

‘All eyes are on local actors’: Covid-19 and local humanitarian action

Opportunities for systemic change

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Key messages

- Covid-19 is shining a light on the failure of the humanitarian system to reform. This is especially true in regard to the localisation agenda, which has seen only incremental changes towards more local humanitarian action, leadership and complementarity.
- The pandemic could usher in more local forms of humanitarian action, and greater complementarity between local and international actors. There is anecdotal evidence of change in discourse, commitments and practice at the global and country levels.
- Major obstacles to fast-tracking the move to more local humanitarian system persist. They include the inability of large organisations to shift to partnership approaches in the midst of the crisis, coupled with funding trends that consolidate rather than shift existing power structures.
- For meaningful, lasting change to happen, there must be a deliberate decision to take action, confront the inequalities that have relegated local responders to the margins, and embrace the opportunities of this reform agenda.

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Introduction

The ongoing global pandemic of Covid-19 has caused a substantial shock across economies and industries, including the humanitarian sector. Travel and access restrictions mean that international staff and initiatives cannot be deployed, affecting many operations (ACAPS, 2020). This has led to a renewed focus on the role of local humanitarian actors.

Will this attention ultimately lead to a fundamental change in the humanitarian system? Will Covid-19 provide the opportunity to shift towards more local humanitarian action? This briefing note considers the early implications of Covid-19 for driving systemic change towards more local humanitarian action and leadership, and more complementarity between international and local actors.

Ongoing internal system reform processes, such as the Grand Bargain (Metcalf-Hough et al., 2020), have not so far provided the necessary impetus to overhaul the institutions of international humanitarian action. Historically, rapid reforms in the humanitarian system have followed external disruptions brought about by mega-crises (Schenkenberg van Mierop, 2020). In that sense, the Covid-19 pandemic certainly has the potential to stimulate systemic change.

Amid the formidable challenges of dealing with Covid-19 and its secondary impacts, and responding to existing humanitarian crises, local actors are increasingly being recognised as critical to humanitarian responses. The pandemic is consequently being hailed by some as an opportunity to empower and support local and national actors in ways that have not previously been possible. However, this is by no means certain, and considerable challenges remain. There are concerns among localisation¹ advocates as to whether locally

led humanitarian delivery is happening at any significant scale, or that it is here to stay.

This briefing note sets out these issues, identifying opportunities and challenges and how these could be addressed to enable effective responses in the wider context of Covid-19 and beyond.²

Covid-19: an opportunity to fast-track localisation?

There appears to be increasing recognition at both the operational and global levels of local actors' unique role and position in responding to crises (including Covid-19 and its related impacts). However, experience tells us that the formal system's configuration, structures and incentives have proven highly resistant to change. Consequently, there are concerns that any progress towards more local and national forms of humanitarian action will be incremental and temporary. As such, Covid-19 does not present a straightforward opportunity to fast-track localisation.

Increased localisation rhetoric at the global and policy level

In its initial form, the Global Humanitarian Response Plan argued that putting national and local non-governmental organisations (NGOs) at the centre of humanitarian operations 'will become the reality in Covid-19 operations for the next few months, out of necessity, and has the potential to provide the blue-print for humanitarian operations in the longer term' (OCHA, 2020a: 25). This was criticised for framing local humanitarian action as an operational necessity rather than 'an intentional process of change that many humanitarian actors have been working towards over recent years' (ICVA, 2020: 2). While the centrality of local actors in the May update of the Plan has been toned down (see OCHA, 2020b: 5),

1 The authors distinguish between the term 'localisation' and local humanitarian action, local humanitarian leadership and complementarity between local and international actors as elements of humanitarian action that are already happening and should be scaled up through more systematic support. In this report, localisation refers to the reform agenda and process of change required within the humanitarian system through changes in donors' and other international actors' practices and policies to further enable and support local humanitarian action, leadership and complementarity. The authors recognise that localisation is a contested term as its use has too often implied that the capacities and approaches of an 'international' level should be transferred 'down' to local groups, rather than recognising the work local actors are already doing.

2 This briefing note is based on a rapid review of the latest reports and on interviews with 13 practitioners and policy-makers.

the new Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC) guidelines on localisation could indicate further commitment to change (see IASC, 2020). One humanitarian worker interviewed for this paper wondered if ‘this will be a penny-drop moment’ in acknowledging that Covid-19 is ‘an opportunity for both localisation and community engagement’. Commentators have echoed this sentiment (Konyndyk and Saez, 2020; Schenkenberg van Mierop, 2020).

