



HPG Report

## From the ground up

It's about time for local  
humanitarian action

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**HPG**

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# Acronyms

<b>CAN DO</b>	Church Agencies Network – Disaster Operations
<b>CSO</b>	civil society organisation
<b>DRC</b>	Democratic Republic of the Congo
<b>ELNHA</b>	Empowering Local and National Humanitarian Actors (Oxfam project)
<b>HAG</b>	Humanitarian Advisory Group
<b>HPG</b>	Humanitarian Policy Group
<b>IASC</b>	Inter-Agency Standing Committee
<b>IDP</b>	internally displaced person
<b>NEAR</b>	Network for Empowered Aid Response
<b>NGO</b>	non-governmental organisations
<b>OCHA FTS</b>	UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs’ Financial Tracking Service
<b>OECD-DAC</b>	Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development’s Development Assistance Committee
<b>SDGs</b>	Sustainable Development Goals
<b>SHAPE</b>	Strategic Humanitarian Assessment and Participatory Empowerment (framework)
<b>STRIDE</b>	Strengthening Response Capacity and Institutional Development for Excellence (Islamic Relief project)
<b>UN</b>	United Nations
<b>WHS</b>	World Humanitarian Summit

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# Prologue

The research for and drafting of this report took place prior to the rapid and wide-ranging escalation of the Covid-19 pandemic. Even now, as the report is being finalised in May 2020, we are only beginning to understand the impact of coronavirus in middle- and low-income countries.

If the virus follows the trajectory we are now familiar with in poor and densely populated areas and in camps for refugees and internally displaced people (IDPs), it will be devastating, and particularly so for the most vulnerable. Already weak public services, markets and local economies will be unlikely to cope as people lose jobs and livelihoods. The secondary impacts of health service disruption, food insecurity, economic stagnation and loss of social protection are likely to reverse hard-won gains on poverty, and make achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in 10 years' time even more difficult, if not impossible.

As widespread lockdowns, travel bans and public health restrictions have drastically curtailed movement and paralysed supply chains, achieving a more local response to humanitarian crises has become a vitally important objective, if not the only viable option. Indeed, the pandemic presents both an unparalleled collective crisis and an opportunity. It has thrown down a gauntlet for the humanitarian sector and its localisation commitments. It tests

our commitment to get funding to local actors quickly and directly, and to support them in responding to the needs in their communities. It challenges us to shift power and operations to those best placed to make decisions and to craft responses that deal with both the primary and secondary effects of the disease. It also highlights both the necessity of local action and its shortcomings, as no one entity can defeat the virus alone. It compels us to recognise that a diversity of actors and complementary relationships must be the way forward.

Lessons from the 2014–2016 West Africa Ebola outbreak may be instructive. Then, the humanitarian response was 'criminally late' in part because the international system was trapped in its bureaucracies and hobbled by politics. The outbreak also taught us that local responses rooted in and implemented by communities were the fastest, most trusted and most effective in stemming the progression of the disease (DuBois et al., 2015; Richards, 2016).

Will the global response to coronavirus be a defining moment for localisation? What opportunities does it present to radically reorient our approaches to humanitarian action, in the same way that past crises have accelerated reform and change? Or will it be yet another moment when we shrug our shoulders and repeat 'never again'. Well, that's up to us. It's about time.

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# 1 Introduction

Achieving a more ‘local’ response to humanitarian crises has been an explicit ambition of the formal humanitarian sector for several decades. United Nations (UN) General Assembly Resolution 46/182 of 1991, the 1994 Red Cross Code of Conduct, the 2003 principles of Good Humanitarian Donorship and the Sphere Handbook all reference the active involvement of local organisations and affected people in the design and operations of humanitarian response. In 2011, the Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC) issued specific guidance for cluster lead agencies on working with national authorities, emphasising that appropriate government entities should be invited to co-chair clusters (IASC, 2011).

More recently, following the 2016 World Humanitarian Summit (WHS), ‘localisation’ emerged as one possible answer to the problems besetting international humanitarian response. Both the UN Secretary-General’s report for the WHS and the resulting Grand Bargain reform agenda called for responses that are ‘as local as possible, as international as necessary’, with a commitment from the formal humanitarian system to fund local organisations ‘as directly as possible’ for at least 25% of annual spend, and to invest in the capacity of local organisations to work in complement with international counterparts.

Proponents argue that a more local approach to assistance enhances flexibility, efficiency and sustainability, is more responsive to context and needs and involves local aid actors and communities more meaningfully in decisions affecting humanitarian programming. There is a substantial body of evidence about the value of local humanitarian action to humanitarian outcomes (de Waal, 1997; Ramalingam et al., 2013; Featherstone and Antequisa, 2014; Tanner and Moro, 2016; Ayobi et al., 2017), including more recent research focused on a

nuanced understanding of the tensions within local, national and regional approaches (e.g. Daly et al., 2017; Piquard and Delft, 2018). Some important change initiatives are working to support partnerships and strengthen local leadership of humanitarian response. These include the Accelerating Localisation through Partnerships consortium of non-governmental organisations (NGOs), Islamic Relief’s Strengthening Response Capacity and Institutional Development for Excellence (STRIDE) project (Wake and Barbelet, 2019), Oxfam’s Empowering Local and National Humanitarian Actors (ELNHA) project, or the SHAPE and Shifting the Power initiatives, the Network for Empowered Aid Response (NEAR) and the Church Agencies Network – Disaster Operations (CAN DO) consortium in Australia and the Pacific. Initiatives such as these suggest that the humanitarian sector is at least trying to put some flesh on the bones of its commitment to local leadership and is looking for practical ways to take this forward. They are, however, isolated examples, and have yet to tip the system towards a more substantial and sustained shift. Among donors, development agencies have long declared capacity-strengthening an institutional priority, yet their humanitarian cousins have lagged behind.

There are multiple reasons for this lack of progress. Conceptually, there is little consensus about what a more genuinely local response looks like in practice, and there are few incentives to promote it within a system that, structurally and culturally, tends towards centralisation, and that struggles to address the politics of action (or inaction) towards ‘localisation’. There are practical and technical obstacles related to structure, organisation and ways of working, as well as blockages related to issues of identity, power and legitimacy. Whether referred to as ‘localisation’, ‘local humanitarian

action’ or ‘locally led humanitarian action’, the humanitarian sector is struggling to understand what actions and reforms are needed to enable and support a more local humanitarian response.

Between 2017 and 2019, the Humanitarian Policy Group (HPG) at ODI undertook a research programme about local humanitarian action entitled ‘From the ground up: understanding local response in crises’. The research adopted a ground-level perspective across four key themes: capacity and complementarity, financing, dignity and protection. We took as our starting point local humanitarian action as a phenomenon in its own right, distinct from the ‘localisation’ reforms outlined at the WHS and the financial and other reforms charted in the Grand Bargain. This framing was deliberate: the term ‘localisation’ itself is inherently problematic, as it reflects an international-centric reform agenda that puts the formal humanitarian system at the centre of the process, reinforces the humanitarian system’s exclusion of local actors and subordinates their priorities and interests rather than promoting change that is rooted in and driven by local and national actors. Throughout the process, we worked alongside local researchers. This confronted us with some uncomfortable truths about how power and resources shape the dynamics of research partnerships in much the same way as they shape relationships within the humanitarian sector more broadly (Fast, 2019a; see also GICN, n.d.).

