

# Mapping local capacities and support for more effective humanitarian responses

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### Key messages

- The resources and capacities of international humanitarian actors account for only a small part of responses to crises. Assistance provided by local and national actors is often not recognised, which can result in inefficiencies, duplication and missed opportunities.
- If carried out in advance or at the start of a response, a comprehensive mapping of capacities and resources could facilitate more locally led humanitarian action and inform a more focused and effective international effort.
- Developing a more context-specific understanding of resources and capacity requires a complementary approach with the inclusive engagement of local actors and affected people. Rather than mapping sources of assistance with the aim of integrating them into internationally run coordination systems, this broader mapping exercise would demonstrate how far local actors and support are already meeting humanitarian needs.
- There are practical and ethical limitations in tracking resource flows and mapping capacities – instead of developing a global tracking system, it would be more useful to understand how resources are managed and capacities are assessed at the level of crises, communities and households, to better target assistance where it is most needed.
- Understanding what is valued by affected people and finding actors with the capacities to deliver – regardless of whether they are international or local – would ensure collective capacities are harnessed so as to deliver greater impact and enable effective responses beyond purely delivering aid.

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Cover photo: A Syrian refugee in Lebanon holds the money he will use to buy groceries.  
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## Introduction

In contexts as diverse as conflict-affected Mosul and refugee camps in Uganda, formal international assistance constitutes just part of the humanitarian response.<sup>1</sup> Local and national actors, including non-governmental and civil society organisations, religious groups, private businesses, host governments and affected people themselves are vital responders, providing aid and services critical to survival and recovery. This can be seen in instances of diaspora groups fundraising for flood responses in southern Nepal, networks of churches providing assistance in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), and residents of Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL)-occupied Mosul risking their lives to coordinate aid distribution. Such examples support the long-held assertions of many humanitarians that international assistance likely comprises a minority of the assistance provided in crises and, despite attracting more funding, may not always necessarily provide the most relevant or timely response from the perspective of affected people (Ground Truth Solutions, 2019: 16).

The capacities of local actors and resources that flow to crisis-affected people are not consistently recognised or monitored.<sup>2</sup> Current means of assessment are too narrow to capture all the existing local capacities that could be harnessed in a crisis. Systems that track financial and other resources are primarily restricted to the contributions of Development Assistance Committee (DAC) donors to the largest international non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and UN agencies, and coordination structures still comprise and are governed by international organisations in many responses. These practices mean the value, capacities and key role of local and national actors remain unrecognised by the international humanitarian system. As well as this resulting in a duplication of effort, it perpetuates traditional divisions between ‘international’ and ‘local’ aid givers that,

despite the efforts of reform initiatives calling for localisation and a shift in power, have proved resistant to change (Fast, 2019; Barbelet, 2019).

Across contexts, international humanitarian assistance can play a crucial role in filling the gaps that continue to exist in crisis response, despite the availability of existing local capacities and a wide range of resources. Rather than seeking to reduce the role of international actors, a better understanding of who has what capacity and who has access to which resources could inform more appropriate responses with better targeted international assistance. This would also facilitate a more ‘local’ humanitarian response, whereby local actors are better recognised and supported for the relief they provide.

## A narrow view misses key parts of humanitarian responses

Support for people affected by crises comes from a broader range of sources than solely international assistance (Bryant, 2019b: 21; Willitts-King and Ghimire, 2019: 22). In contrast, many international responders had a limited awareness of the diversity of resources available; they did not always know which organisations were providing assistance or who was funding them. The negative impacts of this discrepancy were especially apparent in protracted humanitarian contexts, such as South Kivu in the DRC. Despite recurrent crises, local responders received little support to strengthen their capacities (Barbelet et al., 2019: 19). In response, interviewees representing international responders argued that a lack of understanding of local capacities was a key barrier to engagement, either through partnering or capacity-building initiatives (Barbelet et al., 2019: 21). This was despite their organisations having been present in the context for an extended period of time.

This lack of knowledge, including what programmes have worked and why, preserves

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1 This HPG policy brief collates key findings from a two-year research programme on local responses to crises, specifically focusing on alternative sources of financing beyond international assistance (with case studies from Nepal, Iraq and Uganda), and capacity and complementarity (with case studies from the DRC and Bangladesh).

2 In this brief, ‘resources’ refers to ‘both financial and in-kind or material assistance’ provided to people affected by crises (Willitts-King et al., 2018: 1). ‘Capacity’ is understood as ‘the contribution of an actor or an organisation to alleviating the suffering of affected populations’ and could include organisational and operational abilities (Barbelet, 2018: 8).

