

Promoting localised, women-led approaches to humanitarian responses

A BRIEFING NOTE



An opportunity for change

ActionAid works directly with local partners who are embedded in the community and have a strong understanding of local needs. After Hurricane Matthew devastated southwest Haiti in October 2016, ActionAid Haiti and Konbit Peyizan Grandans (KPGA), a locally rooted civil society organisation which has been an ActionAid partner since 2007, launched a humanitarian response in four communes. They established women-led community committees in each of the four communes, which then determined beneficiary criteria, and then planned and undertook response activities. This operational approach devolves power and funding to the most vulnerable women affected by a disaster. It lays the foundations of ActionAid’s call for a more localised international humanitarian system and locally led responses to specific crises.

Governments and NGOs in developing countries are calling for humanitarian responses to be more local or national in nature, and less international. This is because the current international humanitarian system, despite past reforms, concentrates power and funding in the hands of a small group of humanitarian actors who are largely located in richer countries.

This is not only unjust but extremely ineffective. It marginalises the skills, knowledge and capacities of thousands of local and national NGOs working on the frontline in times of emergency. ActionAid believes that strengthening local leadership in humanitarian responses – especially by women – is key to the effectiveness of such responses.

Localising humanitarian action involves shifting financial and other resources, as well as power and agency, to local and national responders. This shift must have women and women’s organisations at its forefront, bringing their invaluable contextual knowledge, skills, resources and experiences to emergency preparedness, response and resilience building. This will help reduce the male-dominated and gender biased international humanitarian system we currently

have, and make responses to humanitarian crises more effective and gender transformative.

The World Humanitarian Summit (WHS) in Istanbul in 2016 provided a unique opportunity for governments, UN agencies and civil society actors to set an ambitious agenda for empowering women and girls as change agents and leaders of such a ‘localisation agenda’. We now need to translate the commitments and collective agreements reached in Istanbul into concrete action.

Acting local in humanitarian responses: effectiveness and fairness

The recent drive to improve local capacity and ownership in relation to humanitarian responses has largely focused on two issues: effectiveness and power. In terms of effectiveness, the UK’s ‘Missed Opportunities’ research project has been gathering evidence since early 2012 about the potential of partnerships between international non-governmental organisations (INGOs) and national non-governmental organisations (NNGOs) in different humanitarian response settings.¹

Box 1: Background to the Missed Opportunities research series

ActionAid UK, CAFOD, Christian Aid, Oxfam GB and Tearfund have documented and researched partnership experiences of INGOs with local groups in several humanitarian responses, ranging from the Haiti earthquake in 2010 to the Nepal earthquake in 2016. In the run-up to the WHS, findings from the research were summarised in a synthesis paper, *Missed Opportunities No More*, which advocates for the localisation of aid and greater global support for INGO-NNGO humanitarian partnerships. (CARE, originally a research partner for this project, became a full member of the commissioning group in 2016.)

The ‘Missed Opportunities’ research shows that national and local actors’ understanding of context and local dynamics allows them to shape programmes accordingly, making the response relevant and appropriate. Work by local and national responders also enhances the effectiveness of assistance by improving accountability to disaster-affected populations. Finally, it smooths transition between the different phases of the disaster cycle (from initial response to recovery), as a result of the continuity and permanence of its staff and the organisations after the response phase compared to INGOs.

In terms of power, the case for a more localised response also stems from inequalities in funding and decision making within the current international humanitarian system. A highly institutionalised ‘oligopoly’ centred around the six UN humanitarian agencies, the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) and six to seven federations of INGOs², accounts for 80% of the humanitarian spending and enjoys privileged access to the main institutional humanitarian donors.³ Only 0.4% of this aid is currently channelled through local and national actors.⁴ This dramatic imbalance is symptomatic of a deficit of inclusiveness, diversity and openness in a self-regulated international humanitarian system, which is also characterised by being “male dominated and gender blind”.⁵



The Women’s Friendly Space in Abricots, Grand’Anse, Haiti, was opened two months after Hurricane Matthew devastated the region in October 2016. The space hosts trainings on protection, provides psychosocial support, and acts as a place for women to organise and come together to discuss their issues. This is one of four women’s spaces built in the region by ActionAid Haiti with local partner KPGA (Konbit Peyizan Grandans.)

