Unequal Risk, Unshared Responsibility

A White Paper in Risk Sharing In Yemen's Humanitarian Delivery Chain

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1. Executive Summary

Despite widespread recognition that risk is inherent to humanitarian work, meaningful **risk sharing** remains absent from Yemen's aid delivery chain. This white paper draws on a bilingual (Arabic-English) survey and nine key informant interviews with actors across the delivery chain including donors, UN agencies, INGOs, and NNGOs to explore why risk sharing continues to stall, and how it can be strengthened.

The findings point to a systemic pattern: risk is often managed reactively, treated as a compliance task rather than a collaborative process. Actors across the delivery chain including NNGOs frequently complete risk registers in isolation, with limited guidance or discussion, and rarely revisit them during project implementation. Risk conversations when they happen tend to follow disruptions, not precede them. Meanwhile, upstream actors rarely surface their own risk appetites, leaving national partners to guess what will or won't be accepted.

The result is a fragmented ecosystem where risk cascades downward disproportionately landing on those with the fewest resources to manage it. In our survey, over 90% of respondents said risk identification occurs primarily at HQ or central levels often excluding the very field teams closest to emerging threats. At the same time, national actors are often expected to absorb the consequences of risk-related decisions they were only partially involved in if at all. This mismatch fuels frustration, inhibits transparency, and deepens power asymmetries.

Five key barriers emerged from the research ranging from weak early engagement to low trust and fragmented planning all of which limit the system's ability to distribute and manage risk collectively. This paper is not an indictment of any one actor, but a reflection of structural patterns across the system. It presents tailored recommendations for each group donors, intermediaries, and NNGOs aimed at embedding risk sharing as a practical and relational process. That includes clearer dialogue, shared planning spaces, and a shift from one-way accountability to negotiated responsibility.

Risk sharing isn't a luxury or a buzzword. It is the foundation for operational trust and partnership equity. If the sector truly wants to localize with integrity, it must stop managing risk around local actors and start managing it with them.

2. Introduction

Despite a growing global push toward localization and partnership equity, risk sharing remains largely aspirational in Yemen's humanitarian system. National NGOs (NNGOs), who operate at the sharpest end of risk from access denials and funding delays to reputational fallout and frontline security threats are often excluded from the very decisions that shape their exposure.

What this research reveals is not isolated failure, but a systemic disconnect. Risk is still treated as a donor compliance box not a shared operational concern. When conversations about risk do happen, they are often late, top-down, and disconnected from field realities.

This white paper explores why meaningful risk sharing remains elusive in Yemen drawing insights not only from local NGOs, but from across the chain of actors who influence policy, funding, coordination, and implementation. It offers a challenge to shift from compliance to collaboration, and from risk transfer to risk partnership.

3. Methodology

This white paper draws on a mixed-methods approach, combining:

- A bilingual (Arabic–English) **online survey** conducted through Kobo Toolbox, designed to assess risk management and risk sharing practices across organizations.
- A series of nine **key informant interviews (KIIs)** with stakeholders from national NGOs, international NGOs, UN agencies, and donor organizations, conducted remotely between March and April 2025.