This report looks across the four research themes to find meaning and point to implications at the systemic level. All four projects document enduring obstacles as well as pockets of progress, each summarised in a series of final reports (Mosel and Holloway, 2019; Barbelet, 2019; Metcalfe-Hough, 2019; Willitts-King et al., 2019), as well as a series of papers examining key debates and aspects of local humanitarian action (Fast, 2017; 2019a; 2019b; Bryant, 2019c). In examining local humanitarian action, however, we did not specifically look at the system-level constraints that hinder localisation, the role of national authorities in local humanitarian action, or the role of donors, the UN and prominent international humanitarian organisations in maintaining the status quo beyond what emerged in relation to our thematic research areas. Nevertheless, the analysis explored both the dimensions of local humanitarian action and localisation as a process within the formal humanitarian system.

After a short summary of the main findings of each research theme (chapter 2), the report then looks at some of the key obstacles to change within the sector (chapter 3), including the conceptual challenges involved in defining what constitutes ‘local’ humanitarian action, different understandings of value within the sector and issues of power and control. The paper concludes with lessons emerging from the research and what they mean in practice for the future, acknowledging that reform, while long overdue, will take time.

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## 2 Key findings of the research

The first project – “As local as possible, as international as necessary”: understanding capacity and complementarity in humanitarian response’ – investigated how the international humanitarian system can better connect with and harness the capacity of local organisations in crisis response. Working in field locations in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) and Cox’s Bazar in Bangladesh, we aimed to clarify what key concepts such as ‘capacity’ and ‘complementarity’ mean in practice, and to provide insights into how capacity is understood in the humanitarian sector; what capacity exists among local, national and international actors in specific contexts; and what incentives, power structures and relationships promote or inhibit collaboration and complementarity (see Barbelet, 2018).

The findings identified situations where local humanitarian actors assume visible and activist roles and situations that privilege international over local responses. The research highlighted failures to recognise local capacity, as well as examples of good practice, particularly where organisations developed long-term and strategic partnerships (see Wake and Bryant, 2018; Barbelet et al., 2019; Barbelet, 2019). It also suggested that the Grand Bargain commitments could serve as a vehicle to alter existing power dynamics. In Bangladesh, for example, the Cox’s Bazar CSO (civil society organisation) Forum uses Grand Bargain commitments to hold signatories to account in their country-level operations and put pressure on international NGOs and the Bangladeshi government regarding the repatriation of refugees (Barbelet, 2019), an approach that other local NGOs are using in Lebanon and Turkey.

Our second project – ‘The tip of the iceberg? Understanding non-traditional sources of aid financing’ – sought to situate assistance from the formal humanitarian system within the wider

range of resources available to crisis-affected people, including remittances, domestic resources and the local private sector. We posited that better data and a clearer understanding of the full financial landscape would reduce duplication and enhance complementarity in humanitarian crises, including small-scale disasters such as flooding in Nepal, in displacement situations in northern Uganda and in long-term humanitarian situations in Iraq (see Willitts-King et al., 2018a).

Perhaps unsurprisingly, the research found that international aid constituted only one source of assistance in times of crisis, and a small one at that. It also showed that simply having better data is not a sufficient answer to the complex issues surrounding humanitarian financing. The research illustrated a diversity of resource types and flows across different contexts, as well as the importance of ‘user value’ defined in terms of timeliness, appropriateness and solidarity. Livelihoods and household-level economic inputs emerged as important sources of sustenance across the case studies, as did government social welfare schemes, though these were often disconnected from or not well-coordinated with the international aid system (see Poole, 2019; Bryant, 2019a; 2019b; Willitts-King and Ghimire, 2019; Willitts-King et al., 2019).

Building on our long-standing focus on the protection of civilians, the third project – ‘Informality and protection: understanding the role of informal non-state actors in protecting civilians’ – explored the part informal actors play in protection: who they are, how they define and provide protection (or not), whether they are effective from the community point of view and the extent to which affected communities distinguish between formal and informal actors in terms of actual protection outcomes (see Fast, 2018). For this project we focused on cross-border protection, specifically Kachin on the border of Myanmar and China and Libyans in



Tunisia. The project aimed to help actors in the ‘formal’ protection sphere to engage with entities whose point of reference may not necessarily be international humanitarian law but whose role may be critical for the protection of civilians affected by conflict.

The research affirmed existing assumptions, identifying few changes in system-wide operational practice and no major shift towards more ‘localised’ protection responses by protection-mandated or self-described specialist protection organisations. It did not identify any significant advances in terms of complementarity between local or community self-protection efforts and international efforts. It highlighted the fluctuating nature of threats to civilians when people cross boundaries of various kinds, whether identity-based or international, and the ways that displaced populations adapt to these threats. Kinship networks and social capital are crucial to these adaptations, yet are rarely recognised in the protection work of international actors (see South, 2018; El Taraboulsi-McCarthy et al., 2019; Metcalfe-Hough, 2019).

The fourth project connected our extensive work on displacement with an analysis of what constitutes dignity in humanitarian assistance. ‘Dignity in displacement: from rhetoric to reality’ adopted a local lens to explore whether, and in what ways, humanitarian interventions uphold the dignity of displaced people. Through in-depth case studies of Syrians in Lebanon and Rohingya in Bangladesh, as well as studies of displacement in Afghanistan, Colombia, the Philippines and South Sudan, we examined what dignity meant to affected people and aid workers, including whether and how responses

differed between international and local actors. We also tested the assumption that a local response results in more dignified and equitable assistance, and whether humanitarian action – local or international – was equipped to uphold dignity at all (see Holloway with Grandi, 2018).

The research illustrated variations in how displaced people experienced a dignified – or an undignified – response, influenced by the type of situation from which they fled, the location to which they fled and the length of their displacement. Two common themes emerged across the case study contexts: self-reliance and respect. The cases emphasised that *how* displaced people received assistance was more important than *what* they received, except when assistance was inappropriate to the cultural or religious context. Significantly, it found that local responses did not equate to more dignified responses (see Holloway and Fan, 2018; Grandi et al., 2018; Holloway, 2019; Mosel and Holloway, 2019).

Overall, the research under these four themes demonstrated that local humanitarian action is embedded in its own local and national systems and cultures, largely reliant on its own resources and capacities and separate from the international response. It is also undervalued and underutilised. Complying with the letter of ‘localisation’ commitments made by donors and aid organisations does not equate to achieving the spirit of these intentions related to systemic reform, power shifts and, ultimately, more effective humanitarian action. What lies between the letter and the spirit in this case, our research found, are divergent interpretations, competing interests and misaligned incentives. It is to these obstacles that we now turn.

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# 3 Obstacles to change

While the obstacles to change within the system are multiple, the research reported on here identified three key themes: the lack of definitional clarity around the meaning of ‘local’ and ‘international’; different conceptions of what constitutes value in humanitarian response; and the role and operation of power within the aid sector. This section takes each of these issues in turn.

