



Localizing the Response

**A Comparative Review of INGO Direct Service Delivery
and Partnerships with Local and National Actors**

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

AFEP	Association for Empowered Partnership
CAFOD	Catholic International Development Charity
CSO	Civil Society Organization
DEPP	Disasters and Emergencies Preparedness Project
DFID	Department for International Development (UK Government, also known as UKAID)
ECHO	European Commission for Humanitarian Aid
EU	European Union
GHP	Global Humanitarian Platform
HAP	Humanitarian Accountability Project
HPG	Humanitarian Policy Group
INGO	International Nongovernmental Organization
IOM	International Organization for Migration
IRC 2020	The International Rescue Committee Strategy 2015-2020
ISHA	Investing in Syrian Humanitarian Action
KSA	Knowledge, Skills and Approaches training (internal to the IRC)
L/NNGO	Local or National Non-governmental Organization
LPSC	Local Partnerships Steering Committee (internal to the IRC)
MSF	Medicins Sans Frontiers
NEAR	Network for Empowered Aid Response
ODI	Overseas Development Institute
OECD	Organization for Economic and Development Assistance
PLE	Project for Local Empowerment
SPMS	Sub Award Partnership Management System (internal to the IRC)
TI	Transparency International
UN	United Nations
USAID	United States Agency for Development and Disaster Assistance
USP	United States Programs (internal to the IRC)
WHS	World Humanitarian Summit

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Localization, partnerships and the IRC

The role of local actors in responding to conflict, disasters and other emergencies in their own countries has long been an essential part of the humanitarian architecture. Local groups are often first responders, organizing search and rescue operations or running community-based projects that meet the very immediate needs in a crisis. Local and national civil society and local government actors are also more likely to remain in a country or a community beyond the crisis period, when humanitarian funding sources have dried up and the international agencies have moved on.

In recent years, there has been increasing focus on the role of local actors in humanitarian crises. A progressive series of attempts have been made to highlight the inequities in the current system that prioritizes decision-making power and funding to international actors, and to put in place some measures to right the balance of power, influence and funding flows to benefit local responders and to appropriately recognize the role that they play. This “localization” movement gained significant traction with the Grand Bargain, presented at the World Humanitarian Summit in Istanbul in May 2016, which included ten commitments, the second of which concerns the localization of aid. This commitment calls for investment in multi-year support for institutional capacity development initiatives, the removal of barriers to partnership with local responders, increased support to local coordination mechanisms, increased tracking of funding that reaches local and national responders, and a **commitment to achieve at least 25% of humanitarian funding to local and national responders by 2020 “as directly as possible”**.

There is also a trend toward prioritization of locally-led responses by the IRC’s key institutional donors, including USAID, DFID and the EU. In addition, national governments are increasingly demanding that international humanitarian actors partner with local groups. In some cases, such as the recent Sulawesi earthquake and tsunami response in Indonesia, strict limitations are placed on the activities and presence of international NGOs and priority is given to local humanitarian actors.

Partnership between international NGOs such as the IRC and local or national actors is one means of facilitating the localization of humanitarian action. In January 2017, IRC had 214 sub-grants open with international, national and local partners with a total value of USD 363 million¹. IRC is a partnership organization. These partnerships cover a wide range of different actors and span an array of different contractual relationships. From local municipalities in Jordan and city authorities in Uganda, to diaspora and local civil society groups in Syria, through mentorship engagement with grass roots protection groups in South Sudan, **the IRC has been working with local partners to ground humanitarian responses in the local context since long before the Grand Bargain.** The IRC Strategy 2015 – 2020 (IRC2020) outlines strategic objectives for the ways in which the IRC seeks to pursue better outcomes for the people they serve – through pursuing greater effectiveness, scale and reach, speed and timeliness, responsiveness, and best use of resources. Based on the organization’s experience, IRC 2020 articulates the way that local partnerships can promote each of these objectives.

The IRC commissioned this review to examine the existing evidence whether, and under what circumstances, programs delivered in partnership between the INGOs and local actors (including local and national NGOs and other civil society groups, and local governance actors such as municipalities) produce better outcomes than programming delivered by international NGOs alone. Following an extensive literature review, an independent consultant carried out a series of 35 key informant interviews with local organizations, IRC staff and external experts in the localization and partnership fields. The results were analyzed using a content analysis tool and are summarized in this report.

KEY FINDINGS

There is a growing body of research on the localization of aid. However, the evidence base that looks critically at the humanitarian outcomes of projects carried out directly and exclusively by INGOs compared with those carried out in partnership between INGOs and local civil society or local governance actors, or carried out by those actors alone, is not well developed. During the course of this research, it was clear that while some narrative studies of the comparative benefits and costs of working in partnership with local NGOs as against direct implementation by INGOs are starting to emerge, there is very little quantitative research in this area, and no randomized control trials that look at the comparative benefits of working in partnership compared to direct work or service delivery by INGOs or local organizations alone.

However, there is a strong anecdotal and experience-based body of evidence that indicates that, under the majority of circumstances, partnerships between IRC and national and local actors will enable IRC to more effectively achieve its strategic objectives. The available evidence indicates that working with local groups who are first responders improves the speed and timeliness of a humanitarian response. Engaging with networks of local actors may improve the reach of humanitarian activities, and bringing grassroots knowledge and understanding into discussions on project design and decision making throughout the project management cycle is more likely to result in more appropriate assistance being provided to clients. Local and national organizations are able to offer more cost-efficient assistance than INGOs. There is a case to be made for caution in active internal conflicts where the impartiality of local actors cannot be assured, and where civil society is weak or non-existent. However, even under these circumstances, effective systems can mitigate associated risks, and consideration should routinely be given by the IRC to local civil society and local governance actors as potential partners in humanitarian action and as a part of understanding operational contexts. In addition, INGOs should take more active measures to ensure that they are not undermining local groups by hiring their staff or unintentionally pushing them out of coordination or funding decisions by excluding their voices.

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The literature reviewed for this report found that **partnerships between local and international organizations enhanced the relevance and appropriateness of humanitarian responses** – national and local actors' understanding of context and internal dynamics allowed them to shape programmes accordingly. They also enhanced the effectiveness of assistance, including by promoting accountability to disaster-affected populations. Partnerships were found to smooth the transition between the different elements of the disaster cycle – unlike the international system where phases such as resilience, response and recovery might be undertaken by different teams and organisations, local NGOs (LNGO) and national NGOs (NNGO) typically work in all of these spaces. This enables them to enhance connectedness and ensure that responses take place in ways that respect longer-term perspectives.

On other issues, however, the picture is more mixed: partnerships take time and resources to set up and manage and require a complex engagement. The majority of local civil society organizations are relatively localised, and have small-scale operations, meaning that issues of coverage were not straightforward – except in those few cases where the national partner happened to be a largescale NNGO. **There were no instances where the researchers concluded that humanitarian responses would best be carried out by INGOs directly, without forming partnerships with local actors**, however there were examples where some INGOs combined direct assistance in initial phases of a humanitarian response with increasing engagement with local actors over time. There were many voices putting forward the case for complementary responses involving both international and national/local actors. As one interview participant put it:

There were no instances where the researchers concluded that humanitarian responses would best be carried out by INGOs directly, without forming partnerships with local actors

“Local NGOs can reach crisis areas more quickly, but they are more likely to have issues getting the money. They are more likely to be flexible, but they are more likely to have a delay in accessing resources. In terms of logistics capacity and coverage, INGOs may have more resources but local NGOs are more likely to have connections and understand the market. There really is a case for working together.”²

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This research also looked in detail at the circumstances under which partnerships might best flourish, and where there might be a case for prioritizing direct delivery of humanitarian assistance by the IRC alone. Partnerships between local and international actors are identified as a key means of bringing in local actors into humanitarian response. What is now being uncovered in more detail is the importance of the quality of these partnerships in order to maximize those benefits. Factors such as mutual respect, the contracting process, the ways in which the partnership is initiated, formalized and managed have all emerged as key. The evidence further suggests that INGOs are most likely to maximize the benefits of partnerships when:

- Partnership is viewed as central to the INGO mission, values and approach;
- Partnerships are viewed in the broadest sense, and not limited only to contractual funding relationships;
- The partnership is put in place with the necessary attention to best practice and built carefully over time;
- Capacity strengthening is viewed as a mutually understood ongoing effort, threaded through the relationship between partners and flowing in both directions; and
- There is already a strong civil society in existence (although this is not a pre-condition).

The opportunities to improve outcomes through partnerships are realized less when:

- Local partners are viewed as implementing agencies, not equal contributors involved in strategy and design processes; and
- The partnership is limited to project to project financial transactions and not seen as a mutually beneficial ongoing relationship.

In terms of how the type of partnership – short and ad hoc vs. longer-term or strategic – influences the effectiveness, efficiency, responsiveness and best use of resources of humanitarian responses, there is a case for a hybrid approach to partnerships in humanitarian contexts, including some direct implementation by INGOs, some shorter-term contractual projects, and the establishment of longer-term partnerships over time. While the benefits of including local actors of all kinds into humanitarian response planning and programming as early as possible are clearly highlighted throughout this study, there is a case to be made for a “sliding scale” where INGOs continue to provide some of the speed and scale gains brought with their access to funding and previous experience in other humanitarian contexts by providing early assistance directly and where possible working with pre-existing local partners, and then allowing for some short term projects with national actors to form the basis for the emergence of a longer term partnership between local and international actors. The findings indicate that there is a role for both international and local actors in the context of humanitarian response – highlighting the need for complementary partnerships in the humanitarian field.

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Recommendations

The recommendations offered here build from the findings in the research that indicate that partnerships between local and international actors deliver better outcomes for clients than work carried out by international organizations working directly. There are a series of recommendations that would enable the IRC to invest in their partnerships with local actors. There are gaps in the available evidence around the role that partnerships between local and international actors might play in furthering localization and delivering better outcomes for clients and provided here are a series of recommendations on how the IRC might position itself as a contributor to this research base. Finally, given the finding that partnerships between local and international organizations are likely to produce better outcomes for clients than work directly implemented by an INGO alone, there are a series of recommendations on how partnerships might best be managed and supported in the IRC to enable IRC to be an effective partner and therefore to maximize the potential that partnerships offer.

Recommendations for developing quality partnerships:

1. Put the Principles of Partnership first – all IRC staff who are involved with local partners should have a baseline familiarity with the Principles of Partnership and ideally, attend relevant trainings on the skills needed to be a good partner.
2. Partnerships with local actors should make sufficient provision for their support costs and IRC should engage with partners to prioritize and fund capacity strengthening plans that target both IRC and the local partner.
3. Ensure that a guidance framework for partnership in the early onset period of emergencies is provided within IRC's partnership systems, including the following guidance:
 - a. Suggestions for emergency teams on how to recognize and engage with community based first responders, local civil society and local governance actors.
 - b. Protocols on the hiring of national staff who are already working for local or national NGOs or local governance groups (this could be done collectively with other INGOs and could include a complete prohibition or a system of ensuring the local group gives permission for the hire, for example).
 - c. Guidance on how to approach local actors respectfully and with a partnership mindset, starting out with the relationship and a genuine interest in their assessment of the crisis and ideas about the humanitarian response, before starting discussions about projects or subgranting.
 - d. Suggestions and ideas about how to effectively coordinate with local actors, taking into account that bilateral coordination may be necessary as some local actors might not engage in formal/UN coordination mechanisms.
 - e. Guidance on how to establish clearly what IRC's intentions are in partnership and what IRC might bring to the partnership besides funding (e.g. technical guidance, strategic links to new donors, the ability to second staff etc.).
 - f. Provide clarity on the role of local government structures and the IRC in emergencies – extending guidance on civil society mapping to include thinking on how national and local government can and should be engaged in humanitarian response and other relief activities.
 - g. Basic go/no go checklists and guidance on partnership in emergencies, including guidance on how to discern when and where a directly implemented, blended or primarily partnership focused approach is most appropriate.
4. Develop and deliver a specific partnership training for Emergency Unit staff, including guidance on mapping, vetting and partnering in emergencies.
5. Ensure that funding amounts that are sub-granted to local partners are tracked, as well as associated IRC costs involved in supporting partnership programs, so Grand Bargain commitments can be appropriately reported and published.
6. When projects are implemented with local groups, ensure that communications highlight the efforts of the local actors (unless security or other constraints apply).

Further research:

1. Document and share case studies from IRC partnership programs such as those in the Middle East, Asia, East and West Africa and the Balkans, in order to extract institutional learning and raise awareness of the extent and effectiveness of partnerships in the IRC.
2. Develop a simple 1-2 page internal paper highlighting what percentage of IRC funding and programming is already linked to local partnerships, and highlighting the partnership principles and the benefits of engaging with local actors for the IRC.
3. IRC could focus on researching the effectiveness of partnerships in places affected by crisis, as compared with many peer organizations that focus on poverty alleviation. IRC could bring their appetite to work in remote and hostile places, with a willingness to experiment and fail in order to learn, to bring a focus on learning from partnership work in contexts like Syria and Somalia.
4. IRC should continue to develop its series of internal efficiency and cost effectiveness comparisons between partnership programs and directly implemented work (this could also be done with other INGOs as part of a research consortium).
5. IRC and partners should conduct empirically sound research comparing the speed, effectiveness, reach, timeliness, appropriateness and efficiency of aid directly delivered by the IRC with aid delivered with local actors in partnership and by local actors alone. This could form the basis of a new evidence-based dialogue within the localization movement and position the IRC as a thought leader in this area.
6. The research above should prioritize humanitarian responses taking place in conflict areas that are still accessible, where the current partnership research is less prominent.
7. Examine the links between community feedback mechanisms and the delivery modality – use this data to find out more about how clients perceive the differences between a program delivered by the IRC and delivered by a partner.

Institutionalizing partnership approaches:

1. Given that partnership with local actors results in better outcomes for clients in humanitarian crises, IRC should seek out opportunities to engage in partnership programming and support local actors in these contexts wherever possible.
2. Sustained engagement with local actors, at all levels, from the field with local or national governments or civil society actors to global capitals with high profile groups like the NEAR Network, would continue to allow IRC to program in tough places and to influence policy and practice in a way that benefits local groups and the IRC, and ultimately produces better outcomes for clients.
3. IRC leadership should engage in the localization movement and identify what role IRC's partnership programming might play in furthering the role of local actors.
4. Highlight the importance of partnerships in leadership communications, noting the importance of partnership in IRC 2020 and encouraging an organizational commitment to localization.
5. Leadership to engage Country Directors and Regional leadership to be enthused and understand the impact of local partnerships on all their departments.
6. Partnership principles and practices should be integrated into recruitment strategies and targets, staff position descriptions, onboarding, performance management and training, including staff not exclusively devoted to partnership work. Country/USP leadership should be held accountable for ensuring partnership principles are upheld in their program.
7. IRC to develop a more public stance on the role of local actors in humanitarian emergencies, and more specifically on how the complementary role of national and international actors can deliver best results.
8. A clear IRC position or "theory of change" to be developed, which outlines IRC's engagement with local actors in all their different forms and articulates how, why, when and to achieve what end IRC engages with local actors.