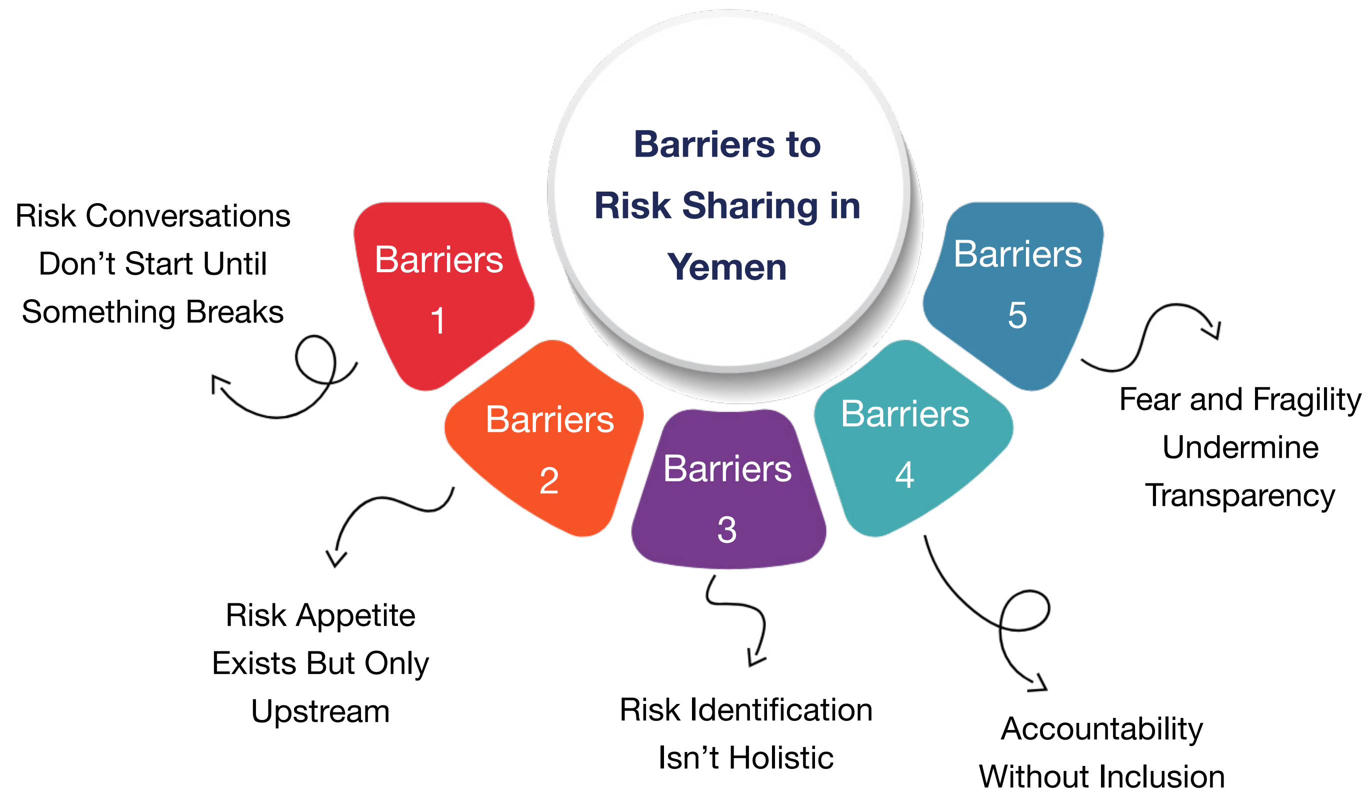
The survey received **55 valid responses**, the majority of which came from NNGOs, who continue to play a frontline role in humanitarian delivery in Yemen. While NNGOs made up the majority of responses, the survey also included participants from INGOs, UN agencies, and donors enabling a broader, delivery-chain-wide perspective on risk practices.

The questionnaire was designed to explore key elements of effective risk sharing, including stakeholder inclusion, risk appetite, response strategies, and documentation reflecting current thinking on comprehensive risk management in humanitarian settings.

The research was exploratory in nature and does not claim statistical representativeness.
Instead, it offers **indicative insights** into how risk is managed and shared or not across Yemen's humanitarian architecture.

4. Barriers to Risk Sharing in Yemen

Despite growing discourse on localization and equitable partnerships, risk sharing remains the most overlooked element in Yemen's humanitarian delivery chain. National NGOs (NNGOs), who shoulder the bulk of implementation, continue to bear disproportionate operational, reputational, and fiduciary risks often without structured dialogue, shared risk protocols, or accessible support mechanisms in place.
This section distills insights from a bilingual survey and nine key informant interviews with actors across the chain donors, UN agencies, INGOs, and NNGOs to uncover five systemic barriers that are holding risk sharing back. These are not just logistical hurdles. They expose a pattern of siloed planning, weak feedback loops, unclear expectations, and suppressed transparency. In short: a delivery chain that manages risk downward rather than sharing it across.
Each barrier highlights not only a technical gap, but a structural imbalance in how decisions are made, how risks are understood, and how responsibility is distributed.



4.1 Barrier 1: Risk Conversations Don't Start Until Something Breaks

Risk dialogue across Yemen's aid delivery chain remains largely reactive. Instead of being integrated into planning, risk conversations are usually triggered by disruption a missed milestone, a procurement delay, or a security breach. This pattern reflects crisis management, not proactive risk sharing.

> **"We don't talk about risks until we're already in trouble."**
>
> Project Manager, NNGO, Aden

The survey revealed that **74% of NNGO respondents said they had never participated in a joint risk sharing dialogue with upstream actors** not even once during a project's lifecycle. This absence isn't due to a lack of risks. It's a structural flaw: the system activates only after consequences surface.

