Photo: Distribution in Hrakove, Ukraine. Photo: Nyriam Renaud/NRC

Toward Local Humanitarian Engagment: Executive Summary

Reflections on engaging local partners in hard-to-reach areas

This executive summary introduces an exploration of the relationships between local organisations and international NGOs and agencies in four countries and examines how the international humanitarian sector can improve its collaboration with local organisations engaged with communities in H2R areas. Four case studies, on Cameroon, Lebanon, Ukraine, and Venezuela, make up the foundation of this study, and are placed in conversation with an extensive literature review on localisation. Diverse in many ways, the four settings offer reflections on engagement with local organisations specific to each one. They also shed light on common themes, challenges and observations that may resonate more globally.

Background

The ability of humanitarian organisations to obtain and maintain access to communities in crisis on the frontlines of volatile and protracted conflicts has long been a challenge, particularly in hard-to-reach (H2R) areas. Complex and interconnected factors from the political, social, and economic to security, cultural and climatic escalate armed violence, contribute to the deterioration of essential infrastructure and services, increase resource scarcity and heighten the vulnerabilities of affected populations.

Needs tend to be most urgent and acute in areas facing high levels of violence and insecurity. These spaces create a grey zone in which access to populations, and people's access to effective aid and basic services, is restricted. Politically sensitive areas are particularly susceptible to this phenomenon.

Humanitarians may choose to prioritise maintaining their presence, even if it means conceding to conditions imposed by armed actors, severely restricting operational access and failing to reach the most vulnerable. Through a series of reactive operational and

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policy decisions, many international organisations have defined operational approaches and policies that increasingly undermine the humanitarian imperative precisely in areas where needs are most critical and operations should be prioritised.

Enduring and emerging challenges create a multitude of obstacles to access in H2R areas. In many situations, such as those explored in this report, humanitarian organisations face suspicions of their motives or fear that their interventions will be compromised by political, diplomatic or military objectives. They may deal with power asymmetries in their engagements, diminishing influence with assertive regimes and pervasive political impunity, or face competition within the sector as organisations vie for resources and visibility in high-risk environments, complicating trust-building efforts.

Humanitarians also face a series of "self-inflicted" obstacles that stem from their own policies and approaches, including increased "bunkerisation" in volatile situations, incongruence between needs and programmes, discounting of local stakeholders' capacities and expertise, and constraints and compromises linked to counter-terrorism regulations and donor state priorities that have significant consequences for access. These factors challenge organisations as they try to demonstrate their legitimacy and authority, implement consistent and quality programmes, and ensure their security across operational and ideological frontlines.

Yet it is in this space that we also discover the potential of humanitarian action to confront and question the norms, power and priorities determined by influential stakeholders including donors, state authorities and non-state armed groups.

International agencies and government donors are crucial players in most efforts to mitigate the effects of conflict and manage insecurity, but despite intentions to localise their

activities, they fall short in cooperating sufficiently and meaningfully with local partners in their planning and programming. Local organisations have emphasised the consequences this has had, particularly in terms of access, the effectiveness of the response and the relevance of programming. The presence and engagement of local organisations inherently influence the humanitarian space and can foster an approach that could be more effective and generate more trust and acceptance if implemented in line with local practices and priorities.

Policy discourse and incremental organisational changes are only the first steps in a potentially profound sectoral transformation. Achieving this objective implies trusting local capacities, legitimising their actions, recognising effective local practices, strengthening local technical knowledge, and developing mechanisms to facilitate partnerships, particularly in terms of funding and administration. It means perceiving local organisations as equals, allies and collaborators, not simply implementing partners. It may also require revisiting the meaning and possible interpretations of the humanitarian principles, as well as their practical application.

The concept of localisation has been vague, however, and in recent years it has taken on a variety of meanings from a range of perspectives. This lack of definitional clarity makes it difficult to put initiatives into practice, monitor them and assess progress. It also contributes to maintaining the status quo, because different stakeholders can effectively use the term to justify what they are already doing, or are comfortable doing, with local partners and to varying degrees. This phenomenon is particularly acute in H2R areas.

