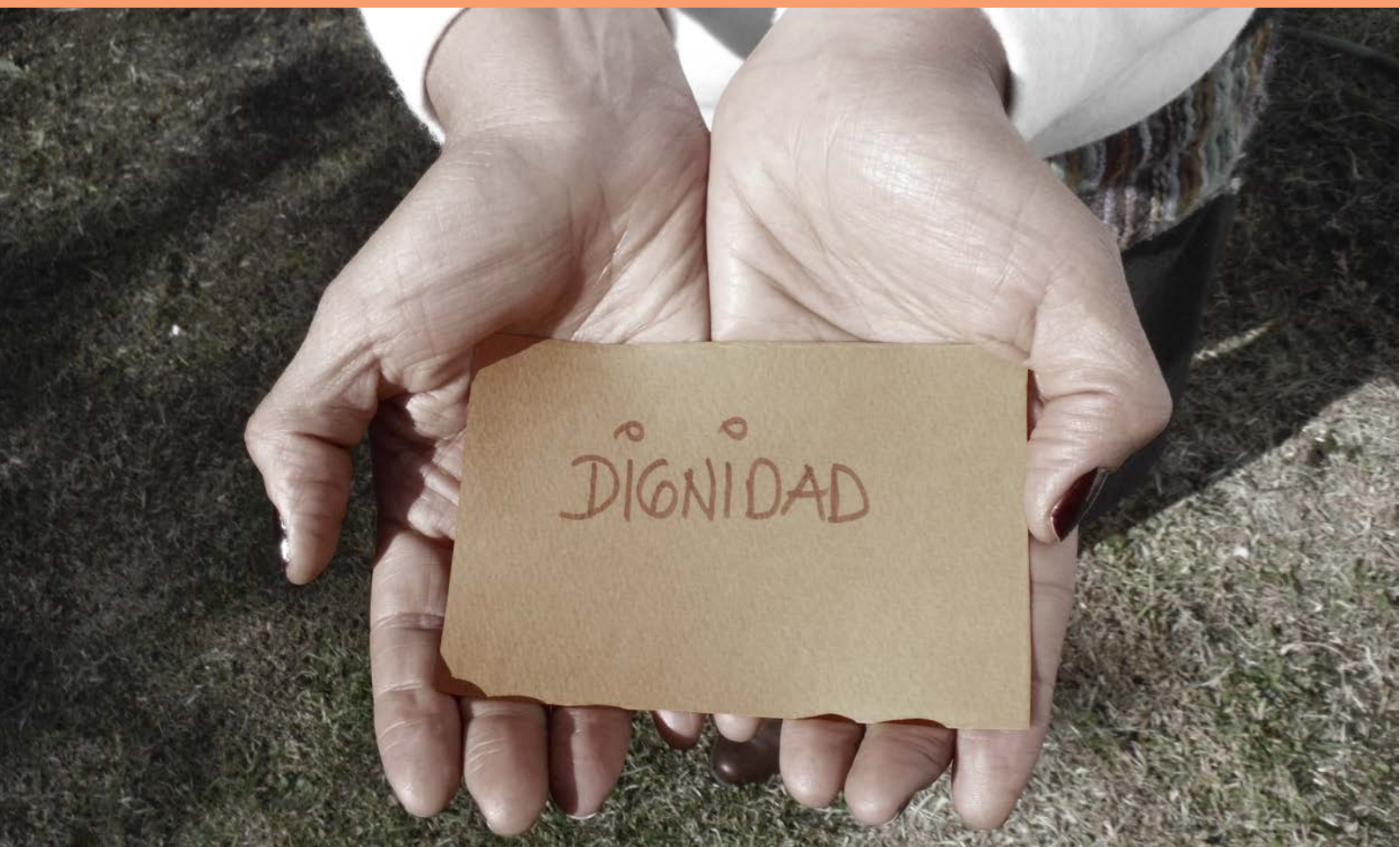# Learning from exposure:
How decades of disaster and armed conflict have shaped Colombian NGOS

Luz Saavedra

ALNAP

ALNAP is a unique system-wide network dedicated to improving humanitarian performance through increased learning and accountability.

www.alnap.org

About the author

Luz Saavedra is a Research Fellow at ALNAP

Suggested citation

Design and typesetting by Alex Glynn and Chloé Sanguinetti

Developmental editing by Roo Griffiths; copyediting by Craig Mackenzie

Front cover photo: 'Dignidad': Dignity; Credit: Luz Saavedra/ALNAP

Back cover photo: 'Caminar juntos para superar situaciones difíciles': Walk together to overcome difficult situations. Credit: Luz Saavedra/ALNAP

Irish Aid
Department of Foreign Affairs
An Roinn Gnóthaí Eachtracha

Table of contents

About ALNAP's research into National NGOs

One of the most striking findings of the State of the Humanitarian System (SOHS) 2015 report is that 4 out of 5 of the 4,480 humanitarian organisations are national NGOs working in country. These organisations have not only increased in numbers, but also in influence. There has been a growing recognition that national NGOs and civil society organisations should lead future humanitarian responses for them to be more relevant, timely and effective.

Although lots of research has addressed the need for an increased role for national NGOs in humanitarian response, the research, advocacy and evaluative pieces are commissioned and elaborated on from the perspective of international actors, primarily international NGOs.

ALNAP's new research seeks to address this gap and interviewed national and local NGOs to find out more about the work they do in disaster and emergency response, from their perspective. What are their priorities and commitments? What motivates and guides their decisions and activities?

The project will seek to fill the current gap in understanding around what humanitarian action looks like in national NGOs' own terms. Through interviews with a wide range of organisations across the humanitarian sector – from DRR and WASH, to livelihoods and organisations of self-mobilised affected-people – in two countries with diverse needs and experiences (Colombia and Lebanon), this project will produce an in-depth qualitative study of the national and local NGO landscape.

www.alnap.org/national-ngos

Acknowledgments

Many people contributed to this research; the author would like to particularly thank SCF Colombia as the host organisation in Bogota, Daniel Martin and his team were exceptionally welcoming and helpful. Several ALNAP members facilitated contact with Colombian organisations. Particularly helpful were the contributions of Carlos Mejía (Oxfam America), Gerard Gómez (OCHA) and Professor Oscar I Salazar (Universidad Nacional de Colombia).

The author is most grateful to the organisations and interviewees that generously dedicated time and efforts to the research. Their knowledge and valuable contributions are the core and base of this report. Finally, thanks to ALNAP for giving me the opportunity to use a brave and pioneering adaptation of Grounded Theory in the humanitarian field, in particular to my colleague Alice Obrecht for introducing it to me and having many interesting exchanges throughout the research process.

1. Introduction

Colombia is a country of nearly 50 million inhabitants, with wide climatological and ethnic diversity. Its humanitarian profile is marked by a long-running armed conflict. One of the most visible human costs of this is the number of internally displaced persons (IDPs) – estimated at 5.2 million (government), 5.7 million (CODHES) and 6,044,200 (Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre)[1]. Estimating the number of people affected by the multiple manifestations of violence over nearly seven decades is daunting, with fierce debate also over when the violence started[2], and what name to give it (armed conflict or political violence). The National Centre of Historical Memory[3] estimates numbers of people affected by terrorist attacks, massacres, kidnappings, landmines, damage to civil infrastructure, military operation killings, selective killings and attacks on the civilian population. During the war at least 220,000 people have been killed, 39,000 kidnapped, 50,000 forcibly disappeared[4]. The UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (UNOCHA) estimates[5] 270,059 people are in a situation of confinement (2013) and that the Unit for Comprehensive Care and Reparation to Victims (UARIV) registered 142,181 new IDPs in 2014[6]. Other forms of violence include sexual and gender-based violence, forced recruitment of minors, forced disappearances and extrajudicial killings.

The country is also affected by cyclical and regular natural disasters, risks and hazards including earthquakes, floods, landslides, volcanic eruptions, droughts, wildfires and storms. The 2015 INFORM Risk Index classes Colombia as 'very high' risk and at the highest risk among neighbouring countries, despite a higher ranking in terms of coping capacity.[7]

Colombia's decades of disasters and armed conflict have shaped the perceptions, experiences and practices of the wide and diverse number of national and local organisations involved in humanitarian response. This paper presents the results of research examining these perceptions, attitudes and experiences. Using and adapting the Grounded Theory approach to data collection and analysis, we held in-depth interviews with 10 organisations[8] and thoroughly analysed the data for emerging trends and concepts in terms of motivations behind involvement in humanitarian work. We made a conscious effort to remain very close to interviewees' words and expressed ideas. Instead of imposing assumptions and preconceived concepts, Grounded Theory makes it possible to go back to national actors to critically analyse their motivations in their own terms. Additional country profiling and interviews with Colombian and international stakeholders informed and triangulated the research.

The organisations interviewed reflect the diversity and richness of Colombian civil society, a term that is often contested, given its political uses throughout the history of the country. The 10 organisations that were interviewed intensively cover both national and local-level work and a focus across 10 sectors, including education in emergencies, water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH), psychosocial support, food security, integral disaster risk reduction and climate change adaptation. They define themselves as humanitarian, developmental, social and human rights organisations,

"Colombia's decades of disasters and armed conflict have shaped the perceptions, experiences and practices of national and local organisations involved in humanitarian response"

and range from social and minority group activists to faith-based groups and specialised sectoral professionals. Annex 1 provides a list of interviewed organisations.

A theme that recurred was that of 'learning from exposure'. Decades of disasters and armed conflict have influenced and left an active learning mark on the experiences and practices of Colombian organisations. Learning from exposure means more than merely being affected: it relates to ways Colombian organisations involved in emergency and disaster response and management understand how the inter-sectionality of disasters and armed conflict has affected individuals and communities, triggering individual and collective action. Learning from exposure permeates the existence of individuals in such organisations, influencing their conceptions of working with and within affected communities.

This paper looks at the idea of learning from exposure as a way to understand the experiences and ways of working of Colombian organisations, in their own terms. Learning from exposure defines how intervention in crisis situations often departs from personal exposure to entail a deep understanding of how human relationships are influenced by the crossroads of disaster and violence. Collective action often takes the daunting task of contributing to healing and rebuilding social relationships beyond physical and material damage and changes resulting from exposure to disasters, violence and their multiple consequences. Thus, the interviews for this research help surface an integral and broader conception of humanitarian action and what it means.

Learning from exposure alters how individuals, organisations and affected communities relate to one another and with 'others'. The findings of this research reveal the nuances and tensions between an approach addressing immediate needs and one that takes a broader social and political context into account. The allocation of responsibilities varies, from public entities bound by law to the differing solidarity contributions of international and national non-governmental organisations (INGOs and NNGOs), private bodies and UN agencies. The ambiguities and tensions arising from coinciding (in time and space) during crisis with diverse actors with sometimes differing agendas are revealed and filtered through the lenses of what exposure has meant to them and how to address it.

In the perspective of Colombian organisations interviewed for this research, change resulting from exposure goes beyond visible and physical damage to encompass social and often more invisible forms of transformation. Change leaves people and the organisations that place them at the centre of their action and narrative with a profound sense of how human relationships should be in opposition to the damage and abuses exposure has inflicted. Intervening in crises then goes beyond material assistance and fixing physical and visible damage to include responses aimed at rebuilding human relationships between affected people and affected communities. How the response to changes through exposure is conceived and implemented not only matters, but also is critical to overcome negative change and further damage. It is a response that

points at, rather than imposes, what to do and how to work with and from affected communities.

Change reveals a central role for agency – understood as a space for free will and initiative to unfold, as both an individual and a community. Agency is critical to overcome damage and enable healing. In this view, the humanitarian response becomes part of a much broader and more integral and continuous process (in time and space) of addressing the consequences of conflict and disasters, to include collective, organisational identity and advocacy aspects of action. The cyclical and chronic aspects of exposure lead to eroding certainties, meaning regaining agency is central. The vantage point from which to address the management of damage cannot be separated from a wider context of regained self-management.
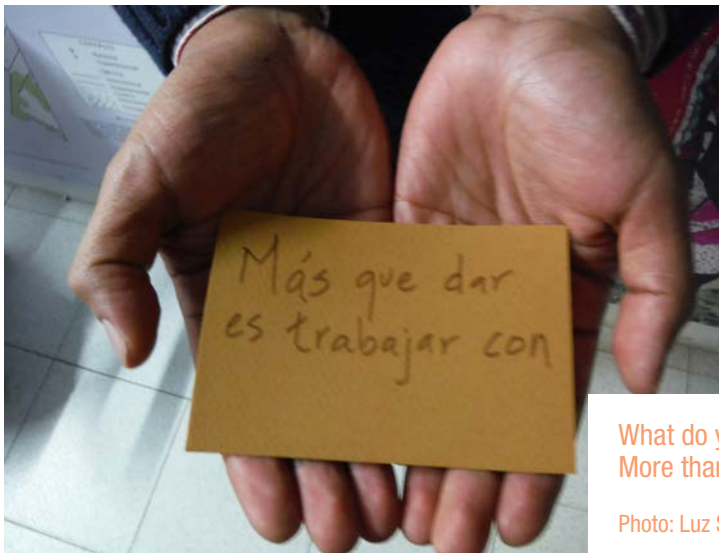
What do you want to say? 'Mas que dar es trabajar con': More than giving is working with.

