



Clair Fajardo, President of the Soler Riverside Valley Neighborhood Association Inc., is a COM Community Partner. When the lockdowns in Metro Manila started, Clair, along with other community leaders, took the lead in providing support to vulnerable and poor communities in ensuring food security, and delivery of water, sanitation, and hygiene (WASH) services in Binondo, Manila. (Photo: Vina Salazar/Oxfam.)

## LOCAL HUMANITARIAN LEADERSHIP

### The View from Local Actors

## **Local Humanitarian Leadership: The View from Local Actors**

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## LIST OF ACRONYMS

AKKMA	Aksyon sa Kahandaan sa Kalamidad at Klima
AMDF	Al-Mujadilah Development Foundation
ASDSW	A Single Drop of Safe Water
C4C	Charter for Change
CDP	Center for Disaster Preparedness
CODE-NGO	Caucus of Development NGO Networks
CDRN	Citizens' Disaster Response Network
COM	Community Organizing Multiversity
CSO	Civil Society Organization
DEPP	Disaster and Emergencies Preparedness Program
DFAT	Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade
DRR	Disaster Risk Reduction
DRRNetPhils	Disaster Risk Reduction Network Philippines
ELHNA	Empowering Local and National Humanitarian Actors
FEP	Financial Enablers Project
FBO	Faith-Based Organization
GIDA	Geographically Isolated and Disadvantaged Areas
HCT	Humanitarian Country Team
HLA	Humanitarian Logistics Association
HRC	Humanitarian Response Consortium
HRO	Human Rights Organization
IASC	Inter-Agency Standing Committee
IDEALS	Initiatives for Dialogue and Empowerment through Alternative Legal Services
IDPs	Internally Displaced Persons
IFRC	International Federation of Red Cross
INGO	International Non-Government Organization
KABALIKAT	Kabalikat sa Pagpapaunlad ng BASECO
LGU	Local Government Unit
LHL	Local Humanitarian Leadership
MEAL	Monitoring, Evaluation, Accountability and Learning
NGO	Non-Government Organization
PDRRN	People's Disaster Risk Reduction Network
PINGON	Philippine International NGO Network
PO	People's Organization
PHILSSA	Partnership of Philippine Support Service Agencies
PPERR	Philippine Partnership for Emergency Response and Resilience
QRF	Quick Response Fund
SAFER	Shared Aid Fund for Emergency Response
SIKAT	Sentro para sa Ikauunlad ng Alternatibong Teknolohiya
SPM	Strategic Partnership Model
UPA	Urban Poor Associates
UN	United Nations
UNOCHA	United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs
UnYPhil	United Youth of the Philippines-Women
WHS	World Humanitarian Summit
WRO	Women's Rights Organization

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The global call for localization and locally led response acknowledges the reality that the humanitarian system is currently organized around international actors. Inequalities in decision-making, access to resources and coordination have led to practical and strategic issues to the detriment of both the disaster-affected populations and humanitarian action itself. More than the limited access to direct funding, the core issue is the power imbalance between local and international actors.

Localization is described 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” (Oxfam Pilipinas, 2020). According to Oxfam’s strategy, local humanitarian leadership has been described 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” (Kergoat, et al., 2020). Despite international agreements and commitments, the challenge lingers as resources for local humanitarian actors remain inadequate and the power imbalance persists.

National and local networks of humanitarian, faith-based, and developmental organizations and private sector foundations have been conducting and leading small- and large-scale disaster responses in the Philippines for decades, definitely pre-dating the Grand Bargain. However, the discourse and struggle for localization have grown in recent years due to the prominence and dominance of international humanitarian actors, especially during large-scale emergencies. Local humanitarian actors and networks, along with supportive international NGOs, have initiated several formations, interventions, and advocacies towards localization. But they are more of an exception, as the humanitarian system continues to be centralized around international agencies.

Oxfam is one of several international organizations that have signed up to the Grand Bargain, Charter for Change and other agreements that push for localization. Oxfam in the Philippines is one of the country programs that has embraced the local humanitarian leadership approach holistically.

This study synthesizes the experience, practice and learning of Oxfam in the Philippines’ Local Humanitarian Leadership (LHL) approach by analyzing the power relationship between Oxfam in the Philippines and its local partners. The study first unpacks the meaning of the term “Local Humanitarian Leadership,” based on the perspectives of local partners, and then assesses lessons of the localization of Oxfam in the Philippines, primarily through its strategic partnership model.