PHOTO: ACTIONAID

Barriers to a more localised humanitarian system and aid

Despite mounting evidence that local and national actors undertake effective humanitarian responses, the formal humanitarian system fails to engage with and support them. On the contrary, donors, INGOs and United Nations agencies working in the humanitarian sphere are structured and operate in a way that *creates* barriers – financial, regulatory and cultural – that obstruct constructive and fruitful engagement with local and national humanitarian actors;⁶ make the formal humanitarian system averse to innovation, learning and transformation; and do not incentivise localisation. Thus the status quo is maintained.⁷

On the **financing side**, most humanitarian funds come from developed country governments⁸ who are reluctant to channel them directly to local and national NGOs. Unfortunately, isolated instances of corruption are on occasion generalised and can influence donors’ perception of localisation possibilities. Traditional donors are already under intense domestic scrutiny on the use (or even the justification) of aid budgets. Some donors also have counter-terrorism legislation that creates additional barriers, hampering support for myriad local and national NGOs that work in contexts where non-state armed groups are categorised as terrorists.

Many donor governments have an **official contractual preference** for large-scale interventions, driving them to deal with large organisations rather than smaller ones in the interests of maintaining fewer partner relationships. With public aid administration bodies suffering the fallout from austerity measures and staff cuts, they prioritise large grants with a single contractor or consortia, even if the contractor ends up sub-contracting to local and national organisations.

There is also a strong culture and dynamic in the formal humanitarian system to **prioritise international standards and solutions over**

national, local and community ones, which are considered (often without grounds) inadequate, corrupt and unable to deliver to the same standards.⁹ For example, Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) argues that localisation is counterproductive and “likely to produce sub-optimal results for the effective delivery of aid to people in need of immediate relief” in armed conflicts.¹⁰ The main argument is that local and national NGOs would not be able to deliver impartial humanitarian aid to conflict-affected populations. Some international humanitarian actors also consider that local and national NGOs are unable to build and scale up capacities to respond to large natural disasters. However, there is clearly a need for greater contextual analysis rather than establishing a global ‘standard’ that excludes localisation in all conflict and natural disasters settings. During the internal armed conflict that erupted in Juba in December 2013, the majority of South Sudanese NGOs were relatively localised in their reach and thus limited in their ability to scale up. However, they played a crucial and complementary role in improving coverage of hard-to-access areas and in reaching remote communities.¹¹

The vast array of regional, national, sub-national and sectoral **humanitarian coordination** forums is daunting for anybody, but especially local and national actors. The number of staff required, the terminology used and even the use of English as a working language in all settings make their participation difficult. On the other hand, several evaluations have found that the UN’s Cluster System is particularly poor at engaging local people and organisations. The evaluation of the international humanitarian response after the Haiti earthquake of 12 January 2010 showed how local organisations and knowledge had been sidelined. Humanitarian actors saw the “Haitians as victims who had other things to do than get involved in the design and implementation of programs”.¹² One of the evaluation’s key findings was how limited the collaboration between international actors and national institutions had been both nationally and locally. During last year’s response to Hurricane Matthew in Haiti, there was improvement in these aspects, but a local organisation interviewed by

ActionAid during that response highlighted the lack of capacity and time to engage in coordination mechanisms.¹³

This lack of support for local and national NGOs is not the monopoly of international donors and other international actors. Many **crisis-affected governments** devote only modest domestic resources to emergency preparedness and response and do not have a national disaster law and operational framework, making it difficult for local and national NGOs to thrive and engage in humanitarian action. The absence of domestic funding and an operational framework is sometimes combined with restrictive legislation to control the operations of national civil society organisations.

Finally, the **media** often portrays international aid workers as the heroes. There is certainly some level of complicity between media outlets in donor countries that want to have aid workers from their region in the news, while INGOs use media visibility for their fundraising and branding purposes rather than place local partners in the spotlight. Localisation should be about challenging the view of affected populations as ‘pawns’ (passive individuals) and the international community as ‘knights’ (extreme altruists).¹⁴



ActionAid Somaliland organised with the community and its partner WAAPO (Women Action Advocacy Progress Organization) various women led emergency distribution of food and dignity kits in Qoyta village, Togdheer region, as part of the 2017 drought response. ActionAid has been working with WAAPO and other two partner organisations from Somaliland involved in the humanitarian response to the drought - SCDO (Solidarity Community Development Organisation) and SOWDA (Somaliland Women Development Association) - for over a decade.