Underlying power dynamics, a climate of risk aversion among international donors and agencies, and a lack of conceptual and operational clarity and accountability from the

leadership of key global entities all impede efforts to enhance local partnerships in H2R areas. Other hurdles exist at the policy level, with insufficient guidelines on forming partnerships with local organisations or mechanisms to do so, despite institutional good intentions to promote localisation.

The barriers to cultivating better local partnerships are interconnected and cannot be viewed or addressed in isolation. Some factors are highly context-specific in terms of their effects on localisation, including the role of the host state and international NGOs, communities' perceptions and expectations and the history of aid agencies' presence in the region. Despite progress in putting localisation policies into practice through consortia, information sharing and adaptive funding strategies, there are still incentives to uphold the status quo and a competitive rather than collaborative approach to local engagement.

Introduction

This executive summary shares key observations and considerations for the humanitarian community. The research project falls within NRC's 2022-2025 strategy, which prioritises its understanding of high-risk and volatile conflict settings and its capacity to access and operate in them. The initiative also supports NRC's continued ambition to enhance its collaboration with local organisations and to remove barriers to assistance and services for displaced and conflict-affected populations.

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Bouba Hamidou, in Boubara village in East region of Cameroon.
Photo: Itunu Kuku/NRC

Key Observations

Access constraints are not fixed. In volatile environments, access to H2R areas will shift and evolve over time and will be influenced by a range of social, economic, military and political factors. The degree of access humanitarian agencies have may often be localised and depend on field engagements and decisions.

Humanitarian access is central to operations in H2R areas, but a number of additional factors affect assistance and protection programmes. These include methods and flexibility of funding, particularly for local organisations; the capacity of partner agencies; tolerance of physical risk, and the transfer of that risk to local organisations; donors' tolerance of perceived financial risk; the risk for local organisations that political stakeholders do not perceive them as neutral; and the degree to which agencies are able to maintain a principled operational space, which the authors interpret as a degree of autonomy to be able to assess needs accurately and engage in operations in an independent and impartial way.

Some have argued that the qualities that make national and local partners indispensable to accessing H2R areas, including their close connections to affected

communities and deep roots in local culture and society, can also impede their ability to maintain a neutral and impartial approach. A common misconception is that local NGOs are less able to withstand pressure from national authorities and other groups and are frequently intertwined in the intricate local dynamics of the crises they are responding to. This perspective overlooks the possible limitations of international humanitarians, particularly in protracted and intricate armed conflicts, internationalised conflicts and UN missions.

The humanitarian principles should serve as a means to an end, rather than be an end in and of themselves. They should serve as a guide to decision making that determines the best option available. Operational compromises may be necessary in complex situations with limited choices. A practical approach to the role and purpose of the humanitarian principles acknowledges the unique challenges national NGOs face while appreciating their significant contribution to humanitarian coordination and leadership, given the chance.

The ability of local partners to be flexible and adaptable, and the fact that they are locally connected, allows them unique opportunities for engagement where international NGOs may be constrained. There is still a tendency, however, to capitalise on local organisations' presence and knowledge as implementing partners through transactional relationships, rather than developing longer-term and more meaningful engagements. International intermediaries often transfer stringent compliance requirements and operational risks to their local partners, which can be time-consuming to navigate, generate bias in reporting and operational incentives, and undermine more equitable and strategic partnerships.
Paying attention to these dynamics is important when implementing localisation reforms. However, it is also critical to avoid using these dynamics as an excuse for avoiding localisation commitments or for

developing programmes that increase dependency.

Trust issues are intrinsic to the spectrum of relationship challenges between stakeholders, including with national authorities, which have increasingly voiced limited trust in the humanitarian enterprise. They claim it is politicised and internationally driven, that is acts on hidden agendas and is a source of *témoignage* (testimony) against their policies and practices. Indeed, national authorities have been identified as a prominent impediment to localisation in many cases. They frequently exhibit characteristics of repression, corruption and/or fragility, and constrain the humanitarian space for local, national, and international organisations.