## 3.1 Different understandings of ‘local’

First responders in any humanitarian crisis are always ‘local’, be they family, friends or neighbours providing shelter, necessities or assistance in the immediate aftermath of a disaster, or local and national authorities tasked with managing response efforts. Their proximity to the disaster and the context is part of their effectiveness, as is their perspective: ‘Because they are present in communities before a crisis hits, they see it not as an event in and of itself, but as something that is linked to the past, to unaddressed risks, vulnerabilities and inequalities’ (IFRC, 2015: 8). In this way, they mirror conceptions of ‘grassroots’ organisations as proximate to the communities or constituencies within which they are rooted. These assets are often seen as positioning them to more effectively tackle the persistent humanitarian challenges of access, cultural relevance and accountability (IFRC, 2015), and may even act as counterpoints to charges of humanitarianism as a neo-colonial or neo-imperialist project (Hopgood and Vinjamuri, 2012).

Beyond the immediate response within households, families and communities, definitions of what constitutes ‘local’ become much less distinct. Our research suggests that

local is inherently relative – in relation to who, what or where. ‘Local’ may be about geography, networks, relationships or affinities, but these categories hide multiple complexities and do not provide neat distinctions. An NGO may, for instance, be ‘local’ in the sense that it hails from the local community, but it may represent elite circles, not the broader population, and so may not have the deep connections to place and community that ‘local’ is often taken to imply. Conversely, individuals and organisations in diasporas are often considered local by virtue of their cultural, personal and kinship affiliations with their home communities, but by definition they are not physically present in those communities. In displacement contexts, an organisation may be of a similar identity group or geographically proximate to a host community, but not to people displaced to that community (and vice-versa). In Lebanon, where organisations are obliged to hire almost entirely Lebanese staff, humanitarian actors may be local in terms of the nationality of the host country, but not to the Syrian refugees they are helping. In Bangladesh, Rohingya interviewees felt that they were treated with more respect by the Bangladeshi army than by their own compatriots from their home communities (Holloway and Fan, 2018: 18).

Nor is it possible to make universal assumptions about how aid recipients conceive of ‘local’ in the first place or, for that matter, the extent to which ‘local’ matters to those on the receiving end of assistance. In the DRC, HPG research suggested that local means living, working and sleeping in the community. In this view, a local actor must be deeply embedded within a particular context (Barbelet et al., 2019). These deep connections are crucial for the survival of those displaced by war and armed conflict. In Libya, family and tribal networks served as vital sources of protection and support

(El Taraboulsi-McCarthy et al., 2019). In HPG's studies of dignity among displaced Rohingya, *who* provided assistance mattered less than *how* it was provided (Holloway and Fan, 2018; see also ICRC, 2018). Among displaced Syrians, the 'how' of assistance mattered more than the 'what' (Grandi et al., 2018: 17). This is not unique to these two contexts. The findings of the 2018 *State of the humanitarian system* report suggested that people did not distinguish between national and international assistance (ALNAP, 2018; see also Barbelet, 2017; Svoboda et al., 2018). At the same time, however, the involvement and acceptance of local actors and culture matter, for everything from security management (Fast et al., 2015) to programming. Affected communities *do* want humanitarian organisations to design, deliver and monitor programmes with the involvement of local institutions, whether community, government or traditional authorities, and without bypassing or undermining local institutions and mechanisms (Barbelet et al., 2019).

Unfortunately, despite a general consensus on the need to foreground local actors in humanitarian response, how to do so has remained largely elusive, with the process of localisation under the Grand Bargain as the primary pathway. Debates about who and what is 'local' have been inextricably linked to questions of funding and assumptions about capacity. These debates touch on the ways that organisations self-define as local or international. Where national and local organisations equate their legitimacy with being 'home-grown', they likewise define their disadvantage as a lack of access to the well-known brands of international actors, with varying types of affiliations that connect organisations across borders, and access to a seat at the decision-making table of the international humanitarian system. This, in turn, deprives them of sustainable and quality funding, organisational stability and the power to influence the sector's approaches and activities. National and local organisations see their share of funding and power diluted via one or more pass-through organisations, leaving them perpetually struggling for influence and resources to respond to crisis.

Some international organisations, by contrast, argue that their national offices count as local organisations just as funds provided by them to local partners constitute support for local response efforts. Thus, understandings and definitions of local humanitarian action are intrinsically connected to questions of power, risk and access. They are linked to the associations of branding and the 'franchising' of international organisations, and influenced by governance models and the structure of a system characterised by ever-expanding affiliations of organisational 'families', networks and confederations. These affiliations, in turn, affect how determinations of 'local' are made, and who defines and asserts these labels.

This lack of definitional clarity can also affect the ways organisations are perceived. For instance, affected populations saw local and international workers in contrasting terms. In Colombia, local workers were seen as more aware of the culture *and* more biased and susceptible to corruption, whereas internationals were more ignorant *and* more neutral and less corruptible (Ángel, 2019). These issues reinforce the position of local organisations in opposition to international ones, setting them in competition for operational space, capacity and money. Indeed, as HPG's research on capacity concluded, in some places the involvement of local actors seems more of an afterthought than a priority (Barbelet, 2018). This process fuels discord and misinformed assumptions about the benefits and costs of localisation.

These insights and debates do not bring us closer to a clear, definitive or encompassing understanding of 'local' humanitarian action, particularly in terms of how local humanitarian action is distinct from the process of localisation. Indeed, the very idea of 'local' becomes open to interpretation: it is possible to categorise as 'local' a village-based collective of farmers, an internationally affiliated national organisation and global faith-based organisations implementing programmes through local churches or mosques. 'Local' may often refer simply to people or organisations that are not 'international' or 'foreign': in that sense, these entities are defined by what they are not, rather

than what they are. This creates resistance, which is visible in the assertion of expectations and the rising localisation activism originating from local organisations (Barbelet, 2019), and in calls to hold international organisations to account for their commitments to the Grand Bargain (Daily Star, 2018; Ahmed, 2018; COAST, 2018; Wake and Bryant, 2018). It surfaces, too, in the calling out of international organisations seeking to fundraise in the global South, undermining the efforts of local organisations to raise their own funds in their domestic context (OpenDemocracy, 2020). In this way, resistance represents both an assertion of power and a call for change).

If the usefulness of local humanitarian action is framed in terms of access, contextual understanding and expertise, including networks and language, then the corresponding and implicit assumption is that international (meaning foreign) actors bring different characteristics (impartiality, neutrality, objectivity) and currencies (financial, administrative) to humanitarian action (Barbelet, 2018), and that these are better in terms of quality or quantity. In this debate, the value, and therefore significance, of these roles is linked to their contributions to operational humanitarian action, as opposed to their identities as actors in the humanitarian sphere.

It is to concepts of value and currencies of power that we now turn.

## 3.2 Different concepts of value

Our research suggests that, at the heart of the local humanitarian action debate, are questions of value: what is valued, why and by whom, with direct implications for where and how the sector invests its energies, activities and resources. Of equal importance is the role assigning value plays in defining the power relationships among international and local actors, confining resources to a small number of players and influencing how those resources are applied and – consequently – what gets done. These contrasting values are fourfold: capacity vs contribution, technical vs contextual expertise, financial vs ‘user’ value and individual vs community value.

