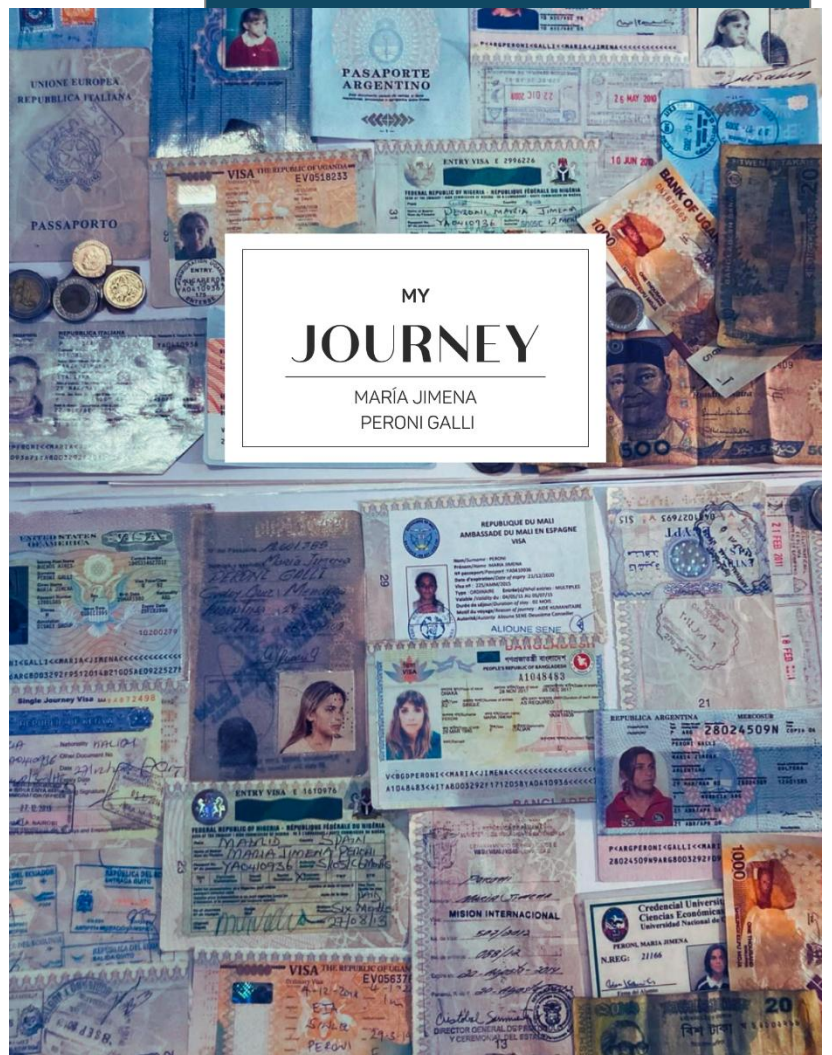


From Cash Coordination to Partnership Brokering: A Personal Journey to Collaborative Humanitarian Action



Maria Jimena Peroni Galli-
Accredited Partnership Broker-
Awarded 2025

"Be patient toward all that is unsolved in your heart and try to love the questions themselves, like locked rooms and like books that are written in a very foreign tongue."

From Letters to a Young Poet Rainer Maria Rilke (1875–1926)

Title: "From cash coordination to Partnership Brokering: A Personal Journey to Collaborative Humanitarian Action"

Author: Maria Jimena Peroni Galli

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Abstract

This paper examines how partnership brokering tackles systemic challenges in humanitarian cash coordination, such as fragmentation, power imbalances, and hierarchical decision-making. Drawing on two decades of professional experience and an extensive literature review, it underscores brokering's capacity to foster trust, inclusivity, and mutual accountability. By enhancing traditional coordination frameworks, brokering has the potential to support more equitable, adaptive, and sustainable humanitarian outcomes.

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1- Introduction: Navigating Coordination in Humanitarian Action

Humanitarian crises often spark solidarity, with donors and governments playing critical roles. Yet, underfunding remains a significant challenge¹. This solidarity flows through a diverse ecosystem of United Nations agencies, international NGOs, the Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement, faith-based organizations, local NGOs, community groups, and the private sector. Among these, the Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC) serves as the primary coordination forum for system-wide emergencies. However, many significant crises that require humanitarian assistance fall beyond its scope².