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the status quo of a mainly international response (Barbelet et al., 2019). With no context-wide understanding of who contributes what, coordination structures that frame much of what is conceptualised as ‘humanitarian assistance’ operate largely by and for international actors, hindering the development of more locally led humanitarian action. Such findings were common in multiple cases in HPG’s research. For example, local and national humanitarian actors interviewed as part of a case study into the Rohingya response in Cox’s Bazar in Bangladesh reported prohibitively high barriers to meaningful participation in coordination systems such as cluster meetings, including a lack of clarity on how to engage and a default to English as the working language (Wake and Bryant, 2018: 27). Similarly, a survey from local organisations participating in the ‘Shifting the Power’ project illustrates that, although capacity-building initiatives have increased their contributions to joint needs assessments, this has not led to improved access to sources of independent funding (Rogers, 2017: 20). Such examples highlight that inclusion in coordination structures does not necessarily translate into meaningful participation, as well as the limitations of the current internationally led system in driving change.

In considering why the international system excludes local flows and capacities in its assessments, it should be recognised that current practice means capacities are determined in line with top-down, bureaucratic definitions that primarily assess organisational ability and financial management functions (Sanderson, 2019: 63). These limitations mean international actors tend to select partners similar to them, and may unintentionally replicate their own practices in organisations dependent on them for funding. This results in international responses having a narrow set of capacities – for instance, the ability to manage funds – rather than utilising organisations that are effective contributors to relieving suffering.

Similarly, decisions about which resources are mapped and considered as humanitarian assistance have largely been made with minimal

involvement from local and national actors (Barbelet, 2019: 28). Many funding flows in crises are not humanitarian in nature, but are instead sent by local actors, religious groups and affected people. These are not well mapped or considered to be ‘assistance’. Failing to recognise these flows may mean some humanitarian resources fail to reach the most vulnerable, or that opportunities to use existing channels for distributing resources – for example, hawala networks that transfer remittances – are missed.<sup>3</sup> Most importantly, not considering these flows helps preserve a sharp division between an international humanitarian sector that has a monopoly on ‘principled’ and ‘neutral’ aid giving, and other activities that are not considered aid.

## Mapping capacities and resources for complementarity

In contrast, a more complementary approach – one that can harness the capacities of all actors – potentially offers better humanitarian outcomes (Barbelet, 2018). Drawing upon the respective capacities of local and international aid providers would first require stronger engagement with these actors to more comprehensively track and map local capacities at the level of a specific crisis. This process would also necessarily engage with the political dimensions of the context, including questions of power and resource control. This would be an important first step in developing a complementary, or at least more ‘interoperable’, way of working, whereby the comparative advantages of each actor or organisation in a crisis can be considered without necessarily integrating them into a centrally run system (Hussein, 2015: 2).

### The need for wide consultation

A mapping process that aims to foster complementarity must first be based on a wide consultation that includes affected people and local aid providers. It should start from the point of contributions to relieving humanitarian suffering, but should not be limited to formal organisations. Such a process would likely

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3 This is not without precedent. For example, Dean (2015: 10) describes the use of registered hawala systems for cash transfer programming in Iraq by the Norwegian Refugee Council, as well as their use by other NGOs for the same purpose in government-held areas of Syria.

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highlight contributions not commonly included in international organisations' understanding of a context, including those from host families, networks of volunteers and other informal groupings. It could also explore financial flows to particular districts from businesses, religious institutions or diasporas.

A mapping of this kind, provided it is undertaken in an inclusive manner, will also help reorient perceptions of capacities present in particular crisis contexts. A more holistic definition of capacity would include technical knowledge, but also less quantitative measures such as specific understanding of the context or ability to access certain areas or groups. Similarly, a more context-specific and detailed tracking of resources would refocus flows around their use by affected people, as well as assessing who receives this support and in what form.

According to HPG research, from the perspective of affected people the dividing lines between international and local assistance are not as clear-cut as they appear in the policies and programmes of many aid actors and donors. This can be seen in respondents' perceptions of different forms of assistance, and which they considered most important. In the flood response in Nepal, for example, local and national actors such as Nepali NGOs, diaspora groups and extended family were cited as arriving first and playing the most prominent role (Willitts-King and Ghimire, 2019: 11). Rather than distinguishing between international and local responders, recipients determined which form of aid was most valuable through considering its responsiveness and appropriateness, rather than necessarily who distributed it.