### 3.2.1 Capacity vs contribution

HPG’s research on capacity, including a global survey of humanitarian organisations, demonstrated that organisations and individuals defined and valued capacity in terms of the abilities they already possessed or believed were particular areas of strength. Local actors tended to value their capacity to secure access and maintain presence, to analyse and understand the local context (community dynamics, local conflicts and politics) and to engage with and understand affected people, their needs and their aspirations. Local communities in the DRC valued their ability to provide longer-term interventions, build community infrastructure and negotiate the dynamics of community relations (Barbelet et al., 2019). International organisations framed capacity in terms of logistics, funding and process, along with knowledge of and ability to uphold international norms, standards and policies. For instance, in Bangladesh, international organisations emphasised their ability to ‘scale up’ responses (Wake and Bryant, 2018: 17). In this way, the dominance of international actors in the leadership and coordination of the humanitarian system means that local contributions are consistently undervalued; instead, engagement with local organisations is framed in terms of perceived ‘capacity gaps’, skewing the relationship from the start.

Striking was the lack of self-awareness all round: international humanitarian workers interviewed in Bangladesh and the DRC spoke frequently and positively about their own capacity yet remained unaware of its limits, and reflected little on the particular needs of other groups, or the contributions they were already making to the response. Local organisations downplayed their own contributions, referring frequently to their capacity deficits and to ‘international’ capacity as something they needed and wanted, including through training (Barbelet et al., 2019). This resulted in generic statements about a lack of local and national capacity, a dismissal of the need to conduct regular or region-specific capacity mapping and a failure to factor in the multiple capacities needed to respond to a crisis into planning and programme design (Barbelet, 2019; Bryant, 2019c).

Also significant was the disproportionate weight given to international humanitarian assistance when people coping with crisis rely on multiple sources of support. While international humanitarian assistance is often the most visible source of help, it is rarely, if ever, the most significant, either in quantity (the amount people receive) or in quality (in terms of appropriateness and timeliness). The research estimated that international humanitarian assistance comprises as little as 1% of resource flows to countries affected by humanitarian crisis, which is dwarfed by community support mechanisms, remittances from diasporas, government and private sector funding and faith-based giving (Willitts-King et al., 2019).

Despite calls for more complementarity, the weight and influence of international institutions in developing strategic plans, making operational choices and determining who receives funding means that such complementarity is unequally weighted. The observed disconnect between the sector's notions of capacity and resources and the actual application of that support – its contribution – to saving lives and alleviating suffering is partly responsible for such imbalances. So too are the major gaps in knowledge about and trust in local organisations and their capacity – as a reflection of their contributions and assets and in non-international funds. As a result, understandings and definitions of capacity have been used, consciously or unconsciously, as a way to keep resources in the hands of the most powerful. Consequently, unequal partnerships endure.

As discussed above, it matters less *who* provides the aid than *what* and *how* aid is provided – that it is appropriate, demand-driven, dignified and, ideally, fast. A complementary response demands an emphasis on the contributions of all, as opposed to an emphasis on attributing change and success to particular actors or brands. If ‘as local as possible, as international as necessary’ remains an aspiration, and complementarity part of more effective humanitarian work, aid organisations need to rethink the way capacity is defined, assessed, implemented and valued: not in terms of who has it, but in terms of its collective contribution to the response. In some circumstances, this may mean an absence of

international involvement. And if international aid is only a small proportion of what people receive, then financial support to countries and communities in need must be analysed from the perspective of households and then programmed with this in mind.

Addressing deeper issues of trust is critical to this shift (see also Keating and Thrandardottir, 2017; Aly, 2019; Slim, 2019). Several studies have highlighted international actors' explicit lack of trust in locals' ability to carry out principled humanitarian action (El Taraboulsi-McCarthy et al., 2017; Barbelet et al., 2019; Fast, 2019b; Wake and Bryant, 2018 see also Pouligny, 2009; Schenkenberg, 2016; Slim 2019), as demonstrated in the consistent failure to respond to requests to include locals in coordination systems.

### 3.2.2 Technical vs contextual expertise

Another key aspect of the ‘local’ debate is the question of what is valued in terms of knowledge or expertise, and the limits these judgements place on local engagement. The formal aid system prioritises some forms of knowledge over others, with ‘universally applicable expert knowledge’ privileged over local, unsophisticated, ‘unscientific’ knowledge (DuBois, 1991). During the 2014–2016 Ebola response in West Africa, community health practices and community engagement were deprioritised in comparison to the scientific knowledge of a highly medicalised approach, to the detriment of the overall effectiveness of the response (DuBois et al., 2015; Richards, 2016; Featherstone, 2015). Much the same happened during the Ebola outbreak in the DRC (Daffe, 2019; Nguyen, 2019; Vinck et al., 2019).

Similar assumptions apply to protection responses in contexts such as Libya and Myanmar, where the response presupposes that international or external actors are able to deliver protection services in a neutral, impartial and professional way (ICRC, 2018). These assumptions do not acknowledge the cultural, tribal, social and religious backdrop, or ‘what role these factors play in terms of the nature of the risks to the physical, material and legal safety of civilians’ (El Taraboulsi-McCarthy et al., 2019: 20). As a result, community responses are

often not valued, precisely because they are seen as less ‘objective’ and therefore less legitimate (South, 2018). Yet in Libya, for example, family and tribal networks served as vital sources of protection and support (El Taraboulsi-McCarthy et al., 2019). This is not to imply that expert technical knowledge is unhelpful or unimportant, but it does suggest that contextual knowledge needs to be at least placed on an equal footing.

The sector is also uncomfortable with knowledge that it cannot easily acquire or measure. HPG’s research on financial flows in Nepal, Uganda and Iraq demonstrated the difficulty of collecting, measuring and comparing data about what is often a dispersed and inconsistent flow of funds to crisis-affected communities. This implies that prioritising such knowledge requires not only an overhaul of the way the sector tracks such funds, but also a fundamental shift in our approach, from measuring the source and level of international financial flows to understanding the use of those flows at household level (Willitts-King et al., 2019). Such household analysis on the combination of funds and how they are used should be prioritised in programme evaluations and impact studies.

### 3.2.3 Financial vs ‘user’ value

The humanitarian sector also tends to equate value with financial or economic worth, particularly in the context of measuring progress or success on ‘localisation’ aspirations and commitments. The localisation agenda, promoted by both international and local actors, has been largely reduced to achieving financial targets for humanitarian aid (e.g. 25% as directly as possible to local organisations by 2020). In the absence of a more meaningful metric for ‘localisation’, money disbursed to local and national NGOs becomes the default measurement for supporting ‘local’ action. While financial resources are crucial in enabling local actors to respond, it is not possible to equate financial value with what households themselves value or need (i.e. user value).

