

Partnerships in First Line Responses (FLR)

UKRAINE 2022 – A CATALYST FOR PARTNERSHIPS

The escalation of the war in Ukraine in February 2022 led to one of the largest refugee movements seen since World War Two. The demand and support for a humanitarian response was unprecedented and much of the international aid system and local actors turned their attention to responding. This resulted in a rapid scale up, or in some cases start up, by members of the international humanitarian community. Due to the essential role that existing formal and informal local organisations were playing in meeting the needs of the displaced, many organisations adopted a partnership approach.

To learn from this experience Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC) commissioned research to explore the relationships between International NGOs (INGOs) and local actors (LAs)¹ who started or scaled up their operations in Central and Eastern Europe. The aim is to provide practical guidance to INGOs responding to emergencies and ‘first line responses’ (FLR) in partnership with LAs.



Photo: Christian Jepsen/NRC

NRC’s longstanding Ukrainian humanitarian partner, Stabilization Support Services (SSS), registers IDPs for assistance in a humanitarian hub in Ternopil city in Western Ukraine.

¹ NRC considers local actors to be groups of individuals, public institutions, local and national non-governmental organisations (LNGOs), the private sector, and other civil society organisations (CSOs), such as academia and the knowledge sector, associations, faith-based organisations, cultural organisations, and formal or informal networks.

LAs played an essential role in the Ukraine response. Many formal and informal local organisations – already present in the area – stepped up to meet the needs of the displaced. Relationships between INGOs and LAs formed very quickly. Those organisations that were able to build on existing tools, networks and relationships found their partnerships easier and quicker to initiate than those that started from scratch. However, for INGOs with limited or no existing presence, early phase strategic commitments to a partnership approach, adequate resourcing, and a willingness to adapt led to more successful partnerships.

Many INGOs working in partnership in the Ukraine response built on their existing **commitments to localisation**, whereas for others the circumstances accelerated their engagement with the Grand Bargain commitments.

The availability of **flexible funds** increased the willingness (and pressure) on organisations to initiate partnerships to deliver programming. For organisations new to the region, it offered a means to start programming quickly whilst they established their legal presence within the region. As a result, there is some criticism that partnerships were a merger of convenience rather than based on a principled approach to localisation.

The **pressure to deliver** influenced almost all aspects of the partnerships discussed in this research—how they were formed, managed and the challenges and opportunities they faced. In the Ukraine response, even though significant flexible funds were available, a global, sector wide focus on compliance meant the application of at times heavy due diligence systems was pervasive within partnerships, and staff spent much of their time working to apply, adapt and innovate standard practices.

The risk focus means we can't have proper equal partnerships with organisations. When the first entry point is doing checks on them for compliance you know it's never going to be an equitable trustful relationship. (INGO respondent)

Because of a focus on 'gold standard' **compliance**, many INGOs chose to partner with larger LAs that could handle these requirements and deliver rapidly, which unfortunately led to some LAs being overloaded. This focus often excluded smaller, less formal organisations that were delivering more directly in the early phase of the FLR.

Existing capacity assessments are designed by international organisations to assess the capacity of potential partners to deliver their programmes and policies, as opposed to understanding what capacity exists in a particular context, and how best to support it. (INGO respondent)

INGOs showed preference for **funding** through donations and smaller lumpsum grants, which provided flexibility and quick delivery and were seen as a means for testing potential longer-term relationships. However, this limited longer term investment in capacity and organisational development for LAs.

The ability to effectively engage in **joint project development** was influenced by the pressure to deliver. In many cases, there was a strong perception that a more directive approach was likely to be less time consuming and was more commonly applied. The ambitions within the Grand Bargain for co-implementation were therefore perceived as difficult to realise in FLR.

Not all organisations had **dedicated partnership capacity** within their staff structures, despite making conscious decisions to work in partnership. Partnership staffing was challenged by rapid staff turnover and recruitment challenges. Whilst making it difficult to manage partnership processes these challenges also influenced relationships. The research found that partnerships where interactions between staff were clearly established and kept to a minimum were less stressful and more effective than those involving multiple, changing staff.