Questioning the value of an international presence

Operationally, the context of Covid-19 has been compared to the Ebola crises in West Africa and the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). We argue that it is also comparable to situations where international actors have no access, such as Myanmar or Syria. In these cases, access restrictions have pushed international actors, particularly donors, to shift their operational practice towards partnering with a more diverse range of local actors (see Barbelet, 2019), increasing complementarity between international and local actors and leading to a greater appetite for risks and flexible funding:

Indeed, when international organisations lack access, they tend to have no choice but to trust local actors present in those geographical areas to implement humanitarian action. Two things happen in these scenarios: the power dynamic between local and international actors shifts towards local actors who can more readily influence how humanitarian action will take place; and international organisations are forced to better understand who has what capacity in this context (Barbelet, 2019: 16).

These situations reveal two things. First, they have led international non-governmental organisations (INGOs) to make a strategic shift towards partnership approaches; second, it is unclear whether attitudes, power dynamics and approaches could be extended to situations where access is feasible. A parallel can be drawn with Covid-19; as one interviewee for this paper noted: ‘It is a fair assumption to think that the humanitarian system after Covid will try to revert to classic patterns’, while pointing out that

‘we can de-risk the locals ... for now, you have to localise just to prove you are doing something’.

While interpretations such as this cast doubt over whether current changes can be as transformative or sustainable as localisation advocates would like, Covid-19 is nonetheless forcing the humanitarian sector to ask hard questions about who is best placed to deliver aid given the local context, restrictions and needs – and even whether international actors are needed on the ground at all. Considering existing local capacity and only using international surge when necessary seems an obvious way of working, and yet the humanitarian sector has long been reluctant to recognise, understand, map and harness local capacity to that end. The operational constraints placed on international humanitarian actors by Covid-19 restrictions are starting to challenge this. As one interviewee reflected:

You really have to want to go now. You really have to justify it to quite a few people to get your name on the list and your body on a plane ... All of those non-essential people are not going back on a plane soon.

In the context of the pandemic, it is remote support rather than surge capacity that seems to be addressing gaps, reinforcing rather than replacing local humanitarian action and leadership (RedR Australia, 2020; VANGO and HAG, 2020). Some organisations were considering new ways of surging before the Covid-19 crisis as part of their commitment to localisation (see for instance Wake and Barbelet, 2019), and these plans now seem to have been put into practice. The Tropical Cyclone (TC) Harold response is emblematic of this shift (PIANGO and HAG, 2020; VANGO and HAG, 2020). As one interviewee explained, ‘they could not send people; they could send materials, goodwill and logistics resources but none of the Australian experts that would usually fly in did fly’.

Shifting strategies and relationships

The increased attention local actors are receiving, and the growing recognition of their unique role and leadership in crises, could – if sustained – challenge long-standing obstacles to localisation around trust, legitimacy and the unequal

distribution of power in the humanitarian sector (Barbelet, 2019; Fast and Bennett, 2020).

There is anecdotal evidence that donor practice is changing. In the UK, the Department for International Development (DFID) has introduced a new requirement that the INGOs it funds through its Covid-19 response must pass on equal or greater levels of indirect cost recovery to their local and national NGO partners (Charter for Change, 2020b).

Similarly, change seems to be afoot at the country level. One interviewee commented that discussions and relationships between donors and local actors in his country, the DRC, appear to be taking place in a more direct manner, with less mediation from international actors. According to this respondent, 'There are discussions about working together more closely. It has never been like this before in my career ... all eyes are on local actors'. Covid-19 may also be giving greater impetus to longer-term commitments to localisation. One interviewee from an international NGO highlighted that one of their organisation's five principles in its global Covid-19 response plan is dedicated to supporting local and national response. As a result, this INGO is now orienting its programme planning towards local and national strategies, putting greater priority on partnerships with local actors and setting funding targets dedicated to supporting local humanitarian organisations, and ensuring the resources to match.

Yet, despite national and local governments playing a more central role in the Covid response, another interviewee emphasised that, in many contexts, Covid-19 responses are coordinated – and funded – separately to wider humanitarian responses. This means that international humanitarian funding does not support local government efforts – a continuation of the practice whereby local actors are shut out of international resources.

