



NEEDLES IN A HAYSTACK: An Analysis of Global South Roles in Humanitarian Knowledge Production



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Cover photo: Steve Johnson on Unsplash

Suggested Citation: HAG, CoLAB, GLOW and inSights, (2022). *Overlooking Local Voices: An Analysis of Global South Roles in Humanitarian Knowledge Production*. Humanitarian Horizons. Melbourne: Humanitarian Advisory Group.

This publication has been funded by the Australian Government through the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade. The views expressed in this publication are the authors' alone and are not necessarily the views of the Australian Government.

About Humanitarian Horizons 2021-2024

Humanitarian Horizons is HAG's three-year research programme which adds unique value to humanitarian action in the Indo-Pacific by generating evidence-based research and creating conversations for change. This research initiative is supported by the Australian Government through the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade.

The research programme for 2021–24 builds on achievements of the Humanitarian Horizons pilot phase (2017–18), the previous iteration of the program (2018–21) and HAG's experience in supporting the sector for almost 10 years. The research is structured into three interlocking streams: 1) Power, People and Local Leadership, 2) Greening the System, and 3) Real-Time Analysis and Influence. It is underpinned by a fourth stream comprised of governance, accountability, and monitoring, evaluation and learning processes.

About the partners

Collaborate Consulting Pty Ltd (CoLAB) is a Fiji-based development consultancy company that has delivered projects with diverse partners in the Pacific, Asia, Africa and Europe. CoLAB's vision is to achieve localised responses to development that are inclusive and sustainable, enabled through genuine collaboration amongst all partners.

GLOW Consultants, based in Pakistan, is a leading national entity providing practice solutions and field implementation support to donors, their implementing partners and research institutions. GLOW has successfully completed more than 100 third-party monitoring and evaluation assignments.

inSights (the Institute of Innovation for Gender and Humanitarian Transformation) is a Bangladesh-based social enterprise providing insights that challenge the current ways of working in humanitarian aid and gender affairs. inSights aims to transform ideas within the humanitarian, social and businesses sectors, turning them into innovations, knowledge and strategies.

Humanitarian Advisory Group (HAG) was founded in 2012 to elevate the profile of humanitarian action in Asia and the Pacific. Set up as a social enterprise, HAG provides a unique space for thinking, research, technical advice and training that contributes to excellence in humanitarian practice.



Humanitarian Advisory Group is BCorp certified. This little logo means we work hard to ensure that our business is a force for good. We have chosen to hold ourselves accountable to the highest social, environmental and ethical standards, setting ourselves apart from business as usual.



Contents

Acknowledgments	2
Introduction	5
About this research	6
Methodology	7
Sources and methods	8
Interpreting the findings	11
Findings	12
Authorship	12
Language	13
Primary data	14
Secondary data	15
Analysis processes	16
What does this mean?	17
Conclusion: finding the will	22
Annex: List of documents selected	23
Abbreviations	25



Introduction

Learning and knowledge have long been key drivers of change in the humanitarian system. Knowledge shapes the agendas and mental models through which humanitarian action happens. Learning – building new knowledge and applying it – is vital in informing and challenging practices and improving the outcomes of humanitarian action.¹ Yet knowledge is not single-sided or static; it is affected by power relations and politics, and can reproduce existing dynamics or challenge them. Hence, it is important to ensure that the way humanitarian knowledge is produced is informed by and reflects the values to which actors in the sector have committed.

Issues related to knowledge and its use go to the heart of the localisation agenda.² Recently, some of these issues – such as whose expertise is valued, how decisions are made, or who determines what success looks like – have been recognised as fundamental to key localisation focus areas such as operational leadership and system reform. While the sector keeps tabs on how it is improving in mainstreaming local leadership in humanitarian response, we have to continue to raise questions about how the expertise of communities and researchers from societies affected by conflict, disaster and global inequality can guide humanitarian action, producing knowledge by them and for them.

This discussion paper began with a question: how could we create a picture of who is involved in knowledge production in the humanitarian sector? Previous research and commentary drew attention to biases in the humanitarian knowledge landscape. Studies showed how, in operational settings, local and indigenous knowledge is frequently put to the side or limited to specific roles, with Global South actors “confined to lesser domains of knowledge.”³ Often these studies considered the experiences of specific organisations or sectors. To build on that work, in this paper we explored representation and visibility in some of the spaces where actors

1 Lavey, J-H, *Communicating humanitarian learning: What do we know?* ALNAP (2022).

2 The term localisation is used throughout this report to emphasise the importance not just of recognising or respecting local humanitarian action, but also that humanitarian action needs to be owned and led from the ground up. The paper draws PIANGO and HAG’s work to define localisation as “a process of recognising, respecting and strengthening the independence of leadership and decision making by national actors in humanitarian action, in order to better address the needs of affected populations” (See Y Ayobi A Black, L Kenni, R Nakabea and K Sutton, “[Going Local: Achieving a More Appropriate and Fit-For-Purpose Humanitarian Ecosystem in the Pacific](#),” Australian Red Cross).

3 Saleh 2017 cited in R Adel, “[Aid industry and the politics of knowledge production: Epistemic agency and its role in decolonising research practices in development](#),” LSE Blog (11 January 2022); J Allouche and C Maubert, “[How to co-produce transdisciplinary and plural knowledge to solve complex humanitarian problems? An illustration in the Democratic Republic of Congo](#),” *Alternatives Humanitaires / Humanitarian Alternatives* (July 2021); B Piquard, “[What knowledge counts? Local humanitarian knowledge production in protracted conflicts. A Central African Republic case study](#),” *Peacebuilding* (2021): 1–16; M Demeter, “[Development Studies in the world system of global knowledge production: A critical empirical analysis](#),” *Progressive Development Studies* 1-18 (2021).

Photo: Henrik Donnestad
on Unsplash

in the sector have sought to develop joint analysis or shared understanding, using three sets of documents as case studies. We also asked: what are the conditions contributing to the representation and visibility of different actors? We explored potential factors through interviews with select stakeholders such as donors, researchers and United Nations (UN) agency representatives.

We found that, based on our case studies, the localisation agenda has only partially influenced the generation of shared knowledge in the humanitarian sector. At present, despite the efforts of some research institutions to make their own practices more inclusive, the conditions that prevail in the sector's forums mean that the knowledge produced about and for these forums marginalises Global South actors. We also found that, even when Global South actors have been engaged in various ways, their visibility in the documents remains insufficient. In other words, recognition is lagging behind practice. Finally, we found that many people who are active in the humanitarian knowledge landscape are open to more equitable practices but are unsure how to achieve them in the face of material and structural challenges. By analysing current inequitable practices and the conditions that entrench them, we aim to support the sector's move from self-awareness and critique to action that will help to localise humanitarian knowledge production.

Structure of the paper

The next section explains the study's methodology. We then present the findings from the document analysis according to the areas in our coding framework. After this, we unpack the findings, drawing on interviews and existing research to highlight influences and explore the conditions that work against more equitable knowledge production in the humanitarian sector. The conclusion invites further discussion whilst posing some questions about responsibilities and opportunities in achieving more localised research.

ABOUT THIS RESEARCH

This discussion paper is part of a series of interlinked investigations of the politics of humanitarian knowledge and what changes can help bring about more inclusive and equitable approaches to research, analysis and decision-making. The series is the product of a collaboration of research groups and individuals based in Asia and the Pacific, under the [Humanitarian Horizons 2021-2024](#) research program. Working within the [Power, People and Local Leadership](#) stream of that program, we examine inequalities embedded in the humanitarian system, the conditions that perpetuate them, and avenues for change. In this series, we turn the lens onto knowledge production, using a range of methods that offer varying ways of conceptualising challenges and opportunities.