Photo: Luz Saavedra/ALNAP

2. Learning from exposure, understanding the effects of crises and violence

Learning from exposure is a process that affects both communities and the national and local organisations involved in disaster and emergency response, despite their varied focus. Additionally, learning from exposure often reveals that the borders between affected communities and organisations' aid recipients are blurred. Disasters and conflict affect all Colombians to a degree, but choosing to work with communities affected by disaster and/or conflict puts organisations interviewed for this research in both the geographical and also the human and emotional landscape where learning from exposure takes place. It is in this understanding of the complex and rich nature of such process that this paper was conceived and written. Learning from exposure is the core category – in Grounded Theory terms – from which the interpretation and analysis of related concepts are generated. In other words, the main resonance in emerging concepts can be understood when interpretation of the analysis is done through the learning-from-exposure lens.

"Change brought by disaster and conflict encompasses social and intangible aspects of how human relationships are conceived and established"

The concept of learning from exposure emerges from the narratives of the Colombian individuals working in national and local organisations involved in emergency response. It can be defined as an understanding of how disasters and armed conflict shape, influence and determine changes and damages in the individuals, families and communities affected. Beyond this understanding, deeply rooted in the often-shared and accumulative experiences and knowledge emerging from exposure, interviewees were significantly in agreement that change brought by disaster and conflict encompasses social and intangible aspects of how human relationships are conceived and established. Accordingly, the response goes beyond immediate and material assistance to include advocating on social and identity-related aspects of work that goes further than a restrictive conception of humanitarian action to include social, developmental and rights-based aspects, including longer-term perspectives and actions.

Exposure affects individuals and communities, generating damage in the form of isolation and disruption of relationships. The chronic and cyclical nature of exposure means that damage accumulates over often years of exposure, permeating individual, family and community coping mechanisms and strategies. These coping strategies impact the way the experience is interpreted, which in turn influences the understanding of individual and collective action derived from exposure. For example, an aspect commonly referred to in interviews was around 'defining damage', a concept that in the words of the organisations interviewed resonates around three key dimensions in particular: (i) how damage fractures communities; (ii) how it generates internal conflict and mistrust within affected communities; (iii) and how it ends in a loss of autonomy through linkages of dependence, often with violence perpetrators. One respondent noted the following: 'The breakage fracture of the social tissue broke a key principle within our community – that is, affective solidarity.'[9] Fear triggers isolation, forces silence and puts off communal discussions and resolution mechanisms.

In a nutshell, it disrupts relationships within affected communities and even families. Mechanisms to remain 'safer' shape perceptions and influence behaviour and narratives on what happened and what action is required.

This broader understanding of damage and its consequences places communities at the heart of the collective action of national and local organisations in Colombia. It influences their conceptualisation of what humanitarian and relief work is and how it should be conducted, and importantly, helps to conceive the dimensions of time and being with communities in a particular way.

Meanwhile, learning from exposure means recognising the need to go beyond understanding how crises affect communities, to acknowledging the broader knowledge of how the Colombian organisation resulting from exposure is defined, influenced and shaped.

Often, the process of learning from exposure is mutually reinforced by these three groups sharing the areas that have been impacted by disaster and conflict throughout the response time. Exposure triggers individual and collective learning processes and actions in response to the damage and consequences of disasters and armed conflict. Processes and actions by communities and organisations are often intertwined and often complement each other; to understand action resulting from exposure the concept of 'accompaniment' is critical. Colombian organisations accompany communities, doing or abstaining from doing, pointing to rather than establishing collective actions and processes. The key is not to contribute to the damage; interviewed organisations often used the expression 'do no harm' while they all refer to similar meanings in their own expressed narrative.

In this sense, then, how action is conceived of and implemented is as important as its objective. When redressing actions in a collective approach, exposure constitutes a source of legitimacy and recognition for relief actors. Legitimacy in the sense of how crises damage individuals and communities, and how they can be supported to overcome these negative impacts. Recognition comes from acknowledging experiences and valuing individuals' involvement in collective action.

What are the influences and motivations behind learning from exposure? Research data analysis reveals generations of changes at different levels: **individual, organisational and within affected communities**. Narratives describing these levels are not parallel; often, the boundaries between them are blurred. For individuals, learning from exposure means acknowledging a life-changing experience; for communities, it is recognising the effect of damage caused by conflict and disaster in the community (it splits their lives); and for organisations, the pointing at changes (being forced, being obliged). The following sections analyse some of these changes, starting with those affecting individuals and communities.

2.1   Individual change

> 'When Popayan happened [an earthquake in 1983] the country didn't have legislation to respond, I was a student of architecture, I thought, "This is not possible," if I study architecture and I am not going to allow, no no no, not being present in a situation that is critical for the country. So I left, I left university and went to help with the reconstruction […] all this to say that I didn't know at the time a 35-year story was beginning […] one acquires commitments and gets involved.'[10]

During the interviews conducted for this research in Colombia, a common emerging theme would be how interviewees explain their involvement in humanitarian response by 'departing from a personal experience'. The above quote is illustrative of this. This was particularly significant in the interviews with individuals pertaining to local organisations but was not exclusive to them.

When a disaster hits, a spontaneous reaction to help causes individuals to radically change their life. Several of the research participants acknowledged their initial involvement as a reaction to the scope and magnitude of disaster. In hindsight, there is recognition of a lack of awareness that, from early on, spontaneous involvement will lead to a life commitment.

> 'I was a volunteer in a foundation working on education issues in the area of Pereira, and the disaster [Armenia earthquake in 1999] struck. The organisation I was working with had a link from years ago with them [INGO] […] and, being there, I was asked to join a 10-hour initial assessment with experts [from the INGO] […] well that completely changed my life. I was an economist, with a specialisation in international trade and this arrived, I got involved, and the INGO offered for me to stay and I stayed […] I liked this story, humanitarian work. In fact I will tell you, I didn't even know at all that the humanitarian world existed. I was working in the private sector.'[11]

The initial impulse to contribute to the relief effort often fosters interactions between national and international respondents. Departing from voluntary work by coinciding in time and place with international relief efforts uncovers, for some, a lack of initial knowledge of humanitarian work and its operational functioning. Individuals exposed to knowledge absorb, learn and use this experience when shaping their own national/local organisations. Section 3 presents the main traits of an emerging typology of organisations (see Annex 3 for the complete typology).

Individual changes in the case of sudden disasters are easily identifiable, but exposure to armed conflict and/or the interaction between disaster and conflict also triggers individual changes:

'I had them in front of me [people affected by armed conflict and subsequent displacement and floods in Monteria in 1996] and that touched me deeply. I studied a different career, I was an agroforestry engineer, I studied to plant trees. And I really had to change everything because I got completely involved in this and precisely because I saw many people, people from my community, with great suffering and was hopeful things could change, work for the next generations to suffer less than all the suffering we have had to put up with: that motivates me, for my sons and daughters and the people in my community to live a little bit more calmly. We know we don't live in paradise, peace and all that. I think the world is always going to be a disrupted place. We need people who have the capacities, the abilities to overcome adverse situations that we will always have to endure. Work together so that calamities do not hit that hard.'[12]

Exposure here means acquiring a commitment to engage in collective action. Departing from an individual experience triggers commitment to work with 'others' and communities in order to overcome the effects and consequences of crisis and disasters. Witnessing the effects of disaster and conflict first hand, or being directly affected personally, or because of exposure while working in affected areas, the crisis affects individuals at a personal level, and some of these individuals in turn engage in relief activities. How to relate to affected people is constructed from a departure point focused on understanding human experience when exposed to crisis, and what aspects need to be addressed and changed.

2.2   Change in affected communities

Learning from exposure unwraps patterns of change within communities affected by disasters and armed conflict. Damage is defined and demarcated by the events that trigger change, disrupting the lives of those exposed to disasters and conflict. Often these are interlocked notions, as exposure originates from both phenomena, sometimes simultaneously, sometimes consequentially.[13]

'Let's say that [disaster] splits them [affected communities], it splits their lives from my perspective.'[14]

There are parallels between interviewees' narratives and the individual life-changing experience that got them involved in humanitarian work, and the exposure of affected communities. Communities also are the subject and object of the rupture brought by disaster when it 'splits their lives'. Interviewed organisations often referred to the impact on communities as the departure point for engaging in collective action for some individuals. In this sense, addressing changes is both a reaction and a way to understand and overcome rupture through collective action, as presented in the following section of this report.

"The crisis affects individuals at a personal level, and some of these individuals in turn engage in relief activities"

Exposure is defined as a disruptive force that marks a "before" and an "after" the crisis hits. Contextual awareness of the effects of exposure cannot be separated from the effects it has on individual and affected communities. Sometimes these effects are visible, as is the case with forced displacement; other times, damage impacts on communities in more subtle ways. Understanding the varieties of ways damage influences communities is paramount to conceptualising and acting on the consequences of conflict in a holistic and opportune manner.

'[…] and then today, they kill one of your family members […] and they [armed actors] "disappear" him. These are things they do, and sometimes they are not making the damage clear […] but towards our principles and cultural values, see? […] When we stop sowing our traditional produce, to lend our work force to mechanised mining […] or cultivation of coca, we stop exercising a cultural value, a productive value that is culturally ours, to do something that is not natural […] and that is what dependency does, it weakens your capacity to resist in the territories […] see? Because you, you are not yourself anymore.'[15]

If in the previous quote crises are perceived to split lives, in this quote crises change who you are: the disruption of individual identity reflects on the community the individual is a part of, revealing collective aspects of damage. Damage forces changes in visible and in subtle ways. Therefore, addressing its consequences demands, in the perspective of Colombian organisations interviewed for this research, approaches that uncover both visible and subtle ways that violence is inflicted on communities. This includes violence as a means of control of individuals and how they express and define themselves, rendering change in identity terms; you are not yourself anymore, which makes you more malleable to external influences and less integrated into the community social network.

However, the borders between individual and community exposure to damage are often blurred, particularly for local organisations with continued presence in the affected areas.

´When the conflict and the situations affect you directly, it seems that one acquires a quicker sensitivity, then that happened to us, when we were affected by the conflict, by the floods. I was a person affected by both things. Then one reacts and starts to see things in a different way. And then I approached other people who were suffering, when people started to arrive displaced and they would tell us, "We don't have anywhere to go, anyone to ask for help, we have lost everything and all our hopes are put in yourselves," because we had an organised space [in the church] that generated expectations.'[16]

Sensitivity here means awareness and empathy, bringing light to some of the tensions generated by the immediacy of needs and the efforts (in time, dedication, presence and accompaniment) required to implement a positive response. The awareness brought by exposure, triggering engagement in relief activities, provides a privileged vantage point for engagement with affected communities. Shared exposure has triggered an understanding that helps interpret experiences and changes. The mechanisms for a crisis to change and affect communities are familiar to individuals who bring assistance from an individual experience of how a crisis affects people. Research participants alluded to knowledge generated from exposure as an essential element to generate confidence and trust, establish dialogue and negotiate alternatives with the affected communities themselves.

What do you want to say? 'Buscando equilibrio': Looking for a balance.

Photo: Luz Saavedra/ALNAP

3. Understanding the role of organisations, from exposure to collective action

Colombian national and local organisations interviewed for this research talked of their origin and the focus of their work, expressing the influences and motivations that decided their organisational identity and focus. Through constant comparisons, a typology emerges as a tool to enable deeper comparisons for an enhanced understanding of their conceptualisation of relief work and beyond.

'I think the main motivator is the evolution of the casuistry. I mean, we [Colombians] have events permanently […] a combination of situations derived from environmental degradation and armed conflict, economic crises […] forcibly we need to organise ourselves. We will never know if it is enough as each disaster has its particular effects. But response is very different from 20 years ago […] I think we have learned a bit the lesson […] Even though we have not modified the threats, but experience helps tackle/deal with the threats that we have had all our lives and new ones, level of conscience, accumulated experience as a learning (individually, collectively).'[17]

The learning derived from exposure to disasters and armed conflict influences communities' understanding of the effects of such phenomena on them, and how to address changes, which in turn shapes collective action in Colombia. These learning processes create organisations and determine their focus of action. The time dimension, given the cyclical and chronic nature of crises, and how it is understood, influence how Colombian organisations define their collective action. This shapes vision, values and ways of working together.