A more nuanced appreciation of the meaning of local

The pandemic is influencing who counts as 'local' or 'international', placing increasing attention on local staff in international organisations, rather than just local actors. Humanitarian workers present in current crises are overwhelmingly

national citizens; INGOs and UN agencies have pulled 50% or more of their international staff out of some countries, or cannot get them back in (Parker, 2020). According to one respondent, 75% of international staff quit South Sudan, leaving behind mainly local staff:

Who was left behind? The local staff. The distinction of local and international organisations does not matter. It is more about are you a citizen who cannot leave, or whether you are trying to get on a plane and get out of there. Right at the heart of what localisation looks like if we take off the blinkers of the old model where your organisation defines you. Your citizenship defines where you can go in the world.

Covid-19 has also shone a light on the similarly under-recognised role of community volunteers in responses. Interviewees argued that, in many ways, Covid-19 is pushing the localisation discussion further down to the community level and forcing humanitarian actors to consider the complex web of relationships at multiple levels. One respondent, from Cox's Bazar in Bangladesh, told us that smaller organisations deploying local community volunteers trained prior to the outbreak appear to be better able to work than larger national organisations in the Rohingya refugee camps. Another respondent argued: 'the localisation topic has been framed around shifting of power between organisations but not about individuals involved. [With Covid-19], participation, community engagement and localisation have really come together'.

The role of governments

Governments are arguably the most critical national and local actor in responses to public health crises. In the DRC, despite having been more or less absent from the humanitarian landscape (see Barbelet et al., 2019), the government took the lead in coordinating and responding to the Ebola outbreak between 2018 and 2020 (Dewulf et al., forthcoming). Many governments are taking on a similarly central role in responding to Covid-19, both because it is a public health issue, and because, as in South

Sudan, international actors have left a vacuum that government has to fill. As such, the Covid-19 pandemic has given international actors an opportunity to go beyond framing localisation as being focused solely on local NGOs, as has largely been the case, and instead focus on the role of government. As one interviewee from an INGO stated, ‘this is a golden opportunity to walk through a door that we have been banging on’.

The international humanitarian sector has often been reluctant to engage with either national or local governments on the grounds that a close working relationship with governing authorities potentially compromises commitments to independence and neutrality. While this can in some circumstances be a valid concern, lack of engagement and interaction with governments limits avenues for humanitarian advocacy and the channels by which international responders can support principled responses that meet the needs of the most vulnerable.

National and local actors, who more easily work across the humanitarian–peace–development nexus, often have established relationships with national and local government, potentially making them better placed to engage on humanitarian issues in the context of Covid-19. (Interestingly, local actors’ links to government have often been seen by international actors as a reason not to trust them because they were assumed to be neither neutral nor independent.)

Governments in Asia in particular have increasingly made partnerships with national and local actors a prerequisite for international organisations’ access. One interviewee noted that: ‘In a range of countries, there is genuine intention this is how you must work and that is enormously positive’. This more assertive stance is not, however, without risk; as the same respondent observed: ‘We need to be careful of the fine line between requiring this as a condition and government blocking humanitarian assistance’. In a similar vein, other respondents reported that some governments are using Covid-19 to close down civil society spaces:

The way government look at local partners they also dismiss them as if they do not matter. In Nigeria, they put

the lockdown and certain people were given passes and they could go around, but no passes to child protection or social workers, only to health workers. In Kenya it was better because the NGO forum is stronger and has formed linkages with government.

Challenges to harnessing local capacity and complementarity during Covid-19

It is too early to tell whether anecdotal evidence of change in the context of Covid-19 is a foretaste of the shape of future humanitarian responses, or whether long-term structural imbalances will continue to block fundamental reform.

Power imbalances and incentives

The humanitarian sector, despite a clear reform agenda around local actors in humanitarian action, remains exclusive and continues to centre around international organisations. Regardless of the intentions of international staff and organisations, the colonial legacy looms large, with unequal relationships relating to funding, trust, legitimacy and capacity reflecting deeper, structural dynamics and assumptions, and a ‘subordination of the local population to the coloniser’s culture’ (Barbelet, 2019: 28).

Covid-19 is a stark reminder of the need for change: for ‘further concrete actions to be taken to support a more structured approach to localisation of the humanitarian system’ (ICVA, 2020). According to one respondent, reflecting on the current state of play:

Covid shines a glaring light on many of the reasons why we need to change the way that we work ... If over the last decades we had more genuinely moved to an approach that centres complementarity and centres local and national systems and looks at our comparative advantages rather than centres the role of international actors, we would be collectively in a much better place to address the challenges of Covid.