Needles in a Haystack: An Analysis of Global South Roles in Humanitarian Knowledge Production

This discussion paper examines what is visible on the public record of humanitarian knowledge production, based on specific publications and how they cite their sources of information. It uses analysis of these publications' content to reflect on trends in knowledge production in the humanitarian sector and what needs to change.

Stories for Change: Elevating Global South Experiences in Humanitarian Knowledge Production

To complement the research in this paper, we sought to create a space for Global South knowledge brokers to share their experiences of working in the sector, their analysis of its biases, and their ideas for future action. We held three workshops and nine one-to-one sessions on aspects of the knowledge production cycle. The findings are shared in a narrative form that explains the sector's failure to recognise and hear a full range of voices.

We will be publishing additional research reports and guidance notes on the humanitarian knowledge production space and challenging existing ways of working. Watch this space!

Methodology

This study examined a particular area of activity within humanitarian knowledge production: the creation of resources. Knowledge production is a large domain that includes many activities of different kinds, such as individual or collective reflection; monitoring and evaluation; research, including applied and academic research, whether commissioned or independently initiated; facilitation and training; and sharing and accessing information through learning repositories or events. It may be done by individuals, groups, at organisational level, through networks, communities of practice, or other institutions, formally and informally. This study focused on resources (e.g. reports and strategy documents) that originated in, and aim to support, collective processes of the humanitarian sector.

We used three sets of documents as case studies, analysing actors' roles and the conditions that supported or constrained them. We also conducted interviews, and drew on other research, that allowed us to consider these processes from a range of perspectives. This methodology section explains our choices and the advantages and disadvantages of our approach to knowledge production in this study.

Figure 1: Methods



SOURCES AND METHODS

This paper began with an analysis of humanitarian documents. These documents served as case studies of the roles of Global South actors and their visibility in one area of humanitarian knowledge production.

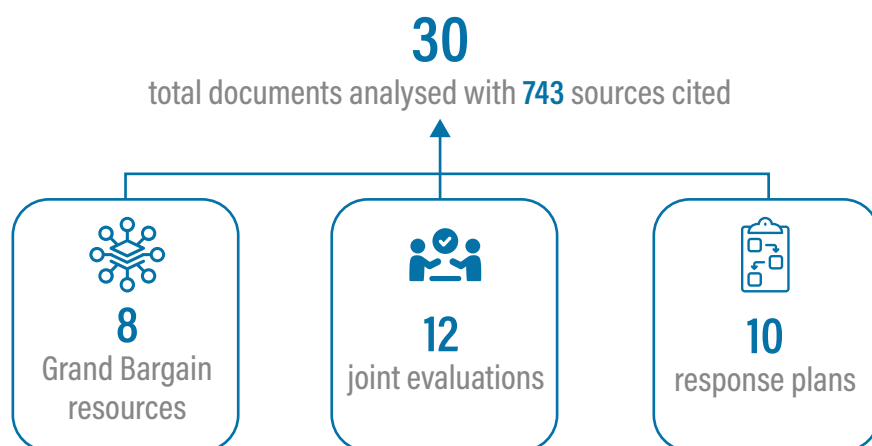
1. Choice of documents

For this study, we identified three sets of documents that aim to capture sector-wide dynamics and collective discussion to help inform humanitarian action. We chose documents that aimed to create or reflect shared understandings on sector practices, priorities or performance – what has previously been described as a kind of “humanitarian consensus.”⁴ Key inclusion criteria were scope for collaboration and/or co-production, and capture of sector-wide discussions, particularly on localisation. This means materials published for individual organisations or based on unilateral initiatives were excluded. Our hypothesis was that those collective spaces would have the greatest chance of including a range of actors in the process of knowledge production. We also sought documents that could be reviewed in “sets”; whether this meant similar documents produced over the years, or documents produced for the same purpose within a shorter time frame, we wanted to avoid “standalone” pieces.

The case study sets have different purposes and processes of creation, as outlined below.

- **Grand Bargain resources** capture global discussions about reform in the sector, particularly on localisation, published between 2016 and 2022. We focused on annual reports and one research report that aimed to capture perceptions of the Grand Bargain commitments.
- **Humanitarian response plans and strategies** represent collaborative work to create shared platforms for understanding and managing crises and justifying the immediate interventions and resources needed. We only included humanitarian response plans in Asia and the Pacific for the year 2021.
- **Joint evaluations** provide evidence of the sector’s performance in a specific response. We chose the Rohingya refugee response because it is a multi-year, multi-country crisis. We included assessments of response plans and evaluation reports that touch on joint action, such as evaluation of interagency and donor agency interventions, published from 2017 to 2021. This means that our sample does not include all evaluation reports on the Rohingya response, nor evaluations of individual agency projects or programs.

Figure 2: Documents reviewed



4 M Finn and E Oreglia, “A fundamentally confused document: Situation reports and the work of producing humanitarian information,” Proceedings of the 19th ACM Conference on Computer-Supported Cooperative Work & Social Computing (February 2016): 1349-1362.

2. Citation analysis

Central to our study was an examination of how the case study documents presented their sources of information. This involved looking at what was cited, whether in the main text or in additional information like bibliographies or annexes. We produced a database of the citations of each document, with the document with the fewest sources footnoting four sources and the one with the most citing 146 sources. The database was cleaned to ensure that duplicate references were not included. In total, there were 1,066 bibliographies, footnotes and endnotes. After excluding duplicates, unverifiable references (e.g. broken website links) and explanatory notes in footnotes, the total number of references examined was 743. We also looked at how different sources and actors were recognised in the documents, such as in acknowledgements of authors and peer reviewers.



To 'cite' something means to acknowledge it as the source of information or ideas. A 'citation' is the way that this acknowledgement is included in the text, whether by naming the creator directly or by including information in endnotes or footnotes (as seen in this discussion paper); sources can also be acknowledged through reference lists and bibliographies.

To analyse the database, we developed a coding framework as shown below. This framework drew on existing research, such as studies exploring ethical and practical issues affecting actors and researchers from Global South countries in the design, analysis and dissemination of humanitarian research.⁵ These studies helped us to identify domains in the knowledge production process that related to our focus on outputs.

The coding framework responded to the following:



Authorship: who are the individuals and institutions listed as authors? (For documents with no individual authors, we looked at which institutions co-branded the report.)



Language: is the material published in languages other than English, and in particular, the language of the context being studied?



Primary data collection: how were different actors engaged in the data collection process?



Secondary data: who are the producers of other materials cited in the case study documents?



Analysis process: whose expertise informed the analysis, including the tools and frameworks?

We then looked at how institutions based in the Global South and Global North were represented, based on the citations and other markers in each document. We define Global South institutions as those headquartered and operating in developing countries and not affiliated to an international entity (more on terminology in the boxed text below).⁶

3. Interviews

We used key informant interviews to supplement the analysis and explore “behind the scenes” in the production of the case study documents. As part of the interview process, we shared overarching findings from the citation analysis and solicited reflections on these findings, as well as on knowledge production

⁵ J Allouche and C Maubert, “How to co-produce”; B Piquard, “What knowledge counts?”

⁶ This definition draws heavily on localisation markers and how local actors are defined. NEAR defined it as those “locally rooted, founded, and headquartered in a country that is not a member of the OECD-DAC (except for Chile, Korea, Mexico and Turkey); carrying out operations at national, sub-national or community level and NOT affiliated to any international NGO [or any entity]” (see NEAR, “What impact is the Grand Bargain having in the Global South?: Perspectives from local and national organisations in the Global South,” *NEAR (June 2020)*).

more widely. Interviewees included donor agency representatives (particularly those commissioning research and evaluations), Global North researchers (particularly those involved in the production of some of the case study documents), and Global South institutions or actors who co-produced some of the humanitarian documents reviewed (e.g. a consultant in Bangladesh). The interviews helped us to understand the broader conditions, including the barriers and challenges, in humanitarian knowledge production.

