April 2020

THE POWER OF LOCAL ACTION

Learning and Exploring Possibilities
for Local Humanitarian Leadership

OXFAM

CONTENTS

Acronyms

CBO	Community-Based Organization
CSO	Civil Society Organization
DRC	Democratic Republic of Congo
DRR	Disaster Risk Reduction
ECHO	European Commission Humanitarian Aid
ELNHA	Empowering Local and National Humanitarian Actors
ERM	Emergency Response Mechanism
GIO	Gender-Interested Organization
HUCOCA	Humanitarian Country Capacity Analysis
INGO	International Non-Government Organization
LHL	Local Humanitarian Leadership
MEAL	Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning
NGO	Non-Government Organization
VRA	Vulnerability and Risk Assessment
WRO	Women's Rights Organization

Cover photo: Members of Abante Kababayen (Forward, Women), a women's organization, and Joy Lumawod (center) display the equipment CDP provided their town. His dedication to women's rights has earned him their trust and friendship. © 2019 Oxfam America

1. INTRODUCTION AND A CALL TO ACTION FOR OXFAM

'Oxfam needs to change and grow. You need to bring in local communities and women. You should not be sitting in the same seat [at the table] as 30 years ago. You are too comfortable.'

Local NGO Representative at the Local Humanitarian Leadership Learning Event,
Nairobi, February 2019

Over the last decade, there has been growing awareness among national and international NGOs, including Oxfam, of the need to turn the humanitarian system on its head[1] by realizing the role of local humanitarian actors in responses. The arguments in favour of a local humanitarian leadership (LHL) approach are clear: local actors are already in the affected areas, know the context and generally have better access – something we are now witnessing in the midst of the COVID-19 outbreak.[2] The approach is also linked to correcting power imbalances and challenging the patriarchal structures within the global humanitarian ecosystem.[3]

This collective movement towards locally led humanitarian responses, which ensure that local actors (at community, district and national levels) and people in the affected communities have a strong leadership role, is inextricably linked to that of shifting, sharing and/or letting go of established forms of power of international humanitarian actors (donors, INGOs and the UN). Globally, this has materialized in a set of diverse (yet overlapping) commitments, such as the Charter for Change and the Grand Bargain.[4]

The humanitarian narrative on 'shifting power' is traditionally associated with financial, decision-making and technical capacities to design and implement aid projects. These are typically in the hands of a few INGOs and UN agencies, and need to 'shift' from 'here' (global) to 'there' (local, closer to the affected people).[5] However, the power conversation needs to take a much broader and more diverse perspective: one that recognizes that there are different forms of power interacting with each other in the humanitarian system. These go beyond the financial, decision-making and technical power flowing from 'donor' to 'affected person' (with many 'middle men' in between). They include: the power of local knowledge, the power of affected people's own experience, the power of local networks, and the power of local and community-based actors to pursue their goals despite lack of funding and other resources.

These and other forms of power need to be seen, recognized and valued within the complex web of collective humanitarian efforts from the local to the global level, and across the whole spectrum of diverse actors (civil society, government, private, humanitarian and non-humanitarian). Shifting power also means allowing women and other underrepresented or marginalized groups (and the actors that represent them) to be at the forefront of influencing and decision making, and addressing the unequal gender power relations within the humanitarian system that devalue the expertise of women and women's organizations.

Despite being a champion of LHL and a signatory to the UN and other commitments on LHL, Oxfam realizes it has much more to do to truly shift power to local humanitarian actors by changing its thinking, behaviours and ways of working. Oxfam also needs to use its convening and leveraging power to influence the transformation of the entire global humanitarian system.

In recent years, Oxfam and partners have designed and implemented humanitarian programmes and responses that focus on shifting power and decision making to local humanitarian actors. In doing so it has built a valuable body of diverse perspectives and practical learning that can inform Oxfam and the wider sector of what actions need to be taken to enable LHL approaches at scale.

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LOCAL HUMANITARIAN LEADERSHIP VS. LOCALIZATION

Localization is understood by many as the 'process through which a diverse range of humanitarian actors are attempting, each in their own way, to ensure local and national actors are better engaged in the planning, delivery and accountability of humanitarian action, while still ensuring humanitarian needs can be met swiftly, effectively and in a principled manner.'[6]

Local humanitarian leadership (LHL) is understood by Oxfam as 'local humanitarian actors (whether civil society, government or both) leading humanitarian response and ensuring it is fast and appropriate and meeting the needs of the affected population.'[7]

LHL refers to a transformed humanitarian system: one which is collaborative, inclusive, agile and diverse in nature, and where aid decision-making processes are equitable and closer to affected people. 'Localization' is therefore part of the process towards that transformation, and not necessarily an end in itself. The changing role of international humanitarian actors such as Oxfam is critical in enabling both localization and LHL. This includes creating space(s) for – or ceding space(s) to – local actors, as well as being a better partner through principled and equitable power sharing.[8]

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LHL Learning Events

In February and March 2019, Oxfam hosted Learning Events in Kenya and Mexico with the support of the Resilience Knowledge Hub as well as funding from the Belgian Directorate-General for Development Cooperation and Humanitarian Aid (for the Kenya event). This was the first time such a critical mass of Oxfam staff – and in the case of Kenya, also local and national NGO partners – had come together for peer learning and knowledge exchange around LHL.

The first LHL Learning Event was hosted by the Oxfam Horn, East and Central Africa (HECA) Regional Platform in Nairobi, from 25-27 February 2019[9]. The 46 participants from across the world included Oxfam country staff and local/national NGOs as well as Oxfam regional and global staff. It aimed to exchange learning on LHL practice, including the successes and challenges of adapting an LHL approach in different contexts. Five working group sessions focused on: equitable partnerships; LHL in conflict and fragile contexts; capacity strengthening; 'creating space' – influencing for system transformation; and funding solutions for local actors. The event ended with discussion between local actors and Oxfam on what each needs from the other to deliver on LHL, and their commitments and ambitions to become more agile for and conducive to LHL.

A second Learning Event, on LHL in Latin America and the Caribbean (LAC), was held in Mexico City from 25-27 March 2019. This brought together 17 participants from 11 countries in the region. Participants shared programme experience, discussed what a feminist approach to LHL and women's leadership looks like, and identified the major challenges they had encountered. This produced three main outcomes: a shared conceptualization of LHL in the region, which forms the basis for a common narrative and vision adapted to the regional context; a roadmap with first steps towards the shared vision; and a learning document that captures the challenges, successes, lessons learned, good practices and recommendations identified during the workshop.

In March 2019, Oxfam held a global meeting on LHL in Istanbul. This sought to bring together practitioners and interested staff to discuss emergent themes, create a roadmap for the future and agree a common vision for LHL that responded to the voices and asks of partners and others at the Learning Events. This shared vision is outlined below.

OXFAM'S SHARED VISION OF LOCAL HUMANITARIAN LEADERSHIP[10]

The humanitarian system that Oxfam envisions is more collaborative, inclusive, agile and diverse than it has been to date – and more accountable to those it aims to support. It promotes healthy humanitarian ecosystems in which a wide range of local, national and international actors recognize and complement one another's strengths rather than try to compete on a playing field dominated by powerful international actors. International actors acknowledge and encourage the leadership of affected people; together, we design and implement solutions, keeping decision making as close to the affected people as possible. The system continues to prioritize principled humanitarian action and standards, and sets ambitious goals for speed and scale in emergency response, but the changes we worked for have brought about a transformation: local and national actors now sit in the driver's seat.

For Oxfam, this will mean minimizing the practice of contracting with local and national partners to implement programmes designed by us; instead, we will enable, support and facilitate the work of local actors and their networks as they shape disaster management programmes, advocate for change and shift into roles of greater power and responsibility. While retaining our capacity for mounting rapid responses to sudden-onset emergencies that overwhelm domestic capacity, we will exit from our leadership and operational roles in those interventions as soon as knowledgeable, responsible local and national actors can take them on. Helping vulnerable communities strengthen their capacity for emergency preparedness, response and risk reduction is not a purely humanitarian undertaking. It calls for a one-Oxfam approach in which we weave together development and humanitarian programmes to help communities simultaneously reduce their vulnerability to poverty and disaster.

The aim of this document

The Power of Local Action summarizes the discussions and examples shared during the Learning Events and global meeting, and seeks to weave them together with current research and thinking on LHL. It is structured around the following key areas, which were identified and prioritized in consultation with Oxfam staff and partners:

- Shifting power to transform the system.
- The importance of equitable partnering.
- Supporting capacity 'sharing' not 'building'.
- Closing the funding gap to enable local humanitarian action.

The paper also discusses three emergent areas for Oxfam:
- Taking a feminist approach to local humanitarian leadership.
- Local humanitarian leadership in fragile and conflict contexts.
- Local humanitarian leadership and resilience building.

While this paper is based primarily on reflections from Oxfam's work, and is therefore a learning document for us, we hope the information within it is relevant and helpful for a wide range of stakeholders. It has given rise to the following 'call to action' which we hope will act as a point of reference not just for Oxfam but for the wider humanitarian community. As this paper argues, the need for local humanitarian action and leadership has never greater.

A call to action for Oxfam[11]

The humanitarian system, which is currently dominated by international actors, needs to change. It must intentionally evolve towards increased local capacity, recognizing the power of many diverse local and national actors working to promote and share **strength, voice and space**, and putting crisis-affected people at the centre of humanitarian response. This is urgently needed to correct an imbalanced, patriarchal and overstretched humanitarian system.[12] Humanitarian action should be 'as local as possible, and as international as necessary'[13] so that people affected by crisis get better assistance.