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A Call to Action

This report marks a further step toward bringing an IRC lens to the partnership dialogue. To date, much of the research and advocacy in this area either assumes that localization is a positive initiative, or presents concerns or suggested restrictions that are also based on assumptions rather than facts. The debate is largely normative rather than evidence driven. To avoid “localization” becoming the next aid industry buzzword to fall by the wayside, and to better understand which program approaches deliver the best outcomes and under what circumstances, it is essential that the localization debate is reinforced with a solid evidence base that clearly demonstrates how the localization of a humanitarian response can lead to improved outcomes for clients. IRC is in a great position to use its own experiences in partnerships, and its rigorous commitment to research and evidence, to lead the charge on developing that evidence base.

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INTRODUCTION

Background

Working in partnership with local and national civil society organizations is fundamental to the IRC's mission to help people whose lives and livelihoods are shattered by conflict and disaster to survive, recover and gain control of their future.

The IRC Strategy 2015 – 2020 (IRC2020) articulates strategic objectives for the ways in which the IRC seeks to pursue better outcomes for the people they serve – through pursuing greater effectiveness, scale and reach, speed and timeliness, responsiveness, and best use of resources. Civil society and government partnerships play an increasingly important role in the IRC's work globally³, and this trend is projected to continue, given the central role local partnership can play in advancing IRC 2020 and the prioritization of locally-led responses by the IRC's key institutional donors, including USAID, DFID and the EU. One of the most notable commitments of all major donors, UN agencies, and NGOs in the Grand Bargain at the 2016 World Humanitarian Summit is to:



“Achieve by 2020 a global, aggregated target of at least 25 per cent of humanitarian funding to local and national responders as directly as possible to improve outcomes for affected people and reduce transactional costs.”

Authentic partnerships build local civil society, support local governance structures and ensure that the impact of the IRC's work endures.

An Evidence-Driven Approach

This study was commissioned by the IRC to review the available evidence for whether and under what conditions working in partnership with local, and national civil society organizations may promote the strategic objectives from IRC 2020, and result in better outcomes for clients. This evidence-driven approach is motivated by IRC's strategic commitment to be outcome-focused and evidence-based in planning, business development and program design. The study was carried out by an external consultant between March and August 2018, and was based around the research questions shown below, which map onto the IRC's strategic objectives of effectiveness, scale and reach, speed and timeliness, responsiveness, and best use of resources:

1. How is partnership typically defined in the international aid literature?
2. Does partnership lead to greater improvement in outcomes than direct delivery? (Effectiveness)
3. Do services delivered through partnership reach a larger number of beneficiaries? In a shorter time? (Scale and Reach; Speed and Timeliness)
4. Is there greater alignment between service delivery and the needs and preferences of beneficiaries where partnerships exist? (Responsiveness)
5. Does working in partnership enable more cost-efficient assistance (more outputs, or more persons at lower cost)? Are outcomes and outputs more sustainable when brought about in partnership? (Best Use of Resources)
6. How does the type of partnership – short and ad hoc vs. longer-term, strategic – influence the effectiveness, efficiency, responsiveness and best use of resources of our responses?

Methodology

Data collection included an extensive literature review, and a series of 35 key informant interviews with local organizations, IRC staff and external experts in the localization and partnership fields. The raw data were analyzed using NVivo 12, a qualitative analysis software tool. Key informant interviews were transcribed and an analysis of both transcripts and recordings were carried out. The consultant took a directed approach to the content analysis, using the research questions as guidance for initial coding. The output of the content analysis lent structure to the final analysis of the raw data and allowed the most relevant themes to emerge. These themes are summarized in narrative form in this literature review.

The key informants who were interviewed for this research include the individuals below. This report was also informed by a partnership feedback exercise with IRC's local partners in Myanmar, Lebanon, the Balkans and Greece, and these local partners provided significant input to this report.

Ali Wood, Humanitarian Support Manager at Tearfund

Alice Hawkes, Risk Mitigation and Inclusion Advisor, IRC

Alicia Fitzpatrick, Deputy Country Director for Programs, IRC Sierra Leone

Anne Street, Head of Humanitarian Policy, CAFOD

Barnaby Willits-King, Overseas Development Institute

Dr Nyunt Nyaing, former Chief of Party, Project for Local Empowerment, IRC

Emily Whitehead, Partnership Coordination Advisor, Mercy Corps

Geoffrey Cressman, Deputy Country Director, IRC Balkans

Gunther Pratz, Deputy Director, Emergency Preparedness, IRC

Jason Phillips, former Vice President International Strategy and Partnerships, IRC

Kate Moger, Regional Vice President, Great Lakes, IRC

Kathryn Hoeflich, Deputy Director for Partnerships (Syria and Jordan), IRC

Lydia Poole, Humanitarian Outcomes

Mandana Ashfar, Independent Consultant focused on local partnerships

Martha Wilkes, Mercy Corps' South and Central Syria Humanitarian Director

Milica Mancic Stojkovic, Partnership and Communications Manager, IRC Balkans

Mohammed Almadi, Syria National Alliance Coordinator

Mohammed Almadi, Syria NGO Alliance Coordinator

Munther Ballad, UOSSM

Paul Harvey, Humanitarian Outcomes

Rick Estridge, Director Training and Curriculum Development, IRC

Samer Saliba, Urban Technical Advisor, IRC

Sanjay Gurung, Director of Governance and Partnerships, Mercy Corps

Sean Healy, Mediciens Sans Frontiers Holland

Sema Genel Karaosmanoglu, Executive Director, Hayata

Destek Derneği/Support to Life. Also Chair of the NEAR Network

Shane Scanlon, Regional Partnerships Director (Middle East), IRC

Smurti Patel, Global Mentorship Initiative

Sudhanshu S Singh, Executive Director, Humanitarian Aid International

Syria Relief and Development (individual asked not to be named)

Vanessa Ortiz, Senior Local Partnerships Advisor, IRC

Veronique Barbalet, Overseas Development Institute

Wendy Guyot, ISHA Director, Mercy Corps

Wesam Sabaanah, Executive Director, Jafra Foundation for Relief and Youth Development

Zoe Daniels, IRC Deputy Regional Director for the Middle East

Localization and Partnership

The role of local actors in responding to conflict, disasters and other emergencies in their own countries has long been an essential part of the humanitarian architecture. Local groups are often first responders, organizing search and rescue operations or running community-based projects that meet the very first immediate needs in a crisis. Local and national civil society groups and local government are also more likely to remain in a country or a community beyond the crisis period, when humanitarian funding sources have dried up and the international agencies have moved on, and there is a case to be made that the aid provided by local actors is often faster, cheaper and more appropriate to the needs of local communities. Regardless of the value of the contribution of local organizations, only an estimated 2% of international humanitarian funding goes directly to local or national NGOs⁴. While a much larger percentage of funding, perhaps as much as 20%, is filtered down to local and national NGOs (L/NNGOs) in the form of “second level” funding (administered by a UN agency or an international NGO and then sub-granted to a local actor), the available data on these funding levels is patchy and in many cases not tracked at all⁵. The traditional international aid architecture, formed of donor governments and funding agencies, the UN system, international and national civil society groups, is currently arranged and funded from the top down:

“At present the system favours humanitarian actors in inverse order to their proximity to crises: international actors have the greatest access to funding and decision making power which they pass on to national actors taking a percentage; national organisations, usually based in capitals come next as they have built up relations with donors in-country and with UN agencies and international NGOs; finally the local organisations, which are the first responders, present before during and after the crises, have the least access to humanitarian funding, the least opportunities to influence and determine humanitarian response, and the least opportunity to develop their capacities, knowledge and humanitarian practice and to prepare for and prevent disasters.”⁶

In recent years, there has been increasing focus on the role of local actors in humanitarian crises. A progressive series of attempts have been made to highlight the inequities in the current system and to put in place some measures to right the balance of power, influence and funding flows to benefit local responders and to appropriately recognize the role that they play. This “localization” movement gained significant traction with the Grand Bargain, presented at the World Humanitarian Summit in Istanbul in May 2016, which included ten commitments, the second of which concerns the localization of aid:

“More support and funding tools for local and national responders”.

This commitment calls for investment in multi-year support for institutional capacity development initiatives, the removal of barriers to partnership with local responders, increased support to local coordination mechanisms, increased tracking of funding that reaches local and national responders, and a commitment to at least 25% of humanitarian funding to local and national responders by 2020, as directly as possible⁷. The Grand Bargain commitments add momentum to a series of initiatives around localization, including the Charter for Change, the NEAR Network, and the Alliance for Empowering Partnerships, all supporting the notion that that aid should be “as local as possible and as international as necessary.”⁸ These movements propose a series of measures which constituent parts of the international humanitarian system should adopt in order to rebalance the system more in favour of local and national actors, so that a recalibrated system engages the relevant strengths of international, national and local actors⁹ and power, agency and funding moves to actors closer to the ground.

The START Network and DFID’s Disasters and Emergencies Preparedness Project (DEPP) have put forward the ‘7 Dimensions of Localization’¹⁰ in an effort to focus attention around the Grand Bargain commitments and provide more structured guidance to international and local actors as they focus on meeting them. These recommendations are provided in full at Annex A of this report. These include recommendations around funding, coordination, capacity enhancement, participation of local actors and local communities, the establishment of partnerships, visibility and the inclusion of local actors on global policy platforms and in advocacy initiatives.

This movement toward localization of aid has also been supported by donors. The US Government’s “USAID Forward” reform initiative ran from 2010–2016, embracing new partnerships, investing in the catalytic role of innovation, and demanding a renewed focus on results. In 2017, the Agency determined that the work advanced under USAID Forward had largely been institutionalized and the initiative was discontinued. The UK’s Department for International Development is a key supporter of the Grand Bargain, and ECHO is currently funding the NEAR Network¹⁴ to work with national NGOs in five countries, Nepal, Turkey, South Sudan, DRC and Somalia,

amongst other demonstrable commitments to building up local responders.

How is partnership defined in the international aid literature?

The localization movement encourages collaborative partnerships between international and national or local actors as one means of promoting the emergence of a humanitarian system that is fairer, more closely linked to local actors, and ultimately better calibrated to meet the needs of communities affected by humanitarian crises. “Partnerships” between international NGOs and local actors, including local and national NGOs (L/NNGOs), informal civil society groups, local and national government bodies and municipalities have been commonplace for decades. Some INGOs work almost exclusively with local actors, and others like the IRC dovetail their directly implemented programming with work carried out in partnership.

The Humanitarian Accountability Project (HAP) defines humanitarian partnership as **“a formal arrangement for working together to achieve a specific goal, where each partners’ roles and responsibilities are set out in a written agreement. Different organizations have different kinds of partners. Partners can be small, community based organizations or large, national institutions. A humanitarian partnership is one in which two or more bodies agree to combine their resources to provide essential goods or services for disaster survivors”**.¹⁵

CARE defines partnership as **“a relationship that results from putting in practice a set of principles that create trust and mutual accountability. Partnerships are based on shared vision, values, objectives, risk, benefit control, and learning as well as joint contribution of resources. The degree of interdependence is unique to each relationship, depends on context, and evolves over time.”**

Mercy Corps’ partnership approach also clarifies what they do *not* consider a true partnership – a transactional, “pass through” relationship where a local organization is considered to be an implementer of an INGO’s project and is not involved in project design or strategy¹⁶. This kind of purely contractual relationship is often given as an example of poor practice, even exploitation, by local NGOs such as this Ivorian organization quoted in a recent article:

“We partnered on a food distribution project with an international non-governmental organization (INGO), on a United Nations agency project. The following year we applied directly to the United Nations agency. The INGO said they ought to get the project and deal directly with the United Nations agency in Geneva. They got the project but were not able to implement it in the field, so they got back to us and subcontracted us for the very same project. This is no partnership. It is abuse and exploitation. We do the work, they get the funds”.¹⁷

Locally led groups such as NEAR, the Alliance for Empowering Partnerships, and coordination groups such as the Cox’s Bazar CSO & NGO Forum¹⁸ and the Syrian NGO Alliance¹⁹ are increasing in power and influence, and one of their areas of focus is the nature of the partnerships between international and national actors. More than ever before, local NGOs are becoming outspoken advocates for partnerships in the fullest sense, where international partners and local groups come together to jointly plan and develop programs, share their visions, appropriately share funding streams, and collaborate in a way that brings together the respective strengths of both local and international groups.



WHAT IS PARTNERSHIP?

*“Partnership is the highest stage of working relationship between different people brought together by commitment to common objectives, bonded by long experience of working together, and sustained by subscription to common visions”*¹¹

*“Authentic’ partnership is associated with the following characteristics; long-term, shared responsibility, reciprocal obligation, equality, mutuality and balance of power”*¹²

*“...a dynamic collaborative process between institutions that brings mutual though not necessarily symmetrical benefits to the parties engaged in the partnership. Partners share ownership of the projects. Their relationship is based on respect, trust, transparency and reciprocity. They understand each other’s cultural and working environment. Decisions are taken jointly after real negotiations take place between the partners. Each partner is open and clear about what they are bringing to the partnership and what their expectations are from it. Successful partnerships tend to change and evolve over time”*¹³

Governments and local governance structures such as municipalities are also advocating for greater control and involvement in humanitarian response – for example, the Government of Nepal limited registration for international NGOs and visas for international staff in the aftermath of the 2015 earthquake, actively controlling the humanitarian response and requiring international NGOs to partner with local or national NGOs, and the Government of Indonesia have put in place similar restrictions in the 2018 Sulawesi earthquake and tsunami response²⁰. In Lebanon and Jordan, local municipalities have emerged as one of the key responders to the influx of Syrian, Palestinian and Iraqi refugees, and partnerships between international actors and these local actors have been found to produce more sustainable, effective outcomes for refugees²¹. Local actors suggest²² that partnerships between local, national and international humanitarian responders (contrasted with “contractual” relationships) can contribute to the shift in power, agency and funding to local actors outlined in the Grand Bargain, which suggests that the diversity of the humanitarian community is an asset and that if we can build on each other’s comparative advantages and complement each other’s contributions, humanitarian responses will be strengthened.