The narrative of national and local organisations interviewed for this research enables the emergence of a typology of organisations, according to their focus and the influences shaping their objectives, goals and ways of working with affected communities. The different types that emerge from within the diversity of organisations are used as an analytical tool from a Grounded Theory perspective and do not constitute an attempt to classify them. Grounded Theory resorts to comparisons between incidents, actions and processes to better conceptualise how meanings, actions and social structures are constructed (Charmaz, 2014: 285)[18]. In this case, the aim is to better grasp how national and local organisations involved in disaster and emergency response conceptualise and understand their work with affected communities and with others. The typology helps enable comparison and emerging trends from the data collected, to better understand the conceptualisation of humanitarian work.

Table 1: An emerging typology of Colombian organisations involved in humanitarian response[19]

Type 'A'	Transforming an international humanitarian organisation into a national one
Type 'B'	Colombian staff of a specific INGO join efforts to constitute a national organisation
Type 'C'	Capacity-building and community training of members of affected communities triggers self-organisation and collective action
Type 'D'	National professionals with exposure to direct international but diverse experience constitute a national organisation
Type 'E'	Sectoral, specialised organisations are founded to respond to armed conflict dynamics and its effects on affected communities

Learning from exposure touches on the collective action of Colombian organisations working in affected areas. In some cases, exposure is critical to determine the focus of their collective action. These are organisations that define their identity as inclusive of relief/humanitarian work, and some acknowledge their identity and express this in humanitarian response terms:

'We participate in the humanitarian local team as one of the few humanitarian response national organisations […] our effort and vision has always been to be an organisation interested in humanitarian response.'[20]

Others are involved in response but express their identities as being in collective engagement humanitarian work, to encompass a more integral identity, including elements of disaster risk-reduction, environmental considerations and awareness of 'differential approaches' when working with particular groups, such as indigenous communities, to name a few elements.

'We have not only wanted to do [humanitarian] response, we do respond, but also for us, more than for the client [the donor], we have aimed at providing a broader look at what is happening at the root of these problems of communities affected by a temporary situation. So we have participated not only in what our country requests as plans for preparation of the response, but also tools for risk management, and we would like to have a voice to influence, a willingness to advocate on risk management, because it is an interesting internal debate in the country. This debate grabs our attention, as we consider that we need to learn from the problems we are facing.'[21]

Linkages with development and advocacy towards public institutions are explicitly expressed as constituents of the organisational identity. This identity is expressed through a willingness to address the changes brought by crises and to adopt a broader perspective that goes beyond 'pure' emergency response to encompass the cyclical and chronic aspects at the root causes of crises.

Interestingly, the integral identity derived from exposure to crises is often expressed by opposition: 'for us more than for the client' here distinguishes between organisational vision and those of others – in this case the donor/agency commissioning a set of relief activities to the NNGO.

For some other organisations, learning from exposure does mean changing the focus of collective action to be able to respond to crises. Sometimes such alterations are a disruption of their original vision, activities and objective as an organisation.

> '[Some] organisations were forced, obliged [stressed by the interviewee] to work in humanitarian response […] their mission and objective was not humanitarian. They are organisations that work on human rights […] or agricultural and livestock production. They are organisations that are working with communities, who in turn get affected by disasters. Then those organisations have to respond, they are compelled, or they receive funds from international cooperation, because international cooperation has the tendency to work with organisations that are already present [in the affected areas].'[22]

Being forced here means a double change – in the form of a disruption of activities by the crisis as well as a shift in organisational focus and mission when crisis strikes. It is interesting to note that the dimensions of change are expressed in terms of being obligatory or compulsory but with nuances. Section 6 delves into some of these nuances and tensions derived from the coincidence in time and space between Colombian and international organisations involved in relief activities.

Some organisations that do not define themselves as humanitarian *self-impose* a shift to response when the communities where they operate are affected by disasters. In this case, the magnitude of damage and needs is central to generating adaptations and change.

Other organisations that define themselves in human rights or development terms are *obliged* under the influence of external, international actors and their pull effect by the availability of funds to respond to disasters. The *force* element presents several dimensions: the arrival of international agencies, bringing emergency response procedures accompanied by the availability of funds, triggers national/local organisation involvement. In other cases, the arrival of international organisations in affected areas reinforces or accelerates the involvement of national/local organisations in humanitarian response.

Research participants noted elements of imposition: 'I bring resources [to respond] and things are done this way': procedures, protocols, manuals and standards are imported and implemented. Some research participants concede that this was the way they were introduced to humanitarian work: 'a world I didn't even know existed before […] and 25 years afterwards, I am still a humanitarian […] affinities have played an important role. I like what I do.'[23] Something echoes in these individuals, triggering a whole life of commitment to humanitarian response (see Section 2.1).

Learning from exposure implies taking ownership of know-how (knowledge) and building on owning the understanding of what intervening in crises means, including exposure to the ways that international humanitarian organisations work. This process of ownership of knowledge is reflected in many facets of collective action by national and local organisations in Colombia. One research participant referred to it as 'learning from experience and improving it'[24]: exposure to international organisations' work, through working together, being hired as national staff, or sharing space in intervention settings, enables individuals to observe and learn, and later on to apply this through the filters of their own interpretation of organisational work.

'From exposure to collective action' illustrates the transition from acquiring knowledge to translating it into practice when working with affected communities. The importance of learning by doing is explicit in the narrative of research participants:

> 'The majority of responders in Colombia, the good responders are people who have been formed in big events here, we have been hit hard, in Ruiz [volcanic eruption and landslides in 1985], in Popayan [earthquake in 1983], in Armenia [earthquake in 1999].'[25]

The additional experience that an individual gains from being exposed to recurring crises is another dimension of the process of learning from exposure. When a crisis hits, a scale-up of the response occurs, and collective action by national/local organisations often builds on these experiences.

> '[Exposure to crisis] it is the addition of individual experiences […] what we do, as an institution, is a bit to recover and replicate the capacities and experiences [generated in responses].'[26]

The recurrent and cyclical nature of crises facilitates learning by individuals who engage in humanitarian response. Research participants noted that, when crises hit, and particularly when there is media coverage, the relief machinery scales up interventions. In this process Colombian individuals are hired, and they then gain exposure to international relief efforts. These experiences are limited in time, as responses scale down. However, the individuals capacitated and trained to intervene in the response remain in the country, often triggering self-organised collective action.

This learning, then, often translates into collective action, and it is at the origin of national and local organisations' foundation. The following section deals with how national and local Colombian organisations are created and how their vision and focus are determined.

Defining positive response

Exposure to disasters and armed conflict generates changes and learning processes that, in turn, influence how Colombian organisations perceive and define what a positive response is, as well as which elements constitute the core of a quality work.

'[…] and it is a successful intervention because it had impact. I have been back to areas where we intervened a year ago, for example, with a humanitarian response. And we still see, let's say, part of the things that we worked with the communities and they are still present. […] Things done marginalising the communities they do not have, they don't have future.'[27]

All interviewees defined a positive/quality response as being linked to working with affected communities and appropriately implementing interventions where the time dimension is essential (both timely interventions in the short term and interventions that have lasting effects). The following sections analyse these two elements as the core characteristics in the perception of national and local Colombian organisations involved in disaster and emergency response. The two characteristics are presented consecutively but this division is conceptual and to a degree artificial: in the narrative and meaning of the interviewees they are intertwined.

4. Understanding the role of communities

Working with communities as a source of impact

Defining a positive response encompasses intangible effects as much as or even beyond material humanitarian assistance, to include elements of trust-building and respect, placing the communities at the heart of the intervention. Being with the affected communities is paramount to their sense of regaining self-management and overcoming crises. It implies witnessing and supporting community efforts to overcome damage from exposure from a shared space and understanding. In the interpretation of how humanitarian work is addressed, these shared experiences have a positive value for individuals and communities exposed to crises.

'[…] the people, the majority of the [affected] people that were in those processes of accompaniment were able to re-establish themselves, to recover more quickly.'[28]

The centrality of affected communities does not imply romanticising working with them. On the contrary, interviewees defined this as hard: it requires effort and dedication, a sense of commitment and being ready to accept personal sacrifices, in terms of time, conditions and personal exposure to security risk as well as human suffering. Shared experiences and witnessing suffering trigger both motivation to keep on with the work and awareness of the dangers of exposure.

'I have had the opportunity to be immersed in the community, in the municipalities, learning from below, living every day with the people from four in the morning until seven in the evening, through episodes of violence, responding to emergency situations immediately. This has helped me learn a lot. There is something I ask God, as a person of faith I am, is that I do not lose my capacity to be astonished. […] Sometimes when we do this work we become desensitised, we get use to someone else's pain, we see families here and there, and if we visited several countries we say, "There is more suffering there than here, this one is not suffering that much." In this humanitarian work there is a tendency to turn a bit desensitised despite the fact that we work for the families, but sometimes it is a form of protecting ourselves, defending ourselves, not to let these things affect you […] but I think it is important not to lose the capacity to be astonished, that situations like this affect us. This is what keeps me working.'[29]

Communities themselves are not considered homogeneous and inherently 'good'. Exposure to disasters and armed conflict brings out the best and the worst in the human condition, and affected communities are not immune to damage and harm, or to power dynamics and abuses that emerge in situations of need, vulnerability and impunity.

"Affected communities are not immune to damage and harm, or to power dynamics and abuses that emerge in situations of need, vulnerability and impunity"

'An example [of how careful they need to be working with affected communities] is that some leaders are a bit contaminated, be it for leftist or rightist ideologies, perhaps taken by false promises or for personal or political interests, influencing important community decisions, for good or for bad. What you need to do in those cases is to offer tools for their own judgement, without influencing too much directly but to leave the cards on the table: "You choose, there are these trends and these circumstances.'[30]

Working with communities from the departure point of learning and experiencing exposure points at ways of intervening in crises rather than imposing collective action strategies and activities. How to work with affected communities is derived from shared experience and interpretation of the effects of crises on affected communities. Interviewees do not explicitly talk about 'participation' or 'accountability' because these are elements that are not considered for the design of the response but departure points for establishing a dialogue over alternatives for collective action.

'For us "accompaniment" transcends physical presence there [in the field]. It has to do with re-establishing relationships that have been destroyed by violence. And that requires, for example, a bet for building confidence […] we can be there in situ, good, but levels of constant communication are also needed, a solidary search for other things that are being requested, we cannot provide but other allies can, for example legal support, being able to refer people to others.'[31]

How to work with affected communities is guided by an understanding of the processes affected people have gone through. In this context, accompaniment goes beyond physical presence and proximity to encompass departing from active listening, recognising and respecting community knowledge and establishing a dialogue with communities. Working with communities in these predefined ways is not optional, as it often comes dictated to by the effects of exposure, particularly visible in communities that are exposed to armed conflict over time.

'But in those areas of conflict, is it normal that certain things happen and nobody says anything, yes? Because that is what is established. Moreover, there are limits where you cannot figure out more. Because it is established there are invisible borders that do not allow you […] then what we do is dialogue […] Nobody talks, nobody says anything, they insult each other and it was no one, everybody silent, you get robbed and the other and everyone silent. Because there are gangs, outsiders around, people trafficking with drugs, yes. Or weapons. Those types of things happen but no one says anything. Everybody knows, the teachers know, the leaders know, they don't say anything, they remain silent, because they can be threatened […] then what we do is to set up a simulation, we hire actors to work for a month [explains strategies to work with communities affected by long-term armed violence].'[32]

Establishing a dialogue with affected communities under these circumstances is not an easy task. Being able to learn from exposure demands counteracting the negative effects violence and deprivation have had on relationships among individuals and within families and communities. Under these circumstances, individuals external to communities are perceived with suspicion and access to and acceptance by communities are addressed in a deliberately careful manner. Awareness of the capacity to do harm permeated the narrative of research participants interviewed for this research.

In this understanding, gaining trust, confidence-building, opening spaces for exchange over alternatives for collective and individual action, enabling understanding and respect and recognising different forms of expression were often explicit in the narrative of interviewees as being among the processes to support communities to overcome change and damage. In this interpretation of how a positive response is defined, community knowledge, strengths and capacities are not merely acknowledged, but are seen as a base for building positive interventions.