The perspective of local actors revealed that:

- The power of local actors emanates from their capacity to serve as the voice of affected communities that is brought about by their closeness to, and the trust bestowed on them by, the affected community.
- Local organizations rooted in communities decide on and perform their humanitarian role from the context, mandate, and ambitions of their development identity.
- Local humanitarian leadership for local actors does not necessarily relate to hierarchies or to the current humanitarian structure, but to their ability to influence critical decisions based on their own empowerment strategies with affected communities.

From these realizations, the LHL approach of Oxfam in the Philippines pointed to the following:

- A holistic strategic partnership model – beyond project-based localization initiatives – is key to enabling localization.
- Recognizing and capitalizing on the strategic development role and capacity of local actors allows humanitarian aid and interactions to contribute to addressing the underlying causes of vulnerabilities of affected communities.
- Joint decision-making ensures that local humanitarian actors are able to influence the humanitarian response and secure the critical commitments from Oxfam in the Philippines necessary to be able to respond effectively and to manage expectations from affected communities.
- Localization involves continuously challenging the narratives that disempower (e.g., local actors have limited humanitarian capacity; are too numerous and diverse to coordinate; once affected, cannot respond; responses need to be external, centralized, expert and large-scale, etc.) and incentivizing enabling factors (e.g., inclusive funding models, strategic partnerships, capacity sharing, etc.) that empower local humanitarian actors.

Ultimately, changing the humanitarian system means convincing donors and international actors to cede more power to locals. This will help re-define the humanitarian architecture. The humanitarian system should enable more diverse, devolved, and decentralized models that emphasize the contributions of local actors in addressing the root causes of vulnerabilities and in generating robust systems and practices for delivering essential and life-saving aid.

Moving forward, there is a need to:

- Recognize that the humanitarian system is embedded in local development systems. Such local development systems are anchored on pre-existing social capital that should be enabled to function even during disasters. Integral to this is the downward accountability not only towards local responders but more so towards affected communities.
- Enable the power of local actors through strategic partnerships. Shift the focus to the quality of humanitarian interaction between affected populations and responding local actors. This opens new approaches in conducting humanitarian response that would go beyond the distribution of goods and services.
- Redefine success to be more reflective of localization reforms and the development-humanitarian nexus. Indicators should include the recovery of social capital of affected communities, the connectedness of humanitarian action to community development, the quality of humanitarian interactions between responders and the community, the quality of relationships between local responders and funders, the visibility of local humanitarian actors, effective incentives for localization and local humanitarian leadership, etc.
- Shift to inclusive and transformative funding that actualizes local humanitarian leadership and make donors and funders accountable for instituting and measuring the changes in policies and practices that would enable such a shift.

## BACKGROUND

### A. The Humanitarian System in Crisis

The “global humanitarian system provides inadequate levels of aid that is often inappropriate, arrives too late, and is provided without transparency or accountability to affected people” (Gingerich & Cohen, 2015).

The underlying issue in the humanitarian system is the power imbalance brought about by inequalities in access to decision-making, resources, and coordination. The humanitarian system is organized largely around international actors.<sup>1</sup> Given such a situation, key to the call for localization is the shift of power, resources, and responsibility (Kergoat, et al., 2020). In 2014, less than 0.2% of reported humanitarian funding was channelled directly to national and local organizations, many of whom decried being treated as subcontractors by international organizations (High-Level Panel on Humanitarian Financing, 2016).

While there were many local actors responding to emergencies, their visibility remained low among donors and international coordination platforms. In the Philippines, the large number and diversity of local humanitarian actors was perceived to be an obstacle to their early inclusion in coordination structures. International non-government organizations (INGOs) served as informal and de facto representatives of national civil society organizations (CSOs) among donors.

Along with the issue of lack of voice of local actors is the claim of a gap in local capacity, or the “capacity constraints” argument (Saferworld, 2020). These issues remain despite wide acknowledgement that local humanitarian action is far-reaching, quick, and relevant (Gingerich & Cohen, 2015). The dilemma lies partly in the power of international actors to define what capacities are valued and their tendency to highlight their strengths and overlook local capacities (Barbelet, Rethinking Capacity and Complementarity for a More Local Humanitarian Action, 2019).

### B. Call for Localization and Local Humanitarian Leadership

These issues have been acknowledged by a wide range of international humanitarian actors. The Grand Bargain was launched during the World Humanitarian Summit (WHS) in 2016. Donors and humanitarian aid organizations<sup>2</sup> signed up to work across nine workstreams to implement the commitments towards localization (IASC, n.d.).

Oxfam made its own commitments to change during the WHS and also signed the Charter for Change (C4C), along with 35 INGOs, and the endorsement of 377 Southern-based NGOs. The C4C is an eight-point commitment “to practically implement changes to the way the Humanitarian System operates to enable more locally led response” (Charter for Change, n.d.). The process of localization was on its way.