PHOTO: ACTIONAID

Box 2: Enabling localisation – ActionAid’s contributions

Rather than emphasise the traditional divide between rich countries that raise funds and poorer ones on which the money is spent, ActionAid strives to work together in a spirit of equality, democracy and accountability.

During the World Humanitarian Summit, ActionAid pursued this approach with a number of women first responders from crisis-affected countries and advocated for “a renewed and revitalised humanitarian system fit for the 21st century that promotes dedicated localisation of humanitarian response, and giving greater recognition, resourcing and voice to national and community actors”.¹⁵ The organisation has been contributing to this renewal of the humanitarian system for many years, through different projects and initiatives. Below are listed those with which ActionAid is currently active or has contact.

Missed Opportunities project research consortia: Since 2013 ActionAid has produced, with other agencies (Christian Aid, CAFOD, Oxfam, CARE and Tearfund), four reports (with recommendations) on partnerships between INGOs and national and local organisations in different humanitarian crises. The findings of these reports were presented in Geneva in November 2016 at an event with the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), INGOs and donors. The consortia called upon the humanitarian system to foster a vibrant national humanitarian response capacity that can implement responses either by partnerships or by independent actors. This will require a mutual strengthening of capacity; an adjustment in resourcing mechanisms to benefit national systems and NNGOs; and the ability to use partnership as a means to scale up preparedness.

Shifting the Power: This ActionAid-managed three-year project is part of the UK government’s Disasters Emergency Preparedness Programme (DEPP). It aims to strike a more acceptable balance between international and local responses to disasters, shifting the balance of power towards locally led humanitarian response. The Shifting the Power project strengthens national decision making and leadership capacity, and helps national organisations to achieve better representation, a stronger voice and greater recognition. At the same time it influences international organisations to support and promote the work of local and national organisations.¹⁶

Transforming Surge Capacity: This three-year project is also part of DEPP and led by ActionAid. The project aims to: (i) strengthen national and regional surge systems to work better with international systems; (ii) help organisations move from a focus on their individual surge capacity to working with others to build everyone’s capacity; and (iii) bring external stakeholders such as the United Nations, private companies and universities on board to explore how they can help.¹⁷

Start Fund: ActionAid is a member of the Start Network. Its Start Fund provides small-scale grants for small- to medium- scale emergencies that often receive little funding. Projects are chosen by local committees, made up of staff from Start Network members and their NNGO partners, within 72 hours of an alert. This makes the Start Fund the fastest, collectively owned, early response mechanism in the world. ActionAid has participated in discussions to establish a Start Fund managed exclusively by Start members’ national and local NGO partners in Bangladesh and the Philippines (the Bangladesh fund got underway in April 2017).

A localisation agenda for donors, the UN, INGOs and governments that includes women and transforms gender roles and relationships

ActionAid indicated at the World Humanitarian Summit that “power must shift and set course for a more transformative agenda for humanitarian response into the future, bringing humanitarian resources and decision making closer to those in greatest need. This includes shifting the power from North to South, from international to local and from a male-dominated system to one where women play a more central role. Local actors should be supported to be at the forefront of the response, harnessing their skills and expertise as well as building their capacity and leadership.”

ActionAid and its national and local partners are participating in this shift of power through different initiatives as well as through their day-to-day emergency preparedness and response work. This transformation will put people affected by conflict and natural disasters – in particular women and girls – at the centre of humanitarian action. To achieve this, it is important that UN agencies, INGOs, humanitarian donors and crisis-affected governments take the following steps:

- **Facilitate the engagement of national and local responders, particularly women’s groups and organisations, in discussions and meetings about the localisation process.** The localisation agenda and the majority of initiatives to date appear to be driven by international, rather than national, actors.¹⁸ Organisers of various localisation initiatives, the leads of the Grand Bargain¹⁹ localisation work stream and INGOs should ensure that national and local NGOs from countries affected by humanitarian crises are engaged in the processes. Women should be equally represented, as well as women’s rights and women-led organisations from those countries. This representation is particularly key during annual meetings to discuss progress on the Grand Bargain and WHS commitments that will take place on the margins of the UN General Assemblies, and the United Nations Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) Humanitarian Affairs Segment (HAS).

