

Toward local humanitarian engagement:

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



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Norwegian Refugee Council
Prinsens gate 2
N-0152 Oslo
Norway
www.nrc.no

Toward local humanitarian engagement: Reflections on engaging local partners in hard-to-reach areas

Anaïde Nahikian and Emmanuel Tronc, Mariana Duque Diez
Marie Courraud, and Arthur Quesnay (in collaboration with NRC Global Access Team)

Copy Editor:

Jeremy Lennard

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Executive summary and key observations

International humanitarian organisations and their government donors are vital players in most efforts to manage insecurity and overcome other obstacles to principled action in hard-to-reach (H2R) areas, but they consistently fail to engage local actors sufficiently and meaningfully in the planning and implementation of aid programming. The localisation agenda recognises that local actors' inherent understanding of communities' practices and priorities has the potential to foster more trust, acceptance and effective humanitarian action, but commitments to embrace a profound sectoral transformation have yet to move beyond policy discourse and incremental organisational changes.

Part of the problem has been definitional. The concept of localisation has been vague and has taken on different meanings from different perspectives. This lack of clarity makes it difficult to put localisation initiatives into practice and assess progress, which in turn contributes to maintaining the status quo.

Other obstacles include underlying power dynamics and a climate of risk aversion among international donors and agencies. Some factors – such as the role of the authorities in question, communities' perceptions and expectations, and aid agencies' past and present activity in the region – are highly context-specific, but all are interconnected and cannot be viewed or addressed in isolation.

Effective localisation requires trust in local actors' capacities, legitimisation of their actions and strengthening their technical knowledge. It may also require improving awareness and application of the humanitarian principles and other standard processes of engagement, and recognition of the good practices that already exist. Rather than embrace such a broad range of challenges, however, international organisations have tended to retain a competitive rather than collaborative attitude toward local actors.

This report explores the relationships between international and local organisations in four countries with a view to determining how the former can better support the latter in their work with communities in H2R areas. The research falls within NRC's 2022-2025 strategy, which prioritises its understanding, positioning and capacity to operate in high-risk and volatile conflict settings. The initiative also supports NRC's continued ambition to enhance its collaboration with local actors, including to remove barriers to assistance and services for displaced and conflict-affected populations.

Case studies from Cameroon, Lebanon, Ukraine and Venezuela form the backbone of this report in conversation with an extensive literature review on localisation. The four studies are diverse in many aspects, and each offers unique reflections on engagement with local actors, but they also shed light on a number of common themes, challenges and observations that may resonate more globally.

Key observations

Access is central to humanitarian operations in H2R areas, but a number of other factors also affect assistance and protection programmes. These include funding modalities and flexibility, particularly for local actors; the capacity of partner agencies; risk tolerance and the transfer of risk to local actors; and the degree to which agencies are able to maintain a principled operational space. Some key observations from the research are as follows:

- Local actors' ability to be flexible, adaptable and connected gives them unique opportunities for engagement where international NGOs may be constrained, but there is a tendency to capitalise on their presence and knowledge as implementing partners rather than developing more long-term and meaningful relationships.
- International organisations often 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.
- Attention to these dynamics is important when introducing localisation reforms. It is also important, however, to avoid using them as an excuse for avoiding localisation commitments and instead develop programmes that maximise access to populations in need, ensure impact and reduce dependency.
- To foster more meaningful partnerships between international and local actors, it is necessary to consider the way funds are allocated and spent, and the space granted to local organisations to lead on humanitarian aid, including the negotiation and maintenance of access in H2R areas.
- Local power dynamics are inevitable in conflict situations, and this may increase the challenge of establishing trust between international and local actors. Trust is essential in access negotiations and partnership development. Ideally, this trust and partnership between international and local actors cultivate trust that extends to beneficiary populations through effective, predictable and responsive programming.
- Trust between international and local actors is tenuous in many situations. Local actors may not be convinced that their international counterparts are willing to provide support or give up their dominance of coordination structures and funding.
- In some cases, national authorities have been named as one of the greatest obstacles to localisation. Such governments are often repressive, corrupt and/or weak, which limits the humanitarian space for local, national and international actors alike.
- The absence of a unified vision and voice on localisation needs to be addressed. Many still see it as a top-down policy priority that may not translate well to the situation in the field. Donors should also revisit their internal processes to allow for more risk taking in insecure and politicised environments to channel more direct funding to local actors.
- It may also be important to broaden the range of actors described as "local" when discussing the definition of localisation to include community groups, stakeholder groups, businesses, religious groups and other "non-traditional" actors. Their potential role, added value, contributions and how best to engage with them should be considered.

- All humanitarian programmes and operations should seek to foster stronger relationships with local actors because they may be able to overcome access restrictions in ways that are not. International organisations should emphasise collaboration rather than competition with local actors, value and elevate local knowledge and capacity in their own programming, and continue to invest in capacity building and joint programme design. Developing partnerships with a range of local organisations in terms of mandate, profile and reach may also support perceptions of neutrality and impartiality.
- Involving a diversity of contributions and engagements from beneficiaries and local NGOs would help international NGOs to deepen their understanding of the local situation and community priorities and expectations, guard against misperceptions of aid as biased and ultimately lead to a more effective response.

I. Introduction

Humanitarian organisations' ability to obtain and maintain access to communities affected by conflict has long been a challenge, particularly in highly insecure environments and hard-to-reach (H2R) areas. People in such areas tend to have the most urgent and acute needs, but at the same time access to them, and their access to aid, are often restricted. As an interviewee in eastern Ukraine said, living in such areas means that you are unable receive assistance. "Villages in this area suffer from lack of access to public services. Even ambulances are absent. Assistance is limited unless we resettle."

Through a series of reactive operational and policy decisions, however, many international organisations have defined approaches that increasingly undermine the humanitarian imperative precisely in places where operations should be prioritised. This is apparent in areas considered too insecure or politically sensitive, where agencies may decide to prioritise presence with diminished space for impact, conceding to conditions imposed by state or non-state authorities even if they severely limit access to those most in need.

Enduring and emerging challenges – internal, external and inter-agency – create a multitude of obstacles to access in H2R areas. In many settings, 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 have to deal with power asymmetries in their engagements, diminishing influence with autocratic authorities and pervasive political impunity. They may also face competition within the sector as NGOs vie for resources and visibility in high-risk environments, which complicates efforts to build trust.

They also have a series of "self-inflicted" obstacles stemming from their own policies and approaches to navigate, including increased "bunkerisation" in volatile settings, incongruence between needs and programmes, a failure to recognise local actors' capacities and expertise that have significant impacts on access.¹

These factors have the potential to disrupt organisations' efforts 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 actors.²

To overcome access constraints, humanitarian agencies have to engage with a range of actors, particularly those who control of territory, have political influence or are involved in conflict dynamics. They have to guard themselves against other actors using humanitarian aid to further their own goals, the blurring of lines between political, military and relief operations, and an ever-shrinking humanitarian space. Literature describes this space as "an increasingly hostile and difficult operating environment, in which direct security threats are growing and the ability of humanitarians to act is becoming more constrained"³.

They also have to confront a series of difficult questions: Should they operate in such environments? If so, how should they do so without strengthening authoritarian regimes or legitimising actors who control H2R areas? To what extent can humanitarians define the conditions of their operations when confronted with political interests that diverge significantly

from their own? How can they reimagine their collaboration with local actors to improve access to H2R areas?

Moreover, there is a tendency to use terms such as “local” or “national” to describe actors situated in a particular country, but this amalgamates them and ignores their geographical, political, ethnic, linguistic, socioeconomic and other differences. There are many distinguishing features between types of NGOs and local, national and international organisations.⁴ This report does not delve into all these factors, but uses the Inter-Agency Standing Committee’s definitions of national and local actors and organisations.⁵ The former operate “in the aid recipient country in which they are headquartered, working in multiple subnational regions, and not affiliated to an international NGO. This category can also include national faith-based organisations”. The latter operate “in a specific, geographically defined, subnational area of an aid recipient country, without affiliation to an international NGO/CSO. This category can also include community-based organisations and local faith-based organisations”.⁶

Humanitarian negotiation has become an increasingly specialised professional practice in the sector in recent decades. Once largely seen as an intuitive, obvious part of the job, it has emerged as a catalyst for illuminating encounters, quandaries and failures. Organisations including NRC, the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) and Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) have led the way in providing training and capacity building in humanitarian negotiations through inter-agency workshops and courses and professional development within the agencies themselves.⁷

Many such initiatives have, however, cemented inequities in the sector by prioritising the international staff of international NGOs (INGOs). More efforts have latterly been made to build the capacity of INGOs’ national staff, but local practitioners are relatively neglected. National implementing organisations tend to take an approach in which local actors replicate the international aid system without addressing the inherent complexities and implications of local staff being field-based proxies for access negotiations.

Local staff face many physical, social and political challenges that arise from being part of the society in which they operate. In their efforts to adhere to the humanitarian principles and good management practices, national organisations face language barriers, resource limitations and a lack of genuine leadership opportunities. Local organisations’ relatively limited resources to deal with operational difficulties and risks are particularly apparent when dealing with issues such as staff safety, kidnappings or unsafe transport.

There is a lack of consistency and fairness in the distribution of risks and opportunities that undermines trust and fruitful long-term collaboration between international organisations, local staff and local NGO partners. Local staff and NGOs continue to bear the burden of frontline exposure, particularly in H2R areas or situations that have become too difficult for INGOs to operate in. As one interviewee observed:

“Very few organisations in the humanitarian sector actually do work in the most impermissible environments. You can reliably find about under a dozen international NGOs, joined by maybe twice as many national NGOs in each place, that reliably respond to emergencies, and not just in the capital or clustered around the borders, but in these more difficult areas. The picture when you really zoom in [is that] there are very few [INGOs] actually present.”

The Grand Bargain (GB) commitments made at the World Humanitarian Summit (WHS) in 2016 were intended to catalyse the transformation of a sector that has traditionally provided aid based on the interests, resources, capacities and constraints of select actors in the humanitarian space. The GB represented a broad consensus that it was imperative to “localise” humanitarian action, broadly defined as building capacity of local NGOs – in part to develop the skills needed

to elicit trust from large western agencies and donors – improving the efficiency of operations and reducing costs, making the most of local communities’ expertise and increasing local organisations’ ability to respond to humanitarian emergencies in a principled way.

The GB vision also promotes a “whole-of-society approach”, in which solutions “originate with local actors” and the goal is to “support locally-emerging initiatives”.⁸ Interviewees across the countries studied said localisation should be conceived as a process that recognises, respects and strengthens the leadership of local authorities and the capacities of civil society organisations (CSOs) in humanitarian responses so they will eventually be able to address their own needs.

The concept of localisation has progressed considerably, but it is not implemented consistently. This is the result of a number of factors: how humanitarian aid is financed, the ways in which INGOs engage with local organisations, the insufficient direct allocation of resources to local partnerships and the unequal sharing of work and risk. As one interviewee put it: “Localisation is something that the sector has been saying rhetorically for a long time. The proof will be in the percentage of direct funding that national NGOs get. You really have to see that go up.”

International agencies and their largely western government donors remain crucial players in the humanitarian system. Despite their GB commitments they consistently fail to cooperate with local actors meaningfully in the planning and implementation of aid programmes. The presence and engagement of local actors inherently influence the humanitarian space and, if programmes are implemented in line with existing local practices, it could foster a more effective approach that generates more trust and acceptance with communities.

Policy discourse and incremental organisational changes are only the first steps in a potentially profound sectoral transformation. Achieving this objective implies trusting and investing in local capacities, legitimising their leadership and strengthening their technical knowledge. It may also require strengthening awareness and application of the humanitarian principles and other standard processes of engagement, and it means recognising and replicating the good practices that already exist.