Have you been directly involved in any task sharing activities within your organization?

Yes No

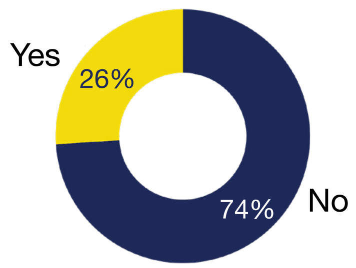
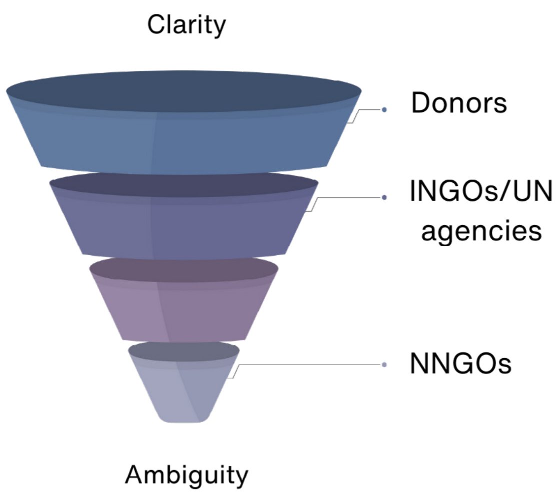


Figure 1: Proportion of NNGO respondents involved in risk sharing activities (n=41)

4.2 Barrier 2: Risk Appetite Exists But Only Upstream

Most donors, UN agencies, and INGOs have documented risk appetite frameworks or at least a formal statement. However, these frameworks are rarely contextualized, poorly understood by field staff, and almost never discussed nor shared with local partners. At the NNGO level, understanding is even more limited: **only one out of 41 NNGO** respondents reported ever sharing their organization's risk appetite with other stakeholders during project implementation.



> **"We don't know what risks they'll accept so sometimes, we play it safe and say nothing."**
>
> Program Manager, NNGO, Sana'a

This top-down approach creates a disconnect. When risks arise, NNGOs are left guessing whether the donor will consider the risk acceptable or whether reporting it could jeopardize the relationship. Without open dialogue, there is no alignment and therefore, no foundation for risk sharing.

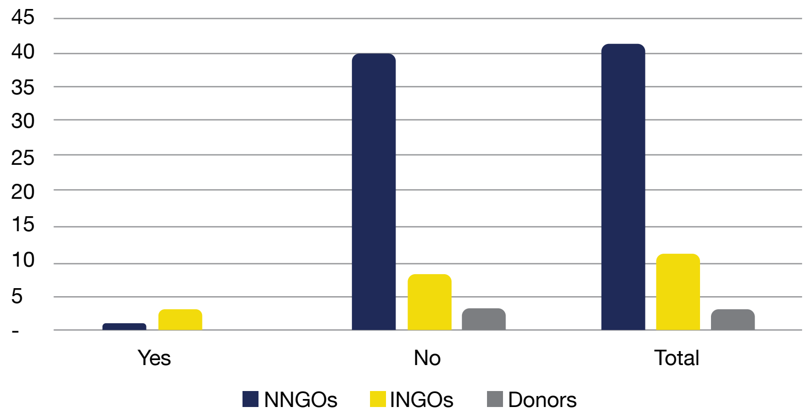


Figure 2: Risk appetite sharing across the delivery chain (n=55)

A breakdown of who reported sharing risk appetite with partners at any stage of project implementation:

- NNGOs: 1 Yes / 40 No
- INGOs: 3 Yes / 8 No
- Donors: 0 Yes / 3 No

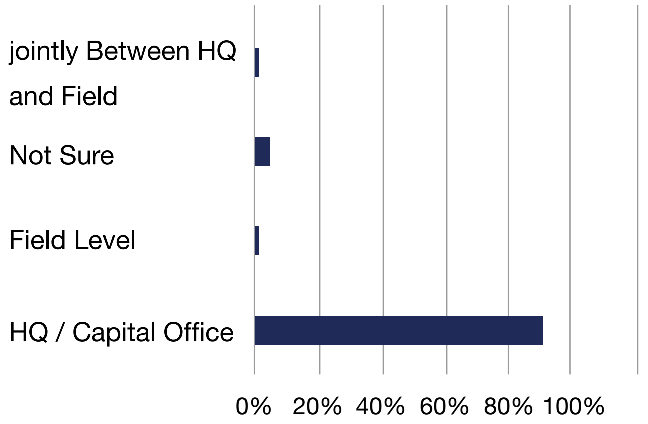
4.3 Barrier 3: Risk Identification Isn't Holistic

Risk sharing starts with risk identification but that foundation remains deeply fractured. While it's reasonable for each organization to begin by identifying risks independently, the process too often ends there. Risks are submitted in isolation, with little effort to align, reflect, or build collective awareness across the delivery chain.