'They told us, "I know how to manage fear", that was what they worked at the time [refers to a previous peak of armed conflict violence in the area of intervention] and that process has an interest […] they were doing a workshop on fear. For us this tells us a lot, it is evidence that shows the importance of intervening in crisis in a moment of very strong political violence, but also the effects that a timely intervention can have, yes? The people, I imagine, in those 14 years have felt fear many times, over different situations, but they have some tools to manage it. For us this is fundamental. It is not only that people and groups have achieved mobilising resources to reduce a bit the impact that a violent situation can cause, but that those resources can remain over time, that this is when the issue of sustainability comes, which are the effects of the intervention. And this is precisely what we always consider, to strengthen the existing local capacities. […] Timely as our intervention has to take place in a quick, reactive manner […] we cannot say, "Wait until next week," but we can act in different ways. We can go directly or through allies, providing guidance on how to manage the situation. The idea is not like a fireman sometimes, but also to unfold strategies that enable the individual, if he/she has links of trust, how this individual can look for ways to mobilise resources and manage. […] There is evidence that the intervention changed the course of what followed for that group of people, for that individual.'[33]

Working with communities, from the perception of the organisations interviewed, demands a broader scope of activities beyond material assistance to include managing relationships with communities and others. The quality and impact of what constitutes a positive response are shaped by an understanding of what the intervention is intended to achieve – ultimately, what humanitarian action is. In the view of many interviewees, working with communities means opening the spectrum of interactions in the spaces of crises to be able to address the challenges derived from exposure. This often implies creating alliances and joint work with others beyond affected communities.

'For us the response is part of a broader umbrella, that does not limit itself to understanding emergencies and disasters, and that requires walking and advancing, finding allies to perhaps build a way that permits the progressive transformations that are required.'[34]

Being a Colombian national or local organisation is not assumed to be better per se. In fact, there is clear awareness of the limits and gaps within organised civil society in Colombia, which is not immune to interests guided by considerations other than humanitarian values. A whole spectrum of interactions and learning unfolds from the coincidence in time and space between more permanent national/local organisations, emergent national organisations or consulting firms and international organisations targeting affected areas/communities as the crisis peaks and/or the disaster hits. These interactions bring tensions among organisations, including criticism:

'It is very different, this is so important it should be written in bold: you act because you believe, you act because you get hired to do so. We act because we believe, independently of whether we get a contract. I don't get paid by the state, nor by any INGO, nor by any politician. I am completely independent, and this enables me to be more objective […] Look how it works, many big INGOs create small consultancy groups, they see an opportunity and create a small NGO. These are like little sons of local consultants but with a vision of […] doing what can be funded. I think the role of NGOs should be another one.'[35]

"With varying degrees, focuses and levels of ambition, [Colombian organisations] aim at transforming social and relational processes"

Research participants often tacitly referred to, and sometimes openly discussed, a 'patronage system' (*clientelismo* in Spanish) – the notion that economic or political interests guide the allocation of responsibilities and subsequent funds when crisis hits. This is often linked to the role of the media in triggering collective action: the bigger the media coverage, the more compelled certain national actors, including the state, feel to respond. In contrast, crises of a permanent or chronic nature get less attention despite their profound impacts on affected communities.

The boundaries of what constitutes humanitarian action permeate the conception of a positive intervention. Here, the diversity of approaches of the organisations interviewed reflects Colombian organisations' heterogeneity: some local and advocacy-oriented organisations explicitly appeal to transformations of the system; other specialised and some local organisations focus on specific, delimited efforts to mitigate the effects of violence as a value in itself. A key emerging lesson from exposure for Colombian organisations interviewed for this research is that, in varying degrees and with varying focuses as well as levels of ambition, they aim at transforming social and relational processes.

Violence has been exercised for decades in Colombia, and peace negotiations between the government and the Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia (FARC) will take time to develop, let alone be felt in the territories in crisis. Yet supporting communities affected by violence to better manage and cope with the effects of violence requires support that is defined by its intended benefits and impact. In this sense, regardless of the approach, the narratives of interviewees point to the importance of providing affected people with tools that endure over time so they can better cope with the adverse circumstances and suffering to which they are exposed.
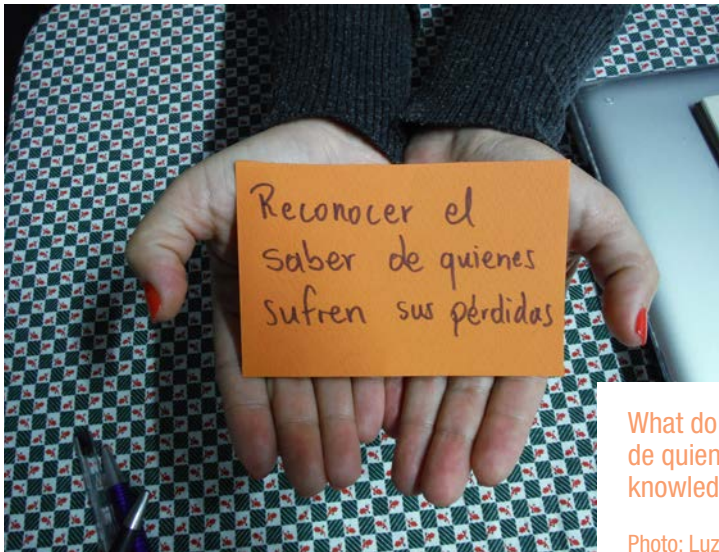
What do you want to say? 'Reconocer el saber de quienes sufren sus pérdidas': Recognising the knowledge of those who suffer losses.

Photo: Luz Saavedra/ALNAP

5. Understanding perceptions around time and crisis

5.1   Perceptions of time

The dimension of time is a concept crucial to understanding better the experiences and motivations behind the involvement of the humanitarian organisations interviewed for this research. In their narrative, a double dimension of time emerges. On the one hand there is the importance of timeliness expressed in terms of a relevant and opportune intervention in crisis, either directly or through supported communities or partners. On the other hand there is the motivation to leave behind tools and elements for self-management within affected communities, so results will have a lasting effect.

Some interviewees talk about 'impact' or 'sustainability', but all refer to working with communities as a core element to assessing a positive response. Working with communities is not a tick-box that adds value per se; how to work with communities is linked to the desired outcomes of intervening in crisis.

'When a person is having his/her rights abused, violated, he/she requires an accompaniment, support, caring. For example, it is not that they do not have the capacity to manage alone, but they require assistance, support. It does not mean the individual is incapable of overcoming the situation, it is that he/she requires support. It is not to take the place of the person's capacity, but to support his/her capacity to get out of there.'[36]

Disaster and armed conflict as sources of exposure are either cyclical or chronic, with peaks through time and territory. In this understanding, interviewees are very aware of the limitations they face, the fact that a positive response cannot happen everywhere and every time it is needed.

'No organisation should arrive in a community wanting to solve a problem where the community has not been consulted, and do it in a way that generates dependencies on the institution coming to help. It has to strengthen the local structure. If you bring a work methodology to a community, that methodology should remain with them […] that capacity has to be transferred, as there is no guarantee the same organisation or the same people may be able to come back, if another crisis strikes.'[37]

The pressures of responding to a crisis situation and the desire to build a response from an attitude of respect, of listening and opening spaces for dialogue, often clashes with the requirements of emergency work. The characterisation of the time dimension as representing quality is two-fold, relating to effects over time and effects at the opportune moment.

'It was a quick impact project, I mean, the families were in an emergency situation and they needed a timely, quick response. The construction of sanitation hardware, shelter and psychosocial attention was quick […] sometimes these types of projects that are for a population in emergency situations are delayed, they have lengthy administrative procedures. Families get desperate, demotivation strikes and people say, "Well, don't they understand that we are in an emergency situation?" Hunger does not wait, basic sanitation conditions health, is not to be debated, discussed, analysed.'[38]

Lasting effects are key to providing 'opportune' responses and generating continuity of the positive effects of the response, beyond direct interactions with affected communities. When narrating the qualities of a particular response perceived as positive, an interviewee explained,

'For me, what is fundamental is that, in this work, those that are working are the ones that are going to benefit from it. The communities themselves. Yes, one is a facilitator, one has to be a source of support, but not the maker of their lives. Impact is to leave them with tools for them to work with, for them to learn how to work out things, create new tools, improve tools, because tools have to evolve, they don't need to be the same forever. There is respect, respect. If you would like to have cold soup, go ahead my dear, eat it cold, because hot soup is yummy and I love it hot but why do I have to give you hot soup? Not to impose, that is respect but also openness to controversy, that there is questioning.'[39]

Crises inflict damage; a positive response points to, rather than imposes, avenues for collective and individual action in reaction to the damage caused. Respect comes from a reaction to the damage in individuals and communities, not from a theoretical or conceptual understanding of how human relationships should be. It is a reaction to the harm done by exposure, a counter-mirror, allowing affected people to understand that their situation is a result of harm.

5.2   Understanding of crisis, dealing with transformed violence

'I think there is a point that has to do with how response is understood, or accompaniment. Well, we are talking about accompaniment to communities that have a long history of crisis behind them […] They have been subjected to conflict lasting several months, several years even […] Therefore, it is not an emergency that is temporary, that you can solve […] quickly. It is a historical problem […] That is it, they are submitted on a permanent basis, it almost becomes normal. It is almost normalised […] Then, what happens? Of course the context to tackle such "emergency" is not "you arrive, you install, you provide 3 m3 of water, done, get out, the community has access to water." No. Here we are also talking about strengthening the community in crisis.'[40]

Perceptions around timeframes and what constitutes 'crisis' were commonly referred to as being beyond immediate response and material assistance.

'To be oriented not only towards specific assistance in material terms, in-kind, infrastructure. But to also address community strengthening […] And we would get told, "No, no, no: community strengthening is development." And we would reply, "But of course it is development, then what to do if the communities live in a context where they have their development conditions limited?" Communities are not simple and empty recipients. I mean I can arrive with a quick assessment in 72 hours and say, "What they lack the most is this, that and this, what do you prioritise? One says water, the other food, the other protection. Done three sectors, that is what is going to be done." That is restrictive, you need to recognise the community is there, they have their own capacities that require accompaniment, strengthening, generate trust for them to manage. In the case of indigenous communities it is vital.'[41]

"Colombian organisations deal with a double challenge: on the one hand addressing the effects of violence on individuals, families and communities; and on the other dealing with security and a context of continued violence and transformation"

For the organisations interviewed for this research, the conception of what constitutes crisis and what effects produce change and damage in affected communities is paramount to a better understanding of the conception of humanitarian work and beyond. Colombian organisations deal with a double challenge: on the one hand addressing the effects of violence on individuals, families and communities; and on the other dealing with security and a context of continued violence and transformation. Organisations' narratives underlined that decades of violence have generated a lasting effect that communities still feel and suffer. Violence and insecurity remain a source of concern.

Working with affected communities exposes organisations to varied degrees of violence, threats and coercion. Dealing with security issues in the Colombian context has two dimensions: (i) the mere presence of staff gives them a level of exposure. This, to an extent, is an exposure all Colombians have experienced, but continued presence in affected areas increases its degree; and (ii) staff are targeted because of the work that they are undertaking within affected communities. This was particularly present in the narratives of local organisations interviewed. Their aims encompassing social transformation and rights advocacy render them part of the context they are aiming to help evolve, as well as subjects of the relief response and beyond. For other types of organisations, armed actors often see their presence as hindering their actions. Some organisations highlighted exposure to violence as a source of learning from exposure over what affected communities are going through, hence enabling a better understanding of how to tackle the effects of violence.

'There are risks as well, as we work with families affected by the armed conflict, armed groups sometimes see NNGOs or humanitarian staff as a threat to them. There are risks there.'[42]

'People that work in the organisation have been the target of violent acts. […] We have received threats, intimidating pamphlets […] we have had security incidents.'[43]

'There have been colleagues murdered, colleagues kidnapped and some have suffered in their own skin violence against themselves, or against their family members. These experiences help us understand things.'[44]

Unfortunately, general trends of insecurity for individuals who engage in collective action in Colombia do not reflect a positive scenario. According to the UN, killings of local community leaders involved in human rights defence have doubled between 2014 and 2015, going from 34 deaths to 69[45]. The programme Somos Defensores (We Are Defenders) experienced a 105% increase in aggression, including threats, killings, assaults and arbitrary detentions, targeting this collective.[46]

Exposure to violence therefore continues to affect those who work with violence-affected individuals and communities, despite the contextual transformations brought about by the peace negotiations.[47] In this context, there are two emerging sources of challenges and obstacles to Colombian organisations intervening in crises. Violence continues and transforms itself while the exercise and effects of violence persist for affected communities. This is linked to the persistence of armed groups and the emergence of other forms of violence.

