



# Pathways for Engagement: Local Partnerships and Humanitarian Access

## Best Practices Summary

Photo: Tina Abu Hanna/NRC

The humanitarian sector has begun to recognise the significance of expanding operational approaches—including access negotiation, programme delivery, and decision-making—to include local and national partners. At the same time, critical reflections on the benefits, opportunities, and challenges of engaging in local partnerships to achieve successful humanitarian access and maintain a secure and permissible operational space have arisen since the establishment of the Grand Bargain commitments of the World Humanitarian Summit (WHS) in 2016. This document aims to provide key points of reflection on the role of partnership development with local actors for humanitarian access, offering recommendations and points of inquiry that have emerged from the literature and practitioner interviews on the topic.

## Localisation in policy and practice

Current research has highlighted a lack of conceptual clarity regarding ‘localisation’ and its ambitions; the absence of a coherent understanding and voice regarding whether and how to concretely implement localisation approaches; perceptions of localisation as a top-down policy priority that may inadequately be translated concretely in the field; and the failure of donors to revise their internal processes to allow for more risk-taking and to enable more direct funding to national actors, despite their ambitions to do so.

In this context, the present research points to several reflections and recommendations to foster local partnerships for humanitarian access and suggests the importance of broadening the range of actors considered to be ‘local’ when discussing the definition of localisation. This is particularly relevant when considering the role, added value, contributions, and how best to engage with organisations including community groups, diasporas, businesses, religious groups, and other ‘non-traditional’ actors as credible partners in humanitarian activities.

Moreover, reflections on localisation have raised the question related to enabling humanitarian access in hard-to-reach (H2R) areas. The concept of humanitarian access may be conceived of as “the access by humanitarian actors to people in need of assistance and protection and access by those in need to the goods and services essential for their survival and health, in a manner consistent with core humanitarian principles.”<sup>1</sup> It is apparent from the research that frontline staff from both international and local agencies are expected to operationalise the humanitarian principles when negotiating access and acceptance. However, local staff typically have fewer resources and options to deal with operational difficulties and security risks than their international counterparts. While partnerships may require strengthening the awareness and practical application of the humanitarian principles and other standard processes of engagement, they also require recognising the effective practices and engagements already established within local contexts.

<sup>1</sup>Swiss Federal Department of Foreign Affairs (FDFA), the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (UNOCHA), and Conflict Dynamics International (CDI). (2014, December). *Humanitarian Access in Situations of Armed Conflict: Practitioners’ Manual*. Version 2.

## Priority aspects for more meaningful partnerships

To foster more meaningful partnerships between INGOs and local actors, it is necessary to consider **(1) the way humanitarian budgets and funds are allocated and distributed, (2) the character and capacity of both parties, and (3) the space granted to local organisations to lead humanitarian operations**, including access negotiation in hard-to-reach areas. Alongside these factors, all programmes and humanitarian operations seeking to engage in partnerships with local agencies must emphasise encouraging more collaboration (and less competition) between local actors, valuing and elevating local knowledge and capacity, maintaining partnerships after projects conclude, and continuing to invest in capacity building, joint programme design, and fundraising. Programmatic efforts should not deter from organisational reflections related to strengthening local response capabilities and mitigating the unintended dependency and consequences of humanitarian action, with the idea of maximising the access, impact, and efficiency of aid actions.

Following the aspects presented, the subsequent section offers recommendations and reflections on key ideas to enrich the discussion on developing better local partnership strategies to achieve successful humanitarian access.

### I. Funding and the role of donors

- Investment in capacity strengthening should build on evidence of current practices such as capacity through secondment, coordination, training, and the creation of pooled resources, among others.
- Foster dialogue with INGOs and donors on the quality and effectiveness of current partnerships and design evaluation systems to review and refine partnership practices.
- Direct funding and management programmes for local actors, reimagining attitudes towards risk to build resilience and accountability by donors and NGOs alike.
- Donors should support long-term capacity building and joint project planning and implementation over short-term grants that privilege sub-contracting relationships.
- Donors should reimagine programmatic success and redefine operational outcomes to include incentives to organisations that create solid and equal partnerships in crisis-affected contexts and allocate funding to support these partnerships in ways that lead to more complementarity.
- Donors should require more from INGOs, particularly on monitoring, accountability, and transparency regarding diversion and fraud.
- Large and influential state donors should convene transparent discussions with both INGOs and local agencies on sensitive subjects, including risk-sharing, access obstructions, and negotiation compromises and their implications at the political and field levels. They may also consider how to use national and local systems of accountability (social accountability through communities, peer-to-peer accountability) to mitigate fiduciary risks, a key obstacle to meaningful partnerships and localisation.