There have been various efforts to provide standard guidance around the quality of partnerships between local and national/ local civil society groups, and these reflect both relationship and results-oriented factors. The Global Humanitarian Platform (GHP) adopted the Principles of Partnership in 2007, with IRC endorsing these Principles soon afterwards. The GHP was originally set up in 2006 by leaders of 40 humanitarian organizations including NGOs, UN agencies, the International Organization for Migration (IOM), the World Bank, and the Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement. The Principles of Partnership (Equality, Transparency, Results-Oriented Approach, Responsibility and Complementarity) were an attempt to acknowledge some gaps within the humanitarian reform process, which included neglecting the role of local and national humanitarian response capacity. The Principles of Partnership have been integrated into the IRC’s Sub-Award Partnership Management System (SPMS) and also inform the Knowledge, Skills and Approaches training that is offered to IRC staff working with local partners.



KEY FINDINGS:

a definition of partnerships in the humanitarian aid context

IRC does not currently have a commonly agreed institutional definition of partnership. In reviewing the literature, and reflecting upon the latest thinking from the localization movement, it can be proposed that “humanitarian partnerships” can be defined as:

A relationship between two or more parties – actors in a humanitarian context could include UN agencies, local or national governments, municipalities or city authorities, where there is a jointly defined purpose and shared goal;

A formally recognized relationship (that does not necessarily include a financially transactional relationship);

Shared ownership of project plans and outcomes;

Exemplifying the partnership principles in all dealings with each other, including equality, transparency, results-orientation, responsibility and complementarity;

A relationship where the balance of power is shared and both parties are clear on what they bring to the partnership.

What do partnerships mean for the IRC?

“The work of PLE in Myanmar and Thailand for me represents the ambition the IRC should have for working in partnership. It shows that when we value and invest in partners’ knowledge and capacities we can have lasting impact at scale.”

Sanna Johnson, Regional Vice-President, Asia, IRC

In January 2017, IRC had 214 sub-grants open with international, national and local partners with a total value of USD 363 million.²³ IRC is a partnership organization. These partnerships cover a wide range of different actors, and span an array of different contractual relationships. From local municipalities in Jordan and city authorities in Uganda, to diaspora and local civil society groups in Syria, through mentorship engagement with grass roots protection groups in South Sudan, the IRC has been committed to working with local partners to ground humanitarian responses in the local context since long before the Grand Bargain. Effective local partnerships enable the IRC to pursue the strategic objectives set out in IRC 2020, resulting in more effective, responsive and durable assistance that reaches more people and produces better outcomes for clients. Investing in local civil society organizations not only recognizes those organizations as allies in achieving the IRC’s core outcomes, but also as catalysts and drivers of change. Partnerships are highlighted in IRC 2020 as an area of focus, and in 2017 IRC introduced the Sub-Award Partner Management System to establish policy, process, guidance and tools to promote effective sub-award partnerships and produce the best outcomes for clients by:

From local municipalities in Jordan and city authorities in Uganda, to diaspora and local civil society groups in Syria, through mentorship engagement with grass roots protection groups in South Sudan, the IRC has been committed to working with local partners to ground humanitarian responses in the local context since long before the Grand Bargain.

- enabling the IRC to pursue its strategic vision with respect to local and national partnerships;
- identifying, allocating and appropriately mitigating programmatic, operational, financial and reputational risk;
- promoting greater accountability for effective and efficient delivery of aid;
- establishing a strong contractual foundation for strategic partnerships that extend beyond program implementation to incorporate mutual capacity strengthening and broader collaboration;
- appropriately catering for the diversity of sub-award partnerships that the IRC engages in, as well as the variety of contexts that the IRC operates in; and
- promoting the core partnership principles of equality, transparency, complementarity, responsibility, and a results-oriented approach in all our interactions with partners.

The Sub-Award Partnership Management System was designed for use by the IRC to support partnerships with local and national civil society organizations, including organizations that are not registered by the relevant national government. IRC also embeds work on partnerships in its technical units, providing guidance on local partnerships, urban planning and engagement with municipalities and local government, working with local health authorities, and building up the capacity of local protection groups.

In country offices and throughout USP offices, IRC works with local partners at varying scales, and several significant programs in Thailand, Myanmar, Syria, the Balkans and other areas have been predominated by work with local groups.





While it is a signatory to the Grand Bargain, IRC has not been at the forefront of the support for the localization movement. While IRC programming globally involves a considerable percentage of work with local partners, there is not clear consensus on the rationale on how and when to engage with local partners. This initial study, involving a review of the available literature and a series of interviews with key informants active in partnership work with the IRC or in the localization movement, presents an opportunity for IRC to bring its unique position to the partnership dialogue with other actors and within the agency itself.

IRC's commitment to evidence-based humanitarian work is second to none. Within the partnership dialogue, there is a great opportunity for IRC to put into action the key differentiators described in IRC 2020 and to find itself in a unique position globally in the partnership space.

This report takes a first look at the evidence base that exists in the currently available literature and from anecdotal accounts from subject matter experts around the research questions, and attempts to summarize the available evidence that contrasts humanitarian action predominantly delivered through international actors with one delivered in partnership with, or led by local actors in terms of effectiveness, scale and reach, speed and timeliness, responsiveness, and best use of resources.

Conclusions and gaps in available evidence will be summarized at the end of each section, along with recommendations for future research. A final section will present some of the evidence base around the circumstances where partnerships between local and international humanitarian actors might flourish, and where they might best be avoided. A brief discussion follows of the circumstances under which direct delivery by INGOs might be most appropriate, particularly when direct delivery by INGOs is part of a strategy which takes into account the role of local actors and gradually engages with local actors over time. A separate summary brief will present these findings and recommendations to an IRC leadership audience is included at the end of this document.

MAIN FINDINGS

Does working in partnership lead to greater improvement in outcomes than direct delivery by international NGOs?

“Not as a given. It’s not a simple equation. I think there is a pre-investment that is required – an investment into a relationship. I’m not talking about capacity strengthening – I’m talking about a relationship. I am convinced that this will lead to better outcomes for clients, more speed, effectiveness, and value for money. But it’s something you have to invest in”.

Gunther Pratz, Deputy Director Emergency Preparedness, IRC

Supporters of localization often start with the assumption that when international actors work in partnership with local and national groups, this will result in better outcomes for clients than when aid is delivered primarily by international agencies directly. However intuitive this seems, rigorous and systematic evidence that demonstrates comparative benefits of the partnership approach or the directly implemented INGO approach is hard to come by. The debate around the extent to which partnerships with local organizations contribute to improvements in humanitarian response is polarized, with proponents of localization insisting that every response should be led and managed as locally as possible (with partnerships between INGOs and local actors being one means of increasing localization), and sceptics pointing to the many perceived challenges faced in developing effective partnerships between LNGOs, NNGOs, local or national governments and INGOs, including assumed low levels of local capacity, strict donor compliance guidelines that local agencies find difficult to follow, and oft quoted but unsubstantiated concerns around corruption²⁴.

Throughout this research, it became apparent that while there is a growing interest in localization of humanitarian aid, there have not been many detailed empirical studies that examine the comparative benefits of humanitarian assistance delivered directly by INGOs and humanitarian assistance delivered by local actors, or by local actors in partnership with INGOs. Partly this is due to the complexity of the humanitarian contexts involved – the idea of setting up some kind of randomized control trial or similarly robust study is extremely challenging in fast-paced emergency contexts. Some information can be drawn from sources of evidence including grey literature, unpublished research, project evaluations, and relevant staff experiences. However, most of the anecdotal evidence that does exist strongly supports the case for partnerships and suggests that humanitarian responses are strengthened when local actors are involved – whether that be as independent actors, or through the means of a partnership with an international NGO.

Emerging evidence that makes an empirical evaluation of the impact of partnership work in humanitarian response comes from the “Missed Opportunities” series of studies commissioned by a consortium of INGOs including CAFOD, Oxfam, Tearfund, Christian Aid and ActionAid. The first study²⁵ looked at the humanitarian efforts in Kivu (Democratic Republic of Congo), the Haiti earthquake, the Horn of Africa food crisis in Kenya, and the Pakistan floods of 2010. Findings are organized according to the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development Assistance Committee criteria for evaluating humanitarian assistance, examining how partnerships contributed to relevance/appropriateness, effectiveness, efficiency, coverage, and connectedness of response efforts in the different settings. Further studies in the series used the same OECD criteria, and examined the effectiveness of partnerships between INGOs, LNGOs and NNGOs in the Typhoon Haiyan response in the Philippines²⁶, in South Sudan²⁷ and in response to the Nepal earthquake²⁸.

The original Missed Opportunities report found that partnerships between local and international organizations enhanced the relevance and appropriateness of humanitarian responses – national and local actors’ understanding of context and internal dynamics allowed them to shape programs accordingly. They also enhanced the effectiveness of assistance, by ensuring accountability to disaster-affected populations. Partnerships were found to smooth the transition between the different elements of the disaster cycle – unlike the international system where tasks such as resilience, response and recovery might be undertaken by different teams and organisations, LNGOs and NNGOs typically work in all of these spaces. This enabled them to enhance connectedness and ensure that responses take place in ways that respect longerterm perspectives. On other issues, however, the picture is more mixed: partnerships take time and resources to set up and manage and require a complex engagement which is not amenable to simplistic measurements of efficiency and value for money.

The majority of partners are relatively localised, and have small-scale operations, meaning that issues of coverage were not straightforward – except in those few cases where the national partner happened to be a large-scale NNGO. There were no instances where the researchers concluded that humanitarian responses would best be carried out by INGOs directly, without forming partnerships with local actors, however there were examples where some INGOs combined direct assistance in initial phases of a humanitarian response with increasing engagement with local actors over time.

A new phase of this research started in 2018 with the “Accelerating Localization Through Partnerships” program, which is implemented by the Missed Opportunities consortium and aims to foster the power of strong partnerships between national and local NGOs and INGOs to strengthen local leadership of humanitarian response and advance the localization agenda in Myanmar, Nepal, Nigeria, and South Sudan²⁹. Some early findings from this research highlight the lack of research focusing on the role of partnerships between international and national actors:

“Hundreds of reports since the World Humanitarian Summit have focused on localization; far fewer focus on partnership. Literature on how to practically facilitate processes, fit-for-partnership and adequate governance of collaboration, tailored to the aid sector across different settings, is almost nonexistent. No report to date appears to have mapped the processes and business models of NGOs operating in humanitarian settings, to lead to the proposal of a set of flexible and adaptive partnership models that facilitate and accelerate local leadership of humanitarian response.”³⁰

The early findings from the Accelerating Localization through Partnerships program indicate that the involvement of local agencies always benefits the overall humanitarian response. Partnerships between local and international actors are identified as a key means of bringing in local actors into humanitarian response. What is now being uncovered in more detail is the importance of the quality of these partnerships in order to maximize those benefits. Factors such as mutual respect, the contracting process, the ways in which the partnership is initiated, formalized and managed have all emerged as key. For many local agencies, the first measure of the quality of a partnership is the quality of the relationship between the two organizations. The director of a local NGO in south Asia laid out her own principles that guided her agency’s collaboration with international NGOs³¹:

- ‘Coffee first’: She emphasized the necessity to first build the relationship, and to explore the challenges in the environment and whether there was a common vision about what to try and address, and how:
“We don’t want to start the conversation with ‘the project’, we may end the conversation with that. We first need to build relationship and can talk about what the issues are, only later can the money question come in. Our ultimate goal is positive change, not the delivery of projects, or maintaining an office or keeping our cash flow going... or even own institutional survival.”
- ‘Relation before negotiation’: As she put it: “partnership is a conversation about how together **we can affect positive change, not a negotiation over resources.**”

This focus on relationships first is essential to developing trust between local and international partners. This idea of trust and relationship building is recurrent in the literature and seems to be particularly important to local actors as an indicator of the quality of partnership itself. International NGO staff were found to be more likely to focus on project results and outputs as a measure of the effectiveness of the partnership³². The current chair of the NEAR network made the following recommendations in order to maximize the effectiveness of partnerships between international and L/NNGOs, and/or national or local governance structures³³:

- Be clear about what both parties bring to the table when first establishing partnerships between INGOs and local partners;
- Where possible, engage first in discussions about the context, the needs, and what each organization thinks would best respond to humanitarian crisis in that location. Only then should financing projects be discussed;
- Approach local actors with respect and curiosity. Just because a local NGO or a local governance group does not speak your language or resemble an international NGO does not mean that it has nothing to offer; the way the organization works with a local partner is really a matter of organizational culture. Is there an assumption that you have the power because you have the money? That determines the quality of

the partnership and what you do. Many INGOs cannot articulate what their added value is, apart from being able to access the funding. Make sure that your staff go into a meeting with a local partner armed with the right attitude and not assuming that they hold the power.

The focus on the importance of developing and maintaining strong relationships between partners (international and local) was also identified by IRC's local partners in Myanmar during a recent partnership feedback in-country

interview – **“Our partnership has been long, and we’ve become like family.” Another partner discussed IRC’s approach with partners: “IRC’s partnership approach lets us have more ownership in implementation of the project which gives us more accountability.”**³⁴

There is an opportunity for the IRC to become more involved in critically examining the factors that do lead to successful humanitarian programming, and to bring more clarity on what respective parties including international NGOs, local or national NGOs, local or national governance structures might contribute to humanitarian programming in different contexts. There is also an opportunity for the IRC, along with other international NGOs, to examine how their current and future partnerships with local actors might be improved in order to maximize the potential that these partnerships present to maximize benefits for clients.

This study makes an initial attempt to collate the available evidence around each of the IRC strategic objectives of scale and reach, speed and timeliness, responsiveness, and best use of resources. These findings are discussed in greater detail below.

In conclusion, there is a short discussion of the circumstances under which partnerships between local, national and international actors might best flourish or where they might be best avoided (or at least given careful consideration). Recommendations for three levels of next steps are then provided, including short- and longer-term areas where IRC could focus organizational attention onto the quality of its partnerships, and a series of recommendations for future research.



KEY FINDINGS:

Research into localization of humanitarian action is growing – however there are few studies that look at the comparative benefits of humanitarian action by INGOs directly vs. humanitarian responses that include local actors, either independently working or in partnership with INGOs.

The evidence base that does exist, most notably the work carried out by the Missed Opportunities consortium, and in grey literature, unpublished research, project evaluations, and relevant staff experiences, strongly suggests that humanitarian responses are strengthened when international actors work in partnership with local actors (when compared to international actors responding directly).