4. Sense check and review

The draft report was reviewed and sense checked by researchers from both Global North and Global South institutions as part of the peer review process. Subsequent discussion and feedback with sense checkers improved our understanding of the process of producing the case study documents. Peer reviewers could see the full quantitative findings as well as the discussion. Reviewers' feedback was incorporated into a revised draft. Sense checkers who reviewed the report included authors of the case study documents, which was helpful in correcting information about how some of the documents were produced. While we sought to apply insights from the interviews and external reviewers in good faith, our analysis combines multiple perspectives and ultimately reflects the views of the research team rather than any of the interviewees or reviewers.

Terminology: Global North and Global South

The terms Global North and Global South are used in this report "to distinguish between countries with high income economies (Global North) that have historically dominated the provision of development and humanitarian aid, and countries with middle- or lower-income economies (Global South), which are located primarily in the Southern hemisphere and have historically been recipients of aid."⁷

We acknowledge the flaws in using these terms, including the profound differences between countries in each category. They also imperfectly reflect our interest in how affected societies are contributing to localised decision-making through research, analysis, or evaluation, because not all countries considered part of the Global South host humanitarian operations, and not all humanitarian operations take place in the Global South.

Additionally, we recognise that actors may not identify with these categories or may represent both Global South and North institutions. This applies to UN agencies, for example, which represent multiple countries. Our definition of Global North, however, applies to UN agencies because they are affiliated with an international (rather than national) entity and usually headquartered in the Global North.

Despite these caveats, as noted in the quotation above, North-South distinctions matter "because of the structural power relations that continue to exist between these two groups of countries."⁸

It is also important to note that our coding framework focused on institutional affiliations. This limited our understanding of how Global South voices and representation influence processes *within* Global North institutions (or vice versa). If authors of the case study documents identified themselves as independent, they were tagged as Global North or Global South depending on where they were based.

⁷ F Carden, T Hanley and A Peterson, *From knowing to doing: Evidence use in the humanitarian sector*, *Elrha Learning Paper* (2021).

⁸ *Ibid.*

INTERPRETING THE FINDINGS

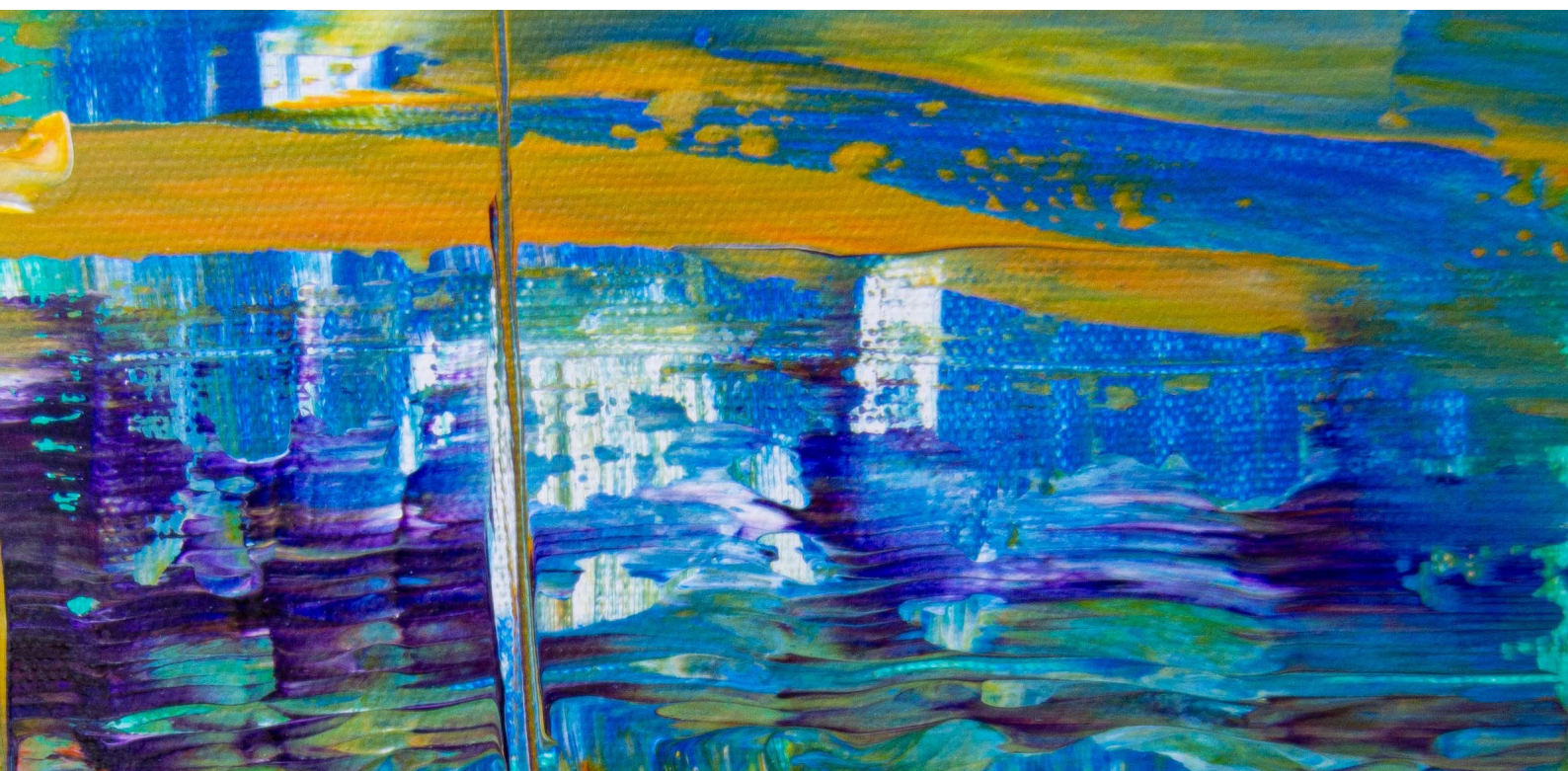
The intention of the citation analysis was to capture patterns rather than highlight specific actors or organisations and their practices of engaging with Global South actors and institutions. This presents a challenge, because even in collective initiatives the responsibility for implementation is often delegated. However, our approach had the advantage of highlighting *to whom* these responsibilities were delegated in each of our case studies, which can say as much about collective decision-making as it can about the chosen partners. It shows how conditions in the sector shape such decisions.

It is important to acknowledge that our sample was small and could not be representative of all types of humanitarian documents published. Our study focused on Asia and the Pacific due to Humanitarian Advisory Group's (HAG) work in those regions, so the sample was also limited due to excluding large geographic areas (e.g. response plans in other regions, such as Africa). In addition, we studied documents produced in narrow timeframes to make the data feasible to code and analyse. This also ensured that all case study documents were prepared after the localisation commitments of the 2016 World Humanitarian Summit. This is important, because it means that all the documents were produced after the sector had committed to improving the inclusiveness and equity of its ways of working.

Recognising the breadth of activities that can be considered "knowledge production," our sample does not allow us to draw generalisations about wider research and evaluation practice, or represent each type of knowledge production (e.g. evaluation, research). We recognise that many researchers and institutions in the Global North have incorporated co-production methods in their work, creating high-quality opportunities for collaboration with their counterparts in the Global South. Some of these were captured during our interviews. The factors shaping the creation of these opportunities are explored in the discussion section.