At first, a **change in mindset and internal organizational changes** would help Oxfam become a convener and to facilitate dialogue rather than projects. It would also enable Oxfam to simplify and improve internal systems, decentralize power, become a better partner and stop thinking that working with local actors is intrinsically a higher risk. This means prioritizing different – possibly new – skills, providing specific staff inductions, and learning from many successful experiences of LHL to date. It also requires Oxfam to recognize the critical role of women's rights organizations (WROs) and gender-interested organizations (GIOs), and use its convening, brokering and facilitating power to ensure they are part of the local humanitarian action ecosystem.

Oxfam needs to **embrace an equitable partnering culture and avoid taking a subcontracting approach**. It needs to value partnerships based on diverse views and contributions by all parties and mutual accountability, provide more visibility to the work of all parties, and diversify its partnerships.

This also means emphasizing '**capacity sharing**' rather than capacity building, hence valuing complementary knowledge and capacities, and building long-term, strategic partnering journeys. Capacity assessments should be based on dialogue and values, and be designed and carried out in a fully inclusive and two-way manner. Tools used to support this process should be harmonized across Oxfam affiliates[14] and should better reflect a capacity-sharing approach.

Funding is key for enabling fundamental changes in the system. Oxfam should support local actors in accessing funding (indirectly through intermediaries such as Oxfam, and directly from donors) and strengthening their management systems and institutional stability (adapting existing systems whenever possible, not imposing new tools). It should also support **long-term funding** for local actors to be able to build strategic plans. Oxfam needs to **allocate at least 25% of its humanitarian funding to local and national actors.**[15]

Oxfam also needs to maintain its influencing capacity and **champion local humanitarian leadership through advocacy work** – both at global and country level – around the Grand Bargain, the Charter for Change and the localization agenda. To that end, there is also a need for strong evidence and analysis.

Ultimately, Oxfam needs to fulfil its **LHL commitments:** it needs to embed the international commitments it has made as a **mandate** for the whole confederation, raise **awareness** at all levels and be accountable for this. Oxfam needs to integrate LHL commitments in all strategy planning processes, and create a plan for delivery and a mechanism for **monitoring implementation** of the commitments. The **Charter for Change commitments should be fully integrated into all relevant Oxfam policies,** not only for those specific to the humanitarian sector.

LOCALIZATION COMMITMENTS FOR OXFAM

- Charter4Change
- Grand Bargain
  - workstream 2 – Localization
  - workstream 6 – Participation Revolution
- CHS Commitments
- Principles of Partnership
- Oxfam's Gender-based Violence (GBV) Call to Action commitments
- Oxfam's Commitment to Change
- Oxfam's Commitment on Meaningful Refugee Participation – Global Refugee Forum | Global Refugee Led Network

2. SHIFTING POWER TO TRANSFORM THE SYSTEM

'Formal humanitarian sector actors can choose to use this moment to focus on those being left behind: by stepping back and following the lead of crisis-affected people and local actors, co-designing interventions together with them, amplifying the power of their voices and supporting the expansion and realization of their choices.'

IARAN, 'From Voices to Choices' report, 2018[16]
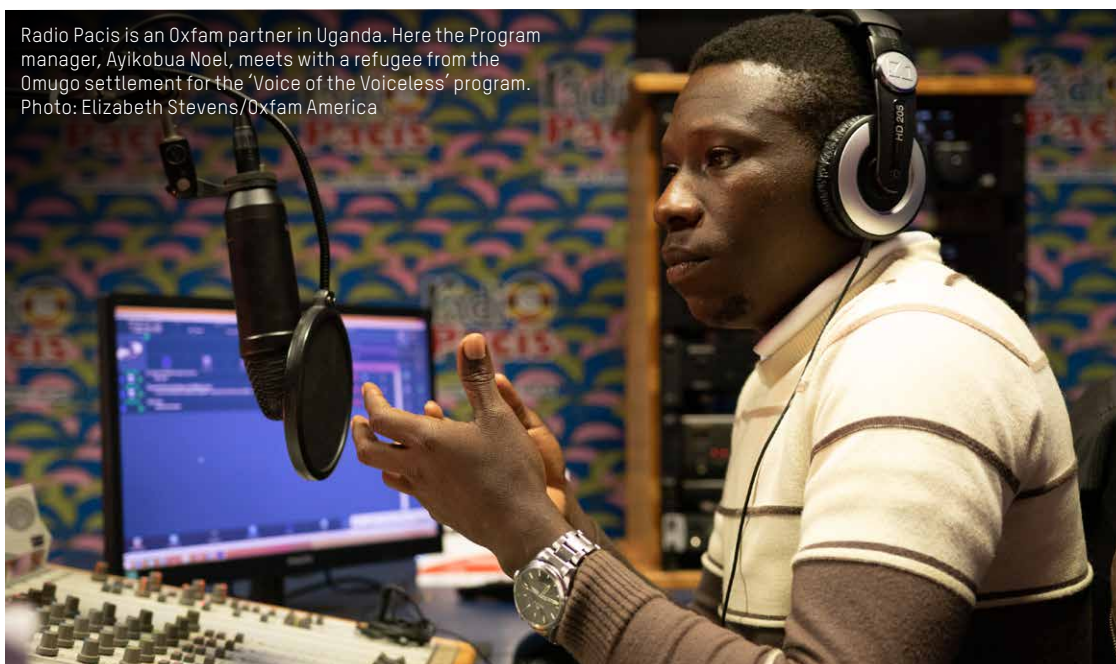
Radio Pacis is an Oxfam partner in Uganda. Here the Program manager, Ayikobua Noel, meets with a refugee from the Omugo settlement for the 'Voice of the Voiceless' program. Photo: Elizabeth Stevens/Oxfam America

There is broad acknowledgement that **transforming the global humanitarian system requires a shift in the power balance as well as deep changes in the values, culture and language of the aid system**. Local actors in various parts of the world are calling for a genuine commitment to LHL, and aspiring to a transformed humanitarian system that can better respond to needs, crises and challenges. There is also increasing momentum at global level in terms of political opportunities in support of LHL, with various global-level initiatives including the Grand Bargain, the Charter for Change, the New Ways of Working and reform of the UN system, among others. Regional and national disaster management structures and policies are offering new opportunities to move towards LHL. In the long term, this means an ever-smaller role for international actors.

Global-level commitments to LHL

The LHL agenda requires a conscious and deliberate shift of power, resources and responsibility to local actors.[17] This in turn needs local-to-global efforts to develop **strong policy and advocacy strategies to reform the system**.

A number of international institutions, including Oxfam, have signed up to these global-level initiatives and committed publicly to creating more space for local actors. They now need to turn this commitment into action and **promote internal organizational changes** by encouraging equitable, strategic partnerships, increasing transparency on resource transfer to local actors, and increasing the profile of local humanitarian actors in their communications, in the media and with donors.

MEASURING OXFAM'S PROGRESS AGAINST THE GRAND BARGAIN: FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

In 2018 and 2019, Oxfam conducted a Grand Bargain baseline study[18] in six countries in Asia: Bangladesh, China, India, Myanmar, the Philippines and Timor Leste. The study focused on the commitments made to improve transparency (workstream 1), support local and national humanitarian actors (workstream 2), increase cash transfer programming (workstream 3), reduce duplication (workstream 4) and increase multi-year funding (workstream 7). The key findings and recommendations for Oxfam are summarized below.

General recommendations:

- Organise inductions on Grand Bargain in all Oxfam offices.
- Develop contextualized priorities and measures for making progress on Grand Bargain commitments in the country (jointly with partners).

Recommendations on Workstream 2 (localization):

- Conduct HUCOCA (Humanitarian Country Capacity Analysis)[19] in all countries in order to map potential partner organizations in regions vulnerable to crisis.
- Explore how to deliver large-scale disaster responses (CAT-1 and CAT-2) while working with local and national humanitarian actors, including via preparatory mapping of actors, advanced partnership agreements, and simulations.
- Develop clear policies on consistent application of indirect cost recovery.
- Promote cross-country learning.

Barriers to change

Despite broad consensus on the need for reform, and public commitments to support it, a range of obstacles stand in the way. These can be procedural, financial, regulatory and/or cultural: they range from INGOs' resistance to change, inertia, bureaucracy within the humanitarian structure, and inflexibility of donor funding and compliance mechanisms. Such barriers 'obstruct constructive and fruitful engagement with local and national humanitarian actors'.[20]

In fact, the humanitarian sector's whole worldview is a blocker to change. People affected by crisis are often considered passive victims and/or merely the beneficiaries of assistance; international actors enjoy more trust and less scrutiny than local ones (see section 7 on LHL in conflict and fragile contexts); and greater value is placed on technical experience and 'Western' management practices than on local expertise and understanding of the context.[21]

The strong power imbalance between actors stems largely from inequalities in funding, decision making and coordination. The humanitarian system is highly institutionalized; it centres around UN humanitarian agencies, the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) and large INGO confederations[22] that together account for the vast majority of humanitarian spending and have most access to institutional humanitarian donors. Direct funding to local and national responders combined remained below 3% in 2017,[23] falling far short of the Grand Bargain's global target, which calls for 25% of humanitarian funding to go 'as directly as possible' to local and national responders by 2020[24].

This power imbalance reflects of a lack of inclusiveness and diversity in a self-regulated international humanitarian system, which is also characterized by being gender-blind. This gender blindness is partly due to structural constraints in the humanitarian coordination system: there is no gender cluster so gender issues sit under the protection cluster, thereby ignoring the experiences and needs of women other than as victims of crises.

Other gender and sexual minorities are also underrepresented and face discriminatory treatment in the delivery of humanitarian aid, or are disadvantaged by non-inclusive policies. In addition, the disproportionate male representation in the senior management of humanitarian organizations, and the lack of funds to support gender-responsive humanitarian action and local WROs and other gender and sexual minorities, limit the spaces for gender-balanced and inclusive humanitarian leadership and conflict.[25]

What does 'creating space for LHL' actually mean?