Yet, as another interviewee noted:

Changes are going to have to happen but they won't come easily. There will be resistance. Some people want this to happen but there will be resistance from organisations. Maybe we will see the failure of the business model to adapt. But also create space for new organisations to flourish.

For all of the rhetoric around the need for greater equity in the humanitarian system, and the fact that Covid-19 provides a rational case for prioritising local actors, anecdotal evidence from this review indicates that, internally, large INGOs have yet to accept localisation and partnership approaches as the strategic way forward, not least because they fear that this will diminish their role and increase competition over scarce funding for concurrent needs. International agencies are typically highly risk-averse and are often reluctant to seek relationships beyond a small circle of 'trusted partners', which may not necessarily be the most effective at supporting local humanitarian action. Trust remains low between local and international actors, and a perceived lack of transparency on both sides means progress towards localisation is slow (Barbelet, 2019: 10).

Funding and donor practices

The disconnect between rhetoric and reality is most visible in terms of funding. In some respects, the Covid-19 pandemic is making it *more* difficult for donors to give directly to local actors. Pressures on domestic resources mean that aid budgets are decreasing, as are donors' capacities to manage larger numbers of small portfolios. Interviewees for this paper also pointed out that some donors are 'nationalising' their funding: supporting domestic NGOs rather than prioritising effective humanitarian action with local actors. To give one example, many of the largest INGO recipients of DFID's Rapid Response Facility funding are UK-based, and only UK charities are eligible for grants from the Small Charities Challenge Fund (DFID, 2020). As one interviewee put it, 'we are still asking what local actors can do for our response, rather than what we contribute to the local response'.

It is also unclear whether funding for the Covid-19 response is new, or existing funding that has been refocused. Some international organisations that usually do direct delivery may not have additional funding available to support the shift to more local partnerships. One donor interviewed for this study confirmed that most Covid-19 funding is not new, and that any additional funding will be slow to materialise due to internal donor government processes. Another interviewee said that they had discussed flexible funding and risk-sharing with donors, but to little effect: 'We are talking about not getting new money for [the Covid-19 response] until next year'.

The Grand Bargain annual independent review highlighted that flexible and predictable – 'high-quality' – funding to UN and INGO partners is not currently passed on to local organisations with the same characteristics of quality (Metcalf-Hough et al., 2020). This restricts local organisations' ability to adapt their response in light of the changing Covid-19 context. At the same time, anecdotal evidence suggests that donors have been flexible with their international partners in the Covid-19 response (see Schenkenberg van Mierop et al., 2020: 6).

Responding during Covid-19 necessitates all actors accepting a greater degree of risk, but the continued lack of discussion on risk and risk-sharing – the process of accepting risk by stakeholders at all levels, including donors, rather than pushing risk down to implementing partners – is further hampering the rapid release of funding to local actors (Schenkenberg van Mierop et al., 2020: 6; Charter for Change, 2020b). More rapid and locally oriented funding mechanisms, such as the Start Fund through the Start Network, have not received the support expected from institutional donors (Bennett, 2020).

The Global Humanitarian Response Plan is channelling almost the entirety of its appeal through UN agencies. While this funding should in theory pass down to those best placed to respond, it is not always reaching NGOs (whether international or national). As one interviewee observed: 'the Charter for Change analysis shows that only 0.1% of funding is going to local actors. The Global Plan states local action as a principle, but it is not clear how it will make it happen' (see also Charter

for Change, 2020a). Indeed, one interviewee, the head of a national NGO, stated that nothing seems to have changed in his country: ‘National NGOs are responding but international actors are getting the funding’. The fact that funding for Covid-19 flowing to UN agencies does not appear to be reaching NGOs suggests the consolidation of a UN-centric approach with little transparency around funding flows or commitment to monitoring where the money is going, or how current funding is supporting a local humanitarian response, as set out in the Global Humanitarian Response Plan.

Partnerships

A major obstacle to taking this opportunity to fast-track the move to a more local humanitarian system is the inability of large organisations to shift to partnership approaches in the midst of the crisis. Changing ways of working and building partnerships (as well as the policies and mechanisms to support this) at this juncture is no easy feat (see *Accelerating Localisation Through Partnership* and HPG, 2020). Progress is also being held back by a lack of prior investment and years of reluctance by large international organisations to adapt their partnership policies and practices beyond remote programming and sub-contracting, including with local actors.