Finally, our analysis was based on the case study documents, so the quantitative findings may misrepresent or under-acknowledge some actors' roles. In fact, by opening these findings to review, the research identified a visibility gap affecting representation of institutions in the Global South. By visibility gap, we mean that Global South actors have been engaged in the production of materials but are less visible in most of the domains examined. **This is one of the ways that the study, by shining a spotlight on systemic challenges and their effects, was designed to contribute to change.**

Photo: Steve Johnson on Unsplash



Findings

This section outlines the findings from the five elements of the coding framework. It focuses on explaining the quantitative findings from the document analysis and highlighting the patterns we observed in relation to the visibility and roles of Global South actors and institutions. It also outlines the challenges and opportunities that shaped the production of the case study documents. Insights from interviews are included to explain some of the findings.

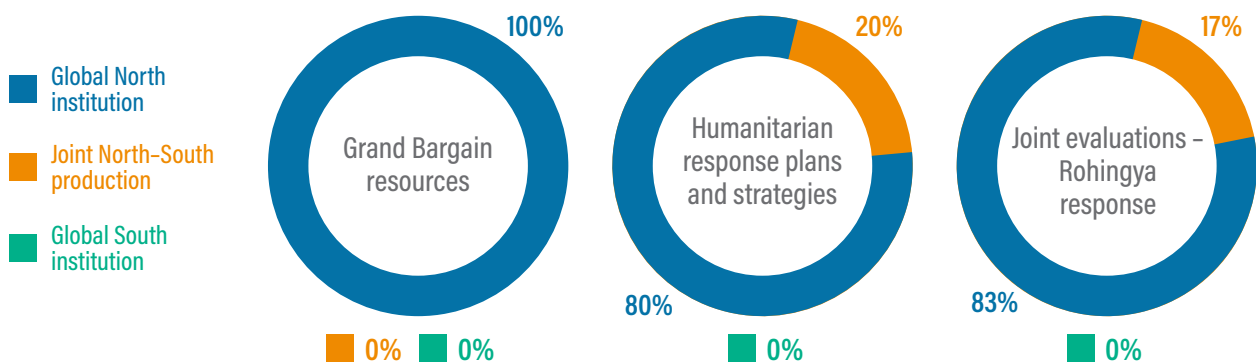


AUTHORSHIP

The authorship of all three document sets was almost exclusively led by Global North institutions.

As seen in Figure 3, joint production between Global North and Global South institutions was the exception rather than the norm, but North–North collaborations among international non-governmental organisations (NGOs), UN agencies, donor agencies were frequent. Actors from Global South institutions are not among the individual authors or co-authors of the Grand Bargain resources, including the research report intended to capture stakeholder perceptions of the Grand Bargain. Two of the 10 humanitarian response plans and strategy documents had a government agency as an institutional author in the country context. Only two (17%) of the evaluation reports reviewed were co-authored by a consultant from a Global South institution.

Figure 3: Authorship of the core resources



- **Opportunities for Global South authorship.** For reasons that are explored in the discussion section, recurring processes or longstanding situations do not seem to lead to more opportunities for Global South institutions. For example, evaluations of the Rohingya response that were part of the sample were authored mostly by actors based in Global North institutions who had extensive monitoring and evaluation experience. In instances where there was co-authorship, Global South researchers spoke of Global North consultants ensuring they were recognised as authors. One collaborator from Bangladesh shared, “We have to keep in mind that we cannot be a researcher until we get the proper recognition or authorship for the publication. They [Global North collaborators] edited my writings in their own language afterward and sent that back to me to check if my information was addressed properly or not and it was perfectly done.”⁹ This

9 Interview 8

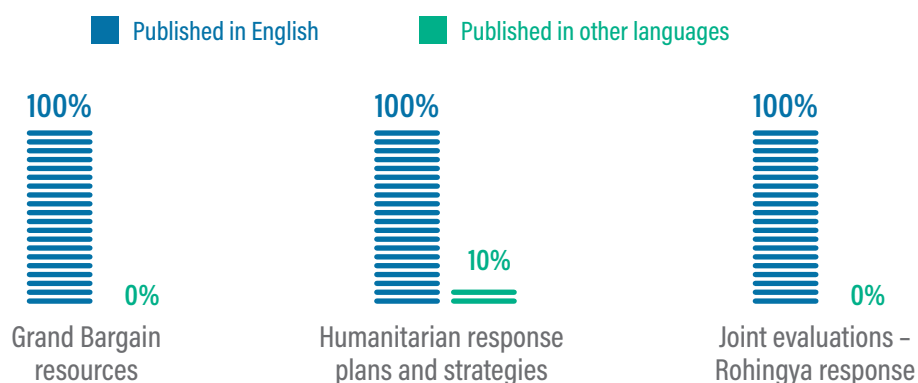
story highlights that there is huge value in recognition through authorship for Global South actors. Whilst Global South authorship in the case study documents was minimal, we noticed their high visibility and representation of Global South actors and institutions in other domains such as data collection (discussed in the Primary Data Collection section below). In the Discussion section, we discuss why this is so.

- **The consequences of an exclusive structure.** Other than as co-authors, Global South institutions do not seem to be contributing to quality control processes such as peer review. The example of the Grand Bargain documents illustrates how this can reflect wider dynamics in joint sector spaces. Because the Grand Bargain signatories are mostly from the Global North (63 of 66), the fact-checking process involved the same composition of actors, leaving little room for Global South engagement. The Grand Bargain’s exclusive structure thus has consequences for Global South engagement in the official production of knowledge about its processes and achievements.¹⁰
- **Collaboration in dissemination:** In some of the humanitarian response plans, government agencies expressed acknowledgment or buy-in of the publication. This can be seen, for example, when the Ministry of Foreign Affairs launched the Pakistan Humanitarian Response Plan 2021 with UNOCHA in June 2021.¹¹ Our methods meant we could not include the dissemination phase in our analysis, which raises the question of whether Global South actors had more engagement opportunities in this and other domains (such as methodology development or advocacy) that we have not considered. Another piece, the *Stories for Change* report, tackles this gap by understanding the experiences of Global South researchers in co-developing methodology and influencing research uptake and accountability.

LANGUAGE

All 30 case study documents were published in English. An online search found only one of these documents – an executive summary of a response plan – published in the language of the country context (see Figure 4). We also looked at whether the documents used sources in a range of languages – that is, whether the cited references were published in languages other than English. Only 6% of references cited in all case study documents were available in other languages.

Figure 4: Language used in the core resources



¹⁰ Report review discussion

¹¹ Government of Pakistan and UN Country Team in Pakistan, “2021 Pakistan Humanitarian Response jointly launched by the Government of Pakistan and the United Nations,” *Reliefweb* (9 June 2021).

Little translation into languages of crisis context. Few of the studied materials were translated into local languages. To be sure, English is an official language in some countries in Asia and the Pacific; nonetheless, the bias to publish in English needs to be considered in light of ethics, accountability and reporting the findings to consulted communities and stakeholders – and the ultimate purpose of the knowledge produced. We recognise that the relevance of these documents for specific audiences varies significantly, but with so few documents translated, consideration of audience needs is rare.

Little use of non-English language sources. Of the 6% of references cited that are available in languages other than English, most were in European or UN languages, particularly French and Spanish. The most widely translated materials are standards or guidance documents, such as those published by the CHS Alliance. Institutions that produce materials available in multiple languages are often UN agencies and European-based NGOs and donor agencies.



PRIMARY DATA

Global South actors were most fully represented in the production of primary data, although this varied substantially across the case study documents. We used information from the methodology and acknowledgments section of the documents to examine how Global South institutions were involved in accessing the primary data. In Figure 5, “Data collectors” means they were involved in gathering primary data from stakeholders through interviews or focus group discussions and/or conducting secondary data analysis; “data sources” means they were among the stakeholders consulted (often by authors).

