginning, while at the same time keeping in mind that these can change and shift over time.
- **Time and Adaptability:** Working in true partnership with communities means that our Western-centric donor timelines must be challenged. We recognize that it takes time to listen, time to build relationships, time to formulate trust and a shared vision, and time to implement programs at the community's desired pace. We also know that so much can change and shift at any time in any given context.

From there, iACT creates the time, space, and opportunity for community members to come together in an intentional, collaborative process. We bring evidence-based curriculum frameworks, health and wellness tools, and training resources. Community members bring material goods, spaces, culture, knowledge, ideas, and networks. Through this mutual exchange, a program is born. Once created, community members lead day-to-day implementation, and are accountable to the children and families they serve. Over time, they expand programs as they see fit and within the available resources. iACT continues to provide some of those resources, which include funding and technical support, as needed.

Getting Clear About Our Role

What We Are: Bridge and Partner

iACT is a bridge and partner. The iACT programs that we call Little Ripples, Refugees United Soccer Academy, and AMPLIFI are really frameworks that get shaped and adapted, then take on a life of their own by each community — and sometimes even renamed. For iACT, to serve as a partner is a very relational and an active doing: we are constructing the conditions under which people and communities can eventually not need us. This takes years. We value longevity, relationships, and being present for as long it takes. iACT makes space for the learning process, both for our US team and for the global communities we work with. We make space for trial and error, and keep working at it until iACT and the community find a comfortable balance.



Photo: iACT staff and community partners in eastern Chad

What We Offer

1. **Presence where others are not.** We work in communities that are hard to reach, politically complex, underfunded, or considered low-priority by larger actors. Humanitarian action should be guided by where the need is greatest, not by what is operationally convenient.
2. **Access to resources.** Many community-led groups have the vision and leadership to create real change, but are locked out of funding systems by language barriers, administrative requirements, or lack of institutional visibility. We act as a conduit, and connect communities to international funding while ensuring they remain at the center of decision-making.

"Humanitarian aid should not be about comfort for organizations, but about entering uncomfortable spaces in order to create comfort, dignity, and opportunity for those most in need."

Sedrick Murhula, Senior Manager Programs & Partnerships, iACT

3. **Amplifying of voices.** People affected by war and conflict are not passive aid recipients. They are leaders, problem-solvers, and experts in their own context. Our role is to help them tell their own stories and engage directly with institutions, partners, and broader audiences — not to speak for them.
4. **Mutual capacity strengthening.** We offer curriculum frameworks, technical tools, and external relationships. Communities bring contextual knowledge, lived experience, traditions, and local leadership. Through this exchange, both sides grow. The goal is never dependence; rather, it is to build the community's own ability to lead and sustain initiatives over time. We focus on helping communities strengthen local infrastructure, systems, and operating structures. This includes supporting organizational development, training, and access to technology and locally managed resources.
5. **Long-term solidarity.** We are not bound by project cycles. We stay through transitions, setbacks, and progress, adapting as realities shift and always following the community's lead on pace and priorities.