LAs reported an over focus from their INGO partners on fund management, quantitative inputs and outputs rather than on **technical capacity** and impact for affected populations. However, some

LAs were positive about the introduction of new approaches and attention on quality programming components including safeguarding and humanitarian principles.

Accountability should work both ways, not only our accountability towards the donor but also our accountability towards the local communities where we go and intervene. (LA respondent)

Investments in ‘**capacity**’ were clearly influenced by the perspectives of those determining ‘capacity’. As a result, the INGOs interviewed tended to prioritise capacity support to meet their own compliance standards rather than the needs of LAs themselves. All interviewees acknowledged that the impact and success of capacity sharing was more sustainable when those at the receiving end were part of determining its content and form.

I think we have this obsession with humanitarian capacity, as if it's something that only we can know and understand, when really if it's an organisation that knows communities, it's not like they're not going to be able to learn (INGO respondent)

CONCLUSIONS

Much of what the research concluded reinforces existing understanding regarding best practice in partnerships. These can be summarised as follows:

- Build relationships and trust.
- Understand the local context.
- Include local actors in all stages of emergency response planning, implementation, and evaluation.
- Foster collaboration and coordination among all stakeholders involved in the response.
- Support capacity building initiatives that enhance the skills, knowledge, and resources of local actors.
- Recognise and amplify local leadership and expertise.
- Ensure cultural sensitivity.
- Communicate effectively.
- Incorporate long-term sustainability into emergency response activities.

The challenge for partnerships in FLR is that the ability (and time) to build on these best practices is usually in short supply due to pressure to act swiftly in the face of immediate needs. In the Ukraine response, even though significant flexible funds were available, a global, sector wide focus on compliance meant the application of sometimes heavy due diligence systems was pervasive within partnerships and staff spent much time working to adapt and innovate standard practices.

The human side of partnerships – interactions and relationships – have emerged as a key factor in partnership success. The tools and systems produced as a sector are only as good as the social foundations on which they are built and the people that implement them. This means that style or ethos – for both LAs and INGOs – is as important as the structures that are put in place to enable partnerships in FLR. Investment in human resources and the staff that engage in FLR must consider partnership skills as a key operational capacity given the developing context of FLRs.

In conclusion, there is much that both INGOs and LAs can do to maximise the opportunities and potential for partnerships in FLR. As a sector we must take advantage of FLR contexts, be flexible and agile, innovate and document our choices.

- INGOs should be proactive and adapt their programmatic tools and approaches to the evolving dynamics of FLR, acknowledging the growing role of LAs as first-line responders. This will enable them to scale up their operations more effectively and navigate changing contexts.
- Some INGOs have an organisational 'preference' for direct programming, which is often accompanied by the perception that partnership comes with greater risks than direct

programming. This perception needs to be critically reviewed with better evidence to enable understanding of this perception.

- Systems and processes applicable to partnerships in FLR should be clearly communicated to all stakeholders – both staff within INGOs and LAs.
- Trust is best built on being realistic about when things will happen, both LAs and INGOs should not underestimate how long processes will take and should ensure a continuous and open dialogue that is clear about where bottlenecks may appear.
- Knowledge management is essential. As a sector we need to invest more in simple ways to document actions, capture how decisions are made and to reflect on the consequences of both.

The following considerations drawn from this research can help with improving each stage of the project cycle:

Programming - *Partnership as a methodology is agreed and partners identified.*

- Leadership in both INGOs and LAs should commit to clear, consistent communication and directives around partnership approaches. There is no room for half-hearted attempts in partnerships, as they undermine the integrity and effectiveness of the collaboration.
- Both INGOs and LAs should define clear roles and responsibilities within their internal structures to improve their partnership approaches. By doing so, organisations can alleviate stress among their staff, improve their internal operations, and enhance the effectiveness of their external partnerships.
- The skills and functions of partnerships need to be better reflected in job descriptions and recruitment profiles. This is particularly important in integrated roles where technical elements and implementation needs to factor in partnership approaches. Partnership capacity amongst staff should also be part of an initial response not an afterthought.
- Staffing, and staff styles had a huge implication on FLR partnership success – whether that was related to issues of staff continuity, individual and organisational styles and culture, experience, and ego. Greater investment in negotiations, mediation and associated relationship building skills are necessary as part of continuing professional development for staff responding in FLR through partnerships.