Many international responders favour direct implementation and do not seek to partner with local organisations at all. They have yet to adopt the policies, operating procedures and operational approaches to support good partnerships, and, when they do work with local organisations, contractual arrangements are restrictive, equipment loans are short-term and there is little by way of sharing programmatic decisions.

One interviewee working for an organisation using direct delivery acknowledged that building a working relationship the Ministry of Health or local organisations will take time: ‘It is nice to think about working with the Ministry of Health in Jordan as part of a Covid response but it is difficult to prioritise if we do not have partnerships in place’. As another interviewee reflected, many organisations, for whom the need for new ways of working has yet to hit home, need to realise that ‘organisations are not going to be able to scale up but rather will

need to scale out through partnerships instead of increasing their own presence’. However, most INGOs do not have the systems in place for this type of ‘remote growth’:

How are we going to help organisations to negotiate programmes with trust with people they have never met in person? The TC Harold response showed that those organisations with existing contacts are figuring this stuff quickly. We saw in Sulawesi in Indonesia. This is what we are going to see now with INGOS and UN agencies. Some organisations will have budget but have no partners. We will see some organisations in Afghanistan, for example, withdrawing all their staff. But they do not want to stop delivering assistance, which will shift the modality to working in partnerships and this is a big shift for some.

The biggest risk is that, instead of seeing more complementarity between international and local actors through genuine partnerships, international actors will default to remote programming and sub-contracting. This will undermine the effectiveness of the response and is not in the spirit of shifting to more local humanitarian action and leadership.

Turning Covid-19 into an opportunity for localisation

These challenges do not mean that there will be no shift towards greater local humanitarian action. They do, however, highlight that, for this change to happen, actors must make a deliberate decision to embrace the opportunities of this reform agenda. As one interviewee noted:

What we have seen so far in the response is that those holding the power need to exercise it. The practical implications of Covid are not enough to prompt or deliver the kind of approach that we are all committing to. It does require proactive donor and host government leadership.

Changing to local humanitarian action as an opportunity for a more effective humanitarian system

The context of Covid-19 needs to be understood as an opportunity for more effective humanitarian action, not as a constraint making local humanitarian action a necessity. As one interviewee commented, ‘the real drive here should be around a more effective response ultimately’. This shift should come from the top of the humanitarian leadership and institutional donors. With key power-holders continuing to frame local humanitarian action as an operational necessity rather than a chance for reform, the changes required to fully harness the opportunity before us will not be made, and the humanitarian system risks going back to its traditional ways once the practical constraints of the pandemic no longer exist.

‘From the ground up’ as the principle for local, national and global strategic planning and coordination

The humanitarian system is driven by global strategic planning exercises such as the Global Humanitarian Response Plan. Although local and national actors were consulted in the drafting of the current Plan, local and national strategies should be central. The upcoming national-level humanitarian programme cycles are an opportunity to anchor the next Global Humanitarian Response Plan, and thus funding decisions, in processes that come from the ground up, with local and national actors driving the planning process. At the national level, this requires the full integration of local and national actors in formal humanitarian coordination, where a Humanitarian Country Team and cluster system (or ad hoc coordination systems) exist. Where government coordination systems are already in place, international actors should support local and national actors, particularly in their advocacy to ensure that humanitarian principles are safeguarded and the needs and voices of the most marginalised are included through full participation. Localising coordination systems and ensuring that coordination leads to complementarity has become even more important in the Covid-19 context (see Barbelet (2019) for more on localising coordination).

Donors must reward partnership and network approaches with quality funding

In order to shift practice and reform the system, donors must reward partnerships, networks of actors and complementarity and push for ways of working that enable local humanitarian action and leadership. This should include prioritising funding for organisations and networks that already work in partnership with local actors. As such,

one obstacle to localisation is the perceived need by INGOs to grow their brand. However, a different kind of growth could be incentivised by donors rewarding INGOs for their networks of partners in crisis contexts. Success then shifts from the number of country offices and sub-offices an INGO has, to how many partners they have worked with for how long in that crisis context’ (Barbelet, 2019: 25).

Donors also need to ensure that funding partners pass on quality funding that is flexible and predictable to local organisations.

There needs to be a collective donor conversation on risk-sharing immediately

Collectively, donors need to have an urgent conversation about risk. A number of donors have shown great ability in light of Covid-19 to introduce flexibility through limiting earmarking and adopting a higher risk appetite in their funding by accepting uncertainty around programme delivery and impacts and relaxing their demands (Schenkenberg van Mierop et al., 2020: 6). If this can happen now, it should have been possible in the past, and needs to continue. Donors should invest more in understanding how risk is shared along the chain as hopefully funding to INGOs and UN agencies increasingly passes down through equal partnerships to local actors.