Table 2: Exposure to violence and its effects on affected communities

Criminal gangs	'There is strong work on reconciliation and peace, not only because of the Havana talks […] there are many issues to solve yet, social issues for this peace to work, cease-fire yes, but beyond so it lasts through time and avoiding perverse and worse processes to emerge. For instance, the issue with the paramilitaries. Indeed, they were officially demobilised [2003-2006], then they turn into what is called today *bandas criminales* [also known in Colombia as bacrim] and they are being more hurtful than the paramilitaries themselves. Because before at least there was one visible head, while now they are 10 or 20 heads and each with its own economic interest, not even a political interest, although politics are mixed in it all.'[48]
Drug trafficking	'The conflict, it transforms itself. It is one actor that is signing the peace with the state. But there are others […] perhaps with less impact than before, but all the drug trafficking […] Colombia lives this in a special manner, but there it is. And it is a huge factor of violence generation that is not going to change.'[49]
Transformed violence	'Now the government is talking about post-conflict and how to organise things. Then what would be the role of the international community and the NGOs working in those areas […] how to work, how to articulate […] then UNOCHA is going to disappear, this is being perceived by many […] it loses its reason for being here. However, it loses its reasons for presence while the circumstances of affected communities, poverty, inequality and violence remain or are transformed. This is not new, transformations happened after the agreements [between paramilitary and the government in 2003-2006] yes they change name, some change their modus operandi, then they are not considered armed actors anymore, they are bacrim. Then the parameters of action, if we can call it that, change as the way to negotiate with them. With bacrim we cannot talk about international humanitarian law […] they are criminal gangs and then, how to negotiate with them, how to talk about humanitarian space in this circumstances is going to be very tricky. Violence in urban areas is increasing […] Transformed violence is happening in many areas of the country […] The organisations will have to incorporate other elements of analysis, with whom do we negotiate? With these people who are destroying and mutilating people to death openly? With the guerrilla, with the paramilitary we had an idea how to establish relations, negotiate in which terms. I could demand respect for international humanitarian law to you, to the government, to myself […] but with these people how… how?'[50]

In a context of transformed violence, many organisations preferred to talk about post-agreement rather than post-conflict context, to show explicitly that the effects of decades of violence, transformed violence and other forms of it persist as a source of damage for affected populations and a powerful reason to continue their work. The effects of violence on communities remain – even if transformed by non-recognised actors – after decades of exposure.

The security and well-being of Colombians remain an issue for the country, particularly for those involved in relief efforts. They permeate understandings of how to work with affected communities, how to operate in disasters and armed conflict environments and particularly how to address relationships with both communities and other actors involved in response.

The interviewees acknowledged significant changes in the context in light of the political negotiations between the state and FARC. Given the history and the significant interests at stake, negotiations in general and the interactions between stakeholders are complex. The violence does not cease because there are negotiations, but it transforms itself in the intersection between territorial, political, economic and criminal confrontation with interests linked to social, economic and political control over the territories.

It is beyond the scope of this research to undertake an exhaustive analysis of the security implications of current conflict dynamics in Colombia, but the strength with which security-related concerns were referred to in the interviews renders it necessary to explicitly reflect the concerns of local and national Colombian organisations involved in the humanitarian response.

Table 3: Continued effects of violence in the context of peace agreement signature

Relevance of continued accompaniment of victims of violence	'It is like violence is becoming chronic [stressed by interviewee]. Then comes a women victim of sexual violence, of forced displacement, moreover they "disappear" her son, she does not have access to any humanitarian aid, but on top of all that the state tells her, "Look, we are going to start talking about other things because a peace agreement is going to be signed" and is something so chronic that it gets installed and many people have not had access to attention and assistance.'[51]
Increased pressure on individuals and communities affected by violence	'The way international cooperation is entering Colombia now, prioritising post-conflict. This is a scenario we are facing, yes? We are mobilising internally our resources to say, "Ok, it is valid and relevant to accompany the victims." […] The complexity of damage is huge […] issues of justice, truth commissions […] today a colleague was giving us testimony, "Oh no doctor, the issue of post-conflict is resulting harder than the conflict." […] The media are selling all these, but what happens with dealing with all the emotional suffering caused by violence? What happens with all these people who have not had a change yet? They tell us, "I cannot, I have not been able to talk about that."[52]
Invisibility of damages	So one of the conditions, let's say, is not to recruit minors. Of course armed actors are not going to admit they are recruiting, not that they are going to demobilise them, because if they do they are admitting their recruitment in the first place […] So all this is going to happen under the table, yes? There are not going to be numbers. Then this is what we are facing, we know is going to happen, there are not going to be official numbers, everything will remain invisible, like many other damages [from violence], many laws, many things but let's prepare to work with demobilised kids […] there is going to be a lot of issues with the post-conflict that are necessary to address […] In this moment the department [region] is turned into shit. We cannot even access certain areas, our advisor got sent to cut his hair, literally, these [uses a vulgar expression to refer to bacrim] don't like people with long hair. Of course he is going to cut it, what to do? This is a strategic area […] these [vulgar expression again] build their drug-trafficking routes through the middle. It is controlled by three armed groups, FARC, the bacrim, I don't know who else… […] These areas are where you have indigenous reserves, areas with the poorest of the poor, not easy to control that vast territory. You also have the livestock extensions, you have everything. Many forces to maintain a balance guarding their own interests. You go there and you feel the fear, the terror."[53]

6. Understanding the perceptions of 'others'

Organisations perceived challenges and obstacles to lie around systemic issues, associated with working with the state and international humanitarian system actors. Sources of tension are related to conceptual issues as well as the way the response is designed, planned and implemented.

 Some criticisms were directed both at the state, and at what often gets called 'international cooperation', for example, perceived rigidity when dealing with evolving contexts and needs, but there are nuances. The most important and a particularly relevant nuance is that the Colombian state is a duty bearer: it has a responsibility to provide, protect and assist as a public entity. Many Colombian organisations define themselves as having a social mission, with an integral (and holistic) approach and a rights-based agenda, which places the Colombian government under particular scrutiny. Policy and advocacy initiatives target state institutional and legislative levels.

> 'The role of international cooperation, by contrast, is qualified as solidarity rather than public duty responsibilities. International cooperation 'should complement, not supersede […] work towards collective action with territorial entities, negotiation and pacts are essential'.[54]

This section splits perceptions and attitudes between government and international cooperation, even though in the narrative of the interviewees they are interlocked notions, particularly when it comes to advocating for the centrality of affected communities in a planning and programming response and the need for a longer-term perspective and to take into account the root causes when intervening in crises in Colombia.

6.1   The Colombian state, and evolution and improvements of humanitarian response

It is beyond of the scope of this research to establish a clear legal and institutional analysis of this. Briefly, though, in Colombia, legislative and institutional development distinguishes between emergencies derived from 'catastrophes' (natural disasters)[55] and those designed as 'humanitarian' (associated with armed conflict)[56], with parallel laws, institutional frameworks and, most importantly, plans for attending to and assisting affected people. Interviewees were in agreement that the evolution of and improvements to the system have been significant. For instance, it is possible to trace, disaster after disaster, legislative and institutional advancements in the response system, preparedness and risk and disaster management. Beyond specific laws and institutions, interviewees acknowledged an improved understanding and emerging awareness in the country.

This recognition does not preclude Colombian organisations from expressing disagreements with and remaining critical of the legislative framework's application and institutional architecture implementation. This is perceived to be part of their role: to monitor and be critical of what are the state's responsibilities as a public entity as 'demanded by the realities in the field'.[57]

Critiques emanate from two main sources. On the one hand there is a clear understanding of the responsibilities of the state as a public entity responsible for ensuring the appropriate application of national and international law to guarantee fundamental rights and their role in the provision of services. This includes leading in the response effort and the management and clear provision of resources and funds. In this sense, pointing at state responsibility is the first and foremost target of advocacy and policy initiatives by Colombian organisations interviewed for this research. On the other hand, critiques are centred on how the state has organised its response and crisis management systems. The perceived obstacles and challenges are, again, dual.

First are the challenges of applying legislation in practice.

'The legislative framework is so strong that it is a limiting factor in itself.'[58]

´We have a decentralised country to respond to emergencies. The local level needs to provide the first response. But distribution and administration of resources is centralised […] how those resources are administered is problematic, the political interests […] we have different systems [lists several, risk management, health] but they don't talk to each other in affected areas, while the affected community is the same. People are affected by social lack of protection, by lack of coordination, by the multiplicity of potentially applicable laws […] they get applied in one way or the other or sometimes not at all.'[59]

Interviewees often pointed to the lack of uniformity in the application of relevant legislation as a constraint. Despite the degree of sophistication of the Colombian system of response, again and again participants pointed to the significant difference an individual, placed in a particular echelon of the system, makes. Several dimensions of the challenge to apply legislation in practice emerged from interviews; these are summed up in three distinct but interrelated areas:

1. The conceptual division between 'natural disasters' and 'internal armed conflict' – what the interviewees define as an artificial division: individuals and communities are often affected by both and are forced to choose which assistance plan they are going to pursue.

2. What is perceived as a problematic institutional architecture between the national level (dictating laws, protocols of application and resource allocation), the regional level (where affected communities are visited and the scope/magnitude dimensions are explored – and where Colombian regional elites are very powerful) and the local level (responsible for the first response and implementation of programmes).

3. Grey areas between 'natural disasters' and 'internal armed conflict' – for instance, if attacks against infrastructure take place, such as fuel pipes being blown up by bombs, generating environmental contamination and degradation, who is in charge? Who responds?

Second, and interlinked with the above, are **the obstacles to access by affected individuals and communities to attention**, **assistance and reparation measures** in the legislative framework.

'[State] institutions are not prepared to assist double, triple, quadruple levels of impacts. Because there are many cases of multiple impacts, not just one, yes? Then institutions are not prepared for that. On the one hand is insufficient [resources, staff, coverage] but legally speaking […] because there are norms […] people should be assisted by the state, there are plans, protocols to follow. But then you go and see the plan and there are many administrative obstacles […] it does not flow.'[60]

The system is sophisticated and complex, involving the three administrative levels of the state: national, regional and local. Registration procedures are lengthy; often affected individuals and communities fear stigmatisation for being openly identified as forcibly displaced, for instance when armed actors are present in the areas of displacement and areas of arrival of the displaced. As section 2.2 showed, not all forms of damage are visible and easily identifiable, hence the insistence on integral approaches by Colombian organisations. Additionally, coverage issues are far from uniform along the extended Colombian territory, with certain areas being historically neglected.

'If the Colombian state is not capable of reaching and responding in certain areas, then what? These areas are in crisis precisely because of lack of attention and service provision in the first place!'[61]

'The state has laws but not coverage. There is a beautiful Constitution, there is everything on paper. But the state and the regions do not achieve coverage of impact. The coverage depends on the governments, some are socially oriented and others are not.'[62]

'All [institutions involved] have a network [for response and action] but with very clear interests, because a lot of the work is seen from a political perspective. It is sad to say so but it is true. While humanitarian assistance is not seen from a much more civic perspective, we are going to fail. There are investments, but they go on and off, very influenced by media coverage. Once the media leaves, what happens with those communities?"[63]

Lack of response by the state triggers collective action by local and national organisations, which respond while remaining critical of the inefficiencies and gaps of state institutions.

6.2   International stakeholders, recognising the learning while critical aspects remain

When analysing learning from exposure in terms of what changes bring to organisations, the role of international actors emerges as one of their multiple influences – be it by observing, sharing spaces of intervention and sometimes adapting international ways of work or by reacting to the modus operandi of international actors in the country. In all cases, interactions influence national and local evolving responses, and there is recognition of the learning from international involvement in the country. How Colombian organisations interpret international involvement in relief efforts is not static: there is with an interesting evolution in perceptions of the intervention of the international humanitarian system in the country.

Box 1: Evolving perceptions of humanitarian action in Colombia[64]

Humanitarian work as purely relief: material provision of goods and little more. This view has largely disappeared but there are remnants:

'"No, it is not that I do not want you to come here and give me food, we know how to grow food, we have resources, we have capacities, we have rights." I mean, people quickly go from emergency humanitarianism, let's call it that, to a stage where they say, "We have rights." And that is a different position, as it is not, "Please do me a favour" but, "Give me," in other words, "I claim my rights."'[65]

As the quote above indicates, a rejection of victimisation as well as of dependency is present in the narratives of interviewed organisations. This critical view indicates initial tensions when sharing time/space in crises with international actors. Ten years ago, international humanitarian workers were relatively despised as los de los chalequitos ('those with the little vests [organisational visibility]'.[66] This view has largely evolved after decades of international humanitarian involvement in Colombia.