Defining access in H2R areas

The two pillars of principled humanitarian access are organisations’ ability to provide communities with assistance and protection in accordance with the humanitarian principles, and the ability of people in need to move freely and safely to obtain essential goods and services. Access constraints are an inherent reality of humanitarian responses and are broadly understood as falling into eight categories:⁹

1. Denial of the existence of humanitarian needs or entitlement to humanitarian assistance
2. Restriction of movement of agencies, personnel or goods into the affected country or areas, including bureaucratic impediments
3. Restriction of movement of agencies, personnel or goods within the affected country or areas, including bureaucratic impediments
4. Military operations and ongoing hostilities impeding humanitarian operations
5. Violence against humanitarian personnel, assets and facilities
6. Interference in the implementation of humanitarian activities

7. Presence of mines and unexploded ordnance (UXO)
8. Physical environment
9. Restrictions on, or obstruction of, conflict-affected populations' access to services and assistance

H2R areas are locations with several constraints that impede humanitarian access. The country analyses undertaken in this study reflect nearly all of the above constraints, with emphasis on administrative and bureaucratic impediments, restriction of movement, physical barriers and interference in humanitarian activities. Circumstances in which access is restricted require humanitarian organisations to negotiate it with all stakeholders, including national and local governments, tribal or community leaders, community members themselves, non-state armed groups and all parties to a conflict. Each constraint has a series of cascading consequences that have implications for these negotiations.

In trying to uphold the humanitarian principles, practitioners have to grapple with tensions between principled and pragmatic approaches, the competing needs for confidentiality and coordination across organisations, and the challenges of engaging with interlocutors in volatile environments.

II. Methodology

This report explores the relationships between international and local organisations in four countries. The research falls within NRC's 2022-2025 strategy, which prioritises its understanding, positioning and capacity to gain and sustain humanitarian access and operate in high-risk settings. The initiative also supports NRC's continued ambition to enhance its collaboration with local actors, including to remove barriers to assistance and services for displaced and conflict-affected populations.

The research sought to answer the following overarching questions. How can we better understand the relationship between local actors and international agencies? How can the international humanitarian sector better support local agencies working with communities and supporting access to H2R areas?

Case studies in Cameroon, Lebanon, Ukraine, and Venezuela form the backbone of this report. They highlight the perceptions of international practitioners who engage with local actors, and the views of local actors and national partner agencies of their experiences of localisation. The case-study countries were chosen because they are diverse in many aspects and offer unique reflections on the challenges and practices of engagement with local actors, but at the same time illustrate themes, challenges and observations that resonate more globally.

Terms and phrases such as “localisation”, “localising humanitarian responses”, “local actors” and “local partners” appear increasingly in policy, donor and scholarly narratives, but there is considerable debate about the language used, beginning with the term “localisation” itself. This report takes the definition set out by the International Council of Voluntary Agencies (ICVA) as the starting point for its discussion.¹⁰

The research team conducted semi-structured interviews remotely and in the field between September 2022 and February 2023. Interviewees engaged with the understanding that they and any quotations used in the report would remain anonymous. The research also draws on a literature review intended to establish a better understanding of the notions of humanitarian access, humanitarian negotiations and engagement with local actors, and to glean agencies' perspectives and strategies on localisation.

III. Reflections on localisation

The discourse on local engagement has increased significantly since the WHS, but there is still no consensus about what localisation means in practice.¹¹ The heart of the issue lies in the ICVA definition as a “process through which a diverse range of humanitarian actors are attempting, *each in their own way*, to ensure local and national actors are better engaged in the planning, delivery and accountability of humanitarian action”. The concept has been vague and has taken on a variety of meanings from different perspectives in recent years. This lack of clarity makes it difficult to put localisation initiatives into practice and assess their progress. It also contributes to maintaining the status quo.

Some interviewees viewed localisation as shifting power toward local actors, while others saw it as INGOs’ attempt to “decentralise”. As one put it: “Most of the NGOs are decentralising, not just the offices, but also the decision-making weight. Things were all going back to Switzerland to be approved. Now, they can do things from here. This is a must. If we want to adapt ourselves as a humanitarian to the surrounding context, we should sit in this context.” Others focused on the capacity-building dimension: “We bring this leadership to all the staff of the NGOs we’re working with. We organise training in finance, in procurement, in project management. We do this so that they are abreast of what [we expect] as the funder. So that’s the approach we’re taking. Capacity building, continuous training, on-the-job training.”

The GB was intended to expand direct multi-year investment to local organisations, remove administrative hurdles for national partners and promote existing national coordination mechanisms. At the time of the WHS, only 0.4 per cent of the formally tracked global humanitarian contributions went directly to local organisations, with most support distributed through subcontracts.¹² International funds continue to be passed to local actors via subcontracts that are often structured in ways that limit them in their decision-making power and agency.¹³ One interviewee went so far as to say that local actors were considered simply a “cheap labour force” to support international agencies in their ambition to maximise efficiency while reducing costs, particularly as competition for funding increases.

Global inequalities in recent years have amplified awareness of the need to address colonial structures that perpetuate unequal funding and decision making and systemic power imbalances. Reforming the aid system is not enough. Incremental reforms built on western-driven structures are considered insufficient to rebalance the power and agency that many view to be at the heart of localisation efforts. Real transformation will require international actors to adapt to their local counterparts, based on a vision that locally-driven humanitarian interventions would be more reactive, timely, cost-effective and appropriate to community needs and expectations, and that they would increase access to affected people and make humanitarian action more sustainable.

The reality though is that local actors have often been excluded from international coordination mechanisms as a result of physical and language barriers and resource limitations, while taking on a greater share of the security and reputational risks associated with humanitarian interventions.^{14, 15} It was recognition of this reality that led the WHS to call for increased direct funding, investment in local humanitarian organisations, development of more equitable partnerships and more inclusive coordination platforms, the key areas that have been driving localisation discourse and policy.

That notion is slowly evolving, but there is an enduring assumption that local actors have less administrative, technical and operational competence and are “looser” in their approaches to principled humanitarian responses than their international counterparts. As one national staff member said: “Sometimes local and national actors may be viewed as aligning with certain ideologies, certain political concepts.”

It is worth exploring the nuances behind these perceptions. It may be the very support that local organisations provide for INGOs that ultimately condemns them. One scholar puts it: “Local groups may be in a better position to enter areas that are off limits to international staff and organisations because of their local knowledge and networks. But this comparative advantage may be offset by their vulnerability to exploitation, manipulation, or intimidation.”¹⁶ There are also suggestions that some INGOs work with local partners that are not neutral or impartial.¹⁷ To counteract the implications of this, INGOs might consider engaging with more local partner agencies to maintain the perception of a principled approach across all sides of a conflict.¹⁸

Three approaches that emerge from the literature to overcome possible misconceptions about the principles and credibility of local NGOs resonate in the case studies. When engaging with a local NGO, international organisations should be transparent about their operational approach and explain the motives for their engagement and their goals. They should offer, as many do, training on the humanitarian principles and how they can be put into practice in the situation in question.

Transparency and community engagement are the most effective ways for humanitarians to gain acceptance and access in H2R areas. As such, good practice requires INGOs to employ staff from different religions, ethnic groups, communities and cultures. Research in Nigeria and South Sudan shows that local organisations felt humanitarian and partnership principles were not discussed, understood or agreed upon. They called for partnerships that embraced the multi-sector, multi-layered reality of aid delivery and recognition of the longer-term development potential of humanitarian assistance.

Others argue that international agencies themselves are not consistent in upholding the humanitarian principles in their operations, which leads to the disproportionate allocation of responsibility, risk and cost to local actors. This features distinctly in the Venezuela case study. They also argue that rather than local agencies not understanding or respecting the humanitarian principles, they draw attention to the challenges inherent in upholding them in complex environments. They note: “The delivery of principled humanitarian aid is not just the product of humanitarian principles. It is also about the process of engaging, the attitudes of staff and their core values as individuals. Other factors such as organisational culture, partnership practice and community engagement strategies all influence humanitarian operations.”¹⁹

The literature and conversations with interviewees indicate that while recalibrating power dynamics may be at the heart of developing partnerships with local actors, the objective is still abstract and outcomes difficult to measure. As one interviewee said: “We’re not well-prepared in terms of the financial assistance, emotional assistance and even overall leadership.” Local partners seek more recognition of their value, skills and contributions, more responsive and holistic capacity-building opportunities, increased space for leadership and visibility, more direct funding, fewer subcontracts and ultimately more equal partnerships. The following sections address some of these issues.

Financing and donor engagement

The question of funding is central to discussions about engaging local partners. As one interviewee observed:

“Money is the key thing. That’s what drives the power in the system ... I know that the people working in humanitarian aid feel strongly that [localisation] should happen, they feel like it’s a moral and ethical responsibility to create better local capacity because when local actors have capacity to independently respond, more people survive and more suffering is reduced. You get better humanitarian programming that way ... but without addressing the funding, you’re not going to see any real change.”

The GB target was to channel at least 25 per cent of global humanitarian funding directly to local and national actors by 2020, but little progress has been made so far. There is a consensus that funding is an opportunity to empower local actors and civil society to lead local responses, but the majority of donor funds still go to INGOs and UN agencies. In fact, “the volume of funding provided directly to local actors halved between 2020 and 2021”.²⁰

The only institutional donors to have met the 25 per cent target are the Czech Republic, New Zealand, Spain, Switzerland and the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA). Several other UN agencies, including the World Food Programme (WFP), also report having done so, but in these cases, the funds are typically channelled through subcontracts, highlighting some of the inconsistencies in reporting on the issue.²¹

Other GB commitments included greater direct multi-year investment to local actors and promoting instruments such as country-based pooled funds (CBPFs) with the aim of making humanitarian action “as local as possible and as international as necessary”. Pooled funds are “multi-donor humanitarian financing mechanisms aiming to provide a flexible and response source of financing for emergencies”.²²

Some progress seems to have been made in using CBPFs and similar mechanisms such as common humanitarian funds and the UN’s Central Emergency Response Fund (CERF), but inconsistent reporting makes it difficult to track the funds that go to local NGOs. Some INGOs have set up the Start Fund, “the first multi-donor pooled fund managed exclusively by NGOs” to “fill a gap in the humanitarian sector” and facilitate local partners’ access to direct funding made available within 72 hours, allowing them to respond quickly to small to medium-sized emergencies.²³

The United States Agency for International Development (USAID) recently announced it would give communities the lead in the design, implementation and evaluation of at least 50 per cent of its programming in sub-Saharan Africa, a reflection of the agency’s revised risk appetite statement.²⁴ As its administrator, Samantha Power, observed: “There is a risk in any kind of partnership and working with established partners who know the ins and outs of USAID risks missing out on opportunities where we could be supporting the local changemakers who are best positioned to advance progress in their communities. A low appetite for risk, as traditionally understood, can stifle new ways of working.”²⁵

Issues of trust and reputational risk mean donors have traditionally been reluctant to support local action, particularly in highly politicised and volatile settings. The complexities of funding flows and donor arrangements have consistently impeded agile responses, particularly in terms of interventions in H2R areas and funding for local partners. Funds often have to clear various levels of bureaucracy before they reach the field.²⁶

Other challenges in funding local partners directly include accountability to legislators and taxpayers rather than affected populations, a limited risk appetite and a shortage of personnel and resources.

As one interviewee said: “Donors have to acknowledge that there are risks all the way down the chain that that they also co-own. With these kinds of ‘zero tolerance’ approaches to diversion, theft, corruption or anything going missing, what you see a lot of the times is the NGO just gets cut off suddenly while an investigation happens, and whether or not there was any wrongdoing, often that organisation will go under because they just don’t have the margin to keep operating when their funding gets cut off. So, it’s really kind of a punitive and non-cooperative relationship.”

Further obstacles include foreign policy objectives and strict anti-terrorism legislation. As one humanitarian put it: “Some colleagues have tried to use humanitarian assistance as gateway to deliver social and political agendas, and it was a disaster.” Media coverage and perceptions of aid mismanagement also affect public perception.

From local actors’ perspective, donors’ reluctance to fund them and associated demands in doing so mean the added value and assets they can contribute go unrecognised and unused. A well-accepted local organisation with a long tradition in a community might not be able to make the most of its capacities because of the combination of audits, legislation and foreign policy objectives it has to fit around. Given this landscape, many donors continue to favour working through UN agencies or large INGOs.

Recommendations

- Donors should support long-term capacity building over short-term grants.
- Donors should require more from INGOs, particularly on monitoring, accountability and transparency regarding diversion and fraud.
- Donors should convene a more honest discussion on risk sharing by engaging at the political level.
- Donors should redefine success by rewarding organisations that create strong and equal partnerships in crisis-affected settings and allocate funding to support these partnerships in ways that are more complementary.
- INGOs should facilitate local actors’ direct access to donors.