Coordination enhances efficiency, reduces duplication, and broadens aid coverage. However, as ICVA (2024) notes, systemic challenges persist, including overlapping efforts, trust deficits, accountability gaps, and the marginalization of local actors. Knox Clarke and Campbell (2015) highlight that most coordination operates at an *alignment* level, where agencies act independently, reinforcing sectoral silos and limiting shared accountability. These limitations underscore the need for inclusive, adaptive coordination that promotes equitable participation and localized leadership to meet evolving needs.

The structure of this paper is as follows: Section 2 examines the evolution of cash assistance, emphasizing its transformative potential and the constraints of existing models. Section 3 introduces the role of partnerships brokering and CVA. Section 4 provides a reflective analysis of my professional journey, highlighting brokering as a promising emerging approach. Section 5 builds on research and illustrative examples, presenting a case for brokering as a transformative method in cash programming. Finally, the conclusion highlights brokering's role in addressing systemic gaps and enhancing coordination in humanitarian cash assistance.

¹ In December 2024, the United Nations appealed for \$47 billion to assist approximately 190 million people in thirty-two countries for 2025. However, the 2024 appeal was only 43% funded, highlighting a substantial shortfall in resources. Reuters. (2024, December 4)

² Namely, national, and localized Crises, Non IASC Activated responses due to several factors- (political sensitivity, longer term protracted crisis), the Refugee Coordination Model (RCM), mixed settings and migration and displacement crisis.

2- Cash Assistance Landscape in a Nutshell

Cash programming provides financial resources directly to affected populations, enabling them to meet basic needs, preserve dignity, and foster self-reliance. It empowers individuals to prioritize their own needs while stimulating local economies through a multiplier effect (ECHO, 2022). Cash coordination structures the delivery of assistance, ensuring accountability, predictability, and efficiency through defined roles and responsibilities (IASC, 2022).

What is Partnership Brokering?

Partnership brokering has the potential to facilitate collaboration between diverse stakeholders, fostering trust and aligning interests to achieve shared goals. Brokers function as intermediaries, addressing power imbalances and guiding partnerships toward sustainable, equitable outcomes (Tennyson, 2018). Their role spans from strategic coordination at the policy level to direct facilitation at the community level (World Vision, 2014).

Effective brokering strengthens relationships, reduces conflict, and fosters innovation, although challenges like unclear roles and unequal resources persist (Van Kampen & Reeler, 2024; PBA, 2019).

Reflective practice is a core element of effective brokering. It helps brokers to adapt their approaches and enhance long-term partnership success (Partnership Brokers Association, 2012)

Over the past two decades, cash assistance in humanitarian aid has undergone significant transformation, driven by diverse stakeholders and evolving coordination models. Humanitarian aid increasingly integrates with government-led adaptive social protection systems to enhance scalability, efficiency, and sustainability during crises. The private sector has also driven innovation and expanded interventions, complementing efforts by traditional actors (Peroni & García Arias, 2020). Multipurpose cash (MPC), representing nearly 50% of all CVA in 2022 (CaLP, 2023), highlights this evolution with its flexibility for anticipatory action and capacity to scale up and mitigate the impacts of crises.

Despite this progress, cash programming faces stagnation risks. CVA volumes declined in 2023 for the first time since 2015 (GHO, 2025), with fragmentation, limited innovation, and slow adoption of emerging technologies cited as key barriers. The IASC's 2022 cash coordination model aimed to enhance CVA through a predictable framework, but persistent challenges such as resource shortages, capacity gaps, and limited local leadership persist (CAG Light Review, 2024).

These challenges highlight the limits of traditional coordination, which often fails to address power asymmetries and build trust among diverse stakeholders. Human mobility and climate change demand adaptable, innovative, and risk-tolerant solutions to *preserve CVA's transformative impact on humanitarian aid* (GHO, 2025). Partnerships brokering complements coordination by addressing structural gaps, fostering inclusivity, redistributing power, and encouraging collaborative decision-making. Beyond facilitating collaboration, brokering can transform coordination dynamics, ensuring cash programming remains adaptive, equitable, and impactful.