### **Mapping at a crisis level**

This mapping of capacities and resources would not be carried out with the aim of finding operational partners, at least not initially. Instead, it would aim to deepen understanding of the context and develop an area-based view

of coverage and gaps in relief. The benefits of such an approach include identifying potential partners, including for capacity-building, and advocating for more local responses. Unlike many current capacity assessments, carried out bilaterally between potential funders and contractors, it would also highlight key resource flows that occur as an unintended consequence of humanitarian responses. For example, HPG research found that refugee camps in northern Uganda have a substantial aid-selling operation – 75% of surveyed households sold aid in order to purchase more useful goods and services, a substantial inefficiency that lowered prices and reduced demand in local markets (Poole, 2019: 22). In this case, understanding the wider context would expose the negative impact of current relief provision.

A clearer understanding of the local context, both in terms of response capacity and flows of resources, would potentially make assistance more complementary and efficient. As a systems approach that recognises the interconnectedness of all actors in a response, such a mapping would also better harness collective capacities, as well as deepening engagement between local and international actors. Over time, it could also facilitate more systematic approaches to strengthening capacity. Mapping local capacities independently of specific projects could provide insights into the longer-term impacts of capacity strengthening and exchanges between actors, and could also suggest who could be utilised in sharing good aid practices. For instance, local development, human rights and civil society organisations may have the capacity or resources to respond to a crisis, but may lack key skills that international humanitarian organisations could help develop.<sup>4</sup>

Calls for context-level mapping are not new. While various forms of context assessment, including stakeholder, political and market analyses, are now a common feature of programming, there are also examples of efforts

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<sup>4</sup> This network perspective of capacities, at least on the level of local actors, was a key feature of Oxfam's (2018) Empowering Local and National Humanitarian Actors (ELNHA) project in Bangladesh and Uganda.

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to incorporate a wider range of actors into formal humanitarian responses<sup>5</sup> (Sanderson, 2019: 112). However, these are largely limited to mapping past or ongoing projects. A more expansive mapping exercise could include potential capacities that might be utilised to carry out assistance activities, including those requiring particular investments from donors or operational partners.

Such mapping could also be used as a foundation to further assess which projects or flows are working, what resource flows have been interrupted by crises, or what could be scaled up. In providing information for international actors, some of whom when interviewed reported lacking such information in a crisis context, this enhanced mapping could reduce duplication in responses, while highlighting gaps that could be filled by international resources and capacities (HAG, 2017: 11). It would assist in reorienting the international system away from purely delivering aid to enabling effective responses (Hussein, 2015: 2).

Rather than mapping sources of assistance with the aim of integrating them into internationally run coordination systems, a more holistic conceptualisation of capacities would demonstrate the extent to which local actors and support are meeting humanitarian needs. It could also provide a common understanding upon which to facilitate a transition to a more locally led response. For example, the understanding of local organisations as operating in a network with peers is the first step towards operating collectively, pooling their respective resources to increase the strength and coherence of their bargaining power and advocacy work. Such networks could also provide a focal point for donors to engage directly, rather than a multitude of small, local groups that donors themselves may not have the capacity to engage with or manage.

### **Engaging with politics and host governments**

Although tracking resources is a technical activity, defining and assessing sources of assistance and capacities are political processes. Currently, the manner in which capacity is defined and assessed in crisis contexts is a reflection of unequal power dynamics across the humanitarian system. The narrow lens used to understand capacities and resources preserves the status quo and limits the growth of local actors' capacities. While not denying the often critical role that international organisations play in responding to crises, a context-wide mapping of these flows could shift the automatic centrality awarded to them in the immediate response phase, instead representing a more permanent web of relationships and support that exists prior to crises, and continues after these responders leave (Ramalingam, 2013: 304). A new way of mapping could challenge top-down, bureaucratised ways of working and perceptions of crises, and potentially provide space to discuss how to quantify metrics such as trust, and what constitutes 'legitimate' humanitarian actors and partners. Though sources of support may not necessarily come from humanitarian actors per se, their 'legitimacy' would be based more on their contributions to meeting the needs of affected people.

While complementary approaches seek to facilitate more effective working between international and local actors, many host governments are playing a more active role in the direct provision of relief. Several recent responses have seen host governments taking assertive and even exclusionary stances towards international actors, on the grounds that national authorities have sufficient capacity to respond.<sup>6</sup> A complementary approach can offer avenues for international actors to engage with host governments in a more cooperative manner. For example, social security assistance was among the most important sources of support

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5 For example, the UN partner platform offers a way for local organisations to become more visible to WFP, Unicef and UNHCR, and invites applications to partner with existing UN programmes, while toolkits such as the 3W database (who does what, where) offer the means to map the activities of local and international actors in certain geographic regions to improve sector and cluster coordination.