At the most local level – that of household recipients – HPG research provides evidence that international aid flows account for barely

2% of total aid flows in the top 20 recipients of humanitarian assistance, dwarfed by loans, investment and tax revenues (Willitts-King et al., 2019). This picture varies widely at country level. In a relatively small-scale disaster (Nepal), the response by the formal international response system provided approximately one-sixth of resources, as compared to Nepali government resources, volunteers and non-OECD-DAC (Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development’s Development Assistance Committee) donors, particularly China (Willitts-King and Ghimire, 2019). In a refugee setting (Uganda), international aid is significant in volume (60% of respondents reported international aid as their most important source of income), but is only one source of income among multiple livelihood strategies: 72% of respondents reported more than one income strategy, such as selling homemade products or daily labour, or engaging in other trades that are disconnected from the international and national aid systems (Poole, 2019). In a conflict and displacement setting (Iraq), government and local business salaries are major contributors to the local economy. More than half of Iraqis polled for HPG’s research had received government salaries in the past month, and over 60% received income from non-government jobs including in retail, construction, catering and other trades (Bryant, 2019).

Within this broader framing of support and income, international humanitarian financial assistance was less important, and its recipients were largely limited to those who had experienced displacement. Research about people’s sources of financial and other in-kind support illustrates the essential role of family, kinship and other community-based networks in Iraq (Bryant, 2019b), Nepal (Willitts-King and Ghimire, 2019) and Uganda (Poole, 2019), much of which is not counted in official tallies of assistance regardless of its local or international origins.

Most importantly, this financial measurement may be beside the point. People affected by the 2017 floods in Nepal valued the immediacy of the relief they received over and above its monetary value. Although community contributions were small, the social value of

non-financial aid and alternative economic flows (cooking meals for flood victims, lending within communities, providing land for refugees to farm) may have exceeded their financial value (Willitts-King et al., 2019; see also Featherstone, 2016). In Uganda, in-kind resources provided by host communities, such as access to land for cultivation, do not involve the transfer of cash but are vital to the livelihoods and survival of displaced people (Poole, 2019).

The importance of non-financial assistance to affected populations resonated across the research themes. Kachin living in Myanmar drew on their communal and personal capacities and resources as assets for their own self-protection, even if international actors did not fully take these into account (South, 2018). For the Rohingya living in Cox's Bazar, receiving humanitarian aid was identified as both a source and a loss of dignity, as it made them feel at once socially respected and economically dependent (Holloway and Fan, 2018: 15). For Syrians in Lebanon, 'dignity often has more to do with the intangibles of aid delivery than the tangible aid itself' (Grandi et al., 2018: 25).

By monetising relationships and resources, as often happens when calculating the significance of a humanitarian response, the sector overestimates the value of money in local humanitarian response *and* in the localisation equation, and fails to consider other inputs that may have greater social value and longer-term potential. This is especially true with regard to the relational and partnership aspects of the localisation agenda and, on an aggregated global level, where humanitarian responses are assessed in terms of overall financial flows (UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs' Financial Tracking Service (OCHA FTS) and global humanitarian assistance figures) and the percentage of funds needed to respond to assessed needs (UN Consolidated Appeals). If value for money is a valid way of looking at effectiveness, then a new metric for measuring value is needed, one that is not economic and is more attuned to how people feel about the aid they receive. By failing to understand the full diversity of support in crises, the system is not applying international flows efficiently or effectively. Doing so will require a shift in energy and actions.

### 3.2.4 Individual vs community value

Humanitarian action is, in theory and in practice, focused on the primacy of the individual. International law recognises the inherent and inalienable rights and self-determination of the individual. As articulated by Jean Pictet, the principle of humanity is 'the embodiment of a moral imperative that views the individual from an ontological perspective' (Labbé and Daudin, 2016: 186). The corollary principle of impartiality is fundamentally a principle of non-discrimination between individual needs. Taking impartiality as its cue, the sector plans, funds, delivers and assesses programmes based on individualistic concepts of assistance, which tend to be easier to count. Needs and outcomes are expressed in terms of numbers: of beneficiaries, of children vaccinated, of individuals with access to latrines, of mothers with access to prenatal care. The Sphere Standards are based on individual calorie intakes or square metres of tarpaulin per person. The delivery of cash is organised according to individual (and sometimes family/household) ID and credit cards, based on individual and household expenses. Value for money is often expressed as cost per beneficiary. Concepts of dignity and protection often refer to individual self-reliance and agency (Holloway and Fan, 2018). These numbers are easier to define and collect, shaping the metrics and corresponding focus of humanitarian programming.

Humanitarian action's emphasis on the individual is often in tension with the collective aspects of identity. When analysed across time and tradition, concepts of aid, protection and dignity have both individual and collective components. Humanitarianism in Chinese culture has been powerfully shaped by the Confucian ideals of responsibility and legitimacy, from the individual to society as a whole (Hirono, 2013; Krebs, 2014). In our research, Syrians in Lebanon primarily expressed dignity as personal safety and individual rights, 'stressing the centrality of respect for the person and their fundamental rights, while also conscious of the social value of one's self-esteem' (Grandi et al., 2018: 9). In situations where people have been targeted as communities based on collective identity, dignity is often expressed as it relates to a person's social and relational identity.

Rohingya refugees emphatically articulated this as community status and mutual respect (Holloway with Grandi, 2018; Holloway and Mosel, 2019), as did Kachin communities in Myanmar, who viewed protection of their ethnic identity (and communal assets such as land and culture) as equally important as individual physical protection and access to internationally guaranteed rights (South, 2018: 15). HPG's research illustrated the importance of social networks for individual household finances in Nepal and Uganda (Willitts-King et al., 2019; Poole, 2019) and for individual protection in Libya and Tunisia (El Taraboulsi-McCarthy et al., 2019). These communal aspects are vital to people affected by conflict and crisis, but their value and effects are less quantifiable and therefore harder to assess.

Humanitarians' continued focus on the individual fails to recognise the impact of assistance on social and communal relationships. This can include everything from increasing tensions between communities to disruptions to a community's social fabric or a mismatch between what communities receive and what they say they want. In multiple contexts, the idea of fairness in targeting assistance emerged as a source of confusion, jealousy and resentment, and contributed to mistrust between aid giver and receiver (Holloway and Mosel, 2019). What is intended as outsiders targeting aid to meet the needs of the most vulnerable can come across to affected people as aid diversion, due to perceptions of fairness linked to kinship and community (see Harrigan with Changath, 1998).

In Myanmar, the protracted nature of the conflict has resulted in increased instances of domestic violence, human trafficking, drug use and forced recruitment, yet these were not necessarily addressed in assistance and protection programmes (South, 2018). CSOs in Myanmar complained that the short-term, results-driven projects of humanitarian organisations undermined their long-term programming and investments in communities (South, 2018).

Even as the sector aspires to provide choice and agency to affected people, it must grapple with a system that, by design, limits people's agency and individual choices (see e.g. Grandi

et al., 2018). Moreover, when viewed through a resilience lens, it is those individuals with strong social networks who are able to cope with crisis most effectively. In a major study of the 2011 famine in Somalia, Maxwell and Majid (2016) document the direct links between social connectedness and the ability of households and individuals to cope with the famine. Thus, an emphasis on local humanitarian action demonstrates an abiding concern for the social elements of human existence, in contrast to the framing of much of the international system, which privileges individual needs and protection.