3- Partnership Brokering in Cash Assistance

Partnerships are essential for scaling and enhancing the effectiveness of cash assistance in humanitarian contexts. Collaboration among humanitarian organizations, governments, and financial service providers (FSPs) drives innovation and expands the reach of CVA. Because CVA operates alongside other financial flows, such as remittances, social protection systems, and peer-to-peer giving, it creates unique opportunities to establish diverse partnerships and foster innovative collaborations (Peroni & García, 2020; Jodar Vidal, CALP, 2020).

Local and national humanitarian actors, as first responders with deep contextual knowledge, play a critical role in ensuring efficient, effective, and sustainable responses. Despite commitments made during the 2016 World Humanitarian Summit and the Grand Bargain to strengthen local leadership, progress has been limited. Key barriers include inadequate funding, limited capacity-building opportunities, and inequitable partnerships. Addressing these challenges demands inclusive governance structures, principled partnerships, and efforts to shift entrenched power imbalances. Promoting equitable participation and sustainable outcomes should remain a core priority (IASC, 2021).

While partnerships are central to humanitarian effectiveness, brokering as a distinct practice in coordination remains underexplored. Brokering goes beyond conventional collaboration by building trust, addressing power disparities, and enabling inclusive decision-making. Emerging frameworks, such as Oxfam's Equitable Partnerships in CVA (2020) and DG ECHO's Promoting Equitable Partnerships with Local Responders (2023), highlight the growing emphasis on shifting power dynamics and promoting local leadership in CVA.

Despite its potential to bridge structural gaps and transform coordination, research on partnership brokering in CVA is scarce. Drawing on 3.5 months of mentored brokering documented in *My Logbook* (Peroni Galli, 2025) and my professional journey, the reflective analysis in the next section explores how brokering can catalyze equitable, context-sensitive coordination. By connecting theoretical frameworks with practical applications, this analysis illustrates brokering's capacity to address systemic barriers and enhance the effectiveness of cash coordination. While subjective, it lays a foundation for understanding brokering's transformative role within CVA.

The figure below illustrates the step-by-step process:

Figure 1: The analytical process



THE PROCESS

Part I



Chronological

Outline my 20-year career, emphasizing the last 15 years in cash programming and the nine years focused on cash coordination.



Experiential Insights

Highlight key moments, roles, or turning points that led me to question traditional (coordination) mechanisms and explore brokering.



Reflection on Bias

How my experiences might shape my perspectives, acknowledging potential biases.



Identifying the Shift

Explain the factors that prompted my shift toward brokering —what I found lacking in traditional approaches. What was it like to 'coordinate' without brokering?



Key Benefits of Brokering

Reflect on how brokering can address cash coordination challenge. What would be like now and in the future, to 'coordinate' (engage in coordination) with the brokering?



Acknowledgment of Limitations

Reflect on the limitations of brokering as well—both in general and in the context of my own experience.



Literature review and case studies

Present specific research and case studies that support my reflections and analysis. Include reflections on significance and bias.



Conclusions and implications

Reflections on how my experiences with brokering can inform broader humanitarian practice, particularly in cash programming.

THE PROCESS

Part II

Source: From cash coordination to Brokering: A Personal Journey to Collaborative Humanitarian Action. Own elaboration. PBA, Accreditation process. Maria Jimena Peroni Galli, January, 2025

4- A Reflective Analysis of My Professional Career

This section provides a reflective analysis of my professional journey, spanning 20 years across government, UN agencies, and international NGOs (INGOs), with a focus on cash programming and humanitarian coordination. Over the past 15 years, I have specialized in cash programming at global, regional, and country levels, dedicating nine years to shaping coordination systems and fostering multi-stakeholder collaboration.

Career Evolution: Key Milestones

My career began in **2004** as a junior economist for a federal development agency, where I gained foundational understanding on Argentine Provinces situation. I later worked with Argentina's Labor Ministry seconded by the International Labor Organization (ILO), focusing on local economic development programs. Following my master's degree, I transitioned to the humanitarian sector in **2009**, focusing on food security and cash programming across multiple countries. During this period, I piloted fresh food voucher programs for drought response, scaled cash-for-work initiatives, integrated cash into social protection systems, and led digital delivery mechanisms during emergencies.

Between **2016 and 2020**, I shifted to inter-agency coordination, developing global cash coordination guidelines, establishing, and coordinating Cash Working Groups (CWGs), and contributing to technical tools such as the Minimum Expenditure Basket Guideline for the Uganda Refugee Response. My role also included embedding cash assistance into humanitarian response plans for emergencies.

