

# Localisation of humanitarian research



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Humanitarian research is dominated by institutions from the Global North (GN), while institutions and researchers from the Global South (GS) are often excluded from meaningful participation. Their lack of representation in humanitarian research publications fails to recognise the unique contributions of GS humanitarian research institutions (HRIs) and undermines the quality of humanitarian research, and, therefore, the quality of humanitarian response.

This brief summarises key points from a study that focuses on issues unique to the localisation of humanitarian research, combining a literature review with 42 interviews of humanitarian researchers from 20 countries. The study highlights the challenges GS HRIs face and opportunities for increased participation, providing recommendations for donors to better support them.

## The self-reinforcing triad of power, funding, and language

- Power and funding differentials between GN and GS are the main underlying barrier affecting the equitable participation of GS HRIs in humanitarian research.
- The advantage of GN institutions in accumulated wealth gives them the resources to out-compete GS HRIs for grants, making it difficult for GS HRIs to access direct funding, build their credibility, and set their research agendas, which perpetuates a cycle of underfunding and disempowerment.
- The “mental legacy of colonialism” has led to invisible biases in humanitarian research, valuing GN researchers and their methods more than those of their GS counterparts.
- Efforts to redistribute power in humanitarian research are not systematic. Individual researchers and donors willing to share power have made progress, but change is difficult within existing power structures and paradigms.
- Most humanitarian research grants are awarded by GN donors to GN entities. GS HRIs may be included in projects as token subcontractors to meet donor localisation criteria. Their exclusion from decision-making may result in neglect of certain areas and issues in humanitarian research.
- Funding for humanitarian research in a given

context dries up between crises, leaving GS HRIs with a specialisation in that context unable to retain their technical experts or to build their research and administrative infrastructure.

- Humanitarian research is dominated by English (and, to a lesser extent, French, and Spanish). The GN establishes and maintains its control and power in the humanitarian sector by using these languages for publications, donor reports, calls for proposals, and conferences, which can exclude some local actors. Language serves as a form of gatekeeping for securing research opportunities, publishing, and gaining credibility.

## Visibility

- GS researchers are underrepresented in academic journal articles and conferences, reinforcing the power differential between GN and GS researchers.
- GS researchers tend to focus more on the uptake of their research results within their local context, targeting affected populations and local decision-makers.
- Many GS HRIs see the co-production of research with affected people and returning study results to the participants as moral imperatives.
- But GS HRIs also value opportunities in internationally respected peer-reviewed journals.

## Partnerships and GS-led research

- Most GS HRIs must rely on GN HRIs/INGOs for research opportunities; these partnerships can link GS researchers with extended networks, provide training, and shield them from government sensitivities.
- The GN partner in a GN-GS partnership usually controls the resources, research agenda, and allocation of roles. GS researchers in these partnerships are often underpaid and employed as data collectors rather than equal partners.
- South to South (S2S) partnerships are often seen as more equitable, with easier communication and flexibility; they are rare due to donor funding going through GN HRIs/INGOs.
- GS HRIs are gradually leading more research, but GN-led research is still perceived as more credible/impactful.
- GS-led research is more likely to benefit the research population, to co-produce the research with the affected population, and to use innovative approaches.
- Donors often do not consider these advantages when comparing proposals

## Capacities

- GS HRIs struggle to build and maintain research capacities and qualified staff due to limited funds and long gaps between research grants.
- Many GS HRIs operate on small budgets with limited overheads that are easier to maintain between grants, making it difficult to comply with donor requirements.

## Contexts, and risks

- Context affects all aspects of research, including security risks GS researchers face.
- GS HRIs may face unique risks that continue long after the study, may extend to their families, and are compounded by double standards regarding acceptable levels of risk for GS vs. GN researchers.
- Local researchers bring a deep understanding of the context, but the definition of “local” is complex and contested.

## Ethics

- Lengthy and bureaucratic ethical review processes can delay research initiatives in humanitarian crises in which evidence needs are urgent if they are to benefit the study population.
- Accepted ethical research principles and procedures are based on Western values and may not align with

local norms; their adaptation is needed to ensure true participant protection.

- Adaptation of methods and processes acceptable to humanitarian crisis-affected populations is an area of research that requires further attention.

## Recommendations

The barriers GS HRIs face are systemic and profound, necessitating structural changes. Below are some key recommendations for GN donors, NGOs, and HRIs.

- Engage GS HRIs early in the research process and create space for them to set research agendas.
- Value innovative, contextually appropriate research methods, designs, and uptake strategies.
- Explore new paradigms for funding and supporting GS HRI research, avoiding evaluation criteria favoring GN methods and capacities, and adjust reporting requirements where necessary.
- Accommodate different languages and budget for translation where necessary.
- Provide practical support for publishing to increase the visibility of GS HRI research.
- Recognize that GS HRIs may require equal or larger investments than GN HRIs to build research capacity.
- Promote GS-led research and collaborations among GS HRIs. Support long-term co-learning partnerships between GN and GS HRIs.
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Please find the full report here

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