Creating space is about promoting an enabling environment for local and national actors to take the lead in humanitarian response and to influence the policies and practices that govern the global humanitarian system (i.e. those of national governments, donors and UN agencies), which currently limit the roles of national and local actors.

Some of the fundamental areas that can contribute to tangible change and gradually broaden or make space for LHL in countries are outlined below, followed recommendations for each **key attribute**.

| ⚙ Definitions, characteristics and questions to consider | 🔍 What have we learnt from practice? |

1. UPHOLD SHARP CONTEXT ANALYSIS

⚙ To be able to advocate for change, it is vital to **understand each specific context**, explore how the system operates and what the characteristics of LHL are.

It is the context that matters most, and the emphasis and milestones of success need to be human (i.e. affected people) centred.

Recent experience shows there are various **push and pull factors**. We must identify them and harness the potential of locally led humanitarian response models to address them.

🔍 The Empowering Local and National Humanitarian Actors (ELHNA) project in **Bangladesh** and **Uganda** showed that assessing the existing capacity in country and understanding the humanitarian ecosystem is key to develop clear political asks, build a national advocacy strategy and identify specific actions at different levels. Once the project had identified who the champions and blockers were, it was possible to explore ways to broaden or create space. It was necessary to find ways to include civil society voices within the government's national disaster management architecture.[26]

2. MOBILIZE LOCAL AND NATIONAL ACTORS

⚙ At the Oxfam Learning Events there was broad consensus among participants on the **low level of awareness of LHL**, potentially further complicated by a 'fundamental lack of clarity around key terms in the debate, not least what actually constitutes "local" and "international", how capacity is assessed, by whom and to what purpose'.[27]

The whole sector needs to **promote global awareness and policy on LHL** and the terms of the debate. The specific commitments in the Charter for Change and the Grand Bargain as well as other global principles need to be clarified, simplified and clearly communicated.

Local actors and national alliances/networks should connect with international actors (UN, INGOs and donors) to demand system transformation around those commitments. This includes empowering WROs on the commitments around inclusive leadership and decision-making capacity to help change deeply unbalanced systems. Local actors should **demand accountability** from international actors on their commitments in various streams of work (e.g. amount of funding, multi-year funding, transparency, partnerships, etc.).

Mobilization of local and national actors is directly linked to **better accessibility to different types of funding**, financial partnerships, UN-led pooled funds, indirect cost recovery, etc.

In **Puerto Rico**, for instance, the final reflections showed that 'there is not a firm understanding of the Charter for Change partnership commitments, let alone LHL commitments and how the organization is going to reconcile the more challenging commitments'.[28]

In the ELHNA project in **Bangladesh** and **Uganda**, most capacity development happened through the Humanitarian Capacity Development Fund. The evaluation of the first Phase describes as an 'effective and truly demand-led instrument for capacity development, empowering local actors to collectively identify and define their own needs as humanitarian actors'.[29]

3. INCREASE REPRESENTATION OF NATIONAL AND LOCAL ACTORS IN RESPONSE COORDINATION

The UN-led humanitarian system (from global cluster level through to national humanitarian country team level) does not allow accessible and inclusive direct representation of local actors. There are several bureaucratic, legal and language barriers to national and local NGOs' participation in humanitarian responses, not to mention insufficient representation of women and other sexual and gender minorities.

Truly changing the humanitarian system also means that those spaces where information is shared and decisions are taken, which are currently dominated by international actors, become **more decentralized**. Coordination needs to be modelled and reshaped by those who are at the frontline of humanitarian work, while key humanitarian principles (independence, accountability and impartiality) continue to drive its effectiveness.

There are positive examples of Oxfam's national partners gaining space, voice and leadership capacity within existing coordination schemes, and therefore participating in decision-making and funding processes.

In **Iraq**, Oxfam's partner, the national organization Rehabilitation, Education and Community Health (REACH), has been included in the Humanitarian Country Team (HCT) since 2017.[30]

4. INCREASE INFLUENCING CAPACITIES AND EMPOWERMENT OF NATIONAL AND LOCAL ACTORS

Developing capacities and empowering local and national actors to lead emergency preparedness and responses in their own context is central to LHL. Furthermore, INGOs need to **develop partners' capacities in designing and implementing advocacy strategies**, and overcome CSOs' difficulties with, resistance to, or fears of establishing dialogues with national and local government.

Networking and building alliances and consortia to operate at scale also increases influencing capacity while enabling coordination, accountability and inclusion of all kinds of local actors (CBOs, WROs and other gender and sexual minorities' organizations, NGOs, faith-based organizations, media, knowledge and research institutions, private sector, etc.). Collective action also enables knowledge sharing and learning, and leads to greater empowerment and opportunities to take part in political and strategic decision-making processes as well as to push for changes in the national and international humanitarian systems. This collective strength should also help local and national actors to **engage and participate in regional and global debates**, in multi-stakeholder platforms and relevant global political processes.

In **El Salvador**, the recent approval of the National Policy for Civil Protection, Risk Prevention and Disaster Mitigation represented a step forward in disaster preparedness and response capacity. The process of building the policy involved representatives from public institutions, the private sector, civil society, universities, local communities and the National Civil Protection System, demonstrating the importance of integrated civil society spaces for national humanitarian efforts.

In the Empowering Local and National Humanitarian Actors (ELNHA) project in **Bangladesh** and **Uganda**, Joint Action Plans were formulated at district level by local NGOs and CBOs and local government administration to address local humanitarian issues. Other relevant actors were also involved, such as the media. Meetings define capacity development needs and plan

multi-dimensional priorities and investments. They are an essential process step in building a network and collaboration among the diverse actors, with the common interest of learning how to identify, prevent and address the effects of disasters in their localities.

According to the evaluation of Phase 1: 'ELNHA has added another dimension to localization, leading to more confident local administrations which over time have included emergency planning into their budgets and sought to influence the national government to allocate more humanitarian funding to the district level.'[31]

This has been a significant part of the ELNHA project, with the consolidation of the National Alliance of Humanitarian Actors (NAHAB) and the creation of **Bangladesh** Women's Humanitarian Platform (BWHP) in Bangladesh, and the Humanitarian Platform for Local and National Organizations (HPLNO) in **Uganda**.[32]

In **Puerto Rico**, 'we created spaces for partners with their national governments that they otherwise would not have had, ensured that US government decision makers were making decisions informed by local actors, supported partners' capacity development in the area of advocacy, an area in which not many Puerto Rican partners have capacity, and advocated to the US government about local humanitarian action'.[33]

5. EMPHASIZE THE ROLE OF THE GOVERNMENT

We need to genuinely value the role of **national and local actors** and keep challenging **international actors** (including Oxfam) to change. **Governments** are also key: according to the UN General Assembly, 'each State has the responsibility first and foremost to take care of the victims of natural disasters and other emergencies occurring on its territory. Hence, the affected State has the primary role in the initiation, organization, coordination, and implementation of humanitarian assistance within its territory.'[34]
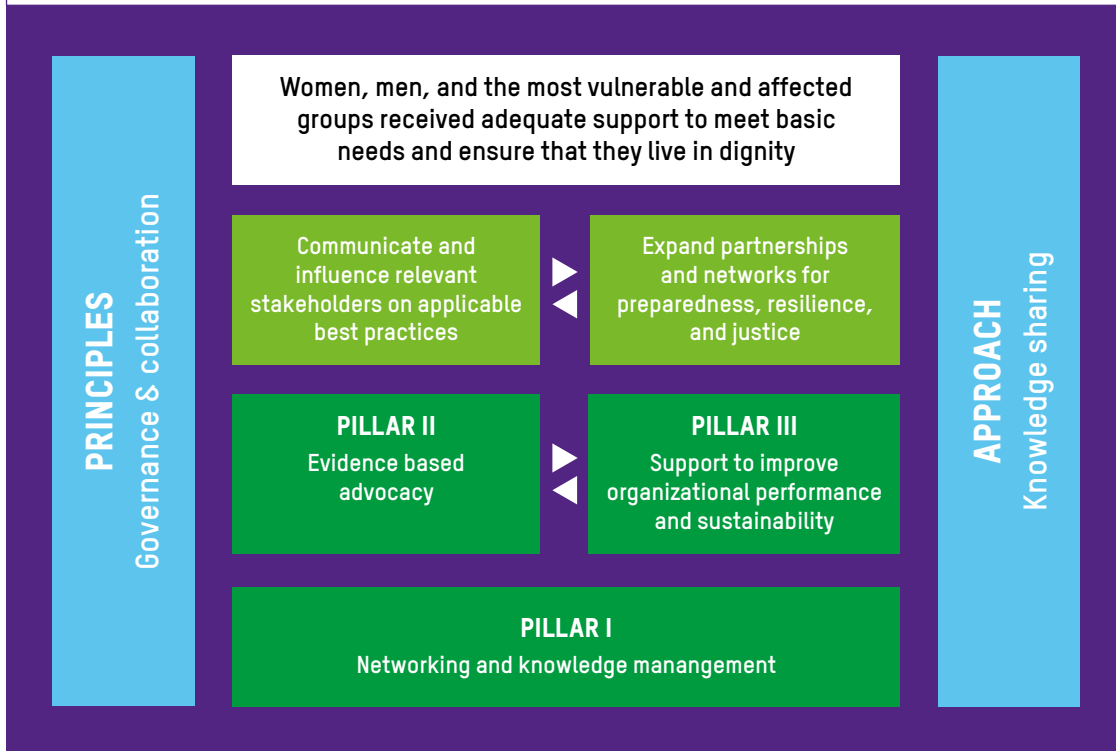
The willingness and ability of governments, whether at the national or sub-national level, to deliver on their main roles and responsibilities in crises varies widely. There are many instances in which governments, duty-bound to protect their citizens, devote only a small share of their resources to disaster management, and those that are implicated in conflicts may be unwilling or unable to deliver aid impartially to everyone in need.