Localization is described 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” (Oxfam Pilipinas, 2020).

Based on the vision of Oxfam’s strategy, local humanitarian leadership has been described 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” (Kergoat, et al., 2020). Being a circular definition, this will need further unpacking, particularly from the point of view of local actors.



Several locally led partnership models<sup>3</sup> have been piloted to promote localization of aid, even in conflict-affected areas. These have generated lessons on alternative funding and partnership modalities as well as on the capacity of local actors to lead humanitarian action (Saferworld, 2020). The COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted not just the potential but also the necessity for the international humanitarian community to adapt its delivery mode consistent with commitments to localization of aid and strengthening of local partnerships (IASC, 2020).

Unfortunately, the challenge persists as resources for humanitarian response remain inadequate, untimely, unpredictable, and inaccessible to local actors. These limitations have been attributed to the continued dependence of the humanitarian system on voluntary instead of mandatory contributions by donors (Gingerich & Cohen, 2015). Some donor countries that subscribe to localization do attempt to make prior arrangements and conduct due diligence procedures with local actors, even before a disaster strikes. But since disasters can strike anywhere, this arrangement can only be done through national or subnational actors that have a wider reach. Moreover, many donors face considerable challenges in adapting their bureaucracy, processes, and policies, such as audit requirements. For instance, donors typically consider it too difficult to have multiple bilateral contracts with small institutions, and thus end up focusing on a limited number of partnerships, mostly with their longstanding INGO partners.

From an extremely low baseline of 2% in 2016, direct funding to local actors has jumped to 20% globally (IASC, 2020). However, the impact has not been felt widely among local stakeholders. Local direct funding has been concentrated in a few complex emergencies and through national actors where funding did not necessarily trickle down “as local as possible.” Moreover, even the Grand Bargain target of 25% is still a fraction of what is needed to transform the power relationships between international and local humanitarian actors.



Community members form a human chain to bring supplies to higher ground in Barangay Lipatan, Santo Niño, Cagayan, an area affected by Typhoon Mangkhut (local name Ompong) in 2018. (Photo: April Bulanadi/Oxfam.)



## C. Synthesizing the Practice and Learning of Oxfam in the Philippines and Local Partners

It is in the context of international humanitarian actors dominating the local humanitarian space that this study was conducted. This paper intends to capture and synthesize the experience, practice, and learning of Oxfam in the Philippines since it rolled out its Local Humanitarian Leadership (LHL) strategy in 2016.

The study recognizes that perspective is essential in gathering lessons in LHL approach. As such, the findings and analysis are presented from two perspectives. The first is LHL from the perspective of select Oxfam in the Philippines local humanitarian partners. A brief history of the discourse on localization in the Philippines is provided, building on previous studies that have already established the narrative of local humanitarian leadership action in the country. It is then followed by an unpacking of the term “Local Humanitarian Leadership,” based on the descriptions, issues, challenges, strategies, and aspirations of local humanitarian partners. The second perspective gathers lessons from the localization strategy of Oxfam in the Philippines. These are discussed using the four pillars of its LHL approach, namely: Voice, Strength, Space, and Oxfam Change.

By gathering lessons from bottom-up empowerment and top-down localization perspectives, the paper hopes to contribute to advancing the understanding and application of local humanitarian leadership among various humanitarian stakeholders.

## EMPOWERMENT OF LOCAL ACTORS

### A. History of the Localization Discourse

The Philippines is a highly diverse country with more than 7,000 islands and almost 200 languages. It faces an array of natural hazards, being very exposed to typhoons and geographically located in the Pacific Ring of Fire. It was under colonial rule for almost four centuries until 1946 and has some of the world’s longest-running armed conflicts. After the ouster of the dictatorship in the mid-1980s, civil society in the Philippines flourished. Several national networks emerged to coordinate actions and amplify local voices. INGOs present in the country largely supported the work of local organizations in both humanitarian and development fields, as opposed to being directly operational.

National and local networks of humanitarian, faith-based, developmental organizations and private sector foundations have, for decades, been conducting and leading small- and large-scale disaster responses. In these locally led responses, partnerships with INGOs have been critical in resource mobilization and other solidarity actions (De Dios, Masagca, & Barrera, 2017).

#### **Growing visibility of international actors**

But this situation started to change in the mid-2000s as INGOs became more involved in direct implementation of large-scale humanitarian responses, and subcontracting practices with local NGOs proliferated. Funding opportunities were also dwindling. In the Philippines, Oxfam partners sensed a shift in Oxfam’s ways of working, with Oxfam becoming more directly involved in programs, operations, and even in national advocacy. Direct implementation combined with the subcontracting of local partners became more pronounced during large-scale emergencies.