Local capacity

Local actors’ legitimacy is determined, and at times undermined, by how their capacity is evaluated. The current practice of using capacity assessments increases competition between local organisations that are already at a disadvantage in terms of partnership opportunities. Research in Nigeria and South Sudan shows there is an elite group of local and national NGOs that is more experienced in working with international actors, and which forms networks and drives the localisation debate with them.²⁷ The Cameroon and Lebanon cases studies similarly found that international organisations rely on a small group of trusted local NGOs.

International agencies already face a high burden of proof to demonstrate their credibility. They are often required to establish their integrity, impartiality and neutrality, as well as

their ability to provide humanitarian assistance more cheaply, efficiently and effectively. This includes submitting extensive paperwork to donors to prove how they operate ethically and prevent issues such as aid diversion. The humanitarian system is discussing ways to reduce these time-consuming bureaucratic processes, but for some donors they are becoming more extensive.

Such requirements are even more challenging for national NGOs, because they must also provide a burden of proof that encompasses their role in local dynamics and how they meet international capacity standards and processes. This takes time, the correct staff members and an understanding of donor requirements and other paperwork to effectively compete for international funding.

As the humanitarian policy researcher Veronique Barbelet writes:

“There is an element of hidden power here, as certain actors (particularly local ones) have been excluded and, in most cases ... local actors had accepted such practices as the norm. Although they clearly felt an imbalance of power, they still largely accepted an imbalance of capacity as a fact (for instance, ascribing their lack of capacity to unequal funding) rather than interpreting the whole process of deciding what counts as capacity as an exercise in power, conducted to prioritize certain skillsets or abilities by those who believed they had them.”²⁸

There also appears to be an assumption that international actors are more knowledgeable and effective. As one interviewee put it: “The challenge with the local NGOs is they don’t have capacity. They have low skill.” Another said: “We do quality assurance. [National NGOs] use our procurement policy. They use our M&E tools. They use our project finance tool. When we look at the tools, most of the tools they are using are not the standard. So, we say: ‘You want to work with us? These are the tools we use because ours are at a higher level’.”

Such arguments show how the notion of capacity is determined by international actors from large western agencies or donors, with an emphasis on administrative and financial management. Local actors provide knowledge to their international counterparts, but this is often taken for granted. This lack of recognition is a central obstacle to more complementary and meaningful partnerships between local and international organisations. There is a the “belief that capacity flows one way – from international actors to local actors – rather than being a reciprocal process where capacity issues are recognised on both sides and lead to different ways to collaborate and partner”.²⁹

As highlighted by Barbelet and the Ukraine case study, complementary approaches are also impeded by factors including coordination practices, donor attitudes to trust and reputational risk, government policies and accountability lines. Strikingly, when asked about examples of positive partnership development, one interviewee said:

“I can’t think of a single context where the international system got it right and really enabled and supported the local civil sector. It’s possible that it happens more in the natural disasters, but there’s a really big difference between violent conflict-related crises and natural disasters, especially where you have cyclical natural disasters, and both the government and national civil society organizations are very well developed. When international aid comes in, they kind of plug into the system, where the government and national organizations are working or at least co-coordinating roles, and it works quite well.”

Local capacity also appears to be taken somewhat for granted when INGOs hire local staff. As Barbelet writes: “Capacity can be maintained and strengthened by not engaging in practices that undermine existing local capacity, for example when international actors poach staff from local organisations with no compensation ... The buying in of capacity by international actors through hiring staff or even partners.”³⁰ An interviewee quoted in the literature also said:

“When INGOs see that a [local NGO] is thriving very well in a given project and they are also implementing the same project, they come and take that staff heading that particular sector to their organization.”³¹

When local staff take up positions with INGOs, particularly in roles that involve translation and community engagement, they tend to have few opportunities for promotion or even to receive necessary training.³² INGOs seek out and appreciate local staff for the contextual and cultural knowledge they bring, particularly in H2R areas, but this “does not necessarily translate to them being trusted with making administrative decisions based on their local knowledge to anchor the future trajectories of their organizations in the field”.³³

As Hugo Slim, a specialist in the ethics of humanitarian aid, writes: “Despite being specialists who understand the history, culture, and fast-moving politics of a place, local aid workers face a ‘very effective glass ceiling’ that limits professional advancement and ability to influence policy.”³⁴

There has not been enough investment in developing capacity beyond short-term, project-based and “one-off” initiatives despite INGOs’ ambitions, but it should be a priority in the development of local partnerships. Designing and implementing ways to measure the impact of long-term investments in local capacity as a future area of study could have a significant influence on how agencies and donors prioritise and allocate funds for training initiatives. In the realm of humanitarian access, acceptance and negotiations, this expertise lies primarily with international practitioners rather than local staff.

Recommendations

- Consider the capacity of “non-traditional” local actors as credible partners in humanitarian activities.
- Involve a wider and more diverse group of stakeholders in defining the capacity needed to respond to a specific situation through local consultation, including with affected people, to create consensus and address power issues.
- Investment in capacity development should build on existing good practices such as secondments, the coordination of training initiatives and the creation of pooled resources.
- Support local actors in conducting self-assessments and tailor capacity-building plans to each unique partnership.
- Strengthen new forms of capacity development such as training, coaching, mentoring and experience-sharing.
- Advocate with donors to make local capacity building a core part of funding proposals.
- Use development funding to support local capacity and sustainability to respond in times of crisis.
- Capacity-building efforts should be based on local actors’ priorities and needs, rather than the requirements of international actors.

Coordination

Local and national NGOs play a key role in enabling access to H2R areas, but as seen in the case studies they are only minimally represented in the structures that coordinate humanitarian operations. Weak coordination undermines opportunities to strengthen relationships between international and local actors in three main ways. It results in parallel rather than complementary systems, fails to consider let alone integrate existing local processes and impedes local actors' ability to leverage their influence, determine locally responsive ways forward or to take on opportunities for leadership.

As an interviewee put it: "It's a perennial problem. You have this international system, which is very fragmented between individual, autonomous organizations. Just coordinating this international network takes a lot of time and energy, and when you have a sudden onset emergency like Ukraine, you end up with the big international organizations in the know coming to meetings. There's no outreach, no seeing what's already happening on the ground, no bringing in of the local actors. If it does happen over time, and the local actors are brought in, it comes in very top-down, very internationally centred way, often very UN-centric, and it's not really conducive to supporting the primary actors."

Other obstacles to local actors' inclusion in coordination mechanisms may involve language, the use of jargon, cultural or political differences, discrimination, and technological and security issues.³⁵ They may also include time and resource constraints.

There have been incremental changes in recent years in efforts to better integrate national actors in coordination, including allowing them to lead discussions, local languages being spoken in meetings and the use of more accessible communication technologies such as WhatsApp.³⁶ These approaches, however, fall short of ensuring their equal participation, supporting their authority in decision-making, leaving space for equal visibility and "airtime" to voice key issues, and making a commitment to co-leading cluster mechanisms with national partners.

Initiatives have largely been part of localisation efforts in a given operational setting rather than at the broader policy level, and there is little with which to assess their impact on the effectiveness of a response. Nor is there much information on whether they make a meaningful difference in terms of fostering equal partnerships or bolstering local leadership and decision making.

Despite their shortcomings, coordination mechanisms represent an opportunity to correct power imbalances in the humanitarian architecture. Promising approaches have emerged in Cameroon, where "the representation and role of local and national organizations in the coordination of humanitarian actions has evolved considerably at multiple levels". This includes national NGOs represented by the Cameroonian Humanitarian Organisations Initiative (CHOI) being allocated a seat on the Humanitarian Country Team (HCT), CHOI being an observer member of the inter-sector and several other clusters and regularly participating in national-level coordination meetings, and NGOs participating in working group and cluster meetings.³⁷

That said, the country also offers a striking illustration of the current coordination challenges. Authorities lead or co-lead many clusters, but local NGOs are largely absent from both national and regional coordination structures, limiting their influence over the directions of responses. As elsewhere, the reasons include a lack of human resources and coordination expertise and a lack of transparency in the process of selecting leads. Nor do local NGOs appear to have much interest in engaging because the benefits are not immediately apparent and they continue to feel unsupported. Others stop engaging when their projects end or when they no longer have funding, highlighting their dependence on their international partners and their funding streams.³⁸

Recommendations

- Coordination systems should use local languages in meetings, share agenda setting, give equal floor time to local actors and commitment to their co-leading coordination clusters.
- Raise awareness among local and national actors of the benefits of their participation in coordination meetings.
- Increase the number of national NGOs that hold leadership positions, such as co-leadership of coordination bodies.
- Broaden the range of actors considered “local” to include community groups, stakeholder groups, businesses, religious groups and other “non-traditional” actors. Consider their role, added value, contributions and how best to engage with them.

Partnerships

Establishing partnerships as part of localisation implies building more genuine and equitable relationships that value local knowledge, access to difficult areas and proximity to social and cultural factors that affect humanitarian action. Some local NGOs view partnerships as positive if they include collaboration in developing proposals and equitable access to funding. Others, however, view them as transactional and unbalanced, and characterised by a lack of dialogue, trust and involvement in decision making. Overall, local NGOs tend to be engaged with INGOs in support roles, such as conducting needs assessments and delivering local programmes, and look to have more independence, authority and autonomy.

A significant proportion of international funds continue to go local actors via subcontracts or as implementing partners. Subcontracts tend to shift responsibilities and risk but fail to provide them with adequate funding to cover even the most basic administrative costs. They deny them a meaningful voice in decision making, and rarely translate into opportunities for future direct funding or leadership. They also represent a missed opportunity for international organisations to make the most of local actors’ contextual knowledge and networks to improve programme design and implementation.

Successful partnerships imply less subcontracting and more complementary relationships between local and international NGOs. Such a shift would also allow local organisations to move from short-term project-based initiatives to longer-term strategic partnerships based on mutual inter-dependence, co-ownership of decisions and risk, and shared resources. The most functional and equitable partnerships are based on trust built over time. This means engagement not only during crises but also before and after them.

Recommendations

- Organise opportunities for local and national partners to discuss strategic and operational avenues for collaboration, review existing partnership models and encourage good partnership practices.
- Develop systems for better information sharing with local partners and give them decision-making power.
- Nurture partnerships after projects conclude and continue to invest in capacity building, joint programme design and fundraising.
- Encourage systems for local actors to report directly on their perceptions and expectations of partnerships, and their effectiveness.
- Foster dialogue with INGOs and donors on the quality and effectiveness of partnerships and review practices regularly.
- The “assets” of partnership should be reimagined to recognise non-financial aspects. A move from transactional to transformational partnerships requires the inclusion of broad range of local actors, including civil society actors such as trade unions, social movements, diasporas, cooperatives, community association and women’s, agricultural and political organisations.

IV. Case studies

Cameroon: A protracted crises with persistent access challenges



Ingrid Prestetun. April 19, 2024. Cameroon, Yaounde, Yaounde capital from the air

Overview

Cameroon is in the throes of three concurrent and complex humanitarian crises: in the Far North region; in the Northwest and Southwest regions (NWSW); and in the east near the border with the Central African Republic. Nearly four million people are in need of assistance, but humanitarian access is a major challenge as a result of administrative impediments, insecurity, physical constraints such as damaged roads and the lingering effects of Covid-19.

This case study focuses on NWSW, also known as Ambazonia, where anglophone groups have long demanded more recognition and rights. Cameroon is a bilingual country in which the anglophone minority accuses the francophone national authorities of marginalising and discriminating against them. Protests erupted into armed conflict in 2016, which in turn evolved into a war of secession and a full-blown humanitarian crisis. The war has “killed thousands of people and displaced over a million”. Today there are many separatist movements in NWSW, all trying to leverage their power over the populations in their territory to advance their positions against the government.³⁹ Humanitarian access and operations have been deliberately restricted, if not prohibited, through security threats and manipulation from both government forces and non-

state armed groups (NSAGs). The international humanitarian community's efforts to respond to the crisis have been limited, but local organisations are present and their operations have proven resilient.