Indonesia, for instance, has asserted its own national standards on humanitarian response since 2017, and rules have been applied on how (and with whom) to establish LHL, according to assessed needs. It has also set up a 'Humanitarian Knowledge Hub', demonstrating how, in an enabling national environment, empowered and leading organizations and networks help transform the way in which the system responds to disasters (see case study below).

IN PRACTICE: SHIFTING POWER – THE HUMANITARIAN KNOWLEDGE HUB IN INDONESIA

The Humanitarian Knowledge Hub in Indonesia is a network of 25 local and national organizations that has benefited from Oxfam's support. The Hub has a wide spectrum of thematic expertise, and three pillars: partnerships; evidence-based advocacy; and sustainability and expansion of the network. Knowledge management lies at the core of its approach, and the Hub uses social media to share and transfer knowledge and promote its activities among its members.[35] In 2018, a year in which many disasters hit the country, the Hub brought together various local and national organizations to respond to the Central Sulawesi earthquake and tsunami. As a partner, Oxfam had to engage and align with the existing response strategy (through a 'standby agreement') and follow the network's standards.

PRINCIPLES
Governance & collaboration

Women, men, and the most vulnerable and affected groups received adequate support to meet basic needs and ensure that they live in dignity

Communicate and influence relevant stakeholders on applicable best practices

Expand partnerships and networks for preparedness, resilience, and justice

PILLAR II
Evidence based advocacy

PILLAR III
Support to improve organizational performance and sustainability

PILLAR I
Networking and knowledge manangement

APPROACH
Knowledge sharing

Recommendations for shifting power to transform the system

1. Uphold sharp context analysis:

- Understand the context, the players, the social and political dynamics.

- Plan joint assessments and power analysis (which includes gender), and ensure the analysis, design and implementation of programmes are gender-sensitive and inclusive.

2. Mobilize local and national actors:

- Increase awareness of all actors on what LHL means; democratize/popularize global policy on LHL.

- Help build networks and collaboration between different actors (including media, private sector and academia).

- Empower WROs and other gender and sexual minorities' organizations on the existing commitments around inclusive leadership, to help change deeply unbalanced systems.

- Support local actors to demand accountability from international actors on their commitments to LHL.

3. Increase representation of national and local actors in response coordination:

- Support greater and more diverse presence of national and local actors in existing coordination mechanisms.

- Connect and collaborate among the different levels – local, national, regional and global – to trigger sustainable change.

- Promote the decentralization of, and improved access to, decision-making mechanisms (e.g. by addressing language barriers, information sharing), to include local actors at the frontline of humanitarian response.

4. Increase influencing capacities and empowerment of national and local actors:

- Increase capacities of national and local actors in designing and implementing advocacy strategies (at all levels: local, national, regional and global).

- Promote networking, alliance building and consortia to operate at scale, as a means to increase influencing capacity and inclusion.

- Advocate with local, national and international players for a shift in the humanitarian system.

- Ensure collective local knowledge and learning processes to empower national and local organizations, and to learn from and build on local knowledge.

- Promote the engagement of local and national actors in regional and global debates, in multi-stakeholder platforms and relevant global political processes.

5. Emphasize the role of government

- Analyse and regularly monitor the role the government plays (at national and local levels) in facilitating and coordinating aid delivery.

3. THE IMPORTANCE OF EQUITABLE PARTNERING

Quality humanitarian frameworks are no longer just about providing quality emergency services for affected people – they are also about ensuring that the partnering undertaken to provide those services is principled, effective and relevant.

Equitable partnering happens when the diverse contributions, attributes and voices of all partners in a collaboration (regardless of their size and financial power) are seen, respected and heard, and utilized as unique strengths in the collective effort to address complex and challenging humanitarian problems. Equitable partnering is a key feature of principled and effective partnerships, aiming for impact and transformation.[36]

Within the complex web of humanitarian relationships (local-global, local-local, global-global), transactions and collaborations, both formal and informal, it is essential to promote and value equity to correct entrenched power imbalances and to empower those at the frontline of humanitarian crises, including those who are directly and indirectly affected.

Equitable partnering is essential in efforts towards strong LHL, because they inevitably place increased value on local capacities and voices. Similarly, the approach stimulates open conversations and the mapping and sharing of the different resources and capacities that different actors can bring to the table in pursuit of the same goals. This will highlight obvious capacity gaps, power dynamics that need to be acknowledged, and steps that need to be taken to make things work for local humanitarian leaders.

At the LHL Learning Events, discussions demonstrated that an equitable partnering culture is starting to emerge in various humanitarian contexts, including Gaza, Lebanon, Myanmar, Nepal, Kenya and the Philippines (some of these are described in short cases studies below). Despite these positive examples, Oxfam's current 'partnering' practice cannot be described as equitable; one participant from a partner NGO commented: 'It appears clear that [at present] Oxfam leads and partners must follow'.

Three urgent challenges for equitable partnerships/local humanitarian leadership – and possible solutions

A commitment to principled partnerships – particularly to equitable partnering practice – is essential to accelerate change towards LHL. The following findings from the LHL Learning Events and sector-wide research on challenges to equitable partnering and LHL emphasize the importance of embedding equity in collaborative humanitarian action.

1. Financial power outweighs other forms of power

Money (or funding) often shapes the tone, quality and overall power dynamics of partnerships. For example, if Oxfam is constantly the one bringing the funds to the table, then this can overshadow other forms of power. If Oxfam does not acknowledge (for example, to donors) partners' financial and non-financial contributions, then the relationship is essentially one of subcontracting – i.e. asking a partner to implement a predetermined course of action.

Possible solutions: If Oxfam listens to its current and potential future partners, understands their various forms of power as well as their various limitations, then it can work with them to create a more equitable partnership. Examples on how to make this work in practice may include:

- Conducting, together with local actors, power and/or resource mapping.

- Promoting mutual accountability, for example through a partnering 'whistleblowing' mechanism aimed at adhering to principled partnering.

- Outlining how decision making in the partnership will work in practice along the programme and partnering cycles.

> **IN PRACTICE: EQUITABLE PARTNERING IN MYANMAR**
>
> **'Sometimes we have to let go and build the trust, listen, change our ways of working and communicating, pay attention, share the power.'**
> Oxfam Myanmar representative
>
> The Joint Strategy Team (JST) is a strong local network in Kachin State, Myanmar, consisting of 10 local and national organizations. Its members provide most of the humanitarian assistance in Kachin state. The JST and Oxfam have been piloting the Emergency Response Mechanism (ERM) as a means to support LHL in Kachin. The ERM is a new type of funding approach, which provides rapid disbursal of funds to local CSOs. From an equitable partnering perspective, the ERM initiative offers a unique experience. The JST and Oxfam have used a 'partnership dialogue' in their initial and continuous engagement, which has set the tone for a well-governed relationship. The partnership is based on open conversations and reflective practice, and on what is needed for the collaboration itself, acknowledging how the different parties benefit from the process.
>
> This approach has meant that Oxfam has had to step back – to listen, wait and see what partners decide to do – and put into practice its organizational commitment to letting go of a position of 'control', whilst upholding its commitment to safe programming. In fact, even funding and compliance from the donor (ECHO) are shared.

2. Short-term projects often create challenges for equitable partnering

There is a widely-held view that short-term humanitarian funding and project cycles do not allow for ongoing, strategic, equitable partnering relationships with local and national actors; that their short-term, delivery-led nature means they are based on subcontracting. This does not allow for co-design, co-creation or supporting local actors' capacities to lead the humanitarian response. This view is a barrier to LHL and needs to be challenged and changed. The humanitarian system architecture has also not been wholly successful in strengthening local actors' capacities in preparedness and post-emergency response, nor in fostering long-term, healthy and sustainable collaboration.

Possible solutions: An organization like Oxfam, which works both in humanitarian response and development programmes, should invest in overarching humanitarian–development collaboration arrangements with local partners. These should be independent of specific emergency interventions and able to endure the ups and downs of funding cycles. If partnering is approached from the perspective of the need for partnering ('the partnering case'), then the partnership can incorporate many different experiences. Examples of how this could work in practical terms include:

- Embracing a partnering 'journey' (or 'road map') approach, by identifying the various moments (past and future) of the programme cycle that go beyond short humanitarian project cycles.[37]

- In chronic and recurrent crisis settings, considering overarching partnering arrangements as independent but accommodating of specific projects that can be reviewed, revised and adapted as demanded by the changing context and needs.

- Providing core funding and other institutional support to local actors, and prioritizing investment in participatory partnering approaches (including revising and moving-on arrangements).

IN PRACTICE: OXFAM'S STRATEGIC PARTNERSHIP MODEL IN THE PHILIPPINES

'Ultimately, it is a choice – our resourcing should reflect our strategy and commitment, whether in abundant or in constrained times.'

Country Director, Oxfam Philippines

Over the last 10 years, Oxfam Philippines has responded to 18 emergencies: five were implemented directly, eight with local partners, and five were led by partners. In 2016, in alignment with Oxfam's Vision 202038, Oxfam Philippines embarked on a major transition to prioritize partnerships as the primary mechanism for delivering humanitarian programmes. As such, it committed to move away from subcontracting partners for implementation, towards partnerships incorporating shared values, trust, mutual learning and development of capabilities.

Oxfam Philippines' starting point is that local humanitarian actors have the capacity – in terms of knowledge, experience, networks and relationships – to lead humanitarian action; usually, what they badly lack is financial resources. All Oxfam's humanitarian responses are now carried out in collaboration with partners. Some best practices which have emerged include:

- Oxfam Philippines supported the Humanitarian Response Consortium (HRC) to set up a Quick Response Fund so that it has funds at its disposal for rapid assessment and response. The HRC has complete decision-making control over this fund.