In many organizations, risk identification is driven more by donor templates than by analysis or discussion. For national NGOs especially field staff the process is further weakened by limited training, lack of tools, and the absence of a feedback mechanism. Without clear guidance on how to spot and escalate risks, most staff operate reactively. Emerging risks are either overlooked or siloed and opportunities for early intervention are lost.

In fact, over 90% of NNGO respondents said that risk identification occurs primarily at the capital or HQ level with minimal input from field staff who are closest to the operational context.

Where does risk identification primarily take place in your organization?



Have you involved other external stakeholders in the risk identification and prioritization process before sharing them?

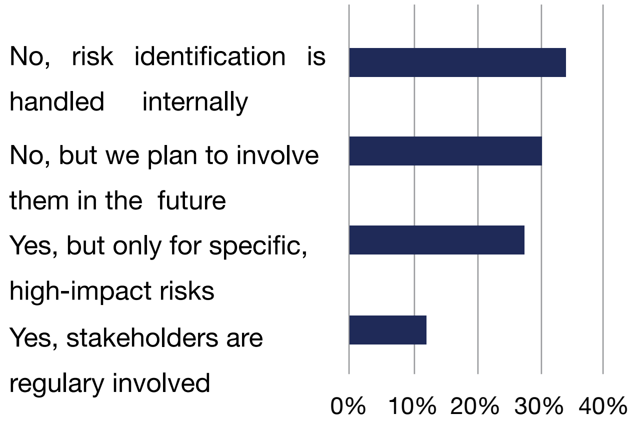


Figure 3: Risk identification practices remain centralized and siloed across Yemen's humanitarian delivery chain (n = 41 for NNGOs; n = 55 overall).

> **"Each partner just submits their risks separately there's no real discussion about what we're all facing."**
>
> Program Officer, INGO, Aden

The result isn't just poor-quality inputs it's a lost opportunity for collaboration. Instead of becoming the first step in a shared risk strategy, risk identification is treated as a one-time submission exercise. Holistic identification requires more: dialogue, reflection, and systems that allow risks to be collectively seen, assessed, and owned.

4.4 Barrier 4: Accountability Without Inclusion

NNGOs often bear the brunt of risk consequences but have little say in prevention or mitigation strategies. When a funding delay occurs or a project is suspended due to insecurity or donor decisions, local partners are frequently left to manage the fallout. They are expected to explain disruptions to communities and authorities, often without prior notice or time to prepare let alone influence the outcome.

> **"They ask us to own the risks, but not the decisions."**
>
> Executive Director, Local NGO

This exclusion not only undermines local credibility, it denies NNGOs the opportunity to help mitigate emerging risks before they escalate. Their frontline positioning means they are best placed to anticipate reputational, operational, or relational consequences but instead of being consulted, they're often informed late or not at all.

> **"We could've helped minimize the impact, but no one consulted us before the donor suspended the project."**
>
> Project Manager, National NGO, Sa'ada

More than just a coordination failure, this dynamic reinforces a dangerous mismatch: local actors are held accountable for delivering under risk, yet denied agency to shape how those risks are handled. That is not risk sharing it's risk shifting.

4.5 Barrier 5: Fear and Fragility Undermine Transparency

Even when risk information is known, it is not always shared. NNGOs expressed concern that disclosing incidents or risks could lead to penalties, such as funding suspension, negative audit outcomes, or reputational damage. This creates a culture of silence particularly among local actors with limited leverage.

> **"You don't report what you survived you hide it, or they might blacklist you."**
>
> Program Manager, NNGO, Aden

This isn't only a downstream issue. INGO staff also described pressure to "manage optics," especially when operating under rigid donor expectations. Without a culture of mutual trust, risk remains hidden not shared and lessons are lost.
Risk can't be shared if no one feels safe enough to speak about it.

4.6 Why These Barriers Matter

These five barriers are not isolated flaws. Together, they form a systemic blockage that prevents risk sharing from taking root. From the absence of early dialogue to weak identification practices, from asymmetric accountability to suppressed transparency each barrier reinforces the others in a cycle of fragmentation.