6 Most prominently, the government of Indonesia refused many staff of international organisations access to areas affected by the 2018 earthquakes in Sulawesi. Though welcomed by some localisation advocates, the response has since been criticised as delivering ambiguous humanitarian outcomes (Morse, 2019).

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in Iraq, where over 50% of respondents had received either government salaries or welfare payments through the Public Distribution System, including a majority receiving them while in displacement. UN agencies and other international actors have also used this system to channel humanitarian aid. Among the most frequent demands from affected people were that such payments need to continue for longer (Bryant, 2019a: 18). Similarly in Nepal, assistance through social security channels can quickly reach many of the most vulnerable (Willitts-King and Ghimire, 2019). A wider understanding of various income sources has identified social security payments as a key source of support and a complementary approach would offer the means of utilising these existing government capacities.

## **The limits of mapping capacity and resources**

Measuring capacities and financial flows in humanitarian crises frequently presents practical and ethical issues. Responses are stretched during emergencies, so mapping existing local capacities to ensure complementarity is challenging. For instance, the scale of displacement in Cox's Bazar and the speed of Rohingya refugee arrivals led to a somewhat chaotic response, where the mapping of all possible capacities would have been extremely difficult (Wake and Bryant, 2018). Other considerations should give pause to automatically mapping support: for example, in a conflict context, various organisations and aid givers may not wish to be visible as a safety measure. This was apparent in the case study of Mosul, where a network of support worked covertly while the city was occupied, with one interviewee reporting an aid worker being killed by ISIL for organising the distribution of relief supplies. Conversely, the city's recapture by government forces has led to persecution of those claimed to be affiliated with ISIL, and aid has allegedly been withheld from those communities (Bryant, 2019a). In such a context, mapping the activities of those risking their safety to organise and deliver assistance could compromise these actors if such information was not treated sensitively.

Measuring resources may also be problematic. For example, a key advantage of remittances for those that send and receive them using traditional hawala networks is their unrecorded nature. This makes them effectively impossible to track, but it also raises questions around what constitutes humanitarian assistance in crisis. Private money transferred within an extended family or personal network is unhindered by many humanitarian considerations and is a source of support only for those that can access it rather than necessarily reaching those most in need (Bryant, 2019b). Private sector donations and faith-based giving, therefore, may be more suitable candidates to further explore the wider flows of resources provided during crisis in order to understand who benefits. While resource flows such as remittances will likely remain private, a sense of their scale at a crisis level would provide an impetus to remove legislative or other barriers to keeping such channels open and functioning during a crisis.

Conversely, while a more holistic view of assistance may consider actors or financial flows previously neglected by the international system, this may not reveal the full extent of the value of social, psychological and emotional support provided by friends, family and other care-givers. These networks were frequently seen as a source of aid by respondents in HPG research in Iraq and Nepal and, although they cannot be measured in the same way, were clearly impacted by conflict and displacement.

## **Conclusion**

This research began from the observation that assessments to track resources do not fully reflect the complex wider lives of those affected by crises. Similarly, current assessments of local organisations are also limited in scope, and are conducted for the purpose of managing risk and subcontracting, with a narrow interpretation of what capacity means. This has led to critical contributions to relieving suffering in crises going unsupported and unrecognised, hindering progress on 'localisation' and preserving assumptions around who has the means to respond in humanitarian contexts.

In contrast, a complementary approach that harnesses the capacities and resources of all actors offers opportunities for better humanitarian

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outcomes. This would require an inclusive consultation with local actors and affected people to develop more context-specific understandings of capacity and resources. This wider understanding of how affected people receive and provide assistance in crises quickly leads to political discussions around who controls resources and why, and issues around trust and what constitutes a 'legitimate' humanitarian actor and partner. Current assumptions and definitions are a product of the politics of an unequal humanitarian system. Rather than this process being defined by international actors, it should be an inclusive one that draws more upon what is valued by affected people and finds the actors with the capacities to deliver them, regardless of whether they are international or local.

Clearer mapping and understanding of local capacities and sources of assistance offer numerous opportunities for better engagement with these actors. It could identify potential capacities that could benefit from investment from the international system, provide a means of connecting local organisations with each other to engage with donors directly or as part of consortia, or provide the information needed to strengthen the social security systems of host governments. While there are practical and ethical limitations in tracking the flows of resources and mapping capacities, a more comprehensive mapping could help make international efforts more focused and effective, while facilitating a more locally led humanitarian response.

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