- It supports other humanitarian partners, such as the People's Disaster Risk Reduction Network, with institutional costs, to ensure preparedness.

- When Oxfam Philippines raises funds for humanitarian response, 80-90% goes directly to partners.

- It conducts joint contingency planning with partners and identifies how each can add value to the other. Partners have identified Oxfam's specific roles to be in communications, MEAL, resource mobilization and safeguarding from sexual exploitation and abuse.

- Situation assessments and proposal development and writing are done jointly with partners. In all communications, Oxfam Philippines highlights the work done by partners. It also helps to make sure that the work of local actors is visible and represented in the UN cluster system.

- Oxfam Philippines endeavours to provide technical support where partners have indicated lack of capacity, e.g. in WASH. Despite limited discretionary country budgets, every year it makes allocations towards the core costs of at least one humanitarian partner for advocacy, capacity building and coordination. It also prioritizes resource mobilization for LHL.

3. Over-reliance on subcontracting hinders local humanitarian leadership

Subcontracting on its own does not equal true partnering. In subcontracting, typically the international actor asks a local actor to implement predetermined project activities under the international actor's terms. True partnering, on the other hand, is empowering for all those involved: processes and activities are co-designed, based on complementarity, and play to each other's strengths.

In a sector typically dominated by reactive humanitarian action, programme cycle management and donor compliance take precedence over everything else. To achieve LHL, knowing what it takes (and why it might be necessary) to partner has to be an essential part of quality humanitarian programming approaches, along every stage of the programme cycle and as part of monitoring, evaluation and learning (MEAL). In other words, principled and effective partnering management needs to go hand in hand with programme cycle management. Capacity gaps need to be identified together and addressed based on demand from local actors rather than on what is observed and prioritized only by the INGO in the partnership (see section 4 on capacity sharing).

Possible solutions: To accelerate efforts on LHL, we need to limit subcontracting to what it is meant to do and strive for partnerships that are collaborative, principled and place a strong emphasis on equity. This can be achieved by:

- Adopting partnering for LHL practices, definitions and measures as part of minimum-quality humanitarian programming standards in organizational frameworks and emergency strategies – and hold ourselves accountable to them.

- Collectively mapping existing capacities and resources, and supporting joint planning and action to put these into effective use through a collective humanitarian response.

- Playing a stronger convening and brokering role to enable capacities to be shared within local networks and between INGOs, local and national NGOs and others.

IN PRACTICE: SUPPORTING LOCAL HUMANITARIAN LEADERSHIP IN KENYA

Since 2015, Oxfam in Kenya has intentionally used different models of support to local partners, transforming its traditional business model. As part of its humanitarian strategy, it has explicitly committed to move away from direct humanitarian response and instead support strong LHL. Some particularly effective examples of this approach include:

- Technical assistance to the County Government of Turkana through a well-defined and formalized partnership (co-designed Memorandum of Understanding with clear roles and responsibilities) and an innovative financing mechanism for improved water outcomes.

- Supporting Arid Lands Development Focus (ALDEF) and Wajir South Development Association (WASDA) in a fully partner-led response in Tana River County, in response to floods.

- Working with non-traditional actors and stakeholder groups in a cholera response. These included the artists' collective Mukuru Youth Initiative (MYI) and Inuka Ni Sisi!, a social movement driving transformational leadership.39

- Supporting the ASAL (Arid Semi-Arid Land) Humanitarian Platform, an emerging network of local organizations, to strengthen its technical, organizational and coordination capacities.

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4. SUPPORTING CAPACITY 'SHARING' (NOT 'BUILDING')

If the aim is to shift or share power to enhance LHL, we must acknowledge and address the politics of capacity development. This has been well documented, with the very concept of capacity building often criticized for suggesting a 'deficit' or 'gap', often of a technical nature, that needs to be 'filled' by an entity that retains knowledge, expertise, resources and/or power.[40] A capacity-building approach tends to enable international actors to define why, how and which capacities are 'built', thus enabling them to retain their power and privilege.

LHL has been subject to this dynamic, with international organizations often prioritizing local/national actors' technical capacity in order to make them 'more effective' humanitarian actors that can then either implement projects or replace/complement responses led by international organizations. Even where strong partnerships exist, a competitive approach to partnering often dominates. This often looks more like subcontracting than true complementarity aimed at providing the best possible response to affected people.

Over the past few years, there has been a focus on building institutional capacity to create strong, sustainable organizations – agreements such as the Charter for Change acknowledge the importance of this. The value of local and national actors identifying their own capacity gaps and driving their own capacity-strengthening workplans is also well documented.[41] However, who decides what constitutes 'sufficient' capacity? Who decides when that 'sufficient' capacity has been reached? Again, the answer is often donors or international actors such as INGOs and UN agencies. Ideally, local actors (including governments of the affected countries) would play a leading role in defining and determining which capacities are needed to play an effective role, not only in their own organizations and workplans but throughout their own humanitarian system(s).

What needs to be recognized, especially in practice, is that capacity can (and should) be *shared*, including between local/national and international actors. This puts a more collaborative approach – one that reflects commitments to mutual learning and partnership – at the centre of any system. It also means that any capacity-building initiative or process should be implemented collectively as a multi-stakeholder process, rather than according to the 'rules' of a partnership between an international actor and 'its' partner(s).

Adopting a systems approach

'Building the capacity of a single actor, or strengthening a single relationship, is insufficient. Rather the focus needs to be on the system as a whole – the actors, their interrelationships and the incentives that guide them. Improvements in outcomes emerge from increasing the performance of individual actors and the effectiveness of their interactions.'

USAID Learning Lab, December 2017[42]

To transform the humanitarian system – from one dominated by international actors to one that is locally led – we need to take a systems approach. This considers local humanitarian actors not as a group of individual institutions but rather as interconnected actors working together on shared outcomes in complex environments, simultaneously influenced by and responding to changing external contexts. A systems approach means reflecting on relationships, interconnectedness, enabling environments and abilities to advocate for change.

While a traditional capacity-building approach tends to focus on technical skills and capabilities (e.g. for providing WASH or shelter), a systems approach – and LHL – emphasize the importance of leadership and advocacy skills, of the ability to understand and manage networks, to enhance participation and strive for gender justice.[43]

There is a strong call for international actors to be more deliberate in supporting a locally led system, including by examining how to move themselves out of the centre and enabling local actors to come in. Deciding how to strengthen the capacity of local and national actors requires an understanding of the local system, which local and national actors are best placed to have. This comprehensive view must be captured in the programme design, which is ideally driven by – or done in partnership with – local actors. Local actors themselves should collectively identify the existing and desired capabilities and capacities of the system and its components, and commit to agreed plans of action and accountability mechanisms.

Measuring the impact of capacity sharing

As capacity only matters when it is used, it is important to measure performance rather than to assess capacity. In a systems approach, this includes identifying and measuring key attributes of a well-functioning system, such as system durability and adaptability, in addition to measuring performance improvements in individuals, organizations (institutions) and systems. Ongoing learning and feedback loops will enable us to understand and adapt programmes as needed at multiple levels.

What does this mean for Oxfam?

To achieve systemic change, we need to recognize our role in perpetuating the power dynamics and dependencies inherent in a capacity development approach that ultimately reduce the effectiveness and impact of humanitarian response. Oxfam can learn from our own and others' experiences with LHL, but also from resilience building and capacity strengthening more generally, and apply more of a systems focus that draws from and enhances the power of local actors. The table below summarizes the key attributes of a systems-focused approach to capacity sharing for LHL, along with some definitions, characteristics and key questions; it also includes good practice examples (mainly) from Oxfam's work which were shared in the Learning Events or drawn from Oxfam evaluations/reviews and other published materials. The table is followed by a set of recommendations for Oxfam, also arising from the Learning Events, which can be adapted to context.

| ⚙ | Definitions, characteristics and questions to consider | 📍 | Examples of Oxfam/ other good practice |

1. LOCAL ACTORS AT THE CENTRE OF DECISION MAKING AND LEADERSHIP

⚙
- Local actors need to be positioned to play a more prominent role in humanitarian response; they are not always effectively represented in decision-making bodies. Oxfam can play a convening, leadership and/or advocacy role here.
- Oxfam capacity projects and programmes should not focus exclusively on building technical expertise but also on strengthening capabilities and opportunities to lead humanitarian action.
- Does Oxfam continue to hold power by co-managing responses? Does co-management serve as a 'brake' on autonomy and leadership? Does Oxfam intentionally create space for local actors to realize their potential?
- How can Oxfam support networks and consortia, encourage partnerships and collaboration between local actors, and take on a mentoring role with smaller organizations?
- How is Oxfam turning its words into action and being more collaborative? What is the role of mutual learning?

DRC – local humanitarian coordination, consisting of 45 local organizations which are organized according to their intervention areas (e.g. protection, WASH, health, etc.). Local actors in Oicha co-designed an Ebola intervention that was perceived to have contributed to prevention and/or isolation of cases.

Uganda – UNHCR now has funding calls for local actors. The World Food Programme, EU Emergency Trust Fund for Africa (EUTF) and ECHO are now actively seeking partnerships with local actors. Local actors now have a platform at settlement and national levels, and the Comprehensive Refugee Response Framework (CRRF) steering committee has local actor representation.

Iraq – in 2018, only 14 national NGOs received Iraq Humanitarian Fund (IHF) support, while in 2019 17% of total allocated funding was channelled to national NGOs through NGO-led consortia aimed at strengthening the capacity of national actors. National NGOs are on average the largest participant type in clusters and have representation in the IHF Advisory Board and Technical Review committees.