- **Make the Grand Bargain and its localisation work stream an opportunity to advance WHS commitments on women and girls’ rights and women’s leadership in emergencies.** More than 3,000 individual commitments were made in Istanbul as part of the UN’s Agenda for Humanity. Gender equality and women and girls’ empowerment emerged as an overarching theme of the Summit.²⁰ The UN, donors and NGOs involved in Grand Bargain localisation work should ensure attention to women’s institutions, organisations and capacities in this process. This will require:
 - commitment by all Grand Bargain signatories to mainstream gender in their efforts, and designate a focal gender person in the Grand Bargain Secretariat in Geneva that ensures reporting on progress and challenges in advancing the women and girls agenda as part of implementing the agreement;
 - direct funding for capacity building and access to response coordination mechanisms (clusters) for local and national women’s groups;
 - specific monitoring and transparent data on how much funding goes to women’s organisations as part of the 25% of humanitarian funding going to local and national responders.
- **Agree a fair and realistic definition of national and local responders.** The Inter Agency Steering Committee Humanitarian Financing Task Team (IASC HFTT) has been discussing since 2016 how to define a local or national responder, and to whom the 25% Grand Bargain aggregated funding target applies. The discussion has become highly political and some INGOs want to ensure that their own local affiliates are included in the definition. “National branches of international organisations that are formally affiliated to an international organisation, through inter-linked financing, contracting, governance and decision-making systems”²¹ should not be categorised as national and local responders. The funding should also go to the national and local responders directly from a donor, INGO or UN partnership or “as directly as possible” through a pooled fund that is directly accessible

to national and local responders. Finally, contributions to national and local responders in-kind and for capacity-building should not be counted as funding for localisation, which should be exclusively money used according to the needs of the affected population.

- **Ensure the participation, active engagement and co-leadership of local and national NGOs in response coordination mechanisms.**

UN, governments and donors should ensure the participation of women and women's organisations in the different coordination meetings, at all levels. Concrete steps need to be taken to improve the interface between the international humanitarian system and national and local responders. This improvement needs to start at the highest level, with local actors in global and field clusters' Strategic Advisory Groups and others occupying leading positions. At country level, there must be space for representatives from national and local NGOs in the Humanitarian Country Team of the crisis-affected country. Local and national NGOs should be encouraged to be cluster co-leads at national and sub-national levels. For that, it is important that INGOs, UN and donors resource local organisations to be able to take these leadership positions and support existing NNGO forums that can make the views, voices and position of national and local responders heard in the decision-making process (which is currently dominated by the UN, INGOs and the international Red Cross and Red Crescent movement). The leadership and participation of national and local NGOs in cluster meetings not only enriches discussions and decisions but can benefit these organisations in terms of information, visibility and access to funding. It is important that INGOs working in partnership encourage and support their partners so they are able to lead and participate in these coordination meetings and ensure that local languages are used at local-level coordination meetings.

- **Adopt a multi-year and sustainable approach to capacity investment for local and national responders, coherent with a new way to fund localised surges in quick**

onset emergencies. This means increasing multi-year investment in the core capacities and organisational sustainability of local and national responders. New mechanisms for long-term investment based on a thorough assessment of capacity needs identified by local and national responders themselves should be created. They should build on existing initiatives for capacity building such as the successful DEPP (which includes Shifting the Power and Transforming the Surge capacity projects). Capacity-building should happen before, during and after a response. This multi-year funding should go hand-in-hand with a rapid response funding facility that prioritises agencies working with local and national organisations and makes sure funding lines allow local actors sufficient funds to support core costs beyond the response (such as adequate staffing, structure, and hardware).

- **Increase not only the resources available to local and national NGOs but also their engagement in decision-making in the governance of the funding mechanism.**

As indicated in the Grand Bargain, donors should eliminate barriers to local and national responders accessing international resources. They should also make greater use of funding tools that increase and improve assistance delivered by local and national responders, such as UN-led country-based pooled funds (CBPF); and NGO-led and other pooled funds, such as the those currently developed by the Start Fund in Bangladesh. There are currently 17 active CBPFs, which received a combined total of US\$706 million in 2016, which is set to increase to US\$1.9 billion USD by 2018.²² Local and national NGOs can access those funds – in 2016 they received almost 18% of all the funding, with percentages varying from country to country. But as important as the funding is that national and local NGO representatives play strong leadership roles in the CBPF Advisory Boards and Allocations Committees (they are currently present in 13 CBPFs) and are part of Humanitarian Country Teams, in order to participate in the strategic and financial decisions made during the humanitarian response.