Humanitarian engagement and access challenges

NWSW access snapshot

- Obstruction of access for civilians
 - Forced displacement and returns
 - Lack of protection against conflict, banditry and other insecurity
 - Movement restrictions
- Denial of the existence of humanitarian needs
 - Official communications deny or minimise the scale and scope of needs
- Restrictions on the movement of organisations, personnel and goods
 - Administrative and bureaucratic constraints, such as travel permits and payment requests
 - Physical restrictions, such as checkpoints and insistence on armed escorts
 - Delays in the deployment of humanitarian actors
- Military operations and hostilities
 - Movement restrictions for civilians
 - Insecurity, whether permanent or unpredictable; few security guarantees
 - Few agreements to facilitate access to aid, including emergency assistance
 - Low awareness of IHL and the humanitarian principles
- Violence against international organisations' staff and property and public service provision
 - Accidental exposure to violence, such as a vehicle caught in crossfire
 - Targeted violence
 - Intimidation, coercion and theft
 - Targeting of hospitals, schools, ambulances and personnel
- Interference in the implementation of humanitarian programmes
 - Direct, political or military, or indirect
 - Linking of humanitarian action to political/military agendas
 - Obstruction/blocking of NGOs' registration process
- Presence and use of mines or explosives
 - Indiscriminate or targeted
- Physical environment
 - Natural obstacles, such as climate shocks (floods, drought)
 - Roads, bridges and airstrips at risk
 - Lack of stable infrastructure

Civilians face a fragile and volatile situation in NWSW. Communities live in fear of violent conflict in which they are often the primary targets. NSAGs have targeted and threatened people including health providers and teachers, and civilians have also been caught in the crossfire of the conflict. Roads are frequently blocked, towns and cities arbitrarily locked down

and public transport requisitioned. Human rights violations are an everyday occurrence, and interviewees mentioned that humanitarian agencies are not respected.

Many roads are in poor condition and public services have deteriorated sharply. Many health facilities are closed or unable to function properly because of a shortage of staff, supplies and equipment. Schools have also been severely affected, with arson and kidnappings by NSAGs in exchange for ransom reported by humanitarians in the region. Economic activity has reduced significantly while banditry has increased. Local populations have abandoned many areas because of the lack of security.

Escalating violence and widespread insecurity complicate the humanitarian response, and access challenges are heightened by the fact that needs are most acute in areas with the poorest infrastructure. Disasters such as floods also force humanitarian organisations to adapt quickly to evolving needs.

The majority of interviewees said the crisis was characterised by dramatically different visions and strategies between parties to the conflict, humanitarian actors, and local and national governments. It was even difficult to identify consistency within the humanitarian sector and local civil society in terms of approaches, facts, needs and understanding of access-related incidents. Both INGOs and local organisations said, however, that the authorities' administrative barriers had limited their presence as they attempted to control movement and activities in the region. As one interviewee put it: "Today very few international actors are really active here, bringing assistance to affected populations is partly rejected and the neutrality of humanitarian action is not respected by the authorities."

The emergence of new NSAG alliances and the fragmentation of others has also complicated the access environment, and situation is further aggravated by the growing presence and activity of armed criminal groups. Recurring security incidents have severely limited the humanitarian presence in some of the areas most affected by conflict, with international organisations favouring short or one-off missions that do not involve enough activities to address escalating humanitarian needs. Nor are needs properly assessed because of continuous insecurity and the authorities' restrictions.

Any assistance distributed tends to be ill-adapted to community needs as a result, and beneficiaries are left feeling they are not heard or taken into account. Humanitarians describe the situation as "more like access to distribute and leave, not ... access to implement programmes". Those able to operate in H2R areas work in a highly insecure environment under numerous constraints as a result of clashes, demands for illegal payments, repeated curfews and lockdowns, NSAG roadblocks, the diversion of aid, abductions and the presence of improvised explosive devices (IEDs).

Interviewees also report serious gaps in programming related to protection, human rights and education. Some NSAGs have enforced a no-school policy in rural and suburban areas, alongside lockdowns, killings and threats targeting teachers and students, the abduction of children and the burning down of schools.

Authorities and NSAGs' impact on humanitarian action

Engaging with the authorities and NSAGs is challenging. As one diplomat said, the government does not want to highlight the instability, so aid organisations have to comply with that stance. Many clearly understand that the central authorities do not want them to provide support for NSAGs in any form, and that dialogue with them is interpreted as subversion. As one interviewee put it: "The message to locals is this: if you work with [humanitarian agencies]

and are in contact with armed groups, it is considered as support to the rebellion and you will pay the consequences.” The authorities have even developed a rating system for NGOs, used to impose specific constraints.

As one interviewee said: “Authorities do not trust humanitarians and see them as at least non-neutral and even as spies.” A diplomat said: “The authorities want to control the narrative and they are fast to denounce reports, like those from HRW [Human Rights Watch], MSF and ICG [the International Crisis Group]. Some violations that could have been discussed at the UNSC [UN Security Council] have been also limited if not blocked in New York by the authorities.”

Interviewees also said the central authorities had sought to benefit from the ongoing deterioration, aiming to create divisions in the diaspora and NSAGs with relative success. They said the notion of secession is bolstered by the diaspora rather than local communities, representing a significant threat to the authorities.

Dialogue and acceptance by the authorities at the local level is far more functional, even with local NSAGs. Communication channels exist, but humanitarian negotiations are still delicate. Governors and other local officials are inevitably more aware of the situation on the ground and generally appear to value the presence and support of local and international humanitarian organisations. That said, interviewees note there have been attempts by the government to criminalise engagement with local authorities and NSAGs.

Reflections on humanitarian engagement

The state is moderately weak at the central level and provides few resources for basic social services and infrastructure. The government-led Humanitarian Coordination Centre (HCC) oversees the humanitarian response and forms part of the local coordination mechanism, alongside the UN, INGOs and local organisations. The international humanitarian response is coordinated by the UN Humanitarian Coordinator and the HCT led by OCHA. The cluster system exists in NWSW, but authorities tend not to form part of it. OCHA agreed that the current coordination set-up had done relatively little to improve access but it believes in its capacity to push for more negotiations and acceptance.

The UN considers humanitarian access a “result of a collective action” and believes its agencies should be able to maintain it via direct or indirect discussion with all actors. It would appear, however, that they face significant deployment limitations and challenges in putting the humanitarian principles into practice. Instead, they keep a low profile on the ground and use local staff and implementing partners as a first asset. As one interviewee said: “We continue to push for more political will, but UN agencies have lost major credibility in Cameroon by avoiding any ‘confrontation.’” It was also noted by an interviewee that the UN had failed to intervene at a high level at critical moments, such as when national staff have been detained.

Some NGOs were described as being opportunistic, focusing on their own priorities and funding, which has significantly impeded efforts to maintain a principled operational space. As one interviewee put it: “We do not really engage in humanitarian challenges through concrete collective actions.” One in particular was singled out for particular criticism for taking significant risks with a limited network, carrying out activities in isolation and not engaging enough with other actors. One interviewee said it had a bad reputation and had been described as unprofessional.

UN agencies perceive local NGOs as maintaining their own dialogues with key actors and that “no one knows what is really discussed between them and the parties”. This creates a dichoto-

my between the main concerns of international organisations in the field and local NGOs, and undermines trust between them. INGO interviewees also felt the majority of local NGO staff had more development than humanitarian expertise.

Local NGOs described the aid system as more of a coordination and information-sharing mechanism than a vehicle for improving operations and access. They also said they did not always feel represented, even on local platforms. Those working on the ground spoke of major inadequacies in the support they received from their international counterparts and mentioned office closures such as that of UNHCR in Bouéa.

One local humanitarian said: “The fact is that international actors in their working groups in Yaoundé pressure us to implement the humanitarian principles and stay here on ground while not supporting us to deliver and secure access or funding. INGOs and UN agencies should examine their work and assess with honesty the quality of the support provided during the past few years to local actors.”

There are significant dilemmas over how to manage access and acceptance in the field. For many, access is negotiated by a local partner that the INGOs funds: “We keep security focal points but it is key to keep the profile of local NGOs.” Lack of trust is a significant challenge when engaging with the central authorities, meaning that issues tend to be solved more effectively at the local level, even for the UN. One interviewee said: “The RC/HC’s main objective is to rebuild relationships with the government. This positioning does not help us address fundamental issues ... Human rights are not at all addressed and not promoted anymore. People look at the system and do not want to criticise it.”

Donor approaches to access

Donors have clearly adopted a cautious approach in NWSW. The main ones – the EU, Germany, Japan, Sweden, the UK and the US, seem to view the current humanitarian architecture as creating different levels of access based on whether agencies are linked to the UN system or are independent INGOs. They do not appear to actively promote working directly with local actors. Regions affected by conflict or serious instability are considered too risky in terms of administration and financial management. One donor cited the example of local NGO staff giving funding to their families and diverting aid.

Some donors are more conservative than others, and some have misgivings about the UN system. One interviewee said: “The HCT doesn’t function well. Avoiding tensions does not mean being absent on the ground. They recognise that local NGOs are used to gather information without real recognition or equal relationships, and that risks are transferred to them, but they are also limited in terms of monitoring interventions in the most insecure environments. Another interviewee said: “Based on our security apparatus, we cannot talk with beneficiaries, it is not possible to go to the field in NWSW apart from Douala.”

Member states play an important bridging role when UN forums are unable to address issues. The EU delegation, for example, has been involved in various discussions and has tried to put issues on the table and push the authorities. Embassies continue to support small projects with a select group of local NGOs they know and trust, but finding synergies between actors and projects when the opportunity for field evaluations is limited is a key challenge.

Relations between international and local actors

Many INGOs see partnerships with local actors as essential for field impact, but some do not work directly with them. This mirrors the broader aid system: “We are still in a model where INGOs design the criteria of selection and want to be present in all parts of the process – mapping, evaluation, finance and human resources and programme implementation.” INGOs perceive local actors as disparate in profile and capacity, describing only a group of five or six as “real humanitarians”.

INGOs consider local NGOs a solid bridge with local communities to prepare for field assessments and dialogue. Local NGOs, on the other hand, do not perceive INGOs as capable of developing community-based programmes because of serious limitations including funding and human resources. Local NGOs receive increasing support and coaching to manage deployment challenges and engage in principled action, but this cannot be said to represent localisation.

Local NGOs see their international counterparts as risk averse. One interviewee said: “We have risked our life during the past years while internationals were talking abroad about the humanitarian situation here. Is it really how humanitarian action should work?” Local actors also appear more pragmatic about the humanitarian principles. Another interviewee said: “We respect the principles but sometimes ... have to be flexible, pay for access negotiations, give NFIs [non-food items]. We cannot report it, but NSAGs have requests and you have to give them something.”

Several local NGOs cited examples of unequal partnerships that demonstrate a lack of “consideration and will to empower and pay tribute to local actions”. Such cases were also seen as part of a push by international actors to create competition between local NGOs and lack of vision to build meaningful long-term partnerships while giving credit to dedicated national actors.

Competition arises primarily as organisations vie for a share of limited resources, but efforts are under way to reduce it. These include forming consortiums and networks and engaging in joint humanitarian missions. Competition also arises between national organisations over leadership positions. Everyone wants to be at the helm, failing to understand that there are pacesetters and followers. Older organisations and leaders also appear unwilling to make space for younger emerging institutions.

Civil society and local actors do not understand “why international humanitarian actors arrive every day, as competences exist here”. They acknowledge that they receive training, but feel it is not enough and sometimes fails to reflect their needs in the field. Local NGOs are also under-supported in obtaining alternative funding outside INGOs and UN agencies. They also perceive their international counterparts as lacking technical expertise, and their engagements as inadequate, particularly at the Humanitarian Needs Overview (HNO) level.

Local NGOs feel UN actors do not trust them, but there are also dynamics that contribute to their hesitance to be honest and transparent with their international partners. They fear being discredited if they ask for extensions, if they are unable to respond to all international actors’ requirements, or if they need other support. On the other hand, UN agencies may only have a small number of local NGOs “rated” as relevant, effective and humanitarian, while the majority are described as not reliable. This gap in trust continues to erode localisation efforts from both sides.

All interviewees agreed that capacity building for local staff should be reinforced and focus on management, governance and operating structures. International actors, however, appear unready to encourage their local counterparts’ leadership or to transfer capacities on a range

of issues, including security, negotiations and field operations, preferring instead to keep them as implementing partners.