Nepal – district preparedness and response plans have been developed in Humanitarian and DRR programme districts where partners are onboarded, as per their expertise area, under cluster mechanism. Likewise in Kathmandu and Rautahat, district partners are supporting the District Disaster Management Committee as the District Lead Support Agency (on behalf of Oxfam) (DLSA). DLSA leads on behalf of all humanitarian agencies working in the district.

Burkina Faso – there is now a dedicated budget for emergencies in almost all municipalities, although it varies according to available resources.

'Taking the Lead' methodology focuses on enabling local actors to better understand and take into account risks and vulnerabilities in disaster planning, and to participate and influence decision making, prevention and risk management.

2. EMPHASIZE CAPACITY SHARING INSTEAD OF CAPACITY BUILDING

- Oxfam tends to (over)emphasize the transference of technical skills and knowledge, particularly to individual actors and organizations. This leads to a continual focus on substitution, formal skills and comparative advantage, rather than true mutual partnerships and accountabilities contributing to system transformation.

- 'Capacity' is often viewed as the need to understand and be compliant with INGO (Oxfam) ways of working and procedures.

- Assessments should identify areas of complementarity and leverage, rather than gaps, to enable capacity sharing/mutual learning.

- Oxfam should be seeking a more balanced form of collaboration, based on spontaneous and open communication that facilitates two-way learning.

Burkina Faso – end-of-project reviews are carried out with partners for mutual enrichment.

Lebanon – Oxfam has recognized the importance of relationship building with partners as part of any capacity plan.

Senegal – a 'balanced partnership' approach has been adopted and formalized, to offer an organizational development plan to partners, and a team specializing in partnerships was formed.

3. IMPORTANCE OF INSTITUTIONAL STRENGTHENING

- International and local actors are often competing for the same resources, with the same requirements.

- Donor funds for indirect cost recovery are not passed on to local actors.

- There are continued (and well-documented) difficulties for local actors in accessing funds, lack of trust from donors due to their perceptions of risk, and high rates of staff turnover exacerbated by lack of reliable long-term funding, low remuneration and limited benefits.

- A continued focus on perceived divisions between development and humanitarian actors and actions is an added factor in the deprioritization of institutional strengthening by donors and international actors.

Iraq – In FY17-18, 11% of total humanitarian spend was transferred to local actors, as compared to 6% in FY16-17. 20% of this funding goes to overheads/admin/core support.

DRC – learning visits have been organized with coordination platform members that address communications, community approaches, prevention and advocacy techniques, etc.

Uganda – strong focus on institutional strengthening along with enhancing funding opportunities for partners.

Senegal – focus on strengthening partners' autonomy through project development.

4. ADOPTING A SYSTEMS PERSPECTIVE

- Interconnected actors should work together on shared outcomes in complex environments, simultaneously influenced by and responding to changing contexts.

- Local actors understand and live the local systems – and are therefore best placed to decide whether and how to 'build' capacity. They should be supported to collectively identify capabilities, capacities, risks and accountabilities, and develop evaluable action plans to address them.

- Complexity must be recognized, and importance placed on the qualities of adaptability and flexibility – recognizing the influence of changing contexts.

- Government engagement and investment, including in disaster risk reduction (DRR) and preparedness, is critical and continues to be lacking. How is Oxfam supporting governments to play their role?

- Oxfam (and the sector) overwhelmingly focuses on short-term planning, projects and implementation of activities, and prioritizes building individual and organizational capacities rather than those of systems.

- Oxfam also prioritizes measuring capacity inputs and increases in skills and knowledge, rather than assessing the use of these by measuring changes in satisfaction, confidence and performance. Furthermore, Oxfam does not assess or measure from a systems perspective, which would mean not only taking into account the degrees of collaboration, representation, multi-stakeholder engagement, functioning governance and collective risk management, but also changing contexts as well as effectiveness and impact.

Chad – partners developed their own capacity-building plans following a needs analysis carried out by an informal network of local actors.

Burkina Faso – collective (NGO and government) contextual analysis was carried out, followed by development of a local response plan.

Tanzania – local authorities are buying into the concept of disaster preparedness and mitigation, and the reactivation of Disaster Management Committees has improved local coordination, this led to the reactivation of Disaster Management Committees, and the development of district contingency plans that include communities' and local actors' priorities. Oxfam also strengthened information sharing on early warning systems through digital technology that links government institutions to the communities. Piloting adaptable user-friendly technology to increase community resilience has improved local preparedness coordination between actors and the identification and use of coping mechanisms.

Vietnam – the Government of Vietnam established a formal DRR Partnership with various DRR donors and INGOs, taking a leading role in the coordination and implementation of humanitarian actions. Oxfam joined as a member of the partnership.

India, Nepal and Pakistan – Oxfam and local actors in each country jointly self-assessed their capacity for delivering effective and efficient humanitarian and DRR programming, and developed country action plans.

Global – Oxfam began adopting more of a systems focus in assessments and planning, through the development of the FRESH (HUCOCA) analysis, which takes an 'ecosystem' perspective.

5. REINFORCING CONNECTEDNESS, ADAPTIVENESS AND INFLUENCING

- It is important to prioritize elements that strengthen programme quality, accountability, evidence-based advocacy, gender, protection, and financial and administrative management, among others.

- How is Oxfam connecting local actors? How is it helping them to become stronger advocates and leaders (individually and collectively) in humanitarian spaces?

Burkina Faso – an Ad Hoc Committee has been formed, managed by a local NGO, which aims to coordinate local actors to better anticipate and respond to disaster risk and build the capacity of municipalities. The aim is that this will evolve into a more sustainable structure.

Iraq – there is no specific local NGO coordination forum. However, NGOs are members of the NGO Coordination Committee of Iraq – (NCCI) alongside INGOs. NCCI provides support and capacity building for local NGOs. There are 169 NGO members, of which 70 are national NGOs.

Uganda – creation and strengthening of national and regional humanitarian platforms for information sharing, learning and knowledge management, coordination and collaboration, and capacity sharing/partnership building. Phase two of the ELNHA Project is focused on strengthening.

Nepal – humanitarian partners have been trained on advocacy, and now have humanitarian advocacy strategies. Similarly, Oxfam contingency plan has been linked up with partners. Partners have been aligned with national networks like the National Platform for DRR, Disaster Preparedness Network, ALTP and Community Based DRM Platform.

6. INNOVATIVE AND COLLABORATIVE APPROACHES – BEYOND TRAINING AND WORKSHOPS

- Oxfam relies heavily on formal workshops and training (both in-person and virtually) in its capacity programming, despite evidence that other approaches, such as accompaniment, are more effective and longer-lasting.

- Are there other tools, techniques and approaches that Oxfam can use more systematically, that can better enhance the capacities of local actors and systems?

- How can Oxfam help to ensure that donors understand the added benefits and effectiveness of 'non-traditional' capacity approaches?

- What is needed to ensure that humanitarian capacity, capabilities and skills can be effectively tested and operationalized?

Burkina Faso – the Vulnerability and Risk Assessment (VRA) methodology allows local NGOs to train other partners, including in other municipalities, thus allowing for scaling up without Oxfam's involvement.

DRC – learning visits to other locations have been carried out, involving both coordination platform members and Oxfam staff.

Iraq – Oxfam has provided coaching and mentoring to partners, and supported their participation in a Grand Bargain mission to Bangladesh. Oxfam also provided flexible funding for local partners to support institutional capacity strengthening.

Lebanon – accompaniment strategy included seconding partner staff to Oxfam's office, as well as Oxfam staff to a partner's office.

Nepal – disaster and response simulation exercises are carried out periodically. Partners have become eligible to access the Disaster Information Management System, GIS based risk identification and GIS based evacuation route, and Humanitarian Open Space identification.

India, Nepal and Bangladesh – Oxfam and local actors are doing joint multi-country simulation, engaging national strategic and local partners. Two cross-country simulations in Nepal (2019) and Bangladesh (2020) have resulted in joint contingency planning and the exploration of additional areas of collaboration.

Senegal – Oxfam has established coaching/mentoring relationships with partners, emphasizing trust and enabling information exchange.

Uganda – Oxfam has offered secondments and placements for hands-on learning, and exchange visits.

7. DIVERSE AND INCLUSIVE – e.g. including women leaders and women's rights organizations

- Oxfam does not consistently prioritize engagement with WROs and gender-interested organizations (GIOs), despite knowing that they are often among the first to respond locally. As such, Oxfam does not prioritize capacity programming that could enhance humanitarian skills and capabilities, strengthen these organizations/movements and recognize their critical role in the humanitarian system.

- Oxfam could better use its convening power to ensure that WROs/GIOs are part of local actor systems, and specifically target interested WROs/GIOs for capacity programming that strengthens local leadership and reduces inequality.

Iraq – now working with five WROs on humanitarian capacity development.

Burkina Faso – during the VRA, space is created for women to share their leadership experiences.

8. MAXIMIZING USE OF APPROPRIATE TECHNOLOGY

- There are few examples of Oxfam supporting and/or using appropriate technology as part of its capacity programming. Given the importance and potential cascading benefits of appropriate technology, this should be an area of future consideration – including assessing for appropriate technology solutions and interest, as well as supporting their uptake and use.

Indonesia – digital platform developed with equal access to ensure knowledge transfer.

Recommendations for sharing (not building) capacity

1. Provide stable resources to local organizations and movements:

- Make extra effort to ensure partners can access resources more easily or rapidly.

- Identify and support ways to help end financial dependence, including supporting local actors to apply directly for funds.

- Prioritize women's rights organizations and movements as humanitarian actors.

2. Ensure that capacity-strengthening approaches are driven by local actors. Don't just build technical capacities, but also those that support strong organizations and systems:

- Strengthen organizational capacity in fundraising, networking and advocacy.

- Support NGOs to be better able to meet donor requirements.

- Engage in participatory processes with local actors that help reinforce ownership of the programme/response.

3. Systematically include innovative and collaborative tools and techniques in capacity programming. Avoid relying on formal workshops and training:

- Adopt a coaching model for financial management, proposal writing and soft skills (e.g. bargaining power, decision making).

- When designing capacity interventions, recognize that actors need to 'learn by doing'.

4. Show stronger support for collaboration, networking, and collective leadership and decision making by local actors:

- Emphasize the importance of collaboration over competition.

- Maximize Oxfam's role as a 'convener' to bring actors together, rather than putting Oxfam at the centre.

- Put in place systems or methodologies that ensure all stakeholders are heard in decision making.

- Explore strategies for increasing engagement of local governments.

5. Play a stronger influencing role with donors and within the sector to increase local actors' stability and visibility:

- Through advocacy backed by evidence, make the case internally and with donors for respecting Charter for Change commitments, and give visibility to local actors in communications and donor reporting.

- Encourage international actors, donors and governments to prioritize local actors and have confidence in them.

- Advocate for more stable/strategic resource allocation to local actors.

- Advocate for donors to relax policies on local partner compliance.

6. Prioritize MEAL approaches that reflect a systems perspective and enhance effectiveness and impact:

- Regularly monitor and evaluate progress and performance, even in the face of complexity. Measure how effectively capacity was utilized – i.e. performance – and not only whether/ how capacity was 'built'.

- Develop and implement common learning frameworks and contribute to a collective understanding of how to localize humanitarian aid.

5. CLOSING THE FUNDING GAP TO ENABLE LHL

Despite international commitments to channel 25% of funding as directly as possible to local actors by 2020 (see Grand Bargain and Charter for Change), in practice the formal humanitarian system is simply not delivering: in 2018, direct funding to local and national humanitarian actors was estimated to have been just 3.1%.[44] Progress since the signing of global commitments on localization has been too slow and not sufficiently transformative, and there is still a long way to go to adequately financially resource local humanitarian action.

The funding factor is not just about quantity; the importance of *quality* funding cannot be over-emphasized. Obstacles to LHL cited repeatedly by local actors and by INGO practitioners – including Oxfam and partners – include too little investment in the core/overhead costs of local and national actors, the absence of multi-year and long-term funding, and local actors' lack of capacities to be competitive (and compliant) in accessing funding.

Donors perceptions regarding financial risk present another major obstacle to LHL. Institutional and statutory donors typically have an overwhelming focus on risk: risk of fraud, financial mismanagement, corruption and deviation; risk of programmes not being value for money; and other legal and anti-terror risks. All of this is at odds with an agenda that is aiming to share power, allow local and national organizations to access more financial resources for their humanitarian efforts, and ultimately to ensure better-quality, more timely and relevant aid.

Against this aid funding background, Oxfam and partners are committed to continuing to exchange and seek solutions together. During the LHL Learning Events in February 2019, partners provided specific recommendations for Oxfam to improve on its organizational and partnering practices to meet Charter for Change and Grand Bargain commitments. These included sharing its overhead costs, supporting long-term funding for preparedness, and doing more to support partners to access funding directly.

It is worth noting that the Learning Events revealed a strong sense of solidarity on this issue, an urge to work together to adequately finance local humanitarian action, and a shared perception that donors are a critical obstacle in the drive towards LHL. The advocacy case (i.e. towards donors) to adequately finance local humanitarian work is pertinent across the Oxfam confederation and the entire sector. INGO senior leadership needs to do more to champion the power of collective local humanitarian action and put it ahead of their organizations' brands. Only then will new aid power models emerge and be more accessible and equitable to local and national organizations at the frontline of humanitarian crises.

IN PRACTICE: DIRECT FUNDING FROM THE GATES FOUNDATION IN CENTRAL AMERICA[45]

For over 10 years, Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation supported Oxfam's work in emergency response and DRR programmes, including 'capacity strengthening' of local, national and regional actors in Central America. This included support to the Regional Agreement on Risk Management (Concertación Regional de Gestión de Riesgos) (CRGR), a four-country regional organization aimed at increasing the capacity of vulnerable communities to prepare for and respond to disasters.

Illustrating its commitment to LHL, the Foundation began funding CRGR directly in 2012. Starting with a $1.6m grant, followed by a $2.5m grant for the second phase and a $2.3m grant for the third phase, all focusing on strengthening disaster management networks at local, national and regional levels, and consolidating the capacity of CRGR to deliver high-quality humanitarian responses and increased resilience in Central America.

Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation has also funded national organizations in Central America directly, including for emergency responses.

Recommendations on closing the funding gap to enable LHL

Given that financial power is a fundamental player in humanitarian politics, it is necessary to join forces to challenge existing funding systems, aid flows and ways of working.

For donors:

- Increase quality and quantity of direct funding for local/national organizations, including flexible, multi-year funding.

- Better understand all risks, not just financial and compliance risks. Balance these with other risks faced by local/national organizations, including risk-taking with other agencies.

- Push grantees to embrace LHL and equitable partnering practices in the processes of budgeting, monitoring and reporting. Simplify and harmonize reporting and compliance requirements.

- Remove unnecessary barriers in funding processes (e.g. allow shorter proposals, and allow them to be submitted in local languages).

For Oxfam:

- Put concerted effort into supporting (enabling) partners to access funds directly from donors.

- Support long-term funding: this includes organizational and programme funding, allowing for quality programming along the preparedness, response and development continuum, and enabling retention of strong and experienced staff.

- Adopt an overheads policy consistent with our commitments on LHL.

- Conduct regular audits of LHL practices and policies.

6. EMERGING AREA FOR OXFAM: TAKING A FEMINIST APPROACH TO LHL

The expansion and recognition of women's leadership in local humanitarian spaces is crucial to improving the effectiveness of humanitarian efforts. Women and girls experience distinct vulnerabilities in emergencies, but often their leadership, knowledge, skills and agency are not recognized or appreciated, and their gender-specific needs are not adequately addressed. It is essential that women have an active and decisive role in humanitarian response; they are often first responders and have a fundamental right to contribute to the decisions that affect their lives. To that end, a **feminist approach to LHL** is needed to transform the humanitarian system into one that is more gender equal and promotes women's rights.[46]

Such an approach:

- **Challenges and seeks to change patriarchal norms** that have consistently marginalized women and women's rights organizations (WROs)/gender-interested organizations (GIOs), and their issues, in the humanitarian system.

- **Centres on women and WROs/GIOs**, advocating for their inclusion and recognizing their leadership and expertise.

- **Promotes an intersectional analysis**, recognizing the multiple forms of discrimination that all women face based on identity factors that intersect with gender, such as race, class, sexuality, age and disability.

- **Bridges the humanitarian-development-peace nexus**, such that WROs'/GIOs' long-term and strategic gender justice focus is better integrated into the humanitarian model.

As discussed above, transformation towards LHL in the global humanitarian system requires a radical shift in our assumptions, how we think and how we act – a true change in mindset and organizational culture. A feminist approach to LHL helps to achieve that goal of rectifying power inequities, with its focus on dismantling harmful structures and decentralizing the false hierarchy which values global over national and local. The table below summarizes the barriers to women and WROs'/GIOs' leadership, as well as the opportunities and benefits created by women's leadership in the sector.

Barriers to women's leadership	Opportunities/benefits created by women's leadership
Presence of harmful gender norms, such as: - Bearing the burden of unpaid care and domestic responsibilities. - Being perceived as less capable because of one's sex. - Facing gender-based violence and sexual harassment. **Disconnect from humanitarian system:** - Assumption that WROs/GIOs do not have the capacity or technical expertise to intervene in humanitarian emergencies. - Seeing the main working areas of WROs/GIOs as 'soft' issues and not a priority in humanitarian response. **Funding gap:** - WROs/GIOs excluded from funding opportunities. - Lack of chances for partnership for WROs/GIOs.	**Fosters more effective humanitarian action:** - WROs/GIOs can bring in a greater understanding of women and girls' gender-specific needs. - Women leaders often act as first responders in their communities and in meeting women's needs. **Brings in gender-transformative humanitarian action, meaning work that is:** - Intersectional; - Supports gender equality work; - Advocates for women's rights; - Builds movements for change. **Bridges the humanitarian-development-peace nexus, which involves:** - Holistic, long-term approaches that go beyond immediate humanitarian response. - Lays the ground for sustainable peace and recovery efforts.

LHL's prioritization of local and national partners aligns with feminist models that highly value contextual knowledge that relies on inclusion of the most marginalized groups. As one of the aims of LHL is to foster equitable partnerships, a feminist approach requires us to carefully consider which partners are we prioritizing, and whether women and WROS/GIOs are part of that discussion. In addition, valuing local capacities also requires asking which capacities are being valued (see section 4), and whether they include areas that WROs/GIOs often work in. These include gender justice, protection and livelihood activities – i.e. areas that go beyond the focus on technical skills demanded by a traditional capacity-building approach.

Recommendations for taking a feminist approach to LHL

Ensure equitable partnership and capacity sharing:

- Prioritize engagement with WROs and GIOs, and appreciate their expertise.

- Ensure that WROs/GIOs are included in strategic partnerships (i.e. non-project-based partnerships that focus on strengthening and promoting the local organization and moving toward partner-led humanitarian interventions).

- Invest in building the capacity of women leaders and WROs/GIOs to help them overcome any barriers they face owing to their sociocultural context.

Close the funding gap for WROs/GIOs:

- Prioritize more flexible and long-term funding approaches that provide overhead funding or indirect costs to WROs/GIOs, to support their growth and sustainability.

- Remove unnecessary barriers in funding processes (e.g. allow shorter proposals, and allow them to be submitted in local languages).

- Develop quotas and other mechanisms to increase funding to WROs/GIOs.

- Disaggregate funding streams to determine the quantity of funds reaching WROs/GIOs.

- Directly fund national and local WROs/GIOs and networks of such organizations, and prioritize investments that strengthen WROs/GIOs as institutional actors as opposed to supporting projects that involve them.

- Commit to funding programmes that will increase women's leadership in the humanitarian sector and projects that include dedicated activities aimed at promoting women's leadership more broadly.

Address power imbalances:

- Champion the humanitarian work of WROs/GIOs in advocacy spaces, and ensure their meaningful participation in these spaces.

- As a convener/broker/supporter, Oxfam should ensure an enabling environment that protects the safety and rights of women and WROs/GIOs, and help them navigate the global humanitarian arena.

7. EMERGING AREA FOR OXFAM: LHL IN CONFLICT AND FRAGILE CONTEXTS

The majority of humanitarian crises are increasingly taking place in contexts of acute conflict and protracted crisis, where the operating space is complex and fraught with difficult choices. In such contexts, LHL is a controversial issue, particularly with regard to perceptions of adherence to international quality standards and humanitarian principles that underpin all humanitarian action. There are often assumptions that locally led responses are not as impartial as internationally led responses.[47]

This is despite the fact that local actors often play a vital role in delivering humanitarian aid in contexts where INGOs have poor access – providing assistance across sectarian and political divides by relying on their knowledge of the local context and employing ethnically diverse staff. This comes at significant risk to these local actors – something which is not always recognized or addressed by the wider humanitarian community.[48] This section summarizes some of the debates between Oxfam and partners around these issues and proposes some solutions for enhancing LHL in conflict and fragile contexts, while recognizing that this is an area requiring further research.

Risks need to be addressed and minimized for local actors

All humanitarian actors face risks in conflict settings. INGOs tend to work at the local level – despite the presence, knowledge and experience of local actors – in places where security risks are lower and to work with local actors and pass on risks *only* when security limits their own access. Given the power imbalances in the humanitarian sector, local actors may feel they have to accept these risks if they want to remain in their core business.

The risks faced by local actors should be addressed as a priority by local and international actors, and in a collaborative way. This includes sharing responsibility for developing and implementing risk assessment and management strategies, and investing in necessary protection measures, while avoiding ad hoc acceptance of high levels of risk. It should also be recognized that the 'outsider' status of regional and international actors can sometimes allow them to play a bridging or convening role in emergency contexts, and they should more fully embrace this role.[49]

Locally led responses do not necessarily compromise humanitarian principles

Humanitarian principles are centred on impartial provision of assistance based on needs.[50] There is no evidence that local actors and locally led humanitarian responses follow these principles less than international actors. Partnering with multiple groups and organizations from various geographic areas, ethnicities, religions and political perspectives can help ensure that assistance is impartial in conflict settings.[51] In the Democratic Republic of Congo, the reflections of various humanitarian organizations highlighted the need for a more inclusive humanitarian system and a collective sense of responsibility for addressing humanitarian needs.[52]

Peer and community accountability could mitigate the risk of aid diversion

The increasing focus (especially by donors) on aid diversion and risk compliance contradicts the principles and practices of equitable partnership, and stands in the way of promoting LHL.[53] Therefore, it may be interesting to explore the possibility of mitigating risk through peer and community accountability mechanisms rather than the 'compliance-only' approach that seems to be favoured by donors and international actors, among others. This approach would also strengthen the legitimacy of local and national organizations, which might otherwise fear exposure to this risk.

Shrinking civic space in conflict settings threatens LHL

Civil society is restricted in almost every country where humanitarian aid agencies work, making it increasingly difficult for them to operate. A number of countries have enacted laws that specifically target and restrict development and humanitarian funders and actors.[54] Advancing LHL relies on the existence of a protected and active civil society; in an ideal world, a locally led humanitarian system should be diverse and inclusive of civil society. Again, in some cases, international humanitarian actors' relative outsider/neutral status gives them an opportunity to support local and national actors to challenge restrictions around civic space.[55]

Recommendations for promoting LHL in conflict and fragile contexts

Recent discussions[56] among practitioners have highlighted the need for:

- **Decentralized decision making, including on expenditure**. Adaptation of models means trusting local actor networks and international staff to make quick decisions. Good context analysis is key in deciding on the appropriate approach.

- **Connecting and supporting coordination between local actors, using diverse, self-defined approaches to collaboration**. This is instrumental in acting at greater scale and supporting civic space, which is often a casualty of internal conflict.

- **Flexible partnerships.** In order to manage risks, it is essential that partnerships and their response plans can be readily adapted to the changing situation.

8. EMERGING AREA FOR OXFAM: LHL AND RESILIENCE BUILDING

As shocks, stress and uncertainty increase due to climate change, conflict and other factors, local empowerment and capacity are central to a more effective response to growing needs and for building resilient societies. Among the various reasons why the need for LHL has been widely agreed by humanitarian actors is that it 'helps ensure emergency preparedness, response and recovery are locally relevant, ongoing and embedded within local community life'.[57] As such, Oxfam's Resilience Framework and its commitment to LHL are complementary and mutually reinforcing.

Oxfam defines resilience as the 'ability of women and men to realize their rights and improve their wellbeing despite shocks, stresses and uncertainty'.[58] It is about enhancing the capacity to proactively and positively manage change (uncertainty, risk, volatility, turbulence etc.) in ways that contribute to 'a just world without poverty'. For resilience to be successful, national and local actors should own and lead the process.

More specifically, the resilience approach is important for LHL (and vice versa) because:

- Resilience outcomes are focused on **capacity:** strengthening local actors in preparing and delivering aid ('absorptive capacity'); understanding risk and vulnerabilities, proactively adopting more balanced partnerships, integrating communities and local authorities, focusing on recovery ('adaptive capacity'); and transforming the system to make it more balanced, inclusive and effective ('transformative capacity').

- Like LHL, the resilience approach **challenges the system** to build a more efficient, effective, gender-just and resilient model, to create fundamental, long-term, sustainable changes in the architecture of aid (New Ways of Working, Agenda for Humanity, Grand Bargain) and to rebalance the relationships and roles between different actors.

- **Women's leadership and empowerment** are central to resilience building and LHL.

- Local leadership is an integral part of all of the **resilience pathways**[59] as defined by Oxfam, including:

  - 'Working collaboratively with stakeholder groups to understand the issues and co-create solutions.'

  - 'Building an understanding of the context, including local, national and global drivers of risk, fragility and vulnerability.'

  - 'Designing for the long term through a sequenced and integrated combination of strategies and approaches.'

  - 'Iterative learning and ongoing adaptive management so that our interventions can adjust in a timely and appropriate way.'

Capacity, empowerment, systems change, collaborative and adaptive approaches are all dots that connect resilience thinking and LHL. As expressed in the Oxfam Resilience Framework: 'We face ever greater challenges in the future because of climate change and intractable conflicts. If we were to create a global humanitarian system today, we believe it would focus on national government leadership, supported and held accountable by civil society, and have resilient communities at its core, with international actors standing by to assist whenever necessary.'[60]

9. CONCLUSION

Local humanitarian leadership relates to a transformed humanitarian system that is equitable, diverse, relevant and allows for those at the centre of humanitarian crises to lead in humanitarian response work. LHL approaches ensure that those actors who are most affected by sudden or chronic humanitarian crisis – be they local or national actors, community groups or individuals who are first responders – are supported to lead on humanitarian action.

Accelerating LHL requires additional collaborative efforts to transform existing structures and incentives, and create a unique paradigm shift of power: vertically, so that local and national actors (instead of international actors) can lead in humanitarian responses; and horizontally, so the diversity of various actors can be appreciated and their strengths maximized through co-creation.

As *The Power of Local Action* explored, LHL is directly connected with various aspects of the humanitarian ecosystem such as: power dynamics (letting go, sharing power); principled, effective and equitable partnering; strengthening and sharing capacities for local action; appropriate funding (in terms of quality and quantity) for local humanitarian action; feminist approaches; supporting local leadership in conflict and fragile contexts; and recognizing how LHL and resilience building mutually reinforce each other. Exploring those themes through a reflective practitioner approach allows us to challenge the assumptions and existing limitations within the humanitarian system: these limitations include our own practices, models, mindsets and behaviours. Furthermore, the learning compiled in this document prompts us to scale up innovative and 'not as usual' approaches, which we now know are essential for improved outcomes.

Today LHL is central to Oxfam's humanitarian programming. The insight, experience and knowledge shared throughout the LHL Learning Exchanges, which are captured and reflected upon in this document, made a significant contribution to Oxfam's new Humanitarian Dossier – *Top Tips for Partnerships and Local Humanitarian Leadership (LHL) in Oxfam Humanitarian Programming* guide (publication forthcoming). These are about **what** needs to happen in Oxfam's humanitarian programmes and partnerships to really enable LHL.

However, much of the transformational change we aspire to is also about **how** we can collaborate and work differently – internally and externally – to make LHL a reality. The launch in February 2020 of a multi-stakeholder collaborative approach across the Oxfam confederation aimed at accelerating change and meeting commitments on LHL is an innovative experiment. It proposes to explore LHL through four initial building blocks for change: collaboration, LHL Key Performance Indicators, learning, and innovative resourcing. The new LHL collaborative approach is launched with the collective awareness that in times of humanitarian change, challenge and uncertainty the power of diverse, inclusive and equitable collaborative action can drive transformation. In the spirit of learning, accountability, critical enquiry, harnessing diverse resources and brokering collaboration for local action, the new LHL coordination approach is also in its essence guided by *The Power of Local Action* journey. As humanitarian actors at every level and in every country addresses the immediate and long-term implications of the coronavirus outbreak, the need for local humanitarian action and leadership is more evident – and more urgent – than ever.

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