In humanitarian coordination, the cluster system was adopted by the government in 2007. The government served as the lead while counterpart UN agencies co-chaired the effort. This system became a platform to

better coordinate the humanitarian action of different actors. The clusters were generally open to local actors, but many local NGOs found it difficult to engage due to a number of factors, including staffing constraints, language barriers, and even – as described by some NGOs – not being allowed to participate.

### **Struggle for local voice**

DRRNetPhils, a network of local CSOs and INGOs, lobbied for years for a paradigm shift in national disaster management and response towards, among others, more decentralization and CSO participation. The shift came to be reflected in the Disaster Risk Reduction and Management (DRRM) Act of 2010, which provided for CSO representation in the DRRM councils from the national to the local levels. The councils were instrumental in crafting policies, especially in mainstreaming DRR in local governance.

Similar collaboration and networking were done by other local humanitarian actors. The Citizen's Disaster Response Network (CDRN) was established in the 1980s and had formed networks in various parts of the country. There were also various consortia such as the Humanitarian Response Consortium (HRC), which was set up by partners of Oxfam in the Philippines. Existing development networks have also integrated humanitarian coordination in their work, such as the Partnership of Philippine Support Service Agencies (PHILSSA), and the network of networks Caucus of Development NGO Networks (CODE-NGO). Even federations of people's organizations (POs) were clustered into regions to form a humanitarian network, as in the case of AKKMA,<sup>4</sup> with PHILSSA serving as support secretariat. The three largest faith-based organization (FBO) networks in the country have also coordinated among themselves to form the FBO PH. The Philippine Partnership for Emergency Response and Resilience (PPERR) was formed as a network-of-network-of-networks composed of the abovementioned networks. The argument that there were just too many local NGOs to coordinate effectively was slowly being eroded.

The visibility of international humanitarian actors, often to the detriment of local actors, reached its peak during the Super Typhoon (STY) Haiyan response. Several international humanitarian agencies "parachuted" into the country with little or no coordination. For those who did coordinate, local CSOs noted that they dominated coordination, direction-setting, and even policymaking during the response. A national DRR-CCA<sup>5</sup> CSO Summit in 2014 – aptly entitled "Local Voices and Participation as Key to Building Resilience" – called for more participation of local CSOs. The national government discreetly took notice of this dynamic. Before STY Hagupit made landfall in 2014, the government mobilized the biggest peacetime evacuation in the world. No international assistance was requested, and coordination was limited to local actors. Only international agencies who were in-country could mobilize resources. Since then, the national government has not made any requests for international emergency assistance.

### **Solidarity through INGO localization**

In 2016, the Start Network launched several innovations; at the helm were INGOs who were supportive of localization. The Philippines was one of two countries that launched an innovation lab for humanitarian action. The rapid financing mechanism Start Fund was activated for numerous small- and medium-scale emergencies and anticipatory projects. Although the Start Fund was accessible only to Start Network members, local CSOs who were part of funding consortia set up by the INGOs received funds, as in the case of HRC, which was in the Oxfam consortium for several responses. Several CSOs were also invited to participate in the decision-making groups that allocated funds (although participation turned out to be minimal).

The Disaster and Emergencies Preparedness Programme (DEPP) introduced pilot projects that were capitalized by INGOs to move the localization discourse forward. These projects brought forth the formation of local platforms that advocated the localization agenda (e.g., Balik Lokal), local coordination (e.g., PPERR), local surge (e.g., On Call), and humanitarian fundraising (e.g., SAFER<sup>6</sup>). Oxfam in the Philippines led an INGO consortium in implementing the Financial Enablers (FE) project. The FE project was a flexible funding facility that enabled local consortia to address self-determined humanitarian capacity development needs.

These platforms and initiatives were critical in setting pre- and post-WHS activities that drummed up support for and held agencies to account for their Grand Bargain commitments. Several localization initiatives ensued, including the membership of DRRNetPhils and PPERR, representing local CSOs in the Humanitarian Country Team (HCT). Quarterly dialogues were initiated between the UN Humanitarian Coordinator (HC) and networks of local humanitarian actors, although these were not sustained.

The COVID-19 pandemic and the ensuing restrictions on travel and mobility necessitated that humanitarian action be locally led. Local government units, NGOs, and community-based people's organizations demonstrated their capacity to respond. While some observed a hiatus in the localization discourse between national and international organizations, conversations continued internally between INGOs and their local partners, between national networks and their members, and within the various consortia.