Recommendations

- Reaffirm the primary role and responsibility of the state in delivering aid to the civilian population, creating an enabling environment for providing assistance and facilitating partnerships with aid actors.
- Establish functional and effective inter-agency and NGO coordination as well as multisectoral coordination with government ministries.
- Strengthen the HCC's function, especially in the field.
- Strengthen the authorities' understanding and acceptance of the principle of neutrality.
- Engage in dialogue across the board to secure operational space and recognition of the role of humanitarian actors.
- Establish a clear and coherent policy framework for humanitarian action at the national, regional and local levels.
- Establish focal points and clearly defined representatives at department level.
- Strengthen communication between humanitarian actors and authorities through the HCC.
- Improve the visibility of local actors through more proactive communication of their activities and information exchange.

Lebanon: Deepening despair amid a multidimensional collapse



Charbel Kosseifi. March 18, 2022. Lebanon

Overview

In recent years, starting with the Covid-19 pandemic and the August 2020 explosion in the port of Beirut, Lebanon has faced a devastating confluence of challenges that have affected both Lebanese and refugee communities and humanitarian access across all sectors. The country is also in the throes of unprecedented political, economic and public health crises that have heightened existing vulnerabilities. Hyperinflation, currency devaluation, loss of income and rising commodity prices have pushed millions of people into poverty.⁴⁰ Tensions and security incidents are on the rise, often sparked by competition for essential goods and services.

Syrian refugees make up around 20 per cent of Lebanon's population, and their presence has stretched resources and services while stirring social tensions. Analysts have said that maintaining a refugee-centric approach to humanitarian programming violates the principle of "do no harm" and fuels perceptions that the aid community is biased. Numerous agencies consulted for this case study contested this accusation, stating and demonstrating that they have adapted their programmes to support the Lebanese population more widely, but the perception persists. This may, however, have more to do with repeated political rhetoric calling for the refugees to be returned to Syria.

Essential services such as electricity have crumbled. The authorities have failed to manage the state electricity company properly for nearly three decades, and blackouts are a hallmark of daily life. "Unsustainable policies and fundamental neglect ... which were the result of the elite capture of state resources, corruption and vested interests, caused the sector to completely collapse in the midst of the ongoing economic crisis, leaving the country without power

through most of the day.”⁴¹ The lack of electricity has reduced people’s access to livelihoods, education and healthcare, driving up humanitarian needs across the entire population.

Fuel is expensive and in short supply, meaning generators are often not an option. This has affected hospitals and clinics, whether because they are unable to afford to run their industrial-sized plants to keep people on oxygen alive, or they are simply unable to get fuel at all. The American University Beirut Medical Centre wrote to the government in 2021 to tell it that 40 adults and 15 children could die if it did not make diesel available.⁴² Some people have been unable to afford to run generators to keep their refrigerators cold, leading to lost food and medicine and increasing cases of food poisoning.

The Covid-19 pandemic has had long-term effects on already vulnerable communities. Many people have lost their jobs and access to essential services, while gender-based violence (GBV) and other protection concerns have increased, including for children. As health needs rose, so did the pressure on an already fragile healthcare system. Clinics faced shortages of medical supplies and fuel, high staff turnover and tensions over vaccinations hindering other medical interventions. The Beirut port explosion injured more than 5,000 people, putting further pressure on the system. It also left around 300,000 people homeless, plunging the country into an acute humanitarian emergency.

Factors affecting humanitarian access and operations

Access constraints

Access snapshot

- Bureaucratic and administrative impediments
 - Delays in INGO registration
 - Difficulties in obtaining work and residency permits for international staff, particularly for certain nationalities
 - Difficulties in opening bank accounts
 - Difficulties in obtaining funding, given that most donors consider INGO registration a requirement
 - Impediments resulting from nationwide lockdown and other Covid-19 restrictions
- Restriction in movement of humanitarian organisations in reaching affected populations
 - Physical obstacles from host communities claiming humanitarian agencies are biased toward refugees
 - Lack of approval from local governorates
 - Obstacles from non-state actors or requests for payment or assistance
 - Harassment and intimidation
- Physical restrictions
 - Winter storms blocking access to key areas
 - Storms forcing INGO office closures
 - Flooding on roads and lack of appropriate vehicles to access key sites
 - Limited capacity of local authorities to clear roads as needed

(cont'd)

- Interference with humanitarian activities
 - Obstruction by local service providers
 - Pressure from local authorities to provide aid to communities not on target beneficiary lists
 - Armed forces and authorities requirement to provide staff lists
- Procurement challenges
 - Supply chain issues related to humanitarian goods including fuel, medication, PPE and other vital equipment

Access has become increasingly difficult across many areas of the country in recent years as a result of a range of intersecting factors, particularly since the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic and the Beirut port explosion. Bureaucratic and administrative impediments make up one of the primary obstacles. INGOs have faced significant delays in their registration processes as a result of inconsistent requirements, a heavy burden of paperwork and corruption.

These delays hinder their ability to operate effectively and force many to postpone their programming. Registration is also a prerequisite for donor engagement, which impedes access to funding. There was high-level engagement on the issue that led to several NGOs being registered but not to systemic change.

Hezbollah's influential role in Lebanese politics also complicates access and donor engagement, mainly as a result of counter-terrorism regulations and inability to work in areas it controls. Some US officials are concerned that providing Lebanon with aid in dollars could inadvertently help proscribed groups, and several donors have withdrawn. Obtaining work and residency permits for international staff has also proven difficult, particularly for certain nationalities, as has opening bank accounts.

Interference in humanitarian activities has also been an issue. Local service providers, essential for tasks such as water trucking and desludging, sometimes obstruct processes, causing delays and disruption. Local authorities also exert pressure to provide aid to communities not on target beneficiary lists.

The economic crisis and supply chain challenges hinder the procurement of essential humanitarian goods including fuel, medication and personal protective equipment (PPE), and floods have at times made roads impassable and key sites inaccessible. There is also a shortage of vehicles able to navigate such terrain, and local authorities do not have the capacity to clear roads promptly.

The 'refugee problem'

A common perception across interviewees was that the "Beirut blast" and Covid-19 had triggered increasing access restrictions across the country. Some thought the security forces had used public health concerns during the pandemic to constrain NGOs' operational space and reduce their ability to carry out interventions, particularly programming for refugees. As one interviewee put it: "Covid-19 has been a blanket excuse ... since then and the Beirut blast, it's been constant restrictions on the ability of humanitarian NGOs to operate. And it's primarily focusing on the response to refugees in settlements."

The situation is strongly influenced by the politicisation of the response to the Syrian crisis. Most refugee responses target Lebanese communities equally, according to both international and national organisations, but the primary restrictions fall upon those implementing

programmes for refugees. This appears to be based on the perception that humanitarian aid encourages refugees to stay rather than return Syria, which runs counter to the government's aim.

Humanitarian response

Lebanese officials and elites continue to impede international assistance, which makes it difficult for international aid organisations to function effectively. The response has become increasingly fragmented as needs layered upon longstanding development and governance issues become ever more urgent and acute. Coordination challenges have been aggravated by a plethora of aid requests and flash appeals that fill immediate gaps but do not sustain the long-term programming the country needs.

Interviewees said civil society in Lebanon was “as vibrant as ever” but described a “worrying trend” toward shrinking civic space for local organisations, particularly NGOs serving refugees and NGOs and human rights organisations working on LGBTQI issues. The driving force behind the increased pressure has been rhetoric about “local NGOs being political instruments and being used for foreign political agendas”. As a result, there has been much greater scrutiny of their funding sources and a perception that obtaining funding from a particular donor state implies alignment with that country's political agenda.

With needs rapidly outpacing capacities to respond, local NGOs face growing demands to support municipalities and communities, often overextending themselves and sometimes their mandate. Local authorities ask partners to expand service provision and increase the inclusion of host communities, given their own financial capacities are impeded. The increased workload has come with protests and threats of harm, particularly during aid distributions and livelihood programming. Developing sustainable programmes has been continually undermined by a failure to involve state representatives in planning and implementation effectively. This has in part been the result of bureaucratic inertia, administrative delays, authorities' overwhelmed systems and competition among humanitarian actors.

Increased inter-communal violence and misperceptions of aid

Anti-refugee sentiment is growing across the country, particularly in regions hosting or bordering informal settlements. As one interviewee said: “Tensions between the communities is something that we're seeing a lot. There is a lot of misinformation circulating, saying that refugees are getting fresh dollars and that refugees are more financially stable.” These tensions, security incidents, extortion and roadblocks have made it difficult to access certain areas, particularly in Bekaa and Akkar governorates, and local law enforcement agencies have been unable to respond effectively. Disputes have escalated into violent clashes, including in distribution areas and when refugees withdraw cash assistance at ATMs.

Some INGOs and their local counterparts have not shifted away from refugees as their main beneficiaries, but the protests, threats, reduced access to informal settlements and harassment by host communities have been disproportionate. The latter have mounted frequent blockades in Aarsal and Rashaya, impeding agencies from reaching their target beneficiaries. They have also prevented refugees from bringing their children to school in Aarsal. International and national NGOs continually affirm that they support refugees and their hosts equally, but convincing local authorities and communities is an ongoing challenge.

As one interviewee from a local NGO said: “When working in informal settlements, there are more barriers, more impediments. [Authorities] always have this suspicion, like ‘why are you coming to the informal settlements, what are you going to do?’ In some areas, the governor, for

example, is requesting anyone who is going to distribute in informal settlements to get pre-approval ... But once you go to get approval, they ask you ‘why are you only targeting refugees?’ So, there is strong community tension.”

Local NGOs are also sometimes restricted in the type of projects they can carry out, leaving some vulnerable groups without essential services and protection. In addition to supporting refugees and LGBTQI communities, they also face challenges working on GBV issues, and differences in expectations and norms between refugees and their hosts. As in many countries, working on gender-related issues and human rights is often tightly controlled if not prohibited.

Financial limitations

Local NGOs identified access to sustainable funding flows as a central challenge, and their international counterparts said it was a considerable obstacle to greater collaboration. As one interviewee put it: “There’s still a lot of progress to be made. I would say access to direct quality funding would be one of the areas where we see the rhetoric around localisation hasn’t translated into actually delivering on global commitments in practice.” This is partly the result of intense competition among local agencies for the recognition, visibility, capacity and reputation that help to foster support for longer-term funding opportunities. Even when programmes are funded, there are significant gaps in terms of administrative costs and overheads, which further deter local NGOs’ from competing for funding opportunities.

When it comes to opportunities for leadership and decision making over budgets and resources, some local NGOs such as Amel have long-standing visibility and a solid reputation among international actors, but not all NGOs enjoy the same recognition. Most financial decisions seem to be made with deference to INGOs and donors with local partners providing inputs, because their role as subcontractors limits them to the technical implementation of project activities predetermined by INGOs.

Local organisations often have to accommodate the priorities of INGOs and their donors, particularly in situations where they have to choose between acting simply as implementing partners or losing funding opportunities in a highly competitive space. They may also feel forced to accommodate activities that fall outside their scope of expertise to ensure some limited funding to continue operations. Financial control ultimately remains in the hands of international donors.

Another key obstacle to direct local funding is linked to the relatively limited capacity of local NGOs to design and submit proposals that meet donor requirements, particularly in competition with INGOs and large NGO consortiums. This includes the initial capacity assessment tool that INGOs use to choose local partners and determine if they qualify for project funding. As one interviewee said: “Local NGOs usually need to go through very time-consuming and cumbersome capacity assessments. Every single INGO has its own capacity assessment tool, and there’s a lack of recognition or harmonisation of these tools among agencies. So, we need to go through the whole process each time we want to work with an INGO.”

The depreciation of the Lebanese pound has also hindered humanitarian organisations in their efforts to provide assistance. The country’s financial institutions have limited the amount of cash that organisations can access in dollars, primarily affecting national NGOs. This has severe implications for the perception of aid, because communities might see aid organisations as uncoordinated and slow-moving.

Recommendations

- Recognise the role that donor states can and must play to support lifesaving assistance for vulnerable populations and good governance.
- Undertake comprehensive joint assessments of the needs of all vulnerable groups, particularly in H2R areas in collaboration with local actors.
- Leverage collective donor pressure in humanitarian discussions with the Lebanese government. Negotiate a comprehensive preferential exchange rate for all humanitarian operations rather than leaving some NGOs to fend for themselves.
- Ensure humanitarian operations take place across all regions, with emphasis on H2R areas and a primary focus on need. Donor and other pressures not to operate in areas Hezbollah controls severely limit access to essential services and force communities to rely on the group for service delivery.
- Humanitarian aid is only sufficient to support acute needs. Essential long-term support requires multidimensional initiatives, governance reforms and development efforts.
- Identify opportunities to invest in local partnerships with the aim of empowering local capacities in the long term.
- Counterbalance funding issues by investing in greater coordination and eliminating duplication and competition between local and international NGOs.
- Strengthen engagement and support for women's organisations to improve the reach and quality of humanitarian programmes and to support localisation of the response.