Localisation should be guided by how effectively it addresses people's needs during an emergency. This implies a transformed and diverse humanitarian system that expects and accepts different scales and results from local and national responders. All humanitarian actors must recognise the complexities of the engagement of local actors with the humanitarian system, and responding at scale, as well as the need to maintain a core capacity for international response. At the same time, INGOs

need to reassess their strategic advantages and distinctive competences vis-à-vis smaller and more specialised local actors.²³ Donors have to incentivise localisation and redefine success as collaboration between different actors. Moving from vested interests, biases and competitive approaches to accepting that different forms of emergency response can co-exist and work together will result in clear winners: the women, men, girls and boys affected by conflicts and disasters.

1. ActionAid, CAFOD, Christian Aid, Oxfam GB and Tearfund (2013) Missed Opportunities: the case for strengthening national and local partnership-based humanitarian responses, pages 4-5.
2. Just five organisations – 0.1% of humanitarian NGOs worldwide – together represent roughly 31% of NGO humanitarian expenditures. In descending order by humanitarian expenditure during 2012-2014, these were: Médecins Sans Frontières, Save the Children, Oxfam, World Vision and International Rescue Committee (IRC). See ALNAP (2015) The State of the Humanitarian System. ALNAP Study. London: ALNAP/ODI, page 41.
3. King's College London, Humanitarian Policy Group at ODI and Feinstein International Center (2016) Planning from the Future: Is the Humanitarian System fit for Purpose?, page 31.
4. Development Initiatives (2016) Global Humanitarian Assistance Report 2016, page 70.
5. ActionAid (2016) On the frontline: catalysing women's leadership in humanitarian action, page 10.
6. King's College London, ODI and Feinstein International Centre (2016) Op cit, page 5.
7. ODI (2016) Time to let go, remaking humanitarian action for the modern era, page 5.
8. Development Initiatives (2016) Op cit, page 44. The majority of funding from government donors continues to come from countries in Europe (48%) and North and Central America (33%).
9. King's College London, ODI and Feinstein International Centre (2016), Ibid, page 60.
10. Schenkenberg, E. (2016) The challenges of localised humanitarian aid in armed conflict. Emergency gap series 03. Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF).
11. Catholic Agency for Overseas Development, Trócaire, Tearfund, Christian Aid, Oxfam (2016) Missed out: The role of local actors in the humanitarian response in the South Sudan conflict.
12. IASC (2010) Real-time evaluation in Haiti, three months after the earthquake of 12 January 2010, page 42.
13. ActionAid Haiti (2016) Hurricane Matthew: Six months after Istanbul. A briefing note on the Matthew Hurricane response following the World Humanitarian Summit.
14. Katherine Nightingale (2012) Building the future of humanitarian aid: local capacity, partnerships in disasters and the future of emergency aid, Christian Aid, page 31.
15. ActionAid (2016) Taking Action to Shift the Power: ActionAid's priorities for the World Humanitarian Summit.
16. More information: <https://startnetwork.org/start-engage/shifting-the-power>
17. More information: <https://startnetwork.org/start-engage/transforming-surge-capacity>
18. Sorcha O'Callaghan and Adele Harmer (2017) Grand Bargain Work-stream 2, Increasing support and funding tools for local and national responders, rapid mapping of relevant initiatives, humanitarian outcomes.
19. The Grand Bargain is an agreement signed in Istanbul during the WHS by more than 50 donors, UN agencies and INGOs. It sets out a shared understanding, opportunities, and common vision of how to improve the effectiveness and efficiency of humanitarian aid.
20. World Humanitarian Summit (2016), Commitments to Action, 23-24 May 2016, page 17.
21. IASC Humanitarian Financing Task Team (HFTT) 'Localisation Marker' working group: Definitions paper (Draft for Comments).
22. OCHA (2017) About country-based pooled funds.
23. King's College London, ODI and Feinstein International Centre (2016), Op cit, page 71.

Acknowledgements: This paper was written by Francisco Yermo. ActionAid acknowledges the contributions of staff at the International Secretariat. Special thanks to Sonya Ruparel, Kate Carroll, Anne Mitaru and Soren Ambrose.

COVER PHOTO: Women-led distribution of the food delivered by ActionAid Kenya in Isiolo County, during the 2017 drought response. ActionAid Kenya implements all community-based interventions of the response with local partners, organised in disaster management committees. CREDIT: ActionAid