How We Work

Aid Recipient

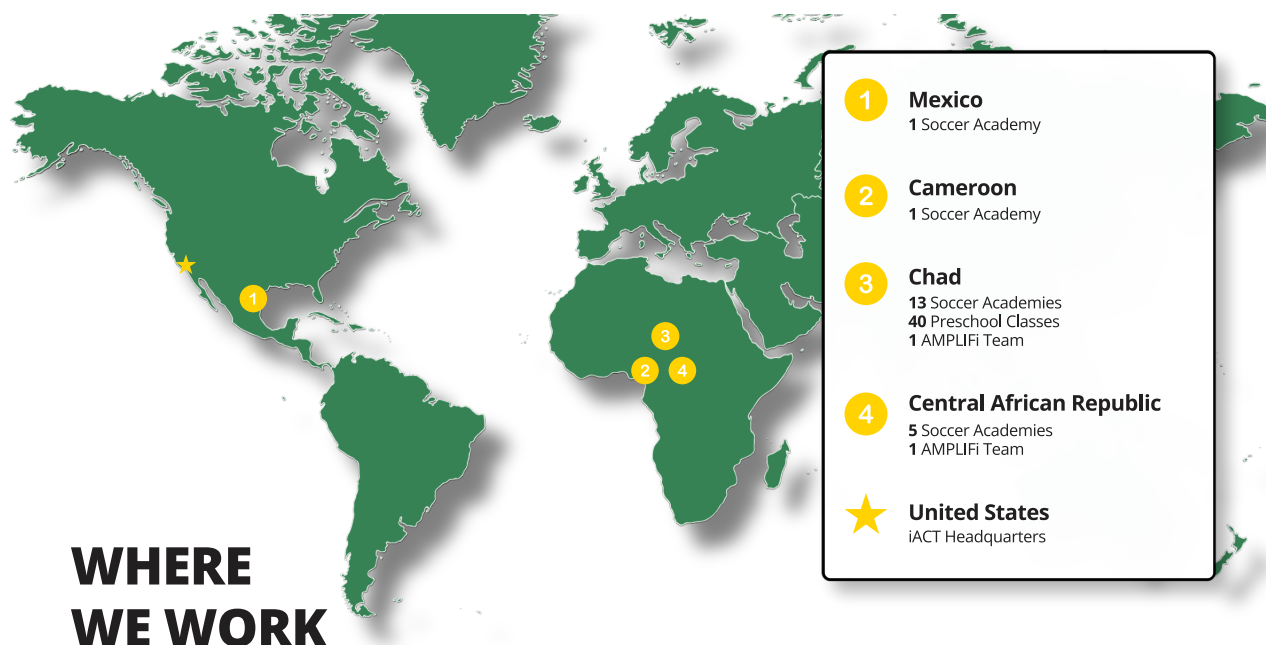
Communities face external-driven relief with no clear pathway forward.

The Bridge

iACT stands in the gap, bringing resources, relationships, and recognition for as long as the community determines the partnership is needed.

Self-determined

Community-owned programs and organizations sustain and expand on their own.



Where We Work

iACT works where few others go — not merely underserved communities, but those actively left out of the international system's priorities due to conflict fatigue, geopolitics, shifting media cycles, and donor convenience. Our presence is guided not by what is easy, but by where the need is greatest and local infrastructure is still being built. The truth is that these locations are not easy to work in. They are difficult to access, with geopolitical maneuvering making it impossible at times for our US team to even visit our program locations.

We often end up where funding is limited. Over the past several years, humanitarian funding for refugee and displaced populations across Africa has been concentrated in higher-profile crises such as Sudan, South Sudan, the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), Uganda, Ethiopia, and Somalia, where conflict and displacement affect millions of people. Since the outbreak of war in Sudan in 2023, donor funding has increasingly shifted toward the Sudan emergency, placing additional pressure on already-limited global humanitarian resources.⁷

81%

Up to 81 percent of humanitarian organizations in the world are considered local/national NGOs or community organizations.⁸

5%

Only 5 percent of the global humanitarian funding goes directly to these same organizations.⁹

In contrast, Chad, Cameroon, and the Central African Republic (CAR) — where iACT currently works — continue to host large refugee and internally displaced populations while having among the world's most underfunded humanitarian operations. The displacement situations in these countries are often described as "forgotten crises" because they receive less international media attention and donor visibility, despite having long-term humanitarian needs. For example, UNHCR (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, the UN refugee agency) reported that its Chad operation was only about 35 percent funded in 2025, leaving significant gaps in education, child protection, psychosocial support, and basic services for refugees.¹⁰

For organizations like iACT working in Chad, Cameroon, and CAR, this funding disparity means that refugee communities often have less access to sustained education, psychosocial support, and youth programming, even as they face prolonged displacement and trauma. Strengthening investment in these overlooked contexts is essential to ensuring that children and families are not left behind simply because the crises they are in receive less global attention.

Locally Led is Cost Effective

Funding locally led organizations and locally led work (e.g. Emergency Response Rooms in Sudan) is reportedly highly cost effective, with 95 percent of funds — or \$0.95 of every \$1 — reaching local communities directly and quickly.¹¹

Funding Structure

Beyond the humanitarian sector's moral imperative to shift power, a community-led approach makes financial sense. As the world faces more and more crises and less funding to meet the critical needs of every person and family, supporting people in crisis needs to be more cost-effective, with more money invested directly into the community. A community-led approach moves our system towards doing just that.