There is a growing need to examine the quality of partnerships – how they are formed, managed, and funded. Partnerships that are developed and supported with partnership principles in mind are most likely to realize improved outcomes for clients.

Relationships between INGOs and local actors are one of the key determinants of an effective partnership.

Do services delivered through partnership reach a larger number of beneficiaries? In a shorter time?

“Local NGOs can reach crisis areas more quickly, but they are more likely to have issues getting the money. They are more likely to be flexible, but they are more likely to have a delay in accessing resources. In terms of logistics capacity and coverage, INGOs may have more resources but local NGOs are more likely to have connections and understand the market. There really is a case for working together.”

Martha Wilkes, Save the Children Emergency Team Leader, Bangladesh

Speed and Timeliness

Throughout the literature, it is clear that community groups and smaller first responders are a key element in the humanitarian response to rapid onset conflict or natural disaster, but their efforts are often undocumented and such groups can become quickly pushed to the side by the arrival of the international community. There is little doubt that the involvement of local actors enhances the speed of a humanitarian response. In many cases, the argument could be made that local actors are often the only responders to a humanitarian crisis, and it is only when a certain number of people are affected, or when a crisis attracts international attention for political reasons that the international community is mobilized.

Donors have also acknowledged the role of local communities in early response to emergencies. ECHO's guidelines note that: **“Local actors are usually the first responders in a crisis... Local community capacity building is a crucial element in a transitional context (post-crisis situation) and necessary to ensure the sustainability of disaster risk reduction efforts.”**³⁵ and DFID makes this commitment: **“Immediate family, neighbours and members of the local community are the first to help those around them when disaster strikes. The UK will help strengthen these local actors' ability to respond.”**³⁶ For example in Greece, local volunteer groups were some of the first to provide some support to the refugees arriving on their shores:



“The locals were there on the beach, pulling people out of the water. They were there with flashlights at night, looking for boats as they arrived. They were in organized groups and sometimes just a few concerned individuals. People were shocked by what was happening on their doorsteps. But we didn't really know how to work with them – they didn't know anything about international refugee law, or our standards and protocols, and we didn't know much about who they were or what their communities were thinking about these refugees. We were kind of at odds with each other, at the same time really appreciating their commitment and what they were trying to do.”³⁷

Sometimes these groups are also overwhelmed by the crisis, and in many cases they do not look like traditional aid agencies and so tend to be overlooked by surge INGO staff arriving in country with a mandate to respond rapidly. It was evident throughout this review that there is a disconnect between proponents of the localization approach and the typical surge capacity staff that are hired to work with INGOs and come in to establish rapid responses to crisis, who are accustomed to directly implemented programming, notwithstanding that they themselves are seeing local actors responding before them.

In Bangladesh, local civil society have been instrumental in providing first line assistance to Rohingya refugees arriving into the Cox's Bazaar area. However, a recent report by the Cox's Bazaar CSO and NGO Forum (CCNGF) and COAST examined the extent to which the international community has met their Grand Bargain commitments as they entered into the Rohingya response³⁸. They found that LNGOs had little role in decision making processes or planning, INGOs were often opting for direct implementation and undermining the contribution of local actors,



80% of local NGOs said that their best staff had been poached by INGOs and 60% reported that they did not receive any unrestricted overhead funding for their work that they carried out in partnership with international organizations. 50% of the LNGOs also noted that although they were directly implementing work on behalf of INGOs, their names or logos were not included in reports or publicity prepared by their partners.

In the Philippines Typhoon Haiyan response it was also noted that while L/ NNGOs were often the first to respond, their resources were often quickly depleted and they did not immediately have access to international donor funding to procure more supplies. In addition, LNGO and NNGO staff and infrastructure were also affected by the typhoon, and this also limited their ability to respond rapidly. In addition to being affected by the typhoon, few L/NNGOs present in the area had significant humanitarian experience and hence they were unprepared to respond³⁹.

It seems clear that the involvement of local actors in a humanitarian emergency speeds up the initial response to the crisis. Local actors are by far the most likely to respond in the first few hours or days of a crisis. Furthermore, there is evidence that partnerships between international and national or local actors can, and do, help to shorten response times and get aid to affected populations more quickly, especially in relation to preparedness and in the immediate aftermath of a crisis. This seems to be particularly true when a pre-existing relationship exists between national and international responders:

“No matter how large and well-resourced an INGO, it cannot be everywhere all the time. Issues of timeliness were highlighted by almost all participants. It is clear that local presence can enable partners to be ‘the true first responders’, getting to affected people in, some cases, days or weeks before the international community arrives. This was apparent in Haiti and Pakistan in particular, where Christian Aid partners were able to set up food assistance several days ahead of the formal humanitarian system. As well as initial response activities, local partners play a vital role in gathering contextual information, assessing damage and needs – all of which contribute to greater responsiveness and therefore effectiveness.”⁴⁰

However, there is also a clear finding that while local actors are almost always first responders, they are often not recognized for their efforts and at times have been actively undermined by the arrival of the “cavalry” in the form of the international NGOs, who fail to recognize their efforts, poach their best staff, and put in place coordination structures that undermine or fail to intentionally include local leadership (for example, by conducting meetings in English or French rather than local languages).

In the Missed Opportunities studies⁴¹, there were several cases which noted the complexity of setting up partnerships between NNGOs and INGOs as time consuming and complex, and particularly in cases when the INGO in question does not have pre-existing relationships with local partners, there is a case to be made for an initial direct INGO response to ensure that assistance is provided as quickly as possible. In all cases, the INGO included local partners in subsequent stages of the response, allowing the time for partnerships to be formed and for projects to be jointly developed.

Scale

Following the Nepal earthquake in 2015, a sample of international NGO workers were more likely to agree with the statement that the requirement to work with local NGO partners **“allowed us to reach more people affected by the disaster”** and to disagree with the statement that working with local NGOs **“caused us bureaucratic problems and slowed us down”**. In Nepal, as in Indonesia in 2018, a requirement was placed by the government on INGOs to work with local actors throughout the emergency response⁴².

In some studies, it is apparent that the ability of L/NNGOs to scale up is limited not by geographic constraints but by their inability to absorb increased funding (or, perhaps more accurately put, the perception that they are unable to absorb increased funding). This is a contentious issue with local actors – in one study local NGO leadership were quoted as saying that this was a concern about spending money rather than actually reaching people in need⁴³. However, the perceived risk of rapidly increasing budgets without the corresponding support for L/NNGOs to put in place the required financial management systems cannot be overlooked, and indeed this is a limiting factor for many direct implementation INGOs when they examine the potential of using the partnership modality in an emergency response. For example, this INGO worker in the Missed Opportunities study noted:

“At a certain level it is difficult to scale up. For the kinds of organisations we work with, it would be difficult to hand over £7-8m. We can typically run between £0.5m to £5m. After that, we find it just becomes too risky. We are trying to find ways of giving more... for example, we can second people into the organisation for a substantial amount of time, and try and build up the overall organisational system, but we face some natural limits.”

The Syria response provides another interesting example of the potential for partnerships between INGOs and local actors to increase the scale of a humanitarian action. Syrian non-governmental organizations and civil society organizations have rapidly grown in number and capacity as Syrians self-organize to meet the needs of their own people. In 2014, the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (UN OCHA) estimated that between 600- 700 organizations had emerged inside Syria⁴⁴ since the start of the conflict in Syria in 2011. Accessing populations in need of humanitarian assistance inside Syria has been a significant issue throughout the course of the war, as many international NGOs have limited access inside the country. The role of local NGOs and civil society organizations (CSOs) has been vital in enabling humanitarian assistance to reach communities, and for many INGOs partnerships with these organizations have allowed access to areas that could never have been reached by them directly. Local to Global Protection (L2GP) estimates that Syrian humanitarian actors were responsible for delivering 75% of the humanitarian assistance in 2014.⁴⁵

Acknowledging the potential challenges that some L/NNGOs (and indeed, some INGOs) might have in scaling up organizational and programmatic systems in order to absorb more funding, it is clear that engaging with local partners can increase the coverage of a humanitarian response. Networks of local actors can work in places where INGOs do not have physical presence, or have limited access for security or acceptance reasons, and therefore it seems clear that partnerships can increase both speed and scale. In some settings, L/NNGOs have considerably greater capacity and coverage than most INGOs. These organizations are large and structured in similar ways to INGOs, which allows them to put in place the required systems and staffing structures to manage the stringent requirements that institutional donors place on their partners.

Reach

In many of the studies included in this research, the local organizations involved were very local or grassroots groups. They did not always have a broad presence in all of the affected areas, and this limited their ability to reach beneficiaries in a timely manner. For example, in South Sudan, coverage of humanitarian assistance has been a significant challenge. Vast distances separate affected communities and direct delivery by INGOs accounted for

much of the coverage in the response. The majority of South Sudanese L/NNGOs 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 communities⁴⁶.

Reach can also be achieved by engaging with networks of local and international actors. In Sierra Leone, the 2014 Ebola outbreak was only contained when a confluence of national, local and international actors worked together under the umbrellas of the National Ebola Response Center and a specially created UN Mission for Ebola Emergency Response. International funding and medical expertise was poured into the country, but many humanitarian actors found that only by engaging with local groups were they able to achieve the reach needed to change community practices and burial rites that were essential to stemming the spread of disease⁴⁷.

The Sierra Leone example suggests that engaging with both national government and local community groups is key to dealing with epidemics. It also shows that reach in any humanitarian crisis is not only achieved by physical presence – reach is also facilitated by local actors because they are more likely to have community acceptance and a deeper understanding of community networks and traditions. This was also found to be the case in South Sudan, where local grassroots community-based organizations facilitated access for INGOs through their networks of community relationships.⁴⁸ This argument is explored further below, in the discussions around client responsiveness.



KEY FINDINGS:

The evidence is clear that local groups are almost always first responders. Therefore, the involvement of local and national NGOs will almost certainly improve the speed and timeliness of a humanitarian response. Local groups are often first responders and their efforts are often poorly understood, inadequately supported, and in many cases undermined by the arrival of the international humanitarian community.

Larger NNGOs may have broader coverage across the country and may be more viable partners for scaling up a response to reach more people. There are sometimes challenges around the amount of funding that LNGOS, NNGOs and other local actors can absorb. This has been reported as limiting the ability of local groups to go to scale – but there are significant local groups (e.g. Adeso, or BRAC) who have successfully scaled up. There are other cases, such as Syria, where L/NNGOs are the primary responders and when working in partnerships with them is the only means for humanitarian actors to take a humanitarian response to scale.

Scale up is faster if INGOs have an existing relationship with LNGOs and NNGOs, or with local governance actors or municipalities in an urban environment.

Working with networks of local actors can extend the reach of an overall program, so working in consortia and bringing local agencies and local governance groups into coordination mechanisms is particularly important.

Is there greater alignment between service delivery and the needs and preferences of beneficiaries where partnerships exist?

“Personally, I feel we shouldn’t be doing anything, at all, ever, without working in partnership, in most of the places we work. I think it provides a real grounding to the work and ensures that we are delivering something that is needed and appropriate, more responsive to our clients’ needs and often more in touch with their feedback. I see our local partners, and I mean at the grass roots level, they often know their populations’ needs well and they are often very adept at gathering that feedback and integrating it into project design. And I think that international organizations, no matter how hard they try, they often revert to a standard project design and then seek community feedback as an afterthought.”

Alice Hawkes, Risk Mitigation and Inclusion Advisor, IRC

The idea that local actors have a better sense of local needs and preferences, and therefore are better positioned to understand what kinds of project interventions are appropriate, is one of the most widely upheld assumptions in the literature. A focus on client responsive design is a key focus for the IRC, and a recent guidance note highlights the role that engaging with local partners can play in helping to achieve greater alignment between the needs and preferences of clients and the services provided by humanitarian actors:

“Engaging with affected communities and targeted clients during the design phase is the time where they can have the highest level of influence on the type and modalities of aid and services provided. However, the project design phase is the point of the program cycle at which clients are typically least consulted: it is often the point when humanitarian staff face the greatest constraints in their time and budgets, and when decisions are informed by multiple (at times competing) priorities and sources of information. The key challenges to client engagement in the design process include: limited time; lack of resources; limited access to clients; lack of trust and solid relationships; feedback fatigue among target populations. In many cases, local partners will have the presence, flexibility, access, trust and networks that can help to address these core challenges, to promote more client-responsive – and effective – design.”⁴⁹

In South Sudan, the Missed Out study found that when INGOs partnered with local actors, the relevance of the humanitarian response was improved because the local organizations spoke the local language, were more familiar with local customs, governance structures, culture and the appropriateness of interventions. In a conflict context, it was found that local NGOs were most adept at negotiating with local authorities and understanding the complex dynamics at play. The fact that local NGOs spoke the language of the communities that they worked with (this was specifically relevant for local, rather than national NGOs, in a country which has more than 60 indigenous languages) was important in promoting effective communication and trust with community leaders and in giving a sense of influence and dignity to affected community members. There were also reports that communities were more accepting of local NGOs because they could see that they lived in their areas and had a lifestyle that resembled theirs⁵⁰.

The Missed Opportunities studies present similar findings, indicating that partnerships with L/NNGOs led to enhanced beneficiary consultation, more appropriate assistance prompted by a better understanding at community level of individual needs, and that partners were more likely to bring new practices into play that work in their communities, which can open up the space for new operational approaches.⁵¹

“Our job is to support locals to support themselves. I’m not going to know what the community needs. The people on the ground are going to know what the community needs. If we are doing our job to the best of our ability, if we are truly doing our jobs, we should [at some point] no longer be relevant or required.”⁵²

Humanitarians working in the Pacific region referred to at least two key examples where engagement with local actors resulted a course correction that resulted in a more appropriate kind of programming that met beneficiaries’ needs. A key Pacific stakeholder described the work of the food cluster during a response, where international actors provided internationally-designated food options (rice and flour) rather than encouraging and supporting communities to use local food sources:

“After a cyclone, everyone starts putting their hand up for flour and rice and forgets about having a food bank in the garden. When you talk about this to the nonlocal, and you look at all the support provided by food clusters, here is no support for these local practices, it’s all about bringing in as much flour and rice as possible. The best bit about localization in any work is sustainability. We should use existing infrastructure and practices — it’s more sustainable.”⁵⁴

In these case, the food cluster engaged more directly with local NGOs and eventually adopted a policy of encouraging family level food production and also changed the kinds of food that were brought in to be distributed, changing the imported flour and rice to a locally procured food basket that reflected community feedback.

