

The Provision of More Support to First Responders

There is growing consensus that humanitarian response needs to be more locally rooted and focussed: “One that leverages the responsibilities and capacities of states, civil society and affected communities, supported by international actors, is one which will be more effective in responding to and mitigating the risks of crises.” This is not lost by those on the ground themselves.

Local and national civil society organisations play a critical role within the global aid architecture. They are the first responders to a rapid onset disaster; in many violent contexts they are often the only ones with reasonable access to affected communities. And they are the ones that stay, throughout the succession of relief, recovery, development and resilience-building.

In the run up to the World Humanitarian Summit (WHS), regional consultations called for reform of the international system which also included affirming the importance of national and local authorities and organizations taking the lead in humanitarian response and the need to be more accountable to affected people. It was reiterated that international humanitarian actors needed to include local capacity building measures as an integral part of their programming, which would help facilitate a timely and planned exit.

However, the regional consultations also pointed out a disconnect between the aspirations and the realities of the international humanitarian response. The need for the establishment of a Network for the global south, grew out of the realization of this increasing disconnect between the needs of disaster-affected communities and the actions of those who define the terms of the humanitarian system, which in turn compromises the effectiveness of the system.

The international humanitarian aid system has expanded and while volume of aid has increased with the needs growing exponentially, its delivery and effectiveness on the ground has not. Poorly designed and administered programmes with poor participation of and accountability to local communities, with high transaction costs in the delivery chain makes the current system non-transparent, expensive and relatively ineffective. The High Level Panel (HLP) of humanitarian financing appointed by the Secretary General of the United Nations, in its report observed: “Humanitarian aid must be disbursed with a minimum of bureaucracy as directly as possible to affected people.”

At the same time, capacity and accountability at national levels in the countries where disasters normally strike at regular intervals is weak. This is often used as the justification by international actors for weak engagement with national and local systems. This has been and must change!

NEAR (Network for Empowered Aid Response) is a movement of civil society organizations with a bold ambition – to reshape the top-down humanitarian and development system to one that is locally driven and owned, and is built around equitable, dignified and accountable partnerships. It was launched at the World Humanitarian Summit in Istanbul in May 2016. The network was founded to focus on this critical gap in the current system and contribute to strengthening the global humanitarian system leveraging the capacity of all stakeholders by promoting a more equitable and dignified humanitarian and development system.

In providing support to First Responders, we start at the basic premise of who or what constitutes first responders, in this case the ‘local’ community? Our definition of local stems from the following:



National NGOs: National and local Non-Governmental Organisations, who are locally rooted, founded, headquartered and who respond to crises in their communities and not affiliated to an international NGO;

Local NGOs: those operating in a specific, geographically defined, subnational area, without affiliation to either a national or international NGO; this grouping can also include community-based organisations, faith based and religious institutions.

Southern international NGOs: those not based in OECD DAC (except for Chile, Korea, Mexico and Turkey) member countries and originating from and carrying out operations in one or more developing countries and not affiliated to international NGO or branches of international NGOs;

All of these have the same goal of engaging in humanitarian action to serve the needs of their communities. Humanitarian action needs to be more effective and to reach affected people as directly as possible. For this to happen, the humanitarian system must move away from a centralized response dominated by international actors to a more diverse system with local and national actors. Recognising that the governments have the duty to respond and protect their people they should receive adequate and timely resources to meet the needs of the communities. There should be a robust national framework led by the government that provides a coordination and accountability mechanism. Such an accountability framework should ensure that affected communities are at the centre of policies and strategies. Meanwhile, non-governmental organizations, CSOs and private sector organizations should strengthen their advocacy for the mainstreaming of accountability to affected populations by all stakeholders.

The need to reform humanitarian financing practices has already been laid out in a number of key reports including Looking Beyond the Crisis (CAFOD, FAO, WVI – and supported by the IASC HFTT), a study by CAFOD Funding at the Sharp End, 2014, the Too Important to Fail High Level Panel report on Humanitarian Financing, and the Secretary General’s Agenda for Humanity.