While the consequences of this cycle hit NNGOs the hardest, the root causes span the entire delivery chain. Risk sharing cannot be achieved through compliance checklists or policy statements alone. It demands a new kind of engagement: one grounded in joint ownership, mutual trust, and continuous, inclusive reflection. **Without that shift, risk will remain a burden not a shared responsibility.**

5. Recommendations: Building the Foundations for Risk Sharing

To move toward genuine risk sharing in Yemen's humanitarian response, actors across the delivery chain must not only rethink how risk is managed but how it is distributed, negotiated, and resourced.

Below are tailored recommendations for each group, drawn from the voices of the field, survey results, and practical alignment with collaborative risk management principles.

5.1 For Donors

5.1.1. Enable Risk Conversations Early and Equitably

- Fund and require joint risk planning before implementation begins not just as a checkbox in proposals.
- Encourage inclusive participation that goes beyond headquarters or senior managers.

> **"We assume risks are being managed, but we don't always ask how or by whom."**
> Donor Representative, Amman

5.1.2 Share Risk Appetite Transparently

- Don't just declare your risk thresholds explain them in accessible terms and invite your partners to do the same.
- Shift from risk transfer to risk negotiation.

5.1.3 Incentivize Honesty, Not Optics

- Build "safe fail" culture into your agreements where reporting risks or failures isn't penalized but used to learn and adapt.
- Create conditions where partners can disclose without fear of losing funding.

> **“Sometimes, partners tell us what they think we want to hear. That’s not really transparency it’s survival.”**
> Program Officer, Donor

5.1.4 Fund NNGO Risk Capacity

- Allocate dedicated budget lines for local actors to build risk management capacity.
- Provide technical support to develop internal policies, train staff, and strengthen reporting systems.
- Embed this support within the risk sharing process not as a separate or optional activity.

📊 Only 21% of local actors felt their organization’s risk appetite was understood internally

5.2 For UN Agencies & INGOs

5.2.1 Co-Design Risk Tools with Partners

- Don’t impose registers or templates in isolation. Work with NNGOs to build shared tools and define relevant categories.
- Ensure field-level input is captured, not overwritten.

5.2.2 Make Risk Management a Living Process

- Risk registers should be updated throughout the project not filled out once and filed away.
- Schedule quarterly reviews with partners to revisit, adapt, and respond.

> **“We filled the risk matrix once. No one asked for it again until project closure.”**
> Finance Officer, Local Partner, Hadramout

5.2.3 Clarify Roles in Risk Sharing

- Share how your internal risk assessments translate into partnership expectations.
- Clearly communicate how responsibilities are assigned and check if they're feasible.

5.2.4 Support, Don't Push Down

- Before assigning a risk, ask: Does this partner have the capacity and tools to manage it?
- Share mitigation resources (insurance, legal support, backstopping) when needed.

5.3 For National NGOs (NNGOs)

5.3.1 Strengthen Internal Risk Foundations

- Develop internal risk policies and educate your team on key concepts like residual risk, appetite, and tolerance.
- Ensure all departments (not just proposal writers) understand how to spot and report risks.

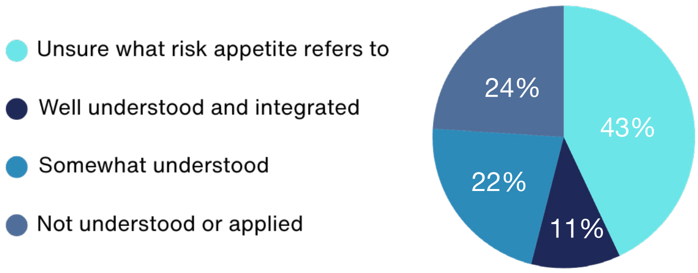


Figure 5: Understanding of risk tolerance remains limited across respondents (n = 41).

5.3.2 Be Proactive in Risk Dialogue

- Share your appetite, concerns, and mitigation options even if not formally requested.
- Ask questions if a donor's expectations seem unclear or unrealistic.

5.3.3 Capture and Use Your Risk Data

- Don't treat the risk register as a donor deliverable. Use it to guide internal decisions and improve planning.
- Regularly review what worked, what didn't, and why.