The costs of setting up and sustaining a community-led program are significantly lower than those of international NGO operations in each context, and, after program set-up, costs go down rather than up. For iACT, hiring from within the conflict-affected or local community means we can keep our US staff small, and can lean into partnerships with local actors, leveraging local resources. This not only keeps costs low for our organization, it also creates growth opportunities for the local community.

To put this into perspective, iACT has eight employees based in the United States, and 263 team members based in the four regions where we currently support community-led initiatives. We do not have international experts deployed on the ground, external consultants leading implementation, or US-based teams directing programs or operations in the community. Instead, all program decisions, day-to-day activities, and implementation are led by people of the community who understand their context best and guide the work accordingly.



Photo: Camp de football féminin in Bangui, CAR

iACT serves as the fiscal and operational anchor for all global programming.

iACT serves as the fiscal and operational anchor for all global programming. Funds raised through iACT flow directly to our international teams. At the moment of this writing, we are actively supporting our global colleagues in registering their own legal entities. We have completed this process in the Central African Republic and are making progress in Cameroon and Chad. This is an intentional move to reflect our commitment to building durable, locally owned infrastructure so that funding can eventually flow to communities more directly and at greater scale. iACT raises funds to support global programs and team member salaries, as well as our own US-based operations.

Case Study: Community-led Success in Bangui



Photo: Bangui United Soccer Academy practice

The Bangui United Soccer Academy (BUSA), in Bangui, Central African Republic, is a powerful example of community resilience, local leadership, and the transformative role that sport can play in youth development, peacebuilding, and social cohesion.

Emerging in a country recovering from years of conflict and instability, the Academy was co-created with local community members who understood the realities facing young people in Bangui and recognized soccer as a tool for healing, protection, and opportunity.

From the very beginning, the founding team understood both the challenges and the potential within their community. These four original coaches committed themselves not only to teaching soccer skills, but also to guiding young people away from violence, harmful behaviors, and social exclusion. Their vision was to create a safe and inclusive environment where youth could build discipline, confidence, teamwork, leadership, and hope for the future.

Despite extremely limited resources, the Academy has gained popularity because of its responding directly to community needs. The program has grown from having four coaches to employing a team of eight coaches and two citizen journalists — expanding the local leadership to a total of 10 trained employees. At the same time, BUSA has advanced from operating at a single training location to holding Academy sessions at four school spaces. This expansion reflects more than a widening geographic reach; it demonstrates stronger community ownership, deeper engagement with schools and families, and increasing awareness of the importance of girls' inclusion in sport and community life.

As the Academy grew, parents, teachers, and local leaders quickly began to recognize the positive changes taking place among participating youth. Young people who were previously disconnected or vulnerable found a renewed sense of purpose, belonging, and identity through being part of the program. For internally displaced youth in particular, the Academy became a place of stability, connection, and psychosocial support.

Strategic Trajectory: From Roots to Scale

- **Personnel Expansion:** The internal leadership team expanded from a baseline of four coaches to a current team of 10 employees (eight trained and certified coaches, and two citizen journalists). This represents 150 percent growth in internal organization capacity.
- **Geographic Expansion:** The program scaled its operations from a single training location to four, all at local schools. This scaling reflects a 300 percent growth in BUSA's physical and operational footprint.

Growth and Expansion

Over time, and through a consistent partnership with iACT, the Academy evolved into a recognized and respected soccer club within Bangui. Its visibility and impact significantly influenced the local sport landscape, drawing attention from both the Central African Football Association and the Ministry for the Promotion of Youth, Sports, and Civic Education. What began as informal training sessions at the local “Don Bosco” field gradually expanded into participation in tournaments and public sporting events across the city. Through these tournaments, the Academy showcased not only athletic talent, but also a broader message of peace, reconciliation, and youth-led development.