Overall, we found that Global South institutions’ involvement in our case studies was skewed towards the data source category. For one of the Grand Bargain resources, affected communities and local and national NGO staff were consulted about their perceptions of the Grand Bargain commitments. In reports on the Rohingya response, government stakeholders and community members (the recipients of interventions) were consulted as part of the evaluations. In response plans, Global South actors and institutions, particularly governments and NGOs, were acknowledged in collecting data for needs assessments and as partners in appeals for funding.

Figure 5: Representation of Global South institutions in the data collection process



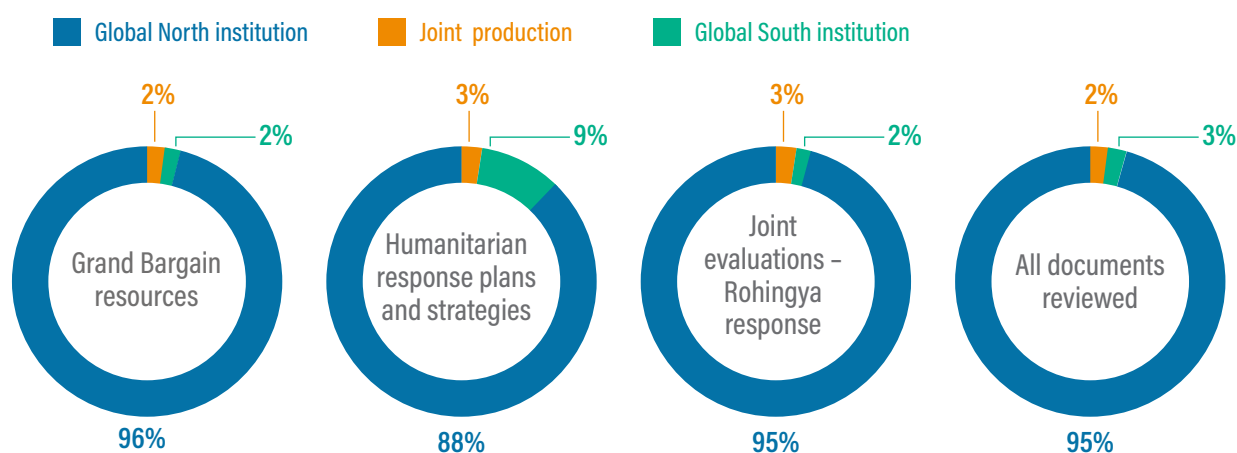
Quality of participation is difficult to gauge. Humanitarian response plans suggest that partners in appeals for funding such as NGOs and government agencies are involved in data collection during needs assessment (such as in the preparation of humanitarian needs overviews, which inform response plans) or calculation of response costs. Whilst the development of needs overviews and response plans highlights the intersectoral and collaborative work in developing these documents, the extent of actors’ involvement was unclear, making it difficult to draw conclusions about processes and participation levels.

Sources tied to documents' purpose and context. The primary data required varied depending on the purpose of the documents. This was clearest in the Grand Bargain reviews, for which the primary data source was the upstream signatories (essentially self-reports from donor institutions and interviews with them). Most (75%) of the Grand Bargain resources reviewed involved Global South actors as data sources. As noted earlier, the Global South's engagement in the Grand Bargain review process is a reflection of what started as a structure mostly driven by Global North institutions. In later years, Global South actors' engagement increased. As clarified in the 2018 report, it was only "at the end of 2017, and in advance of its work plan for 2018, [when] workstream 2 co-conveners sought suggestions from participating signatories for 10 'local actors' to join the workstreams teleconferences."¹² The lack of data from Global South actors in earlier years therefore reflected their minimal participation in the Grand Bargain at that time.

SECONDARY DATA

In the case study documents, the work of Global South-based institutions and actors is less frequently cited. Figure 6 shows that 95% of all references cited were authored by actors from Global North institutions. Only 3% were authored by Global South institutions, and 2% were produced through North/South joint production.

Figure 6: Authorship of references cited



Capturing context. Representation of Global South institutions in the cited references is slightly higher in humanitarian response plans and strategy documents. These materials are mostly government documents or statistics that explain the crisis context. It is important to note that much of the information about context (e.g. the situation and needs of communities) is obtained through primary data assessments (discussed above), so a lot of information about the crisis context is unpublished and unreferenced.

Differing institutional profiles of North and South actors. The range of institutions cited differed between the groupings, with a more diverse range of Global North institutions included than Global South institutions (see the methodology section for definitions). The dominant voices from Global North institutions are UN agencies (25%), INGOs (19%), interagency forums (18%) and research institutions (12%). Global South institutions that inform these documents are mostly government agencies (35%) and NGO networks (40%).

Formats. In keeping with the above, there is a greater diversity of formats in the references from Global North institutions. Notable differences included more frequent citing of meeting reports produced by Global

¹² V Mercalfe-Hough and L Poole with S Bailey and J Belanger, *Grand Bargain annual independent report*, Humanitarian Policy Group (2018), footnote 7

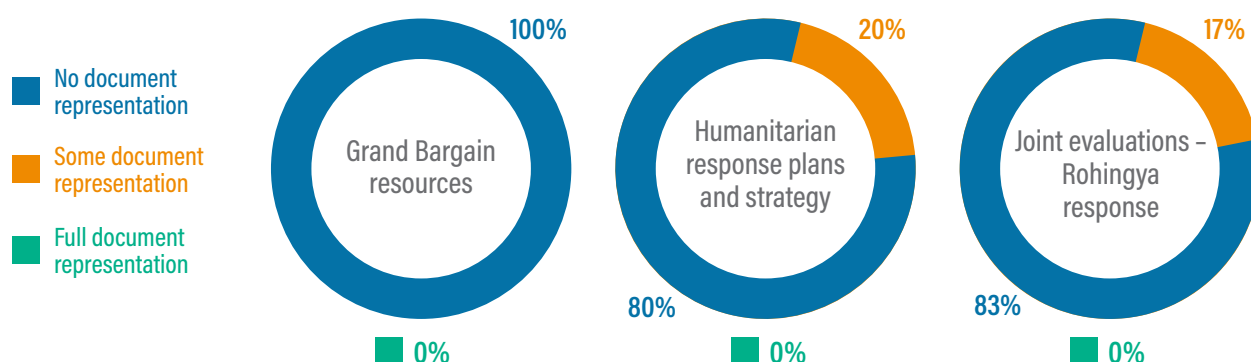
North institutions, arguably reflecting the convening and networking power of Global North institutions and the weight given to their views by the sector, and more frequent citing of press releases and discussion papers produced by Global South institutions. Citing of research reports is also frequent across all case study documents. However, 93% of the total research reports cited are published by Global North institutions, whilst only 4% were jointly produced and 3% are research publications from the Global South.

ANALYSIS PROCESSES

Most of the core resources draw on the expertise of Global North institutions in analysing crises and needs (response plans), reform in the sector (Grand Bargain documents), and performance (joint evaluations). The case study documents give little information about who or what informed the underpinning frameworks or their analysis processes. Even if documents provide more information about research design or data collection, they rarely detail the process of framework development or who shaped the conceptualisation of findings. However, we thought it was important to include this section because, in contrast to the data collection phase, there is much less participation of Global South actors in the analysis and sense-making stages (see *Stories for Change* report). This goes to the fundamental factors that shape knowledge production in the sector, and highlights issues of transparency and the relative visibility of contributions.