A Syrian humanitarian organization interviewed as part of this research echoed these findings in his context:

“It’s easy for us to know what people need, because these are our families, our communities. When I started working with some of the INGOs they were putting things in the food basket that we would never, ever eat. They weren’t really asking people what they needed, or how they cooked. And they didn’t understand too well the ways that we do things, how it might feel to show up and be asked these questions. We were able to give advice and direction that made the food programming more respectful, I think, in every way.”⁵⁵

An IRC interview echoed these sentiments:

“I don’t know about hard evidence, but anecdotally and using gut logic, it seems obvious that those who are living and working closer to these communities have a better understanding of what the needs are, understand the context, know the system so they can get the stuff in there, that seems obvious.”⁵⁶

It could be proposed that this level of local understanding and contextual knowledge can be provided by local staff hired by an INGO, or simply by engaging more effectively with local communities. This argument was explored in some detail in the Missed Opportunities report, and the authors concluded that local partners provided a more significant level of local expertise due to the following factors:

- National staff hires for INGOs tend to come from capital cities or at least regional towns where education levels are higher and it is easier to find applicants who are fluent in the language used by the international community. These INGO hires are less likely to come from rural areas or the parts of cities which are most likely to be hardest hit in a humanitarian crisis;
- Local community based groups have pre-existing respect and relationships with their communities.⁵⁷

IN SAUDI ARABIA

Since the 1970s, many multinational corporations (MNCs) engaged with local, family run oil businesses in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, in order to meet regulatory restrictions that required MNCs to have a local partner. Many of these relationships morphed over time into joint enterprises, with the local partners providing contacts and government engagement and the MNCs bringing technical expertise and investment capacity.

A new push toward localization of the oil manufacturing industry in the KSA has renewed interest in strengthening these relationships. The starting point is the redefinition of both MNCs and local companies to revise their shared vision and clarify what each has to offer the other. Key to this is the willingness of local companies to ensure that they have investment capacity to bring alongside their MNC counterparts, in addition to bringing local knowledge to marketing, supply chain and support service capabilities.⁵³



Capacity and Scale Up – when scale increases, does relevance decline?

Interviews during this study raised important challenges to the relevance of national actors' ability to respond, mainly questioning the extent to which larger national or regional NGOs have the required contextual understanding and "grounded" engagement with local communities. Many of the larger Syrian humanitarian actors are registered in countries in Europe or the US and engage closely with diaspora networks, and while they have strong networks and links inside Syria that allow them to operate, it is likely that these organizations have a less nuanced understanding of the everyday realities of their beneficiaries than a grass roots group living in the same location might. This was also a finding in the Missed Again study in South Sudan, where larger NNGOs based in Juba risked becoming disconnected from the communities that they work with. Several communities interviewed were unable to differentiate between the INGOs and NNGOs working in their areas and community members said that they feel better represented by faith leaders or traditional leaders than civil society actors. There may be a case for some kind of spectrum of relevance, with very local community based groups and perhaps local municipalities or other local governance structures like village councils at one end, national NGOs in the middle and INGOs at the other end. One thing seems certain – engaging with local groups leads to enhanced relevance in humanitarian programming, and in this case, the more local the better.



KEY FINDINGS:

There is evidence to support the idea that the engagement of local actors in a humanitarian response leads to greater alignment between client needs and preferences and service provision, compared to services provided by international agencies acting alone.

There is a general, "common sense consensus" that L/NNGOs have a far better understanding of communities and a more acute understanding of localized vulnerability, community politics and gaps in aid provision.

This normative assumption is backed up by evidence in the Missed Opportunities research series, where it was found that improved understanding of communities helps L/NNGOs provide a more accurate view of beneficiary needs and therefore encourage greater alignment between services delivered and the needs and preferences of the target population.

When L/NNGOs are based in the communities where they work and have a "grass roots" approach they are more likely to have a nuanced understanding of what people are facing on a day to day basis – larger NNGOs may be too removed from local contexts.

Does working in partnership enable more cost-efficient assistance (more outputs, or more persons at lower cost)?

“Dollar for dollar, yes, working with partners allows us to reach more people more efficiently. I know how much it costs to reach beneficiaries through an international organization and all of our overheads and our salary structures are a whole lot higher”.

Kathryn Hoeflich, Deputy Director for Partnerships, Syria and Jordan, IRC

One of the arguments most commonly put forward in support of the localization of humanitarian response concerns efficiency.⁵⁸ The generally accepted wisdom is that LNGOs and NNGOs operate at a lower cost than INGOs, with their higher expatriate salary and benefit packages and headquarters costs, and that therefore working in partnership offers better value for money – at the most basic level, a lower financial investment leads to better outcomes for clients. There is some evidence to support this assumption in the literature.

In a comparative study, DFID found that WFP programs in Niger and Mozambique that invested in local partners to grow supplies to use in the next emergency response resulted in significant cost savings when compared to programs implemented directly by WFP, or implemented by WFP and INGO partners.⁵⁹ The most comprehensive studies indicate that local salaries can be lower by anything up to a factor of 10, and the local knowledge on markets and systems possessed by NNGO and LNGO partners can reduce transaction and procurement costs⁶⁰. Comparing INGOs with local and national NGOs, ALNAP⁶¹ reported a range of costs that are likely to be lower including labor, overhead expenses, start-up costs, supplies, travel and lodging, shipment, and security. While this may in some cases be a factor of insufficient investments in L/NNGOs and other local actors (related to the smaller percentages of overhead costs that are covered, discussed below), it seems sufficiently clear that local involvement brings down the overall costs of humanitarian programming. Similar efficiency findings emerge from the Missed Opportunities series:

“The efficiency of humanitarian aid is linked to the amount of outputs generated for a given input and at the most basic level of cost there is little argument that in specific areas, NNGOs offer efficiencies over INGOs. Most NNGOs that participated in the research were based in the affected area and their staff lived in those communities. They were typified by low-cost and low-profile delivery while direct delivery agencies tended to be based in the coordination hubs, often living in hotels and driving newly purchased vehicles. While international organisations implemented projects through large teams of national staff, there were often significant salary differentials between those employed by INGOs and UN agencies and those working with NNGOs. By living in closer proximity to communities and by working in a more practical way, NNGOs had lower overheads.”⁶²

IRC Balkans supports an extensive portfolio of partnership programming and recently conducted a comparative analysis examining the costs of partner staffing and operations, as compared to the equivalent costs incurred by the IRC. This study, while in a nascent stage of development, found that partners paid project managers around 50% less than the IRC. Finance managers were paid 70% less than their international counterparts, and office costs were also around 70% lower. This study has not examined the costs involved in providing capacity strengthening support, or allowed for the fact that working in partnership requires a different staffing structure for the IRC team. However, it does provide some early data to indicate that partner operating costs are lower⁶³.

Another IRC cost efficiency study looked at six case management projects in Iraq in 2015, three of which were implemented by local NGOs. Data from this small sample of projects suggests that local partners—who do have lower costs—can operate more cost-efficiently than INGOs, though this may have been due to the fact that local partners worked on different kinds of cases than the IRC. The median cost per case served during 2015 was \$138 for the three local partners and \$597 for the IRC as a direct implementer. Interestingly, this was not driven by lower support costs, but by lower spending per case on programmatic resources like lawyers. The study concluded that these findings suggest that local partners are not a substitute for INGOs but fill a complementary role by providing a high volume of services on cases that do not require as intensive legal support⁶⁴.

The IRC’s flagship partnership programs in Thailand and Myanmar offer another example of cost-efficient impact. The Project for Local Empowerment (PLE) assisted over one and a half million clients with lifesaving health, education, livelihood and protection services in conflict-affected South-East Myanmar and in nine refugee camps in Thailand. This project was entirely implemented by local civil society actors, with INGO support.

All this was delivered for the relatively modest cost of \$60 million over 6 years from 2011 and 2017⁶⁵. Around 40% of this overall budget covered the cost of the support provided by INGOs. Comparisons of cost are challenging, but it can be estimated that a similar project carried out directly by the IRC would have cost significantly more.

Capacity and resourcing the partnership approach

Working in partnership requires a different approach to staffing, structuring and costing projects. If this is not taken into account, then it is easy to take the simplistic view that projects carried out partnership with local and national NGOs are bound to be more cost efficient. However, the cost of supporting these projects can be high and in many cases involves a duplication of staffing in addition to the funding of necessary capacity strengthening efforts to support local actors to meet donor and INGO standards, particularly in the areas of project quality, compliance and protection against terrorist financing:

“Partnership also has costs associated with it that should not be underestimated or ignored. For the Haiyan response there was considerable investment reported by several INGOs in setting up partnership teams to identify, assess and support partner operations. The process of partner assessment itself can take several weeks and include a range of project and support staff. To address issues of absorptive capacity and to reduce perceived financial risk, some NGOs scaled up their own logistics capacity in order to undertake procurement on behalf of their partners. Several also seconded technical staff into partner organisations to make up for short-term capacity gaps. Perhaps the most important cost – and also considered by NNGOs to be one of the greatest gaps in partner investment – is in capacity development, which is essential to ensure preparedness for humanitarian response in the future”.⁶⁶

The IRC’s programming in Syria, Jordan and Lebanon involves significant engagement with partners. The establishment of a partnership unit for Syria provided support to local partners in developing both organizational and technical capacity.

Integrating capacity strengthening into partnership work between INGO and L/NNGO partners is one of the key ways to encourage the mutual transfer of learning between agencies. It also leads to increased local ownership over humanitarian response, as L/NNGOs absorb more donor funding and extend their programming to reach more people in need.

To be effective, this kind of capacity strengthening needs to be resourced, planned and intentional – and it also needs to be respectful and useful. During interviews for this research, L/NNGOs expressed concern about the way in which capacity strengthening efforts were presented as something that was “being done to them”, without due care and attention for what their needs were, and how this learning might be most usefully shared:

“We found that because we have several INGO partnerships, we were then plugged into several “capacity strengthening” programs. Mostly these involved workshops that happened at times that were not always convenient for us, and much of the content was repeated by different agencies.



COSTS UNCOVERED⁶⁸

The costs associated with L/NGO and NNGO programming are generally lower, but these apparent cost efficiencies may have a longer term impact on their effectiveness.

Donors may not cover L/NNGOs overheads which stymies their efforts to establish their organization and reduces their long-term capacity to independently respond to emergencies.

L/NNGOs funding from INGOs is usually project based, covering staff and operational costs and capacity development initiatives that link to a short-term outcome. This funding model leaving the gaps in funding assistance between funding cycles and reduces the local partners’ ability to sustain organizational stability and development and ultimately reduces their capacity to deliver assistance to clients.

L/NNGOs often pay far lower salaries, so their staff are therefore more likely to apply for jobs with INGOs and UN when they move into an area. One study in Bangladesh found that L/NNGOs had lost up to 80% of their staff to better paid roles⁶⁹. This move from local to international actors often happens when funding levels peak and emergency operations are expanding, leaving local organizations behind when they have the greatest opportunity to grow⁷⁰.

So I went to three different risk management workshops, and my finance director went to five different finance trainings! It isn't efficient, and nobody really paid attention to what we need or want."⁶⁷

Throughout a process of trial and error, Mercy Corps' Broadening Participation in Civil Society program in Iraq found that their L/NNGO partners responded best to a coaching/mentorship approach to capacity strengthening, where each organization had a coach assigned to them that walked through an initial mapping exercise which helped them identify their own strengths and weaknesses and then pulled in additional supporting resources as needed. The coaches also helped L/NNGO leadership clarify and put forward their own knowledge and skills that they had to offer in a way that would be easier for the international community to understand, and this led to significant changes in the way that coordination meetings were conducted, making them more inclusive of local organizations by changing the time they were held and including Arabic as a key language with English translation, not the other way around.⁷¹

The Investing in Syrian Humanitarian Action program is a collaboration between the IRC, Mercy Corps and Disaster Ready that provides training and support to Syrian humanitarian actors, partly using an online portal which provides training in humanitarian standards and organizational development, as well as technical support on smartphones and tablets. Ongoing in-person bilateral support is tailored to each Syrian NGO and the process of engagement is specific to each organisation's needs. Over 12,000 Syrian humanitarian actors have signed up for the online trainings. The program is seen as a significant investment in Syrian civil society and in Syrian people. The costs of these programs are significant – but the investment in local humanitarian actors is key to ensuring a quality, principled humanitarian response.⁷²

Assessments of the overall cost savings of localizing humanitarian action must also take into account the investments that are needed to support L/NNGOs to meet international standards, donor requirements, and to provide the best possible services and support to people in need. Capacity strengthening is also a great example of complementarity – INGOs often have access to resources and technical knowledge that can be exchanged with L/NNGOs, who in turn can provide local knowledge, language skills and understanding of the needs of the local communities.

Efficiency and funding flows in humanitarian response

Another incentive to localise humanitarian action is the reduction in transaction costs within funding flows from donors down to clients. Currently, it is common for humanitarian funding to pass through as many as seven agencies or administrative bodies such as pooled funds before it eventually reaches clients⁷³. This convoluted path reduces efficiencies and has a direct impact on value for money and eventually impacts on the effectiveness of humanitarian response:

“Transaction costs in humanitarian funding are any required outlays or inputs that slow or reduce the funding flow between the original donor and end-use recipient...For our purposes, the definition of transaction costs is wide enough to include all the following: multiple links in the transaction chain, leading to accumulated overhead costs; bureaucratic procedures, process requirements, and administrative burdens requiring staff time and at times even additional staff positions; and procedural delays in final disbursement and activity start-up. Technical inefficiency of this type can be built into funding structures and procedures or caused by their poor implementation. In the context of rapid-onset emergencies, speed will be a primary casualty. Slowness in funding can also create allocative inefficiencies because often by the time the funds arrive—weeks or months after the initial shock—the response they were intended to fund will likely no longer be what is most needed.”⁷⁴

Herein lies one of the most significant disconnects between practice and rhetoric in the localization movement. While the majority of donors support the concept of working with local actors, and publicly uphold the Grand Bargain commitments around making humanitarian assistance as local as possible and as international as necessary, the vast majority of donors are also extremely reluctant to directly fund L/NNGOs because of perceptions of risk and the time and administrative effort required to manage multiple smaller grants⁷⁵:

“Efficiency and the stated goals of localization are impeded by risk perception and capacity constraints on the part of donor governments. Donor governments, for a variety of domestic political and regulatory reasons, have not been willing to fund local actors directly, deeming it too great a risk.