### 3.3 Currencies of power

Different conceptions of value between the humanitarian sector and affected communities, or between local and international actors and how they define the parameters of a response, also reflect – implicitly and explicitly – the presence or absence of power. The role of power in the aid sector is well known and documented, from its colonial roots (Mignolo, 2012) to the way that legacy determines the functioning of the humanitarian machinery (see Bennett and Foley, 2016; Collinson, 2016, Barnett and Finnemore, 1999; Donini, 2016). Power is both the raw material shaping the sector's current technocracy and the fuel that energises its institutions, partnerships and decisions.

Governments use power to pursue political agendas, creating patterns of behaviour that humanitarian organisations find it hard – and risky – to challenge or undo (Bennett et al., 2018). For their part, international aid organisations protect their own power in the 'closed spaces' – within institutions, coordination platforms, roundtables – where decisions are made about strategies, policies and funding (Barbelet, 2019; Konyndyk and Worden, 2019; Stoddard et al., 2019). They protect their power through increased compliance, due diligence requirements and risk aversion. These same tools of compliance and accountability, however, can also challenge their power and expose the flaws and mistakes of internationals. The #AidToo movement has emphasised this, revealing the



extent to which power imbalances within aid agencies have damaged the reputations of institutions that have ‘tolerated poor behaviour’ and ‘lost sight of the values’ they stand for (Charity Commission, 2019).

HPG’s research documented tangible examples where power asymmetries affected relationships, behaviours and humanitarian outcomes. These power asymmetries appear in the currencies of capacity, money and legitimacy.

### **3.3.1 Capacity as power**

The sector uses the nominally technical notion of ‘response capacity’ and the process of capacity assessments as a form of invisible power. Organisations that possess capacity determine how to prioritise skills and abilities and, in turn, determine which organisations have the ‘right’ kind. The same organisations usually assume that capacity, capability and expertise flow in a single direction: from international to national organisations. In many of the contexts studied, complementarity was interpreted and implemented in terms of ‘as international as possible, as local as necessary’ – the opposite of the Grand Bargain’s aspiration (Barbelet et al., 2019). Similarly, it is assumed that protection expertise and capacity lie with international actors, as opposed to communities themselves (Fast, 2018; South, 2018; Metcalfe-Hough, 2019). Implied in these behaviours is a determination of what constitutes a viable partner, who is eligible to receive funding and who is able to access international structures, networks and alliances, influence decision-making and mobilise resources. Local actors interviewed over the course of our research recognised these patterns, yet saw few avenues to change them or upend the system. This resulted in feelings of inferiority and denial of agency (Barbelet et al., 2019). More fundamentally, it reflects the deep, structural subordination of local organisations and the local population to the interests of dominant and more powerful entities.

### **3.3.2 Money as power**

Power also emanates from access to money, expressed not just in terms of levels of funding, but also in the quality of that funding and the relationships that result. Traditional aid funding

follows a predictable course from donor to implementer to recipient, and is defined in terms of donor priorities rather than the priorities of recipients (Willitts-King et al., 2019). The narrow contours of that supply chain are drawn by bureaucracy, government regulation and counter-terrorism legislation (O’Leary, 2018; Gordon and El Taraboulsi-McCarthy, 2018). Thus, the architecture, processes, systems and incentives upon which the entire humanitarian enterprise is based are contingent on how it is funded and the conditions attached to this funding. This determines which organisations survive.

Such restrictive supply chains are highly sensitive to public attitudes and intolerant of financial and reputational risk, favouring organisations with preferred supplier relationships, unrestricted and long-term funding, robust reserves and internal controls that allow them to meet ever-more stringent due diligence demands. This leaves organisations without direct access to (international) donor funds more vulnerable to political influence and less likely to be able to secure sustained investment in organisational structures and internal controls that could improve their access to that funding. The fact that many global-level events, conferences and meetings take place in northern capitals makes it difficult for smaller, under-resourced organisations to participate in these important decision-making forums and, consequently, larger international and national organisations become proxies representing their opinions and views.

### **3.3.3 Legitimacy as power**

Finally, power is closely linked to legitimacy, and specifically who is perceived as a legitimate partner by those who currently hold power and the purse strings. Our research documented yet again the ways that legitimacy is automatically conferred on organisations that understand and conform to international rules and standards, that operate in English, that are fluent in industry jargon and that assimilate into existing processes. Legitimacy based on physical proximity, cultural affinity, operational readiness or adaptiveness, sustained access to populations and longevity of operations is undermined at best, and discarded at worst. For example, in the DRC

local NGOs gained legitimacy when they became eligible for the UN's country-based pooled funds, irrespective of whether doing so made them stronger, more capable or more effective humanitarian organisations (Barbelet et al., 2019). The conflation of power and legitimacy poses a significant obstacle to reform.

### 3.3.4 Shifting power

The localisation agenda itself has been beset by the same power imbalances evident in the wider sector, despite its aspirations to upend them. These imbalances exist at and between all levels: among internationals, nationals and locals, all the way to the most local community level. This is neither adequately recognised nor discussed. Although HPG's 2019 evaluation of the Grand Bargain noted that half of the 254 clusters surveyed in 23 operations had national or local authorities in leadership roles at national or subnational levels, and 42% of cluster members globally were national NGOs (Metcalf-Hough et al., 2019), some believe that the parameters of these debates and decisions are still very much shaped by donors and international organisations (A4EP, 2019). While in many ways rising localisation activism represents affirmative action towards shifting power and challenging the status quo, it has also increased tensions between international and local actors operating in the midst of crises, and among local organisations that deny that such activism represents their views (Wake and Bryant, 2018; Barbelet, 2019). In some places the localisation agenda has become intertwined with a nationalist agenda, as governments in Bangladesh and Indonesia assert control over responses in a way that gives prominence and positioning to a civil society that aligns with its policies (Loy, 2018; Wake and Bryant, 2018; Barbelet, 2019).

This is not to say that important power shifts are not happening. HPG's research highlighted important change initiatives such as Islamic Relief's STRIDE project that aims to build the humanitarian capacity of development organisations that already have community ties and benefit from long-

term funding (Wake and Barbelet, 2019). Oxfam's ELNHA project on enhancing local humanitarian leadership aims to develop competencies beyond technical and operational skills and foster local autonomy and decision-making (Barbelet, 2019). The SHAPE and Shifting the Power initiatives are working on legal, regulatory and funding blockages to support organisations to be influencers on their own behalf (Start Network, 2018). Similarly, southern civil society initiatives such as NEAR and the CAN DO consortium of eight church agencies in Australia and the Pacific Rim are working to strengthen local organisations while brokering the divide between international and local actors by designing tools for assessing the capacity of local organisations and customised due diligence frameworks for international donors.

Research undertaken by the Melbourne-based Humanitarian Advisory Group (HAG) and the Pacific Islands Association of NGOs (PIANGO) has documented shifts towards national leadership and more equitable partnerships for disaster response in the Pacific island states of Vanuatu, Solomon Islands, Fiji and Tonga (HAG and PIANGO, 2019a; 2019b). Likewise, the Red Cross movement analysed the comparative advantages of the movement's local, national and international components with a view towards more effective complementarity (Ayobi et al., 2017; Austin and Chessex, 2018). In some areas of Myanmar, we found evidence of complementary ways of working between local and international actors where a few big local organisations (with annual budgets in the millions of dollars) were leading a large-scale response in areas not accessible to international actors (South, 2018). Previous HPG research documented a rebalancing of power in situations of restricted access in Ukraine and Syria, where local actors have access and could more readily influence how the response played out (Barbelet, 2017; Svoboda et al., 2018).