As the program grew from supporting around 400 children a year to almost 1,000 today, so did its mission. BUSA evolved beyond soccer alone and began addressing broader social and community issues affecting youth, especially girls. Recognizing the physical and cultural barriers that often prevent girls from participating in sport, the Academy launched menstrual hygiene awareness and support initiatives to ensure that all girls could participate fully and confidently alongside boys. This commitment to inclusion has become one of the Academy's defining strengths.

The Academy also began using local radio platforms in 2025 to spread messages promoting girls' inclusion, sport for peace, reconciliation, and youth empowerment. A BUSA player and two coaches attended these radio talks and encouraged other girls and the community to embrace and support girls' participation and inclusion in soccer. These radio sensitization campaigns, which happened quarterly, reached out to the vast majority of the country, increased awareness nationally, and generated growing interest in replicating the Academy's approach in other regions of the country.

Forward-looking Goals

- **Target Scale:** Expand reach from four partner schools to five partner schools by 2028
- **Capacity Building:** Scale local leadership by training 10 additional community coaches
- **She Should Play campaign:** Continue country-wide awareness on girls' participation in sport, and reach over 100,000 families by 2028

The Academy has continued to grow significantly in both participation and community reach. With support from iACT and additional funding partners, Bangui United Soccer Academy has expanded its activities, increased the number of youth engaged, and strengthened its presence as a positive community-led initiative. Importantly, this growth has been driven by local leadership, ownership, and commitment. The Academy's success reflects the determination and vision of the community itself.

Impact and Reach

From 2023 through 2026, our team at iACT closely examined the development of the Bangui United Soccer Academy and assessed its impact not only on the pitch, but also on the lives of young people and the wider community. Through conversations with the Ministry for the Promotion of Youth, Sports, and Civic Education, as well as with teachers, parents, coaches, and youth participants, it became clear that the Academy represents far more than a soccer program. It has become a space of psychosocial wellbeing, protection, identity, and belonging for children and youth affected by internal displacement, conflict, and instability.



Photo: She Should Play soccer camp in Bangui, CAR

Local Leadership

One of the clearest indicators of the Academy's community impact has been the growth of its leadership. From the original four coaches, four additional coaches later joined the program initially as volunteers, because they had witnessed the positive impact BUSA was having on the local youth. Among the newer coaches are two women who currently play for the Central African Republic women's national soccer team, serving as important role models and sources of inspiration for younger girls in the Academy.

Local Schools and Government

Because BUSA represents far more than a sports initiative, its influence has also expanded into schools. The Ministry for the Promotion of Youth, Sports, and Civic Education and the Department of Education recognized the program's role in helping youth to stay engaged, avoid harmful influences, and contribute positively to society. As a result, schools have increasingly sought partnerships and collaboration with the Academy as part of broader efforts to support youth development and help build a stronger future for the Central African Republic.

"This program [She Should Play], which we warmly commend, perfectly aligns with the government's vision for the promotion and development of sport in general, and women's sport in particular. It has enabled our young girls, aged 6 to 18, to discover, learn, and flourish through sport, especially football. She Should Play is not simply about sports activities: it is a strong commitment to the empowerment, inclusion, and emancipation of the young Central African girl."

Director General of Sports, representing the Ministry for the Promotion of Youth, Sports, and Civic Education, Central African Republic



Photo: Warm-ups at She Should Play in Bangui, CAR



Photo: Local officials addressing the crowd at She Should Play

Local Youth

Many of the young people participating in the Academy, especially those internally displaced, have described the program as a place where they feel safe, seen, and connected. For youth who have experienced disruption, uncertainty, and social exclusion, BUSA provides routine, mentorship, friendship, and a renewed sense of purpose. Participation in soccer has helped strengthen confidence, emotional wellbeing, teamwork, discipline, and social connection. Above all, many youth have expressed that they now feel a stronger sense of belonging within their community.

Parents and Families

The impact of the Academy extends well beyond the players themselves. Parents' engagement and support have been tremendously strong, reflecting the trust the community has placed in the program. Families have consistently spoken about the emotional, physical, and behavioral growth they have observed in their children since joining the Academy. Teachers and community leaders have also noted improved social behavior, stronger peer relationships, and increased youth engagement in positive community activities.