The Grand Bargain commitments in this area have so far focused mainly on increasing indirect funding to local actors through intermediary agencies (which may help build greater local capacity but does not foster a meaningful shift in responsibility) and direct funding to the actors through the country-based pooled funds (which represent only a tiny sliver of humanitarian funding at present).⁷⁶

The end result is that local agencies are often delivering a significant amount of aid without being fully resourced to do so. Local to Global Protection (L2GP) found that in 2014, Syrian groups delivered 75% of humanitarian assistance in the country. However, they received only 0.3% of the direct and 9.3% of the indirect cash funding available for the overall Syria response⁷⁷. The current trend is for donors to fund consortiums of INGOs in humanitarian contexts, with a single INGO taking on the lead role and the burden of administration of several sub-awards to both international and national/local NGOs:

“Donors want to use INGOs to manage multiple grants and then the INGOs are being pushed to fund locally without understanding the complexities.”⁷⁸

While in some ways the use of consortia reduces administrative costs, it does not in itself shift more power or influence to local actors or reduce the challenges that L/NNGOs face in recovering support costs.

Corruption and compliance

Corruption is a challenge for all actors in the humanitarian response, be they local, national or international. Transparency International, the recognised global authority on corruption issues, do not make a distinction between international and local or national actors with regards to levels of corrupt activity or aid diversion, for example. A recent study of four complex humanitarian contexts (protracted conflicts in Afghanistan and Somalia, the Ebola crisis in Guinea and the response to the Syrian refugee crisis in Lebanon), found that corrupt practices were equally likely to occur within international agencies as within national or local civil society groups or local governance structures:

“Across all contexts, there were challenges in engaging with the affected population, which impacts the type of information an organization might receive on the quality of programs and the related risks of corruption, including gate-keeping, favouritism and other forms of abuse. These practices are not specific to a particular type of organization (national or international). Humanitarian resources are not only diverted by governmental actors and national NGOs, but also as a result of the practices of international agencies.”⁷⁹

It is generally easier for larger, well-funded organizations to put in place organizational structures and procedures that allow for appropriate checks and balances to be put in place. Efforts by donors to reduce potential risks—including fraud, waste, or diversion—have dramatically increased the compliance burden on all agencies and these requirements are often extremely difficult for smaller L/NNGOs to meet. There is growing concern that L/NNGOs capacity strengthening efforts are often focused on their ability to receive and manage donor funding in a way that meets these stringent standards.⁸⁰

There is some evidence to suggest that the focus on compliance in capacity strengthening efforts can have a negative impact on partnerships. In a recent partnership feedback exercise, partners and IRC staff noted that IRC Myanmar's partnership approach emphasized issues of risk and compliance. Partners expressed that this focus often came at the expense of developing meaningful partnerships based on strong relationships. One partner

THE COST OF COMPLIANCE

In 2016, ECHO effectively froze funding to five major INGO partners working with local Syrian organizations for 8 months in the middle of a humanitarian crisis in order to resolve requests about the extent to which L/NNGOs could meet their compliance standards. Although increased levels of accountability are welcome, the focus on risk-related compliance requirements creates barriers to creating a more localized response – if donors will not fund local actors, and INGOs spend much of their time supporting L/NNGOs to manage compliance requirements rather than focusing on organizational development more broadly or developing technical skills like protection or case management, then many of the efficiency gains involved in localizing the humanitarian response will not be realized.

explained, **“Sometimes the finance staff only knows the numbers, but they don’t know us.”** A senior leader of a partner organization suggested, **“They don’t take the time to get to know us, but maybe they don’t want to know us.”**⁸¹

Furthermore, local organizations participating in this study reported that they have partnerships with several INGOs and each of them vetted them separately, even though they were sometimes funded by the same donors. This leads to the L/NNGO spending significant time on meeting vetting and administrative requests, creating more inefficiencies⁸². If the risk of corruption is likely to be similar between international, national and local actors, it follows that international NGOs (who typically handle larger budgets) actually present a greater risk in financial terms. However, local and national NGOs are more likely to be penalized in terms of reductions in funding amounts and limited likelihood of receiving major donor funding directly, if they cannot fund the necessary processes and organizational structures needed to absorb institutional funding.



KEY FINDINGS:

L/NNGO costs are generally considerably lower than those of international organizations, allowing them to operate at a lower cost overall. Therefore, humanitarian responses that include local actors are likely to be more cost efficient.

L/NNGOs are often based in affected areas, allowing them to operate with lower profile and lower expenses, which also contributes to increases in cost efficiency.

INGO partnerships with L/NNGOs should be resourced appropriately. Staffing structures and budgets must be aligned around the support, monitoring and mentorship that are needed to work with L/NNGOs. These costs are often not covered by donors and not taken into account when making cost comparisons between partnership programs and those directly implemented by INGOs.

Local or national NGOs may request INGO support to help them develop their organizational capacity or their technical growth. INGOs may also benefit from building up their own capacity through engagement with local actors – for example, L/NNGOs or local governance structures can build up the capacity of INGO staff in local languages or cultural factors that impact programming. These kinds of capacity investments require significant budgets and planning. The costs of these efforts should be included in cost/benefit analyses.

Donor restrictions and the centralization of the humanitarian financing system mean that multiple “pass throughs” occur before funding reaches L/NNGOs implementing projects on the ground. These transaction costs reduce efficiency of humanitarian action and also reduce the amount of overhead costs that L/NNGOs are eligible for, reducing their ability to invest in their own organizational structures, strategies and planning.

Perceptions around risk and the increasingly challenging donor compliance burden are both barriers to direct funding of L/NNGOs. The evidence discussed above indicates that the perceptions are not held up in practice – in fact, levels of corruption are equally high in INGOs who handle larger budgets, and could therefore be seen as a greater liability.

The findings above focus on cost efficiency. Another interesting avenue for further research could be a comparison on cost effectiveness between humanitarian programs implemented directly by INGOs and those delivered in partnership with local or national humanitarian actors.

The sustainability factor: Are outcomes and outputs more sustainable when brought about in partnership?



Local and national NGOs are based in their own countries and are likely to stay there. Local governments and local authorities such as municipalities are, by their very nature, sustainable structures that generally exist independently of short term humanitarian responses. A key argument in support of localizing humanitarian action is that supporting local agencies leaves a legacy behind that provides multiplier benefits for local communities. Once an internationally funded humanitarian crisis is over, INGOs and UN agencies tend to move on, taking their staff and their resources with them. It is common practice for INGOs to eventually hand over activities to a local partner when they decide the time is right to exit a country or a specific location. If we accept that INGOs should, and generally do, exit at some point after a crisis, and local actors remain, then it seems likely that humanitarian projects are more likely to be more sustainable when brought about in partnership.

Local governance structures and municipalities

IRC's own research into sustainability and the role of local governance structures and city governments (including municipalities) has concluded that engagement with these structures provides many benefits, particularly in the cases involving large displaced populations in urban environments:

“While partnering with city governments on program implementation can be time intensive, the potential added value outweighs the challenges. Partnership, collaboration, and trust-building with city governments is important to delivering effective programming and supporting the self-reliance of displaced in cities. Where appropriate, working with city governments results in programs that are more feasible, appropriate to, and sustainable in the urban context. Successful collaboration will lead to more sustainable outcomes not only for the beneficiaries directly involved with programs, but also for the broader population of the city. There are two primary reasons for this. First, while national governments must grapple with the legal and political differences between migration statuses such as citizen, asylum seeker or refugee, municipal authorities are primarily concerned with the label of resident; that is, whether or not the person resides within the city’s municipal boundary. As such, municipal authorities have proven to be willing partners looking for expertise or support to manage an influx of new city residents while maintaining – or even strengthening – continuity and reach of public service delivery channels.”⁸³

Even the most vocal proponent of direct assistance by INGOs, the *Medicins Sans Frontiers* movement, often opt to partner with local hospitals, ministries of health, and other local groups in order to provide better continuity of care, and to make some effort to provide sustainability of services after they withdraw.⁸⁴

One of the most sustainable impacts of IRC’s Project for Local Empowerment (and SHIELD before it) stemmed from partnerships with government ministries, which ultimately resulted in the expanded service delivery systems for Burmese in Thailand built into Royal Thai Government policy. On the other side of the border, PLE connected Burmese CSOs with government ministries in a way that will enable them to be integrated into service delivery systems – so sustainability goes beyond individual institutional capacity, to the role they play in the bigger picture.

The focus on building organizational sustainability

Programs that have a specific focus on capacity strengthening of local partners often include some elements of what could be termed sustainability. In these cases, the term often relates to the sustainability of the organizations themselves – are they structured and supported in a way that allows them to continue to operate? Are they self-sufficient in funding, or eligible to apply for funding directly from institutional donors? The final evaluation of the IRC’s Project for Local Empowerment⁸⁵ program on the Thailand/Myanmar border revealed that organizations felt that their capacity to respond to humanitarian crises had increased, although they continued to request additional

training and financial support. The participants in the ISHA program in Syria reported that they were 80% more likely to continue humanitarian operations in Syria than they would be if they had not participated in capacity strengthening training and other support⁸⁶. These gains in organizational sustainability will lead to increased self-reliance in the future, and at a most basic level the continued existence of these agencies means that there will be a larger cadre of local trained humanitarian actors on the ground, ready to respond to new crises. What is not quite so clear is the knock-on effect for the sustainability of project outputs and outcomes. It can be assumed that if a local partner is still in existence, is still funded and still engaged in humanitarian activities, that they may continue to have engagement in clients and projects after international partners (and international funding) ends. But the evidence for this is anecdotal, for the most part. Evaluations of project outcomes and outputs following the end of a project are quite rare, and so it is difficult to find evidence that involving local partners in a project always leads to more sustainable outcomes. The “Breaking the Hourglass” study followed eight national NGOs in Iraqi Kurdistan following the withdrawal of donor funding, and found that the negative impacts of withdrawal of international funding or partnership support from an INGO to a local group can best be mitigated by prioritizing the longer-term sustainability of their local partners:

“This can be done through attention to both organizational and operational capacity building, a focus on the capacity of the institution as opposed to simply that of the individuals within the organization, support to longer-term projects, provision of core funds, and efforts to support alliances amongst local groups to contribute to a robust civil society.”⁸⁷

In the Hurricane Haiyan response in the Philippines, local NGOs were found to be more likely to work across a spectrum of activities including short-term emergency response activities and longer-term development activities. So their involvement in the response was found not only to improve sustainability, as L/NNGOs took on projects on the longer term once INGOs moved one, but also to improve connectedness – helping clients meet a spectrum of their needs in a joined up way, rather than focusing on their immediate problems in isolation. L/NNGOs were also found to have historical knowledge of past natural disasters and the likely impact on specific local communities, also enhancing the sustainability of the humanitarian response by grounding it in previous experience⁸⁸.

Investments in humanitarian capacity and disaster risk reduction

The Shifting the Power was a three-year project (2015-17) funded by the UK’s Department for International Development (DFID) through its Disasters Emergency Preparedness Program (DEPP) within the Start Network. Shifting the Power engaged with 55 L/NNGOs in Bangladesh, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Ethiopia, Kenya and Pakistan. The final evaluation found that 97% of L/NNGOs indicated that their overall capacity for humanitarian response has increased, 92% had increased participation in humanitarian coordination mechanisms or working groups, 82% had led humanitarian needs assessments or evaluations, and 84% had been involved in lobbying or collective action around humanitarian issues⁸⁹.

Another DEPP project, Protection in Practice, implemented by Oxfam, the IRC and World Vision⁹⁰ was set up to encourage strengthened practices by national humanitarian organizations in responding to protection needs of crisis-affected people. In addition to achieving the aims of the project, this investment in local capacity led to a ripple effect where organizations that had received training and awareness raising in protection in emergencies went on to share this learning and train other local organizations. Two-thirds of the organizations also made applications for additional independent funding for their protection activities after the project had closed.

Sustainability of humanitarian response may be seen as something of an oxymoron – by its nature, humanitarian programming is expected to be short term. However, in countries with recurring natural disasters, or where conflict is rife or recurrent, investment in local humanitarian capacity can be aligned with disaster risk reduction efforts. Also, as in South East Myanmar, emergency actors can evolve to become a key part of an ongoing service delivery system:

“Essentially, working with local NGOs involves a shift in the location of capacities and influence, in which vulnerable communities assess and understand their circumstances more completely, engage in project design and implementation with other local stakeholders on a more equal footing, and gain a much stronger voice in dialogues with higher levels of authority and power. Improvement in programming was attributed to the resultant insights into the specific needs of the target beneficiary population, which resulted in increased sustainability.”⁹¹

The role of local partners in exit strategies and project transitions

Both in humanitarian response and development programming, it is assumed that a transition of project activities and ownership to a local partner is an effective means of facilitating the exit of an international NGO. In humanitarian contexts, this is often assumed to be part of the transition of activities from emergency to recovery or rehabilitation activities. The IRC closed their program in Haiti in 2016, and handed over programming activities to local partners FOSREF and FADHRIS⁹². While in reality, close out and transition is often a challenging process, evidence suggests that early planning, transparent communication with clients, local partners, and local staff, and realistic organizational and financial planning capacity strengthening all contribute to effective handover and to the eventual sustainability. This calls for a significant effort, almost from the beginning of a humanitarian operation⁹³ and should be a key part of INGO strategy for partnership more broadly. A partnership approach, where local or national governance structures, or civil society partners are involved from the earliest stages of project design, is likely to produce far more sustainable project outputs and outcomes as compared to a project which is delivered directly by an international NGO and then rapidly transitioned to a local group when the INGO decides to withdraw or loses its funding.

“When you look at the kind of capacity strengthening efforts that go into making a local partner really ready to operate independently, I think that’s where you link back to the higher level of strategy about why you are working with partners in the first place. If you’re going to make that kind of investment, it has to be with the aim of getting out of the way, with the aim of IRC no longer being the implementing partner because the transfer of capacity has been sufficiently well done so we can go and move our efforts elsewhere. I think we are really behind on that kind of thinking. Our exit criteria are probably the least developed part of our strategy.”⁹⁴



KEY FINDINGS:

There is evidence that project outputs and outcomes are more sustainable if brought about in partnership, because engaging local partners in longer term planning and exit strategies is a key means to encouraging sustainability – but it must be paired with a realistic funding strategy and organizational capacity strengthening.

Engaging with local authorities in urban environments has been proven to improve sustainability of project outputs and outcomes, particularly when dealing with urban displacement.

