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Humanitarian Policy Group

Holding the keys: humanitarian access and local organisations

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Key messages

- Simply being 'local' does not automatically translate into better humanitarian access in conflict, though having good contextual knowledge can give an organisation an added advantage.

- Personal networks help in establishing the necessary trust and acceptance to negotiate access, but such acceptance is not limitless. To be sustained, it must be earned through effective, reliable, timely and relevant humanitarian assistance that demonstrates tangible benefits.

- Flexibility, agility and local connectedness allow local organisations to identify windows of opportunity where access might be possible.

- Local organisations tend to be small and agile, but lack predictable funding. Conversely, international organisations are typically able to respond at scale, yet lack proximity to people in need. Rather than expecting local organisations to become like international ones and vice-versa, a complementary approach taking full advantage of the strengths of each should be the way forward.

Photo: A woman walking near the frontline in Nikishina, Ukraine, 2015. ©European Commission DG ECHO.

Access to people affected by conflict is essential if humanitarian agencies are to provide assistance and protection.[1] Yet access is often curtailed precisely where aid is most needed. Access challenges for humanitarian organisations are neither new nor fundamentally different today than they were in the past. During the Cold War, norms of state sovereignty meant that aid agencies were mostly confined to helping people once they had left their country of origin.[2] However, since the end of the Cold War humanitarian agencies' presence in conflict contexts has increased substantially in line with the aid sector's

1 This HPG Policy Brief presents the key findings of a two-year research project on local organisations and access in Syria and Ukraine.

2 F. Terry, *Condemned to Repeat? The Paradox of Humanitarian Action* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2002).

growing funding and geographical reach, and the organisational need to maintain visibility in high-profile emergencies.[3] This expanded reach has also meant venturing into areas with significant levels of insecurity, including deliberate attacks against aid workers. As a result, aid agencies have developed management strategies and protocols to mitigate risks and allow them to maintain some degree of presence even in non-permissive environments, including various forms of remote management.[4]

Increasingly, international organisations have been looking to collaborate with local partners to gain access to populations in need, if not directly then by proxy. However, despite the critical role played by local organisations, either as enablers of access for international agencies or as responders in their own right, much of the debate and research on access in recent years has focused on the 'formal' system (the UN, the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), international NGOs). There is limited research on whether and how other, 'non-traditional' or local actors (diaspora groups, businesses financing relief operations, local activists, grassroots movements, faith-based groups, philanthropists, the private sector) obtain access in order to conduct relief and protection operations. This HPG Policy Brief argues that the formal humanitarian system should try much harder to harness the expertise of local organisations in reaching those most in need, and help them become effective aid providers in their own right, and not merely enablers of access for international organisations.

Local humanitarian response

The role of local organisations and communities in responding to the effects of armed conflict or the aftermath of natural hazards is as old as humanitarian action itself.[5] Communities affected by conflict often have no other choice than to protect themselves in the absence of any outside help. In the Nuba Mountains in Sudan, for instance, the locally led response has largely operated without any outside support. Lack of access by UN agencies and international aid groups has meant that local communities have had to rely on self-protection measures taught by civilian protection volunteers.[6] In Kachin State in Myanmar, local organisations have succeeded in delivering aid and providing protection to displaced populations despite the challenging political and security environment.[7]

If local humanitarian action has a long history, it also has a long history of being undervalued by the formal humanitarian system. Rather than engaging with local organisations on an equal footing, the international system has mostly preferred to limit itself to contractual relationships and subcontracting. There are signs that this is changing, and there is broad recognition that partnerships between international and local organisations must be based, not only on a fairer distribution of financial resources, but also equality around the decision-making table. Initiatives such as the Grand Bargain agreed at the World Humanitarian Summit in 2016 and the so-called 'localisation' agenda are indications of a long-overdue change.

Access: a function of flexibility, agility and local knowledge

International and local organisations face similar access challenges, related to geography, climate and terrain, poor infrastructure, bureaucratic hurdles such as cumbersome visa or accreditation procedures or import regulations, counter-terrorism legislation and violence and insecurity. However, while the challenges may be similar, the way local organisations adapt to them is not. Being embedded within a community enables local organisations to identify and react to the needs of affected people, and allows them to exploit small windows of opportunity where access might be possible. Knowledge of and familiarity with armed groups allows local organisations to better understand their motivations and goals. In Syria, for instance, organisations change the language they use

3   S. Collinson and M. Duffield, *Paradoxes of Presence: Risk Management and Aid Culture in Challenging Environments*, HPG Commissioned Report (London: ODI, 2013).

4   There are various degrees of remote management and different definitions of the concept. It can range from sub-contracting a local organisation to deliver assistance while all the decision-making remains in the hands of the international agencies to a less extreme form where some decision-making is shared though the international organisation remains physically distant.

5   For more details, see reports produced as part of HPG's project on the 'Global History of Modern Humanitarian Action'.

6   J. Corbett, *Protection in Sudan's Nuba Mountains: Local Achievements, International Failures*, Local to Global Protection Project (L2GP), 2012.

7   C. Jaquet and C. O'Loughlin, 'Redefining Humanitarian Space: The Kachin IDP Crisis in Myanmar', *Humanitarian Exchange*, 55, 2012.