"After just two months with the Academy, I witnessed a radical transformation: [my daughter] now showers twice a day, washes her clothes, smiles more often, and has even started to show leadership with her peers. She expresses herself with greater confidence and is much more open at home. I don't know how to thank the team enough for this transformation in her life."

Abourou A., mother of Bangui United Soccer Academy's She Should Play participant



Photo: BUSA mother and player with iACT-US staff



Photo: BUSA group photo in Bangui, CAR

Community Leadership and Decision-making

At the heart of BUSA's success is its deeply rooted community-led approach. The Academy is led collectively by community members who work together to plan activities, make decisions, and implement initiatives based on local realities and priorities. Rather than relying on rigid hierarchies, the Academy operates through collaboration, trust, and shared ownership.

To support coordination and representation, the Academy has two coordinators, one male and one female, who represent the program at external meetings, events, and engagements. However, leadership responsibilities are shared across the wider team, with members contributing according to the needs of the program and their own individual strengths.

One of the most unique and effective aspects of the BUSA model is the way decisions flow from within the community itself. Coaches, youth leaders, and parents all contribute to discussions and planning processes. Parents play an especially important role, through a parents' committee that supports community engagement, planning, and decision-making. This structure has helped strengthen trust between families and the Academy, while ensuring the program remains accountable and responsive to the community it serves.

BUSA also collaborates closely with the local Bangui Football Association, which provides technical advice, mentorship, and training support to strengthen the quality of coaching and of the program.



Photo: Members of the BUSA coaching staff in Bangui, CAR

Today, Bangui United Soccer Academy stands as a model of how communities, even in contexts of instability and limited resources, can create sustainable and impactful solutions for youth development, peacebuilding, and social transformation.

The following key metrics demonstrate the foundational pillars of BUSA's community-led model, showcasing its leadership, equity, and institutional credibility as a registered Non-Governmental Organization (NGO).

- **National NGO Registration:** The Bangui United Soccer Academy is a nationally registered NGO in the Central African Republic.
- **Legal and Structural Sovereignty:** To ensure authentic local governance, 100 percent of the local leadership team are Central African Republic citizens residing permanently within the country.
- **Government Ministry-level Collaboration:** BUSA maintains formal recognition and collaborative support from the Ministry for the Promotion of Youth, Sports, and Civic Education, aligning grassroots efforts with national development policies.
- **Operational Self-sufficiency:** Local leadership manages all day-to-day operations, including logistical coordination, program deployment, match-day management, and community events.
- **Targeted Inclusivity Initiatives:** Through specialized programming such as the She Should Play initiative, local leaders design and execute targeted interventions that directly address community needs. This commitment to equity is reinforced by having women in key coaching positions and organizational leadership roles.

iACT's Role and Outcomes

iACT's role has been to support and accompany this locally led effort rather than direct it. iACT does not maintain a team on the ground and instead relies entirely on BUSA's leadership and community members to make decisions, shape programming, and implement activities in ways that are culturally relevant, contextually appropriate, and responsive to local needs. This approach has allowed the Academy to grow organically from within the community, reinforcing sustainability, local accountability, and long-term impact.

The Challenges

The BUSA case study demonstrates a strong model of community-led programming that iACT has been implementing and strengthening for many years; still, in today's humanitarian landscape, there are challenges to be overcome.

These challenges are particularly significant in refugee contexts, where community-led organizations (CLOs) and refugee-led organizations (RLOs) must operate within the legal, administrative, and political frameworks of host countries. iACT has experienced this firsthand not only in Bangui, but also in the other regions where we work.

In some host countries, policies may say they support refugee participation and community-led approaches; however, actual implementation can be considerably more difficult in practice. Refugee-led organizations may face restrictions and administrative barriers that limit their ability to develop into fully independent and sustainable organizations. Even after an organization is established, challenges such as the following may remain:

- **Legal recognition:** Even in countries where policies are supportive of refugee- or community-led organizations, the financial costs associated with legal registration and its related requirements can be prohibitive for organizations with limited resources.
- **Access to financial systems:** Opening organizational bank accounts, receiving international transfers, and accessing local grants can be difficult for CLOs and RLOs.
- **Access to operational resources:** Particularly in remote regions without strong communications technology infrastructure, organizations may have to navigate consistently weak cell phone or internet networks; and there may be other general infrastructure-related barriers.
- **Freedom of movement:** Refugee individuals may need to obtain special permissions or documentation in order to travel outside already-designated areas. This can create delays when teams need to travel for program expansion, training, monitoring, partnership development, or other program activities.
- **Identification and documentation:** Limited access to appropriate, official registration documentation can make it difficult for refugee-led organizations to complete administrative, financial, and legal processes.