Investments in organizational sustainability for L/NNGOs can lead to their increased engagement in humanitarian response – the assumption is that this improves sustainability by encouraging local ownership of activities and leaving behind an institutional memory of program activities.

Strengthening local responses to crises, by investing in DRR capacities and surge capacities, will lead to improved sustainability over time.

How does the type of partnership – short and ad hoc vs. longer-term, strategic – influence the effectiveness, responsiveness and best use of resources of humanitarian responses?

The local NGO is often a subcontractor and not a real partner that can contribute in the design of the project. The local NGO rarely receives a decent overhead rate as it is the funding from these projects that pays for all its operational costs and not their national governments, unlike northern NGOs who are heavily subsidized by their national donor governments.”

Degan Ali, former Chair of the NEAR Network⁹⁵

This paper has so far focused on the evidence base around **how** partnerships between local and national civil society and governance groups and INGOs might lead to better outcomes for clients. We will now turn our attention to the circumstances that allow such partnerships to thrive, and the circumstances that might be less favorable for the partnership approach. We will then review the current increasing shift toward the partnership model in humanitarian crises and will examine the proposal that the best model for humanitarian assistance is one that includes both international and national actors.

How does the type of partnership – short and ad hoc vs. longer-term, strategic – influence the effectiveness, efficiency, responsiveness and best use of resources of humanitarian responses?

The dialogue in the localization movement tends to demonize the “contractual” model of working with local partners, where an INGO engages a local group as an implementer of an already planned and funded project. They contrast this transactional, often short-term engagement where the INGO holds the power, money and planning with a longer term, more gradual, relationship-oriented, co-created engagement where the partnership principles of equality, transparency, results-oriented approach, responsibility and complementarity are really upheld. But are the two kinds of relationships mutually exclusive, and does a contractual relationship with an L/NNGO always have to be at odds with the principles of partnership? Which of these kinds of relationships will ultimately produce better results for clients? And is there a potential role for both kinds of engagement?

For many INGO workers, particularly those involved in emergency response or on surge rosters, putting in place a contractual relationship with a local partner in order to increase the scale, reach and timeliness of a project is often the most obvious thing to do. Subcontracting is useful for delivering quick results for one-off projects, such as food distribution, and short-term partnership might be useful during the onset of an acute emergency when the nature of the situation requires quick impact⁹⁶. This was a common finding in the early Missed Opportunities reports – even self-identified “partnership” agencies like Oxfam and Tearfund defaulted to a more contractual model of operation in the first phases of emergencies. It is a commonly held assumption amongst INGO surge staff that this kind of working with L/NNGOs (or direct implementation by an INGO) is always going to be the most appropriate means of moving quickly and delivering the best results for clients (even though the evidence presented in this report would indicate that this approach comes at a cost in terms of responsiveness to client needs and the sustainability of the overall intervention):

“We probably think that partnership is slowing us down, and the only way to speed things up is to get the money and then tell someone else what they need to do – partnering in emergencies is born out of that mindset. In that context, partnering is often seen as an obstacle. I still see that in the emergency department, there are many who are skeptical about working with local partners in emergencies.”⁹⁷

In the Syria response, an interesting mix of modalities emerged from the earliest stages of the crisis, with the many INGOs adopting a contractual model of working with partners across the Turkey border into Aleppo and other parts of northern Syria, allowing for rapid scale up of large food and NFI distribution programs, and some engaging with partners in a longer term, partner-led relationship supported from Turkey, Jordan and Iraq. Formal studies of the evolution of this period of humanitarian history have yet to emerge, but it is likely that key lessons can and should be learned from the ways in which partners have been involved with and shaped the Syria response differently in areas where a longer term, full partnership approach was employed⁹⁸.



Although INGO staff are more likely to reflect on the utility of a short term contractual relationship for delivery of assistance in emergencies, this mode of operation remains generally unpopular with L/NNGOs – in almost every case in the literature and every interview, L/NNGOs stated a preference for a longer term, relationship oriented engagement with an INGO where the project, or projects, became a part of the work that the two organizations are doing together. There is a prevailing sense that L/NNGOs are more likely to see the challenges in implementing projects without being involved fully in their design, and L/NNGOs also commonly raise objections to short term contracts not only because they are often top down and not implemented with the principles of partnership in mind, but because these kinds of projects often do not involve capacity strengthening efforts and often do not adequately cover support costs for the local organization. Importantly, the extent to which other objectives such as effectiveness and sustainability are achieved also depends on the extent to which the project engages with the partner on a longer term:

“The relationship between local partners and INGOs should be established based on the strategic vision, mission, and interests of both sides, with sufficient and detailed capacity-building programs to bridge the gaps between the two partners’ views, plans, and strategies. Field experience shows that this type of partnership creates and fosters local partners’ and communities’ feelings of ownership of development projects, which in turn helps to facilitate sustainability of projects and development interventions. While it is important to establish a long-term partnership it is of equal importance to remember that the goal of such an endeavor is a sustainable outcome, not dependency upon the international community.”⁹⁹

Again, the importance of prioritizing relationships emerges – in order to realize the full potential of working with the local community, it seems clear that the relationship must come first. This is contrary to commonly held view amongst international NGO staff that L/NNGOs are often “in it for the money”. The desire and interest of the local partners who participated in the Protection in Practice project was clear:

“The project went on for three years and I was consistently amazed at how involved the partners were. I thought the partnership relationship would tail off after the training and the resourcing part was over, but partners were consistently engaged and wanted to keep up the relationship even though we weren’t offering more funding. That 3 years really gave time for an actual relationship to develop. And we’ve now been able to work with those partners on other projects, and overwhelmingly the response has been really positive and engaged even though there is not the promise of something more formal!”¹⁰⁰

This overall experience was reflected in the final evaluation of the Protection in Practice project:

“International organizations need to shift away from a sub-contracting attitude to national and local partners and adopt a co-implementation approach. Co-implementation creates relationships and puts each partner on a more equal footing. This is exactly what the PIP partners indicate as one of the project’s greatest strengths: engagement that is tailored, personal, and strong. Continuity and consistency are key factors to make this co-implementation relationship work. Co-implementation has been confirmed to be a very effective approach and could be used much more widely, especially in areas where local organizations have better access than international actors, and where added local capacity could therefore really make a difference.”¹⁰¹

In Mali, IRC invited local partners to a series of meetings to jointly plan and advise IRC on their strategy, to figure out where the greatest needs were, and to share ideas and planning. No specific funding opportunity was on the table, but IRC went on to formalize a relationship with around eight organizations, creating an MOU at an organizational level not a project level relationship. This relationship was put in place recognizing that there might be periods when there is no financial relationship between the IRC and local organizations, but that there was still

value in talking to each other about contextual changes, talking about unmet needs, sharing information about funding opportunities. Crucially, there was not an assumption that IRC would receive money and the partners should implement projects, but when funding opportunities arose there was a discussion about the potential to work together and how the two agencies should position themselves around this opportunity.¹⁰²

A similar relationship between INGOs and L/NNGOs evolved in Beirut, Lebanon during the Syria crisis. The Partnership Coordination Group became the main coordination body in Lebanon focused on the response in South and Central Syria, and around six major INGOs and up to 20 L/NNGOs participated in joint planning, needs assessments, and information sharing. Sometimes funding opportunities were a part of the relationship between international and national actors, but often the coordination was around a shared vision of the response. This also led to an improved level of coordination around capacity strengthening, with INGOs coming together to offer shared training opportunities. Crucially, the pre-existing relationships allowed for rapid response when an emergency arose, smoothing the process of moving into a formal funded partnership¹⁰³.

KPMG recently produced a review of its own partnerships in the business sector in the global south. The relative benefits of short term, transactional partnerships are contrasted with the collaborative, strategic benefits of working together on a longer-term basis. Crucially, KPMG conceptualize these partnerships on a continuum. It may be possible to start working together on a short-term contractual basis and for a relationship to evolve over time into a much more transparent, collaborative arrangement¹⁰⁴.



KEY FINDINGS:

In terms of how the type of partnership – short and ad hoc vs. longer-term, strategic – influences the effectiveness, efficiency, responsiveness and best use of resources of humanitarian responses, there is a clear case for a hybrid approach to partnerships in humanitarian contexts, including some direct implementation by INGOs, some shorter-term contractual projects, and the establishment of longer term partnerships over time.

Short term, transactional “contractual” relationships between INGOs and L/NNGOs are common in acute emergency settings where there is often a perception that there is not enough time to “do” partnership work.

This mode of operating is not popular with L/NNGOs, who prefer a longer-term relationship where funded projects fall into the overall context and partnership principles are upheld.

There is some evidence that a longer-term relationship allows for the full range of benefits of partnership work to be realized, particularly with regards to improvements in sustainability and effectiveness.

In some emergencies, the combination of direct response by an INGO with sub-contracting and partnership approaches working in tandem may provide faster assistance and allow for more people in need to be reached.

How can partnerships be developed to ensure the best circumstances for clients? Are there circumstances where direct delivery by an INGO might deliver better outcomes for clients?



The research carried out as part of this work for the IRC indicates there is evidence that engaging with local actors throughout the course of a humanitarian response delivers better outcomes for clients on most measures, as compared with a humanitarian response delivered by international actors alone. However, in the literature two consistent challenges to this rule arise – what about partnerships in internal conflict, where local partners (be they L/NGOs or local governance actors) are too close to the conflict themselves to provide neutral, impartial assistance? Secondly, what should the role of partnerships be in locations where civil society is weak, or nonexistent? Might these conditions give rise to circumstances where directly delivered assistance by an INGO would produce better outcomes?

Medicins Sans Frontiers make the distinction between emergency response in natural disasters and in internal armed conflict, and they highlight some significant concerns with the wholesale adoption of the localization of aid:

“However, before moving forward with the localization agenda, one issue must be reversed as a matter of priority: the political correctness with which a range of NGOs and others have promoted this agenda. For good and bad reasons, governments want to maintain control over what is happening in their countries, and to impose their sovereignty, especially when they are embroiled in conflict. While the localization agenda is likely to add value and

enhance the effectiveness of aid efforts in some contexts, imposing it irrespective of context dynamics is likely to produce suboptimal results for the effective delivery of aid to people in need of immediate relief!”

Throughout the course of this research, participants also raised the challenge around local capacity and concerns around the extent to which it would be possible to fully engage with local partners in areas where civil society is non-existent, or where civil society is very nascent:

Some of our contexts had a different partnership landscape – either capacity wasn’t there, or the political landscape wasn’t in place for civil society to flourish. There is more consensus that we need to be better in the way that we partner, and we need to have more structured processes for partners.¹⁰⁵

It is important to examine both these assumptions as further research around the effectiveness of the partnership approach is planned. It is not a given that armed internal conflict is a condition that precludes partnerships – INGOs are equally open to political influences and, as we have seen in Nepal, Indonesia and other countries, national governments are increasingly likely to restrict international humanitarian actors working without national partners. The Syria conflict provides an excellent example of a complex civil war where local humanitarian agencies were extremely limited in their work before the war. In just seven years, Syrian NGOs rapidly grew in size and professionalism, and have delivered the majority of the aid inside Syria.

If the evidence suggests that the inclusion of local actors **always** produces better outcomes for clients, then the focus should be on **always** seeking an opportunity to engage with local partners in humanitarian responses. At the very least, it remains important to take a “do no harm” approach to working with local civil society – at minimum, international humanitarian agencies should take the time to map, engage with and understand the landscape of local responders, and should put in place measures to avoid undermining their efforts by avoiding diversion of funding streams or “poaching” L/NGOs staff.

It is also clear from the literature that the benefits of partnership take time to evolve, and improved outcomes are linked to the establishment of an effective relationship that respects the principles of partnership between the national or local actor and the INGO. **In some cases, there is justification for INGOs to directly implement programming at the beginning of an emergency, allowing time for quality partnerships with local actors to be established.** The original Missed Opportunities report looked at the role of local partners in four humanitarian crises – Kivu (DRC), the Haiti earthquake, the Pakistan floods of 2010 and the Horn of Africa food crisis in Kenya. The five agencies involved in the study are firmly rooted in the partnership approach to development (CAFOD, ActionAid, Christian Aid, Tearfund and Oxfam, however Tearfund and Oxfam are also directly implementing agencies). In this study, and in subsequent interviews, both Oxfam and Tearfund outline what could be described as a “sliding scale” of partnership involvement in humanitarian response. Oxfam described its response in all four crises as either directly implemented or using a largely contractual approach to partnership in the early months of the response. **This allowed for a large, rapidly scaled operation to take place which prioritized the humanitarian imperative over the partnership approach, reaching more people at the early crisis stages without taking the time to engage fully with local partners in the design and development phase of the projects.** Internally, Oxfam used the justification that local capacity was overwhelmed by the same crises that affected the rest of the local population. Over time, Oxfam transferred more resources to partners and engaged local groups in targeted capacity strengthening efforts that ensured that the human resources and organizational/ financial management systems were in place to hand over more funding to partners. This approach is pragmatic, in situations where local civil society is not fully equipped to respond to humanitarian emergencies, either because they have also been impacted by the crisis or because they do not yet have the capacity to absorb large amounts of funding or to work in ways that the formal humanitarian system recognizes as valid.

Tearfund is currently undergoing a review of the way that they dovetail their directly implemented humanitarian response work with their extensive portfolio of partnership work, largely with Christian groups and church networks. They are in the process of establishing a series of criteria to review their potential intervention in a new crisis, taking into account their existing networks of partners, their partners’ presence and capacity to respond (and Tearfund’s presence and capacity to respond), the extent to which their partners have also been impacted by the crisis, and the ability of the partner to manage and account for large amounts of institutional donor funding¹⁰⁶. The criteria will help determine the decision to intervene directly, with partners, or both. In all situations, both Oxfam and Tearfund continue to emphasize the importance of the local civil society landscape and their partner networks.

While the benefits of including local actors of all kinds into humanitarian response planning and programming as early as possible are clearly highlighted throughout this study, there is a case to be made for a “sliding scale” where INGOs continue to provide some of the speed and scale gains brought with their access to funding and previous experience in other humanitarian contexts by providing early assistance directly, and then allowing for some short term projects with national actors to form the basis for the emergence of a longer term partnership between local and international actors. This is to some extent what was seen in the Syrian response. **This provides another opportunity for the value of complementarity to come to the fore – for example in the Balkans, IRC provided protection and crowd management training and mentoring to their local partners to allow them to integrate this into their work, while remaining partner-led in other aspects of the program design¹⁰⁷.**

The focus on quality – how can partnerships be fostered to maximize the best outcomes for clients?