Since 2020, my work has prioritized community engagement, fostering inclusive spaces for collaboration, and strengthening regional cooperation and government engagement. This period marked a focus on principled dialogue and adaptive approaches to address complex challenges, including route programming and shock-responsive social protection.

Key Insights from Coordination Challenges

Throughout my career, pivotal moments reshaped my understanding of coordination. Early roles in government highlighted political constraints, while my transition to INGOs revealed the complexities of aligning diverse actors in multi-stakeholder consortia. Donor-driven agendas often limited genuine partnerships, and CWGs were not yet widely institutionalized, restricting opportunities for systemic collaboration.

Coordinating humanitarian responses exposed the strengths and limitations of existing systems. Leading CWGs allowed me to apply principled approaches, but systemic barriers persisted, including misaligned priorities, power imbalances, and fragmented structures. These experiences prompted critical reflections: Who drives decision-making? Whose interests are prioritized? How can systems ensure accountability to affected populations?

In regions like Latin America and the Caribbean (LAC), where government-led responses dominate, CWGs often struggled to adapt to existing frameworks. This challenge underscored the importance of inclusive, adaptive spaces that integrate diverse actors, such as social protection, disaster risk management and migration specialists. Route programming further highlighted the rigidity of traditional systems, emphasizing the need

for flexible frameworks capable of addressing politically sensitive issues like the migration crisis.

Identifying Systemic Limitations

I observed recurring limitations in coordination systems, including:

- i. Fragmentation and Silos: Rigid sectoral boundaries have stifled innovation in multi-sectoral cash assistance (e.g., Nigeria 2017, Central America 2020).
- ii. Top-Down Decision-Making: Hierarchical models marginalized local agency and community participation (e.g., Bangladesh 2017, Uganda 2018; R4V, 2022).
- iii. Power Imbalances: International actors and donors often dominated, sidelining local stakeholders, and shaping decision making (e.g., Geneva 2017, LAC 2024).
- iv. Slow Adaptation: Traditional models struggled to respond to evolving needs, such as migration crises or climate change (e.g., LAC 2024).
- v. Lack of Mutual Accountability: Limited structures for trust-building hindered equitable partnerships (e.g., South and Central America 2020).

Over the past five years, Latin America and the Caribbean have experienced significant shifts in displacement and migration. However, coordination mechanisms have struggled to adapt. *While adjustments have occurred, they have not been formalized to address situations at origin, transit and destination or return, with a route-based approach, with a regional, hemispheric dimension, which also has its correlation at the national level* (IEACH, 2024, p.13)

ROUTE-BASED PROGRAMMING

It represents a paradigm shift in humanitarian response, aiming to align assistance with the actual migration routes rather than being constrained by international borders. This approach seeks to break from traditional country-centric response models, aiming to address the dynamic and evolving needs of migrants throughout their cross-border journeys (CashCap/NORCAP, 2024)

Embracing Brokering as a Solution

In response to systemic challenges in humanitarian coordination, I adopted partnership brokering as a transformative complement to traditional coordination. While coordination can ensure efficiency and operational alignment, brokering addresses deeper systemic barriers, such as power imbalances and trust deficits, to enable equitable participation. This shift allowed me to develop context-sensitive collaborations that not only strengthen partnerships but also have the potential to enhance the effectiveness and adaptability of humanitarian responses.

Figure 2. Chronicle of my journey



5- Brokering as a Framework to Address Cash Coordination Challenges

Brokering serves as a practical framework for addressing power disparities and fostering trust within cash programming, complementing coordination's focus on efficiency. By embedding inclusivity and collaboration into humanitarian systems, brokering creates the conditions for more equitable partnerships and mutual accountability. In resource-constrained environments, integrating brokering practices can enhance coordination's effectiveness, ensuring humanitarian action remains both efficient and adaptive to evolving needs.

Transforming Coordination Through Brokering

Brokering provides a transformative pathway to tackle entrenched challenges in humanitarian coordination. It shifts the focus from transactional, top-down models to participatory frameworks rooted in shared ownership. Partnership brokers actively support stakeholders by facilitating collective processes, such as mapping pathways, selecting approaches, and recalibrating strategies as needed (Tennyson & Wilde, 2000). This aligns with Peter Senge's (2012) assertion that effective responses require bridging the gap between interdependence and action. In complex humanitarian contexts, where no single actor can act alone, mutual reliance enables stakeholders to contribute their strengths toward shared goals.