Humanitarian work as protection, beyond provision of material assistance. Human 'shields' (using the physical presence of Human Rights activists as a deterrence measure against violence) and accompaniment by human rights and conflict resolution organisations, coupled with international investment in 'safe areas' throughout the years of attempt peace negotiations, have impacted the perceptions of local and national organisations (see Section 4 for further details on accompaniment). Humanitarian work is now seen as a strategy of protection of lives in the face of damage, suffering and death.

Humanitarian work as necessary but a step towards bigger, more significant, transformations. Particularly interesting in this view is the insistence that, 'You do not fall into victimising affected people again, generating more harm'[67] and explicit linkages with broader processes of development, human rights and, specifically, political participation.

Acknowledgment of the solidarity contributions of international cooperation in the country, coupled with learning processes of mutual benefit, does not preclude Colombian local and national organisations from having a critical perspective on international engagement. These criticisms are perceived both as a source of obstacles and challenges and as a source of tension.

The main and consistent criticism is the perceived rigidity of the humanitarian system, in the face of what affected people believe positive humanitarian responses and relationships should be. Several dimensions of this rigidity emerge when analysing and comparing the perceptions and attitudes of local/national organisations.

One key dimension to understanding the critical perspective of local/national organisations is a temporal one – in terms of when to respond, and what timeframe is required to generate positive impacts and tensions between shorter-term emergency interventions and a broader, longer-term and integral vision of work to encompass social, human rights and development objectives.

First, **rigidity generates delays and an excessive focus on bureaucratic processes hinders quick reaction to emergency situations**.

'There is a rigidity that we consider should be revisited and explored, in the understanding that emergency work is a dynamic world […] If a month and a half has passed [since the initial assessment] and there has been mobility within affected communities, and they are not the same ones that we saw before but people have gone back to their dwellings, so they are in that other area, and the zone has another name, yes? Or perhaps it is in another municipality, changing that is not as flexible as one would like it to be. And then you have to ask permission from Brussels, or New York, or Washington, or the moon, but sometimes it simply does not arrive.'[68]

International cooperation, in particular donors, is perceived to have an excessive focus on bureaucratic procedures, to the detriment to the social mission and what the context and the affected communities' realities dictate. The Colombian government and international cooperation come up against the same fierce and reiterated criticism in this sense.

'We could have many more advantages if what is written in the law were managed in an appropriate manner. For instance, access to funds. But the reality is not as timely and appropriate as it is expressed in the law. Yes, in order to achieve a humanitarian project for a municipality or a particular community, you have to undertake a series of steps and things that can delay you and delay you, and then is not humanitarian response anymore. The circumstances when you pass such proposals are like this today. They may reply a month, two months later. Then things have changed, have evolved completely. But this is something we often see with the international cooperation as well.'[69]

The gap between theory and practice is underlined in the public advocacy and policy public statements of interviewees, with an important and significant nuance: national and local organisations do not claim to speak on behalf of affected communities.

Secondly, **rigidity is understood as a lack of flexibility to remain relevant and generate a positive impact**. Evolving contexts and needs demand adaptations and modifications that are not easy to obtain, and lengthy negotiations and applications for administrative permits and legal requirements are compartmentalised between different institutions. This rigidity affects all phases of the project cycle.

> 'We do not even have an idea of how they eat [indigenous community diet]. But nonetheless the international aid arrives, yes? They know how to do things and one understands that a bit, tries to mediate, explain, "These are not products they are used to" […] how can you even discuss with the World Food Programme, "Excuse me, we would need to change this food because […]" That is what is officially assigned, so that is what is going to be done […] Yes and when the state is the same, sends the list of products, the boxes and there you go, distribute! No, that stubbornness should not be, the reality does not match.'[70]

Sometimes the lack of flexibility verges on harm, be it by inaction or by pushing for procedures and processes that are disconnected from the field.

> 'It is like an administrative priority, you legalise the resources [formalisation of administrative and accounting], "I will send you an audit to check how you executed the resources, not to check whether the community solved […] or what was distributed." I mean, here is the piece of paper, the receipt I bought and applied the VAT discount. One has to hire a canoe, with a person, that is his livelihood and he says 500,000 pesos [approximately 110 GBP], which is subject to retention of 50,000 pesos for the state [11 GBP]. Then I have to tell them I will keep 50,000 pesos, they don't have health services, they don't have access to education, they don't get anything! But I retain the tax money for the state. There are these limbos, the situation is contradictory […] for the humanitarian context there should be flexibility. The state is not capable of responding, those communities are in crisis because of lack of attention from the state, do not on top of all ask them to pay taxes […] but we get asked to comply.'[71]

In this perspective, bureaucratic and administrative procedures 'become a distraction from the fundamental purpose, which is to help alleviate the suffering of communities in crises'.[72]

Third is **rigidity as inadequacy: imposing rather than departing from field realities**

> 'It was difficult because the INGOS already had projects, formulated and funded by donors, hence they were trapped by matrixes [log frames]. But with the community we achieve, well, the community would say, "From you we would like this and that." We negotiate, they re-shifted their proposals and manage to do it. It was an interesting case as the community was leading, not the INGOs, which is what tends to happen always. What is normal, what we are used to, is to see INGOs and agencies arrive with their agendas, their issues and they are placing them here and there, they say to communities, "This is what we have, we have this project and it is funded, so we need to do it like this." It's not that the INGO wants it like that, but there are contractual conditions, administrative compulsory requirements, things that need to be complied with. In general, things are worked in advance, timings included, then they arrive at the community and tell them what to do, and the community says, "Ok, good" and accepts.'[73]

When communities manage to take leadership of emergency response, this is celebrated as an achievement, an example of success that clashes with the abundant sector rhetoric of effective participation, accountability to affected people and localisation of aid. Reality clashes because it is perceived as a clear imposition, despite positive – but acknowledged as 'rare' or 'lucky' – examples.

> 'We have been very lucky with international cooperation that has flexibility. But we have also faced others where the time, for example, to do a proper context analysis, to get the trust of communities, to generate the confidence […] well that does not match a logical framework, it does not have a place within a logical framework.'[74]

As seen in previous sections, a positive response is an intervention that points at rather than imposes what to do (and how) – is aware of the potential of damage and the harm this would entail.

> 'You have to understand very well the cultural issues in local communities, so the projects can dialogue with those realities and then not enter imposing. That is why I was mentioning it before, when the project is not set up jointly [with affected communities] it's much more complex. And I am aware that agreeing humanitarian projects is not an easy thing, emergency responses are quick responses. It is a tension that is clearly felt, perhaps the experts can tell us. We are really learning here.'[75]

There is acknowledgement that not all the answers are known, and that, in a positive response, the ideal to aspire to is building together. In this perspective, international involvement in crisis is often respected while also being perceived as intrusive, and even sometimes excessive: 'There is too much prominence of the internationals' role'[76], while the focus should be on the affected communities.

'When something happens to you, that I would be able to understand that suffering and not to say, "Oh poor you, oh, what happened?" but that I feel that pain like when something happens to a relative. I think things are starting to change, because we understand and we see the action of many truly respectable humanitarian entities doing their relief work and all, but there are no feelings, there are no grounded values, there is no permanence [over time]. Then I go, I distribute and I leave, like press reporters: something happened, I took a picture. Sometimes we need to set up meetings, because all the flags arrive: I am CAFOD, I am SCF, I am WVI, I am CARE […] oh well.'[77]

What do you want to say? 'La educación salva vidas si se garantiza': Education saves lives if it is guaranteed.

Photo: Luz Saavedra/ALNAP

7. Conclusion: regaining self-management

'We have a difference with some NGOs, I think we have to be impartial, being neutral paralyses us. Being neutral places you in zero, and that is paralysing. Being impartial does not paralyse you but you have a position, you have a voice, you have something to say. Some INGOs say they are neutral. Well we are not, we are impartial, we are in favour of the families, the victims, which does not leave me at zero. I have a position, I have a discourse. That has motivated me to work in this sector, I had to learn fast to be able to deal with these situations, live immersed within the communities, learning from bottom up.'[78]

Learning from the bottom up is an essential foundation of learning from exposure. Collective action and processes are derived from the changes brought by exposure to disasters and armed conflict and the inter-sectionality of diverse damages on individual and affected communities. Change reveals the central role of agency, understood as free will and initiative, because the trigger to action is the imposed changes and the eroding certainties that disaster and conflict expose.

Colombian organisations do not appeal to have a voice; they claim to have one, where agency and regained self-management are a reaction to exposure. Learning from exposure is the basis for experiences and knowledge to manage and overcome damage. The idea is not necessarily new and is in fact quite simple: provide affected communities with the skills and tools to look after themselves. Recovery cannot be imposed, as damage was, no matter how good the intentions and how complete the theoretical frameworks guiding action. It requires an integral approach, where solidarity actions and public responsibilities are acknowledged and respected while often being perceived as partial. Regaining self-management should come from within the affected communities. Needs and rights must be addressed within this broader context and understanding; learning from exposure adds value, it is a life-changing experience.

In this view, recovery is much more than addressing immediate needs. Often, it is narrated as a journey towards aspired transformation.

'Learning [from exposure] is a very personal thing. Without taking into account the situation [work] taking place, well, reflecting in the field leads you to conjugate elements of a social, economic, political, historical nature, because they are present there, and somehow emerge in emergency situations […] you don't repair a web of a spider because it's broken! [Your intervention] has to go beyond. It is an ethical issue in my perspective: are we putting the people at the centre? It is related to human rights, not an object of my action, because in the end it is almost a permanent work, it can become very personal.'[79]

"If disaster splits lives and armed conflict changes who you are, response is conceived in opposition to disruption and violent change"

If disaster splits lives and armed conflict changes who you are, response is conceived in opposition to disruption and violent change: it should point at actions and alternatives rather than impose; it should be respectful to community voices rather than ignoring or neglecting them; it should allow communities to express themselves rather than speaking on behalf of them. It is not presented as a straightforward task but rather as one that requires dedication, effort and investment, a sense of commitment that, in order to be maintained, needs to emanate from the source of damage itself.

'Emergency is precisely the rupture with what was planned.'[80]

Disaster and armed conflict trigger engagement and involvement – you are being forced, as an individual, as an organisation. Because engagement is a reaction in the face of situations that should not even exist in the first place, involvement and awareness go hand in hand, often generating criticism of the rigidity of the system as a source of yet another imposition on how things are and relationships are established.

Learning from exposure means learning by doing, doing with communities, and doing so that the effects of the interventions in crises can last over time and tools and approaches can be owned by affected people. Learning from exposure is used beyond the support initiatives deployed by Colombian organisations working in disasters and emergency. There is a wide diversity of ways of being with affected communities, to accompany them so they can regain a sense of self-management.

What do you want to say? 'Te respeto porque existes':
I respect you because you exist.

Photo: Luz Saavedra/ALNAP

Endnotes

1. See http://www.internal-displacement.org/americas/colombia/figures-analysis

2. On 9 April 1948, President Jorge Eliécer Gaitán was shot in the street outside his office in Bogota. This incident triggered a series of riots, popularly known as El Bogotazo, which marked the beginning of the period known as La Violencia.

3. See databases for 1988 to 2012 for the above-mentioned categories of events: http://www.centrodememoriahistorica.gov.co/micrositios/informeGeneral/basesDatos.html

4. Centro Nacional de Memoria Histórica , documentary There was no time for sadness

5. See https://www.humanitarianresponse.info/es/operations/colombia/perfil-humanitario-colombia

6. See http://www.unidadvictimas.gov.co/index.php/en/

7. For an overview of Colombia's risks and hazards see http://www.preventionweb.net/countries/col/data/. The INFORM model adopts the UN International Strategy for Disaster Reduction (UNISDR)'s three aspects of vulnerability: physical exposure and physical vulnerability are integrated in hazards and exposure; fragility of the socioeconomic system becomes INFORM's vulnerability dimension; and lack of resilience to cope and recover is treated under lack of coping capacity.

8. See Annex 2, methodological approach adapting Grounded Theory.

9. Research participant interview, Bogotá 17 August 2015.

10. Research participant interview, Bogotá 6 August 2015.

11. Research participant interview, Bogotá 5 August 2015.

12. Research participant interview, Bogotá 28 August 2015.

13. In the interviews, research participants provided examples of the interaction between disasters and conflict, as both phenomena can exacerbate the effects and impacts of each other. For example, communities affected by conflict may flee to areas that are more vulnerable to exposure by disasters. Disaster-affected communities are more vulnerable to the influences of competing armed actors and confrontations for the control of territories, communities included, leading them to be more exposed to being affected by conflict as well.