In past research (Barbelet, 2019), donors have expressed concerns that the way responses are approached in contexts where international actors have no access could be seen as good practice and would be replicated more widely. Such concerns relate largely to the consequences for donor governments should issues of mismanagement of funds or possible lack of

neutrality of a local actor lead to parliamentary scrutiny at home, contributing to already negative views of humanitarian aid and funding. Learning from these experiences is critical to inform risk management and risk sharing.

International actors are critical in supporting local actors in their advocacy with governments

The context of Covid-19 is an opportunity to seek complementarity between international and local actors. Advocacy in particular is an area where more complementarity should be explored. As governments take a more central role in responding to crises in the context of Covid-19, local actors may be faced with access constraints and the closure of civil society spaces. In many ways, local actors are well placed to engage their governments in advocacy and negotiations around access and humanitarian issues. However, the tools and mechanisms for humanitarian diplomacy are not always available to them, suggesting that partnerships with international actors on advocacy could lead to better outcomes. International actors in particular will be better placed to put pressure on donor governments to engage affected governments through diplomacy on such issues.

Documenting and scaling up good practice

Funding and scaling up good practice around local humanitarian action, local leadership, good partnership practices and other complementary ways of working is critical. Examples include the Accelerating Localisation Through Partnerships consortium, Oxfam's work on local humanitarian leadership and its Humanitarian Country Capacity Analysis and Take The Lead approaches (see Barbelet, 2019), as well as approaches such as Islamic Relief's 'Strengthening Response Capacity and Institutional Development for Excellence' (STRIDE) project, where investment in partnerships is one part of preparedness plans (see Wake and Barbelet, 2019). There is also an array of good localisation practices in the Asia-Pacific (VANGO et al., 2019).

While organisations that have yet to adopt a partnership approach will find it more difficult to change their practices, now is the time for donors to invest in them to adapt their systems and operational procedures to work in partnership

with local actors. Documenting and analysing the contributions of local humanitarian action, local leadership, partnerships and more complementary ways of working will also be critical. This will help make the case that locally led responses that build on complementarity with international actors are more effective. This will also help in identifying where changes in the humanitarian system have enabled these practices and ways of working, and advocating for long-term change. Tracking local actors' engagement in humanitarian responses is particularly important now, as the next humanitarian programme cycles will design the Humanitarian Needs Overview and Humanitarian Response Plans at national level for existing humanitarian crises.

Conclusion

The global impacts of Covid-19 have created significant additional levels of suffering, which may well continue and worsen as the pandemic unfolds. However, it is clear that, against this bleak and uncertain outlook, the pandemic could provide an opportunity for long-overdue systemic change and reform in the humanitarian sector. This shift should come from the top of the humanitarian leadership and institutional donors.

Through necessity, the pandemic could force a more local humanitarian action and greater complementarity between local and international actors. Local humanitarian actors – including affected governments as well as NGOs and community volunteers – are already responding in the absence of international funding and presence, demonstrating their potential to provide a more rapid and effective response. This could finally be the moment when the localisation promises of the Grand Bargain are delivered.

However, while 'all eyes are on local actors', the humanitarian response so far highlights both how much more progress is needed to fulfil that promise, and the challenges that mean that change will not necessarily happen or be long-lasting.

The international system needs to move on from reactively trying to adapt programmes to the rapidly changing context, to a position where decisions and proactive choices are made to utilise the disruption caused by Covid-19 as a force for change. Necessity is not enough. This

opportunity for system reform is urgently needed. Without a shift, the humanitarian system risks ending up with less effective responses and worse outcomes for people affected by crises.

The humanitarian system can choose to invest its resources, time and effort in continuing with a traditional humanitarian response through the deployment of international staff and other resources. Or it could invest in unleashing the full potential of local humanitarian action, local leadership and equal partnerships. The most effective response to existing and new

humanitarian crises in the context of Covid-19 will likely be one where international and local capacities work in complementarity.

The only certainty in this early stage of the crisis is the degree to which uncertainty will persist as it evolves. In the context of the Covid-19 pandemic, there is a critical role for humanitarian organisations to document what they are able to achieve and where the challenges are, and to build evidence around the unique role of local and national actors in this context, as well as monitoring whether change is happening and how.

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