These positive examples of shifting power point to alternative futures, even if they remain exceptions to the existing state of play.

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# 4 Lessons and implications

Several lessons emerge from across HPG's research that can help to catalyse the next phase of a more locally led and responsive humanitarian action.

## 4.1 Lessons

### 4.1.1 Humanitarian action is always stronger with local action

Local humanitarian action is not always better, but without it humanitarian action is always worse. Across the four research themes, we sought to highlight spaces and examples of humanitarian action 'from the ground up'. In all cases, humanitarian action that is not or does not account for the 'local' in its myriad forms is always less relevant, less effective and more likely to fall short of the imperative to do no harm.

Local humanitarian action is not on its own sufficient to make responses more effective, but it is absolutely necessary. Our research on financing demonstrated that individuals and groups affected by crisis have variable access to resources, some of which is determined by local power dynamics (Willitts-King et al., 2019). In some cases, implementing local actors' concepts of protection, particularly in conflict settings, may expose people (particularly minorities) to other threats. Libyan refugees interviewed for this research questioned the idea of tribes as providers of protection because the social mores of some tribes, including those relating to the status of women, are incompatible with human rights (El Taraboulsi-McCarthy et al., 2019: 18). Kachin IDPs explained how heavily they relied on their local churches as providers of emergency assistance and protection (South, 2018). Yet the values of some religious communities in these areas may exclude or undermine the rights of sexual or religious minorities or others whose personal choices, lifestyle or circumstances fall outside the belief frameworks of these

communities (Fast and Sutton, 2018). In other settings, the goal of upholding and affirming the dignity of the displaced may place limitations on the nature or extent of local action (Grandi et al., 2018; Holloway and Fan, 2018; Mosel and Holloway, 2019).

Even so, local actors must be centrally involved in humanitarian action. An abundance of evidence from HPG research and elsewhere illustrates the agency of communities in crises and the specific contributions and capacities of local and national actors in providing financial and other resources. Even if capacity across the sector is uneven, particularly within local organisations that may not have the range of skills, ability to scale or organisational infrastructure to manage a response on their own, internationals must not undermine or overwhelm local capacity and action. Too often internationals inadvertently or deliberately replicate the structures and processes of the dominant actors in the humanitarian system, rather than valuing the particular strengths local organisations bring in their own right (Barbelet, 2019). Distinctions between local and international drive a humanitarian culture that attaches unhelpful labels to people and activities in crisis settings, and reinforce an aid narrative that distinguishes between aid givers and people affected by crisis (Bennett et al., 2018; Hilhorst, 2013).

As humanitarians contest different meanings of local, as a sector we risk losing sight of the real vision of local humanitarian action. Instead, the vision that should drive humanitarian action is one that begins with action rooted in the specificities of context and emphasises an effective humanitarian response and positive outcomes for crisis-affected people. It recognises the strengths inherent in a complementary and diverse response, and the value and importance of devolving decision-

making as close to the ground as possible. This vision is about providing assistance and protection in ways that save lives *and* safeguard dignity, regardless of who provides these services. Likewise, it is about shifting the character and manifestations of humanitarian response to one that is more contextualised and local in its quality, focus and profile.

#### **4.1.2 Effective and local humanitarian action is not a zero-sum game**

Supporting local humanitarian action implies contextualised and complementary functions, not simply a reduced role for international humanitarian organisations or increased roles for local actors, where the contributions of one preclude those of others. In current debates, effective humanitarian response and the local/international dichotomy is too often framed in this way, with a fixed amount of resources to go around. Too often, local actors, including those living the realities of crises, are side-lined and not supported. This represents a missed opportunity to promote and achieve more contextualised and effective humanitarian action.

With regard to protection, fears that localisation will mean a reduced role for international humanitarian organisations engaged in protection work appear largely unfounded. International organisations have a particular role to play in protection given their custodial function with regard to norms and laws, and their access to channels of diplomacy, lobbying and advocacy to change the behaviour of conflict parties in a way that local organisations cannot, and sometimes would rather not. However, local actors, including crisis-affected communities, must also be agents of their own protection (Fast, 2018; Metcalfe-Hough, 2019).

Achieving a complementary and contextualised response requires listening to those on the receiving end of assistance (Anderson et al., 2012; Mosel and Holloway, 2019; Swithern, 2019) to better understand what these communities need and value, attaching equal worth to both contextual and technical expertise and identifying new metrics to assess the resources that those affected by crisis define as important (Willitts-King et al.,

2019). At present, however, the interests and incentives of the most powerful actors in the system take precedence over the needs and values of individuals and communities in crisis.

National and local governments, particularly in disaster contexts, have existing channels for response and responsibilities to their citizens. Larger organisations will have economies of scale, global presence and platforms, and local organisations will have ongoing and contextualised engagement and a better chance of tapping into the diverse resources at crisis, country or regional level. Each of these represents important capacities necessary for an effective response to the needs of people living in crisis. All require complementarity that builds upon and resonates with the particular dimensions of a crisis or context (see Ramalingam and Mitchell, 2014). Our research suggests that it is possible to enhance complementarity by adopting broader definitions of capacity that reflect the full range of contributions towards alleviating the suffering of those affected by crisis, and are not confined to the parameters of organisational capacity or assessments of risk that tend to prioritise international actors (Barbelet, 2019).

#### **4.1.3 Power is both the greatest resource and greatest impediment to effective local humanitarian action**

The incentive structures and power imbalances that exist throughout the formal and informal system are deeply entrenched, but they are not immutable. The lack of progress towards the goals of the Grand Bargain illustrates only incremental progress in upending the current system and achieving the envisioned reforms. Global movements and individual initiatives prove that aid can both redress the power relations embedded and institutionalised in the structures of the formal system and transition them into something that is more organic, self-organising and reflective of new possibilities. Unpacking these dynamics can surface new pathways towards local humanitarian action. Converting the diverse forms of power from divisive to more productive requires directly confronting power inequalities.

Confronting power means first acknowledging the tensions and conflicts of interest between community, local, national and international aid objectives and institutions, and exploring their attributes and implications openly and honestly. It is by exposing and working within these tensions that existing power dynamics can be propositional – entry points into conversations among different power-holders to rectify mistrust and rebalance relationships. This requires humility on all sides and a spirit of collaboration in both discussion and action.

Confronting power also means de-linking the symbolic power of many international organisations from the concept of legitimacy, and instead connecting it with those best placed to contribute to the response. This involves doing away with labels and in particular the international/local binary that defines current reform efforts and predetermines who gets access, operational space and funding. It requires striving for a diversity of organisational and individual attributes that align with the sector's mission, values and outcomes. Finally, it involves prioritising the varied types of capacity and capability diverse organisations bring to a humanitarian response, with an emphasis on contextual expertise, including language, social positioning and trust. All this requires leadership to tackle existing inequities head-on.