### II. Moving from funding to empowering local actors

- Local actors offer significant non-financial assets, including contextual knowledge and relationships to improve programme design, develop locally responsive programmes, and strengthen community accountability and programme sustainability. Moving from transactional to transformational partnerships may also require efforts to include a range of local actors, namely the government and other civil society actors.
- When considering capacities around humanitarian access, organisations should not limit their vision to traditional professional development, trainings, workshops, and “on-the-job” experiences but should tap into additional types of values and assets unique to local counterparts, whether contextual, cultural, linguistic, relational, which remain essential dimensions at every stage of humanitarian negotiations.

- Furthermore, agencies should invest in the design and delivery of alternative forms of capacity development (training, coaching, mentoring, experience-sharing) along with defining and investing in existing complementarities.
- Encourage mechanisms for local actors to report directly on their perceptions and expectations of partnerships, as well as on their assessments of the effectiveness of current partnerships.
- Organise discussions and spaces for strategic and operational opportunities to collaborate, to critically review existing partnership models, and to encourage good partnership practices on a longer-term basis.
- Use development funding to support local capacity and sustainability to respond in times of crisis.
- Support local actors in conducting self-assessments and tailoring capacity-building plans for each unique partnership.
- Advocate with donors to make local capacity building a core part of funding proposals.
- Capacity-strengthening efforts must be based on local actors' priorities and needs, rather than on the requirements of international actors.
- INGOs should support and facilitate local actors' direct access to donors.

### III. Coordination and decision-making for access

- Increase the number of national NGOs that hold positions of responsibility, such as co-leadership training, coaching, orientation, and co-lead rotation. Design plans with local agencies for greater handover to local leadership.
- Develop systems for better information-sharing with local partners and allow them to have adequate space to make, implement, and follow up on negotiation decisions in H2R environments.
- Coordination systems should include the use of local languages in meetings, equal floor time, shared agenda setting, and commitment to local actors co-leading coordination clusters.
- Local actors look to having more independence, authority, and autonomy, but have been generally engaged as partners to INGOs in support capacities, such as preparing needs assessments and delivering programmes locally. Looking forward, local actors can also be more closely associated to monitoring the operational impact of humanitarian programmes and the ongoing implementation of negotiation agreements.
- Raise awareness among local and national actors of the challenges and benefits of their participation in coordination meetings, particularly in terms of gaining and maintaining humanitarian access.
- The capacity needed to respond to a specific humanitarian situation should be defined through local consultation with a wider and more diverse group of stakeholders, including through consultations with affected people, to create consensus and address power issues in how capacity is defined.

## Challenges and further questions on localisation and humanitarian access

- Local power dynamics exist in crisis-affected contexts where international intermediaries simultaneously transfer high compliance requirements and operational risks to their local partners, which can create significant time burdens, generate perverse reporting and operational incentives, and undermine more equitable and strategic partnerships. Paying attention to these dynamics and power imbalances is critical when building more equitable partnerships with local actors, and it is important to avoid using these dynamics as an excuse for avoiding localisation commitments.
- National actors take on a greater share of the security and reputational risks associated with humanitarian interventions, particularly in H2R areas and vis-a-vis central authorities and security actors. With increased visibility of national NGOs comes increased pressure, which may

potentially limit the space for public communication and denunciation. In short, some national partners may privilege a more discrete role in order to maintain their operational access.

- Trust between international and local actors remains low. Local actors may not be convinced that international actors are willing to provide support or to give up the dominance of coordination structures and funding. That said, the alignment of some national NGOs to government authorities has also been a source of consideration. In several studies, national governments—particularly those that are repressive, corrupt, and/or weak—have been named as one of the greatest obstacles to local partnerships, a perception that limits not only the operational space for humanitarian activities, but also prospects for collaboration between national and international actors.
- The facilitation and strengthening of meaningful partnerships requires a commitment to recognise, reinforce, and reward the added value of local organisations, rather than to take an opportunistic approach to collaboration. As such, trust in local actors needs to be reinforced from donors to INGOs in terms of funding and leadership in coordination spaces and activities.
- Information exchange and fluent communication is at the core of developing better partnership strategies, in order to ensure that humanitarian access initiatives can benefit from both the expertise and knowledge of local actors, as well as the capacities from INGOs.

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