We examined how the analysis of core resources drew on the expertise of differently located institutions by looking at the analysis frameworks (if available) used in the work and the authorship type. It is difficult to determine the extent to which Global South actors were engaged in this stage, and we can only form understandings based on what is provided in reports. This is reflected in our terminology. “No documented representation” means that the analysis was led by Global North institutions or used global frameworks, whilst noting that it was adapted to local context as suited. When reports are co-authored by both Global North and Global South actors, we took that to mean there was “some documented representation” in the analysis because Global South actors were acknowledged as authors. “Full documented representation” means that Global South actors led the analysis and were sole authors of the report, though no examples of this were identified. Figure 7 shows that most of the core resources reflect the expertise of Global North institutions in their analysis of the crisis and needs (response plan), reform in the sector (Grand Bargain documents), and performance (joint evaluation).

Figure 7: Representation of Global South institutions in analysis



We further discuss all the findings in the next section.

What does this mean?

Based on the document analysis and interviews, the roles of Global South actors are concentrated in primary data collection; their representation is minimal in other domains such as analysis and authorship, despite these documents being the result of collaborative work in both international and domestic contexts. There is no doubt that primary data collection is extremely important. It is critical in facilitating access to crisis-affected communities, connecting the right stakeholders to information, and translating information to make it accessible to English-speaking audiences. However, this visibility gap warrants consideration, especially when the sector has committed to localisation. What are the implications of Global South actors' low visibility in key processes of knowledge generation and the resulting outputs? In the text below, we discuss some of the interlinked factors that contribute to this phenomenon and propose strategies for overcoming them.



Turning the lens on ourselves: an analysis of Humanitarian Horizons publications

As part of our aim to hold ourselves accountable, we examined a selection of HAG's own work. In total, 15 documents were selected from publications under the Humanitarian Horizons 2018–2021 research programme, with 363 citations included in the analysis. These research outputs were selected because they nominally had scope for collaboration and/or co-production. Key findings are indicated below.



Authorship: The Humanitarian Horizons documents analysed were strong on North–South co-authorship: 93% of the Humanitarian Horizons research reports in the sample were jointly produced. However, they had different conditions of production from the other documents reviewed. Because they were part of a research-intensive program of work, with both longer timeframes and significant flexibility in research design, there was scope to use more collaborative approaches. When contrasted with the documents in the main dataset, this finding reinforces the importance of conditions of production, meaning the opportunities for the process and outputs to be co-produced.



Language: All the publications were available in English, and five (33%) of the 15 reports were also available in another language – primarily translations into Bahasa Indonesia and Bislama. The reference materials within documents reflect the same strong bias towards English as in the main documents: 98% of references were in English only, and only 2% were published in other languages.



Secondary data: Only 23% of citations in HAG's Humanitarian Horizons 2018–2021 reports were of the work of Global South actors, mostly resources and strategy documents from government agencies. This means that even when working in partnership we are not building enough on the work of peers such as research institutions, scholars and consultants based in affected countries and regions. Adding to the language findings, this reinforces that our thinking needs to draw more on the work of Global South actors and institutions.

1. The sector is set in its ways

Established processes are major obstacles. Actors producing humanitarian documents are bounded by ways of working that have been institutionalised over time. For example, one respondent shared that in a recent global multistakeholder platform meeting, participants suggested simplifying the process of developing needs assessments and response plans to make it “less bureaucratic and human resource intensive.” “Local NGOs struggle to participate in these processes... even for international organisations. It’s very heavy and resource consuming...”¹³

From this perspective, set behaviours and norms can hinder change. Crucially, for commissioned research and evaluations, researchers are bound to processes and expectations reflected in the terms of reference (TOR), which are often drafted to match the priorities of commissioners rather than contextual or implementation needs. TORs dictate the scope of work, budget and time limitations, and often feature minimal researcher input.¹⁴ In some of our interviews, respondents shared that TORs have shaped what is feasible in terms of the extent of engagement with Global South institutions in the production of the case study documents and the knowledge production process more broadly.¹⁵

Timeframes can also present challenges in a sector used to working in emergency settings where timelines are short and contextual factors can change rapidly. Interviewees noted the short time frames in which the documents we analysed were produced, often aligned to planning, funding, and monitoring cycles.¹⁶ This can also reduce the opportunities and incentives to challenge inequities embedded in established processes.



Strategy 1: Create opportunities for meaningful feedback from day zero

Changing the behaviour and norms that hinder equitable research and knowledge production begins and continues with conversations, which must include the possibility of revising the terms around which research is structured. This includes setting precedents in joint forums, or influencing decision-makers to make learning and knowledge processes more inclusive. The resulting changes can benefit all stakeholders and support the development of more fit-for-purpose processes. Some key questions to reflect on are:

- What are the opportunities for Global South actors to influence your agency’s research agenda?
- Do you allow researchers or consultants to provide feedback on the ToR? If so, is there enough flexibility to change the terms based on their feedback?
- Have you considered your level and forms of engagement with Global South actors in research/evaluation? Do you have direct communication lines with them that enable their insights to feed into all phases of the research?
- Building on these experiences, how will you use your access to joint forums to push for more inclusive approaches?

2. Established ways of working favour existing networks

There is an important connection between *process constraints* and the *relational* aspect of the production process – that is, the opportunities to establish meaningful collaborations between Global North and Global South institutions and individuals. Some of our interviewees described the dilemma of breaking away from

¹³ Interview 6

¹⁴ Interviews 1, 2, 4, 5, 6

¹⁵ Interviews 1, 2

¹⁶ Interviews 1, 3

the usual Global North contractors to conduct research and evaluation and explore partnership opportunities with Global South actors.¹⁷ Establishing trusting relationships with researchers or consultants with the professional skills to deliver the quality required may be difficult for those commissioning or conducting research.¹⁸ This is true for all consultants, but especially for Global South actors, whose networks are less extensive and who face structural disadvantages. As found in the research conducted to develop the Start Network's anti-racism and decolonial framework, "Heuristics, or decision-making shortcuts, are often influenced by racial and colonial power dynamics, which then lead to negative consequences such as imposition, exclusion, devaluation and alienation."¹⁹

In our dataset, we see a pattern where joint production between North and South institutions was the exception rather than the norm, but North–North collaborations between international NGOs, UN agencies and donor agencies were frequent. As sociologist Monique Beerli explained, "when a donor can be sure of the quality of research and work ethic of a given subcontractor based on past experience, it will be difficult for newcomers to break the structural continuity of such relations."²⁰ An exception in our dataset was a Global South consultant's statement in an interview that Global North collaborators ensured that the consultant is recognised as author. This may be regarded as a first step in enforcing inclusiveness, but also begs the question of how "quality research" and professionalism are defined which often favours Western training, attitudes, assumptions, and the associations between different people and different types of (unequal) knowledge. It also suggests that other aspects of humanitarian knowledge production, such as the types of materials that are most likely to be preserved and accessed through shared repositories or passed on through word-of-mouth recommendations, are influenced predominantly by Western ideas.



Strategy 2: Think and act outside of specific deliverables

Challenging the impacts of short time frames and habitual networks can be a first step to thinking and acting outside of specific deliverables. For example, our interviews revealed that some organisations created opportunities for new connections before they were relevant to a piece of work or set up longer-term institutional partnerships.²¹ Our previous learning report showed that providing a generous amount of time and resources to nurture partnerships with researchers in a country context yields tangible benefits in the long run for both researchers and commissioning agencies.²² The Elevating Local Voices piece also highlights that trust and commitment to partnership principles that are underpinned by equitable ways of working are vital to building a more equitable knowledge production landscape. Some key questions to reflect on are:

- What are the profiles of people usually recruited as lead consultants? Having this data can help your agency to identify bias in the recruitment of consultants.
- Do procurement frameworks and organisational policies allow for direct engagement with Global South researchers/consultants? For example, do any legal or due diligence issues prevent direct contracting?
- Does your organisation allocate resources to partnership brokering and capacity strengthening activities that can support in-country researchers/consultants in the delivery of outputs?