14. Research participant interview, Bogotá 5 August 2015.

15. Research participant interview, Santiago- Buenaventura 17 August 2015.

16. Research participant interview, Bogotá 28 August 2015.

17. Research participant interview, UK-Medellín 2 September 2015.

18. Charmaz, K (2014) Constructing Grounded Theory (2nd edition) Sage publications, London. Charmaz acknowledges that any rendering of meaning is an interpretative one. We cannot know what goes on in people's heads, but we can offer our interpretations of what they say and do.

19. The author does not claim that this is a representative typology of all Colombian organisations involved in disaster and emergency response in the country. Rather, it constitutes a typology that resonates with the experiences and sense-making of the organisations that agreed to participate in the research. Its usefulness is derived by the interpretations provided and the categories suggesting generic processes and exploration of implications when attempting to better understand their involvement in relief efforts in crises (Charmaz, 2014: 337-338). For the full typology table, see Annex 3.

20. Research participant interview, Bogotá 5 August 2015.

21. Research participant interview, Bogotá 6 August 2015.

22. Research participant interview, Bogotá 5 August 2015.

23. Research participant interview, Bogotá 5 August 2015.

24. Research participant interview, Bogotá 6 August 2015.

25. Research participant interview, Bogotá 6 August 2015.

26. Research participant interview, Bogotá 5 August 2015.

27. Research participant interview, Bogotá 5 August 2015.

28. Research participant interview, Bogotá 28 August 2015.

29. Research participant interview, Bogotá 28 August 2015.

30. Research participant interview, Bogotá 28 August 2015.

31. Research participant interview, Bogotá 20 August 2015.

32. Research participant interview, Bogotá 19 August 2015.

33. Research participant interview, Bogotá 20 August 2015.

34. Research participant interview, Bogotá 6 August 2015.

35. Research participant interview, Bogotá 20 August 2015.

36. Research participant interview, Bogotá 28 August 2015.

37. Research participant interview, UK-Medellín 2 September 2015.

38. Research participant interview, Bogotá 28 August 2015.

39. Research participant interview, Bogotá August 2015.

40. Research participant interview, Bogotá 6 August 2015.

41. Research participant interview, Bogotá 6 August 2015.

42. Research participant interview, Bogotá 28 August 2015.

43. Research participant interview, Bogotá 20 August 2015.

44. Research participant interview, Bogotá 28 August 2015.

45. See http://internacional.elpais.com/internacional/2015/08/20/actualidad/1440035145_096172.html

46. See http://www.somosdefensores.org/index.php/en/

47. Since 2012, the government and FARC have engaged in peace negotiations in Havana with the facilitation of the Cuban, Norwegian and Chilean governments. See www.crisisgroup.org/en/regions/latin-america-caribbean/andes/colombia.aspx

48. Research participant interview, Bogotá 28 August 2015.

49. Research participant interview, Bogotá 5 August 2015.

50. Research participant interview, Bogotá 5 August 2015.

51. Research participant interview, Bogotá 20 August 2015.

52. Research participant interview, Bogotá 20 August 2015.

53. Research participant interview, Bogotá 19th August 2015.

54. Research participant interview, UK-Cartagena 8 September 2015.

55. Law 1523 (2012), the first comprehensive national policy for disaster management in Colombia. See http://www.colombiahumanitaria.gov.co/FNC/Documents/2013/index.html

56. Law 1448 (2011) on Victims and Land Restitution establishes measures for attention, assistance and integral reparation in internal armed conflict. See http://www.unidadvictimas.gov.co/normatividad/LEY+DE+VICTIMAS.pdf

57. Research participant interview, Bogotá 6 August 2015.

58. Research participant interview, Bogotá 4 August 2015.

59. Research participant interview, Bogotá 6 August 2015.

60. Research participant interview, Bogotá 19 August 2015.

61. Research participant interview, Bogotá 6 August 2015.

62. Research participant interview, Bogotá 19 August 2015.

63. Research participant interview, Bogotá 20 August 2015.

64. Summary from research participants' interviews, August-September 2015.

65. Research participant interview, Bogotá 6 August 2015.

66. Research participant interview, Bogotá 24 August 2015.

67. Research participant interview, Bogotá 6 August 2015.

68. Research participant interview, Bogotá 6 August 2015.Research participant interview, Bogotá 5 August 2015.

69. Research participant interview, Bogotá 6 August 2015.

70. Research participant interview, Bogotá 6 August 2015.

71. Research participant interview, Bogotá 6 August 2015.

72. Research participant interview, Bogotá 28 August 2015.

73. Research participant interview, Bogotá 20 August 2015.

74. Research participant interview, Bogotá 28 August 2015.

75. Research participant interview, Bogotá 26 August 2015.

76. Research participant interview, Bogotá 28 August 2015.

77. Research participant interview, Bogotá 28 August 2015.

78. Research participant interview, Bogotá 6 August 2015.

79. Research participant interview, Bogotá 6 August 2015.

80. Research participant interview, Bogotá 6 August 2015.

Annex 1. Interviewed organisations

- ACF Spain
- Agencia Presidencial de Cooperacioón (APC)
- Centro de Investigación y Educación Popular (CINEP)
- Corporación AVRE (Psychosocial Accompaniment and Assistance on Mental Health to Victims of Political Violence Corporación)
- Corporación para el desarrollo social y comunitario
- Fundación HALU Bienestar Humano
- Fundación PAIS 21
- Fundación SAHED
- Heartland Alliance International Colombia (HAI)
- Infancia y Desarrollo
- MSF Spain
- Opción Legal
- Pastoral Social
- Proceso de Comunidades Negras (PCN)
- United Nations OCHA Colombia

Annex 2. Methodological approach adapting Grounded Theory

## Sampling methodology for the selection of organisations and individuals for interview

The unit of analysis of the research is responses to emergencies and disasters implemented – partially or completely – by NNGOs in Colombia.

The data will initially be obtained from individuals working within the NNGO selected for the research. Country profiling prior to the data collection will enable contextualisation and the identification of potential emergency and disaster responses to initiate interviews, but interviewees' selection of disaster/emergency responses will constitute the major criteria for inclusion.

Methodological approach to data collection and analysis

Purposive sampling was used for the selection of countries, organisations and individuals, in three stages:

Figure 1: Phases in the research using a mixed methodology
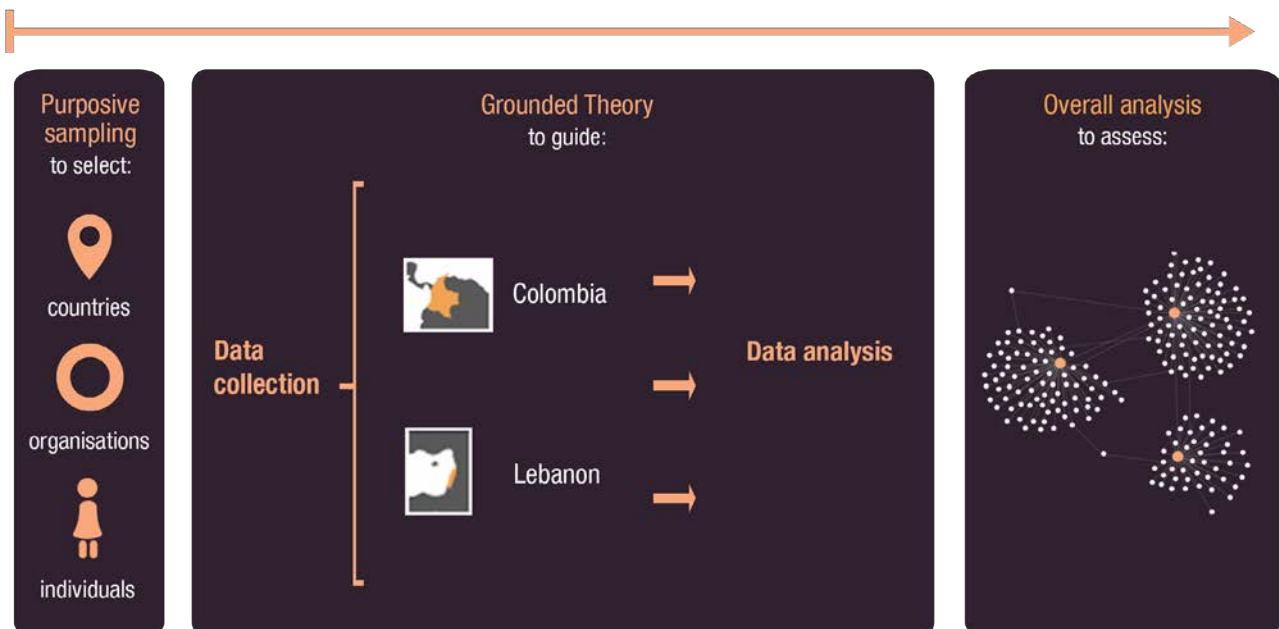
Stage 1: Country selection

Country selection was determined by (i) limitations in terms of resources, notably time, human and budgetary resources, which made wider country coverage impossible; and (ii), perhaps more importantly, an understanding that it is difficult to find homogeneity among the 100+ countries in which emergencies and disasters recur, even if we consider only non-Western countries.

Under these premises, the criteria to select the countries were:

1. A certain degree of geographical representation, with a sample that includes diverse continents and regions, to capture various experiences at national and local level from a qualitative perspective;

2. Countries that have an active mixed humanitarian profile with multi-risks/hazards, including natural and manmade disasters – often including armed confrontation – and displacement;

3. Countries with evidence of existing and active national organisations and platforms;

4. Countries that, for different reasons – including language barriers – have not received as much attention in research related to the work of NNGOs in emergency and disaster response.

Stage 2: Organisation selection

The initial sampling of NNGOs was carried out through profiling of the country selected and key informant interviews:

1. Country profiling to determine and improve understanding of the risks and hazards resulting in disasters and crisis, in order to understand humanitarian needs and its responses, including mapping of national and local organisations according to available data;

2. Key informant interviews to identify on the one hand critical contextual elements, ranging from cultural awareness to issues around language, security and accessibility, and on the other, potential NNGOs to invite to participate in the research. The criteria for selection aimed for some degree of representativeness of the diversity of situations within the country of research and included size (small/large), geographic scope (national/local), orientation/composition (women's organisations, self-organised-affected communities, minority groups) and a degree of subjectivity in terms of particular interest associated with quality of response, including scope and magnitude or response to specific needs of most vulnerable groups.

Selection of key informants was done through ALNAP network member organisations and/or contacts, and included nationals and/or widely experienced people in the selected country, including diaspora individuals.

In practice, in Colombia the snowball technique was applied to widen the criteria of inclusion of organisations to accommodate references suggested by the interviewees themselves. This proved to be a very successful inclusion criterion, enabling the inclusion of organisations not mentioned before that are outside of certain coordination mechanisms and focus on specific sectors or vulnerable groups.

Organisations were contacted to explore their potential interest in participating in the research, with mixed results. Therefore, participation in the research was determined by the organisations who accepted the invitation and volunteered to be interviewed.

The ALNAP Community of Practice (CoP) was another source of potential organisations, including the both Humanitarian Evaluation Community of Practice and the Urban Response Community of Practice, and provided further contacts.

ALNAP Members recommended two types of organisations: former or current partners involved in humanitarian response; known national and local organisations in the country because of their trajectory in emergency response, their reputational credentials in the country of research and the presence of specific individuals working in said national/local organisations with an individual trajectory in the humanitarian sector. This may also include individuals with a mixed trajectory of work with both international and national organisations. Some ALNAP members were particularly supportive on the dissemination of the NNGO Research Info Sheet, including the Disasters Emergency Committee, Sphere and the host organisations in the selected countries, Save the Children for Colombia and Lebanon.

In the case of Colombia, mediation through UNOCHA involved a general invitation to participate on the research to all organisations in the UNOCHA country database.

Stage 3: Individual selection

Once national/local organisations had been invited to participate in the research and had accepted, most of the time they appointed particular individuals to be interviewed. Organisations were invited to participate through individual or group interviews. Group interviews were limited to a maximum of three individuals, given the requirements of the methodological choices involving adapted Grounded Theory. In most cases, organisations preferred to do one-to-one interviews, with only a few organisations preferring to do group interviews.