- **Dependence on third-party actors:** In some situations, RLOs may need to rely on national organizations or other third-party partners to complete processes that they cannot undertake independently. While this can help move activities forward, it can also create additional dependency and limit organizational autonomy.
- **Language barriers:** Refugee communities and host-country institutions may not always share the same language. This can make communication, registration, administrative processes, partnership development, and access to information difficult and time-consuming.
- **Institutional and administrative capacity:** Community-led organizations may have strong community legitimacy and leadership but may not initially have the financial, administrative, legal, monitoring-and-evaluation, or organizational systems required by formal humanitarian institutions and donors.

iACT has worked to help address some of these barriers by providing technical and organizational training, resources, and partnerships that support communities in taking greater ownership of their programs. However, these challenges also demonstrate that community-led programming cannot be achieved by solely transferring responsibility to communities. It requires an enabling environment in which refugee and community-led organizations have the legal recognition, resources, systems, mobility, information, and decision-making authority necessary to lead effectively. Strengthening community-led programming requires not only supporting community organizations in building institutional skills, but also addressing the structural barriers that can prevent them from exercising their capacity.

Conclusion

iACT's experience across Chad, Cameroon, Central African Republic, Mexico, and other iACT program contexts demonstrates that sustainable impact requires more than just delivering programs to communities; it requires helping to build the conditions for communities to lead, adapt, sustain, and ultimately shape those programs themselves.

At the same time, community-led work cannot be achieved by transferring responsibilities without transferring the resources, authority, systems, and support required to exercise those responsibilities effectively. Community-led programming requires trust, flexible funding, technical accompaniment, accountability, and a willingness to adapt organizational structures and ways of working. **The goal is therefore not to withdraw external support, but to transform its purpose from directing implementation toward resourcing, strengthening, connecting, and amplifying local leadership.**

The success of this strategy should ultimately be measured not only by the number of children reached, programs delivered, partnerships established, or trainings completed, but by whether local teams and communities have greater capacity, authority, resources, and confidence to lead and sustain meaningful change.

Call to Action

The next phase requires a shared commitment from iACT and our partners, and from donors and community stakeholders, to move from intention to action.

Starting with ourselves and our partners, we make a call to:

1. **Shift decision-making closer to communities** by fostering and clearly defining local leadership roles, authority, accountability, and participation in program design and adaptation.
2. **Invest in local capacity and systems** (leadership, finance, procurement, safeguarding, monitoring-and-evaluation, technology, and organizational development) and not only in direct program-service activities.
3. **Resource local leadership appropriately** by ensuring that funding reaches local actors, and that it has the flexibility and duration needed to sustain programs and respond to changing community priorities.

4. **Build equitable partnerships** with refugee-led organizations, community-led organizations, schools, government institutions, and other local actors, based on complementary strengths, shared accountability, and mutual respect.
5. **Use evidence to strengthen community-led approaches** by systematically collecting, analyzing, and sharing data and community feedback to understand what is working, what needs to change, and where investment should increase.
6. **Create pathways for local sustainability** by supporting locally managed partnerships, income-generating opportunities, community contributions, local fundraising, and stronger connections to national and regional systems.
7. **Hold ourselves accountable for the shift in power** by tracking not only program outputs and reach, but also who makes decisions, who controls resources, whose knowledge informs programming, and whether local actors are gaining greater ownership over time.

The opportunity — to move beyond describing localization and community leadership as principles, and make them visible in how programs are designed, funded, managed, evaluated, and sustained — is before us. The next phase of iACT's work — and that of the humanitarian sector as a whole — should therefore be defined not simply by how much we deliver, but by how much leadership, ownership, capacity, and opportunity we help build within the communities we serve.

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