Confronting and rebalancing power also requires a shift in approach to funding that channels resources based on contribution not attribution, and that includes a wider portfolio of funding sources whose effectiveness can be measured in terms of user-defined value, and not simply financial resources. Channelling increasing levels of flexible and sustained funds directly to local organisations is a critical equaliser, even as it represents only one way of confronting existing power imbalances in the sector. At present, while some shifts in funding have occurred and all actors in the system broadly support this goal, the sector remains unable or unwilling to direct substantial funds to local organisations and demonstrate significant changes in practice.

## 4.2 Implications: redefine the problem and reframe solutions

**To support local humanitarian action, the sector must redefine the problem and reframe solutions so that international actors are not automatically favoured.** It is not enough to meet the challenge of local humanitarian action without redefining the way we view the problem in the first place. Much of what we have discussed above is about shifts in terminologies, mindsets and behaviours, in that order. The required shifts are multiple, and at their heart demand a fundamental reorientation of the ways humanitarian action is operationalised.

These shifts in interpretive and operational framing are, however, not a panacea. In and of themselves they are not enough to reorient the system towards one that better balances power and resources between and among local and international actors. Yet using different terminologies requires different mindsets for response, which in turn shift behaviour. Together, they reframe solutions that point to a pathway to reform.

### 4.2.1 Reframe direct implementation as contributing capacity

As a starting point, approaching humanitarian response in terms of how assistance and protection are provided is more important than who provides it. At present, capacity is narrowly framed in terms of risk management and organisational competencies, both of which favour internationals. This is particularly true where organisations directly implement activities. The arguments put forward here highlight the importance of adopting a broader definition of capacity in terms of who is contributing and how, as opposed to defining capacity in ways that match the skills and assets on offer. This approach emphasises contribution to achieving results as opposed to attributing results to one (set of) actor(s). Reframing implementation in this way opens the door to a broader set of actors and moves away from narrow attributions based on brands and activities.

In practice, this highlights a need to engage in participatory mapping of national, regional and reciprocal capacity throughout a response (Barbelet, 2019; Bryant, 2019c). This is not the same as capacity assessments, which imply a judgement about 'who' has capacity and inevitably privilege international actors. For internationals, this requires mapping existing actors and their contributions *before* deciding to respond. Within clusters, ensuring that cluster meetings are open and accessible to local actors in terms of location, language and membership is one way to broaden participation, increase diversity and bring in existing contributions in current responses. More specifically, actively promoting the names and contributions of local implementing organisations in the response itself would help to clarify the roles and contributions of local actors in the humanitarian supply chain. Consulting with and involving more diverse voices would help us all better understand the configuration that offers the best results for affected people in terms of access, coverage and quality.

#### **4.2.2 Shift incentives to reward devolved, collaborative and complementary action**

At present, incentive structures within the humanitarian system serve the status quo. For example, attributing capacity, and therefore funding, to organisations and coordinating humanitarian action tends to function by exerting power and claiming credit, often in terms of brands and logos. This definition of capacity favours well-known and well-connected actors and has led to ever-expanding mandates and larger organisations. Moreover, while effective coordination is necessary where there is a multiplicity of actors, in too many contexts coordination mechanisms become *de facto* gatekeepers, excluding local actors by virtue of language, networks or even the ability to navigate the complexities and relationships of the formal humanitarian system. What if, instead of coordination, the mandate of the cluster system and other coordination mechanisms was to advance complementarity among local, national and international actors? What if funding opportunities were tied not to categories of 'local' and 'international' but instead to collaborative networks and complementary action? What

if the starting point for a response was asking people what they need and value? These shifts require flexible and proactive funding that supports planning and network-building, that is not simply reactive to crisis, and that could encourage exchange and learning among local actors or in multiple directions.

Starting locally with what people need and value, and determining roles based on the potential and actual contributions of different actors, opens up space for greater complementary action. This suggests the need to begin with what is needed and who can effectively and legitimately meet these needs. A shift from a coordination mandate to a complementarity mandate could encourage collaboration among actors. Tying funding to networks that highlight the contributions of local actors, as opposed to funding those that appear to attribute success to the actions of single organisations, could create an incentive structure that rewards organisations which support or privilege local action.

In practice, this could involve hiring more contextual experts in a response, or at a minimum placing contextual expertise on a par with technical expertise in health, water and sanitation or shelter. Some have suggested immersion experiences as a way of generating insights that may otherwise be inaccessible to those from outside the community (Chambers, 2012). Donors could privilege funding to networks that not only include but also foreground local humanitarian actors, or increase their flexible funding allocations. Other options include renaming coordination mandates as complementarity mandates; seconding international organisation staff to work at local organisations; or providing funding to enable local organisations to approach or match the salaries of international organisations and thereby retain qualified staff, as a deliberate effort to counter the poaching of local staff at the beginning of a sudden-onset emergency. For large international actors in particular, these various actions imply a need to develop niche areas of expertise in an effort to focus and contract, rather than expand, mandates to match the plethora of needs in any given response. Together, these represent concrete steps towards reorienting incentives to generate shifts in behaviour.

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## 5 Final thoughts

The grounded perspectives explored through HPG’s research on local humanitarian action, and the shifts they imply, are both time-intensive and long overdue. Our work shows that the barrier to greater local action is not a dearth of capacity, but instead the reluctance of international actors – donors, UN agencies and international NGOs – to cede power. The research suggests that action is required at the international, national and local levels, in order for local humanitarian action to gain greater recognition and opportunity. However, despite the goals articulated in the Grand Bargain, effort, attention and political capital are all largely invested in a top-down approach. The Grand Bargain’s ‘localisation’ workstream has not – for all the reasons set out above – delivered on its original ambition. Where local and international humanitarian action have worked effectively, this has been the result of deliberate and sustained efforts on the part of both international and local actors, or because of a disruption or challenge to the existing system, as opposed to technically focused efforts at incremental change. For example, local actors have played prominent roles in two recent crises. The EU’s decision to shift from a UN agency to the Red Cross/Red Crescent movement as the primary provider for the cash response in Turkey (European Commission, 2019; Parker, 2019) and Indonesia’s restrictions on the presence of foreign aid workers in the 2018 tsunami response (Loy, 2018) indicate that

power shifts when forced, and not voluntarily. Moreover, the approaches that present increased opportunities for local action, such as cash-based responses, preventive or anticipatory action, or development-focused initiatives (e.g. Doing Development Differently<sup>1</sup>) tend to be considered in terms of effectiveness and efficiency as opposed to the opportunities they present for greater local humanitarian action. Harnessing these approaches to propel local action to the forefront of response presents possible ways forward.

The required shifts are time-intensive in that they will not be achieved quickly or expediently through revised language, processes and techniques – although these are important too. They require changes in organisational culture and individual attitudes, based on listening to people affected by violence and disasters, brokering effective partnerships and networks and managing change. These shifts require effort and will take a generation to embed, but they are long overdue.

Local humanitarian action is not a new phenomenon. Local organisations have been the engine and energy of humanitarian response for some time. This is true both in high-profile crises and in the crises that go under the radar of media attention and political action but are no less destructive for the people and communities they affect. It’s about time that local contributions are acknowledged, supported and prioritised.

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1 See From Poverty to Power (2017) and ODI (2016a; 2016b).

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