Local power dynamics are inevitable in conflict settings, and this may accentuate the trust issue between international and local organisations. Trust is also essential in access negotiations and partnership development and must be cultivated through effective, predictable, and responsive programming. Trust between international agencies is generally mutual, but between international and local organisations it is often tenuous, particularly in areas where access is limited for international organisations and where international NGOs tend not to collaborate with their local counterparts. The latter may not be convinced that the former are willing to provide support or relinquish their dominance of coordination structures and funding.

Slum village of Pretare, Venezuela. Photo: Ingebjørg Kårstad/NRC

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Considerations and Recommendations

Current research reveals a lack of conceptual clarity regarding localisation and its ambitions. There is no unified vision or voice on whether and how approaches should be implemented. Interviewees for this project still view localisation as a top-down policy priority that is often inadequately translated concretely in the field. Donors must equally revisit their internal processes to allow for more risk-taking in insecure and politicised setting to enable more direct funding for national stakeholders.

NRC uses a broad definition of local actors that emerges from the Inter-agency Standing Committee (IASC) and Grand Bargain discussions: "NRC considers local actors to be groups of individuals, public institutions, local and national non-governmental organisations (LNNGOs), 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." This research suggests broadening the range of actors considered to be local to include indigenous groups, social enterprises, informal community-led collectives, trade unions and media outlets.

Remote town of Arsal, Lebanon. Photo: Charbel Kosseifi/NRC

Potential challenges to working with local actors in hard-to-reach areas:

Local organisations have contextual expertise, language capacity and network connections. These have been identified as assets in considering local partners but possessing them does not guarantee access. Some considerations of potential drawbacks to local partnerships are:

Limited resources – local organisations may have insufficient financial resources, staff and equipment to respond to large-scale crises or provide long-term support to affected communities.

Lack of expertise and scaled operational experience – such as logistics, coordination, and technical support.

Security risks – local organisations may face higher risks than their international counterparts, disproportionately exposing staff and volunteers to danger while hindering the NGO's ability to operate effectively.

Political or community pressures – local organisations may face pressure from local authorities, political groups or other stakeholders to prioritise certain communities or individuals over others. This could compromise their ability to be neutral and impartial in their operations.

Accountability challenges – local organisations may lack robust and donor-validated mechanisms to ensure that funds are used appropriately and reported on correctly, and that activities are carried out effectively.

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Recommendations

To foster more meaningful partnerships between international NGOs and local organisations, the report recommends considerations for humanitarian actors, leadership, and donors.

Report recommendations and considerations:

- Recommendation: Reconsider the way funding instruments are conceived and used.

- Recommendation: Humanitarian actors should examine the relationship character relationships within a partnership.

- Recommendation: Humanitarian leadership should re-examine the space granted to local organisations to lead in working groups, clusters, and other coordination mechanisms.

- Recommendation: Frontline humanitarian actors and humanitarian leadership should explore how they to empower local organisations in their negotiations to gain and maintain access to H2R

All humanitarian programmes and operations that seek to foster stronger relationships with local organisations to overcome access restrictions must emphasise greater collaboration and less competition between local NGOs; valuing and elevating local knowledge and capacity; and maintaining partnerships after projects end. They should continue to invest in developing the knowledge, skills, and capabilities of local organisations with a vision of local empowerment and sustainability of actions including joint programme design and analysis, and fundraising. Developing partnerships with a range of local organisations in terms of mandate, profile and reach may also strengthen perceptions of neutrality.

Involving diverse contributions and engagements from beneficiaries and local NGOs will help their international counterparts to deepen their understanding of the local situation, community priorities and expectations. It may also guard against misconceptions of aid as biased and ultimately lead to a more effective and relevant response.

HARVARD HUMANITARIAN INITIATIVE

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