(revolutionary or religious) depending on the ideology of the armed group, or use local religious authorities as intermediaries to negotiate access.

Networks play a critical role in local organisations' ability to negotiate access. Personal ties and ties of kinship, tribe, ethnicity, politics and religion are critical in endowing local organisations with the necessary trust to engage in access negotiations, though they are by no means a guarantee of success. Local organisations also have to prove their worth by providing timely, effective and adequate assistance. Nor do these networks necessarily extend to all regions of a country, and as a result a local organisation's reach is likely to be limited and circumscribed. For many local organisations, their character and credibility in many ways derive from their proximity and capacity for a rapid, nimble and flexible response. In contrast, while international aid agencies are capable of working on a larger scale, they also tend to have more complex administrative structures and reporting requirements that slow down their response, and their distance from affected communities – physical, cultural or linguistic – can make it difficult to identify needs quickly and precisely.

Local organisations in Ukraine and Syria interviewed for this research described how they initially relied heavily on private donations and volunteers. They had no access to institutional funding (UN agencies, INGOs, bilateral donors), in part because they were unknown and as such had no track record of effective delivery or administrative history. Currently, funding from the formal system cascades down from a donor to a UN agency or INGO, before passing, usually via a subcontract, to a local partner. Direct, unmediated funding to local organisations still accounts for only a tiny fraction of overall humanitarian funding.[8]

In order to access institutional funding (if not directly, then at least through UN agencies or INGOs), local organisations face a difficult choice: whether to change their structure in response to donor requirements (notably to do with reporting mechanisms) and risk losing the characteristics – small, agile, nimble – that contributed to their effectiveness, or see their volunteers move on, often to international organisations and their funding dwindle, potentially to the point that they cease to exist altogether. This is not an easy choice: interviews for this study revealed a strong sense among local organisations that, with increased formalisation and institutionalisation, they were not only changing their structure, but were also losing their very identity. In Syria, some organisations opted to form coalitions, seeking strength in numbers and enabling their voice to be heard more forcefully in international fora. It is clear that local organisations currently do not have many options if they want to ensure more sustained funding, and as such adapting to the formal system seems like the most feasible route to long-term survival.

Policy implications

There is an expectation within the formal humanitarian system that those outside it should change to fit that system's requirements, norms and practices. There is no similar expectation on international organisations. In any case, it is very unlikely that the large organisations that make up the bulk of the international humanitarian system really can shed weight and become more agile and flexible given their current structure, which makes change very difficult and very slow.[9] What is needed is a recognition that diversity provides humanitarian organisations with options. Rather than crowding out local actors or relegating them to a position as mere sub-contractors as long as they do not look and act like an international agency, there should be a complementary approach identifying those that are best placed to respond and support them.

Such a collaborative and complementary approach would entail a mapping of local aid actors, including organisations that do not focus exclusively on providing humanitarian assistance, in order to understand where they have a presence, how they work and what international agencies can usefully do to support their efforts to provide assistance and protection. Capacity-building is key, but it must be based on a broader understanding of capacity that goes beyond the technical and bureaucratic aspects of aid work, such as reporting and fundraising, and which challenges the assumption that the only capacity that needs building is within local actors; staffing profiles, funding process and policies within international agencies also need to change. For example, organisations with

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8   Globally, data from the Financial Tracking Service (FTS) shows that 0.5% of total humanitarian funding went to local and national NGOs in 2015.

9   C. Bennett et al., *Time to Let Go: Remaking Humanitarian Action for the Modern Era* (London: ODI, 2015).

dedicated partnership managers tend to be better equipped to forge and maintain relationships with local organisations. Introducing a mentoring programme, whereby staff from international agencies are seconded to local organisations and vice-versa, could be a useful way to foster a complementary approach. For donors, supporting local actors means following up on the commitments made as part of the Grand Bargain in a meaningful way, as well as ensuring that counter-terrorism measures do not negatively impact their work. The localisation agenda promises to maintain a focus on local actors, though it will be critical to define precisely what local means, and to translate the rhetorical commitment to localisation into tangible results.

Conclusion

Belligerents hold the upper hand in deciding, indeed dictating, what rules apply to humanitarian access, the consequences of which will have similar effects on organisations regardless of their provenance. The difference lies in how local organisations address these challenges, and their flexibility and proximity to people in need. At the same time, some of the strategies adopted by local actors (using local knowledge, adapting language to suit the authorities controlling access, hiring staff with the right skills and expertise) are a reminder to the international humanitarian sector of its own good practice – good practice that has long been identified by international organisations and regularly highlighted in research, evaluations and lessons learned, but not systematically used.

The formal system as it stands today cannot respond adequately to ever-mounting needs. Equally, local organisations on their own will not automatically be able to respond at scale either. What is needed is a complementary approach that identifies those organisations that are best placed to act in a particular crisis – whether local or international – and the appropriate model of partnership to facilitate assistance to people in need. This will rarely be an easy discussion as organisations might have to admit that they are not the best equipped, and as a result should withdraw and instead support those with a comparative advantage. It is to be hoped that humanitarian organisations – international and local – will have the courage and the wisdom to do this.