17 Interviews 1, 2, 3

18 Interviews 1, 2, 3

19 START Network, *Anti-racist and decolonial framework (June 2022)*, p 10

20 Beerli 2017: 64

21 Interview 3

22 Humanitarian Advisory Group, Behavioral Architects, L Vaike, Z Rua, L Belarmino, S Naivalu, F Zebeta, T Butu, M Ayessha, L Moala, *Research in the rear view mirror: Reflecting on our localised research model*, Humanitarian Advisory Group (2022).

3. The onus is on Global South actors to make up the skills gap

The burdens placed on Global South research producers to meet expectations set by Global North actors are captured in the language patterns of research publications. As our findings show, the case study documents reflect very little consultation of written materials published in languages other than English or translations thereof. This reflects the global dominance of English both within and beyond the aid sector. As a previous study found, “even though donors and international staff could not carry out their projects without the linguistic competence of brokers, donors’ incompetence and brokers’ crucial skills are made invisible through the hegemonic position of English.”²³ The reliance on English language sources, particularly if combined with the habit of drawing on peer reviewers from established Global North networks, appears to be so widespread and accepted that many stakeholders have minimal understanding of its impacts on the research.

The reliance on English is also reflected in the dissemination of materials. Some respondents pointed to the expense of translation or the difficulty of translating certain humanitarian terms into local language.²⁴ These are significant barriers that must be recognised, particularly when dealing with large numbers of documents that are updated regularly. Previous research has highlighted the challenges of sharing findings with affected communities even when they have participated in the research, and despite recognition that this is an ethical imperative and beneficial to current and future research.²⁵

Finally, the issue of language use is also relevant to the uptake of documents. For example, the tendency for research activities to be “in complex English and communicated through text-intensive reports [...] risks excluding national and local community non-English speakers”²⁶ and reflects the lack of technical skills – often acquired through investing in relationships with Global South actors – required to overcome language barriers.



Strategy 3: Increase the skills base of stakeholders that commission and use research

Improving the capacity of research commissioners and users to engage with multiple languages and methods is an ambitious but necessary step if the burden of working in multilingual and intercultural environments is not going to be disproportionately carried by Global South actors. Whilst our interviewees recognised the resources required for translation, it is important to consider the missed opportunities when the linguistic range of resources used to inform response plans or evaluations is so narrow and when materials are published in language that is inaccessible to participating communities. Some key questions to reflect on are:

- What skills can your team employ to improve access to information in context-relevant languages and to work in intercultural environments?
- How does contextualisation take place and who decides what adaptations are needed?
- Does your agency have established relationships, learning and reflexivity processes through which traditional knowledge and practices inform response plans, evaluation, and other consultancy work?
- Does your agency have clear and feasible processes for sharing the results of research with affected communities in appropriate languages and formats? Are they followed? If not, why not?

²³ S Roth, “Linguistic Capital and Inequality in Aid Relations,” *Sociological Research Online* (2019), 24(1), 45.

²⁴ Interview 1, 2, 4, 6

²⁵ R Afifi et al., “Implementing Community-Based Participatory Research with Communities Affected by Humanitarian Crises: The Potential to Recalibrate Equity and Power in Vulnerable Contexts,” *American Journal of Community Psychology* 66, no. 3–4 (2020): 381–91.

²⁶ L Tanner, “Annex 1: Draft landscape report,” *Humanitarian Leadership Academy* (2016).

4. Individuals feel constrained by structures

Finally, these process and relational constraints are seen as a reflection of *structural issues* confronting the sector for a long time. Some respondents reflected that time constraints in establishing partnerships with Global South actors and institutions should not be hard if the structures were set up to be inclusive of them in the first place.²⁷ Similarly, meaningful participation and leadership of national NGOs in the cluster system is key to ensuring their priorities are reflected in response plans.²⁸ The Grand Bargain being driven mostly by Global North institutions leaves little room for engagement with Global South voices.²⁹

Others spoke about the money chain, stating that knowledge producers perceive that institutional donors control the terms for the way research and learning is produced,³⁰ whilst institutional donors perceive that governments and public accountability determine the terms.³¹ Political and practical factors can affect the level of engagement of Global South research and development institutions with research funding for aid.³² Academic researchers who committed to more localised and inclusive research at the time of the World Humanitarian Summit have reported difficulties in gaining institutional support to adapt their ways of working.³³

In other words, these structural issues are perceived as outside an individual's control. It has an effect on the extent to which individuals can manoeuvre or shift dynamics within the current settings and whether the priority should be on trying to promote change higher up the chain. Indeed, where we have seen good practice in modifying established processes, such as enabling Global South actors to push back on the TOR, these are often led by individuals who have thought about issues of localisation, decolonisation and shifting the power to Global South actors and who are finding ways to challenge these structural constraints and explore collaborations.³⁴ In other cases, whilst consultants are bound by the TOR as discussed above, they have tried to engage Global South actors and overcome the built-in exclusivity of the existing structure, such as in the Grand Bargain review process.³⁵



Strategy 4: Join forces

An upsurge in attention to humanitarian knowledge production and an increasing stock of examples and inspiration is apparent in the discussion about localisation, decolonisation and inequalities in the sector. As humanitarian actors continue to adopt practices that challenge inequitable norms and behaviours, it will be important to draw connections between their initiatives, looking for ways to make them the norm and more than the sum of their parts. Some key questions to reflect on are:

- Are you aware of the approaches that others are using to develop more equitable practices? Which of them can you pilot in your own agency as a first step?
- How can you use your existing relationships or contacts with Global South actors to inform or change your approaches?
- How can you share your own positive experiences to help build momentum for change in knowledge produced in the sector?

27 Interview 5, 6

28 Interviews 3, 6

29 Report discussion; Critiques of the Grand Bargain being Global North-led have also been reflected in some of the discussions in the sector such as the Pledge for Change 2030 (see J Alexander, "Five international NGOs launch fresh bid to tackle power imbalances in aid," *The New Humanitarian* (October 2022), available at: <https://www.thenewhumanitarian.org/news/2022/10/27/Pledge-Change-aid-reform>)

30 Interviews 1, 4

31 Interview 2

32 S Guthrie et al, *Stage 1a: Review of Management Processes: Evaluation of the Global Challenges Research Fund, UK Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (2022)*.

33 L van Duijn and T Hilhorst, "What has happened with the academic commitments at the WHS?" ALNAP (May 2019).

34 Interview 2

35 Report discussion

Conclusion: finding the will

This report offers an empirically based way of revealing Global North bias in key processes of knowledge generation and the resulting outputs. We hope the findings spark reflection by showing how power inequalities manifest in tasks such as choosing what references to cite or deciding on the composition of a research team. The intention is to show that whilst these research practices may seem small scale or opportunistic, they are a manifestation of a bigger problem – they contribute to preventing the sector from benefiting from multiple types of knowledge that are necessary for effective response. Continuing to marginalise Global South roles in design, analysis, monitoring, evaluation and other forms of research will prevent the sector from achieving its localisation goals.

Increasing reflexivity among researchers and research institutions in the humanitarian sector has the potential to contribute to achieving more equitable practices. Like some of the interviewees for this study, people who have reflected on their experiences in research partnerships agree that “successful research partnerships require trust, time and effort.”³⁶ Investing in the relational aspect of research partnerships is essential to shifting the inequities that currently affect knowledge production in the sector. Principles of co-production, which have often been approached in terms of relationships between academics, practitioners and communities, can help to guide actors as they build their partnerships.³⁷

Beyond the scope of specific collaborations, however, powerful actors in the sector must confront important questions about their responsibilities and opportunities to produce more localised research. What are the conditions preventing more North–South joint production? How can those commissioning or designing research and evaluations avoid perpetuating these conditions and instead create incentives for stronger Global South roles? **Rethinking funding models and time frames, revisiting the skill sets required for roles, and increasing the focus on translation and uptake are some suggestions to help change the power dynamics in the humanitarian knowledge landscape and support the use of research to improve outcomes.**³⁸ While no one actor can overcome all the structural challenges this involves, finding the will to commit is paramount.