The only exception to these individual selection and inclusion criteria was when ALNAP members, organisations referred by interviewees (through snowballing) or diaspora/country experts pointed to particular individuals within the suggested organisations. In this case, inclusion criteria targeted particular individuals. In practice, this was possible within the limits of the individuals' availability for intensive interviews.

Data collection and analysis adapting Grounded theory

Intensive interviews with national/local organisations were not conducted with a preconceived questionnaire.

The interviews – lasting between one and two hours depending on participants' availability – were very open and based on active listening. They started with the open question: 'Tell me about the experiences, motivations and practices behind your organisation's involvement in disaster and emergency response.' Interviewees would then explain and the researcher's role was only to come back to certain points to clarify and look for examples to ensure understanding of the interviewees' explanations in their own terms.

Intensive interviews were – with the informed consent of interviewees – recorded and transcribed. This amounted to some 13 hours of audio and 275 pages of transcripts, with the average interview transcription at slightly above 30 pages, without counting the field notes. Grounded Theory methodology was then used to analyse this material in three stages:

1. Initial line-by-line coding (MAXQDA) resulting in 1,918 coded sections for a total of 310 codes and sub-codes, accompanied by 141 memos (contextual, explanatory and methodological notes to describe, analyse and compare emerging concepts);

2. Focus coding and intensive comparative tools (between codes, between incidents and between codes and direct data from the transcripts), to identify a core category of codes and key issues such as frequency and intensity and help define the dimensions of selected core codes. In this stage, we gave particular attention to in vivo codes, which are codes extracted from the direct words of the interviewees;

3. Clustering of core codes (including their sub-codes and dimensions) and further comparison, particularly around identified key 'incidents' (such as 'dealing with security' or 'departing from a personal experience') in order to define the structure and flow of writing and reporting.

Annex 3. Types of organisations and how to understand them

Table 4. Typology of organisations

Type	Key Process	Description
A: Transformation from an international humanitarian organisation into a national one	Strategic transformation as a result of context evolution	Transformation here means a gradual process of transitioning from an international organisation into a national one. A significant indicator is the progressive nationalisation of teams and a shift in the leadership and management. Rationale behind the transformation includes legal framework requirements in-country, and the potential to access national funds (both public and private) and (as a result of years of capacity reinforcement) training and learning by Colombians within international organisations. Note that this type is mentioned here but not specifically targeted on the data collection intensive interviews, coding and analysis adapting Grounded Theory for this research.
B: Colombian staff of a specific INGO join efforts to constitute a national organisation	Using experience as a result of exposure to crisis and INGOs' work	Colombian staff of INGO self-organise and constitute a national organisation1. This evolution is determined by willingness to use collective experience as a core element to establish the composition of the team. Exposure to the ways of work of a specific international organisation influences the objective and understanding of these types of organisations. The influence permeates language and concepts used by this type of organisation, in order to define humanitarian response, how quality is conceived and actions to implement quality responses. Tools and systems learned from international exposure are reproduced, adapted and applied.
C: Capacity-building and community training of members of affected communities triggers self-organisation and collective action	Applying experience from combined exposure to disasters/conflict and international efforts on capacity-building.	Territories exposed regularly/chronically to disasters and conflict are targeted by international actors who, in turn, train and prepare affected communities to better cope with disasters/conflict and improve their self-organised response. Those at the receiving end of capacity-building initiatives remain in the territories where they are affected by disasters/conflict again and again as a result of the cyclical/chronic nature of risks associated with them. Trained leaders and communities decide to apply their experience and permanence in the territories, by organising themselves, triggering the creation of their own organisation. Repeated incidents reinforce learning processes.
D: National professionals with exposure to direct international action, but diverse experience constitute a national organisation	Applying experience from international but diverse exposure2.	Conceptual frameworks such as, disaster risk reduction and inclusion of environmental considerations, when conceptualising humanitarian work combined with field experience. Different professionals from diverse and varied sectors and international experiences join forces, bringing together their shared affinities and sensitivities, and launch collective action in the form of a national organisation. Learning is often expressed as a reaction to the perceived weaknesses of the formal international humanitarian system. These organisations place advocacy and influence over public institutions at the core of their collective action.
E: Sectoral, specialised organisations are founded to respond to armed conflict dynamics and its effects on affected communities	Sectoral specialisation as a result of exposure to armed conflict.	Exposure to international ways of working is an influence. The effects of armed conflict on the affected population triggers collective action in the form of specialised national organisations. Legal support, psychological and psychosocial assistance, and education in emergencies are examples of the sectoral focus of these specialised organisations. These organisations are formed with an understanding of the effect armed conflict has on affected communities. In order to deliver a quality response, efforts are concentrated around specific professional expertise.

1. The process of constituting a national organisation, in the case of the organisations that participated in this research, has sometimes been accompanied by the original INGO, in the form of financial support and guidance in the initial stages of constitution.
2. Some of the modalities alluded to by research participants interviewed for this research include being hired as staff or consultants and/or being recipients of relief efforts contracts by international organisations, UN agencies, the Colombian state and even private initiatives.

Type 'A' organisations were referred to but not included in the sample of organisations interviewed in Colombia. They are included in the typology as they reflect a growing trend in Colombia, whereby the key process is a strategic transformation as a result of context evolution. The main factors for this 'nationalisation' of organisations, are the combination of the legal and political evolution in Colombia, and the product of years of capacity building and nationalisation of international organisations' teams.

Type 'B' organisations are formed from acquiring experience as a result of a double exposure to crisis and INGO work. The use of experience goes beyond individual learning and knowledge generation to encompass the comparative advantage of having worked in teams within an institutional framework, facilitating and taking advantage of institutional and collective processes of knowledge generation, application and learning.

Type 'C' are geographically local organisations. Interestingly, here the origin of the key process from an exposure perspective is the aspiration to apply in practice experiences from combined exposure. The exposure to disasters/conflict can lead to the formation of a noticeable social vision and raising awareness of human rights. These organisations are also exposed to internationally led efforts on 'capacity-building', e.g. the creation of village committees or capacitation of community leaders. Sometimes, years after this 'capacitation' takes place, sensitised individuals gather together to engage in collective relief activities triggered by disaster/conflict. They take ownership, filter, distil and apply learning from exposure.

Type 'D' organisations present some similarities with Type 'C' in terms of the key process they derive from exposure. They also apply experience acquired in several modalities of involvement in international relief efforts and exposure to disasters/conflict. Similarly, there is a noticeable social mission, but this is nuanced with stronger links to advocacy towards the Colombian state. Conceptual frameworks of what is integral to their work, such as disaster risk management and climate change adaptation, are often considered as core to the identity of these types of organisations, and their geographical scope is national instead of local. International exposure has influenced behaviour and ways of work, while learning is also derived from applying and improving international exposure, with a critical perspective of perceived weaknesses of the formal humanitarian system.

Type 'E' are specialised organisations, determined by exposure to violence and armed conflict as a central trigger for collective action. Exposure to international relief efforts comes from sharing time/space in interventions in crisis, mutual learning and support.

The narrative of research participants is illustrated when they are defining advice or induction processes for individuals freshly joining the organisation:

- Local organisations (Type C) emphasise the importance of recognising the value of voluntary work against monetary reward for engagement in relief work. But more important is the central role of understanding the social agenda of the organisation, the problems communities confront and the importance of defending community rights. In this view, international actors are welcomed, as long as their work does not diverge from the social agenda of the local organisation. The communities

themselves define their lines of work, as opposed to accepting being told what needs to be done. This generates tensions when organisations coincide in the territories.
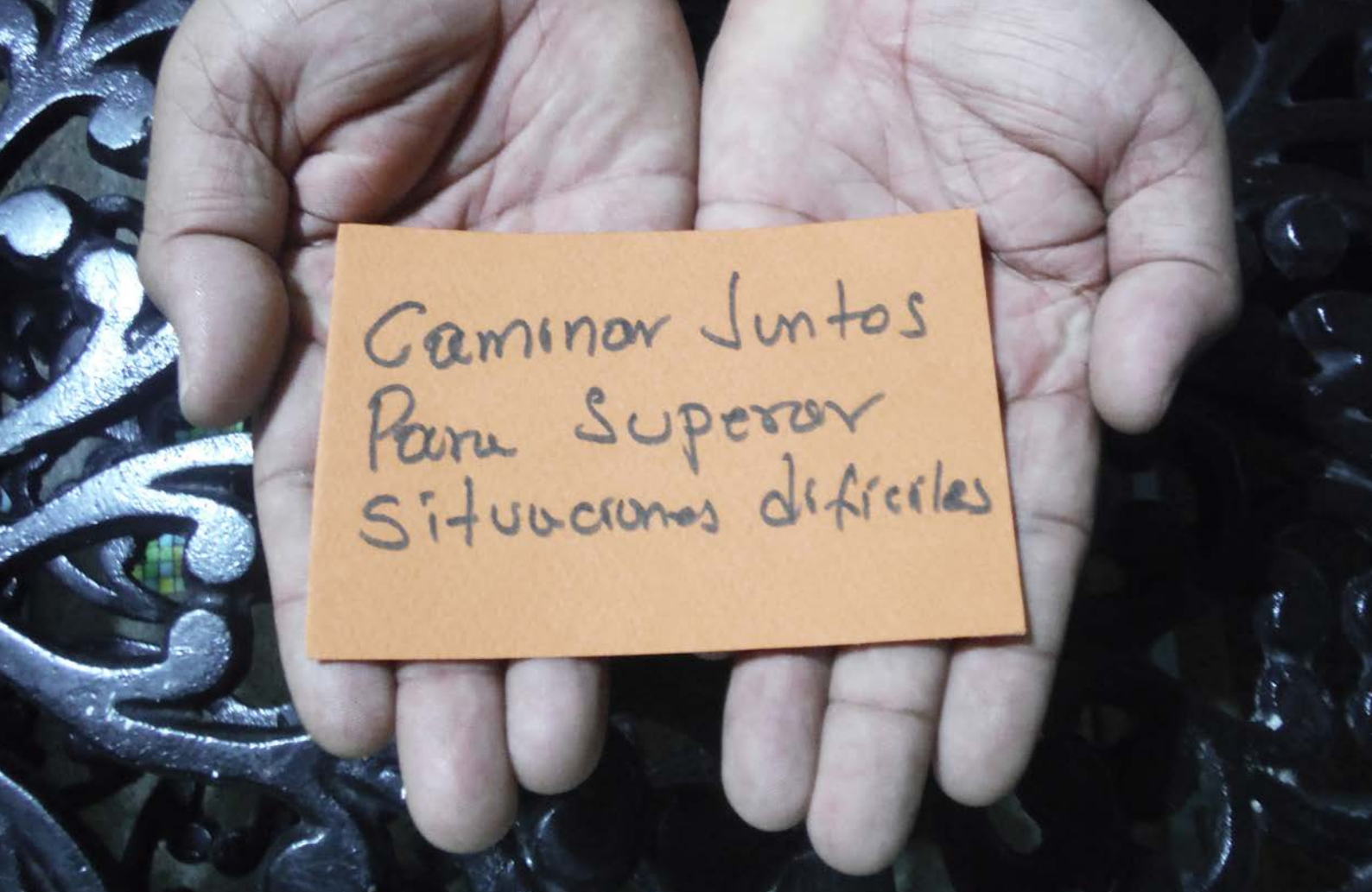
- Specialised organisations (Type E) are similar to organisations born of former national staff of INGOs (Type B) in underlining the importance of understanding history, the evolution of context and past alliances and coordinated work, to finally point at technical and strategic lines of practice. In this view, international actors have strongly influenced articulation of work, processes and actions. Programme planning, definition of strategic lines of work and the importance of documentation and knowledge management have been influenced by tools and approaches used by international humanitarian actors. Tensions here arise from the differences between short-term programming aimed at responding to peaks in the crisis and a longer-term vision, where the central role of communities is not an added quality value but a core element to define quality work. Section 3 of this report looks at what defines a positive response.

- Professional organisations who focus on a particular humanitarian sector (Type D) underline the importance of commitment, with values and philosophy behind their collective engagement and action. Their approach, in which disaster risk reduction and considering environmental work is integral to their response, matches a strong policy and advocacy agenda pointing at the limits and responsibilities of the state. In order to do this work, these organisations emphasise the importance of independence from what is labelled as the 'establishment'[3] (be it the state or the international formal humanitarian architecture) and 'looking for solutions without fearing controversy [...] understand that this job is not easy'. In this view, international actors are perceived from a critical perspective; dialogue and joint work are welcomed and rigidity and imposition of requirements are contested.

3.   Research participant interview, 20 August 2015.
4.   Research participant interview, 6 August 2015.

Caminar Juntos
Para Superar
Situaciones difíciles

ALNAP