Identifying Partnerships - *Specific partners and funding opportunities are identified and partners capacity to implement activities is confirmed.*

- INGOs should be open to adapt and accommodate non-traditional partners to foster innovation. They should rethink their standard operating procedures, be prepared to work outside their usual paradigms, and consciously engage with entities that might not fit into their conventional partnership frameworks. This approach will likely require additional effort but has the potential to yield fresh insights, strategies, and meaningful impact.
- The adherence to 'gold standard' tools caused stress for everyone involved. Flexibility within systems and the ability to adapt tools should be supported by devolved authority and clarity on what are mandatory requirements vs 'nice to haves'. 'Good enough' and minimum standards are likely a more realistic starting point.
- 'Lack of humanitarian capacity' is often cited when it comes to LAs, particularly by international actors. This creates a way for traditional humanitarian architecture to undermine local capacities even months after a crisis. INGOs need to identify a way to assess (and build on) contrasting / transferable skills that might be unfamiliar to our humanitarian 'lens' but equally relevant to meeting humanitarian needs in different contexts.

Formulating Relationships - *Projects identified, and contracts agreed.*

- Flexible funding was clearly a valuable enabler in the Ukraine response. However not all INGOs cascaded these flexibilities within their partnerships. As a principle, the same flexibilities e.g., reporting, budgeting that INGOs receive should be cascaded to LAs.
- Continued focus on project funding continues to challenge the viability and sustainability of LAs, Financial support should extend beyond project activities i.e. book ending projects and

provision of overhead support - enabling running costs to be covered alongside start up and close down support.

- INGOs must address systems that reinforce a 'sub-contracting' mentality. A range of contractual options is essential. This enables legal flexibility to work with a wider range of local FLR responders, establish relationships more quickly and enable rapid disbursement of funds.

Implementing Partnerships - *Implementation of quality projects including monitoring, and performance management*

- Pay on time.
- Over frequent and rigid control – sometimes without explanation – from the INGO side was perceived as burdening LAs with useless activities. An open dialogue on what information is needed and why, alongside flexibility for what is collected and shared, building on iterative ways of working should be integrated into partnerships.

Evaluating & Investing in Partnerships - *Drawing lessons from the partnership, identifying key learning and capacity building opportunities*

- Trust and respect are fundamental to partnerships and are valuable commodities that enable teams to be open to learning. Creating space and processes which bring together INGO and LA staff to understand and engage with a context is a good starting point upon which a capacity sharing needs can be understood, and relationships can be built.
- Within a partnership a focus on transactional capacity sharing alongside longer-term investments or priorities related to strategic or organisational development is necessary. The two should not be mutually exclusive and can be built into a variety of capacity sharing options including training, mentoring and peer learning.
- Recognise when staff functions require a knowledge sharing function and actively recruit for these skills.
- Active reflection on the success of a partnership should focus on more than the project outcomes. Practical ways to assess and reflect on relationships and processes should be included in M&E and built into partnerships through open processes e.g., regular partner forums, and more confidential feedback options e.g. complaints and feedback.

METHODOLOGY

Key informant interviews were carried out with nine LAs (primarily based in Moldova), twelve INGOs and four international resource organisations (UN, networks etc.) Findings were then combined with a review of existing tools and policies to understand the approaches used to develop operational partnerships in the early stages of the response - during the first 3-6 months (referred to as a 'first line response' or FLR). The research focuses primarily on the experience from Moldova but also draws on experience from across the Ukraine response. The research was structured around NRC's Project Cycle Management (PCM) Framework, covering the five stages of programming, identification, formulation, implementation, evaluation, and learning.

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FOR FURTHER INFORMATION

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