Our intention with this research is to prompt the thinking of donors, UN agencies, international organisations and other researchers about biases and inequalities entrenched in specific practices, and how eliminating these might contribute to more effective support to crisis-affected communities. **When lack of representation leads to an incomplete understanding of problems and solutions to enduring humanitarian crises, it should be everyone’s priority to push for change.**

³⁶ L Fast, *Researching local humanitarian action through partnerships with local actors*, ODI, 2019, p. 6

³⁷ M Lokot and C Wake, *The co-production of research between academics, NGOs and communities in humanitarian response: A practical guide*, London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine (2021).

³⁸ F Carden, T Hanley and A Peterson, From knowing to doing.

Photo: Steve Johnson on Unsplash

Annex: List of documents selected

Grand Bargain resources

1. Metcalfe-Hough, Victoria, Fenton, Wendy, Saez, Patrick, and Spencer, Alexandra. (2022). Grand Bargain Annual Independent Report 2020. Humanitarian Policy Group, ODI.
2. Metcalfe-Hough, Victoria, Fenton, Wendy, Willits-King, Barnaby, and Spencer, Alexandra. (2021). The Grand Bargain at Five Years: An Independent Review. Humanitarian Policy Group, ODI.
3. Metcalfe-Hough, Victoria, Fenton, Wendy, Willits-King, Barnaby, and Spencer, Alexandra. (2020). Grand Bargain Annual Independent Report 2020. Humanitarian Policy Group, ODI.
4. Metcalfe-Hough, Victoria, Fenton, Wendy, and Poole, Lydia. (2019). Grand Bargain Annual Independent Report 2019. Humanitarian Policy Group, ODI.
5. Metcalfe-Hough, Victoria and Poole, Lydia with Sarah Bailey and Julie Belanger. (2018). Grand Bargain Annual Independent Report 2018. Humanitarian Policy Group, ODI.
6. Derzsi-Hovarth, Andras, Streets, Julia, and Ruppert, Lotte. (2017). Independent Grand Bargain Report. Global Public Policy Institute.
7. Australian Aid et al. (2016). The Grand Bargain - A Shared Commitment to Better Serve People in Need.
8. Ground Truth Solutions and OECD. (2018). The Grand Bargain: Perspectives from the Field.

Humanitarian response plans and strategy documents

1. Humanitarian Response Plan Pakistan (December 2020)
2. Humanitarian Response Plan Pakistan (April 2021)
3. Humanitarian Response Plan Myanmar (January 2021)
4. Myanmar Interim Emergency Reponse Plan (June – December 2021)
5. 2021 Joint Humanitarian Plan Rohingya Humanitarian Crisis
6. Humanitarian Response Plan Afghanistan 2018-2021 (January 2021)
7. Flash Appeal Afghanistan (September – December 2021)
8. Timor-Leste Joint Appeal & Flood Response Plan Towards Recovery (June 2021)
9. HCTT Nexus Strategy 2021-2025: Humanitarian-Development Collaboration for Climate-Related Disasters in Bangladesh (August 2021)
10. Action Plan on COVID-19 and Natural Disaster Responses January to June 2021 (March 2021).

Rohingya response evaluation

1. 2020 Mid-Term Review Rohingya Humanitarian Crisis January to July 2020
2. Heward, Charlotte and Carrier, Michael (2020). Metasynthesis DEC Rohingya Refugee Crisis Response Lessons Learned Report. Groupe URD.
3. UNHCR and WFP. (2021). UNHCR-WFP Joint Assessment Mission Report, Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh, July 2021.
4. Sida, Lewis and van Mierop Schenkenberg, Ed. (2019). Synthesis of Rohingya Response Evaluations of IOM, UNICEF and UNHCR.
5. van Mierop Schenkenberg, Ed, Wendt, Karin, and Kabir Sahjabin. (2019). Independent Evaluation of the Aktion Deutschland Hilft e V. (ADH) Joint Appeal to "Rohingya Myanmar Bangladesh". HERE-Geneva and Aktion Deutschland Hilft.

6. van Mierop Schenkenberg, Ed and Thomas, Manisha (2018). Real-Time Response Review of the Disasters Emergency Appeal for People Fleeing Myanmar: Responding to the Needs of Refugees and Host Communities: Review of the DEC Phase 1 Responses. DEC, UK Aid, and HERE-Geneva.
7. Analysis for Economic Decisions. (2021). Evaluation of the European Union's Humanitarian Response to the Rohingya Refugee Crisis in Myanmar and Bangladesh, 2017-2019. European Commission.
8. UNHCR. (2017). Assessment Lessons Learned with a Protection Focus.
9. ISCG. (2019). Joint Response Plan for Rohingya: 2019 Mid-Term Review Humanitarian Crisis.
10. Austin, Lois. (2018). Independent Review of CashCap Support to the Rohingya Crisis Bangladesh 2017-2019. Norwegian Capacity.
11. ISCG. 2018. Review of Gender Mainstreaming in Rohingya Refugee Response in Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh.
12. Buchanan-Smith, Margie and Islam, Shadul. 2018. Real-Time Evaluation of Communicating with Communities Coordination. Communication and Community Engagement Initiative.

HAG's Humanitarian Horizons documents

1. HAG, PIANGO, FCOSS, VANGO, CFST, and DSE. (2022). Demonstrating Change on Locally-Led Humanitarian Action in the Pacific: Ki Namuka Vata Ga Nikua.
2. HAG and Pujiono Centre. (2021). Undervalued and Underutilised: Non-Humanitarian Actors and Humanitarian Reform in Indonesia
3. HAG and Pujiono Centre. (2021). Shifting the System: The Journey Towards Humanitarian Reform in Indonesia.
4. HAG and PIANGO. (2021). Walking Together in Partnership: Exploring the Impact of Localisation of Humanitarian Action Research in the Pacific.
5. HAG and Pujiono Centre. (2020). Building a Blueprint for Change: Laying the Foundations.
6. HAG and VANGO. (2020). No Turning Back: Local Leadership in Vanuatu's Response to Tropical Cyclone Harold.
7. NIRAPAD, HAG, Henry Glorieux and Kazi Shahidur Rahman. (2020). Elevating Evidence: Localisation in the 2019 Bangladesh Flood Response.
8. Development Services Exchange, PIANGO and HAG. (2019). Localisation in the Solomon Islands: Demonstrating Change.
9. FCOSS, PIANGO and HAG. (2019). Localisation in Fiji: Demonstrating Change.
10. Civil Society Forum of Tonga, PIANGO, and HAG. (2019). Localisation in Tonga: Demonstrating Change.
11. HAG and Pujiono Centre. (2019). Charting the New Norm: Local Leadership in the First 100 Days of the Sulawesi Earthquake Response.
12. HAG, PIANGO and VANGO. (2019). Localisation in Vanuatu: Demonstrating Change.
13. HAG and PIANGO. (2018). Tracking Progress on Localisation: A Pacific Perspective.
14. HAG. (2018). Intention to Impact: Measuring Localisation.
15. HAG and NIRAPAD. (2017). When the Rubber Hits the Road: Local Leadership in the First 100 Days of the Rohingya Crisis Response.

Abbreviations

HAG	Humanitarian Advisory Group
NGO	non-governmental organisation
TOR	terms of reference
UN	United Nations
UNOCHA	United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs