

Localisation and local humanitarian action

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Cover photo: Sarah calling for women to join her group. Credit: Oxfam GB

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Andy Featherstone

Editorial

The theme of this edition of *Humanitarian Exchange* is localisation¹ and local humanitarian action. Five years ago this week, donors, United Nations (UN) agencies, non-governmental organisations (NGOs), the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) and International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC) committed within the Grand Bargain to increase multi-year investments in the institutional capacities of local and national responders, and to provide at least 25% of humanitarian funding to them as directly as possible. Since then, there is increasing consensus at policy and normative level, underscored by the Covid-19 pandemic, that local leadership should be supported. Localisation has gone from a fringe conversation among policy-makers and aid agencies in 2016 to a formal priority under the Grand Bargain. Wider global movements on anti-racism and decolonisation have also brought new momentum to critical reflections on where power, knowledge and capacity reside in the humanitarian system. Yet progress has been slow and major gaps remain between the rhetoric around humanitarian partnerships, funding and coordination and practices on the ground.

In the lead article, Howard Mollett and Laura Donkin interrogate the link between capacity-strengthening and localisation, concluding that supporting local leadership is a more effective approach. Capacity-strengthening is also discussed by Elise Baudot Queguiner, Jubril Shittu and Esther Christen, who explain how an innovative initiative is using a longer-term integrated training, mentoring and partnering approach to support Nigerian local and national actors to achieve organisational sustainability, increase humanitarian response capacity and develop new partnerships. Reflecting on lessons learned from implementing capacity-strengthening projects with national non-governmental organisations (NGOs) in Afghanistan, Mohammad Rateb Shaheed and Isabella Leyh argue for a significant shift in the ways in which such projects are conceptualised and implemented, recommending a focus on sustainability and a recognition that national NGOs are teachers as well as learners. Mazen Alhusseiny, from Syria Relief, and Augustin Titi Rutanuka and Armel Rusake Rutebeza, from CEDIER in the Democratic Republic of Congo, share their experiences of how partnerships with international organisations have influenced organisational development. Su Myattun and her co-authors emphasise the importance of understanding the history of localisation in Rakhine, Myanmar, noting that Covid-19 restrictions, combined with shifts in perception of collaborating with international organisations, have created new opportunities for locally owned responses. Anuja Jayaraman, Rama Shyam and their co-contributors discuss how

1 'Localisation' here refers to the reform agenda and process of change required within the humanitarian system through changes in donors' and other international actors' practices and policies to further enable and support local humanitarian action, leadership and complementarity. HPN acknowledges that localisation is a contested term and that its use has too often implied that the capacities and approaches of an 'international' level should be transferred 'down' to local groups, rather than recognising the work local actors are already doing.

long-term engagement with community volunteers in Mumbai has enabled volunteers to move from being participants to collaborators and community leaders during the Covid-19 pandemic. Charlotte Greene and her co-authors and contributors explain how the survivor- and community-led crisis response approach, which enables national and international NGOs to work with and support spontaneous self-help actions by disaster- and crisis-affected people, has worked in Haiti.

Juliet Eyokia, Md. Abdul Latif, Peter Ochepe and Petra Righetti consider the lessons learned from the Empowering Local and National Humanitarian Actors (ELNHA) programme in Uganda and Bangladesh, which offers an alternative approach to humanitarian response based on more equitable, collaborative partnerships between international and local responders. Esteban ‘Bong’ Mascagca, Janice Ian Manlutac and Benedict Balderrama provide an overview of the types of Quick Response Funds operating in the Philippines, making the case that locally designed and managed pooled funds can reduce bureaucratic delays and strengthen local leadership. Jean Claude Cerin and co-contributors reflect on the localisation journey of a network of local and international NGOs in Haiti that has aimed to strengthen local coordination, ownership and decision-making. Christian Els and Henrik Fröjmark analyse data from 10 countries on funding flows to local actors and opportunities for them to take up leadership roles in humanitarian coordination, pointing out that the differing methods donors and aid organisations use to calculate funding to local actors can distort the figures. Ben Munson, Ramya Madhavan and Sarah Stephens and their co-contributors report on the outcomes of a pilot programme to expand evidence and enhance understanding of how local and national NGOs use flexible funds. Josie Flint, Josaia Jirauni Osborne, Chris Roche and Fiona Tarpey outline emerging findings from research conducted by a partnership of organisations in Australia and the Pacific Island nations on how Covid-19 has affected locally led humanitarian action in the region. Mia Marzotto, Kemal Alp Taylan, Fatuma Ibrahim and co-authors share learning from research that suggests practical language provisions can improve local and national organisations’ access to guidance and technical tools and enable them to take more leadership in humanitarian programming and decision-making. Jihan Kaisi, Rosy Haddad, Loujine Fattal and Alina Potts discuss their experience in Lebanon of working in partnership to co-create research processes based on local partners’ knowledge. The edition ends with an article by Andy Featherstone, who examines the challenges faced by humanitarian agencies that engage with state-led structures and makes recommendations about how these can be addressed in the future.

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Outreach to authors and the review and editing process for this edition involved support and feedback from members of networks active on localisation, including Charter4Change, NEAR and A4EP. Particular thanks are extended to Mai Jarrar, Meryem Aslan, Mihir Bhatt, Nagwa Musa Konda, Saeed Ullah Khan, Sema Genel Karaosmanoglu, Sudhanshu Singh, Howard Mollett, Nils Carstensen and Veronique Barbelet. This edition has been expertly edited by Matthew Foley and Katie Forsythe and produced by Hannah Bass.



A 12-year-old girl faces the risk of sexual violence as she walks from house-to-house in the town of Uvira, DRC selling vegetables to support her family (see p.31). Credit: CEDIER

Localisation and local humanitarian action

Capacity-strengthening and localisation: perspectives from CAFOD and its local partners

Howard Mollett and Laura Donkin

We feel like we are trapped in the eternal school of capacity-strengthening, and nobody tells us what it will take for us to graduate. This seems also linked to control over access to resources and direct relations with the donors (Fadi Hallisso, Basmeh and Zeitooneh, Lebanon, 2020).

Donors, UN agencies and NGOs that endorsed the Grand Bargain committed to increase efforts on capacity-strengthening as part of wider action on localisation. Yet progress has been slow. While multi-year humanitarian funding has increased somewhat, this has not translated into, or been matched by, increases in support for multi-year local capacity-strengthening. At the same time, long-overdue attention to issues of racism and decolonisation in the humanitarian sector has brought new momentum to debates about power, knowledge and capacity. This article addresses three key elements of that wider conversation:

- Local leadership of capacity-strengthening.
- Articulating localisation objectives in capacity-strengthening.
- Capacity sharing and exchange.

Local leadership of capacity-strengthening

One of the first criticisms local partners raise regarding the capacity-strengthening efforts of many international agencies is their tendency to provide top-down, externally defined training ‘packages’, instead of embracing and modelling leadership by local actors themselves. As one CAFOD partner in Zimbabwe put it: ‘Capacity-strengthening projects should also target the staff of donor organisations and make them aware of the rights of local organisations to negotiate the terms of such programmes. The “Big Brother” mentality still exists amongst staff of donor agencies. As such, it is difficult for local NGOs to act on what should be in principle their right to negotiate with their donor partners as this can be taken as them being a difficult partner’.

Figure 1 Humanitarian capacity framework



These power dynamics permeate discussions about capacity-strengthening. But momentum has been building towards supporting local partner-led capacity-strengthening approaches. One such approach, CAFOD’s humanitarian capacity-strengthening (HCS) model, developed based on consultation and experience with local partners, puts a partner-led change process at its centre. The HCS model reflects each partner’s capacity-strengthening priorities and preferences. Progress is at the partner’s pace, with accompaniment support from CAFOD’s in-country Humanitarian Capacity-strengthening Officers (HCSOs). Grants provide flexible resources for partners to implement and roll out activities internally and to hire local expertise as needed, alongside support for peer exchange between local partners. CAFOD’s role is increasingly that of a broker and/or facilitator.

Approaches such as this raise questions for international NGOs (INGOs) about their organisational presence, staffing and operating model. CAFOD, for example, has reduced staff numbers at headquarters over the past decade, while maintaining or increasing funding to local partners. However, we have found that, in many contexts, CAFOD still needs staff, albeit at country level, to effectively support this. An independent learning review found that, in some contexts where we did not have HCS capacity on the ground, our ability to act as an effective partner to local partners was constrained. So, while international agencies need to adapt their approach, this doesn't automatically mean reducing INGO staff numbers. Rather, it means deploying staff differently.

Articulating localisation objectives in capacity-strengthening

Discussions about capacity-strengthening are sometimes based on assumptions about its contribution to localisation. In fact, these links cannot be assumed and are often not clearly or explicitly articulated in capacity-strengthening initiatives. One recent major review of CAFOD's HCS programmes identified the following contributions to localisation:¹

- By developing stronger governance and organisational systems, local NGOs (LNGOs) have improved their effectiveness, organisational culture and ability to manage donor funds, rather than being dependent on international intermediary agencies, including CAFOD.
- LNGOs are better prepared for emergencies, improving the quality, accountability and speed of their emergency response work.
- LNGOs are better recognised for their abilities by authorities and other humanitarian actors.
- Stronger links and connections have been established between national and local organisations in the Caritas family.
- Improved visibility, profile and systems have enabled LNGOs to attract new donor funding.

In reflecting on this experience, three key issues arise.

How access to funding shapes or skews capacity-strengthening

Direct access to funding for local actors is frequently raised as a top priority for localisation, including by many CAFOD local partners. For example, Caritas Gokwe and Caritas Harare in Zimbabwe have doubled their annual budgets and Caritas Zimbabwe has secured new funding from the World Food Programme (WFP) and the UN Population Fund (UNFPA). While approaches to capacity-strengthening by INGOs often in practice keep the local partner dependent on the international intermediary for accessing institutional funding, some agencies have developed partnership and capacity-strengthening models where the international agency over time transitions to becoming a technical support 'sub' to the local partner, as the latter grows in confidence and ability to manage funds directly.

1 Rogers, E. (2020). 'People at the heart of change: learning and good practice from CAFOD's Humanitarian Capacity-strengthening programme (2013-2020)'. London: CAFOD (<https://cafod.org.uk/About-us/How-we-work/Evaluations/HCS-programme>).

One potential downside of an over-emphasis on funding – whether direct or indirect – is that this can skew capacity-strengthening efforts. A preoccupation with funding can marginalise local actors that are less focused on acquiring the systems, staff and ways of working required to meet donor due diligence and compliance requirements. This dilemma brings into sharp focus the distinction between ‘localisation’, which centres on the role of international actors and their approach to engaging with or funding local actors, and ‘local leadership of humanitarian action’, which is about support to initiatives, civil society groups and networks rooted in the national and local context.

CAFOD has worked with local partners to co-facilitate a survey of over 60 Caritas national organisations regarding their experience of localisation in the Covid-19 response. Several partners reported accessing funding from institutional donors and UN agencies, and emphasised the importance of multi-year partnerships along the lines of the HCS model. However, several Caritas national organisations also raised concerns about how capacity-strengthening skewed towards access to institutional funding can lead local organisations to compromise on their local character and connection to communities. Many, although not all, of CAFOD’s partners are faith-based national and local organisations, which raise funds from the faith community in their own contexts, as well as from international faith-based networks, philanthropists and other sources. These donors often provide more flexible funding than traditional institutional donors. Many of CAFOD’s local partners also express a preference for having CAFOD or other INGOs act as funding intermediaries, thereby reducing the local actor’s responsibility for compliance and allowing them to focus on programme delivery and other priorities, including domestic resource mobilisation. Indeed, for some of CAFOD’s partners the ability to mobilise local resources is regarded as more important in enabling local leadership of humanitarian response and community solidarity.

Capacity-strengthening and advocacy, voice and influence

While discussions on localisation often focus on funding, the participation, voice and influence of local actors in decision-making is also of central importance. For CAFOD, staff leading on capacity-strengthening tend to have a background in humanitarian response and organisational development, with varying levels of experience in coordination processes and policy/advocacy work. For this reason, we draw on humanitarian policy capacity to support, accompany and complement their work. In Zimbabwe, this has involved advocacy accompaniment support to local partners, alongside but separate to HCS support. CAFOD also invests time and resources in initiatives led by local partners that do have policy/advocacy experience, including support for south/south exchange and collaboration on humanitarian advocacy, including on localisation issues; linking local partners into policy-making at national to global levels; and supporting global, regional and country-level civil society networks.

Many of CAFOD’s partners do not prioritise support for policy/advocacy competencies, possibly out of frustration with the very slow pace of change on localisation among international agencies. This is contrasted with the more immediate and tangible benefits of investments in internal technical capacities and organisational development.

For faith-based local NGO partners, coordination with national and local faith structures can be as complex as the processes involved in ‘mainstream’ humanitarian coordination. Caritas national organisations spend a substantial amount of time facilitating coordination with and between local Caritas diocesan organisations and other local faith-based structures at the parish level, as well as with national faith institutions and inter-faith processes. Fostering greater understanding among international actors of these processes, and finding ways to bridge these worlds, is one area where the capacity of international actors needs to be built.

Inter-agency collaboration across capacity-strengthening and wider localisation efforts

CAFOD’s experience also points to the importance of a kind of tipping point being reached in specific contexts, which can be catalysed through inter-agency collaboration and partnerships towards realising links between capacity-strengthening and wider localisation efforts. With the exception of the two Grand Bargain localisation demonstrator country missions to Nigeria and Iraq, donor, UN and NGO discussions on localisation have remained largely confined to headquarters and inter-agency policy spaces. Most national NGOs have been little engaged and are not connected to those global processes. To shift beyond this dynamic and catalyse change in different contexts, beyond the ad-hoc invitations of individual national NGO representatives into global level policy processes, it takes multiple levels of effort on localisation, including joint agency and coalition or consortium approaches at global and country levels, and promoting links between these.

Among the five contexts surveyed in the independent review of CAFOD’s HCS efforts, the highest levels of engagement in localisation advocacy have been in Myanmar and Nigeria. These are contexts that have benefited from several multi-year inter-agency consortium initiatives including the UK-funded Shifting the Power consortium and the Accelerating Localisation Through Partnership programme, as well as collaboration through Charter4Change and country-level, local civil society-led working groups and networks on localisation and related issues, including human rights. In Nigeria, CAFOD staff cited the importance of the Nigeria Joint Response consortium of INGOs in facilitating capacity self-assessments and mentoring for LNGOs, including by other local actors. For individual national NGOs to prioritise localisation in their capacity-strengthening or wider organisational strategies, it therefore helps if there is a wider ‘tipping point’ in their context, giving them confidence that investment will reap tangible benefits. By contrast, in Zimbabwe there has been a minimum level of engagement on localisation by individual agencies and coordination structures, and nothing like the level of investment in collaboration on localisation at an inter-agency or coalition level seen in other contexts. In the absence of that wider momentum, it is unsurprising that CAFOD’s local partners in Zimbabwe have not prioritised localisation in their capacity-strengthening efforts to date.

All of this returns us to the underlying question of underfunding of capacity-strengthening in general, compounded by the lack of support for capacity-strengthening initiatives that foster local leadership. From CAFOD’s perspective, increased support to country-level funding mechanisms and platforms offers arguably the best opportunity to make progress on this. For example, CAFOD

played a lead role in the Shifting the Power consortium. A particular focus of our input was the design of the HCS framework and governance structure, which we revised to include a greater emphasis on country-level decision-making involving local partners. This was instrumental in the consortium translating rhetoric on ‘shifting the power’ into more practical actions and approaches. Many of the NGOs involved in the consortium – national and international – have gone on to scale up and document learning in local partner-led approaches to capacity-strengthening. Local NGO forums supported by STP in Bangladesh and Pakistan continue to collaborate on capacity-strengthening and wider localisation efforts. Promising results have been achieved where donors come together to support multi-donor funds at the country level providing multi-year funding for collaborative approaches to capacity-strengthening, as the examples of the **HARP-F** and **LIFT** Funds in Myanmar demonstrate. Increased flexibility within existing funding streams to incorporate organisational capacity-strengthening beyond the sector-specific priorities of project funding would also help.

Shifting towards capacity sharing and exchange

Changes in terminology in this area, from ‘capacity building’ to ‘capacity development’ to ‘capacity-strengthening’, reflect a greater recognition of the expertise and agency of local actors. The latest evolution is to use the terms ‘capacity sharing’ and ‘capacity exchange’, which recognise the reciprocal nature of the relationship. The logic is that these terms more strongly reinforce principles of localisation and challenge assumptions about where knowledge and capacity reside.

Even prior to using these terms or wider discussions in the sector on ‘capacity sharing’, this was already a strong feature of CAFOD’s HCS approach, which emphasises organic, independent exchanges between local and national NGOs. CAFOD facilitates mentoring between LNGO staff, joint emergency simulations and training, international peer exchange visits and flexible grants for in-country peer-to-peer activities. Local partners lead on deciding priorities and approaches.

According to the independent review of CAFOD’s HCS work, building stronger links and connections between national and local organisations in the Caritas confederation has gone beyond strengthening individual organisations to strengthening networks. For example, in Zimbabwe local NGO partners supported each other with the induction of their newly formed boards of Directors and the development of an introduction package for new employees. In Nigeria, the Catholic Caritas Foundation of Nigeria (CCFN) facilitated an online write-shop to help other national and local partners develop their HR policies. In Myanmar, one local-level diocesan organisation (KMSS Pathein) supported another in a different part of the country (KMSS Kalay) on establishing and strengthening feedback and complaints handling mechanisms, humanitarian capacity self-assessment and community-led procurement during flood response.

These links have also led to collaboration between partners. In Zimbabwe following Cyclone Idai, Caritas Harare seconded three staff and provided support vehicles to Caritas Mutare. During a flood response in Nigeria, a staff member from Caritas Maiduguri was seconded to Caritas Idah, which

had not previously responded to emergencies. Local-to-local peer learning and capacity-sharing has extended beyond Caritas national organisations and their local partners to benefit a wider range of national and local civil society partners. For example, KMSS Myanmar is working with other national and local NGOs to cascade local-to-local capacity-strengthening funded under the country-level LIFT funding mechanism.

Box 1 Promoting localisation through LNGO Focal Points

CAFOD's PEOPLE project (preparing for emergencies through strengthening organisational procedures, learning and exchange) used a Training of Trainers (ToT) approach enabling Focal Points from 10 local organisations to roll out training within their organisations during the project, and build an internal resource beyond the project. In Myanmar, local partner Focal Points supported over successive rounds of HCS now have a dual role: working both for their own organisation and supporting other Church-linked partners in the country with capacity-strengthening activities. Focal Points from KMSS Yangon and KMSS Patheingyi supported other partners in the development of Emergency Preparedness Plans. Supporting Focal Points to lead organisational strengthening activities builds confidence and develops their leadership and coordination skills, which can benefit future emergency response work.

The term 'capacity sharing or exchange' also implies a more equal role between international agencies involved with national partners. The Core Humanitarian Standard acknowledges the importance of learning from local actors, and many international agencies recognise this as integral to a partnership approach. In CAFOD's experience, some of the most interesting capacity exchange efforts have taken place in the context of learning across longer-term development, resilience and humanitarian efforts. For example, as part of a recent mapping of anticipatory action programming, CAFOD has learned from the experience of local partners in Central America, who support indigenous networks and systems in early warning and early action linked to climate change. CAFOD is following up to share this learning about anticipatory action both internally among CAFOD staff and with other local NGO partners globally. Similar processes have happened on issues relating to gender justice and agroecology in humanitarian crises.

From localisation to local leadership and capacity-strengthening

The potential links between capacity-strengthening and localisation and/or local leadership of humanitarian action are manifold, but they cannot be assumed. Increased support for locally led approaches, more explicitly articulating local leadership and localisation objectives and investing more in capacity sharing and exchange all offer promising ways forward. More transformative change – both with individual organisations and within specific contexts – has come about through inter-agency collaboration and sustained effort at multiple levels. In the experience of CAFOD and its partners, it's when we link support for the organisational development of individual NGOs to

collective efforts on capacity-strengthening and wider shifts in power and resources that more systemic change beyond individual organisations starts to happen. Donors need to incentivise this, and national NGO partners need to call for this collectively, as there is a limit to what any one INGO or UN agency can achieve with its partners alone. As local actors define capacity-strengthening priorities and lead joint efforts, this may increasingly bring to the fore issues including domestic resource mobilisation and volunteerism, which have received less international attention. It may also challenge assumptions about what the priorities are to foster local leadership of crisis response; depending on the extent to which local actors seek recognition and funding from international actors versus their own national and local constituencies. In reflecting critically on the links between capacity-strengthening and localisation, we have also underscored how the very concept and practice of ‘localisation’ itself can be problematic, and skew things towards international priorities. As such, working towards capacity-strengthening in support of local leadership might be a better way forward.

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Strengthening local actors in north-east Nigeria: a nexus approach

Elise Baudot Queguiner, Jubril Shittu and Esther Christen

A strong and resilient civil society in Nigeria is essential to help address the needs of its most vulnerable populations. Even beyond the calls of the localisation agenda, the massive humanitarian and development challenges, particularly in Nigeria’s north-east, accelerated by the repercussions of the Covid-19 pandemic, demand focused attention on increasing local response capacities and strengthening local actors to achieve their potential.

In north-east Nigeria, as well as other high-profile emergency contexts, local NGOs contend with project dependency, little or no unearmarked financing, high staff turnover, and limited institutional capacities, which all render their long-term development and sustainability tenuous. Yet, longer-term institutional capacity-strengthening and partnership initiatives that focus on Nigeria’s frontline responders are rare and local NGOs have few readily available support centres or resources to turn to.



Life skills session in Nigeria. Credit: Chad International

The initiative Promoting Local Response Capacities and Partnerships (PLRCAP) in Nigeria, developed in 2019 by the Nigeria INGO Forum (NIF), Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC) and Ascentium Consulting, helps redress some of these gaps. Through a longer-term integrated training, mentoring and partnering approach, spanning the ‘triple nexus’, the initiative builds on recommendations and opportunities highlighted in localisation reviews. It helps Nigerian local and national actors to construct paths towards organisational sustainability and increased humanitarian response capacity, and encourages new partnerships.

Stepping up to meet Nigeria’s humanitarian needs

North-east Nigeria continues to grapple with a complex humanitarian crisis now in its 11th year. Against a backdrop of poverty and development challenges, it is predicted that 8.7 million people will require urgent assistance in the conflict-affected BAY states of Nigeria (Borno, Adamawa and Yobe) during 2021². Meeting the scale of these needs remains a critical challenge requiring enhanced engagement and a seamless complementarity between local, national and international actors.

² OCHA Situation report, 4 February 2021.

More than 352 registered local NGOs serve on the frontline of aid delivery in the BAY states, providing critical assistance across all sectors of the humanitarian, development and peace nexus.³ Several mapping efforts conducted over the years suggest that, while needs and funding have significantly increased the number of local responders, many remain limited in reach and scope. Too often actors are either recently formed and new to humanitarian work or to the thematic area of response or are limited in surge capacities. Reviews also found institutional fragility marked by broad under-resourced ambitions and undefined strategic plans and operating models. Few had established or identified core cost structures or viable funding models.⁴

In addition, capacity-building efforts were found to be fragmented and focused essentially on implementing programme objectives. Despite partnership discourse, terms and allocation of risk favoured funding partners and followed a subcontracting logic, with relations driven largely by operational objectives.⁵ Recommendations called for more equal partnership approaches, focused mentorship and longer-term accompaniment of national actors, as well as the promotion of self-assessment to generate evidence-based action plans.⁶

Fostering organisational sustainability and partnership

The development of PLRCAP was initiated and steered by field-based staff of SDC and Ascenteum Consulting jointly with NIF in 2019 as a demand-driven, longer-term institutional capacity-strengthening programme targeting local NGOs working in humanitarian contexts. It was designed in consultation with local actors and NIF members (INGOs). The programme emerged from a desire to advance a promising opportunity to test a nexus approach in a pilot initiative to strengthen institutional capacities in response to localisation reviews and findings in Nigeria.

The initiative uses a personalised integrated learning approach, combining training, twinning, and mentorship to advance organisational sustainability⁷ and promote partnership between local and international NGOs. Drawing on Nigerian private sector and development expertise, the objective was to equip Nigerian NGOs with additional skills, knowledge and social capital to better survive

3 As per current comprehensive civil society organisation (CSO) mapping being conducted in north-east Nigeria by NORCAP.

4 See among others: Christian Aid, CARE, Tearfund, ActionAid, CAFOD and Oxfam (2019) *Accelerating localisation through partnerships: recommendations for operational practices that strengthen the leadership of national and local actors in partnership-based humanitarian action in Nigeria* (www.christianaid.org.uk/sites/default/files/2019-02/Accelerating-localisation-research-summary-nigeria.pdf); Workstream 2 (2019) *Mission report from Nigeria: localisation workstream demonstrator country field mission* (<https://interagencystandingcommittee.org/grand-bargain/mission-report-nigeria-localisation-workstream-demonstrator-country-field-mission>); Bioforce Institute (n.d.) 'Improving crisis response by strengthening collaboration between international and national aid actors'.

5 See for example: www.christianaid.org.uk/resources/nigerian-national-localization-framework and www.christianaid.org.uk/sites/default/files/2019-02/Accelerating-localisation-research-summary-nigeria.pdf.

6 See among others the Nigeria Localisation Framework (www.christianaid.org.uk/resources/nigerian-national-localization-framework).

7 The programme defines organisational sustainability as the ability to deliver the organisation's mandate in the face of short-term challenges.

and grow amid changing aid dynamics and the complex context of north-east Nigeria. Stakeholder consultation lasted throughout the initiative, including through surveys and interviews. Exchange was regularly fostered.

The pilot phase included 13 Nigerian NGOs and a recently formed local NGO network for women-led organisations, their international partners and capacity-building experts. Participants were selected through a competitive application process. Criteria for selection included proven humanitarian footprint and experience, clarity of organisational ambition and development needs, and legal registration. International twinning partners were INGOs with large operations in north-east Nigeria that had a particular interest in supporting the localisation agenda. The selected facilitators and experts, 14 in total, were largely drawn from the donor community, academic and training institutions and the private sector. All were well versed in working with NGOs and small- and medium-sized enterprises in Nigeria.

Facilitating learning and knowledge-sharing

Training courses and subsequent tailor-made mentoring sessions were founded on the needs and requests of participants and best practices in strengthening NGO sustainability and organisational development. The approach was grounded in the NGOs' desire to grow their institutions and expand their financing to become, as said explicitly by some, 'equal or better than the INGOs'. Courses were tested through pre- and post-learning assessments, satisfaction surveys and individual interviews.

In terms of course and mentorship content, emphasis was placed on several key thematic areas, including strategic planning, financial sustainability, project development, communication, governance and management. The subsequent mentoring session proved invaluable in providing an opportunity to practically import the learning. The programme concluded with a training module in the Bioforce/Oxfam 'Taking the Lead' methodology, providing a tool for organisational self-assessment and action planning to support continued growth.⁸

One of the key areas of focus was strategic planning, and how non-profit organisations can develop and implement successful longer-term strategies. For many of the NGOs involved, strategic planning was either seen as a luxury or meant documenting broad ambitions and programmatic activities. In contrast, the programme sought to build strategic planning as an essential leadership tool to navigate complex, dynamic environments and effectively manage and build scarce resources. Using tools like PESTLE⁹ and 'strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats' (SWOT) analysis, participants sought solutions to current challenges, including decreases in humanitarian funding, increased national NGO competition and access constraints. For some, the intended

⁸ www.bioforce.org/en/taking-the-lead-local-stakeholders-back-at-the-centre-of-crisis-response.

⁹ The PESTLE tool analyses the macro-economic environment, including political, economic, social, technology, legal and environmental factors, helping to set out trends and likely impact on the organisation.

course of action was to limit the breadth of activities and increase quality and reputation, while for others it was to expand their sectoral focus and funding opportunities (e.g. in Covid-19 community awareness-raising) and tighten links with international partners and donors.

Over the course of the PLRCAP engagements, we have had to reflect on a number of operational standards and procedures, as well as our structure. Particularly, we revised our organisational structure to depict an agile supported environment where functional staff are dedicated to generalist cross-functional teams to encourage agile delivery of project deliverables (Nigerian local NGO working in the north-east).

Another key area of focus was financial sustainability through better financial management as well as diversifying resourcing streams. The challenge for most was securing unearmarked funding and covering core costs: few participants had analysed, budgeted or developed resourcing plans to cover core costs. With no reserves, few if any could survive project breaks, let alone invest in their growth. Through the project, participants were guided on better management and budgeting of core costs and given ideas on how to better present and justify these costs to donors. For many it was an eye-opener that an NGO could engage in revenue-generating activities. Participants were supported in idea generation and analysis through the use of the basic tools of social enterprise, including Effectuation¹⁰ and Business Canvas Modeling.¹¹

We had built on already initiated conversations for socially sustainable ventures to support organisational operations outside the realms of donor funding. This was a plus for us as even though we had commenced talks of this nature, the PLRCAP initiative supported us with a compendium of knowledge, considerations, tools and tailored mentorship to guide us in this regard. We were able to use the Business Model Canvas to shape our thoughts and ideas and prioritise them so as to know how to fund them when opportunities present themselves (Nigerian local NGO working in the north-east).

Participants were also supported to draw up communication and branding strategies, which involved defining communication priorities and ‘telling an impactful story’. In addition, the effective use of social media and building functioning websites, including the mechanics of online giving, had direct practical import through, for example, the activation of ‘donate now’ buttons, content critique and development, and the application of free online tools to better ensure an active social media presence.

Finally, the challenges of human resource management were addressed. Coping mechanisms to deal with high staff turnover and lack of human resource expertise and systems were shared, as

10 <https://innovationenglish.sites.ku.dk/model/sarasvathy-effectuation>.

11 www.strategyzer.com/canvas.

were future options for better addressing these needs through outsourcing and building innovative partnerships. Emphasis was placed on identifying critical posts, succession planning and effective use of volunteers.

The most mind blowing is the succession plan strategy in the human resource management training and importance of having a succession plan in place against unforeseen circumstances (Nigerian local NGO working in the north-east).

Unfortunately, due to the Covid-19 pandemic, all trainings and mentorship sessions had to be moved online. Although this allowed more participants from each organisation to attend the courses and an increased number of training and mentorship sessions, participants struggled with connectivity and felt that interactions between themselves and the facilitators were limited. To address these challenges, course recordings and materials were made available online. Certain trainings, especially the ‘Taking the Lead’ facilitation courses, were substantially adapted in terms of content and methodology, with greater emphasis placed on written materials and smaller breakout sessions.

Fostering partnership and coalition-building

The PLRCAP approach also sought to promote exchanges, build partnerships and encourage coalition-building between local/national and international NGOs and between local and national organisations. It is hoped that these new dialogues will continue. Partnership opportunities were also fostered with relevant networks, including the West African Civil Society Institute and the Global Fund for Community Foundations, offering further learning opportunities and support structures focused on key components of NGO sustainability. Opportunities were also arranged to enable sharing and learning among local and national actors working across the nexus in north-east Nigeria. Case studies and meet-and-greet sessions were organised with local NGOs who had attained greater financial sustainability through building alternative revenue streams, including Nuru Nigeria, Society for Family Health, the Hasske Foundation and the Sophia Essahmed Foundation.

Finally, the international partners of the participants (all NIF members) were invited to join the training sessions as ‘twinning partners’, to input into curriculum development and support their partnering organisations in coaching and follow-up. To what extent the twinning model has been successful and whether it will leverage future collaboration will be assessed in the final evaluation.

Looking to the future

PLRCAP has highlighted the demand for focused, longer-term institution building and affirms that supporting local actors is a nexus opportunity. The approach has shown the utility of combining the complementary expertise of the humanitarian sector with private and development sector competence in institutional strengthening and efforts to design locally owned solutions. It has also

demonstrated the relevance of national private sector engagement in helping NGO leaders navigate the complexities of running their institutions with few resources in difficult dynamic contexts. The focus on agility and adjusting to changing external financing patterns and building alternative revenue streams was seen as timely and relevant, especially given an anticipated decline in humanitarian funding. There was also a keen interest noted in the skills and tools traditionally used by social entrepreneurs, an area that offers many opportunities for future development.

The initiative, co-funded by SDC and OFDA¹², has just completed its pilot year. The second phase will involve scaling up and deepening its approach, including expanding its base of experts, fostering further partnerships with the development sector, social entrepreneurs and the private sector, and working specifically with local NGO networks. The next phase will be informed by lessons learned, an external evaluation of the pilot initiative and wide consultations with local actors. Longer term, PLRCAP also aims to broaden its donor base and link with development actors. In addition to SDC, which is committed to maintaining its financial support to scale up the initiative to promote and advance localisation efforts, other donors have offered financial support, including two INGO consortia. PLRCAP looks forward to continuing to hone and improve its approach, and to serving as a helping hand to the national and local organisations that are so critical to meeting the needs of the most vulnerable.

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Partners not participants: reflections on capacity-strengthening projects in Afghanistan

Mohammad Rateb Shaheed and Isabella Leyh

Introduction

Anyone who has ever participated in training knows the feeling: it's been an interesting couple of days but, as the session comes to an end, you are already mentally trawling through the list of neglected tasks awaiting you at the office. There is rarely time to pause and reflect on what you've learned, let alone change anything. Now imagine that your organisation doesn't have

12 OFDA is the former US Office of Foreign Disaster Assistance, which was recently incorporated into the new US Bureau for Humanitarian Assistance (BHA).

any sustainable core funding, a necessity for strategic thinking and organisational change. You don't have the luxury to think about anything except getting your projects done, and now you need to fit four or five days' work into two. Under the Grand Bargain, humanitarians committed to 'achieve by 2020 a global, aggregated target of at least 25% of humanitarian funding to local and national responders as directly as possible'. By that deadline, only 1% of humanitarian funding to Afghanistan reached national and local NGOs.¹³ This means that a reliance on project-to-project funding is the reality for most national NGOs (NNGOs) in Afghanistan.

The Afghan NGOs we talked to said that the absence of government support, lack of sustainable funding and the need to focus on project implementation are the primary challenges to enhancing their organisational capacity. This creates a vicious cycle: a lack of core funding prevents them from strengthening their internal systems, but international donors want evidence of stronger systems to boost funding. So-called 'capacity-strengthening' projects are seen by staff of Afghan NGOs as a chance to break that cycle.

Reflecting on lessons learned from implementing capacity-strengthening projects with NNGOs in Afghanistan, this article argues for a significant shift in how we conceptualise and implement them. Recognising the lag in systemic funding commitments, we need to minimise the resources NNGOs must bring to the table in order to participate in capacity-strengthening projects, while maximising the efficiency and relevance of the outputs produced. To do that, any such initiative needs to focus on sustainability and put the NNGO's expectations, strengths and needs at the centre of design and implementation. This offers an opportunity to counter inherent power imbalances, recognising that NNGOs are teachers as well as learners. While the article focuses on the Afghan context, the recommendations will hopefully resonate across the humanitarian sector.

The challenges to sustainable change for Afghan NGOs

The link between sustainable funding and organisational effectiveness is critical to running an NGO. Afghan NGOs bemoan that, with funding completely tied to short-term projects, they struggle to retain experienced staff who tend to look for better-paid and more secure opportunities with international organisations, taking their skills and knowledge with them. When implementing a capacity-strengthening project with a group of NNGOs, the focal points for the majority of partners changed at least once within a year, as staff moved on to work with international organisations or were let go as a result of waning project funding. The replacement process often took months, significantly hampering progress. Meanwhile, the outputs of organisational capacity-strengthening projects, such as new processes, manuals or systems, are not always used or implemented after the project ends. Between backfilling roles and preparing for the next project, there simply isn't the time.



Neighbourhood in Kabul. Credit: Teseum

Research has shown that donors and international partners often don't fully understand NNGOs' needs, expectations and existing capacity, and don't engage with them sufficiently to diagnose capacity gaps.¹⁴ Consequently, they miss opportunities to form a sense of mutual ownership or to establish a common understanding of the short- and long-term benefits of capacity-strengthening projects. We also found in Afghanistan that capacity-gap analysis is often limited to generic structured questionnaires that don't capture many of the practical challenges national organisations face. This results in a top-down approach, with international partners encouraging NNGOs to replicate their own policies and standard operating procedures, without sufficiently taking into account the existing capacities and unique contexts of NNGOs. Afghan NNGOs often operate in rural areas on the frontlines of instability and conflict. This brings an array of practical and security challenges far removed from the realities of many international partners and trainers and puts them at odds with international partners' guidelines and procedures. A lack of

14 See for example Barbelet, V. (2019) *Rethinking capacity and complementarity for a more local humanitarian action*. HPG Report. London: ODI (<https://odi.org/en/publications/rethinking-capacity-and-complementarity-for-a-more-local-humanitarian-action>).

collaboration, mutual understanding and buy-in from both sides very often results in just another day of training that the NNGO will agree to attend, resulting in new policies or procedures that will be binned due to limited resources and operational realities.

Our experience indicates that the sustainability of capacity-strengthening projects may also be hindered by the absence of impact measurement frameworks that centre on their long-term success. It is rare that international and national partners must report against indicators that measure the sustainability of such projects, looking at how outputs will be (or have been) utilised after the project ends. Without this, 'success' is supply-focused and measured in outputs that may be meaningless, an evaluation practice that plagues the whole humanitarian sector. Indicators of how many people attended a training, for example, tell us nothing about whether that training led to any changes.

Breaking the cycle will take time, money and a culture of listening

We do not claim to have all the answers. But our experiences in Afghanistan have generated substantial learning and some practical recommendations that may be useful to donors, facilitators and NNGOs.

Donors

Funders can ensure that participating in capacity-strengthening work is not a burden for organisations. This means that any such effort includes money for NNGOs to cover (a) staff time to partake in meetings and trainings and (b) the implementation of longer-term project outputs, such as production and roll-out of manuals, policies, tools or other mechanisms. This can be done by ensuring that NNGOs have access to sustainable funding to cover core activities and costs (preferred) or, where this is not possible yet, including a budget line in capacity-strengthening project budgets for NNGOs to cover their participation and implementation costs. One way to combine these and perhaps speed up the journey to core funding, would be to provide non-project funding for a meaningful period, coupled with a requirement to undertake certain systems-strengthening activities. As we are not seeing sustainable direct funding flowing to NNGOs in the short term, beefing up project budgets with a share going to NNGOs becomes all the more critical to the success of capacity-strengthening efforts.

Donors can of course do more than just fund. Project staff often spend many weeks a year in trainings, time they cannot spend on assisting crisis-affected communities. Where possible, donors should strive to combine capacity-strengthening projects to reduce the time commitment demanded of NNGOs and help them to plan. For example, in one case a donor asked the authors to combine training and policy development for two separate capacity-strengthening projects, focusing on monitoring and evaluation (M&E) practices and systems of accountability to affected people. This not only enabled the trainers to demonstrate and reinforce the important link between the two subject areas, but also minimised the NNGO time commitment while maximising the usefulness of the resulting policy. Donors should also be flexible, enabling NNGOs to pilot their

capacity-strengthening ideas within their funded programmes. Staff from one NNGO recalled how an INGO and intermediary donor had refused to alter the project's monitoring instruments to include an additional set of questions developed as part of a capacity-strengthening project. This hampered and delayed the NNGO's ability to practise new skills.

Donors should also include participating NGOs' feedback in partners' measurement frameworks. This can be done by adding simple perception-based indicators to track training objectives and outcomes. Ideally, data against these indicators needs to be tracked beyond the end of the project to measure its sustainability. A six-month post-programme feedback survey sent to participating NNGOs, for example, would allow international partners to understand the lasting contribution (or not) of the training and support provided.

Tracking impact through perception

In addition to tracking the usual indicators around satisfaction with and usefulness of training and outputs, perception indicators measuring participants' feelings regarding participation, quality of relationships with trainers and sustainability of project outputs should be added to capacity-strengthening measurement frameworks. Here a few suggestions:

- Percentage of clients who feel their opinion was taken into account in the design of the project and/or the project output.
- Percentage of clients who believe they will use the project output in their future work.
- Percentage of clients who think the facilitators made participants feel comfortable to ask questions or raise concerns.
- Percentage of clients who have continued using the project output six months after the project ended.
- Percentage of clients who feel that implementing the project output is adequately resourced six months after the project ended.

To ensure that the sustainability of a project is tracked, it is advisable to track some indicators not merely at the end of the project, but six months later in a post-project survey.

From trainers to facilitators

For those international entities implementing capacity-strengthening projects, the starting point should always be to recognise national partners' existing expertise. Room should be created to listen to their expectations for the project. This seems obvious, but not doing so implies that capacity is present at the international but not the local level. This is simply not true and is predicated by power imbalances rooted in the legacy of colonial ideas that have long underpinned the humanitarian system. Many capacity-strengthening processes do, after all, simply aim to make local processes better 'fit' with those designed by an international system. Understanding capacities must go beyond a simple questionnaire to incorporate open discussions with the

team, desk reviews and workshops. Projects that are designed collaboratively, highlighting both the strengths and self-identified weaknesses of the partner, stand a better chance of producing sustainable outputs.

Having national partners take the reins in the design of capacity-strengthening projects requires flexibility, but greatly increases the project's usefulness to NNGOs. An example of this was a national partner that was supposed to be trained on the practical components of M&E, including field visits and data collection. At the onset of the project, it quickly became apparent to the facilitator that staff already possessed in-depth understanding and expertise on the topic. They expressed a wish to strengthen their capacities on strategic M&E planning and policy development instead. That the international organisation did not identify and address this capacity gap in the planning stage is also the result of them providing their M&E plans and templates to national partners instead of asking them to develop their own forms and tools. This practice, which seems to be the norm rather than the exception across the response, reinforces national organisations' dependence on their international partners. On this occasion, due to the flexibility of the international partner and donor, the focus of the training was shifted and an M&E policy developed in tandem with the national partners.

After the planning stage, collecting regular feedback from participants needs to become a cornerstone of all capacity-strengthening efforts. This complements the outcome-tracking mentioned above. It means asking how participants would prefer to give feedback throughout the project and customising the approach to their preferences. This is especially relevant if the capacity trainer is not yet familiar with the cultural norms and practices around voicing honest feedback or complaints. All feedback received should be discussed with participants to co-formulate recommendations for course correction.

The sustainability of capacity-strengthening projects depends on whether enough space is created to brainstorm together on how the new approach or system can be applied across the organisation into the future. This might mean translating an organisational strategy into concrete action points for specific projects or transferring new skills or tools applied in a pilot project to other programmes. Depending on the level of support needed, time should be invested in developing action plans or training teams on how to include the new tools or skills in future proposals and budgets. In the above example, future-proofing the work meant assisting the NNGO in operationalising their new M&E policy and templates in their day-to-day operations through regular coaching sessions and office visits. In another project that focused on strengthening the NNGO's accountability to affected people practices through the systematic collection of feedback data in a chosen pilot project, this meant developing a standardised set of feedback questions that the organisation can apply across all its projects. This ensures that the skills needed to collect and respond to feedback do not remain within a single project and team.

National NGOs

Naturally, NNGOs also carry responsibility for the success of capacity-strengthening projects. Buy-in from senior management is critical, as they need to sign off before new approaches and tools are rolled out. The project's focal points need to inform all levels of staff about the purpose of the project, giving them a chance to ask questions, provide input and plan their work so they can attend relevant training or meetings. Ideally, NNGOs should assign at least two focal points to each project, to safeguard against high staff turnover and ensure the preservation of skills and knowledge.

NNGOs need to know and exercise their rights to be active participants in both the design and implementation of capacity-strengthening projects. They should state their expectations and their identified strengths and weaknesses and share what methods and approaches have worked (or not worked) from previous capacity-strengthening efforts. They must insist on having channels in place to give their feedback and make active use of these channels, while not shying away from openly communicating when they do not see the value of, or simply lack the current capacity to undertake, a proposed project. This is not happening yet. Attempts to gather honest and critical feedback from national partners, in the form of lessons learned sessions or feedback surveys, often do not amount to much more than a round of praise and thanks. This highlights the prevailing power imbalance between the international and national. National partners might not feel comfortable to speak their minds and discuss the challenges they face for fear of reduced support or funding from international partners and donors (in their case often one and the same). An open feedback culture needs to be built over time and relies on a trusting relationship between donors, international partners and NNGOs. It requires a shift in power dynamics. Involving national partners more systematically in the design and implementation of capacity-strengthening projects is an important step in that direction.

Lastly, a commitment from NNGOs to implement the project's co-designed changes for the long term is critical. A short letter of understanding signed by both parties at the beginning of a project, detailing the jointly agreed-upon responsibilities and deliverables, can be a simple tool to ensure that all parties are aware of their roles and can be held accountable for fulfilling them. For example, when some national partners stopped delivering the outputs necessary for the continuation of a multi-year capacity-strengthening project, it became increasingly difficult to hold them to their commitment because there was no written agreement.

Being held to account

To ensure the success and sustainability of capacity-strengthening projects, active accountability from all parties is required. Donors' main accountability lies in ensuring that NNGOs have sufficient resources not just to participate in capacity-strengthening projects but to implement their outputs and ensuring that their feedback is used to measure success. Trainers and facilitators are accountable for properly engaging national partners, co-designing programmes that make

sense and taking feedback into account. NNGOs need to offer their expertise, feedback and active participation throughout the process, because ultimately they are accountable for translating outputs into organisational change.

At the heart of all of this is a systemic shift in attitudes, where national actors are seen as partners not participants, and knowledge is exchanged instead of transferred.

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Empowering local NGOs: the story of Syria Relief

Mazen Alhousseiny

Despite the gravity of the crisis in Syria, the international humanitarian system has failed to address the humanitarian consequences of the conflict. This forced non-humanitarian actors in Syria to form community-based organisations to collect donations from their social networks in order to support those affected by the conflict. With the engagement and commitment of Syrians in the diaspora, these initiatives expanded, and new humanitarian volunteers, whether expatriates or Syrians still in the country, felt the need to register and legalise their commitment. Syria Relief is one of these newly formed NGOs.

Syria Relief operated initially through local knowledge and local contacts to deliver emergency aid, including tents and food for displaced people. However, according to its chairman and co-founder, Dr Ayman Jundi, 'We realised that the conflict would be a protracted one, and that humanitarian needs would soon be spiralling. So we decided to set up an organisation that can formally and transparently raise the funds necessary to deliver aid to vulnerable communities in hard-to-reach areas, which would include emergency medical care as well as skills and capacity building for medical staff inside Syria'.

At the beginning of the response, newly formed Syrian-led NGOs operated on a small scale armed with limited knowledge and collecting funds through the limited channels available to them, buying essential items for families from local supermarkets and distributing them through volunteers. Few international organisations were active in the response, but the number began to increase from mid-2014 following UN Resolution 2165, which allowed cross-border operations into

non-government areas without Syrian government approval. More funds became available from institutional donors, either directly to INGOs/UN agencies or through the Country-Based Pooled Fund (CBPF) managed by OCHA.

Syria Relief started working with INGOs in 2013. One of its first international partners was Save the Children. Funding from Save the Children covered distribution costs (mostly food assistance and other commodities), and basic training on topics such as safeguarding, cash and voucher programming and communications. This vital partnership changed the way Syria Relief operated, from a newly formed charity with a passion for philanthropy as its main resource and motivation to a more systematic operation working to international standards and in line with donor compliance requirements.

The capacity development process

In April 2014, Save the Children set up a special unit to organise and develop its partnership activities, comprising dedicated staff from each function and department within Save the Children International, including monitoring, evaluation and learning, logistics, finance, safety and security and HR. All were local staff, led by an expatriate. This structure encouraged local partners to be more open and increased trust in the relationship. Training expanded to cover operational management skills, stress management, monitoring and evaluation, project and asset management, first aid, distribution, psychological first aid, Hostile Environment Awareness Training (HEAT) and finance. Focused on individual rather than organisational development, the training expanded the horizons of Syria Relief's staff, resulting in higher standards and a clearer understanding of the contractual commitments and technical requirements of partnering with INGOs and UN agencies.

In 2015, the partnership unit led the development of a unified organisational capacity assessment tool (OCAT) for INGOs working in cross-border operations from Turkey. The user-friendly tool was designed to simplify the complicated process of assessing the capabilities of local NGOs by reducing the need for repeated assessments for each partnership between a local NGO and an INGO. The tool has also encouraged local NGOs to conduct self-assessments on their organisations, increasing awareness of their own capacities and how to improve them. The unit also designed special stand-alone proposals focused on developing partners' capacity at an organisational level, using grants and funding from institutional donors including the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC) and the IKEA Foundation.

Through multi-year grants between 2016 and 2019, Save the Children coached local partners on the OCAT process and encouraged them to use it as a self-assessment tool, with the results reflected in Organisational Capacity Development (OCD) strategies aimed at addressing institutional gaps. Each partner, including Syria Relief, was asked to design concept notes for small grants to meet organisational needs identified through the OCA and in OCD plans. SCI provided coaching and mentorship to help local partners look beyond project implementation capacities and focus on developing the foundations for sustainable operations.

In Syria Relief's case, funding was used to develop the capacity of field staff in Syria who had no access to professional training due to cross-border travel restrictions, enhance its systems to match institutional donors' compliance requirements and strategic planning. The first grant was used to hire a qualified consultant to train the NGO's senior country-based management team on USAID rules and regulations, with a view to reviewing and modifying operational policies and procedures to match its strict requirements. Syria Relief also used the grant to develop its monitoring, evaluation, accountability and learning (MEAL) capacity in line with the Core Humanitarian Standard on Quality and Accountability (CHS). The second grant funded training for field staff inside Syria on these new policies and procedures, ensuring that they were adopted and adhered to.

The third grant supported Syria Relief in developing its first holistic strategy for the forthcoming three years. The plan has significantly helped Syria Relief as an organisation to design its own path, rather than being donor-driven or overly influenced by continual changes to the context. The final grant within the scope of capacity development was used to establish Syria Relief's own organisational development unit in order to mentor and support local community-based organisations (CBOs) and civil society organisations (CSOs), as well as continuing training for Syria-based staff on more advanced skills, such as management and reporting.



Harasta in the governorate of Rural Damascus, Syria. Credit: Ammar Saboh/ICRC

Syria Relief's localisation approach

Over the last two years, Syria Relief has achieved promising results in terms of its aim of greater localisation. For Syria Relief, developing local organisations, strengthening grassroots CBOs and enhancing the capacity of local NGOs is one of the goals defined in its first strategic plan. Syria Relief is now not just a beneficiary of training and capacity enhancement activities, but is also transferring these skills, experiences and best practices to other NGOs and CBOs. Organisational development activities in 2019 and 2020 targeting local and international NGOs covered individual capacity enhancement (i.e. training on managerial and operational topics such as project management, partnership management, proposal development, report writing and management skills), technical training (i.e. hostile environment awareness training (HEST) and Sphere), organisational capacity enhancement (i.e. development of policies and procedures, systems for finance, supply chain, project management), and consultations and workshops on change management and the future of Syrian NGOs working from Turkey. These activities benefited approximately 40 NGOs and CBOs, assisting 450 aid workers from the Syrian context. With dual levels of support (individual and organisational), Syria Relief aims to ensure a strong and healthy operational response for the vulnerable individuals who rely on those NGOs.

Syria Relief is integrating capacity development with advocacy for more localised responses through the networks and fora it is a member of. The organisation is an active participant in national, regional and global networks such as the Syrian NGO Alliance (SNA), the North West Syria (NWS) NGO Forum and the Syrian Networks League (SNL) in Turkey, the Syria INGO Regional Forum (SIRF) in Jordan, the International Council of Voluntary Agencies (ICVA), the Network for Empowered Aid Response (NEAR) and the Grand Bargain. Through these memberships, Syria Relief advocates for the rights of vulnerable Syrians, while implementing partnership principles and ensuring that localisation is pursued within the Syrian context.

We have worked closely with other organisations committed to localisation and local empowerment to establish a platform to advocate for the importance to local NGOs of partnership principles and capacity development. As chair of the platform, Syria Relief has worked hard to ensure its sustainability, and that its recommendations are adopted by the Humanitarian Country Team through embedding the platform within a working group under the NGO Forum. Syria Relief has also been chosen by ICVA and NEAR/IRC to be part of their revision committees providing feedback on products to measure, promote and encourage localisation, such as ICVA's Localisation in Humanitarian Leadership Report and IRC's Collaborative Strategy and Program Design Guide. In addition, Syria Relief was selected by the Grand Bargain localisation workstream to co-lead the Syria country dialogue and facilitate the participation of Syrian NGOs in the process and the writing of the report.

Our current responsibility is to help maintain a strong civil society in Syria that can help in the rebuilding of the country once the conflict ends. To that end, Syria Relief is working on strengthening the capacity of local CBOs, civil services directorates and grassroots charities, engaging directly with them to enhance localisation. The approach is comprised of two integrated pillars:

Pillar 1: Syria Relief provides ongoing capacity-strengthening support to local NGOs via its organisational development unit, allowing it to share knowledge and experience in three areas (technical, operational and organisational) through training, coaching, mentoring and consultancy support. The main aim of this pillar is to develop the capacity of these organisations and enable them to diversify funding streams, in addition to fulfilling the main roles of NGOs during the reconstruction phase in post-conflict countries.

Pillar 2: Syria Relief ensures that local NGOs' voices are heard and respected through participating in national, regional and global forums and highlighting the need for localisation, reflecting the progress made by INGOs, the UN and donors working in targeted contexts; and developing research showing the impact of localisation in targeted contexts.

This approach aims to share the lessons and best practices Syria Relief has accrued through working with its partners, similar to Save the Children's approach to working with Syria Relief previously.

Mazen Alhousseiny was working as the Organisational Development Manager with Syria Relief at the time of writing. He supported the capacity-strengthening of Syria Relief as well as other Syrian CBOs.

From a group of volunteers to a local NGO: CEDIER's journey in support of the protection of children in eastern Democratic Republic of Congo

Augustin Titi Rutanuka and Armel Rusake Rutebeza

For more than a decade the territory of Uvira in eastern Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) has been characterised by inter-ethnic conflicts over access to and management of land and related resources. Additional agropastoral conflicts, power struggles and inter-community tensions have led to cycles of violence, including murder, abduction, rape, serious violations of children's rights, and destruction of property, assets, crops and livestock. Local armed groups linked to different communities, and which interact with foreign armed groups, have been fighting each other for years. These activities have resulted in near-permanent insecurity in Uvira, leading to displacement and shelter-, food-, health- and protection-related needs. International humanitarian actors have also found it difficult to access the area and respond effectively.

Children in Uvira were particularly badly affected by this insecurity. As well as suffering from high rates of severe and moderate acute malnutrition, children's rights were ignored and violated – especially girls who faced early marriage (which was perceived as normal), low school enrolment rates and difficult labour (e.g. young girls carrying heavy loads to the market).

From a group of volunteers to a Congolese non-profit organisation

In 2002, a group of volunteers (including three women)¹⁵ were moved by the situation of children living on the Katobo plateaus in the Uvira Territory in South Kivu. The group, which would in 2002 become the Centre for the Integral Development of the Rural Child (CEDIER) (a registered non-profit association), initially had no formal structure, no understanding of the humanitarian sector and its architecture, no financial or physical resources and very little support from within their community. Yet, even in these early years, the volunteers were able to provide some support to vulnerable children in their communities – they identified those children that were malnourished, shared information with humanitarian and state actors able to respond and referred and transported children to the nutrition centre. Humanitarian and state actors did not have access to the communities where the volunteers were working and thus, while the volunteers did not have the capacity to treat the children, they could advocate for them, share information and refer them to those who could.

CEDIER was officially recognised by the authorities in 2005, when it registered legally and developed its vision of 'a sub-region of the Great Lakes where children are flourishing in their villages'. CEDIER decided to formalise its existence after interacting with humanitarian actors who advised them to do so in order to receive funding from and partner with international humanitarian organisations. CEDIER's vision reflected both a geographical ambition and thematic expansion from its work as a volunteer group. Geographically, their ambition was to work not only in eastern DRC in the Uvira region but also across the border in Burundi – a goal that is still in progress. Thematically, CEDIER wanted to expand its work on child malnutrition to address other root causes of children's vulnerability, including working with children associated with armed groups. In order to tackle these issues, CEDIER's strategic programme is multi-sectoral, and includes child protection, nutrition, sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV), peace and conflict transformation, and working with young people and adolescents to prevent them from returning to armed groups through social work and vocational training. The organisation's focus remains on tackling SGBV issues related to children, particularly early marriage and the denial of the right to education for girls. Similarly, its work on peace and conflict transformation aims to tackle conflict dynamics to prevent children's recruitment into armed groups, prevent malnutrition and the overall impact of conflict on the community.

15 Commonly, women are reticent to participate in community support and volunteerism due to stigma in society that perceives women as not having capacity. The fact that three women were among the volunteers is noteworthy.



A 10-year-old girl sells flour in the Kibondwe/Kasenga market in Uvira town. Credit: CEDIER

Since 2005, CEDIER has been an active member of the UN-led coordination system, in particular the child protection Area of Responsibility under the protection cluster. Through their active participation in the cluster, CEDIER has gained the trust and respect of other humanitarian actors as well as that of communities. Despite this, some international actors are still reluctant to partner with CEDIER even though it has the ability to access many of the conflict-affected areas in the Uvira region and has the advantage of being based locally.

Eligibility and institutional development

In 2010, CEDIER failed a performance evaluation organised by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) with a score of 51%. The evaluation was organised within the framework of the country-based pooled fund in DRC (known as the Humanitarian Fund) to assess whether CEDIER could be eligible for funding through this mechanism. The evaluation results and failure to become eligible for the Humanitarian Fund triggered an internal reform process in CEDIER, which ultimately resulted in organisational change that enabled them to become eligible for the Humanitarian Fund in 2016.

This reform process was supported through partnering with different international actors. From 2010 to 2012, CEDIER partnered with Mensen met een Missie (a Dutch Catholic missionary development organisation) and joined its Institutional Development and Organizational Reinforcement (DIRO) support programme. Through this programme, CEDIER received three types of support: capacity-strengthening for its staff, organisational development support and logistical support. The capacity of CEDIER's staff was strengthened through a series of thematic training sessions on project design, resource mobilisation and management, and conflict analysis. In terms of organisational development, CEDIER benefitted from activities which enabled it to develop its first five-year strategic plan, restructure the organisation in line with a new vision and mission, and devise administrative, financial and logistical procedures and accompanying guidance. An independent audit expert also supported CEDIER to upgrade their financial systems, tools and procedures as well as organisational planning and donor reporting systems. CEDIER also received a contribution for the purchase of its first vehicle.

Between 2012 and 2018, Oxfam GB provided training to CEDIER's programme, logistics, finance, administration and human resources, and coordination departments. This significantly improved the reporting and archiving system, relationship with state services and performance of the team in general. Oxfam also funded the Coordinator and Programme Officer to attend a 'Management and Leadership in Emergencies' training organised by Bioforce,¹⁶ which strengthened their capacity.

Both the partnership with Oxfam GB and the results of the UNDP's performance assessment to determine eligibility for the Humanitarian Fund in DRC encouraged CEDIER to engage an external accounting firm to undertake regular audits. These audits have reinforced a culture of accountability and transparency and the need to follow good management practices.

¹⁶ Institut Bioforce France is an institute based in France that specialises in providing training to humanitarian actors. In this case, CEDIER's training was part of a project entitled 'Context' that focused on strengthening the skills of humanitarian professionals and was funded by the UK Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO) as part of the Disaster and Emergencies Preparedness Programme (DEPP) piloted by Oxfam within the Start Network.

Partnership and impact generated

CEDIER has forged partnerships with several actors (see Table 1) who have a similar or complementary vision and are ready to engage in a broader process of mutual learning and support. These partnerships involved the pooling of financial, material and human resources to enable the provision of timely and effective humanitarian support to vulnerable people.

Between 2003 and 2021 CEDIER partnered with seven international organisations including one donor (SDC) and one UN agency (WFP). It also benefitted from three allocations from the Humanitarian Fund in 2017, 2018 and 2019. CEDIER's partnerships, most of which were shorter-term, mainly focused on food security, nutrition and child protection interventions. Partnerships with Oxfam GB and Mensen met een Missie were more complex and long-term.

The project in partnership with Mensen met een Missie strengthened peaceful cohabitation and social cohesion in Katobo's middle ground. It involved an operational and resilient mechanism for inter-community dialogue (a mixed committee). Results included the construction of a mixed village as part of the inter-community approach, as well as participatory analysis with all communities on good peacebuilding practices and peaceful cohabitation.

Table 1 CEDIER's partnership history

Year	Partner	Activity
2003–2004	Action Against Hunger (ACF)	Nutrition referral
2007–2008	SDC	Food, non-food assistance, support to agropastoral activities for resilience building
2008–2012	Mensen met een Missie	Peaceful cohabitation and social cohesion
2012–2018	Oxfam GB	Emergency protection and preparedness for conflict-affected communities
2017–2019	Humanitarian Fund (pooled fund) in DRC	Community protection
2020	Street Child	Capacity-building for local child protection structures
2019–2021	WFP	Nutrition and food hygiene
2021	In consortium with AVSI	Child protection

The partnership with Oxfam GB focused on emergency protection and preparedness for conflict-affected communities in North and South Kivu. Through this project, CEDIER has supported, equipped and trained two 'Acting with Youth' structures as part of participatory action research (RAP), 12 community protection committees and 12 women's forums on protection. Its aim was to support good local-level governance, as well as capacity-building, children's referral to services, the emergence of women's leadership and democratic dialogue between civilians and customary, military and police authorities on issues of protection and law.

One impact of the project was an agreement with the national Congolese armed forces and armed groups in the locality to remove checkpoints on roads used to deliver agricultural products to markets. An example is the case of the Revwe barrier in Mulenge, in the Kigoma grouping, which was erected by the Democratic Forces for the Liberation of Rwanda (FDLR). Following advocacy by the community protection committee set up and supported by CEDIER, local authorities agreed to engage the FDLR to remove the illegal checkpoint. In return, the authorities provided the FDLR with access to fields for them to cultivate.

As a result of CEDIER's efforts to promote women's voices and leadership, a woman who had become a community activist and advocate was asked by the wise men in the village to become the first female member of the Lubunga/Committee of Sages. In the Acting with Young People project in March 2018, a young woman was appointed for the first time as secretary of the Lubunga de Barundi in Bwegera following the signing of the commitments regarding the inclusion of young people in Lubunga (Bafuliiru, Barundi and Banyamulenge) in the village of Bunga.

With the allocations from the Humanitarian Fund, CEDIER has led three protection-focused projects in response to humanitarian emergencies related to armed conflict. With its community-based approach, it has supported 15 community protection committees (CPCs) (six women and six men per structure) and 15 women's forums (FdFs). Six-hundred and forty-five of the committee members (as well as 20 change agents attached to CPCs), 70% of whom are female, have been trained on various topics according to the needs and realities of their context. These needs were identified based on a protection concept and risk analysis, response actions determined through community protection plans, community contingency plans, as well as advocacy and awareness techniques, and referrals of victims.

The impact of CEDIER on these partners

As much as these INGO partnerships have influenced CEDIER's policies, procedures and programmes, CEDIER has also influenced the learning and systems of its partners. For instance, it was able to change Oxfam's proposal to provide bicycles in remote communities for community members to transport victims of violence referred to other areas for services and support. CEDIER argued that Oxfam's proposal would violate the principle of confidentiality as everyone would know that the bicycles were being used to transport victims of violence. CEDIER also argued that the proposal would lead to conflicts over the use of the bicycles.

In terms of advocacy and awareness within the Oxfam partnership, CEDIER influenced the introduction of and led a legislative and interactive theatre approach. Based on training received by consultants hired by Oxfam, CEDIER transformed the theatre approach to support the work of the CPCs by using theatre to advocate and raise awareness with decision-makers at community level. In the context of strengthening the involvement of communities in protection actions on the one hand, and strengthening local resources through the transfer of knowledge on the other, CEDIER has also influenced the integration of RAP in protection and peace activities with community structures.

Dynamics of relationships with partners

In general, relationships with partners are evolving well. However, it is noted that some partners still favour vertical relationships in which one partner implements strategies and follows guidelines from the other partner. For CEDIER, this does not promote mutual constructive exchange.

At the end of each project, most partnerships ended. With Oxfam, however, collaboration has continued (e.g. alert-sharing, tool development and the development of approaches) even without funds. While not planned as such, the approach has become part of a 'good' exit strategy, which has allowed both organisations to continue to support each other's work even in the absence of a funding relationship. It demonstrates the mutual respect between partners and how much each actor values the partnership.

Hence, it is very important for international actors to invest in long-term partnerships with local organisations and local communities, including in the transfer of skills and capacity between each other. This approach will not only help to build trust and maintain strong relationships between all actors but will also ensure more effective support for affected people living in remote and insecure areas.

CEDIER encourages international organisations and donors to trust in and build the capacity of local actors to empower them to acquire the necessary skills to intervene in areas they deem inaccessible. As well as operating at lower cost and being able to physically access remote communities in insecure environments, local actors are able to sustain activities and support communities over the long term.

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Histories and hierarchies of localisation in Rakhine State, Myanmar

Su Myattun, Niki Ignatiou, Etienne Bergès, Yeeshu Shukla, Lal Muani and Than Hla

While the international community is guided by deadlines and guidelines, local actors here are caught between front lines and ethnic lines.¹⁷

Myanmar has been called an ‘innovation lab for localisation’.¹⁸ Local communities, especially diverse groups of local women and their organisations, have historically been the first responders to disaster and conflict. The valuable skills possessed by these groups, such as their strong understanding of the local context and the needs and realities of the community at large, enable them to reach those most in need. Despite this, their active role as agents of change within humanitarian responses is not always recognised. Increasing humanitarian access restrictions in Myanmar have led to the country becoming seen as a testing ground for locally led humanitarian action, which risks ignoring the rich, complex and long-existing humanitarianism and local activities already there. The Covid-19 pandemic has heightened these challenges by restricting humanitarian access more than ever. International actors are having to revise their approaches to local partnerships accordingly, and still struggle to reach frontline responders.

Humanitarian needs in Myanmar are driven by multiple factors, including armed conflict and natural hazard-related disasters, which are aggravated by chronic poverty and protracted displacements. In Rakhine State, 120,000 Kaman and Rohingya Muslims have been interned in camps since 2012 and 800,000 Rohingya refugees remain in neighbouring Bangladesh since fleeing in 2017. In the last two years, violent armed conflict between the Arakan Army (AA)¹⁹ and the Myanmar army has displaced over 90,000 civilians within Rakhine and led to a new level of government restrictions on humanitarian work. The unfolding political crisis will further contribute to these needs as the Tatmadaw’s (the official name of the armed forces of Myanmar) violent crackdown on demonstrators continues, and many international donor governments are either withdrawing developmental assistance that directly benefits the Myanmar state or strongly considering the shape of new engagement guidelines and protocols in Myanmar. Humanitarian actors are under increasing pressure to circumvent the state wherever possible and avoid

17 Trocaire (2017) *More than the money –localisation in practice* (www.grandbargain4ngos.org/upload/more-than-the-money-full-report_5b28deb171df6.pdf).

18 Group URD (2018) *Myanmar: an innovation lab for innovation* (www.urd.org/en/review-hem/myanmar-an-innovation-lab-for-localisation/).

19 The AA is an Ethnic Armed Organisation that has been fighting for greater autonomy in Rakhine State. They had become one of the more significant challenges to the Myanmar army, although a ceasefire has been in effect since November 2020.

programming that is seen to legitimise the new government. More than ever, there is a need to understand how to support and transfer power to local responders, such as local women's groups, who are the first and sometimes only actors to provide lifesaving support in Rakhine and elsewhere.

This article discusses the recent history of localisation and its current opportunities in Rakhine. It examines how the recent conflict with the AA has shifted narratives on international and local humanitarian action. It also showcases the experiences and innovative solutions of local first line civil society organisations (CSOs), such as women's rights organisations (WROs) in Rakhine through the Rakhine First-line Response Mechanism (R-FRM), which endeavors to find a balance between localisation, meaningful access and humanitarian principles within the new remote dynamics of Covid-19.

Histories and hierarchies of localisation

Power dynamics between local and international humanitarian organisations working in Myanmar differ across the country, but the international localisation agenda often bypasses the historical trends which define local humanitarianism. Despite talk of 'power transfers' in general terms, international programmes often have little cultural or political context. Such context is vital in Rakhine, where complex ethno-religious identities have shaped aid relationships in the past two decades and set its CSO context apart from the rest of the country. Rakhine faces some of the most acute levels of violence, displacement and natural hazards in Myanmar and yet its local humanitarian ecosystem has not had access to the same financial and capacity-building resources as in other conflict-affected areas in Myanmar.

Rakhine's humanitarian landscape has been structured by the same ethno-religious and economic dynamics that fuel its armed conflicts. Rakhine Buddhist communities, fueled by religious nationalism, were suspicious of international agencies and for a long time viewed them as biased towards the Rohingya and Kaman Muslims. Conversely, some INGOs do not work with CSOs which are seen as 'too religious' or which may refuse to work in areas due to religious differences. These accusations have led to a general deterioration of trust, and in certain instances violence and altercations between INGO and UN offices and staff in Rakhine and the local community.

In reality, Rakhine's network of informal, grassroots aid providers is incredibly nuanced, with complex links to different religious tendencies. They play a key role in sheltering and supporting internally displaced people (IDPs). Many are referred to in Myanmar as *Parahita*, a Pali term signifying 'working for others'. Parahita networks, for instance Buddhist monks and monasteries, are religiously inspired but most do charitable volunteer work across communities. Their largely informal yet robust nature mean they are the core of first-line responses throughout Rakhine State and indeed Myanmar. Smaller ethnic CSOs are often the only groups able to access people in remote areas that are usually out of reach for INGOs because of government-imposed access restrictions and security risks. These national and subnational restrictions have meant that INGOs have had to rely on ethnic CSOs much more than before.

The ethno-religious fabric of Rakhine's CSO environment serves as a complex asset and social capital for international action in Rakhine. In many cases, INGOs depend on the ethnic and religious constituencies of small partners to gain community trust and carry out funded activities. However, international actors and donors have struggled to engage with such networks and the ethno-religious identity of local partners is seen as risky regarding donor accountability and humanitarian principles. This has led to funding bottlenecks and the under-development of certain portions of civil society, specifically WROs who are not always recognised as key humanitarian actors. Women and WROs still lack meaningful recognition throughout Myanmar, with low numbers of women represented in senior leadership roles both at government and local level. A large portion of households continue to rely on men to provide the majority of income for families, with women maintaining responsibility for (unpaid) domestic and care work. Covid-19 has further entrenched gendered inequalities, as well as systemic and structural exclusion in decision-making processes.

As with other conflict zones in Myanmar, patterns of displacement and resulting IDP settlements are often dictated by ethnic identities. In one example, a women-led CSO usually based in Chin State extended its activity to central Rakhine specifically to support ethnic Chin communities displaced there. It had become apparent that this organisation was able to work with remote communities that others were unable to reach and their needs would have otherwise remained unaccounted for and overlooked. For instance, it led a particularly successful maternal healthcare programme adapted to the cultural specificities of childbirth for that ethnic group.

Changing developments in Rakhine State from 2018 onwards

Prior to 2018, international actors could bypass a number of government restrictions by relying on well structured, professional national- or Rakhine State-level CSOs, most of which operate from the state capital, Sittwe. However, in the last three years, increased scrutiny and control from the Rakhine State government has led to constraints on these larger CSOs, signifying that hierarchies of localisation have shifted among national NGOs, state-level CSOs and frontline community actors.

Since 2018, the AA conflict has brought to light some of the missed opportunities from not engaging constructively with the complexity of Rakhine's civil society. Violence and human rights abuses have affected all regions and ethnic groups in Rakhine, including the majority Rakhine Buddhists, Christian and Hindu minorities, and Rohingya and Kaman Muslims. The state of humanitarian access in Rakhine has been further worsened since the political crisis that started in February 2021, with fears around food shortages and lack of access to displacement sites.

The new layer of Covid-19 restrictions, combined with shifts in perception on collaborating with international organisations, has created new opportunities for locally owned responses that depend solely on township-based ecosystems and economies. Local perceptions of international assistance have become much more positive, recognising that the UN and INGOs strive to provide needs-based humanitarian assistance. New government access restrictions at national and subnational levels have meant that INGOs have had to rely on ethnic CSOs much more than

before. In Rakhine, the Covid-19 pandemic has drawn attention to a deepening public health crisis and shrinking INGO access to vulnerable communities. In August, the Rakhine State government cancelled multiple international agencies' travel and activity authorisations after staff members were diagnosed with the virus. The government has also restricted the activities of all other international humanitarian agencies to only 'essential assistance' of food, health, water and latrines – although there is some flexibility in these limitations.

It has therefore become necessary to work through hyper-localised mechanisms such as local traders or youth networks who act as central coordination points and have the presence across townships to respond to displacements. Local actors have been providing a large part of the response to vulnerable communities that INGOs have been unable to reach due to Covid restrictions. A key development has been the creation of a local coordination mechanism, the Arakan Humanitarian Coordination (AHCT) team, which brings together six local Rakhine CSOs to assist communities throughout the state. The AHCT has played a key role in supporting quarantine centres and Covid-19 needs. However, this created difficulties for international actors and donor-funded projects. The complex political and religious influence and responsive nature of these groups does not fit well with short-term project cycles. Working with them involves looking beyond traditional partnership models and slowly developing trusted relationships. Long-term funding and a dimension of flexible, unrestricted funding is often conducive to these. Progressing to systemic township-level responses means speaking to frontline actors and understanding how to support, meaningfully engage and work with these local networks.

Establishing the Rakhine First-line Response Mechanism

The Rakhine First-line Response Mechanism (R-FRM)²⁰ is a consortium project, co-led by ActionAid. It is a local preparedness and emergency response arrangement developed to equip CSOs and community-based frontline emergency actors and self-help groups to provide critical preparedness, awareness, multi-sectoral assistance and early recovery support to victims of emergencies in Rakhine. The mechanism is specifically tailored to the fragmented nature of Rakhine's emergencies and local humanitarian landscape, which vary significantly from township to township.

The project's progressive engagement and trust building has supported preparedness efforts and allowed for emergency responses to be designed, coordinated and led at the township level. One of its main partners, the Rakhine Youth New Generation Network (RYNGYN), highlighted that, compared to other mechanisms, the R-FRM partnership and funding model allows for the flexibility and time to build relationships with frontline actors. This is evident in villages that have been cut off by the Myanmar military from external markets, as was the case for several months in Dar Let, Ann township, which led to severe food insecurity and rocketing food prices. Youth networks within the project in Ann and in the neighbouring township of Myebon have been constantly monitoring the crisis by interviewing those who have fled. Having a durable presence in the township enables the

20 This project is led by ActionAid, Christian Aid, the Rakhine Youth New Generation Network, Phyu Sin Saydanar Action Group and The Peace and Development Initiative – Kintha.

R-FRM to actively explore access and build relationships in harder-to-reach areas, while continuing its engagement with the community; for instance it is currently exploring cash solutions for people to purchase items in external markets.

Similarly, the R-FRM can reach frontline community-based organisations (CBOs) working across ethnic groups. In July and August 2020, operations from the Myanmar army displaced thousands across Rathedaung township to the neighboring township of Buthidaung, which both became inaccessible to INGOs due to the security situation and government-imposed restrictions. Through the presence of partner PSSAG in Buthidaung, the R-FRM was able to work with a Rakhine CSO that responded to the needs of people recently displaced in the Mya Taung monastery to identify food insecurities in four Rohingya villages in that area, which they also supported. More recently, the R-FRM also leveraged its presence in Kyauktaw in central Rakhine. While there are a few large and long-established official camps in the area managed by big aid agencies, there is a growing mosaic of smaller camps made up of IDPs who fled in July 2020, which are not recognised by the government and most actors are prohibited from accessing. A small local Rakhine CSO was able to provide cash assistance to ethnic groups in these camps, including people from the Dainet, Mro, Khamee and Chin Ethnic groups, using a mobile money transfer network.

Mechanisms like the RFRM have become increasingly important during the current political crisis in Myanmar, which has created new levels of access restriction and a degree of operational instability for international actors. Localised funding and response mechanisms are a first step to meaningfully transferring power and resources to frontline responders in Rakhine. Local actors have reported that they are better able than international organisations to adapt to the destabilising and unpredictable crisis dynamics they face. These actors also highlight that the localisation of humanitarian action needs to consider the increasing amount of human rights abuses that Rakhine organisations and ethnic groups face, including arbitrary arrests, torture, abduction, forced labour and military recruitment. Raising legal awareness and building the capacity of CSOs and communities on issues around freedom of movement, assembly and expression are some recommendations that have been made. In the same way that many Rakhine CSOs intersect with religious and ethnic influences, some – especially women’s groups, youth groups and networks – have a strong background in human rights activism. This is another factor that those supporting Rakhine’s localisation efforts will need to understand and support in the future.



Rakhine Youth New Generation Network (RYNGYN) conducting community consultations in Rathedaung.
Credit: RYNGYN

Conclusion

Local CSOs such as women's groups, faith actors and youth groups are the first to respond in a humanitarian emergency. The Covid-19 pandemic and unfolding political crisis in Myanmar has further highlighted the importance of local CSOs, and yet the localisation agenda still struggles to support these actors without understanding the diverse and contextual histories that define them. By briefly examining this in Rakhine, it quickly becomes apparent how important it is to explore the rich histories and cultures of localisation in specific regions, which become visible when comparing Myanmar's conflict-affected areas. Local humanitarian actors in Kachin State to the north, for example, have become large and well structured as a result of a long civil war and significant international investment. In the south-east, local humanitarianism has been shaped by trans-border relationships with Thailand, where more than 100,000 refugees have fled from Myanmar over the last three decades and from which several key CSOs operate. Acknowledging and understanding these complex humanitarian histories, rather than considering localisation in a cultural vacuum, is more than ever a precondition to meaningfully transferring power to frontline response actors.

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Responding together to Covid-19 in Mumbai: joint action by communities, civil society and government

Dr. Anuja Jayaraman and Dr. Rama Shyam with Dr. Harvinder Palaha, Dr. Nayreen Daruwalla, Pragya Dixit, Dr. Shanti Pantvaidya and Sushma Shende

The Society for Nutrition, Education and Health Action (SNEHA)²¹ has been working to improve health outcomes among women and children in Mumbai's informal settlements for over two decades. The mainstay of SNEHA's approach is to work in close proximity with people in vulnerable urban communities, while also working with public institutions – especially health systems – to address the social determinants of health and ensure that services reach underserved populations. Between 2016 and 2019, SNEHA's programmes helped reduce wasting among children under three from 17% to 12%, increase early registration of pregnancies from 17% to 36% and reduce unmet needs for contraception among married women of reproductive age from 18% to 11%. SNEHA's programmes have also helped cut anaemia among adolescents, from 49% in 2019 to 26% in 2020.



Dharavi fruit and vegetable distribution. Credit: SNEHA

21 <https://snehamumbai.org>

Promoting community engagement

Over the years, SNEHA has worked with people to build capacity within communities ‘to expect, demand and negotiate availability and improved quality services from the health systems’, and to undertake responsibility for the wellbeing of their mothers, children and adolescents.²² This is accomplished by giving community members the right health messages, referrals to health facilities and information on how to access these services and what to expect. A network of some 4,000 community volunteers recruited and trained by SNEHA, the majority of them girls and women, participate in community events and meetings, disseminate health-related information, assist community members to access health services and support the public health system to deliver routine services. SNEHA staff keep volunteers motivated through training, public appreciation of their efforts and culturally sensitive programming.

Through the Comprehensive Sexuality Education (CSE), young girls and boys are equipped with life skills through sessions on nutrition, menstrual health and hygiene, challenging gender norms, civic education, street theatre and digital safety. Girls face resistance from family – mostly brothers – at home, even as they learn to negotiate to increase their mobility and participation in public spaces. Male volunteers, though fewer in number than females, are encouraged to look beyond gender norms and to be at ease holding conversations about women, child and adolescent health.²³

The opportunity of talking to other people like listening to each other’s good or bad experiences instils a lot of hope. When we see other successful women, we get inspired to be like them. My child will also think that my mother is going out and doing such good work, she will also get inspired to become a good person. I will be able to give them (my children) a good life (Woman, 28 years, secondary education, homemaker).

The community is closely involved in the recruitment of volunteers, so that volunteers represent the community and not SNEHA. Child health and nutrition programme volunteers are trained in community mobilisation approaches to enable them to better persuade and support people to use available ante- and post-natal care services. They also disseminate and share information about healthy diets, the importance of regular weight checks, home-cooked foods for children and pregnant women, exclusive breastfeeding, immunisation, early registration of pregnancy and family planning methods. If required, they assist new mothers by managing their households and help get their children immunised. Engagement with SNEHA also helps volunteers use the information they gain to improve health and nutrition practices in their own households and challenge gender role stereotypes.

22 Child Health and Nutrition draft proposal 2015.

23 Ramani, S., Shaikh, N. and Jayaraman, A. (2019) *Institutionalising community participation processes in urban informal settlements: lessons learnt from community volunteers in SNEHA’s Aahar programme (2016–18)*.

Community volunteerism has been transformational for both women and men. It has given women an identity beyond their households and the opportunity to be part of something bigger. They step out as ‘confident social workers’ and interact with other families in their neighbourhoods, which they could not do previously owing to restricted mobility. Newly gained knowledge, increased mobility, the opportunity to socialise with SNEHA staff and other community members and public acknowledgement of their efforts has helped volunteers gain confidence and make this transition. However, it needs to be acknowledged that their reach is restricted. Patriarchal norms limit them in terms of geography and time. Volunteering is unopposed as long as household chores are not compromised, and volunteers do not venture beyond their neighbourhoods.

Galvanising young people and women to assist their own communities during the pandemic

The effects of the Covid-19 pandemic, and in particular lockdown measures, have significantly affected the communities in which SNEHA works. A survey of 1,567 randomly selected respondents cited severe challenges with access to food, livelihoods and routine health services. With SNEHA’s encouragement and backing, community volunteers have provided material, emotional and psychological support to their neighbours, as well as working with public authorities to deliver services to women, children and families in containment zones, where access is restricted.

With physical distancing one of the critical preventive measures, SNEHA teams were compelled to support volunteers remotely and relied on relationships with communities and public systems built over decades. A directory of phone numbers (of volunteers and their neighbours) compiled at the beginning of the lockdown became the mainstay for maintaining contact. A web-based application was also developed to keep track of who was being called and why. Volunteers who owned smartphones were supported with data pack refills and trained to use online meeting platforms such as Zoom and Google Meet. Gaining digital competency was empowering for volunteers – especially for women.

As women became more house-bound than ever and young people lost access to schools and colleges, smartphones became their window to the world. However, few women and adolescents ‘own’ a phone themselves. Some used the phones of their male relatives. We found that more boys than girls owned smartphones independently. Lack of phones compelled young girls and volunteers to make home visits, armed with masks and hand sanitisers, to spread awareness on Covid-19 and identify food security and health service needs within their neighbourhoods. Their association with SNEHA gave them access to more information and thus made them more confident in assisting neighbours in distress. Volunteers stepped in to assist frontline public health workers. Pregnant women from other states stranded in Mumbai were assisted with registrations at municipal maternity hospitals. An integral element of SNEHA’s adolescent and youth programme is a module on civic education that helps young people to understand Constitutional rights and

responsibilities and the governance structures responsible for public works. Armed with this information, 64 youth volunteers repeatedly called public helplines and reached out to local authorities to get their areas disinfected or sanitised.

Health messengers during the pandemic

Unsurprisingly there has been a surge of interest in Covid-19 and people have been bombarded with information on their phones and televisions and on social media. Not all of this is correct and there has been a definite requirement to give people accurate, reliable and simplified information. To raise awareness on Covid-19, SNEHA trained selected volunteers to disseminate messages on risks and preventative measures using multiple platforms and media – WhatsApp, podcasts, video clips and voice messages. SNEHA also ensured that volunteers understood the processes in place within public institutions for identification and referral of cases and where relevant information could be found. Volunteers engaged with the community through talks, demonstrations, role plays and street theatre and support groups. They ran information sessions with schools, religious leaders and labour unions to reinforce the application of preventive and safety measures, while assisting with routine health services.

Community volunteers also helped in the screening of suspected Covid-19 cases. Fifteen women were trained to administer a contact survey with 1,165 households to check the spread of the disease, and 76 suspected cases were referred for further management. Dozens of youth volunteers became our eyes and ears on the ground, making time for weekly one-hour online sessions and answering questions such as ‘how do we make people understand that crowding is dangerous?’, ‘how do we stop children from going out and playing together?’ and ‘what should we do if a friend complains of cough and fever?’ Throughout the lockdown, youth volunteers have also distributed sanitary napkins to 2,600 girls and women, and women volunteers have set up 22 condom depots, with stocks of condoms and oral contraceptive pills replenished by public health workers. Some volunteers received online training in record keeping and family planning counselling enabling them to keep track of their community work as well as substitute for health workers or SNEHA staff members who could not access their areas.

Alleviating food insecurity

With many of SNEHA’s intervention sites demarcated as containment zones with severe restrictions on movement, being in constant touch through phone calls and messages helped SNEHA understand community needs and the hardships faced by vulnerable inhabitants. With local shops shut and movement curtailed, programme teams soon realised the urgent need to procure food items. Volunteers and programme team members coordinated with different actors including other NGOs, municipal authorities, the public food distribution network and private shopkeepers to arrange for food kits, particularly for people who were needy and vulnerable, such as pregnant women, and daily wage workers. SNEHA worked closely with municipal authorities to identify vulnerable families in need of food, which was then distributed by volunteers living in the containment zones.

They picked up food boxes from the boundaries of the zones and dropped them off at community locations, to be picked up by a community contact. The food distribution effort would not have been possible without the active and unconditional involvement of volunteers – the link between NGOs, municipal authorities and those eligible to receive food kits. Nearly 30,000 families received food relief.²⁴

In one distant suburb, populated by vulnerable migrant families, a 19-year-old volunteer gathered the details of families that had lost their income owing to the lockdown. She wrote letters to the elected representative seeking food relief, and pushed the SNEHA team to ensure that 140 families could access food through the Public Distribution System (PDS). The PDS runs shops that procure grains from public granaries and supplies them to vulnerable people at subsidised prices. Over 750 volunteers – mostly women – have been trained on how the PDS works, and how to support people in understanding and claiming their entitlements. They interact regularly with PDS officials and visit the local fair price shops to ensure regular distribution of subsidised food grains, discourage corruption and help families obtain new food cards. Volunteers helped almost 3,000 families with no cards to access free food grains under emergency arrangements introduced by the government.

Addressing violence and providing psychosocial support

Domestic violence in Mumbai increased during the lockdown, as perpetrators and survivors were confined in close proximity for long periods. Services for women in distress were often delayed or unavailable and there was a conspicuous lack of coordination between the various executive departments in the state, including the health department, the police and government-run shelters.

A large community volunteer base of 700 women and men provided the first response to survivors of violence. They connected survivors to support networks, accompanied them to police stations, rescued women and girls being subjected to severe violence in their homes and provided psychological support. They ran community kitchens which provided cooked food to migrants and collected money from religious institutions to provide ration packets to families in their neighbourhoods. Thirty youth, trained as ‘barefoot counsellors’, formed a network to identify adolescents in distress, provide emotional support and refer them to clinical psychologists where required.

Coming closer amidst crisis: what did we achieve together?

The pandemic has been a testing time for everyone, but it has also given SNEHA the opportunity to work closely with community volunteers to test the sustainability of its programmes when field presence was not possible. ‘We learned that we could count on community ownership and collaboration if the situation demands it.’ Volunteers moved rapidly from being participants to

24 Chakraborty, P. (2020) *Distribution of fresh fruits and vegetables in Dharavi, India: lessons and learnings from the Covid-19 pandemic*. SNEHA (https://snehamumbai.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/Documentation_of_Fruits_Vegetables_Distribution_Project_Dharavi_Sept_2020.pdf).

collaborators to community leaders tackling crises head on. Continued support to the public health system was reinforced, even as the need to invest in working with other public departments such as the PDS and those assisting the vulnerable through welfare schemes emerged as central to SNEHA's work. SNEHA was able to achieve this thanks to its long presence in the community and the rapport it had built with community members.

Although a joint response was stitched together, there were still many knots. The first challenge was motivating SNEHA staff to adapt to working online or via phones. Mostly women, they are used to intimate conversations with community volunteers. It was extremely difficult to continue these from their homes – cramped one-room tenements with no privacy. Keeping volunteers engaged and willing to perform routine tasks was not easy. Continuous efforts had to be made to motivate them, through giving information, training or appreciation, especially as there was no monetary compensation for their efforts, just the satisfaction derived from helping their neighbours and their community.

Youth volunteers helped us reach a woman who was denied entry into a public toilet after one of her relatives was taken away to a quarantine centre to rule out Covid-19 infection. They ensured that counsellors from SNEHA rendered psychosocial support to her. The police was informed and they beseeched the woman's neighbours to be empathic towards her access to basic amenities (SNEHA staff).

Working on mental health was most challenging, with telephone counselling unsuited to principles of confidentiality. Access to routine adolescent health services was severely curtailed during the pandemic. Young people were in need of assistance and yet it wasn't possible to have conversations on sexuality or sexual and reproductive health with them as they didn't feel comfortable expressing their concerns at home via phones or online platforms.

In one of the world's most populous cities, what has worked is collaboration between people, civil society and the authorities. Non-profits like SNEHA engendered community ownership to build local response, while the creative use of technology, creating spaces for volunteers to express their concerns and fears and supporting the public health system were key to crisis management. Through youth and women as spirited contributors, we managed an unprecedented crisis, highlighting how building and strengthening community stewardship lays the path towards sustainability.

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Learning from survivor- and community-led response in Haiti

Charlotte Greene, Chris Ball, Foster Jovin, Frantceau Panier, Jonides Villarson, Naomie Beaujour, Nathalie Töpperwien Blom and Simone Di Vicenz

This initiative is a collaboration between the Local to Global Protection Initiative and 12 national non-governmental organisations (NNGOs) in Haiti: GADEL, KORAL, ATEPASE, ACDED, SCH, SJM, AHAAMES, FNGA, GARR, Haiti Survie, RODEP and RSFP. Act Church of Sweden, Diakonie Katastrophenhilfe, Christian Aid, and Lutheran World Federation provided support through mentoring and knowledge capture, and in the co-design and implementation of the survivor- and community-led response (sclr) approach in Haiti.

Survivor-/community-led crisis response (sclr)²⁵ enables national and international NGOs to work with and support spontaneous self-help actions by disaster- and crisis-affected people. So far, the approach has been co-designed and adapted in collaboration with nearly 30 NNGOs in the Philippines, Myanmar, the West Bank and Gaza, Sudan, Kenya, the Democratic Republic of Congo, the Central African Republic and Haiti. Together, these responses have addressed crises including floods, earthquakes, typhoons, droughts, conflict-related displacement, protracted crises, the Covid-19 pandemic and long-term poverty.

Sclr aims to support crisis-affected communities to lead and manage their own holistic, coordinated responses to emergencies in ways that improve immediate survival, protection and well-being, strengthen longer-term resilience and facilitate greater social cohesion.

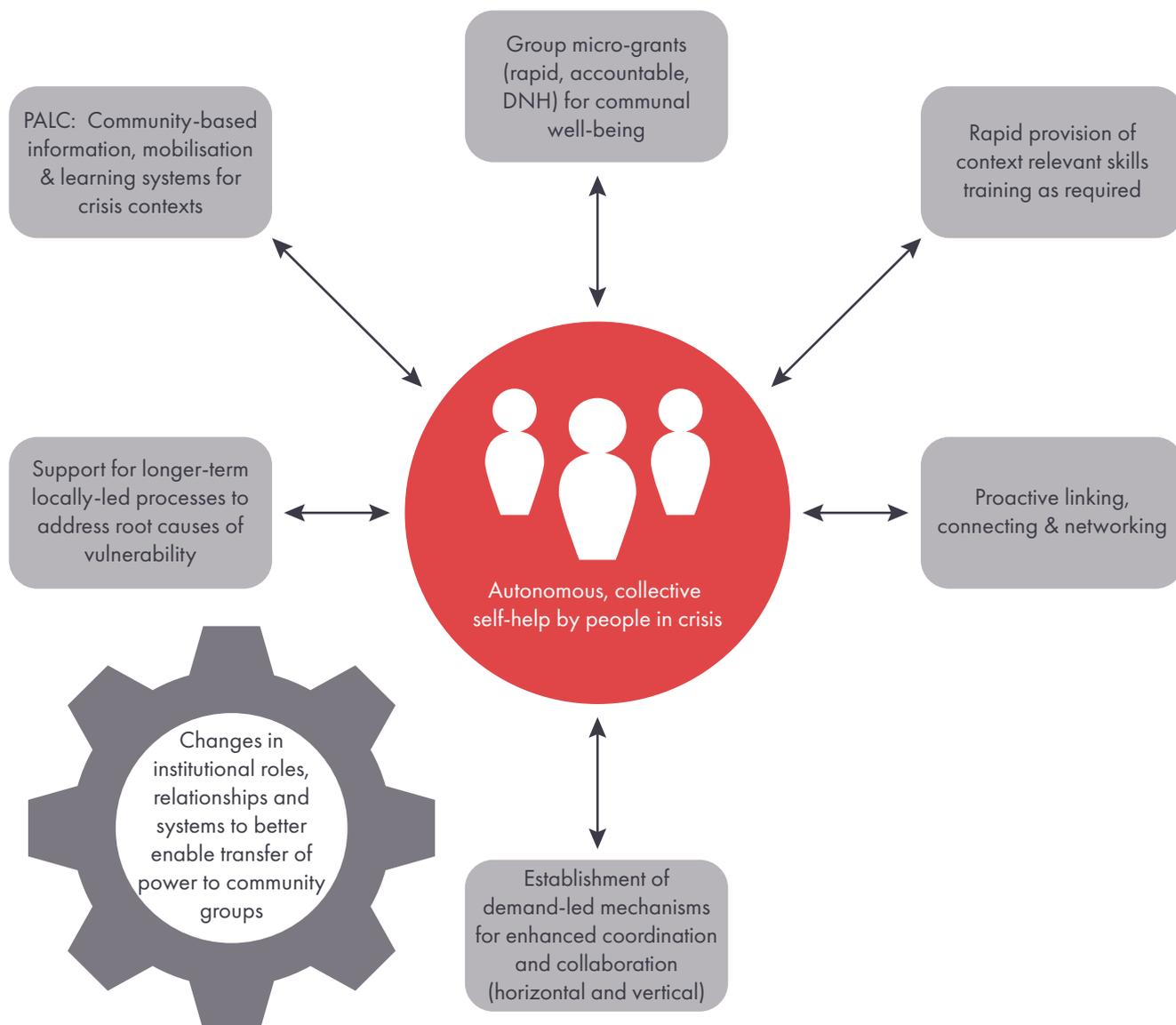
Sclr includes the following components:

1. Participatory Action Learning in Crises (PALC).²⁶
2. Provision of emergency micro-grants.
3. Strengthening capacity in crises.
4. Addressing root causes during crises.
5. Enabling demand-led coordination systems.
6. Changing institutional relationships.

25 <https://vimeo.com/312168167>

26 PALC is a community mobilisation and facilitation process that combines appreciative inquiry, identifying locally relevant do-no-harm mechanisms, and supports experiential learning and information sharing.

Figure 1 The components of sclr



This way of working has developed through practice, but it is not meant as a ‘blueprint’. Each organisation applying sclr needs to adapt it based on the context and local expertise.

The Haiti experience

Phase I of the programme in Haiti, involving six NNGOs began in June 2019; phase II, involving an additional six NNGOs, ran from July 2020 until April 2021. Each NNGO received a grant of between \$12,500 and \$23,000 to practice the sclr approach. A series of micro-projects designed by self-help groups and community-based organisations (CBOs) were selected, funded and implemented by the self-help groups and CBOs themselves.

Phase I funded 28 group grants benefitting 7,532 people (4,395 women and 3,137 men). The needs addressed by these micro-projects were diverse: construction of family and public latrines,

nutritional assistance to infants, repair of water catchments and cisterns, repair of a health centre and community centre, assistance to small traders, support to farmers, road improvement, water system extension and improvement, and extension of the electricity network. Phase II supported 21 group grants benefitting 18,449 people (9,773 women and 8,676 men). These micro-projects funded the construction of water tanks, installation of solar lamps and repair of electrical networks in areas at risk of violence, distribution of school kits, food distribution to vulnerable groups, construction of community spaces, rehabilitation of irrigation and drainage canals, road repair and restarting a local ambulance service.

What has changed as a result of using the sclr approach?

After phase I, the NNGOs involved were asked to reflect on major changes at implementation sites (towns, villages, neighbourhoods, communities). Change was defined as perceived outcomes within the framework of planning, monitoring and reporting processes, including specific results at the micro-grant level, the behaviour of certain people/actors, dynamics within the community, the relationship between organisations and communities and working methods. During a learning workshop with NNGOs organised in July 2020, changes were analysed in terms of the extent to which the sclr approach had contributed to their realisation and impact.

The most significant changes attributable to the sclr approach relate to the following:

1. Social cohesion, solidarity and a sense of ownership, leading to strong involvement and greater focus on meeting the needs of marginalised groups.
2. Empowerment and capacity-strengthening of participating groups to identify community actions and manage micro-projects and grants, increasing the effectiveness of and participation in community implementation of projects.

Most of the NNGOs indicated an increase in social cohesion,²⁷ both within communities and in their organisation's facilitation of community engagement. ATEPASE²⁸ attests that 'leaders shared all of the information with the committee but also with the beneficiaries, including details of exactly what they would receive, such as construction materials. So, everyone knew what to expect and if something was going to change, it had to be discussed in a larger community meeting so that everyone was aware'. This points to the role sclr can play in facilitating feedback, again strengthening social cohesion. As FNGA²⁹ put it: 'With this activity we start to see the relaunching of *aktivite kominotè*, a traditional approach of community mobilisation and self-help'.

27 Social cohesion refers to the extent of connectedness and solidarity among groups in society. It identifies two main dimensions: the sense of belonging of a community and the relationships among members within the community itself.

28 ATEPASE: Association de Techniciens pour la Promotion de l'Agriculture et la Protection de l'Environnement du Sud'Est

29 FNGA: Fondation Nouvelle Grand-Anse

Another important characteristic and outcome of sclr is empowerment.³⁰ Specifically, managing funds is a significant factor contributing to the feeling of control and agency for communities. The transfer of control in this way leads to a strong sense of independence, with communities and groups choosing the solutions they think are right for themselves, and which are most effective for their own communities. A major feature of sclr is that it encourages communities to take initiative, not just implement project funded activities. One aspect of this is that groups take a leading role in solving the problems they face and can prioritise their own issues. This leads to significant engagement, enthusiasm and participation in micro-projects. The PALC facilitator (a key component of the sclr approach) acted as a common resource for communities, NNGOs, INGOs and local government, and PALC volunteers are still serving the communities today. Additionally, communities and groups are encouraged to show entrepreneurialism in their solutions (further contributing to their empowerment). As an example, a member of one group that received a micro-grant visited an NNGO's office (GADEL³¹), where they saw a tippy tap.³² They became interested and asked how it worked. Back in the community, a group member explained the hand-washing apparatus to another member and together they helped the community construct more than 30 tippy taps with no external support.

Reflection during the learning workshop in July 2020 also focused on changes at the institutional level within organisations through the application of the sclr approach, including behaviour, practices, thinking, profile and credibility. The NNGOs involved claimed that sclr had helped to strengthen relationships between the facilitating NNGOs, the groups and other actors in terms of increased trust, open communication and collective accountability. As a GADEL staff member described it, 'We have a close relationship with the communities, working in close collaboration, compared to before. This approach has allowed us to better orient our actions, which facilitates perfect collaboration with the communities. The relationship is more open, there is more of a sense of teamwork, and more confidence'.

Another example of improved relationships comes from FNGA: 'In one community there are some thieves who steal livestock. Before, community members wouldn't have spoken about it with our organization because we work on livestock and the community feared that if they told us about this problem, maybe they wouldn't be selected as beneficiaries for livestock activities. Now they are speaking about this issue, sharing how they are dealing with it (surveillance brigades, keeping the animals closer to home at night)'. However, understanding of sclr is not instantaneous, and takes time to establish. Furthermore, at the start of phase I, some NNGOs expressed concerns about a loss of control, though they gradually let go as the benefits of renewed community relationships, the enthusiasm of groups and the inherent accountability of sclr became clear. This became even more apparent in the second phase of implementation.

30 Empowerment in this text is defined as the individual and collective ability to create and resist change.

31 GADEL: Group d'Appui au Développement Local.

32 A tippy tap is a hands-free hand washing apparatus mainly designed for rural or developing areas without running water. It is made from inexpensive and generally locally available materials, making it accessible and affordable.



Community water reservoir and filling station. Credit: SJM, Haiti

Key learning

Handing over decision-making power significantly increased participation. Responsibility for and power over funding is a significant factor in groups feeling they have control over the actions being carried out in their community. Making financial decisions is not usually an aspect that community members have control over (or even knowledge of) in more traditional approaches to humanitarian aid. Communities are more likely to be inspired to be involved if they also feel empowered to do so, and this is what autonomy over their budgets achieves. One NNGO (ATEPASE) noted that it is far more difficult to achieve community participation when the organisation intervenes directly, but that with sclr engagement is automatic, meaning that the process becomes, as a whole, far more autonomous.

Nevertheless, planning systematic communication and exchange is extremely important for sclr to work well. It takes thoughtful analysis and planning on how information is communicated and coordinated with the main actors, with predefined modalities to minimise rumour, jealousy and

tension in communities, because not everyone benefits. Pre-recorded messages informing the wider community about initiatives and regular meetings were chosen as effective ways to do no harm and increase inclusion.

Continuous accompaniment³³ in the form of mentoring and support to capacity-strengthening is essential but can be a challenge. Skills in financial reporting as well as technical skills are the key to success. Strengthening key competencies is a fundamental component of the approach. This takes time and good working methods. Although sclr is a less ‘hands-on’ approach, it does require substantial accompaniment depending on the existing capacity of community groups. Some groups had never involved local authorities in their work. One group, for example, ‘didn’t see any need to inform or seek authorisation from the DINEPA³⁴ because it is “chez eux” [their home]’ (ATEPASE). This required ATEPASE to sensitise the group about the importance of getting authorisation from local authorities and working collaboratively with them to maximise impacts. The importance and necessity of this is now understood, though this was not the case prior to the sclr pilot.

One of the main lessons at field level was that groups should not take decisions independently, but with the wider community to ensure that everyone has the same information. This point was raised in relation to salaries, where a verbal contract had been ‘agreed’, but the money paid was not what the contractor had expected. To address this problem the group proposed preparing a brief contract to be signed by parties involved and witnessed by ATEPASE. The lesson here is the need to ensure that agreements are done more formally. In another instance, it was found that the sclr approach could be assimilated within other ongoing projects in the same area with similar aims. Referring to a parallel women’s empowerment project, for instance, FNGA reflected that ‘there are similarities between the approaches, and perhaps this can be further developed’. Aligning the additional components and processes of sclr, such as the PALC, to ongoing projects could help increase impact and identify what works best in a specific context. Thus, another lesson is perhaps to look outward to the community and gain a wider perspective.

Perhaps one of the biggest challenges facing an NNGO with regard to sclr is that the concept can take time to be fully understood, as members of the organisation are effectively doing the inverse of what they have historically been trained to do. They have to unlearn current practice in order to let go of control. Over the years, local partners have been subject to constantly changing requirements and increasingly stringent standards from donors and INGOs. They have increased their capacities and, in order to respond to these requirements, have become in some respects boxed in, or forced to prioritise the needs of donors over the aspirations of communities, or had to increase their

33 ‘Accompaniment’ refers to the support that community groups require from local partners. This includes skills upgrading as well as technical support (depending on the type of activity), and most importantly support with financial management.

34 DINEPA: Haitian National Directorate of Drinking Water and Sanitation.

control over every aspect of projects or risk losing funding. What we are doing now, through the sclr approach, is asking them to take a step back, to hand over control, and to enable communities to lead, make mistakes and facilitate collective learning.

Conclusion

Overall, the co-design and implementation of sclr in Haiti demonstrated the potential of this approach. Sclr has proved to be relevant to the context, effective and able to draw on local capacities and social cohesion. It has been well received by the 12 NNGOs involved because it allows them to engage with communities in a positive and effective way, while addressing bespoke needs.

Sclr is a new concept, meaning that there are inevitable challenges to be dealt with and lessons to be learnt. One challenge requiring reflection and innovation is how to promote this approach with donors. As ATEPASE explains, most humanitarian donors want to know beforehand what results the project aims to achieve, and this can be difficult when communities have a lot more control over a project. Sclr presents a process-based approach to emergency response, rather than a results-based one. This promises true innovation in the way impacts are formulated – logframes are restrictive in the sense that they do not capture processes but focus merely on results. In this sense, sclr may herald an exciting shift in the humanitarian system and requires advocacy for changes in donor standards. Sharing of best practice and relaying successes to donors is necessary to move forward with the approach. The benefits of sclr are widely felt and acknowledged; the ability to enable community empowerment is important in itself, but the implications of doing so make sclr even more far-reaching in its effects. The two phases of the programme illuminated some challenges, but it is clear that these can be overcome, and doing so will be exciting. There is scope for sclr to be widely adopted in Haiti, and this joint collaboration between the Local to Global Protection Initiative and four INGOs providing support, documenting learning, and acting as mentors to the 12 NNGOs has shown the possibilities of working and learning together for the benefit of people affected by crisis.

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Strength, voice and space: making locally led response a reality

Juliet Eyokia, Md. Abdul Latif, Peter Ochepe and Petra Righetti

The Empowering Local and National Humanitarian Actors (ELNHA)³⁵ programme is a five-year project funded by the IKEA Foundation and implemented in Uganda and Bangladesh. It proposed an alternative and more effective approach to humanitarian response based on more equitable, collaborative partnerships between international and local responders. The project focused on finding ways to connect meaningfully, based on evidence that local actors and organisations are already driving responses in many areas.

ELNHA was shaped by three core complementary strategies:

1. Strength, which was concerned with ‘the collective and organisational capacity of local and national humanitarian actors (LNHAs) to design, lead and deliver humanitarian responses’.
2. Voice, related to ‘influencing the local and national humanitarian agenda through coordination and advocacy among LNHAs’.
3. Space, which was concerned with influencing the overall international humanitarian architecture, and sometimes national architecture, in order to create an enabling environment for local humanitarian leadership.

Structurally, the ELNHA programme worked by funding local-level networks, coordinated by trusted subnational and national NGOs, with technical and coordination support from Oxfam. This structure served to reimagine how we worked together. The project faced a number of barriers posed by the sector’s power dynamics, culture, funding and incentive structures, making it challenging to transform and innovate. In the findings below we reference three key behaviours that reflect the barriers posed by international actors, as perceived by local actors:

1. Lack of interest in participating in locally initiated joint action planning and in joining local networks.
2. International actors’ lack of capacity to adapt their role and function based on the capacity already on the ground (i.e. working in complementarity).
3. Limitations in international actors’ ability to fund based on need rather than on their due diligence requirements.

Despite these challenges, ELNHA was able to bring together more than 250 local actors from Uganda and Bangladesh to strengthen a movement towards a more decentralised and locally owned model for humanitarian response. In this article ELNHA local partners – Community Empowerment for Rural Development (CEFORD) in West Nile, Uganda; SORUDA (formerly Soroti

35 www.oxfamnovib.nl/donors-partners/about-oxfam/projects-and-programs/elnha

Rural Development Agency), located in the Eastern Region of Uganda; and Garib Unnayan Sangstha (GUS) in Kurigram, Bangladesh – and their international partner, Oxfam, share their experience and learning.

Main features of the project

Traditionally, projects are designed by international organisations and then implemented by local actors. This practice has been shown to be both ineffective in building local ownership and in promoting sustainable outcomes. So the first question for Oxfam was how to ensure the design of the project was flexible enough to be determined locally, while having a clearly defined framework to secure – and assure – our donor’s funding commitment. The solution was to establish two funds (a capacity fund and a response grant facility), one for capacity-strengthening and one to respond to emergencies, without defining ahead of time in what ways and for what activities these would be accessed. The only parameter was that both funding mechanisms would be exclusively accessible to local actors. Such a set-up was possible in great part thanks to the foresight and openness of the donor to test this novel approach.

Next, a diverse range of local actors (from local government, the media, civil society and the private sector) were invited to come together at district and national level in Uganda and Bangladesh, to reflect on the gaps and strengths of their local humanitarian structures and organisations, and determine which actions needed to be taken to improve them. The driving principle was that most local problems can be solved locally and all can contribute to strengthening the system of actors that respond to people’s needs in emergencies. Collectively these stakeholders developed a long-term vision of change – a joint action plan (JAP) – that they implemented, together, to tackle barriers and capacity gaps. Actors were identified based on a context analysis of the humanitarian capacity of the districts and the country, facilitated by Oxfam and coordinated by local NGO leads at the district level.

In addition, in case of a humanitarian emergency, local NGOs in the ELNHA network could apply to the response grant facility to implement a self-designed response for their affected area. In a break from traditional practice, the intention of the model was to allow local NGOs to define their own programmes and build experience and confidence in project design, proposal development and implementation. As reflected by GUS in Bangladesh, the experience led to ownership, recognition and visibility in humanitarian coordination spaces, and supported capacity-strengthening and learning through practical, direct experience.

The activities defined by local actors ranged from organisational capacity-strengthening in finance or procurement, for example, but were also more system-wide: conducting joint needs assessments, coordinating early warning systems, developing contingency plans aligned to district government, inclusive disaster policies, and more. These initiatives to improve the functioning of local structures were key in shifting mindsets (of both local actors and international organisations) by forcing us to think more long-term (beyond the project) and improving accountability between

local actors and crisis-affected people/communities rather than merely accountability towards a donor. Accountability between local actors (also termed ‘horizontal accountability’) was an important element of the project and was fostered through a process of collectively agreeing on a common ambition, setting out the steps to get there and allocating roles and responsibilities to each other. Such accountability evolved through the process of developing and implementing the JAP and by responding to emergencies as a consortium of local actors. We have seen that, by learning to work together, local actors establish networks and partnerships of trust and cooperation that strengthen their response capacity and their influencing of the humanitarian agenda.

In terms of the funding oversight, some of the larger local organisations were budget holders who coordinated activities implemented by a network of local actors. When required, Oxfam provided technical support and quality assurance, linked actors with national and international spaces, and compiled learning.



Refugee group in Uganda. Credit: AYWAD

What was the experience of local actors and Oxfam on this project?

The main reflections of CEFORD, SORUDA and GUS on the experience can be summarised as follows:

By engaging diverse actors, new opportunities for collaboration emerged. Local governments in the West Nile region, Uganda and in Kurigram, Bangladesh now engage local NGOs more in the planning and implementation of disaster protocols. For instance, after attending a humanitarian standards course organised by local NGOs, a radio station in Uganda set up a radio programme called 'Voice of the Voiceless' to provide space to refugees and the local government to discuss issues and share information.

The new collaborations also required more consortia management skills than local and national NGOs in the network had. District-level NGO leaders dealt with grievances and competition, with some feeling they were better than others and some preferring to work alone. Working in complementarity rather than competing is difficult to achieve for any organisation (international organisations still have a lot to learn in this regard). Local NGOs recognised both the value and the complexity of the approach and worked together with Oxfam to establish better governance policies for their networks and consortia. Oxfam also saw that local-to-local networks required gradual interpersonal growth and trust building, which can only develop through time.

Agreeing as a collective on the priorities for strengthening local structures was eye-opening for some and irrelevant for others. For some, the amount of time and commitment that this process required was too great for the return they were getting. Used to working on projects with predefined activities and financial allocations, they saw no need to change this. This was not just the case for local organisations; partners lamented that UN agencies and other INGOs present in their areas did not participate in this process, undermining its impact. For others the exercise provided a unique and new space to reflect on their organisation's value-add, future identity, who they wanted to be and how to get there. It allowed for longer-term, strategic thinking that considered their role in a broader system of humanitarian aid. This has led to developing organisational strategies, resource mobilisation and positioning through advocacy and joint engagements.

ELNHA's capacity-strengthening approach was its greatest contribution. It placed local actors at the centre, providing space to define their own capacity development needs and the means to address them. Stronger and more established local actors were able to support the growing, smaller organisations, and by working together they were able to leverage their strengths and mandate. For instance, SORUDA in Uganda put in place operational policies that resulted in a growing number of partnerships and an increase in its funding portfolio, which enabled the organisation to expand geographically from Lamwo District into Agago District. The opportunity to reflect on their organisation's long-term vision, develop resource plans and choose what niche areas to focus on gave SORUDA greater direction and structure, which made them more competitive in accessing funding. For example, in a consortium with two other organisations (FOKAPAWA and NUWOSO) they co-created and submitted to the UN Trust Fund and USAID-USHA (Uganda Sanitation for

Health Activity) a proposal for \$140,000 that was approved to implement a humanitarian response in refugee and host communities in Palabak Kal, Lamwo district. SORUDA was also able to host learning exchanges for other actors in Karamoja and Acholi, providing mentorship and coaching, while also sharing lessons in response experience.

Local actors valued the opportunity to access seed funding for self-designed humanitarian response, yet communities felt funding amounts were too small to meet their needs, especially when compared with the scale of programmes delivered by international organisations. Communities had higher expectations and wanted more needs met, which sometimes resulted in strained relationships between local NGOs and the communities they served, despite ongoing communication between them. Local partners perceive a risk that this unmet expectation will change their relationship with affected communities from one of trust and cooperation to disengagement. Certainly more could have been done by the local actor to better manage community expectations; however, we collectively noted that the provision of small grants has the potential to do more harm than good if not managed appropriately.

Local leadership was further strengthened through establishing, running or joining local, regional, and national platforms. These coordination platforms acted as spaces for information-sharing and dialogue. More specifically, they became spaces for local actors to amplify their voices and act as key players in the humanitarian ecosystem. It was through these platforms that local actors formed consortia to increase the scale and reach of their response programmes, consequently allowing them to better compete for funding. For example, a consortium of local actors from a district in Bangladesh successfully competed against international organisations in obtaining funding from the Start Fund. While some local actors joined district and national networks with the aim of accessing funding, most stayed for experiential learning and collaborative opportunities.

Many local NGOs in ELNHA, like CEFORD, GUS, and SORUDA, gained experience not just in managing and leading a consortium, but as co-applicants on funding proposals in support of other local NGOs. GUS reported having developed a range of skills through identifying resource persons, chairing platforms and coordinating initiatives from a range of actors. Local-to-local consortia allowed agencies to leverage and pool staff for timely deployment and provided an opportunity to administer and coordinate joint response work. It strengthened internal planning, particularly resource allocation and use, in a transparent and accountable manner between consortium members. These strengthened collaborative relationships meant response work and troubleshooting were resolved quickly.

ELNHA advocated for the participation and inclusion of local actors in humanitarian spaces where decisions are made, and at different levels – from district coordination and cluster meetings to the steering groups of Start Fund Bangladesh or the Comprehensive Refugee Response Framework (CRRF) Steering Committee in Uganda. For many local NGOs, regular participation, particularly at national or international levels, has been challenged by language barriers, limited technical knowledge, few available staff, distance and the tendency of representatives from larger

organisations to dominate the space. Indeed, many local actors were not aware of the importance of being part of these coordination platforms. ELNHA's early work to support LNNGO access to different levels of coordination unfortunately failed to factor in the gap between local-level coordination spaces and national ones, where most key decisions are made. While Oxfam and district-level NGO leaders supported some strengthening of the communications and connections between local NGO subnational networks and representatives with their national counterparts, this area still needs more investment and attention.

For local NGOs like GUS, visibility and participation in decision-making spaces led to more opportunities for partnership and collaboration outside their district. Beyond this, local NGOs noted that regular participation had knock-on benefits of strengthening staff capacity and building confidence. Those larger, more dominant organisations became allies for joint advocacy and requests. Inclusive participation in meetings accelerated during the Covid-19 response, as virtual meetings eliminated issues of distance and reduced staff availability barriers.

What do INGOs and local actors need to do to reinforce local humanitarian structures going forward?

Some key shifts are needed in the norms and behaviours of humanitarian actors. Learning from ELNHA reconfirmed the following:

- Humanitarian actors need to work in line with the existing local humanitarian policies and actors.
- Success needs to be measured by long-term strategic partnerships, collective outcomes and mutual cooperation, although it remains difficult to delink these from financial incentives.
- It must be recognised that the next era of humanitarian action requires international investments in networked responses – strengthening collaboration between a movement of diverse actors at international and, most importantly, local levels, as well as governments, the private sector and civil society.

For local actors, many of whom have emerged and been shaped by the same traditional humanitarian system that is guiding the incentives and culture of INGOs, the ELNHA programme has provided a framework to test a different path. Key elements that have resonated with local actors are:

- There is a need to work cohesively and with the full extent of capacity, skills and resources available from different actors, whether international, government, private, media or other NGOs. This requires openness to collaborate rather than compete, and investment in building relationships of trust with other actors in the system.
- Become advocates, collectively, for the rights and agency of local actors, ensuring that engagements are mutually beneficial and are supportive of longer-term outcomes for people in need.
- Responding to people's needs must dictate the operations and approaches used, recognising their role and agency in emergencies.

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Boost local Quick Response Funds to strengthen local humanitarian leadership

Esteban 'Bong' Masagca and Janice Ian Manlutac with Benedict Balderrama

The call for local humanitarian leadership, where decision-making and funding models intentionally shift power to local and national actors before, during and after a crisis, has been around for at least the last 10 years, and was reinforced with pledges and commitments made at the World Humanitarian Summit in 2016. Pivotal events over the past year – the Covid-19 pandemic, calls to decolonise aid and the Black Lives Matter Campaign – highlight why this must be so.

The People's Disaster Risk Reduction Network (PDRRN),³⁶ an NGO that has been delivering humanitarian action in the Philippines for almost two decades now, offers a deep dive perspective on various types of Quick Response Funds that are helping local actors be in the driver's seat again and could potentially reform the aid sector to be locally led.

Quick Response Funds

Quick Response Funds (QRFs) are budgetary allocations or standby funds for rapid assistance to areas affected by disasters and crises. They are usually replenished annually. There are varying scales of QRFs: some are organised by national governments, some by local networks, some by the UN and some by individual INGOs.

One of the biggest challenges in the sustainability of locally led humanitarian action is funding for local NGOs and actors to strengthen their technical and institutional capacity, expand/enhance their humanitarian protocols and systems, manage their risks and concerns, retain their qualified staff and support roster *and then respond to an emergency*. Local actors do not have the large reserves that INGOs and UN agencies enjoy, and often need to raise funds before launching a

36 www.pdrn.org/who-we-are

response. Local QRFs, which provide a variety of options and access to local actors, can fill this gap. This could be an entry point for other funding models to help local actors deliver aid effectively. Below are examples of QRFs that PDRRN has been engaged with.

Philippine government QRFs

In the Philippines, governments are required to allocate 5% of their annual revenue allotment – the total funding that a municipality, city, province or national government office receives from taxes and other income – for disaster risk reduction and management (DRRM). Of this, 30% must go to QRFs, and 70% to preparedness work. Where the QRF has not been utilised in a given year, the savings go into a trust fund which can be used for general programmes after five years. However, where neighbouring towns, cities or provinces are impacted by disasters, by law they can request these funds as part of larger pooled funding. Technically, each government DRRM office includes representatives from civil society, the private sector, faith-based groups and academic institutions, all of which have voting rights and help shape the government’s final DRRM Plan and budget. Thus far no government office has given money directly to a local civil society or private sector organisation. However, local non-government actors like PDRRN have worked alongside government on joint assessments and planning, and at times have provided training for government responders. Based on its assessments and recommendations, PDRRN has secured government resources indirectly, e.g. affected communities needed shelter support and the government provided this based on PDRRN’s recommendations.

Local QRFs for non-government actors

A significant number of local development organisations in high-risk areas of the Philippines, including PDRRN, now engage in relief work in response to recurring disasters affecting their communities, such as Covid-19. With limited access to emergency funds from international actors, they get their support from their networks, although this is on a small scale. These organisations are commonly part of national networks with clear humanitarian programmes and maintain QRFs to enable them to undertake rapid assessments and provide initial life-saving humanitarian assistance.

One of these networks, the Humanitarian Response Consortium (HRC),³⁷ comprises 12 local NGOs that have been responding to humanitarian crises in the Philippines since 2010. HRC implements responses as a consortium, not as individual organisations. There is a single line management system made up of staff and managers from different organisations. Resources are controlled through a single budget using a single system for processing, where one agency takes the lead in managing the response, including responsibility for funding. This is rotated among all members. Decision-making is devolved as much as possible, so that decisions are more responsive to changes in the context.

37 www.singledrop.org/humanitarian-response-consortium

PDRRN currently coordinates the HRC. The QRF, which is managed by another member, was established in 2016 with a \$40,000 donation from Oxfam. In 2018, the fund was increased to \$50,000 with pooled resources from various donors. The QRF allows for a 72-hour turn-around time to respond. To date, it has leveraged a total of \$1.6 million from various donors including Oxfam, UNICEF, Christian Aid, Latter-Day Saints of Charity (LDSC) and SEAOL Foundation to respond to five emergencies, including several destructive typhoons and the ‘Marawi Siege’ in Mindanao.

Another local QRF, the Shared Aid Fund for Emergency Response (SAFER),³⁸ is a collaborative partnership of three groups, the HRC, the Caucus of Development NGO Networks (CODE NGO)³⁹ and the Catholic Bishops Conference of the Philippines-National Secretariat for Social Action (NASSA)/CARITAS) Philippines.⁴⁰ SAFER raises funds from local publics and the private sector to augment the resources of on-the-ground organisational partners of SAFER member groups working in disaster-affected areas, especially in poor, vulnerable and hard-to-reach communities.

In its first two years, funds generated by SAFER came mainly from friends, families and the social networks of founders and staff. Individual donations ranged from \$2 to \$200. As SAFER gained credibility with the responses it was able to mount, including to fires, typhoons and floods, private sector donations began, ranging from \$1,000 to \$20,000. Over the last two years, SAFER has supported eight local organisations in 11 emergency responses reaching 2,375 poor households, raising funds from private companies, diaspora groups, families and donors, who got to know SAFER from social media posts, internet searches and referrals from previous donors.

SAFER recognised the value of good marketing and communication and accountability to its supporters early on, and uses social media to report on the funds it has generated and where the money went through pictures, videos and donor reports. In 2021, it launched givinghero.app/safer to cast a wider net for donations and to educate the public about local solidarity, or the traditional Filipino concept of *bayanihan*. Although limited in scope, with annual funding of around \$38,000, this mechanism of localising humanitarian response is working, is proving more responsive and needs to be promoted.

SAFER recently surveyed Filipino employees involved in its ‘giving hero’ programme, where employees donate time or money as part of their company’s corporate social responsibility contributions. Eighty-four percent of individual donors said they were more likely to give if a match was offered, and one in three said they would give a larger gift if matching was applied to their donation. Responding to these findings, SAFER is adjusting its donation portals and approaches for 2021 to attract more match funding from bigger organisations and companies and expand partnerships with those that are particularly supportive of giving and volunteering. Fifteen per cent of donations received by SAFER go on administration.

38 www.facebook.com/saferpinas

39 <https://code-ngo.org>

40 www.caritas.org/where-caritas-work/asia/philippines



PDRRN Interim Response Manager Ann Ria S. Barrera consults with the officers of the Relocation Area Community Association (RACA) in Virac, Catanduanes for Super Typhoon Goni (locally known as Typhoon Rolly) in November 2020. Credit: PDRRN

The Oxfam Emergency Response Fund

Over the last seven years, Oxfam has embedded a mechanism similar to a QRF, the Emergency Response Fund (ERF), in two consecutive multi-year DRR programmes in Asia-Pacific and Central America to support locally led responses to disasters. ERF grants range in size from \$15,000 to \$200,000. The fund prioritises small-scale, under-the-radar and forgotten emergencies. The ERF was designed to reduce bureaucracy around fund administration, and turn-around time for grant approval is between 12 hours and four days, with a half-page template for requests. According to research on the ERF,⁴¹ the reporting templates and mechanisms are among the simplest local actors have ever encountered, with final reports needing a maximum of three pages. That the ERF is part of a donor-supported programme shows that there are donors who are supportive of accountability mechanisms that are not solely based on lengthy monitoring and end-of-project reports.

The ERF has supported 15 local NGOs in 24 humanitarian responses in Bangladesh, El Salvador, Fiji, Guatemala, Honduras, Indonesia, the Philippines, Nicaragua and Vanuatu. Across these responses, local actors demonstrated how swiftly they could reach isolated communities and how, by being first on the ground, they could help shape response options with input from affected populations. PDRRN was one of the actors that implemented an ERF response in Salcedo municipality.

ERF funds have been critical in facilitating preliminary set-up and assessment processes in humanitarian responses. The Sulawesi response in Indonesia in 2018–2019 was an \$11.8 million

41 Manlutac, J.I. (2021) *Funding the frontline: how an Oxfam Emergency Response Fund facilitated local humanitarian action*. Oxfam (<https://policy-practice.oxfam.org/resources/funding-the-frontline-how-an-oxfam-emergency-response-fund-facilitated-local-hu-621178/>).

response, to which the ERF contributed just \$50,000. The timing of that contribution was strategic, however, because it enabled local partners to conduct rapid assessments. These assessments allowed response interventions to be co-designed with Oxfam, and were later used for public appeals and other resource mobilisation. Being first on the ground also meant that the local consortium, Jejaring Mitra Kemanusiaan (JMK),⁴² was able to build good relationships and trust with affected communities, helping them to effectively manage the response. Of the total budget, \$2.4 million went to JMK to directly manage the second phase of the response.

Game changers in locally led humanitarian response

Humanitarian response organisations as a whole, and local NGOs in particular, are under-resourced compared to the scale of need.⁴³ To compound the problem, this is a crowded field, with many groups and actors vying for media attention and citizen engagement, as well as funds and other resources. The funding landscape is changing, but it needs to change faster. There is a consensus among local actors that funding mechanisms like SAFER, government QRFs, country-based pooled funds (CBPFs),⁴⁴ the Start Fund,⁴⁵ Oxfam's ERF, the UN's CERF,⁴⁶ DREF⁴⁷ and others should not just be part of this change, but should lead the way in innovation and inclusion. This would stand in contrast to the current trend, where large donors launch fewer calls for proposals and concentrate larger amounts of funding in each call. Complex bid requirements that demand huge investments limit access by small and local CSOs, perpetuate a top-down approach and can be very disempowering.

Prepositioning funds before a response can also help reduce bureaucracy in the actual response. This is an area where QRFs can be game changers. We need more locally designed pooled funds managed at national and subnational levels, that are accessible and useful even at municipal to village levels. Organisations should be given autonomy to disburse funds based on local circumstances, needs and capacities, while adhering to standards of transparency and accountability. These QRFs should be complemented with multi-year capacity-strengthening to help local actors increase their humanitarian capacity and systems. Current funding models are often highly centralised among large national NGOs, especially the foundations of media corporations and major companies such as the ABS-CBN Foundation, GMA Kapuso Foundation and those aligned with international NGOs. Funds should also be directed to credible national networks of local NGOs and actors who are agile and nimble, and have presence and operations across the country.

'Support must be mobilised and enhanced for QRFs and pooled funding mechanisms designed and managed by local NGOs and actors, including making them channels for funds and resources

42 www.jmk.or.id

43 UNOCHA (2020) 'Global Humanitarian Overview: monthly funding update', 31 July (www.unocha.org/sites/unocha/files/GHO_Monthly_Update_31JUL2020.pdf).

44 www.unocha.org/our-work/humanitarian-financing/country-based-pooled-funds-cbpf

45 <https://startnetwork.org/start-fund>

46 www.unocha.org/sites/unocha/files/120403_OOM-CERF_eng.pdf

47 <https://media.ifrc.org/ifrc/dref>

of INGOs and other international donors,' according to a national coordinator of a local NGO network. This effort to reform the humanitarian architecture and financial systems needs support and investment from everyone – local NGOs and actors, INGOs, donors and government – to make it truly locally led, effective and meaningful. There is much work to do, both for international and local actors, in supporting local QRFs and putting forward, not just words of encouragement, but also funding and resources.

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L'union fait la force: lessons on localisation from Haiti

By Jean Claude Cerin with Christon Domond, Oenone Chadburn and Asha Kurien

'L'union fait la force' are the words written on the Haitian flag: 'unity makes us strong'. Many Haitians may tell you that these words have yet to be fulfilled in Haitian society but the members of the RIHPED (Réseau Intégral Haïtien pour le Plaidoyer et le l'Environnement Durable) network⁴⁸ are dedicated to this mantra and have seen it lived out through their work in Haiti.

Since 2016, efforts to support localisation, like those proposed within the Grand Bargain, have struggled to generate enough transformational change that satisfies national NGOs and moves the humanitarian system towards integrated collaboration between local and international actors. At first glance the Covid-19 pandemic presents a set of circumstances that seem to favour localisation, especially in light of international travel restrictions. Yet, research⁴⁹ has revealed only anecdotal evidence of shifts to a localisation approach from those working on it prior to the emergence of Covid-19. A sector-wide shift remains hampered by limited funding, mistrust and an assumed lack of openness on both sides.

This case study discusses the localisation journey of a network of organisations in Haiti that has aimed to strengthen local coordination, ownership and decision-making. It draws on three main

48 <https://rihped.info>

49 Barbelet, V., Bryant, J. and Willitts-King, B. "All eyes are on local actors": Covid-19 and local humanitarian action. Opportunities for systemic change'. HPG briefing note. London: ODI (<https://odi.org/en/publications/all-eyes-are-on-local-actors-covid-19-and-local-humanitarian-action/>).

sources: (1) the Integral Alliance Haiti Partner Listening Forum Report⁵⁰ from January 2020;⁵¹ (2) an action plan based on the recommendations of partners following the onset of Hurricane Matthew; and (3) the RIHPED member survey conducted in 2021 to inform this article.

The Origins of RIHPED

RIHPED was formed in 2014 by bringing together six local Haitian organisations: Concile des Eglises Evangélique d'Haïti (CEEH), Fédération des Ecoles Protestantes d'Haïti (FEPH), Fondation Haïtienne de l'Enseignement Privé (FONHEP), King's Organisation, Micah Haiti and Union Evangélique Baptiste d'Haïti (UEBH); and five international organisations: Food for the Hungry (FH), Tearfund, World Concern, World Relief and World Renew. The five international organisations are members of the Integral Alliance (IA),⁵² a global network of Christian international NGOs. As members of IA, these organisations coordinated their humanitarian responses internationally, but were not coordinating well enough at the national level, including in Haiti.

The initiators of RIHPED were motivated by their experience of the humanitarian response to the 2010 earthquake in Haiti, which was characterised by limited coordination between NGOs and local organisations being shut out of key spaces where resources were being distributed and decisions were being made. The founding members drafted a contingency plan to prepare for potential future humanitarian disasters and legally registered the RIHPED network as a foundation. They also established a fund called Fond de Réponse Rapide et Efficiente (Fond FRERE), an Emergency Fund for Rapid and Efficient Response. While both local and international NGO members contributed to the fund, the decision-making process to allocate funds was locally led, based on the members undertaking collective analysis of where the needs were greatest as equal peers. RIHPED held its first national assembly in 2015 and has continued to grow (it currently has 14 members). All members pay a membership fee proportionate to their size and commit to collaborate, including on fundraising to keep the FRERE fund topped up.

50 <https://drive.google.com/file/d/1gzWTBgcDVgO7EGIDRD8qyIMsz5tWup1U/view>

51 In working through the content for this article, some Haitian interviewees gave informal feedback on the narrative recorded in the Partner Listening Forum (PLF). There was concern that it did not make a strong enough distinction between integral partners being critiqued and wider country-level humanitarian coordination being critiqued. The RIHPED member survey, on which the majority of this article is based, reflects more of the positive experience between NNGOs and integral INGOs. In addition, the member survey was taken 13 months after the PLF, which also suggests improvements in relationships between the members, although no formal comparison was done.

52 www.integralalliance.org



Neighbourhood on the outskirts of Port-au-Prince, Haiti. Credit: Heather Suggitt

RIHPED in action

In 2016, when Hurricane Matthew hit Haiti, RIHPED was in a strong position to support communities affected because of the contingency plan it had put in place. The resources from the Fond FRERE allowed the members to implement the Assess and Assist programme, which entailed conducting a rapid needs assessment and providing initial assistance to the most vulnerable families in the affected communities. The Hurricane Matthew response included distribution of food and hygiene kits, repair of damaged homes, training and seed distribution for farmers, cash transfers and humanitarian project management training for RIHPED member organisations. The results of the needs assessments spurred member organisations to seek and secure funding for larger interventions.

In November 2019, all RIHPED members came together to review its direction. As part of a strategic development meeting, the network went through an externally facilitated learning and awareness process, which included recognising the different motivations and drivers between national and international agencies. This encompassed a review of values and a SWOT analysis, which formed the basis of defining the network's new strategic objectives. The exercise increased buy-in and alignment among members. They also articulated a vision statement for the future: to 'see

families less vulnerable and communities more resilient through the actions of a dynamic and representative Haitian network of Christian organisations, capable of influencing major decisions and popular practices in the matters of environment and disaster risk management’.

When Covid-19 arrived in 2020, RIHPED was once again able to conduct needs assessments, which allowed them to quickly fundraise for a two-pronged response. The first intervention addressed food insecurity and tools and seeds to grow crops were provided to communities. RIHPED’s response was localised and highly coordinated as it assisted health institutions as part of its second intervention. The network distributed personal protective equipment, medical equipment, food and food supplements to hospitals and state-run psychiatric centres. All this was possible due to the ongoing efforts of RIHPED members to respond effectively, rapidly and locally.

Member satisfaction

In a survey conducted among RIHPED members, participants shared their motivations for joining and remaining in the network. The responses included a vision of working together and a desire to pool resources and expertise. Enel Angervil, the director of a local NGO called Fondasyon Kominote Kretyen an Aksyon (FOKA), said: ‘I joined RIHPED because I wanted to coordinate with other local actors who could help our organization build capacity. The sharing of resources like knowledge, information, funds, training and technical expertise remains a motivator for our participation in the network’.

Tearfund, an INGO member of the network, shared that it chose to support RIHPED to increase local coordination between national and international NGOs, support locally led decision-making, decrease delays in funding by establishing local pre-positioned finances (i.e. Fond FRERE) and strengthen the humanitarian capacity of local NGOs.

While Tearfund identifies areas of improvement, including its desire to locally fund and independently staff the administration and coordination of the network, it remains encouraged by the impact and steady growth of the network. ‘The local and international NGOs work hand in hand in a way that complements the other. We collaborate on all decisions regarding the network’, said an INGO member colleague. Some participants explained that the ongoing community presence of some network members has enabled reach and connection to some of the remoter parts of the country. This has proved valuable for trust and early phase information-sharing when it comes to preparedness and early phase needs assessment.

A desire to receive training was another popular motivator for local NGOs to join the RIHPED network. Survey responses indicate that training offered through the network has been of great use to local NGO members. Representatives from one such member, Fondasyn Chanje Lavi, reported that the network has strengthened the capacity of its members through the host of training it offers, especially in the area of project management.

Participation in the network is not without its challenges. One major issue is a power imbalance between the international NGOs and local NGOs, who have fewer resources. One member reports, 'historically there has been a lack of confidence and capacity in the NNGOs. They perceive they are inadequate against the larger agencies'. To respond to this imbalance, RIHPED provides regular training and capacity-strengthening for local organisations. This training is identified by members from their own observations and experience. The RIHPED executive committee sources training from a cross-section of international and local training providers, ensuring as much as possible is done in Creole and that wherever possible the costs are covered by RIHPED. While international NGO staff often receive capacity-strengthening from their colleagues and teams in head offices, many local organisations do not have that luxury. Being a member of RIHPED helps give access to international standard training on themes such as cash programming, logistics, monitoring and evaluation for both local and international members.

Christon St. Fort, the director of Federation des Ecoles Protestantes d'Haiti (FEPH), explains that one of the premier benefits and successes of RIHPED was the existence and disbursement of locally held pre-positioned cash prior to Hurricane Matthew, the Fond FRERE. This fund was established by gathering membership contributions and securing grants in addition to/separate from the membership fees. In the wake of the hurricane the cash was leveraged and used as a pooled fund. This was not without challenges, as one responder from a local organisation explained: 'Members who contribute more money hold more weight in the decision making. The international organisations pay higher fees, and therefore have more influence than the local organisations'. Others worry that a pattern of competition between members affects their ability to collaborate. An INGO representative said: 'we felt there was too much competition among the members, even when the rapid assessments were being done as a team, the results were not made available to all members at the same time'.

Despite these challenges, when asked if they were reconsidering their membership, 100% of the participants responded 'no', suggesting a high level of satisfaction. The members of RIHPED are committed to moving forward together while addressing these serious challenges facing the network.

Lessons learned

Drawing on their experience since 2014, there are a number of lessons that RIHPED has learned that have been central to its growth.

Lesson 1: effective coordination improves local preparedness and response capacity

The members of RIHPED created and implemented a common contingency plan, which allowed them to know exactly who was in the best position to intervene in the event of a catastrophe. This plan was immediately referenced and used as RIHPED began coordinating a couple days before Hurricane Matthew made landfall. It has undergone several updates and continues to influence the response strategies of the network, most recently in the Covid-19 response. Having a mapping

document that outlines on what themes each organisation works, in what areas they are present and who their target communities are is crucial to synergy among members. Periodic meetings, sharing of information and general coordination efforts have enabled stronger preparedness mechanisms and more efficient responses.

Lesson 2: joint pre-positioning improves response efficiency

RIHPED has been able to put in place systems to pre-position funds to support non-food items (NFIs), public health information and UN cluster-recommended communications. This joint pre-positioning, including maintaining a live map of where organisations work and how they can collaborate on logistics such as sharing warehouse space, allows the network to rapidly begin assessments and provide relief in the wake of a disaster. Keeping funds available in Fond FRERE, consistently updating the contingency plan and keeping an updated map of member resources is key to strong pre-positioning. RIHPED has simplified the application process to access money from the pooled fund, such as digitising monitoring and evaluation by using tablets to collect baseline data and reporting, while also improving joint reporting, which has led to increased efficiency.

Lesson 3: to counter power imbalances between members, deliberate structural changes are needed

The network revisits all members' understanding of the role and contribution of local organisations on an ongoing basis. As new members are inducted, they are encouraged to uphold the value that the network places on the role of local actors. RIHPED recently took steps to ensure a majority of local NGO representatives on the executive committee in order to establish the importance of listening to and being led by local voices.

Members aspire to set up a separate secretariat for the network staffed by an independent general manager and an administrative assistant to address the current over-reliance on the administrative resources of the larger organisations. This is a critical ongoing issue, but there is recognition that becoming an independent, self-funded network may take many years. These steps will allow responsibilities as well as power to be shared more equally across all members.

Lesson 4: the network's independence will only be achieved with secure and long-term anticipatory funding

For this to happen, all members will need to increase their contributions. The network will also need to extend across the rest of the country to enable more local organisations, including local partners of the member INGOs, to join. RIHPED members will need to do much more to raise donor awareness of the importance of networks like RIHPED and the need to invest in them.

Lesson 5: a strong network does not compete with its members and works to temper competition between its members to avoid self-sabotage

Survey responses indicated a desire for clearer channels of communication between members to prevent a tendency towards competition. One member shared that on one occasion, although emergency needs assessments were carried out jointly, the data analysis report was not available to all members at the same time.

Many of these lessons learned resonate with recent analysis by the Humanitarian Policy Group (HPG). In the 2020 report *From the ground up*⁵³ questions are asked about whose values are prioritised, especially who ‘assigns value’, and how resources are allocated. Defining power relationships among international and local actors is at the heart of the international humanitarian debate; RIHPED has stepped into the centre of this conversation through iterative learning and practice.

The way forward

RIHPED members are of the opinion that collaboration between local and international NGOs in their network positions them to better support each other where needed while also supporting the needs of affected communities. They also expressed that their common Christian faith facilitates trust and collaboration: ‘Faith helps us to take risks with assurance, and it facilitates the trust that we have in other members so we can work together’.

Going forward, RIHPED members are exploring ways to raise awareness among humanitarian peers and donors about the importance of investing in networks such as theirs that support the work of local actors. They are also working towards setting up an independent secretariat, reducing the reliance on external funding sources (that INGOs have facilitated) and extending RIHPED’s reach to strengthen disaster risk reduction and humanitarian preparedness and response across Haiti. They know this will take time, but the story so far shows a deep-rooted commitment to ensure this joint initiative between local and international can be a model of collaboration to inspire others.

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53 Fast, L. and Bennett, C. (2020) *From the ground up: it’s about time for local humanitarian action*. HPG report. London: ODI (<https://odi.org/en/publications/from-the-ground-up-its-about-time-for-local-humanitarian-action>).

Local funding flows and leadership: recent trends in 10 major humanitarian responses

Christian Els and Henrik Fröjmark

Five years after the major humanitarian donors and INGOs signed the Grand Bargain committing to increasing funding for local actors, Local2Global Protection (L2GP) has analysed data on funding flows and leadership in humanitarian coordination. This article presents an overview of the findings from 10 country contexts (Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon, Nigeria, occupied Palestinian territories (oPt), Somalia, South Sudan, Sudan, Syria and Ukraine) between 2016 and 2019, looking at direct funding to local and national actors, trends in spending since 2016, the use of country-based pooled funds (CBPFs) and indirect funding.⁵⁴ This overview suggests that there is still a considerable gap between policy and practice when it comes to the Grand Bargain commitments on funding: in 2019, according to OCHA's Financial Tracking Service (FTS), nearly \$10 billion was allocated in these countries, representing almost 40% of the global humanitarian funding budget. Of this, less than \$200 million, or 1.9% of funding, went to national and local actors. Meaningful changes in direct funding to local and national NGOs or representation in humanitarian leadership structures are not yet recorded. Tracking and analysing humanitarian funding flows and humanitarian leadership structures will be key to inform the debate on localisation, track change and hold the humanitarian community to its commitments.

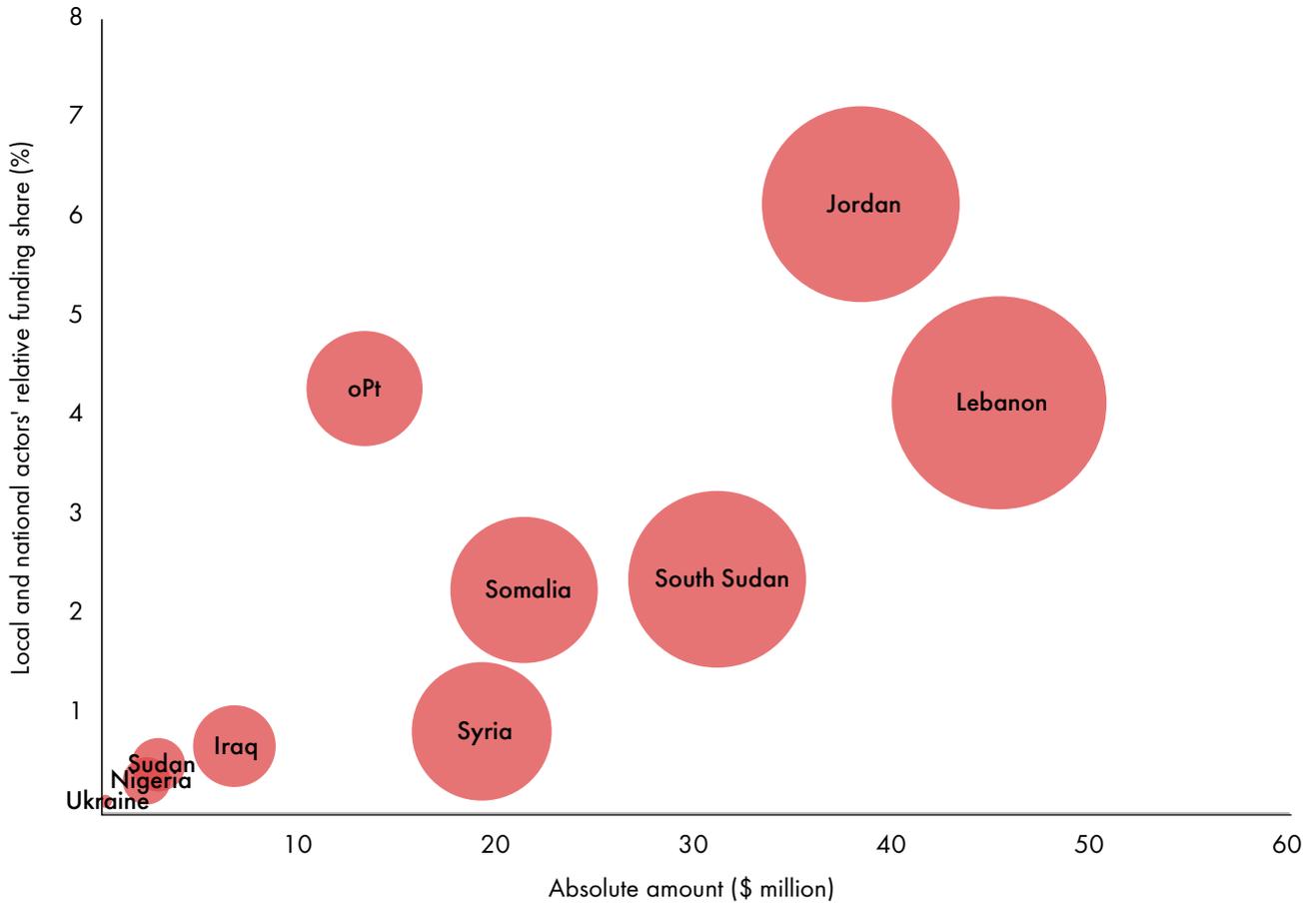
Direct funding

The amount of direct funding accessible to local and national humanitarian actors varies both in terms of the share of total reported funding and absolute amounts across the 10 countries studied. Jordan and Lebanon, where national governments play a large role in humanitarian action, have the highest amounts going to local actors, both in absolute terms and as a proportion of humanitarian funding. Most of this goes to the national governments of each country. In all other countries examined, local funding reported in FTS was mainly received by local and national NGOs.

Local and national actors in Lebanon and Jordan received around \$40 million in 2019, or 4% and 6% of total reported funding in each country, respectively. The oPt was the only other context where local actors received more than 4% of total funding. Local actors in Syria, South Sudan and Somalia all received between \$20–30 million per country, but this accounts for only slightly more than 2% of the total humanitarian response in South Sudan and Somalia and less than 1% in Syria. Local and national actors in the remaining countries received under \$10 million, less than 1% of each country's total humanitarian funding in 2019.

54 Detailed country briefs for each humanitarian response, including notes on methodology, were published by L2GP in 2020 and 2021, and can be found here: www.local2global.info/research.

Figure 1 Relative and absolute numbers of direct funding flows to local and national actors for 10 focus countries in 2019



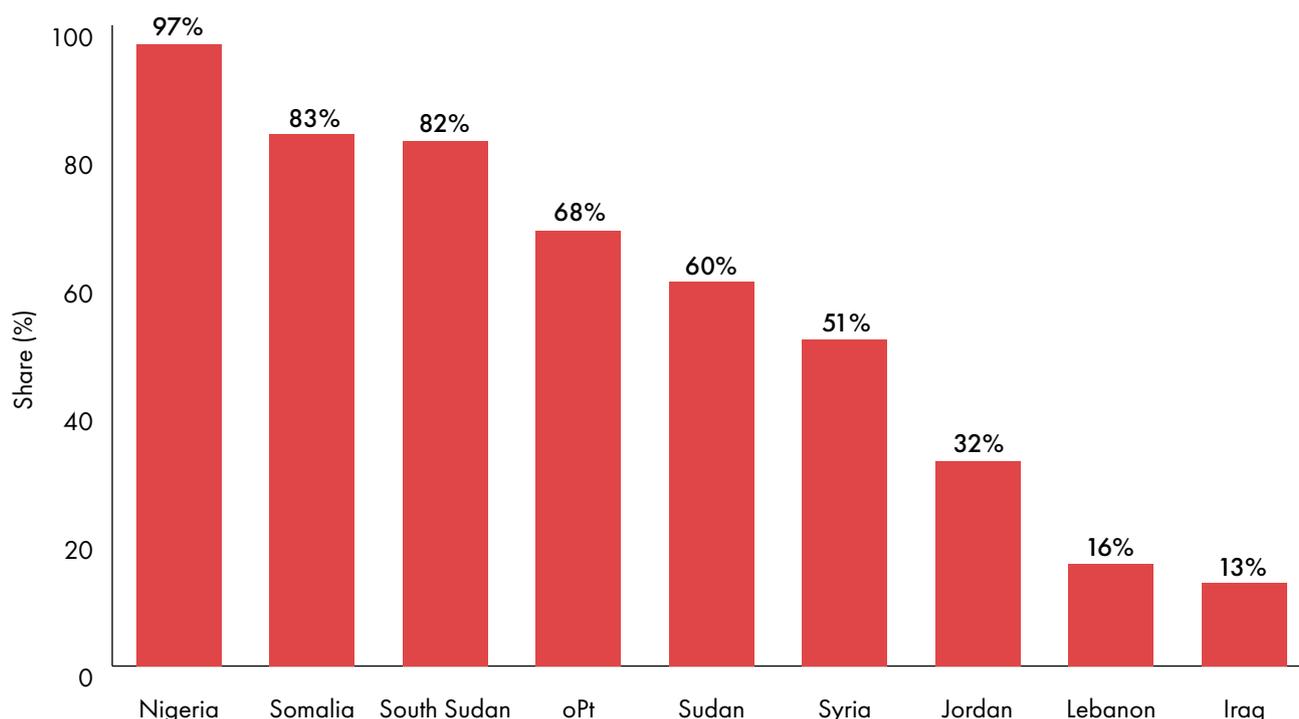
Looking at the longitudinal data from 2016–2019, in some cases funding to local actors did increase significantly (oPt, Somalia), while for others (Lebanon, South Sudan, Jordan) flows remained overall constant, albeit with some fluctuations over the years. In other cases, notably Iraq and Sudan, funding to local and national actors actually decreased. Direct funding to local and national actors represents such a small proportion of total humanitarian funding that a single grant can create a significant shift upwards, before funding reverts to typical levels the following year. Four years into the Grand Bargain, 2019 funding patterns showed no clear upward trend in direct funding to local and national humanitarian actors.

Pooled funds

Country-based pooled funds play a major role in funding local and national NGOs in all of the focus countries. In all but one they are the single largest provider of direct⁵⁵ funds to local and national NGOs. In six out of the 10, CBPFs provide more direct funding to local and national NGOs than all other donors combined (2019 data).

Globally between 2016 and 2019, CBPFs increased their combined funding to national NGOs (NNGOs) from 18.4% to 24.8%, which is also reflected in the increase in NNGO funding shares in Nigeria, oPt, Somalia and South Sudan. In Lebanon and Jordan, CBPF allocations to NNGOs have remained more-or-less constant, while in Sudan, Iraq and Syria, CBPF funding shares to NNGOs decreased between 2016 and 2019. While it is clear that there is an overall upward trend in CBPF funding to local and national NGOs, it is equally clear that there are considerable variations between countries.

Figure 2 CBPF funding share of total NNGO funding in 2019



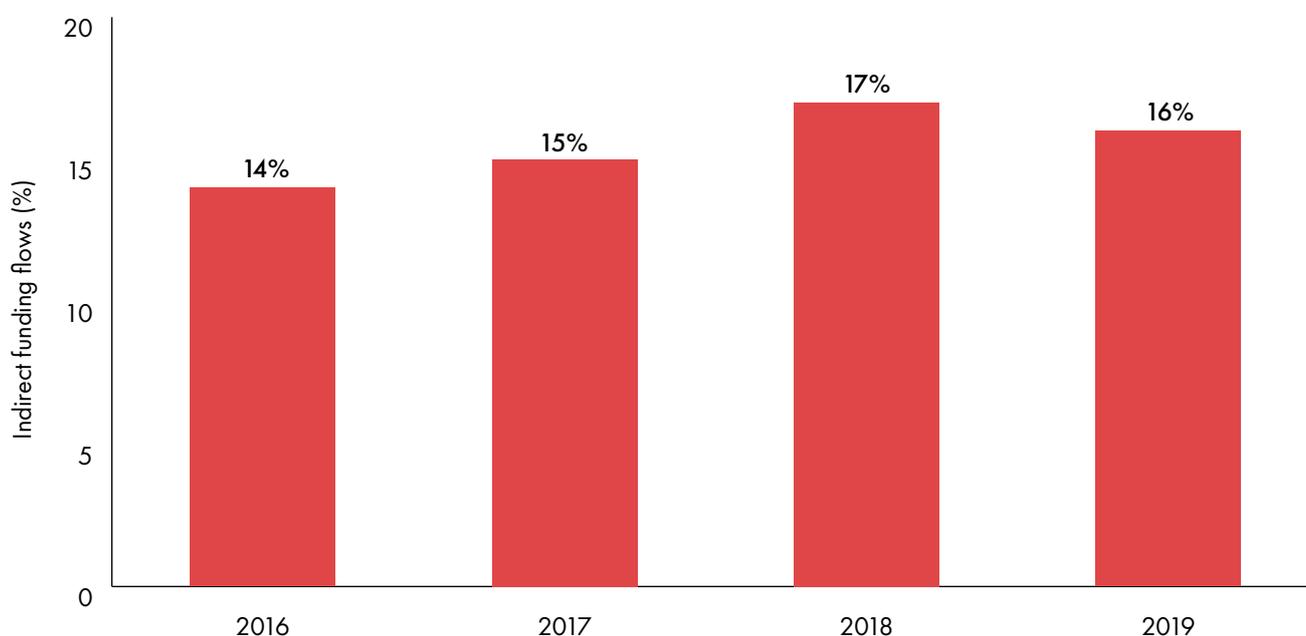
55 The term 'direct' refers to funds allocated without an operational intermediary. While CBPFs receive their funding from government donors they have no programmatic operations, unlike many UN agencies and INGOs, and their sole purpose is to provide funding.

Indirect funding

Indirect funding⁵⁶ accounts for a large proportion of funds allocated to local and national actors. Despite the importance of indirect funding, and Grand Bargain commitments to transparency, comprehensive data on funding flows from/through the UN and INGOs to local and national actors remains difficult to source and monitor. For this research, only global-level data for a handful of major organisations could be analysed. To their credit UNHCR, UNICEF, ICRC and UNRWA publish this type of data, and together these agencies accounted for more than 30% of global humanitarian funding in 2019. INGO signatories to the Charter4Change also publish specific data on this type of funding. While lack of a more complete dataset on indirect funding limits analysis, the data available clearly demonstrates that indirect funding accounts for a considerably larger share of local and national humanitarian funding than direct funding.

Of UNHCR, UNICEF, ICRC and UNRWA's combined expenditure, 16.1% was sub-granted to local and national NGOs, as well as local and national government actors. Longitudinal trends between 2016 and 2019 show a slight increase in the proportion of combined funding going to local and national actors. Over this period funding to local and national actors on average increased by 2.2 percentage points, from 13.9% in 2016 to 16.1% in 2019.

Figure 3 Indirect funding flows to local and national actors from UNRWA, UNHCR, UNICEF and ICRC



56 'Indirect funding' here refers to donor funding transferred to an implementing agency through an intermediary organisation such as a UN agency, an INGO or a member of the Red Cross Red Crescent family.

Calculating indirect funding flows to local actors

A closer look at figures on funding to local and national humanitarian actors shows how some organisations and donors have used different methods to calculate their proportion of funding to local actors. This means that figures cannot be compared across different organisations, and that it is not possible to provide an exact measure of how different organisations and donors are performing against the 25% commitment in the Grand Bargain. In addition, some organisations changed their calculation methods between 2016 and 2019. The lack of an agreed method of calculating the share of funding to local and national actors means that a great deal of uncertainty and confusion remains regarding what has actually been achieved in terms of reaching the Grand Bargain commitments.

Data from UNHCR provides an illustration of this. In its 2020 Global Report, UNHCR reported that it had reached the 25% local funding target by calculating the amount of funding transferred to local and national actors as a percentage of its programme expenditure in 2019.⁵⁷ Had UNHCR calculated the percentage against the organisation's total expenditure (as it did in 2015 and 2016⁵⁸), the percentage of funding going to local actors in 2019 would have been 17%.⁵⁹ This method of calculating the percentage of funding transferred to local and national actors was adopted by more than 30 INGO signatories to the Charter4Change movement in 2015 and has been used in their annual reporting ever since.⁶⁰ Moving forward, it is crucial that a uniform and transparent way of calculating these percentages, and thus delivery against commitments, is used by all signatories to the Grand Bargain.

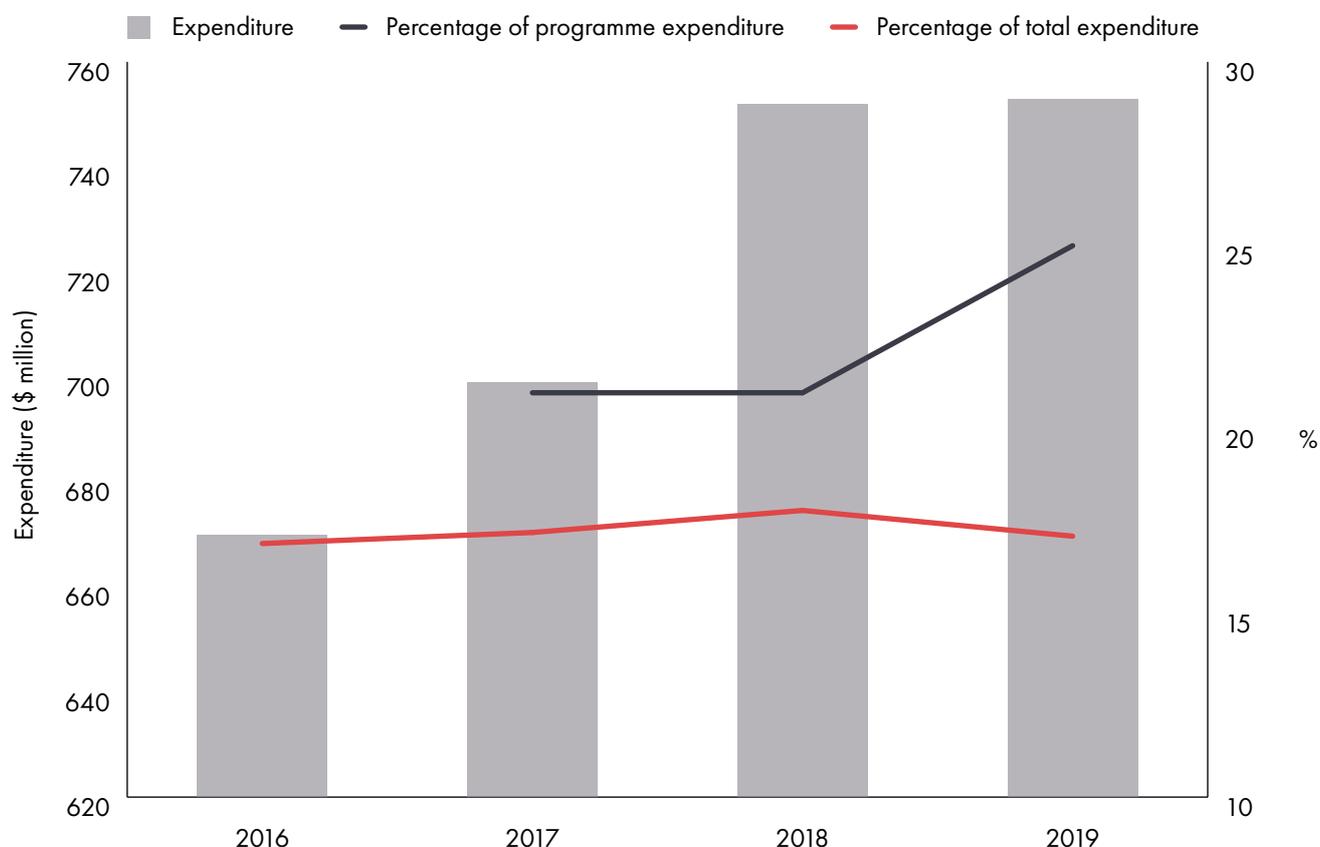
57 https://reporting.unhcr.org/sites/default/files/gr2019/pdf/GR2019_English_Full_lowres.pdf (p.23).

58 https://interagencystandingcommittee.org/system/files/unhcr_-_self-report_.pdf (p.5).

59 https://reporting.unhcr.org/sites/default/files/gr2019/pdf/GR2019_English_Full_lowres.pdf (pp.23 and 35), total expenditure: \$4,415 million; total to local and national responders: \$752.6 million.

60 For more on Charter4Change please see: <https://charter4change.org>

Figure 4 UNHCR funding to national partners



Note: Depending on the base for percentage calculations, UNHCR’s funding to local actors either stayed stagnant (against total expenditure) or increased (against programme expenditure).

Source: Authors’ analysis of UNHCR reporting⁶¹

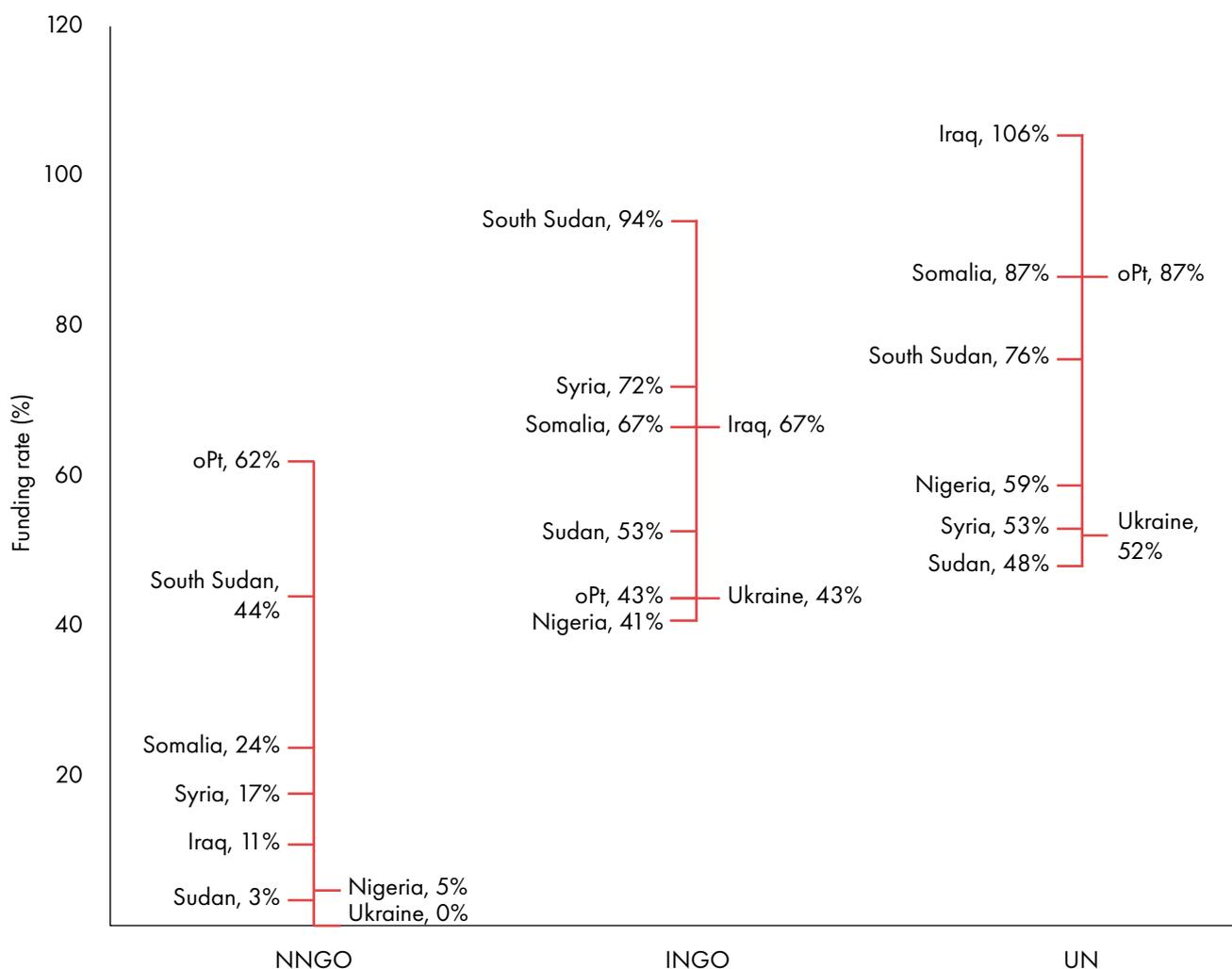
Funding gaps

The gap between funding requested and funding received is a well-noted and major issue for most humanitarian responses. Within this it is important to consider the ratio of funds requested to those received by organisation type. National NGOs receive a much smaller share of funding requested than INGOs and UN agencies. **Figure 6** shows an analysis of OCHA FTS data that demonstrates that, for each of the 10 countries analysed, funding gaps for UN agencies and INGOs are smaller than for NNGOs. While NNGOs appealed for much smaller dollar amounts in Humanitarian Response Plans

61 Percentages of total expenditures based on UNHCR Global Reports 2016–2019. NNNG=national NGOs + national governments; TE=total expenditure. 2016: NNNG: \$614 million; TE: \$3,967 million (<https://tinyurl.com/jbar2u6d> pp.184 and 27). 2017: NNNG: \$699 million; TE: \$4,083 million (<https://tinyurl.com/r3wxuat5> pp.33 and 51). 2018: NNNG: \$752 million; TE: \$4,226 million (<https://tinyurl.com/jxcn9u3b> pp.37 and 51). 2019: NNNG: \$753 million; TE: \$4,415 million (<https://tinyurl.com/uwa5xjd7> pp.23 and 35). Reported percentage of programme expenditure going to local and national actors, based on UNHCR GB reporting: 2017: 21% (<https://tinyurl.com/yktrdebv> p.8). 2018: 21% (<https://tinyurl.com/4pxuxcvk> p.2). 2019: 25% (<https://tinyurl.com/z283bfhn> p.2).

(HRPs), the proportion of funding received compared to funding requested is significantly lower, amounting to less than 50% of the requested funding in most countries. National NGOs' appeals receive less funding than UN agencies and INGOs in all countries studied except oPt.

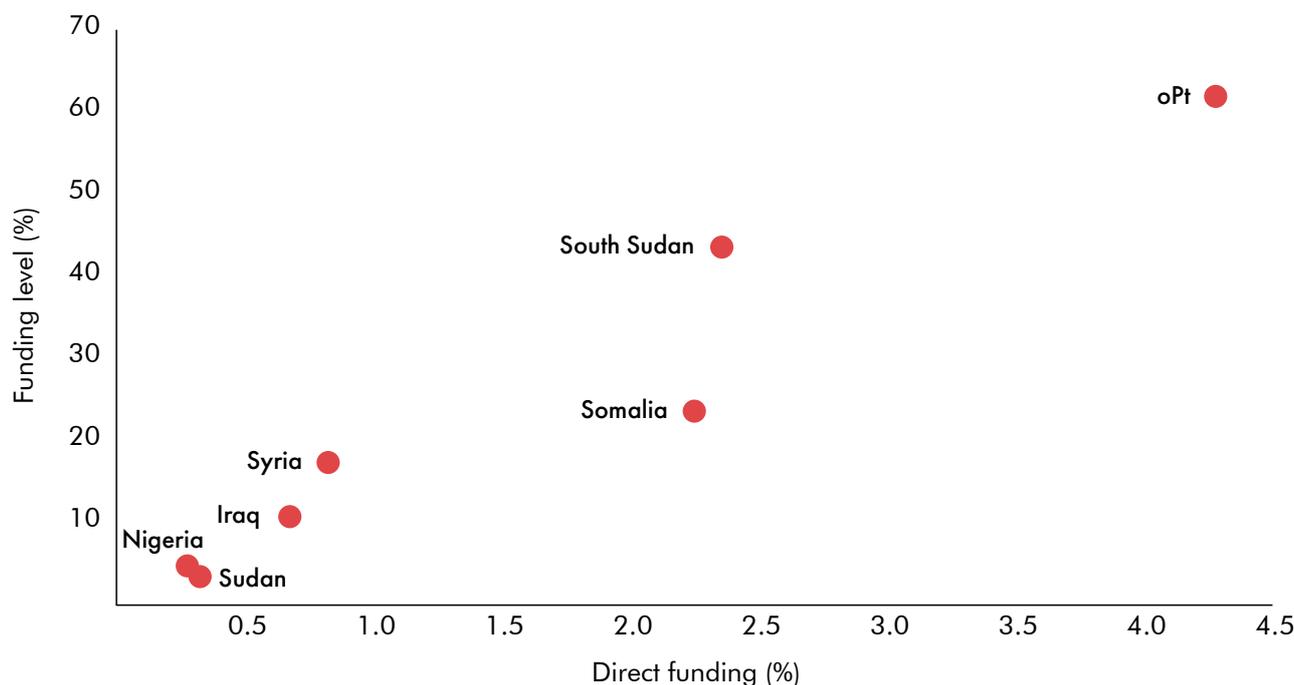
Figure 5 Funding rates of humanitarian response plan by organisation type



Source: Authors' analysis of OCHA FTS data

Comparing funding gaps with levels of direct funding for these 10 countries, we can see that larger funding gaps correlate with lower direct funding flows and vice-versa (Figure 7). This correlation may indicate that NNGOs in countries receiving smaller proportions of overall funds face greater issues fundraising.

Figure 6 Funding gaps and direct funding



Source: Authors' analysis of OCHA FTS data

Cluster membership and leadership

The final area examined was local and national participation in humanitarian leadership, particularly in clusters. Most clusters globally report on leadership functions at a national and sub-national level, as well as releasing detailed information on membership by organisation type. The overall picture is of a humanitarian coordination system where local and national NGOs form a large part of the membership, but very rarely hold any leadership positions.

UN agencies dominate cluster leadership at both national and local level for most of the countries studied. INGOs are represented in cluster leadership positions, both nationally and sub-nationally, and hold approximately 20% and 30% of these leadership positions, respectively. National NGOs dominate cluster membership in most countries, but their representation in leadership roles is very limited. In one of the countries studied, South Sudan, they hold two cluster leadership positions at the national level; in the other nine they hold none. At the sub-national level NNGOs hold less than 25% of cluster leadership positions.

Conclusion

Despite commitments made in the Grand Bargain to ensure that local and national actors receive 25% of humanitarian funding, local and national actors in the countries studied receive less than 10% of total funding. In eight of the 10 the proportion of funding transferred directly to local actors was less than 3%. In some cases it was lower in 2019 than when commitments were made in 2016.

Overall, most direct funding comes from CBPFs. Although these funds represent only a small share of total humanitarian funding they were the largest source of direct funding in nine out of the 10 countries studied, and the trend shows the proportion allocated to local actors is increasing. However, at present the proportion of humanitarian funding going to CBPFs is so small that CBPF funding to local and national NGOs could double and still remain within single figures as a proportion of global humanitarian funding.

The most important international source of funding for local and national actors is indirect funding from UN agencies, INGOs and other international humanitarian actors. These funding streams are considerably harder to track. Increasing clarity and transparency in reporting on indirect funding to local humanitarian response should be a priority to fulfil the Grand Bargain commitments on localisation and transparency. Although indirect funding can allow for flexibility and can be allocated on the basis of assessments by local partners, there is considerable risk that such streams relegate local and national actors to the role of subcontractor responsible for delivering on the programme goals of the funding agency.

Analysing the gaps between funding requested and funding received, it appears that even though local and national NGOs typically launched considerably smaller appeals under HRPs compared to all other types of organisation, they receive the smallest proportion of those appeals. This not only hinders their ability to implement programmes, but also suggests that HRPs are a much better 'deal' for those with institutional power, leverage and access to the structures where final decisions are made than those on the periphery.

This gap in power is further illustrated by examining country-level leadership positions by organisation type. Cluster leadership positions at national level remain dominated by UN agencies and to a smaller extent INGOs and national government agencies – even though cluster membership is dominated by national NGOs in most of the focus countries. Local and national NGOs fare somewhat better when it comes to leadership positions in sub-national clusters. Still, national actors are significantly under-represented in most of the countries studied.

Our hope is that this analysis will inspire informed debate at both national and global levels on how to increase funding for local and national NGOs and opportunities for them to assume decision-making roles within the humanitarian system. Our findings suggest that power imbalances are structural and run through all aspects studied in this research, making them harder to address. Further research is needed on the barriers to increasing the power of local and national actors and their access to funding. But to move from what seems to be a general agreement in policy on the need to strengthen local humanitarian action to real change in practice, much more must be done. This study clearly shows that international and multilateral actors have not yet let go of either funding or leadership. The question why that is still the case has yet to be answered.

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Innovating to increase flexible funding for local-level organisations

Ben Munson, Ramya Madhavan and Sarah Stephens, with contributions from, Evelyn Nojang, Jesmin Prema, Mohammed Kabir, Pascal Maga, Yahya Omid and Henriques Verónica Henriques

Despite explicit commitments detailed in the Grand Bargain, funding to local actors is still critically lacking five years on. Studies suggest disappointing amounts of both direct and indirect funding to local and national NGOs (L/NNGOs). One study suggests that just 0.2% of overall humanitarian funding goes directly to these actors, while only 14.2% flows either directly or indirectly through other channels, including through international INGOs and pooled funds⁶².

Local organisations are routinely the first responders to crisis. They are regularly relied upon to rapidly scale up, lead and embed recovery and post-crisis phases, utilising their understanding of the context and access to local communities and networks. Their crucial role, and the inevitable increased risk that comes from being frontline responders in crisis contexts, is not acknowledged in the form of funding. At present, L/NNGOs do not benefit from the same levels and safeguards of access to flexible funding afforded to international organisations.

In the absence of access to flexible funding, L/NNGOs are trapped in a cycle of project-based approaches. They also suffer the consequences of staff turnover, which stems from an inability to invest in and strengthen the capacities of their staff and the sustainability of their organisations.⁶³ Therefore, flexible funding is critical to cover core costs for L/NNGOs and increase their longevity and sustainability.

62 Local to Global (2019) 'Funding to local actors still far from Grand Bargain commitments' (www.local2global.info/wp-content/uploads/GB_funding_flows_2019.pdf).

63 Global Protection Cluster (n.d.) *Advancing the localisation agenda in protection coordination groups* (www.globalprotectioncluster.org/wp-content/uploads/GPC-Learning-Paper-on-Localisation.pdf).



An adolescent girl follows a radio-broadcasted lesson at home using a rechargeable radio during Covid-19-induced school closures in North East Nigeria. Credit: Hallmark Leadership Initiative

Methodology and methods

The impetus for advancing locally led humanitarian action has never been greater.⁶⁴ However, there is limited research and a lack of rigorous evidence to inform efforts to advance localisation. In direct response to this, Street Child and Save the Children Denmark (with funding from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Denmark, Danish International Development Agency (DANIDA)) designed a pilot programme to expand evidence and enhance understanding of how L/NNGOs use flexible funds. The pilot had three aims:

- to increase understanding of how L/NNGOs choose to spend institutional funding;
- to explore the ways in which institutional funding influences access to further funding; and
- to share findings with relevant recommendations to increase institutional funding for L/NNGOs.

64 CPAoR and Street Child (2020) *Accelerating localised response to Covid-19: practical pathways* (https://static1.squarespace.com/static/531748e4e4b035ad0334788c/t/5f06fcb5bcae5e1803b85b/bf/1594293432239/2020_Accelerate+localisation+paper_CPAoR+and+SCUK.pdf).

The study was conducted in six conflict and crisis-affected contexts (Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Cameroon, DRC, Mozambique and Nigeria) and prioritised protracted crises, presuming they would offer opportunities to invest in organisational strengthening. In each context, one organisation was selected to receive \$15,000 over a three-month pilot period (March–May 2020), which coincided with the onset of the Covid-19 crisis in these countries.

The availability of the grants was advertised by the Education Cluster at the country level. The length and level of detail asked for in the application was adapted to avoid identified issues faced by L/NNGOs when attempting to access funding⁶⁵ – for example, their capacity to complete the application and the language of application. L/NNGOs had to meet the following eligibility requirements:

- To be an independent L/NNGO without affiliation to any international agencies and without any previous or present partnership with Save the Children or Street Child. This was intended to limit the influence of INGOs on the L/NNGOs' decision-making.
- To have implemented activities in the education sector at some stage in the last five years. This was intended to ensure funding flowed to education-focused organisations, as the fund was made available and advertised through the Education in Emergencies (EiE) sector.
- To have an annual budget between \$150,000 and \$4,000,000. This was intended to ensure the organisation had the capacity to absorb and use funds (<10% of annual budget) and that the grant was large enough to have a discernible effect on the organisation.

Street Child shortlisted organisations that met the selection criteria; all shortlisted organisations were assigned a number, and a random number generator was used to select a single organisation for each country. The selected organisations are listed in Table 1.

These organisations were asked to submit a three-month indicative budget before the grant was transferred to allow analysis and evaluation of expenditure, but no further guidance was given on how to spend the grant. Instead, the organisations were encouraged to spend the funds as they saw fit. After three months, Street Child conducted a semi-structured interview with each organisation to gather information and feedback on expenditure, and the factors influencing budgeting and expenditure decisions.

65 Street Child innovation for localisation landscape analysis: <https://bit.ly/3veSRyW>.

Table 1 Organisations selected for the pilot programme

Country	Organisation	Annual budget (\$)
Afghanistan	Coordination of Rehabilitation and Development Services for Afghanistan (CRDSA)	250,000–4 million
Bangladesh	Samaj Kalyan Unnayan Shangstha (SKUS)	250,000 –4 million
Cameroon	Mbonweh Women’s Development Association (MWDA)	150,000–200,000
Democratic Republic of Congo	Environmental Actions and Emergency for Development (EAED)	150,000–200,000
Mozambique	Action for Community Development Association (ASADEC)	150,000–200,000
Nigeria	Hallmark Leadership Initiative	250,000–4million

Key findings

All organisations involved in the study acknowledged the difficulties in accessing institutional funding through the humanitarian architecture and appreciated the autonomy and opportunity that this grant offered. Four of the six organisations spent the entire grant in the three-month project period, with 95% average expenditure rate across all six organisations. The other two organisations required additional time to spend the grant and recommended that future grants have more flexible timelines.

Allocations

All organisations’ expenditure reports reflected the initial allocations made in their indicative budgets; in some contexts, organisations changed components of their programmes in response to emerging restrictions related to the onset of the Covid-19 crisis. This suggests that, first, L/NNGOs attempt to adhere to budgets and, second, that they are able to adapt to rapid changes in circumstances, and re-programme budgets to respond.

Organisations suggested that the nature of the funding increased their confidence in investing in organisational needs and core costs:⁶⁶ five out of six spent approximately 10% of their funding on central staff salaries and office costs, and one conducted a five-day workshop with a consultant

66 Core costs refer to salary contributions and any costs incurred outside of programme implementation.

to create an organisational strategy. Feedback from five of the six organisations suggested that they had previously found it difficult to fund these types of activities, due to the prioritisation of programmatic activities.

However, Street Child analysed the cost categories in the expenditure reports and found that, on average, organisations spent approximately 85% on programmatic activities. This reflects proportions that are perhaps on par with restricted grants. This countered speculation shared in initial consultations – for example, from an Education Cluster Coordinator at the county level – that L/NNGOs might use the grant to cover core costs which are difficult to fund as standard contracts usually force organisations to restrict overheads. An analysis of the semi-structured interviews appears to attribute L/NNGOs' decisions not to use more of the funding for core costs to a number of different influencing factors.

Influencing factors

An analysis of the semi-structured interviews conducted with the organisations offered the following additional insight into these influencing factors.

Internal factors

The size, scope, financial capacities and leadership of the L/NNGOs appears to have had an impact on cost allocations, with clear differences observed between small and large organisations. For example, Hallmark in Nigeria was able to allocate funding for an organisational strategy and sustainability workshop, whereas other organisations reported that they did not consider activities of this nature.

External factors

- The advertisement and announcement of the grant by the education clusters at the country level appears to have influenced allocations towards programmatic activities – particularly education activities – as organisations assumed that the funding was for this purpose, despite clarifying there were no restrictions on its use.
- L/NNGOs appeared to have an accurate and strong sense of needs in their communities and chose to allocate costs towards programmatic activities that were targeted or tailored toward these needs. L/NNGOs had designed or developed programmes to address these needs but had been unable to find flexible funding for them. They believed that producing proof of concept for these programmes – through using the grant – would allow them to generate evidence that would expand access to further funding.
- The onset of the Covid-19 crisis required rapid re-prioritisation and re-purposing of budgets to activate responses. In this instance, it appears that the availability of unrestricted funding amplified the agility and flexibility of L/NNGOs at the frontline, leading to more rapid and responsive programming in crises.

Conditioning factors⁶⁷

- Historic relationships and requirements from donors appear to have influenced organisations to prioritise project activities and limit core costs. Organisations adhered to this proportioning due to a lack of precedent in receiving flexible funding. Action for Community Development Association (ASADEC) in Mozambique confirmed this, stating that ‘at no stage did we consider using the funding for operational [core] costs alone’.
- Knowledge of the programming focus and priorities of the INGO administering the grants also appears to have influenced the type of programme activities prioritised by L/NNGO grantees. Coordination of Rehabilitation and Development Services for Afghanistan (CRDSA) commented that ‘if Street Child did not focus on children, we would have chosen to implement programmes in WASH’, supporting this assumption.

Access to further funding

In certain instances, organisations reported that the provision of flexible funding allowed them to trial or test a proposed programme or approach that, in turn, created opportunities to secure further funding. One organisation secured funding from the Malala Foundation to expand an initiative innovated under this pilot programme; other organisations have reported a range of initial and advanced discussions with donors – particularly with international organisations acting as intermediaries to direct downstream funding.

Conclusion

The pilot programme offered substantial insight into the use of flexible funding, showing that L/NNGOs make careful, considered choices in how to allocate funds and adapt programmes to changing circumstances within the framework of various influencing factors. This study and analysis show that the factors influencing budgeting, programme planning and implementation are complex and can be categorised as internal, external and conditioning elements. Street Child suggests that these are given careful consideration when designing further studies: for example, through controlling one or more variables to conduct critical analysis of a single factor.

Street Child also suggests these categories are considered by donors seeking to provide grants to L/NNGOs, to ensure flexible funds are expended as freely as possible. For instance, in the example from ASADEC above, the organisation did not consider using the funding solely for core costs due to donor expectations (or in this case, perceptions of expectations). Donors must communicate clearly to prospective grantees what proportion of the budget can be spent on covering their core costs. If funding is channelled through intermediaries, it is important that intermediaries also invest in clear communication and refrain from interpreting or imposing conditions on the grant, whether by intention or omission.

67 ‘Conditioning factors’ refers to factors which have influenced the learned behaviours of an organisation over time.

Our analysis suggests that an intentional and significant shift in understanding flexible funding is required to reap its benefits. For example, Mbonweh Women's Development Association (MWDA) in Cameroon stated that the choice to keep organisational costs low was based on community need and that the organisation is used to working with limited salaries and leveraging community contributions. These assumptions, perhaps arising from years or decades of working within an environment that has tended to restrict funds for L/NNGOs, should be challenged to create more conducive conditions for flexible funding. This could include donors ringfencing funding for flexible use and sharing suggestions for how funds can be used towards organisational strengthening, or to leverage further funding opportunities.

Recommendations

For donors

- Consider the duration and restrictions related to grants and invest in an increased proportion of flexible funding with flexible timeframes (for example, using no-cost extensions). This pilot programme allowed L/NNGOs to hold underspent funds in reserve to spend as they chose.
- Offer flexible funding for L/NNGOs – directly or through intermediaries – during the onset of crises. This pilot proves that providing access to flexible funding for L/NNGOs allows them to adapt programming to respond to changing circumstances and community needs.

For further exploration

Donors and intermediaries should consider investigating the following:

- How flexible funding influences how L/NNGOs apply for, allocate and spend funds. This could involve inviting organisations to apply for ringfenced funding without any restrictions on amount or timeframe and tracing expenditure over time.
- The impact of capacity-strengthening support coupled with flexible funding (for example, in financial management and monitoring) to ascertain its effect on expenditure choices.
- The need for flexible funding for operational core costs and the ways in which communication on the lack of spending obligations for this type of funding influences investment in these costs.
- Avenues for neutral grant allocation to avoid conditioning factors. This could involve inviting an interagency or intersectoral committee to allocate, manage and monitor the grants.
- Whether and how minimum budget thresholds can be revised or removed to allow smaller local and community-centred organisations to apply for and access flexible funding.

Acknowledgements and next steps

Street Child is grateful to the six selected organisations whose engagement and openness has led to the learning and recommendations arising from this pilot project. For the full research report,

please see www.street-child.co.uk/publications. For a recorded session on the findings from the pilot project, featuring reflections from representatives of the six organisations, please see www.street-child.co.uk/live-webinar-innovation-for-localisation.

Street Child is working in close collaboration with Save the Children Denmark to explore opportunities to advance the suggested studies set out in this paper. As an immediate initiative, these learnings are contributing to the creation of a Localisation Toolkit – produced in partnership with the Child Protection Area of Responsibility (CPAoR)⁶⁸ and Save the Children International – to accelerate local leadership in the cluster co-ordination architecture. If you are interested in learning more about this pilot programme or planned projects, please contact Ben Munson at ben.munson@street.child.org.

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Local leadership, Covid-19 and the Pacific

Josie Flint, Josaia Jirauni Osborne, Chris Roche and Fiona Tarpey

Introduction

Although the evidence base around the localisation agenda is uneven, there is increasing recognition that a great deal can be learned from local leadership across the Pacific in the context of Covid-19. In disaster response over recent decades, self-reliance and traditional knowledge have had to compete with the substantial presence of international agencies and donors. Managing the consequences of this influx of aid actors has become a key challenge of emergency response in the Pacific, but emerging analysis of humanitarian and development programming in the context of Covid-19 suggests that this has the potential to change. Notwithstanding the great damage brought by the pandemic and containment measures, in the Pacific this shift in context has created the conditions to significantly strengthen local ownership of humanitarian response and development.

68 www.cpaor.net



Port Vila International Airport during the Tropical Cyclone Harold response: government staff process received humanitarian supplies for fumigation. Credit: Ginny Stein

With many Pacific Islands closing their borders, as well as internal restrictions on mobility, the spread of the virus has been closely contained. As of 29 March 2021, according to the Pacific Community's Covid-19 updates, a handful of countries had kept their cumulative total of cases below 20, while Fiji and New Caledonia had had 67 and 120 cases respectively, and Papua New Guinea had reported more than 4,100 cases (likely to climb). Interestingly, case numbers are far greater in the US- and French-administered territories of Guam and French Polynesia.⁶⁹ Despite this relative success, the social and economic impacts of the pandemic have been significant.

In this context, emergency and development responses in the Pacific have made use of new configurations of expertise and input, while also carrying the legacies of neocolonial relationships and ways of working. Based on preliminary research by a partnership of organisations in Australia and Pacific Island nations, including the Pacific Islands Association of NGOs (PIANGO), which

69 See www.spc.int/updates/blog/2021/01/covid-19-pacific-community-updates.

draws on a region-wide survey, key interviews and documents, this article outlines the emerging findings on how Covid-19 has affected locally led humanitarian action in the region.⁷⁰ It concludes with some questions for future reflection and research.

Disrupting the status quo

Notwithstanding the multifaceted impacts of Covid-19, perhaps the single most influential change in the humanitarian and development sectors in the Pacific has been the departure of large numbers of international aid workers. Restrictions on entry to Pacific countries and movement within them have limited access to surge support; while the possibility of ‘travel bubbles’ among Covid-19-safe countries has been raised, at time of writing no agreements have been made. Establishment of regional working groups, coordination, and monitoring and evaluation have also seen shifts in the status quo in practice, and these are further explored below.

Localisation regional working group

The creation of the Technical Working Group on Localisation (TWG) under the Pacific Resilience Partnership (PRP), an initiative that predated the pandemic but which has done much of its work since the onset of Covid-19, reflects the region’s commitment to local leadership as essential to improving the outcomes of humanitarian and development activities.⁷¹ Beyond emergency response, initiatives to promote local leadership in humanitarian action are tied to an overall Framework for Resilient Development in the Pacific (FRDP). A ‘Mapping Localisation’ survey by the TWG captured a strong perception that the reduction in international presence would strengthen local leadership in the humanitarian and development sectors.⁷² The survey, which sought to identify the impacts of Covid-19 across these sectors in the Pacific, will be used to inform the TWG on what support local actors need to better respond to their constituents.

Emphasis on decentralising coordination

The pandemic has brought greater recognition of subnational forums and actors and their links to more visible and internationally connected networks. In Fiji, for example, where PIANGO is based, there has been more decentralised coordination in the wake of Covid-19, particularly with the support and leadership of the NGO umbrella platform, the Fiji Council of Social Services (FCOSS). This includes increased collaboration between actors at the subnational level, such as local officials, NGOs, faith-based organisations and other community groups, as well as greater collaboration between the national government and subnational officials.

70 This article draws primarily on research captured in: Australian Red Cross, Humanitarian Advisory Group and Institute for Human Security and Social Change at La Trobe University (2020) *A window of opportunity: learning from Covid-19 to progress locally led response and development* (<https://humanitarianadvisorygroup.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/A-Window-of-Opportunity-Covid-think-piece-24-November-2020.pdf>).

71 See www.resilientpacific.org/pacific-resilience-partnership.

72 PRP Localisation TWG’s ‘Mapping localisation in the Pacific survey’, August 2020 (paper forthcoming).

Locally relevant approaches to monitoring and evaluation

These shifts in the status quo have also converged with longer-standing efforts to disrupt hierarchies in the aid system. This is particularly noticeable in work to develop more locally relevant approaches to monitoring, evaluation and learning (MEL).⁷³ While the pandemic has restricted some forms of data collection, it has also opened up space to try out methods neglected by top-down or standardised approaches to MEL. Engaging through ‘tok stori’ practices of narrative storytelling in the Solomon Islands, for example, can help to access insights in a relational way.⁷⁴ This is not so much about ‘new’ practices being developed as about taking advantage of shifts in hierarchies to return to previously marginalised local expertise, knowledge and techniques. By combining these strategic efforts with more tactical changes during the pandemic, there is potential for transformative change.

Expanding spaces to help shift power

The physical absence of foreign aid workers has created space and opportunities for local leaders to use their creativity and innovation. It has encouraged changes in established ways of working, enabling shifts in institutional cultures. Across the sector, communication is reported to have become more informal and therefore more accessible, related to and with implications for the increased proportion and participation of national staff. The main technologies of communication have expanded to include social media (such as Facebook Messenger, WhatsApp and personal Skype accounts), which are perceived as more horizontal forums that favour interpersonal collaboration. Meetings have been held in local languages such as Bislama in Vanuatu, and meeting approaches have been more informal. Local aid workers reported that they felt less pressure to keep other parts of their lives (like faith and family) separate from their professional roles – which national and local aid workers find to be more culturally literate ways of working.

This is not to say that the impacts of international power lift immediately. Interviews conducted by researchers at La Trobe University highlighted concerns among national and local aid workers that, in stepping into more prominent roles, they would be judged according to standards and expectations that they had not been part of shaping. Some expressed fears that they will not be supported by international colleagues if they do not appear to be meeting those standards of success. One interviewee described these continuing legacies of externally driven aid approaches as ‘Colonisation of the mind’. International systems and organisations have pressured local organisations to conform to ways of working that undermine local knowledge and experience for so long that it will take time to change. Some interviewees also reported an increased jockeying for power among local staff, particularly those in senior roles.⁷⁵

73 Pacific Community (2020) ‘Pacific MEL Rebbilib report on MEL capacity’ (www.spc.int/updates/blog/2020/08/pacific-mel-rebbilib-report-on-mel-capacity-available-for-download).

74 DLP (2020) ‘Talking about tok stori’ (www.dlprog.org/opinions/talking-about-tok-stori).

75 La Trobe University research on Covid-19 impacts on organisational adaptation and ways of working, April–November 2020 (paper forthcoming).

Overall, however, Pacific Islander aid workers have reported shifts in everyday working practices. They feel more freedom to express their ideas and explore solutions and feel encouraged to propose more creative, culturally appropriate methods, while also experiencing greater collaboration with Pacific Islander colleagues within and between organisations.

Responding differently

These changing dynamics were apparent in the response to Tropical Cyclone (TC) Harold in April 2020. Analysis of the first 50 days of response in Vanuatu by the Vanuatu Association for Non-Government Organisations (VANGO) and HAG indicates that local communities, leaders and civil society played a far stronger role after TC Harold than in previous responses and this contributed to more appropriate and relevant assistance.⁷⁶ Strong ownership of the response by community structures such as the Community Disaster and Climate Change Committees and the Malvatumauri (National Council of Chiefs) supported increased participation in logistics, sourcing of local experts and provision of more appropriate locally sourced food rations.

While there was consensus among contributors to the research that the response was less timely, this primarily reflected the pandemic context overlaid with the cyclone's impacts. As one interviewee for that paper summarised: 'Covid-19 has restricted a lot of international experts to step in and help, forcing us to do things within the country capacity. As much of a struggle as it is, this is a step forward for our country'.

As the response to TC Harold highlighted, the pandemic has disrupted international supply chains, both in terms of the production schedules of suppliers beyond the Pacific region and their ability to safely deliver goods to countries with increased border control requirements. This has had implications for humanitarian response in the region, which has typically relied on these international chains.⁷⁷ To help address these challenges, the Pacific Humanitarian Pathway on Covid-19 was established in April 2020 to expedite responses to humanitarian and health crises across the region.⁷⁸

In the public health response to Covid-19, there is emerging evidence of increased opportunities for women. In Fiji and Vanuatu, according to research by the Australian Red Cross, an emphasis on health programming, community engagement, and risk reduction – areas where women have

76 HAG and VANGO (2020) *No turning back: local leadership in Vanuatu's response to Tropical Cyclone Harold* (https://humanitarianadvisorygroup.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/TC-Harold-Practice-Paper_final-electronic.pdf); in Bislama at: https://humanitarianadvisorygroup.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/Localisation-in-Vanuatu_Bislama-overview_200619.pdf.

77 ARC (2020) *Local response in a global pandemic: a case study of the Red Cross response to Tropical Cyclone Harold during Covid-19 in Vanuatu and Fiji* (www.redcross.org.au/getmedia/7c374bd0-90c8-423d-a0e4-8c0a26ea4bc5/ARC-TC-Harold-Full-report-Final-Electronic-041120.pdf).

78 See Pacific Islands Forum (2020) 'Pacific Humanitarian Pathway on Covid-19 continues delivery of medical supplies', 30 June (www.forumsec.org/2020/06/30/pacific-humanitarian-pathway-on-covid-19-continues-delivery-of-medical-supplies/).

greater experience and recognition – favoured more women’s participation and leadership than is typically seen in responses to sudden-onset disasters.⁷⁹ In Fiji, for instance, women’s voices were also amplified by the turn towards online platforms that offered more inclusive spaces for engagement.

Relationships done remotely

It is clear that the significant move towards remote support was met with strong backing by local and national actors. However, a closer look at this picture shows some important differences in perceptions of these experiences – differences that highlight the need for a better understanding of how best to conduct partnerships remotely.

In the TWG survey across the Pacific region, 70% of respondents believed there had been an increase of remote support in the context of Covid-19. However, the proportion of international and regional actors that held this view was higher than the proportion of national and local organisations. This suggests that those supplying remote support believe their contribution is more extensive or active than those on the receiving end; it may also reflect different understandings of what this support entails. The increase in remote working also drew attention to digital divides, such as different levels of access to or familiarity with certain platforms or varying levels of stability in digital infrastructure, and the potential for these to impact the effectiveness of remote support.⁸⁰

Importantly, research consistently highlighted that the strength of pre-existing relationships was an important factor in the effectiveness of remote support. In the TWG survey, undertaken in July 2020, 61% of local and national organisations reported new partnerships with other organisations. Yet relationships based on trust and mutual understanding take time to develop.

Familiar funding flows

Despite the notable changes brought about by the pandemic context, funding continues to flow primarily through international agencies. This situation is deeply entrenched. Globally, the amount of humanitarian funding that went directly to local and national organisations in 2019 was approximately 2.1% of the total, despite the 2016 Grand Bargain target of 25%.⁸¹ These challenges are borne out in a joint study on the difficulties that local groups, particularly women-led organisations, faced in accessing timely and sufficient funding during the pandemic.⁸²

In the Pacific, based on our research, funnelling funds through international bodies before they reach local and national organisations continues to be international donors’ dominant approach.

79 ARC (2020).

80 ARC (2020).

81 Development Initiatives (2020) *Global humanitarian assistance report 2020* (<https://devinit.org/resources/global-humanitarian-assistance-report-2020>).

82 ActionAid et al. (2020) *Humanitarian funding, partnerships and coordination in the Covid-19 crisis: perspectives from local women-led organisations and women’s rights organisations* (<https://charter4change.files.wordpress.com/2020/07/wlo-covid19-joint-policy-brief.pdf>).

However, 66% of national and local actors in the Pacific reported increased funding in the wake of Covid-19.⁸³ Lower implementation costs – due to much reduced international travel and surge costs – may be one influencing factor: 60–80% of Red Cross funding for TC Harold went to the affected National Societies.⁸⁴ Whether the increase in resources has kept pace with the greater needs reported by national and local organisations, and the higher proportion of needs to which they are the primary or sole responders, is not yet clear. Local actors’ lack of visibility in humanitarian financial reporting has long inhibited the potential to track sub-grants below the headline allocations.

As the research above highlights, there are signs that cultural and technical shifts are having an impact on how funds are used once they reach the Pacific-based organisations. More work will be needed to understand these shifts and support their potential to contribute to improved outcomes for Pacific communities.

Conclusion

Experiences in the Pacific in the wake of Covid-19 have shown that local leadership of humanitarian action and development – during implementation of the response as well as when setting the agenda for aid in the region – has strengthened in many ways. And yet several participants in our research expressed the concern that, when the pandemic ebbs and international presence rises, the opportunity to learn from and extend this local ownership might be lost in the return to ‘normal’. Instead, it is critical that, as a sector, we reflect upon why and how locally led practices have emerged during the pandemic and how best to maintain their place at the centre.

The pandemic has brought a sharper reckoning with habitual ways of working that – whether explicitly or not – deprioritise locally grounded, culturally specific and contextually contingent forms of expertise and practice in favour of supposedly generalisable or standardised knowledge, expectations and behaviours. While transnational collaboration, assistance and support are integral to aid efforts, the terms on which these take place have been more directly challenged as a result of more open debates about inequalities in combination with the rapid change to presence and practice.

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This article is based on joint research conducted by the Pacific Resilience Partnership’s Technical Working Group on Localisation, the Pacific Islands Association of NGOs, the Australian Red Cross, the Humanitarian Advisory Group and the Institute for Human Security and Social Change at La Trobe University.

83 Localisation TWG (forthcoming).

84 ARC (2020).

'How can we contribute if we can't participate?' The accessibility of humanitarian guidance to local and national organisations

Mia Marzotto, Kemal Alp Taylan, Fatuma Ibrahim, Marian Ellen Hodgkin, Rev. Father Paul Martin Lukusa Mbwebwa and Charles Abugo

In [the Democratic Republic of Congo], we sometimes mix French and English in coordination meetings, but if we want to better understand key information, all reference documents are in English and not everyone is comfortable with it. How can we be effective and contribute with our knowledge if we don't understand the documents and we cannot participate in meetings? (Rev. Father Paul Martin Lukusa, Country Director, AIDES, the Democratic Republic of Congo).

The past few years have been pivotal for recognising and advancing the key role of local and national organisations in the humanitarian sector. Although new global commitments and guidelines have brought global attention to localisation, local and national organisations still don't routinely participate in humanitarian coordination mechanisms. Language barriers, in particular, continue to limit meaningful participation – even for senior figures such as Father Lukusa, as highlighted above. Local and national responders who are not comfortable with international languages⁸⁵ struggle to access even basic information about sector-specific standards and how to uphold them. They are also unsure about how to engage with coordination mechanisms.

To help address this challenge, Translators without Borders (TWB) recently led two research-based projects with the Global Education Cluster and the Child Protection Area of Responsibility, with funding from Save the Children. The research revealed that practical language provisions can improve local and national organisations' access to guidance and technical tools. This enables them to take more leadership in humanitarian programming and decision-making. In this article we share what we did, what we learned and what remains to be done.

A note on research methodology and limitations

TWB led two mixed-methods research projects to gather experience, insights and recommendations from local and national organisations, cluster members and coordinators. The first focused on the use and usefulness of technical guidance on education and child protection. The research team interviewed 63 key informants, including local and national education and child protection responders and cluster coordinators, from Bangladesh, DRC and Mozambique. This was followed by comprehension workshops in DRC and Mozambique, individual resource reviews in Bangladesh and a readability assessment of some existing materials.

⁸⁵ These are languages that extend far beyond national boundaries, such as Arabic, Chinese, English, French, Russian and Spanish.

The second aimed to understand local responders' information needs regarding the humanitarian coordination system. It included a workshop with members of the Global Education Cluster's Strategic Advisory Group and interviews with 13 key informants. Interviewees included national and local responders from DRC, Yemen, South Sudan and Venezuela, and global and national cluster and NGO forum coordinators. An online survey with questions relevant to both projects received a further 325 responses from education and child protection cluster members from Bangladesh, DRC and Mozambique. Due to the Covid-19 pandemic, much of the research was conducted remotely. People with internet access, most of them men, are therefore overrepresented and local and national responders had less opportunity to input on developing the resulting guidance. Therefore, the data almost certainly understates the difficulty local and national organisations face in accessing online materials. We encourage local and national responders to suggest changes and improvements to the guidance we have developed.



Local responder reads the guide on engaging with humanitarian coordination mechanisms, in Congolese Swahili. Credit: Victoire Rwicha/Translators without Borders

What did we learn in our research?

Language, format and jargon limit understanding and use of guidance

Guidance is always in English and we need to discuss with those who do not speak English. Thus, you need to translate to Portuguese and again [into a] local language sometimes (Child protection programme manager, Sofala, Mozambique).⁸⁶

Global guidance resources and technical tools are usually available only in UN official languages, in long written formats and also tend to overuse jargon and abbreviations. Most research participants reported that sector-specific and coordination-related terms like ‘resilience’ and ‘country-based pooled funds’ can be confusing and difficult to translate. This is an especially acute problem in contexts where multiple languages are spoken.

Our research confirmed that local language speakers cannot always access the same information or do so as promptly as speakers of international languages, which limits their ability both to understand information and to contribute to time-sensitive discussions. The fact that coordination meetings are usually held in international languages compounds the problem. Most local responders consulted also reported having to read resources available in English or other international languages more than once to understand them because of their style and complexity. Rohingya volunteers, for example, typically found long sentences confusing. We also assessed some existing education and child protection documents against plain language criteria and found that they fell short of TWB’s recommended benchmarks for clear writing.⁸⁷

Beyond their own comprehension challenges, research participants in the first project also found some existing materials unhelpful as a basis for communicating with non-specialists, including parents and foster parents. This is a wider target audience than most sector-specific materials are probably developed for, and the finding suggests developers and users should discuss expectations from the outset. Applying plain language principles is an established way of making written content more immediately understandable for the widest possible audience. The first project found that applying these principles to a technical document markedly increased information recall among participants in Beni, DRC. This suggests using plain language may be particularly important outside urban centres, where literacy rates and exposure to technical terminology are typically lower.

86 While this article aims to elevate the voices of all local and national responders involved in the two studies, quotes are kept anonymous where limited consent for data use was received.

87 TWB’s plain language assessment involves a quantitative readability assessment that uses both commercial editing software and open source tools, and a qualitative assessment against a checklist of commonly cited plain language elements. For more on plain language writing, see: https://translatorswithoutborders.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/Plain-Language_Write-Clearly.pdf.

Internet issues and lack of knowledge of where to look hamper physical access to guidance

We have access to some documents in the printed version but have difficulty with [online documents] for lack of means (Child protection specialist, NNGO, DRC).

Among people consulted, those with better connectivity reported accessing guidance via email and internet searches. Others reported using hard copies of key guidance materials. Poor internet access, slow download speeds and related costs were raised as issues across all countries. For instance, in Mozambique 34% of those surveyed had problems accessing resources, with internet connectivity and cost cited as key obstacles. Some also described having one copy of a document for their whole organisation and having to obtain authorisation to read it. Community-based staff and volunteers said they had no office to read in and struggled with longer documents.

For research participants in Bangladesh, DRC and Mozambique, confusion about where to find guidance documents online was an additional challenge. They also reported difficulties navigating and prioritising a sometimes overwhelming flow of information.

Asked how they would prefer to access cluster resources, participants mentioned holding meetings and training to discuss new guidance and its application in members' work, and sharing key documents on a flash drive or via direct email. This would help local and national responders learn about guidance related to their work in a language they speak, while avoiding information overload. It can also make it easier for them to relay key points to colleagues more widely – including in less connected rural areas where access to coordination meetings and electronic copies is limited.

Existing guidance is useful but not always up-to-date and adapted to the context

They should adjust the content and add more concepts that relate to [our context]. They should also tell us about other documents that we can consult and that will give us additional information (Primary school teacher, Goma, DRC).

Where research participants had access to existing resources, they reported using them and seeing them as valuable in their work. However, most people consulted about global guidance on the humanitarian coordination system felt that it is rarely tailored to national and local organisations and their specific roles and expertise. Interviews with global coordination staff similarly indicated that most resources assume more prior knowledge of the international humanitarian system than they would expect local and national organisations to have.

Participants consulted on technical education and child protection guidance also felt such guidance is of more direct value when it is adapted to their context. For example, participants in North Kivu valued the references to national laws and content tailored to the realities of eastern DRC in the contextualised version of the Minimum Standards on Education in Emergencies.

Other issues raised were about resources containing pictures that did not reflect local realities, or hyperlinks to resources not available in relevant languages. Similar criticisms were made about guidance not being updated to reflect changing situations – for instance, measures linked to the pandemic such as physical distancing. While regularly adapting and updating guidance can present a challenge, several local responders consulted were keen to contribute to those efforts. This calls for establishing a clear process with diverse participation and appropriate investment, as previous similar contextualisation efforts highlight.⁸⁸

Shorter, better tailored documents in a range of languages and formats would be easier to use

When you find the documents, most of those available on the internet are [very long] and in English and it's difficult for us to understand some of the information and what to do with it (NNGO platform representative, Juba, South Sudan).

While global expertise can inform local action, it must be communicated in a way that makes it easy both to grasp and use. Across the two studies, local and national organisations consulted requested resources to be in ‘as many languages as possible’, including the main languages of their countries. They also indicated the need for shorter documents, with illustrated content such as tables, graphs and practical tools like checklists for meeting sector-wide standards. Glossaries and lists of acronyms were also mentioned as other helpful ways to improve readability. Where documents cover a large volume of information, people called for tools such as indexes and checklists to help the reader find the content they need. These requests were linked to ensuring that guidance materials benefit the work of their intended audiences, while minimising reading effort for all readers, regardless of their language skills or literacy levels. They are also in line with all plain language principles.

Many research participants also expressed a preference for guidance in audiovisual formats (see Box 1), while others suggested that audio files as a summary of a written document could make guidance more user-friendly and accessible even in low-connectivity contexts. As learning styles vary, a range of formats is likely to benefit all responders, including international staff.

88 Interagency Network for Education in Emergencies (2011) ‘INEE minimum standards contextualization package’ (<https://inee.org/resources/inee-minimum-standards-contextualization-package>).

Box 1 Audiovisual guidance helps local organisations participate in response planning

In September 2020, Save the Children and the Child Protection Area of Responsibility produced a video on the needs assessment and analysis step of humanitarian response planning. The video was the first of a series aimed at increasing understanding of and participation in response planning processes among partners, including local organisations. The Child Protection coordination groups in Iraq and South Sudan, which contributed to the video, have already disseminated it widely. They found that the video increased the participation and knowledge of local members in child protection needs assessment and analysis. As an indication of early impact, local organisations took a more active role in response planning and coordination in late 2020, particularly at subnational level. Local members commented that they understood better how to contribute to needs assessments and analyses, and why their input was important. Some said that, for the first time, they could understand how the number of people in need of humanitarian assistance and the magnitude of a crisis are calculated. The video is currently available in English and Arabic, on the CP AoR website: www.cpaor.net/Video_needs_assessment_analysis.

How did we act on these findings?

We used the findings to produce three main resources:

1. A guide for national and local responders on engaging with humanitarian coordination mechanisms, available on the GEC website in ten languages.⁸⁹ It includes general information about the cluster system and specific sections about the education sector. Users can adapt the guide to other sectors and contexts. Feedback on the guide, including requests for further translations, can be provided via the Global Education Cluster Helpdesk.
2. Specific recommendations for improving the accessibility of existing guidance on education and child protection in emergencies, available on the GEC⁹⁰ and CP AoR⁹¹ websites.
3. A checklist for commissioning new guidance to help cluster coordinators and members provide information in plain language that's geared to the needs of local and national responders, available on the GEC and CP AoR websites.

Furthermore, the Global Education Cluster has recently set up partnerships with AIDES in DRC, ASEINC in Venezuela and Soul for Development in Yemen to translate key working documents into French and Arabic. This helps national and subnational education cluster members to access

89 See www.educationcluster.net/localization. The guide is available in Arabic, Bengali, Congolese Swahili, English, French, Juba Arabic, Kenyan Swahili, Lingala, Portuguese and Spanish.

90 www.educationcluster.net/localization

91 www.cpaor.net

guidance related to their work and disseminate information to other responders and community members in the most relevant languages. As project partners, we are also advocating with other global clusters to follow suit.

Where do we go from here?

There are a number of practical lessons we and other humanitarian organisations can take from these studies. First, we should write guidance more clearly: established plain language principles show us how to achieve this and doing so will improve clarity for readers and for translators. For example, we should use the active voice, short sentences, and familiar terminology in a structure that reflects readers' information needs. Second, we should produce guidance in more formats to help responders access information, both online and offline. Third, we should earmark resources for language support, including translators and interpreters for local languages. Donors can support this as part of their investment in localisation and coordination. Organisations should share translations of guidance documents and technical tools electronically.

In contexts where connectivity is low, organisations producing new guidance should make those resources available as durable hard copies. This can be supplemented by introducing new guidance through meetings and training sessions. Perhaps most importantly, organisations should use the expertise and insights of local and national responders to adapt and develop resources to meet their needs. If the quality of humanitarian action is to benefit fully from the contribution of national experts such as Father Lukusa, we must all lift the communication barriers to their contribution and leadership.

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Localising knowledge generation during a pandemic to make distributions safer

Jihan Kaisi, Rosy Haddad, Loujine Fattal and Alina Potts

Over the last decade, efforts to build the evidence base for humanitarian action have grown immensely. While localisation is often discussed in relation to programming, the same approach is often missing in research and evaluation. Researchers based in the Global North often work with teams of enumerators and facilitators from the countries under study to collect data; however, the analysis, publication and dissemination of these findings is often carried out away from these settings and without the participation of local humanitarian workers, let alone members of the affected community. The way that imbalances of power affect the health and well-being of crisis-affected populations is an increasingly common topic of study, and considering power within research processes is equally important.

In 2019, we partnered as a national NGO based in Lebanon (Union of Relief and Development Associations (URDA)), an international NGO (CARE in Lebanon) and a Global North-based research institute (the Global Women's Institute at the George Washington University (GWI)) to carry out participatory action research with women and girls living as refugees. The project, Empowered Aid, is based at GWI and takes place in Lebanon and Uganda – two of the largest refugee-hosting countries in the world. It was initially designed with a number of partners in both countries, some of whom had established working relationships with GWI staff. The Institute has recognised expertise in ethical and participatory research on violence against women and girls in humanitarian and development settings.⁹² The research phase in Lebanon was designed through workshops held with CARE and URDA. Women and girls are centred as knowledge-holders who identify and share the ways in which accessing humanitarian aid – such as cash assistance, food, fuel and firewood, shelter and water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) – can put them and their peers at risk of sexual exploitation and abuse (SEA). Recommendations were also developed to better address such risks and these were applied to distributions, where safety and risk were measured using adapted distribution monitoring tools.

The findings of our research and all the participatory methods and tools we have developed and used are freely available.⁹³ In this article, we reflect on our research process in Lebanon: from design and planning, to data collection and analysis, to sharing findings and putting them into action. At

92 See for example: GWI (2017) *Bridging research and action for change: 5-year anniversary report*. The Global Women's Institute at the George Washington University (https://globalwomensinstitute.gwu.edu/sites/g/files/zaxdzs1356/f/downloads/GWI_5yearReport_FINAL_Proof_lo-res_spreads.pdf).

93 To read more about Empowered Aid and access our results reports, tools, facilitation guides and manuals, visit <https://globalwomensinstitute.gwu.edu/empowered-aid>. Peer-reviewed publications of the research findings are forthcoming.

each stage, we highlight aspects of our partnership that we consider innovative; how we sought to take a capacity-sharing approach at each stage of the process; and how risk was managed and shared, particularly since the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic.

Research design and planning

In selecting a distribution partner with whom to test Empowered Aid's recommendations, several criteria were considered important. First, that the partner was engaged in distribution programming in northern Lebanon that included at least one of the types of aid mentioned above. Next, that they had incorporated gender and protection mainstreaming into their distribution programme, as well as a mechanism for safeguarding. And finally, that they were open and willing to commit to a research and learning process that centres women's and girls' experiences and includes their voices in humanitarian decision-making. URDA was interested in this partnership in order to share their deep knowledge of the communities in which they work, and to benefit from learning and exchange with organisations focused on gender and protection issues. An initial design workshop was held in person (before the pandemic) where each partner presented their organisation's mission and structure, reviewed findings from the first phase of Empowered Aid and identified ways to apply them in URDA's distribution programming. In these workshops, the partners also shared their distribution monitoring tools and jointly adapted them to better measure SEA risks, based on findings from the research.⁹⁴

With the onset of Covid-19, the team had to find new ways of working. Even CARE and URDA staff based in the same country could not meet in person for long periods. In order to ensure all partners could continue to contribute to project design and management discussions, extra mobile internet was purchased for team members from the national NGO, as they tended to have less reliable access to internet, and the international team collaborated via Zoom for online workshops scheduled to fit the Lebanon timezone. SEA awareness messages were updated and accompanied by Covid-19 awareness messages in all distribution and monitoring activities.

It was critical that major decisions be made in collaboration, with each partner organisation having an equal voice in the process. In this way, the team weighed benefits of continuing the research against possible risks (a key ethical principle of all research), given the changing context of the pandemic. As lifesaving aid was being distributed, it was decided that the distributions we had planned and procured would go ahead even though much of the data collection, such as focus groups and in-person surveys, would need to be dropped due to public health regulations. Instead, a new tool was developed, a short 4–6-question in-person interview that could be conducted quickly at the distribution site. This allowed for basic information on safety and access to services to

94 This article summarises the field-testing phase for these tools, which is now concluding. The tools will soon be available as part of a comprehensive toolkit that will be shared on the website (<https://globalwomensinstitute.gwu.edu/empowered-aid>).

be collected from women and girls at a time when service providers, such as CARE and URDA, were largely cut off from these populations, whose lower access to mobile phones made them less able to engage in the shift to remote services under Covid-19.

Data collection and analysis

With the onset of the pandemic, risk management came to the fore as URDA and CARE staff (following their agencies' protocols) decided whether to engage directly in the distributions. It was a difficult decision: URDA was aware that most NGO staff were at home while refugee communities were in even more need given the combination of lockdown and Lebanon's economic crisis. The principle of 'do no harm' took on new meaning as the URDA, CARE and GWI team worked together to avoid exposing people to additional risks. As knowledge about the virus changed rapidly and public health guidance shifted during the first part of the pandemic, we changed distribution plans six times. Ease of communication was essential and URDA's practice of using Whatsapp inspired the research team to create a WhatsApp group to share challenges on the spot and collectively identify ways to overcome them. Every night at least some members of the team held meetings to discuss and re-plan: even sharing a pen (for signatures used in verification processes) could potentially cause harm. Continual 'reinventing' was exhausting, but was key to maintaining safety for ourselves and those we were serving.

Key elements of the adapted distributions included ensuring that teams were provided with adequate protective equipment; URDA staff still reflect on how much they miss sharing smiles with community members receiving the aid distributed. Distribution planning was spaced and timed to reduce the number of people at the site at any one time. Coincidentally, many of these modifications aligned with women's and girls' recommendations for reducing SEA, which we were already planning to incorporate, such as having a smaller number of families arrive at pre-arranged timeslots to collect aid rather than gathering large numbers together as is done typically. For example, in a tented settlement of 315 families in Akkar, we divided the families into ten groups with approximately 30 people visiting the distribution site at a time. Chairs were set out at two metres apart to ensure adequate spacing and aid recipients were called one by one to receive their food parcel and return home. Chairs were sanitised before the next group came. At another distribution site, aid was distributed door to door by mixed-sex teams – another recommendation from Empowered Aid's first phase, as women and girls reported feeling unsafe when men aid workers visited their homes alone.

In both of these modes of distribution, awareness sessions were conducted on SEA risk and Covid-19 key messages. Distributions were monitored using safety audits and a short in-person questionnaire (described above) that was asked of a subset of adult women attending the distribution. In-person post-distribution monitoring (PDM) surveys were shifted to phone surveys and carried out with a subset of all distribution participants several weeks later, to assess their

satisfaction and perceived safety with these new methods of distributing. Refugee families generally reported more concern about lack of food than Covid-19: ‘If we die from Coronavirus and illness, it will be better for us than to die from hunger!’.

Sharing findings and putting them into action

During this participatory action research, which is ongoing, Lebanon has faced revolution, financial crisis, a global pandemic and, on 4 August 2020, one of the largest non-nuclear explosions ever recorded when 2,750 tonnes of improperly stored ammonium nitrate exploded in Beirut’s port. URDA and CARE, as well as other aid actors in Lebanon engaged as members of Empowered Aid’s technical advisory group, immediately applied the findings of the research to their emergency response efforts in the aftermath of the blast. For example, modes of delivering aid and repair assistance at household level incorporated the recommendation to use mixed-sex or all-women teams, and overall more women aid workers, volunteers and community leadership structures were incorporated into URDA and CARE’s emergency responses. Ensuring that low-literacy, visual awareness materials were posted at key locations such as Western Union offices and cash machines is not as easy as it sounds, especially when teams were already stretched.

The Covid-19 pandemic had already fundamentally changed the way information about services and aid is shared with refugee communities. In many ways we have failed women and girls in our reliance on mobile and online platforms, as many fall into a gendered ‘digital divide’ because dominant gender roles limit their access to any phone, or only to male relatives’ phones. When conducting the phone survey as part of distribution monitoring, for instance, we found we had to call households in the afternoon when men had returned home if we wanted to reach women, so their husbands could pass the phone to them. Our consent process included questions to determine if the person responding had enough privacy to speak fully; when this was not the case, potentially sensitive questions about safety and risk were not asked. At the same time, the constraints on women’s and girls’ ability to access information and services puts them at potentially higher risk of exploitation and abuse by those who may take advantage of this power differential. With this in mind, Covid-19-specific recommendations were drawn from Empowered Aid’s research.⁹⁵

Throughout the research, we found it essential to not import foreign or pre-determined processes for data collection, analysis and write-up, but rather to co-create processes based on local partners’ knowledge of the rapidly changing Lebanese context and programming realities. This became even more essential with the onset of the pandemic when our internationally based team members (some of whom had spent years working in Lebanon) could no longer travel. Collaboration between URDA, GWI and CARE strengthened the bond between the organisations as well as individual team members, who felt that they were able to maintain a voice in decision-making and common vision,

95 Empowered Aid’s Covid-19-specific findings and recommendations for Lebanon are available at: https://globalwomensinstitute.gwu.edu/sites/g/files/zaxdzs1356/f/downloads/GWI-CARE-Empowered%20Aid-Lebanon-Covid19Note_a11y.pdf. Sector-specific recommendations are available at: <https://globalwomensinstitute.gwu.edu/empowered-aid-resources>.

despite working in such a dynamic environment. We feel the learning generated by Empowered Aid was produced and shared in ways that prioritise local actors' needs and encouraged creative and innovative thinking at a truly extraordinary time.

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Jihan Kaisi of Lebanese NGO URDA (left) conducts a post-food parcel distribution monitoring visit using tools adapted as part of Empowered Aid, a participatory action research collaboration aimed at better mitigating risks of sexual exploitation and abuse during aid distributions. Credit: Mohamad Biriny/URDA

The state of play: localisation and state leadership of humanitarian action

Andy Featherstone

This article examines state leadership and coordination of humanitarian response. It highlights some of the challenges faced by humanitarian agencies that engage with state-led structures in recent crises and makes recommendations about how these can be addressed in the future, and how agencies may seek to identify and mitigate residual risks.

From principle to practice: the localisation of humanitarian leadership

Commitments to ‘localise’ humanitarian action have re-emphasised state leadership of humanitarian response and have been accompanied by efforts to strengthen state capacity to play this role. Despite this, the shift to national leadership has been hindered at times by the international humanitarian system, which has been likened to a ‘members’ club’ with little space for national authorities or NGOs. Responses to crises such as Typhoon Haiyan in the Philippines have added weight to this claim, as UN coordination has duplicated or bypassed national government structures.

Conversely, in contexts where states have asserted their leadership, experiences have been variable, and in some instances there have been challenges in adapting to the changes, which has affected the speed and effectiveness of response. These challenges have been particularly pronounced where authorities have lacked adequate capacity to lead the response, or have adopted positions or policies that have been perceived to hinder or restrict the timely flow of assistance. In such situations, humanitarian agencies have had to tread a fine line between support for and engagement with state structures, balanced against an imperative to ensure that those in greatest need are able to receive the assistance that they require in a timely way.

The importance of context in determining engagement with state-led humanitarian response

Engagement with state-led humanitarian response in situations of armed conflict

The role of the state in situations of armed conflict can be particularly problematic. In such contexts, there is considerable scope for difficult relationships between government and humanitarian agencies. The key concern expressed by humanitarian agencies working in countries such as South Sudan, Afghanistan and Myanmar is how to safeguard their neutrality while working with a government that is a party to the conflict. Challenges also frequently exist regarding the manipulation of aid and the implications this has for the impartial delivery of assistance. In such

contexts, the provision of assistance is frequently challenged, prompting accusations by one side or the other of being biased or partial. Fear of being accused of partisanship directly affects the willingness of NGOs to cooperate with governmental authorities.

Engagement with state-led humanitarian response in other contexts

The situation is clearer for states that are not in conflict but may be affected by natural hazard-related disasters or refugee influxes. It is in these contexts where there is greater potential for effective state leadership of humanitarian response. In such cases, the international laws that govern humanitarian response may be underpinned by a national disaster law and responses may be coordinated by a national disaster management agency, which can offer an enabling environment for response. It is these contexts that are the focus of this article.

Common challenges in engaging with state-led responses

This paper seeks to draw lessons from state-led responses to natural hazard-related disasters in Nepal and Indonesia and the Rohingya refugee response in Bangladesh.

- While in the aftermath of the April 2015 earthquake in Nepal, the government was quick to assert its leadership and had some experience in coordinating response, it lacked a legislative framework (national disaster law) to do so and its capacity was variable.
- In Bangladesh, the government has significant experience and disaster management capacity. However, in the Rohingya response, its assertiveness has often put it at odds with humanitarian agencies.
- Indonesia has had a long history of state-managed humanitarian response, which was largely informed by the response to the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami. After the earthquake that hit Sulawesi in September 2018, it sought to promote a local response that drew on the capacity of local and national NGOs.

While state-led response is the right thing to do, there have been some common challenges.

A lack of clarity about state structures and coordination mechanisms

In the early phases of each of the three responses there was significant confusion over regulatory and process issues, including who could access or join the response. During the Sulawesi response, for example, there was confusion among international humanitarian agencies about how disaster response systems worked at the national, regional and local levels and who had different roles and responsibilities.⁹⁶ In Nepal, at the time the earthquake struck, the National Disaster Management

96 Robillard, S., Howe, K., Rosenstock, K. and Munive, J. (2020) *'We must be the pioneers': perspectives on localization in the response to the 2018 Sulawesi earthquake in Indonesia*. Boston: Feinstein International Center, Tufts University and Save the Children Denmark.

Law was yet to be passed and decisions were initially made on an ad-hoc basis and not implemented consistently at local levels, making it complex for aid actors to navigate and ensure the timely provision of assistance.

Bureaucratic and political impediments to humanitarian action

The case studies each offer examples of the challenges that existed for NGO registration, both for international organisations and national responders. In Nepal, the surge of INGOs that accompanied the response was unwelcome by the state and there was justified concern at the number of organisations that sought to work without being properly registered. For those NGOs that did seek to register, however, the process was initially undocumented and as a consequence was lengthy and overly bureaucratic and detracted from the task of saving lives and protecting livelihoods.

In Bangladesh, reports revealed a lack of trust between the government and NGOs. This was partly a consequence of the government's assertive stance against INGOs, including barring some aid organisations from operating in the camps and dictating what specific aid was allowed in. There was a perception that the government was wary of a heavy INGO presence, particularly one that would encourage permanent settlement of the refugee population and be blind to what it saw as a very real security risk of radicalisation within the camps.⁹⁷ These restrictions were considered by some to have contributed to poor camp planning, which limited the prospects for complementarity through an inconsistent understanding of which actors had responsibilities for facilities and services. Delays in approving NGO proposals, the detention of staff and the expulsion of some INGOs were interpreted by some as being purposeful tools deployed by the government to enforce their control.⁹⁸

Accommodating capacity gaps of state-led response and staff

In all three case studies, humanitarian organisations raised concerns about the capacity of the state to lead the response and flagged the risk that assistance would be constrained as government structures were inadequately resourced and became overwhelmed.

In Nepal, the turnover of civil servants was a particular challenge as post-holders would change frequently, often with very little notice. Furthermore, new post-holders would not necessarily come with any knowledge of development or humanitarian practice. Linked to the issue of skills, there were concerns about the variable attitudes of government staff towards humanitarian action and the work of NGOs more generally.

97 Wake, C. and Bryant, J. (2018) *Capacity and complementarity in the Rohingya response in Bangladesh*. HPG working paper. London: ODI (<https://odi.org/en/publications/capacity-and-complementarity-in-the-rohingya-response-in-bangladesh>).

98 Ibid.

The threat of partiality and corruption

In Nepal, there were persistent claims of partiality and political manipulation of assistance. Vulnerable groups must be involved in decision-making about assistance to ensure it is relevant to the particular needs of different groups, but in some areas the most vulnerable were excluded from local decision-making bodies, which had significant implications for the inclusivity of the earthquake response.⁹⁹ In one of the responses, there were also concerns raised about petty corruption and the need to make ‘facilitation’ payments to government. This had implications for the principled nature of the response, and proved difficult to address, particularly for local NGOs as they were reliant on government officials to authorise project implementation.

The imposition of humanitarian programming modalities

In all three of the case studies, governments required INGOs to work through local partners. While this was broadly welcomed, it also created some very practical problems. In Sulawesi, the government limited the number and role of international actors, refusing them permission to operate unless they had a local partner. International organisations that prioritise working through partners reported some challenges and changes to ways of working related to government regulations. These included identifying new partners and supporting new and existing partners to manage larger volumes of funding than they had historically received. In cases where partnerships did not previously exist, the process of finding new partners hampered the ability to rapidly respond. Even in cases where partnership processes were adapted to expedite timeframes, there were delays and a level of strain placed on local actors to navigate multiple and concurrent partnership requests.¹⁰⁰

A similar situation occurred in Nepal, where the need for partnership was felt to have negatively impacted on the timeliness of the response; many NGOs reported delays while partner assessments were undertaken prior to establishing agreements. The delays were often exacerbated by unclear government rules and processes.

A reticence to speak out

Where government leads response, there can be reticence to advocate on behalf of affected people. In the case study countries, NGOs balanced their public advocacy against the risk of government reprisals for fears that it may affect their operations or presence in the country. NGO expulsions from countries with more repressive regimes, such as Sudan during the Darfur response in 2009, represent an extreme response. Even in countries with far better governance, there has been a reticence to raise issues of concern, such as poor coordination, gaps in the response or concerns about partiality. One commentary on local leadership in the Rohingya response considered the

99 See for example: Save the Children (2016) *Did the humanitarian response to the Nepal Earthquake ensure no one was left behind? A case study on the experience of marginalised groups in humanitarian action.*

100 Dutch Relief Alliance (n.d.) *Localisation in action? Operationalising support to local leadership in Sulawesi.*

greatest gap to have been in creating space for constructive discussion between the state and humanitarian agencies on the effectiveness of the response. An independent review of the Sulawesi response questioned whether INGOs had been too accepting of gaps in the overall response that meant that humanitarian principles were not fully applied. It reported an apparent lack of willingness to take up the limitations of the response with the Indonesian government.¹⁰¹

Navigating the trust deficit: strategies to strengthen collaboration with the state

So, what should be done to try to close these gaps or, where necessary, to ensure that negative effects on the provision of assistance are mitigated?

The necessity for dialogue

An honest appraisal is needed of the strengths and weaknesses of different actors and potential complementary roles to deliver the most effective response. A global focus on the binary nature of localisation and a polarising discourse – ‘do you go local or save lives?’ – has contributed to mistrust and a combative approach to responding to needs in the Rohingya crisis.¹⁰²

The importance of government relationship-building and capacity-strengthening

National governments need to recognise that they must make changes in order to strengthen and increase the comprehensiveness of the disaster management system, and commit to making those changes. Experience from Indonesia has shown that a significant disaster event can be pivotal in helping governments recognise the limitations of existing policy and strengthen national humanitarian response and coordination capacities. UN agencies and NGOs can play an important role in supporting these efforts.

The benefits of a long-term investment in partnership

Investment in strategic humanitarian partnerships is both the right thing to do and a necessary action to take in these contexts. Of greatest importance is for future models of humanitarian delivery through local partners to be accompanied by sustained investments in local NGO organisational capacity to a standard and quality that permits a sustainable shift to a genuine partner-led response.¹⁰³ It is also essential that all NGOs strengthen their links to National Disaster

101 Lawry White, S., Langdon, B. and Hanik, M. (2019) *Real time response review of the 2018 Tsunami Appeal Disaster Emergency Committee and Swiss solidarity*. Dara and Vine Management Consulting.

102 Humanitarian Advisory Group and NIRAPAD (2017) *When the rubber hits the road: local leadership in the first 100 days of the Rohingya response*.

103 Featherstone, A. (2016) *Opportunity knocks: realising the potential of partnerships in the Nepal earthquake response*. On behalf of ActionAid, CAFOD, CARE, Christian Aid, Oxfam and Tearfund.

Management Agencies in order to boost capacity while advocating on challenges that must be addressed. This may require INGOs to provide space for national civil society to engage government and support the expansion of their operational and advocacy.

The need to maintain bottom lines that are consistent with principles and values

It is essential that humanitarian organisations understand the implications of working in societies with deeply entrenched inequalities and fragile governance systems, particularly in contexts where the state may perpetuate these challenges. Research for this study highlighted that NGO staff possess varying levels of tolerance for perceived deficiencies in state-led response, with a tendency for harder-line application of principled response being voiced at greatest distance from the field. While the fundamental principles of humanitarian action remain an essential part of efforts to respond in crises, in the heat of a response, a dogmatic approach to these leaves little space for negotiation. Above all else, there is a need to discuss principled response, roles and responsibilities and government capacity during a response, but it is equally important to do this outside of a crisis as a core part of preparedness planning.

The importance of politically informed humanitarian programming

Humanitarian agencies generally recognise that, while they are mainly concerned with delivering neutral or impartial emergency assistance to populations in need, they are also important political and economic actors and as such will have an effect on and be affected by government. This underlines the importance of understanding the political context in which NGOs work and of maintaining a power analysis connected to NGO presence and operations. Linked to this analysis and no less important is the need for INGOs, in particular, to continually analyse what their role should be in national humanitarian contexts. There are a number of reasons why agencies find it difficult to develop this sort of analysis, which include a lack of incentives, a dearth of skills, short project cycles, rapid staff turnover and competing priorities. Alongside this is the need to understand the potential that assistance has to exacerbate violent conflict.

Conclusion: the need to shift the dial on NGO–state engagement

It is important that humanitarian actors recognise the need for government leadership in humanitarian response, as well as their own role in national capacity-strengthening where this is requested. Conversely, it is important for government to recognise the technical skills and capacity that NGOs possess, which can be used to strengthen the timeliness, effectiveness and sustainability of the assistance provided. Where these complementarities exist, there is the greatest possibility of a productive partnership in humanitarian preparedness and response.

Despite an acknowledgement of the need for change in the international humanitarian system, it has been slow in coming. Some actors have questioned whether motivations exist within the

international humanitarian system ‘to relinquish their dominant position’¹⁰⁴ and have pointed to a lack of incentives for them to do so. Five years after the Grand Bargain localisation commitments were agreed, progress is becoming more evident, and in each of the case studies, despite the challenges, there was broad support for state-led response. However, there is still some way to go before this localised model is able to deliver effective and complementary assistance that is responsive to those in need. Success will require greater willingness to honestly and robustly assess capacities, access and context to determine responsibilities and resource distribution based on who is best placed to perform certain roles.

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Aftermath of the 2015 earthquake in Nepal. Credit: EU/ECHO/Pierre Prakash

104 Gingerich, T. and Cohen, M. (2015) *Turning the humanitarian system on its head, saving lives and livelihoods by strengthening local capacity and shifting leadership to local actors*. Oxfam International.

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