Ukraine: An international humanitarian system parallel to Ukrainian efforts



Destroyed buildings in Posad-Pokrovske, Kerson Oblast, Southern Ukraine. 6 February 2024

Overview

Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 has triggered a devastating humanitarian crisis. Many thousands of people have lost their lives, 7.6 million have fled the country and 6.2 million are internally displaced. The response has been largely carried out by civil society and the Ukrainian government with their own resources, but these have been depleted over more than two years of intense conflict, rendering the situation unsustainable without external support.

Only a small fraction of international aid, however, reaches Ukrainian organisations directly. More than \$3.82 billion in humanitarian funds and \$11.93 billion in development funds were allocated in 2022, but international efforts run parallel to the Ukrainian mobilisation.^{43,44} The international humanitarian system receives most of its funding from global donors, but its effectiveness in reaching the most vulnerable people is limited.

This situation stems from the structure of international aid financing. Major donors have set up complex allocation mechanisms that severely limit the funding available to underdeveloped Ukrainian organisations. The majority is channelled to UN agencies, subsequently passing through international NGOs for redistribution.⁴⁵ This setup establishes an "aid economy". Since 24 February 2022, dozens of INGOs have gone from no or minimal presence in Ukraine to multi-million-dollar operations.⁴⁶

The crisis in Ukraine prompts concerns about the closed, inefficient and costly humanitarian system. In the absence of clear incentives from donor countries, INGOs and UN agencies replicate programmes with minimal focus on supporting Ukrainian efforts. The sluggish

deployment also highlights bureaucratic challenges, despite there being no physical obstacles to access in areas under Ukrainian government control.⁴⁷ The quantity of aid delivered has increased with the expansion of international organisations' programmes, but it lacks flexibility and often fails to adapt to the conflict's changing dynamics.

Poorly directed and uncoordinated international assistance disrupts an effective response and erodes Ukrainian efforts. It is vital that the Ukrainian state maintains its role in regulating the humanitarian space and international resources effectively. The emergence of an international aid economy has also established a hierarchy, elevating foreign actors while relegating Ukrainian organisations to a secondary status as implementing partners. This hierarchy is evident in the cluster system which, instead of integrating the Ukrainian mobilisation tends to enforce top-down regulation, leaving local organisations responsible for the "last mile" delivery to communities.

The effects of this aid structure have, in some cases, created competition between Ukrainian organisations for funding. The influx of funds to international organisations is also increasingly diverting human capital away from civil society, the private sector and the government, as has been the case in other emergencies. This runs counter to GB commitments to increase support for localisation. The international response must reinforce, not replace, local systems. International actors should seek to complement, support and fill gaps in the local response, making aid "as local as possible, as international as necessary".⁴⁸ As the Ukrainian crisis shows, however, these objectives are far from being achieved.

Access snapshot

- Restriction in movement of humanitarian organisations in reaching affected populations
 - Active conflict
 - Military tactics preventing humanitarians from accessing communities in need and preventing communities from fleeing or accessing life saving assistance
 - Movement restrictions for humanitarian staff in areas under Russian military control
 - Blocking of movement of relief supplies across frontlines
 - Blocking of aid convoys
- Bureaucratic impediments
 - Visa delays
 - Suspension of permissions to operate in certain areas
 - Lack of clarity over NGO registration processes
 - Issues around tax exemptions for humanitarian aid
- Physical restrictions
 - Presence of mines and unexploded ordnance in areas of active conflict
 - Suspension of passenger and cargo flights, and damage to road and rail services
 - Fuel shortages
 - Damage to infrastructure and supplies, and injuries to aid workers while delivering assistance
 - Shelling by Russian military destroying NGO facilities and injuring humanitarian personnel

The structuring of Ukrainian efforts

Large-scale horizontal and informal mobilisation

INGOs and UN agencies evacuated in February 2022, leaving Ukrainians to face Russia's invasion alone. During the first months of the crisis, most humanitarian aid came from informal activities supported by the Ukrainian state. The mobilisation was horizontal in nature and stood out for its speed of action, efficiency and adaptability. The approach was made possible by the trust of individuals belonging to a community of shared values through solidarity networks and interpersonal relations.⁴⁹

These were formed on the basis of friendships and acquaintances from the same profession or neighbourhood to address needs they saw in their communities directly. Word-of-mouth communication, the exchange of services with other groups and sometimes their ability to access different resources led to the delivery of assistance. The networks enabled emergency supplies to be delivered to families and hospitals in combat zones, sometimes even in occupied territories, while international humanitarian organisations were unable to respond as quickly.

National volunteer groups take great risks when delivering aid close to the frontlines. It is difficult to draw up a precise map of this quickly evolving sector, but three groups appear to make up the CSOs active in humanitarian aid. The first comprises around 150 "NGOs", characterised as organisations with conventional experience in aid delivery. The organisations that have been operating in Donbass since 2014 in particular are extensively trained in international humanitarian standards and have experience in working with international partners. This enables them to receive funds from both private sources and donor states through INGOs present in Ukraine since 2014.

Christian churches form the second group. They are financially self-sufficient, supported by their private international networks and faith-based NGOs. They benefit not only from a large influx of money, but also an extremely efficient distribution network.

National volunteer networks form the third group. They vary in terms of structure, activities and socio-professional background. There were more than 1,700 such groups in May 2022, generally in the form of "charitable foundations" or "public organisations". They are financed by pooling their own income, private donations from the diaspora and fundraising via social networks. Ukrainian NGOs also contribute to funding these groups which, lacking any real structure, do not meet INGO criteria.

Institutionalising the Ukrainian mobilisation

Although horizontal, the intensity of the conflict has forced these locally-based entities to structure themselves and develop high-performance tools. Coordination is at the heart of the process and has been developed through the establishment of humanitarian hubs. These bring together several dozen CSOs with urban storage facilities and secondary locations that enable them to be closer to the frontline. The hubs help to centralise and streamline distributions while strengthening collaboration between volunteer groups, humanitarian organisations and municipal officials. The Dnipro hubs, for example, act as relays to the Donbass hubs, which distribute aid to the surrounding *hromadas* or municipalities and near the frontlines.⁵⁰

Hubs designed to coordinate volunteer efforts have also been developed at the *oblast level*.⁵¹ In Kharkiv, for example, more than 100 CSOs have been coordinated around a single hub since May 2022. The hub has several storage facilities, some of them of industrial size thanks to the involvement of large-scale retailers.

Beneficiaries are better targeted via rapid individualised distributions by building, door-to-door or parcel collection. The desire for transparency and accountability, major donor reporting requirements and Ukrainian regulations have led to a strengthening of monitoring capabilities, often using digital tools.⁵² Effective use of social networks such as Telegram, Instagram and Facebook, coupled with various online payment services, enable activist groups to publicise their work and raise funds quickly.⁵³ Survey systems make it possible to assess the number of vulnerable people at the building or village level regularly as well.

When a territory stabilises, local authorities take over the assessment, supporting the identification of people for social protection registers. *Oblast* administrations identify the most urgent needs across the country and inform ministries and international organisations. A state hotline, supported by volunteer organisations specialised in this type of service, is also available for specific requests, such as medicine. The most significant deliveries of aid are managed by national ministries, who delegate oblast administrations to link up with INGOs and prioritise the most urgent needs reported by the lower administrative levels.⁵⁴

Challenges of international deployment

The return of international NGOs and UN agencies after they evacuated in the run-up to Russia's invasion was slow and poorly coordinated. According to interviewees, it took them a year to redeploy effectively, not because of the “unique nature of the Ukrainian crisis, but due to their own operational challenges”. Interviewees also pointed to a lack of preparation and self-reflection after delivering emergency aid in other conflicts, including in Ukraine in 2014. Donor pressure prompted some adjustments in mid-2022 and some programmes were expanded, but adaptation to the local situation was limited. The stabilisation policy, which began in 2023, also lacked a crucial connection with local initiatives and the professional sectors involved, despite established partnerships.

Previous shortcomings were replicated, resulting in a limited emergency response despite substantial financial commitments.⁵⁵ The response was also unevenly spread across the country, primarily focussed on western regions while people in the east, those most affected by the conflict, received inadequate assistance. As in 2014, challenges include difficulties in recruiting personnel, collaboration with the Ukrainian government to streamline administrative processes, major waves of displacement and operating in frontline areas subjected to intense bombardments.

By mid-May, nearly three months after the start of the invasion, only around 20 INGOs were operational. This was in stark contrast to the hundreds of programmes established to assist neighbouring countries in accommodating and aiding refugees.⁵⁶ Despite their previous presence in Ukraine, international agencies took more than five weeks to begin aid distribution.⁵⁷

On the upside, the Ukrainian Red Cross, supported by ICRC and other members of the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement, scaled up its responses relatively swiftly. INGOs also formed a network in Donbass, as they had in 2014, that coordinated effectively with local authorities, and numerous Ukrainian organisations serving as intermediaries between INGOs and local communities grew professionally and were institutionalised. INGOs that had been active in the country since 2014 and possessed private funds were able to redeploy rapidly. The funds afforded them a high degree of flexibility to collaborate with their Ukrainian partners, though such initiatives and expertise remained on the margins of the broader humanitarian system.

Aid efforts gradually extended to the east of the country. OCHA's coordination headquarters relocated to Dnipro in June, but the geographical expanse posed challenges for UN agencies,

which faced difficulties in establishing and stabilising their logistical systems after the liberation of Kherson and Kharkiv.⁵⁸ That said, the UN response in Kherson was relatively prompt. An aid convoy arrived two days after Ukrainian forces recaptured the town, but the international humanitarian deployment overall was hampered by unwillingness to operate in emergency zones.⁵⁹

OCHA's service mapping reveals an over-representation of international organisations, with INGOs seemingly outnumbering their local counterparts despite their absence on the ground, particularly in the east. Reports these INGOs publish often refer to offices that are now vacant or past programmes to justify their field "presence" to donors, leading to an overestimation of the international aid footprint. As one interviewee put it: "They are motivated to project an image of greater presence and operational activity to donors and the public than is the reality."⁶⁰

Areas under the Ukrainian government's control are relatively accessible and cooperation between the authorities and international organisations is extensive. The main H2R areas are near the frontlines, where ongoing hostilities are the main access constraint. OCHA divides the country into three operational zones. The first covers a distance of 40km from the frontlines. These areas have been heavily bombarded and all civilians face acute humanitarian needs, but it is Ukrainian organisations rather than INGOs that provide assistance.

The second zone encompasses the rest of the country, which hosts a large population of internally displaced people (IDPs) who lack water, electricity and gas as a result of widespread infrastructure damage. The third zone is made up of areas occupied by Russian forces. These were accessible between 2014 and 2021 but have been inaccessible from Ukraine since February 2022. The only access route available is through Russia, but interviews with organisations working in these areas in recent years suggest the diversion of aid is a problem. In some cases, a single organisation monopolises and controls access and the means of delivering aid.

The logistical and operational problems international organisations have faced are largely the result of a lack of human resources. The recruitment of qualified staff is made difficult by mass displacement, military mobilisation, the fact that qualified personnel are already working in Ukrainian organisations and a shortage of translators. The UN is largely understaffed, particularly OCHA, which is responsible for aid coordination.

The humanitarian response in Ukraine also underscores the growth of INGOs since the 1980s. As they have expanded and assumed substantial financial management responsibilities, deployments have become more complex and less adaptable, and they have limited their operations to mitigate risks and exposure. The situation has created tensions with donors over the concept of programme criticality, in which aid providers are supposedly willing to accept higher levels of risk when the needs are exceptionally urgent.

The lack of on-site security, which is addressed by delegating security monitoring to organisations such as the International NGO Safety Organisation (INSO) or the UN Department for Safety and Security (UNDSS), hampers the decision-making capacity INGOs need to deploy assistance as close as possible to the most vulnerable populations. Insurance complications also often lead INGOs to decline participation in convoys organised by UN agencies on the frontlines on the advice of their external security officers. Many local organisations feel they are better prepared for implementation than their INGO partners, particularly on and near frontlines, because they have their own risk frameworks.

The development of a parallel international system

The strategy of “bunkerisation” and new security protocols have widened the divide between international organisations and local actors in Ukraine and elsewhere.⁶¹ The former’s diminished presence on the ground has impeded their ability to properly assess needs, leading to inappropriate interventions. This perpetuates a top-down approach to implementation that lacks the necessary contextual understanding and evaluation capacity, despite the involvement of local entities.

In the absence of effective assessment capabilities, INGOs rely on coordination clusters overseen by OCHA, but this system is severely under-resourced, particularly in terms of the comprehensive mapping of local actors.⁶² This is evident in OCHA’s data, in which international organisations are disproportionately represented compared with CSOs.⁶³ The clusters also validate INGOs’ efforts and prioritise fund allocations based on promotion of the humanitarian principles. Ambiguity surrounding the neutrality of Ukrainian organisations and concerns about corruption intensify pressure on INGOs, leading them to self-impose limitations on operating in high-risk areas and collaborating with local partners.

As a result, international aid initiatives take place independently of Ukrainian efforts. Instead of enhancing the capabilities of Ukrainian entities, international funding is channelled toward UN agencies and INGOs with only a handful of Ukrainian NGOs meeting the eligibility criteria. WFP, for example, was allocated a budget of more than \$838 million for 2022. It planned to establish partnerships with nine organisations by the end of the year, half of which were local. Each partner was entrusted with further distributing aid to smaller organisations at the district and community levels.

The global approach has focused on reinforcing humanitarian hubs to manage food security and water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) initiatives. Most international entities also provide multi-purpose cash (MPC) assistance. WFP assisted nearly three million people a month with food and cash assistance and provided cash to 1.8 million unique beneficiaries between February and the end of September 2022.⁶⁴ Taken together humanitarian actors disbursed more than \$1.2 billion to around six million people in the first year of the response.⁶⁵ MPC programmes expedite aid distribution, but rather than bolstering local endeavours, they enforce an operational model dictated by international governance.

Most of the funding for the response has remained in the hands of international organisations, leaving their Ukrainian counterparts underfunded. The burdensome and time-consuming compliance requirements of the international system prevent the latter from obtaining direct funding, even when they have legal status under Ukrainian law. The ability to raise private funds in Ukraine is also diminishing, but obtaining funds from INGOs via subcontracts barely covers operational and indirect costs. Such funds are also short-term and may end abruptly if aid and funding priorities change.

Strategies for overcoming constraints

Given the effectiveness of Ukrainian organisations, many INGO staff question their role in supporting them. The challenge is to strengthen their capacities and independence through direct funding and ensure equitable collaborations in terms of decision making, risk sharing and consideration of local organisations’ direct costs and overheads.⁶⁶ This calls for greater flexibility and funding reforms.⁶⁷ Donor countries in particular have put pressure on UN agencies to move in this direction as a means of localising aid, but most international aid players are passing the buck for their lack of action and initiative. Donors encourage localisation in theory, but they place constraints on the allocation of funds, creating a bottleneck. Allocations also lack transparency which makes it difficult to assess their distribution.⁶⁸

Against this backdrop, the Ukraine Humanitarian Fund (UHF), the CBPF overseen by OCHA, has introduced measures to facilitate funding for local organisations. It was promoted at the beginning of 2023 as the “new face of localisation”, but it has several limitations.⁶⁹ Changes to eligibility criteria, coupled with a system of risk waivers, mean that only a limited number of local organisations with a strong background in international partnerships can receive direct funding.⁷⁰ The fund also has very few staff to monitor a large number of allocations.

The UHF pilot project is primarily designed to support CSOs via international organisations, which are responsible for overseeing the provision of grants ranging from a few thousand to tens of thousands of dollars to around 300 CSOs. As such, limited localisation mechanisms exist, but calls for standardised application procedures, simplified eligibility criteria, alignment with Ukrainian legal frameworks and, most importantly, acknowledgment of the urgency of deploying aid have gone unheeded.

New and more flexible approaches

New approaches are changing the rigidity of the funding system, including private funding arrangements that provide INGOs with the flexibility to disburse funds to emerging CSOs rapidly.⁷¹ Some also hire volunteers to finance their activities under the umbrella of their organisation. These arrangements generally help to cover certain costs, especially for local organisations trying to sustain their activities on the frontlines. After years of conflict, these humanitarian workers are almost all suffering from trauma or burnout and many have been displaced.

Technical assistance for CSOs constitutes a second component of support for those wishing to structure themselves. This often involves “humanitarian to humanitarian” support, in which INGOs help their partners gain the skills and autonomy necessary to access funds.⁷² More broadly, advocacy aims to strengthen the localisation of aid with major donors, such as the UK’s Disaster Emergency Committee (DEC) involved.⁷³ An NGO forum, for example, has emerged from a collaboration between INGOs and local actors, intended to strengthen the latter’s visibility in international structures.

Aid in the long term

The definition of an aid strategy for Ukraine implies a complex articulation of short and long-term objectives. Uncertainty about the duration of the conflict reinforces the idea that aid must be considered in the long term as a profound transformation of Ukrainian society. The entry en masse of international NGOs should not weaken Ukrainian institutions and marginalise local volunteer associations. Channelling assistance via volunteer associations has potentially important structural effects, such as the stabilisation of a population and its integration into reconstruction efforts. Humanitarian aid must be part of economic and social resilience and development efforts without falling into the pitfalls of the nexus approach, which was scheduled to be implemented in 2021.^{74, 75}

Making aid systems complementary

There is an urgent need to restructure the system for allocating funds in a way that makes international and Ukrainian interventions more complementary, and to set up direct financing mechanisms. This is possible thanks to the Ukrainian state’s coordinating role. The resilience of state institutions combined with a highly mobilised society and substantial international aid could enable an effective and sustainable humanitarian approach to a long war. “The Ukraine response might be “a vital opportunity to demonstrate commitments to localization”.”⁷⁶

The Ukrainian administration has held up well and has maintained a relatively solid social safety net, supported by significant development aid. It also uses civil mobilisation, characterised by a highly-developed private sector and a robust society, to create great capacity for adaptation and ensure effective aid for populations in need. Management and coordination capacities are also increasing, and this is reflected in the growing institutionalisation of monitoring groups and processes.

The structure of this model invites two key observations. On the one hand, it reduces the risk of corruption. The horizontal nature of the Ukrainian mobilisation demonstrates the ability to monitor aid networks and consolidate coordination around actors with the same values. These bottom-up control mechanisms are effective, as shown by the dismissal of ministers and governors in February 2023 for corruption, and the denunciations of embezzlement by volunteer groups.

Ukrainian control of aid is more effective than monitoring by international organisations, which are outside society, have little presence in the field and are able to internalise the management of problems. Channelling more funds into government and civil programmes could improve transparency and accountability. Accompanied by effective monitoring and reporting mechanisms provided by Ukrainian organisations, donors could tackle corruption head-on while strengthening the state's capacity.

On the other hand, the perception that Ukrainian volunteers are an amalgam of civilian and military people is based on the population's huge commitment to support its army and the specialisation in civilian aid of a significant proportion of Ukraine's state-supported organisations. This specialisation goes hand in hand with management efforts, particularly in aid coordination and monitoring, which could be supported. Martial law and the military mobilisation of the state do not mean its total militarisation. The civil administration continues to operate and needs international support if it is to last.

Recommendations and key messages

- Prioritise direct funding for Ukrainian NGOs that covers operational costs and overheads to reduce reliance on international aid.
- Foster collaboration between international and local NGOs for advocacy. Encourage major donors and government bodies to recognise local actors, ensuring their involvement in decision-making processes.
- Develop a flexible aid strategy that balances short-term response and long-term goals. Focus on strengthening local institutions and integrating volunteer associations.
- Recognise and value the expertise of local organisations in understanding the situation, culture and dynamics of affected communities.
- Actively involve local NGOs in needs assessments and programme design and implementation, ensuring that response strategies are culturally sensitive and relevant.

Venezuela: Humanitarian access in a highly politicised setting



Ingrid Prestetun. June 16, 2022. Venezuela, Caracas. City view of the capital of Venezuela, Caracas

Overview

Despite the presence of human rights organisations in Venezuela since the last century, dedicated humanitarian interventions only began to take shape between 2017 and 2019. This period coincided with the escalation of an economic crisis caused by poor governance of the country's main source of revenue, oil. It has also had to cope with hyperinflation, leading to severe shortages of food, essential services and livelihood opportunities, and mass migration.⁷⁷

In this highly politicised setting, discussions about partnerships between local and international organisations centre on overcoming the stigma associated with humanitarian aid, navigating government restrictions and scepticism, and upholding the humanitarian principles. Given the complexities of the situation, Venezuela provides a compelling case study for examining engagements with local humanitarian organisations.

Main challenges for principled access

Politicisation of the humanitarian space

The initial challenge the humanitarian community confronted stemmed from the government's refusal to acknowledge the existence of a crisis. There was no room for humanitarian activities because state institutions were resistant to external organisations operating independently and claimed there were no urgent needs to address.

This perspective gradually shifted as a result of three main factors: international pressure and the migration of around seven million people brought the crisis to global attention; economic

sanctions aggravated the situation, prompting the government to acknowledge and condemn it; and the Covid-19 pandemic provided an opportunity for humanitarian organisations to collaborate with the government. A turning point in accepting aid came in 2019 when the political opposition attempted to facilitate it by framing it as a humanitarian intervention via the Colombian and Brazilian borders.⁷⁸

The government has become more acquainted with the humanitarian community and access negotiations are generally successful, but there is a constant need to reaffirm that the humanitarian principles underpin all operations. At the same time, local and national NGOs exert extraordinary efforts to distinguish themselves from human rights organisations to avoid stigmatisation, because the government views human rights programming as supporting the political opposition and/or international agendas.

Administrative compliance

Navigating the administrative and bureaucratic procedures required to conduct humanitarian operations poses a significant challenge for local NGOs because of the absence of a standardised registration procedure. The government provides inconsistent instructions, leaving the process to depend on the specific authority handling a case and its relationship with the organisation in question, and leading to varying waiting times.

International organisations face challenges related to financial accountability and the lengthy visa application process. Obtaining legal authorisation to work in Venezuela often takes several months, and some organisations do not receive a response at all. As a result, international organisations have adjusted their operations to accommodate long waiting periods before deploying their staff. Some opt to send staff on tourist visas, meaning they have to exit and re-enter the country every three months. Only a few major international organisations have direct agreements with the national government to deploy their personnel.

Organisations accept the high cost of moving staff through different countries, but this poses legal risks for expatriates. That said, very few cases of individuals facing issues because they lack proper visas have been reported. Administrative processes also involve complexities in currency management. To be officially registered in the country, all financial transactions must be in Venezuelan bolívares, while most international partnerships and project planning are conducted in US dollars. Managing these dual currency systems requires extra effort, particularly for smaller NGOs, because of the constant fluctuations in exchange rates. It also takes a long time to set up financial structures to pay staff.

Personalisation and duplicity in governmental institutions

The success of operations relies heavily on the approval and support received from local, regional and national authorities, making trust between organisations and public institutions vital. The process of building trust is deeply personalised at every level, meaning it has to be started again from scratch if there is a change of personnel within the institutions in question. The same applies to establishing an understanding of the humanitarian community and its methods of operation and objectives, given that awareness of the humanitarian principles among civil and military officials is limited.

Coordination issues among different levels of government are also a challenge. Official directives follow a top-down structure, originating at the national level and mandating local authorities to comply, but there is a lack of consistent communication and unified guidance. As a result procedures are often reversed when a new local government official is appointed until the national authorities provide clear instructions. Local leaders vie for control of resources

and supervise decisions made by opposition leaders. Dealing with them creates an extra challenge for the humanitarian sector, because it is crucial to foster positive relationships with both sets of authorities and secure their approval for any projects.

Logistical problems

The main obstacles to humanitarian operations are the persistent shortage of essential resources, particularly fuel for transport, and the regular disruption of electricity and water supplies. Effective communication and collaboration between agencies have proven vital in addressing these issues. Both local and international organisations emphasise the importance of unified negotiations to secure necessary supplies, and that conducting them with the national government achieves better outcomes.