If we work on the premise, based on the available evidence, that programming delivered in partnership between INGOs and L/NGOs will always deliver better outcomes, then the focus for the IRC shifts onto how best to establish, foster and develop respectful, productive relationships with their national and local partners.

The START Network and DFID’s Disasters and Emergencies Preparedness Project (DEPP) have put forward the ‘7 Dimensions of Localization’¹⁰⁸ in an effort to focus attention around the Grand Bargain commitments and provide more structured guidance to international and local actors as they focus on meeting them. These recommendations are provided in full at Annex A of this report. The 7 Dimensions of Localization include the following specific guidelines for the development of quality partnerships:

- International actors use a nuanced vocabulary to describe the nature of the collaborative relationship with local and national actors, which is reflected in formal agreements such as contracts and MoUs;

- Verbal and non-verbal communications between collaborating entities or between aid agencies and affected populations always express basic respect and take into account cultural sensitivities and differences around what is considered 'disrespectful' behavior;
- Principles and criteria for partnership are clearly articulated, inclusive and transparent;
- Partnership MoUs include a clause on joint reciprocal evaluations and monitoring of the quality of relationship at regular intervals as a sign of a genuine partnership;
- Whistle-blowing and complaints and response procedures are embedded in the partnership policy;
- Purely formalistic and unnecessary due diligence assessments are avoided;
- International agencies do not demand that the collaborating L/NNGO gives continuous primacy to their relationship;
- Ending a partnering relationship is done with practical responsibility and respect for the other partner.

The recommendations below provide some more ideas and suggestions for the IRC to invest in their partnerships.



KEY FINDINGS:

The evidence reviewed in this report suggests that partnerships between local and international actors will provide better outcomes than humanitarian responses delivered by INGOs directly.

Some voices in the literature have expressed concern about the wholesale adoption of the partnership approach in armed internal conflicts, and where civil society is weak or nascent. However, there are strong examples of cases where both of these conditions are in places and yet local partners have thrived. There is a need for these assumptions to be challenged and tested with evidence.

Partnerships yield the most effective results when they are based on strong, trusting relationships between international and national actors. These take time to develop, and so in some cases it may be appropriate for an INGO to intervene directly and provide first line assistance, while building up relationships with local partners over time.

The evidence outlined in this review suggests that partnerships have the biggest impact on outcomes when:

- Partnership is viewed as central to the INGO mission, values and approach.
- Partnerships are viewed in the broadest sense, and not limited only to contractual funding relationships.
- The partnership is put in place with the necessary attention to best practice and built carefully over time.
- There would be no access otherwise, due to security or other constraints on INGOs.
- Capacity strengthening is viewed as a mutually understood ongoing effort, threaded through the relationship between partners and flowing in both directions.
- Where there is already a strong civil society in existence.

The opportunities to improve outcomes through partnerships are not fully realized when:

- Local partners are viewed as implementing agencies, not equal contributors involved in strategy and design processes.
- The partnership is limited to project to project financial transactions and not seen as a mutually beneficial ongoing relationship.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS



This study was commissioned by the IRC to review the available evidence for whether and under what conditions working in partnership with local and national civil society organizations may promote the strategic objectives from IRC 2020, and result in better outcomes for clients.

The evidence base that looks critically at the humanitarian outcomes of projects carried out directly and exclusively by INGOs with those carried out in partnership between INGOs and local civil society or local governance actors is not well developed. During the course of this research, it was clear that while some empirically sound studies of the comparative benefits and costs of working in partnership with local NGOs as against direct implementation by INGOs are starting to emerge, there is very little quantitative research in this area, and no randomized control trials that look at the comparative benefits of working in partnership compared to direct work or service delivery by INGOs or local organizations alone.

However, there is strong anecdotal and experience-based body of evidence that suggests that, under the majority of circumstances, partnerships between IRC and national and local actors will allow IRC to more effectively achieve its strategic objectives. Working with local groups who are first responders improves the speed and timeliness of a humanitarian response. Engaging with networks of local actors may improve the reach of humanitarian activities and bringing grassroots knowledge and understanding into discussions on project design is more likely to result in more appropriate assistance being provided to clients. Local and national organizations are able to offer more cost-efficient assistance than INGOs.

The recommendations offered here build from the findings in the research that indicate that partnerships between local and international actors deliver better outcomes for clients than work carried out by international organizations working directly. As such, there are **a series of recommendations that would enable the IRC to invest in their partnerships** with local actors. There are gaps in the available evidence around the role that partnerships between local and international actors might play in furthering localization and delivering better outcomes for clients and provided here are **a series of recommendations on how the IRC might position itself as a contributor to this research base**. Finally, given the finding that partnerships between local and international organizations are likely to produce better outcomes for clients than work directly implemented by an INGO alone, **there are a series of recommendations on how partnerships might best be managed and supported in the IRC** to best enable IRC to be an effective partner and therefore to maximize the potential that partnerships offer.

Recommendations for developing quality partnerships:

1. Put the Principles of Partnership first – all IRC staff who are involved with local partners should have a baseline familiarity with the Principles of Partnership and ideally, attend relevant trainings on the skills needed to be a good partner.
2. Partnerships with local actors should make sufficient provision for their support costs and IRC should engage with partners to prioritize and fund capacity strengthening plans that target both IRC and the local partner.
3. Ensure that a guidance framework for partnership in the early onset period of emergencies is provided within IRC's partnership systems, including the following guidance:
 - a. Suggestions for emergency teams on how to recognize and engage with community based first responders, local civil society and local governance actors.
 - b. Protocols on the hiring of national staff who are already working for local or national NGOs or local governance groups (this could be done collectively with other INGOs and could include a complete prohibition or a system of ensuring the local group gives permission for the hire, for example).
 - c. Guidance on how to approach local actors respectfully and with a partnership mindset, starting out with the relationship and a genuine interest in their assessment of the crisis and ideas about the humanitarian response, before starting discussions about projects or subgranting.
 - d. Suggestions and ideas about how to effectively coordinate with local actors, taking into account that bilateral coordination may be necessary as some local actors might not engage in formal/UN coordination mechanisms.
 - e. Guidance on how to establish clearly what IRC's intentions are in partnership and what IRC might bring to the partnership besides funding (e.g. technical guidance, strategic links to new donors, the ability to second staff etc.).
 - f. Provide clarity on the role of local government structures and the IRC in emergencies – extending guidance on civil society mapping to include thinking on how national and local government can and should be engaged in humanitarian response and other relief activities.
 - g. Basic go/no go checklists and guidance on partnership in emergencies, including guidance on how to discern when and where a directly implemented, blended or primarily partnership focused approach is most appropriate.
4. Develop and deliver a specific partnership training for Emergency Unit staff, including guidance on mapping, vetting and partnering in emergencies.
5. Ensure that funding amounts that are sub-granted to local partners are tracked, as well as associated IRC costs involved in supporting partnership programs, so Grand Bargain commitments can be appropriately reported and published.
6. When projects are implemented with local groups, ensure that communications highlight the efforts of the local actors (unless security or other constraints apply).

Further research:

1. Document and share case studies from IRC partnership programs such as those in the Middle East, Asia, East and West Africa and the Balkans, in order to extract institutional learning and raise awareness of the extent and effectiveness of partnerships in the IRC.
2. Develop a simple 1-2 page internal paper highlighting what percentage of IRC funding and programming is already linked to local partnerships, and highlighting the partnership principles and the benefits of engaging with local actors for the IRC.
3. IRC could focus on researching the effectiveness of partnerships in places affected by crisis, as compared with many peer organizations that focus on poverty alleviation. IRC could bring their appetite to work in remote and hostile places, with a willingness to experiment and fail in order to learn, to bring a focus on learning from partnership work in contexts like Syria and Somalia.
4. IRC should continue to develop its series of internal efficiency and cost effectiveness comparisons between partnership programs and directly implemented work (this could also be done with other INGOs as part of a research consortium).

5. IRC and partners should conduct empirically sound research comparing the speed, effectiveness, reach, timeliness, appropriateness and efficiency of aid directly delivered by the IRC with aid delivered with local actors in partnership and by local actors alone. This could form the basis of a new evidence-based dialogue within the localization movement and position the IRC as a thought leader in this area.
6. The research above should prioritize humanitarian responses taking place in conflict areas that are still accessible, where the current partnership research is less prominent.
7. Examine the links between community feedback mechanisms and the delivery modality – use this data to find out more about how clients perceive the differences between a program delivered by the IRC and delivered by a partner.

Institutionalizing partnership approaches:

1. Given that partnership with local actors results in better outcomes for clients in humanitarian crises, IRC should seek out opportunities to engage in partnership programming and support local actors in these contexts wherever possible.
2. Sustained engagement with local actors, at all levels, from the field with local or national governments or civil society actors to global capitals with high profile groups like the NEAR Network, would continue to allow IRC to program in tough places and to influence policy and practice in a way that benefits local groups and the IRC, and ultimately produces better outcomes for clients.
3. IRC leadership should engage in the localization movement and identify what role IRC's partnership programming might play in furthering the role of local actors.
4. Highlight the importance of partnerships in leadership communications, noting the importance of partnership in IRC 2020 and encouraging an organizational commitment to localization.
5. Leadership to engage Country Directors and Regional leadership to be enthused and understand the impact of local partnerships on all their departments.
6. Partnership principles and practices should be integrated into recruitment strategies and targets, staff position descriptions, onboarding, performance management and training, including staff not exclusively devoted to partnership work. Country/USP leadership should be held accountable for ensuring partnership principles are upheld in their program.
7. IRC to develop a more public stance on the role of local actors in humanitarian emergencies, and more specifically on how the complementary role of national and international actors can deliver best results.
8. A clear IRC position or “theory of change” to be developed, which outlines IRC's engagement with local actors in all their different forms and articulates how, why, when and to achieve what end IRC engages with local actors.

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ANNEX A

The Seven Dimensions of Localisation Framework: Emerging Indicators

DIMENSION	EMERGING INDICATORS
RELATIONSHIP QUALITY & PARTNERSHIPS	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • International actors use a nuanced vocabulary to describe the nature of the collaborative relationship with local and national actors, which is reflected in formal agreements such as contracts and MoUs. • Verbal and non-verbal communications between collaborating entities or between aid agencies and affected populations always express basic respect and take into account cultural sensitivities and differences around what is considered 'disrespectful' behavior. • Principles and criteria for partnership are clearly articulated, inclusive and transparent. • Partnership MoUs include a clause on joint reciprocal evaluations and monitoring of the quality of relationship at regular intervals as a sign of a genuine partnership. • Whistle-blowing and complaints and response procedures are embedded in the partnership policy. • Purely formalistic and unnecessary due diligence assessments are avoided. • International agencies do not demand that the collaborating L/NNGO gives continuous primacy to their relationship. • Ending a partnering relationship is done with practical responsibility and respect for the other partner.
PARTICIPATION REVOLUTION	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Crisis responses are designed, implemented and reviewed in ways that are empowering for affected populations. • People have an early say in the design and planning phase of response. • Formal communication, feedback and response mechanisms are set up with participation from the community and are regularly tested. • Crisis-affected populations are involved in reviews and evaluations. • All people are treated with full human dignity. • Expected standards of staff behavior are widely known. • The collaborating agencies demonstrate practical competency in working with conflict-sensitivity. • Community/survivor-led funds are utilized where conditions allow. • Donors and operational agencies plan for adaptation.
FUNDING & FINANCING	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A minimum of 25% of funding is channeled to L/NNGOs. • Quality of funding is given equal attention as quantity. • L/NNGOs receive appropriate funding to attract, retain and maintain qualified human resources. • Un-earmarked overhead costs are allocated for management and future institutional development. • Existing organizational systems are reinforced rather than disrupted. • No extra conditions are added to those of the donor. • International agencies encourage and enable direct contact between L/NNGOs and donors. • Co-managed pooled funds that are accessible to L/NNGOs are a primary funding modality.

FUNDING & FINANCING (continued)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • National (or regional) grant-making bodies are actively sought, and reinforced to play that role. • Donors encourage proposals in line with localization commitments. • Open budgets or budget transparency is the goal in partnering relationships. • Fraud and corruption risks on all sides are acknowledged and managed. • Reporting, accounting and MEAL procedures and formats are harmonized between different international agencies collaborating with L/NNGOs, also in a subcontracting relationship. • Increased financial autonomy and sustainability of the L/NNGO is a strategic objective in all partnering relationships.
CAPACITY ENHANCEMENT	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Capacity-enhancing investments are strategic. • Capacity-strengthening investments are cumulative and mutually reinforcing. • Nothing new is created without certainty that what exists is beyond repair. • Local/national/regional capacity-resource centers are supported and reinforced. • Capacity strengthening efforts are purpose and need-driven, not supply-driven • The underlying goal in a partnership is capacity sharing. • Capacity development investments are managed like any other objective. • Organizational or network capacity strengthening is an ongoing process, not an event. • When capacities have been strengthened, role changes must follow. • Capacity development support is provided by competent professionals with contextual knowledge. • Negative impacts on existing capacities are anticipated and avoided. Where some negative impact happens, corrective action is taken. • No direct implementation without purposeful and simultaneous capacity support.
COORDINATION, TASK FORCES & COLLABORATIVE CAPACITIES	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Support provided to pre-existing local and national networks to avoid establishing multiple new platforms. • L/NNGOs are actively present in local and national task forces and coordination mechanisms. • Government in principle co-leads all coordination mechanisms. • Collaboration is recognized and rewarded. • Support provided to pre-existing local and national networks to avoid establishing multiple new platforms. • L/NNGOs are actively present in local and national task forces and coordination mechanisms. • Government in principle co-leads all coordination mechanisms. • Coordination is led by people with the required competencies. • L/NNGO presence and participation is effectively 'representative'. • The coordination and collaborative environment is enabling for L/NNGOs. • Deliberations and decisions are informed by in-depth situational understanding, including the views of affected populations. • Coordination imposes discipline but leaves openness for creative innovation.

VISIBILITY	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The roles, work, risks taken, and contributions of L/NNGOs are rendered visible. • L/NNGOs need to agree on communications that could put them at risk. • Innovative ideas and practices developed by L/NNGOs are publicly acknowledged
DISASTER & HUMANITARIAN POLICIES, STANDARDS & PLANS	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Stakeholders can effectively input into government policy and planning. • Local and national agencies influence international policy debates and standards discussions on relief and humanitarian action. • Individual participants from L/NNGOs that participate in national, regional and international policy, planning and standards debates are truly 'representative' and accountable.

END NOTES

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