Notwithstanding the critical role of local and national actors in prevention and risk reduction, and in crisis-response, between 2010 and 2014, local and national NGOs received only 1.6% of the total funding for humanitarian action given directly to NGOs, and only 0.3% of the total assistance reported to the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs’ Financial Tracking System (OCHA FTS). In 2014, that figure dropped to 0.2% (a total of US\$46.6 million out of US\$24.5 billion) and their share of total funds given to NGOs dropped to 1.2%. NEAR has been advocating for a target of 20% of humanitarian funding to go directly to local and national actors by 2020, the Grand Bargain commitment calls for a 25% target.

Local organizations should directly receive a greater portion and a better quality of humanitarian funding to respond more effectively to communities in need and to support the sustained capacity development of local organizations. If this is achieved, it would decrease inefficiencies by removing the multiple levels of sub-contracting and intermediaries and thus create efficiency in the system. Further, the long term sustained investment in capacity strengthening of local organizations will contribute to reducing real and perceived risks. Ultimately, the current lack of trust and negative narrative about local organizations needs to be changed to reflect a more balanced and principled partnership founded on respect, equity and trust.

What does this mean in practice?

- Multiyear funding also for local and national organisations so they can plan more effectively to respond to communities in which they work and live.



- Provision of a minimum of 10% overhead rate and appropriate staff allocation in budgets to ensure that organisations can retain good qualified staff who are able to respond. Unrestricted funding through a fair overhead rate is key conduit to capacity strengthening as it allows local organizations to invest in the capacity of their organizations. Therefore, it is imperative that UN agencies adopt a higher overhead rate for local organizations. Currently there is an unbalanced overhead rate system implemented by UN agencies that undermines the capacity of local organizations where either no overhead rate is provided to local responders or a lower rate than that provided to INGOs. If there is serious commitment to capacity strengthening and thus the reduction of risk associated in increasing financing to local organizations, then it is essential that a higher overhead rate be provided to local organizations.
- At least 5% of the budget allocated to local and national NGOs should be for investments in organizational capacity strengthening and emergency preparedness. Long term investment in the capacity of local and national organizations needs to be seen as a key part of delivery of services or goods to affected people. South Sudan, Somalia, and DRC are great examples of countries with protracted long term crisis where the aid system has not been able to produce, after over 25 years of presence strong cadre of local organizations able to lead and independently respond nationally or in their local areas operation.
- National pooled funds managed by national organizations and exclusively for local and national organizations should be established that will allow the achievement of the 25% GB target. Further, existing UN managed pooled funds at country level have to be made more accessible to local and national NGOs with 80% earmarked for local and national actors.
- Review existing donor rules and regulations to ensure that they are realistic and can be applied to local NGOs. Creation of a standardized reporting and financial compliance system for all UN and other donors would reduce the current demand on local organizations. Numerous capacity assessments and due diligence processes are a large capacity constraint on organizations that are already struggling with limited capacity.
- Enhanced transparency and traceability of funding that is truly being directly transferred to local and national organizations. This could be done through an agreed reporting and tracking mechanism such as IATI, OCHA FTS or others.

All actors that are dispersing funds, including local actors should track and transparently report annually how much has directly reached communities in need. Concrete targets, implementation and monitoring plans need to be established to ensure that commitments move beyond rhetoric and become a reality. There needs to be an action plan in place that is shared with all stakeholders. A transparent monitoring mechanism needs to be in place to track the commitments of donors, UN, INGOs and others and reviewed periodically.

All of this ultimately requires the need for partnership to be strengthened with closer dialogue between all stakeholders.



Questions

- What is WFP doing to ensure a genuine shift in approach towards empowering and strengthening the capacity of local and national actors? Is WFP committed to implementing some or all of the above recommendations?
- What are the obstacles that WFP and other UN agencies experience in truly pivoting towards genuinely supporting local leadership?
- What is it that WFP requires from their local partners in order to see such a pivot take place and successfully implemented?
- What is it that local partners would like to see WFP and others do differently or better support their organizations and their ability to respond to the needs of local communities?