There is, however, a noticeable drawback for implementing partners during contract negotiations between national organisations and INGOs. This is the result of occasional inflexibility in handling issues related to the lack of access to electricity or communication infrastructure. In contrast to INGOs, national NGOs face potential reputational risks when dealing with these challenges. Some INGOs demonstrate rigidity in operational activities and reporting procedures, even when notified about shortages of essential supplies.

The NGO regulation bill and its implications

There is ongoing debate about the consequences of a bill to regulate NGOs currently under consideration in the national assembly.⁷⁹ The legislation would impose extra prerequisites for the establishment and functioning of NGOs and other non-profit entities. Perspectives on the bill and its implications differ among local and national organisations as well as INGOs.

Only preliminary documents have been made available to the public, but some of the provisions have raised concerns. The requirement, for example, for each organisation to have at least one government representative on its board is seen by some as interference. As one interviewee from a local NGO put it: “There is no way we can maintain our neutrality if the government establishes a law in which we must have at least one military or non-military representative of the government in our board of directors ... Once it starts to occur, we are no longer be able eligible for international funds. Thus, it means our end.” Other went so far as to call it an attempt at espionage.

INGOs approach the bill from a different angle. Some welcome the legal certainty, particularly given the absence of uniform guidelines for non-profit organisations, but it raises concerns among local NGOs. It might offer reassurance in theory, but in practice it could create extra administrative obstacles and potentially lead some donors to withdraw support for the country. As one interviewee said: “With this new law, it will be easier and quicker to donate to Ukraine or Turkey, and we will be made invisible again.”

The humanitarian principles

Understanding of the humanitarian principles among Venezuelan NGOs is a recent development. Though some have been active in the country for more than three decades, their focus on human rights advocacy has meant they have often taken positions that are neither neutral or impartial.

Government institutions have also stigmatised these organisations, creating a widespread belief that they are affiliated with opposition movements and leading some to maintain silence in order to collaborate with INGOs and secure funding from donors. The stigma arises from

two factors. Firstly, human rights organisations have been prominent in reporting abuses and are widely recognised across the country, even if their focus is on humanitarian activities.

Secondly, the opposition misused humanitarian language during a campaign in 2019. The term “humanitarian emergency” was used to justify approval for the entry of goods from the acting president, Juan Guaidó, who was vying with the formal government for legitimacy. This harmed humanitarian organisations, eroded trust in their principles and restricted the humanitarian space, necessitating subsequent negotiations with the authorities.

As the international community has engaged in dialogue with the government, however, understanding of the humanitarian principles and their importance has improved. This has led to a gradual change in mindset within public institutions, but the humanitarian community has still had to modify its language and steer clear of terms such as “complex humanitarian emergency” and “humanitarian intervention” to overcome past stigma.

In this setting, international organisations have become more adaptable about the nature of their local partners, particularly as the more substantial ones have development expertise. The signing of joint operating principles, however, is mandatory. These are viewed as a guarantee of mutual understanding and a shared commitment to the humanitarian principles. According to humanitarian workers in Venezuela, ensuring and demonstrating neutrality is essential to avoid conflicts with the authorities. Transparency practices in which communities and local and national institutions are informed about planned activities are key to doing so.

Humanitarian access: a twin-track scenario

Humanitarian organisations in Venezuela do not encounter direct obstruction, but are met with more implicit hurdles when seeking authorisation from authorities. They also have to work on gaining acceptance and upholding the respect of the communities they aim to assist. Discussing access in these circumstances necessitates an examination of the different scenarios organisations have to navigate.

Coordination with government authorities

Securing government approval for projects is a persistent challenge, although there has been some improvement over time. The government initially resisted humanitarian initiatives, viewing them as intrusions or external interference. Nor did it recognise the country’s humanitarian crisis. By engaging in direct dialogue with the government, however, the international humanitarian community was able to clearly articulate the humanitarian principles, programme objectives and ways of working, and this led to an expansion of the humanitarian space. The government eventually acknowledged the existence of a humanitarian crisis, albeit only related to the effects of US economic sanctions, and the upheaval caused by Covid-19 and mass migration created an opportunity for humanitarian interventions.

Ongoing access negotiations with the government are frequent, mainly as a result of the personalised decision-making process. Communication breakdowns at various levels also mean field teams sometimes have to educate local authorities and officials at military checkpoints about their work and the humanitarian principles to secure timely access.

The government’s acceptance of projects varies based on their nature. Those involving infrastructure are well received, but service-oriented initiatives face more resistance. Certain topics, such as access to food and clean water, have to be avoided publicly because the government does

not acknowledge such needs in the country. Cash programming is virtually impossible because the government is concerned about losing its credibility.

Collecting and sharing data about the humanitarian situation is also difficult, and both international and local organisations said maintaining access was contingent on their refraining from doing so. This means that even if access is guaranteed, needs cannot be properly assessed nor the impact of interventions monitored.

Interviewees from local and national NGOs acknowledged the vital role international organisations play in initiating discussions and reaching agreements with the government, and many recognise OCHA as the legitimate entity for coordinating access. They understand that international organisations have a direct line of communication and receive different treatment from the government, free of obstacles based on political differences. In effect, it is easier for them to demonstrate their neutrality and impartiality. Local and national NGOs have also shown themselves willing to share concerns and report incidents openly, enabling them to be addressed in a systematic and unified manner with the government.

Access to communities for programme implementation

Access to communities is notably smoother and more efficient when negotiated through local and national NGOs. Many have built longstanding relationships with the communities they work with, earning recognition on the ground. They also have deep understanding of local cultures and social dynamics, allowing them to operate with sensitivity and expertise and avoid harmful actions. These organisations feel their international counterparts do not always engage with due care when entering or leaving communities, and that their rigid protocols can be disruptive to the people they aim to assist. The presence of international organisations also tends to raise the expectations of communities, which assume they have more substantial resources to offer, which can damage trust.

That said, politicisation and polarisation continue to impede the efforts of all organisations, be they local, national or international. People harbour constant suspicions about their allegiance to the government or the opposition, meaning that diplomacy, sensitivity and the strict application of the humanitarian principles are vital when engaging with communities and selecting local partners.

Engagement with local actors

Localisation is frequently discussed in the humanitarian community, but there is a sense that it does not translate into practice. Local organisations maintain close ties with their international counterparts, but tend to feel undervalued. Relationships have generally been strong, particularly those involving prominent national organisations or local entities with extensive experience in implementing projects, but there is evidence of a deterioration more recently. International organisations showed more interest in dialogue and building local capacities three to four years ago, but there is a growing perception that local NGOs are not treated equitably. International organisations are also wary of some of their local counterparts' social work and background in human rights advocacy.

Local and national NGOs feel information sharing is somewhat one-sided in that they receive lots of requests from their international counterparts but receive little in return. They also say essential discussions about the political landscape and its impact on the humanitarian sector are often avoided. According to one interviewee from a local NGO, conversations about risks tend to revolve around immediate challenges and overlook the deeper issues at

play: “Discussions about risks are about whether there is no gasoline or if there is a power outage, and this is not enough.”

The situation imposes an added burden on local organisations to establish collaborations, while international organisations’ accountability and transparency efforts towards them remain unclear. This leads some local organisations to argue that there has yet to be a shift from project-based cooperation to strategic collaboration, and to emphasise the need for a more comprehensive approach.

There have been advances in terms of funding, including the opportunity for local organisations to apply directly to the country’s humanitarian fund. International donors also have a mandatory requirement for international organisations to submit projects in collaboration with local entities, but the formalities and procedures can only be managed effectively by organisations with an established reputation. The situation is also difficult for those without foreign bank accounts, effectively excluding grassroots organisations from accessing resources and forming partnerships.

Localisation has been slow and not entirely successful at times, but the enhancement of local organisations’ administrative capabilities has increased. Many acknowledge the progress they have made in monitoring and evaluation, financial management and data handling thanks to support from international partners. They have also bolstered their expertise in managing crises and internal cases related to sexual abuse, fraud, corruption and discrimination. Many of the most skilled local staff, however, end up taking roles with international organisations.

Coordination efforts are still developing. One key accomplishment is the Humanitarian Response Plan (HRP), which aligns all organisations behind specific objectives. Platforms such as the HCT, clusters and local coordination teams also exist, and these use Spanish as their working language to ensure ease of communication among participants. Local organisations have also been invited to participate in the latter two spaces, viewing them as opportunities to engage in meaningful dialogue, foster connections and collaborate effectively. The proliferation of coordination spaces, however, also puts a strain on local organisations’ time and staff capacities.

Recommendations and key messages

- Humanitarian access in Venezuela is not blocked or impeded but is subject to many requirements. Challenges include bureaucratic and administrative requirements, corruption and overlapping power disputes. Lack of information and obstacles to sharing data in public constrain humanitarian action.
- Access negotiations at the national level have improved through dialogue between international organisations and the government. Access at the local level is easier for local organisations given their long-lasting relationships with communities and contextual knowledge. In both cases, negotiations are highly personalised. There is also a need to create trust and smooth relations with each governmental institution to avoid operational constraints.
- Localisation practices have included strengthening administrative management, protocols to protect against sexual exploitation and abuse, logistics and monitoring and evaluation. Knowledge transfer regarding negotiations with the authorities to facilitate access and risk management forms a second tier.
- International and local organisations perceive regulatory risks in different ways. International organisations think that accountability and transparency are enough to operate, local organisations feel constrained and persecuted.
- Even though space has been made for local organisations in clusters and the humanitarian architecture, participation puts a strain on their time and capacities. Part of their resources are used to meet international organisations' and donors' requirements. Nor are administrative and bureaucratic procedures considered realistic for partnerships with international organisations.
- Local and national organisations lack recognition for their programming capacities, which are undervalued and questioned. International organisations feel there are not enough well-trained local humanitarian staff or capacities to implement large projects, which puts successful and principled-based operations at risk.
- Establish a transparency strategy in which all humanitarian organisations inform OCHA weekly about what they will be doing. OCHA should then use the information to send an anticipatory bulletin to the national government, so organisations can prove they have informed the authorities when asked.
- Inform all parties before developing projects. Telling military, civilian and parallel authorities is the best way to ensure there will not be political misunderstandings that could affect access.
- Adapt vocabulary to avoid sensitive terms such as food insecurity, complex humanitarian emergency and human trafficking. Doing so has helped to keep the humanitarian space open.
- Ensure personnel speak Spanish, which has improved relations between international and local NGOs.

V. Conclusion

The humanitarian sector has begun to recognise the significance of shifting operational decision making and leadership to local and national partners, albeit slowly. This report highlights some of the key experiences of national and international humanitarian professionals with partnerships and localisation and their reflections on them. Several key themes emerge, including the lack of conceptual clarity about localisation and its ambitions; the absence of a unified vision and voice on whether and how to implement approaches; localisation as a top-down policy priority that may not translate well in the field; and donors' failure to revise their internal processes to allow more risk taking and more direct funding to go to national actors despite their ambitions to do so.

The case studies identify priority areas for more meaningful partnership development: encouraging more collaboration and less competition between local actors; valuing and elevating local knowledge and capacity; collaboration on joint funding proposals and programmes; direct funding and direct management of programmes for local actors; and reimagining attitudes toward risk to build resilience and accountability by donors and NGOs alike.

Interviews across the case studies indicate that while funding and capacity building are widely discussed, the many dimensions of local empowerment should not be lost sight of. These include opportunities to develop local leadership, decision-making capacity and mutual learning, and most importantly, not to continue practices that undermine local capacities. When considering access capacities in particular, it is clear that humanitarian organisations should not limit their vision to traditional professional development, workshops, and “on-the-job” training, but should tap into values and assets unique to local counterparts, which are essential dimensions of humanitarian engagement.

The case studies also highlight local NGOs' advantages in terms of their agility and flexibility in rapidly evolving and politically sensitive situations, characteristics that many INGOs have made the most of in their operations. Many local NGOs also demonstrate unique advantages in terms of negotiating access, cultivating acceptance with authorities and communities, and providing nuanced, strategic support for operations on the basis of their local understanding and networks.

They continue, however, to be hindered by a lack of sustained funding and capacity to meet onerous donor and INGO administrative requirements, and they face a higher “burden of proof” in demonstrating their neutrality and independence in highly political environments. Rather than insisting that local NGOs mirror the structures and limitations of the traditional international system, INGOs and donors should support them in taking on leadership and decision-making roles that result in sustainable and meaningful outcomes for communities on the ground.

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