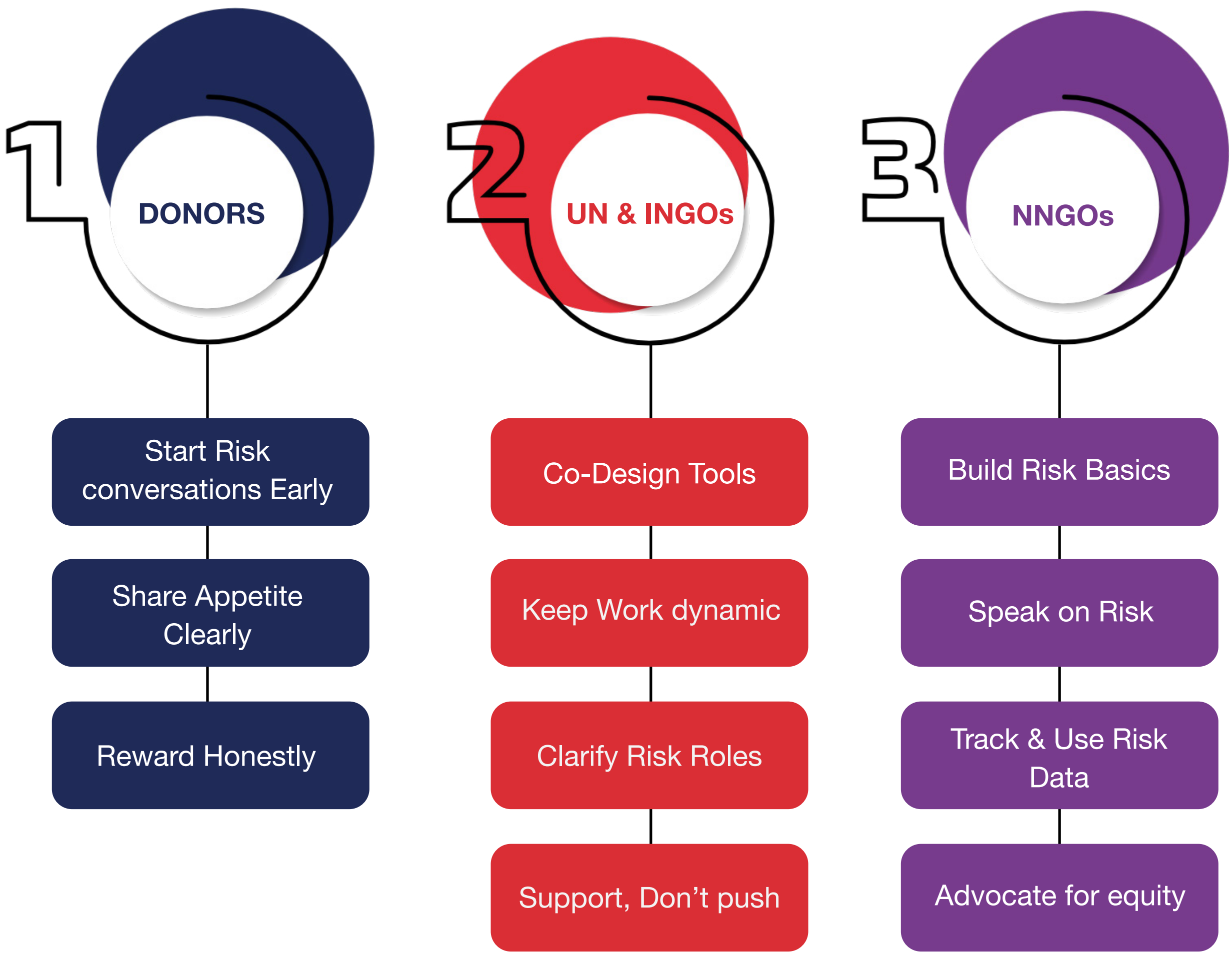
5.3.4 Advocate for Equitable Roles

- Push for early involvement in risk decisions and speak up if you're being asked to carry risks without support.
- Frame this not as resistance, but as responsible partnership.

> **“We’ve started to ask more questions it changes the conversation.”**
>
> Program Manager, National NGO, Abyan

6. Conclusion

Risk sharing is not just a technical necessity it’s a matter of equity, trust, and collective accountability. The findings in this paper reveal that despite years of humanitarian engagement in Yemen, risk continues to concentrate disproportionately on the most local actors. Changing that requires more than new tools. It demands open dialogue, inclusive processes, and shared courage.



This white paper offers a starting point. The next steps are up to all of us.

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