Key Contributions of Brokering

- **Addressing Fragmentation and Silos:** Brokering aligns diverse actors, fostering cross-sector dialogue to reduce duplication and create cohesive responses. For example, while developing the Minimum Expenditure Basket (MEB) tool for the Uganda Refugee Response (2018), principle-based dialogue ensured sectoral inclusion, fostering collaboration and ownership across stakeholders.
- **Overcoming Top-down Decision-Making:** Brokering promotes horizontal coordination by engaging local actors as co-creators. The Dutch Relief Alliance (2021) highlights how partnerships that amplify local voices and shift power dynamics ensure community-driven responses. Due to government restrictions, my work with local organizations in Cox Bazar (2017) failed to demonstrate how decentralizing decision-making could benefit cash responses. The refugee and migrant response plan process we set up in 2020 within the Regional CWG for the Venezuelan Response (R4V) exemplified horizontal dialogue in practice.
- **Challenging Power Imbalances:** Brokering redistributes power by fostering equitable spaces and amplifying marginalized perspectives. Participatory video projects in Uganda (2018) and Colombia (2019) empowered communities to directly speak to Cash Working Group (CWG) and donors. Research from Nigeria and South Sudan (DRA, 2021) further underscores how shared leadership dismantles entrenched hierarchies and fosters balanced partnerships.
- **Enhancing Adaptability:** Brokering enables stakeholders to pivot during crises. This is crucial in route programming, which aligns interventions with migration pathways instead of static national borders. Similarly, government-led simulation exercises for shock-responsive social protection demonstrate how to embed adaptability into humanitarian systems.

- **Fostering Mutual Accountability:** Brokering embeds shared responsibilities into coordination frameworks. Our research on partnerships between NGOs and financial service providers shows how mutual accountability fosters transparency and sustainable collaboration (Peroni & García, 2020).

However, brokering is not without its challenges. Excessive facilitation can slow decision-making, and unclear roles may dilute leadership. Furthermore, brokering might demand considerable time and resources, potentially conflicting with urgent humanitarian needs. While transformative, brokering requires balance and decisive leadership to ensure effective interventions.

6- Conclusion: Integrating Brokering into Coordination Systems and its broader implications for humanitarian practice

This paper reflects on the interplay between coordination and partnership brokering within humanitarian cash assistance, offering both analytical insights and personal reflections on their complementarities and distinctions. Coordination remains a cornerstone of humanitarian response, delivering alignment, efficiency, and rapid aid delivery, particularly critical during funding constraints. However, as I have argued, coordination alone often falls short of addressing deeper systemic challenges such as fragmentation, inequities, and limited accountability.

Brokering, in contrast, is not just about filling these gaps but transforming the way partnerships are built and sustained. It fosters trust, redistributes power, and ensures that decision-making processes are inclusive and equitable. For those asking, “Why learn brokering if I already coordinate effectively?” the answer lies in recognizing that brokering adds depth to coordination—it turns operational alignment into systemic change. By integrating brokering into their skill set, coordinators can drive not only efficient aid delivery but also sustainable partnerships that are adaptable to the systemic complexities of crisis ahead.

Throughout this paper, I have sought to clarify that while my reflections are shaped by personal experience, they are grounded in evidence-based research and systematic analysis. My aim has been to bridge the gap between subjective perspectives and practical frameworks, offering a structured approach to enhance coordination practices. By drawing on both reflective practice and empirical insights, I have demonstrated that coordination as it currently stands is insufficient to meet the demands of an increasingly interconnected and crisis-prone world. Brokering, supported by evidence and tailored frameworks, offers a pathway to bridge this gap, enhancing both the practice and impact of coordination.

So, is principled-based coordination alone the goal? No. The nuances lie in understanding when coordination needs brokering practices to evolve. By fostering adaptive and inclusive systems, we can transform how humanitarian, and development actors engage with one another and with affected communities. My journey has reinforced that brokering is not just an approach but a mindset—one that aligns technical expertise with human-centered approaches to create a more equitable and effective humanitarian response.

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