## B. Defining Local Humanitarian Leadership from Local Actors

Framing the approach as “Local Humanitarian Leadership” instead of “Localization” is important in developing the narrative. Localization is a term “coined by international organizations to describe the process to which they are committed by the Grand Bargain” (HLA & IFRC, 2017). Though the term has sparked controversy because of its limitations, it continues to be used. However, the danger in using such an ambiguous term is that its shortcomings can be mainstreamed.

“Localization” frames the process from the perspective of dominant international or non-local actors. It presupposes that humanitarian action is external and thus needs to be localized. It connotes the channelling of aid through local actors, without opposing the transactional subcontracting relationships between international and local agencies. While subsequent definitions<sup>7</sup> have emphasized better engagement, localization still suggests starting from the framework laid out by international agencies to which local actors are invited to engage.

On the other hand, “local humanitarian leadership” confirms that affected populations and their institutions are not only passive victims of disaster but are active agents of change. While affected populations do need support to recover, this does not make them dependent on the aid or service providers. LHL establishes that the desired change is not limited to the capacity of local actors to respond but by their power to lead. By explicitly stating leadership, the approach recognizes the need to analyze power relationships among different stakeholders and interest groups. While funding has been at the center of the debates, it is not the only element necessary to actualize local humanitarian leadership.

The meaning ascribed to the term is sensitive to the perspective of the user – the local and the non-local. An earlier study identified key building blocks for locally led response, namely: 1) development perspective and orientation; 2) community organizing as a core humanitarian strategy; 3) pro-poor guiding principles; 4) local resources; 5) collaboration strategies or models; and 6) challenging power and gender relations (De Dios, Masagca, & Barrera, 2017).

From an international perspective, local humanitarian leadership may involve “greater local autonomy and ced(ing) power and resources to structures and actors currently at the margins of the formal system” (Bennett, 2016). While treating power as a divisible resource is arguable, the unsustainable level of control over systems and resources will need to be broadened and shared (High-Level Panel on Humanitarian Financing, 2016).

Several local partners of Oxfam in the Philippines were asked to define what LHL meant to them. They were also asked how their partnership in humanitarian action has changed since Oxfam in the Philippines adopted its Strategic Partnership Model and LHL strategy.

Respondents were a mix of long-time (some for more than ten years) humanitarian partners, several of whom are members of the HRC, new humanitarian partners, and existing “development” partners. Partners were not asked to define LHL word for word. Focusing on each word is used only for presentation purposes to capture the meaning ascribed by the different local partners to LHL.

## 1. Who is local?

Defining who is “local” has been a highly contentious matter. Based on ongoing international agreements, local humanitarian actors include national, subnational, and local government, civil society, and private sector organizations. Excluded from the list are international actors and their affiliates (Fabre, 2017). A recent study of Saferworld even implied that national NGOs are not local, lumping them under the same category as international actors. Instead, the study referred to the level of participation of “vulnerable crisis-affected people and/or the local CSOs and institutions that represent them.” (Saferworld 2020).

Partners of Oxfam explained that “local” is a relative term. Local humanitarian actors are not homogenous. An individual or an institution is more local if they are closer to the community and even to the affected individual in terms of presence, knowledge, and identity. These elements are perceived to have an impact on the relevance, timeliness, and gaining of trust of the affected population.

The relativity of being local distinguishes stakeholders that are homegrown, internal, or nearby, as opposed to actors who are foreign, external, or far away, and who will be surging into the affected community. Moreover, the relativity recognizes that an organization can be local to a community, and a surging external actor to another community. As such, formal registration does not necessarily determine how local an institution is to affected populations.

While not necessarily amounting to a dichotomy, different characteristics of local and non-local humanitarian actors can be drawn. Will the actor provide generalist systems thinking or specialized expertise to the response? Will decision-making be decentralized or centralized? Will the design of the response be customized for each community or standardized for the entire project? Will the partner have limited or wide scope of reach? Will partners have limited visibility and access to resources or not? Will they provide a representative voice of the affected population or not? How far will their institutional accountability be from the community?

### **Presence in affected community to provide pre-positioning and connectedness to social development**

Local government units (LGU), POs, and organizations working on community-based programs are considered the most local institutions. When several local actors work in a consortium, the partner who has pre-existing presence and knowledge is often given the lead role. Other partners typically provide capacity support or access to resources.

Local presence before a disaster enables pre-positioning of staff, if not of goods. This offers an advantage not necessarily of a quick response, but, more immediately, access to areas that may be restricted or isolated. Moreover, longstanding presence makes it more likely that the institution will provide social services even beyond the disaster response period. During the COVID-19 response, several NGOs had to rely on their partner POs and core leaders. These grassroots leaders and organizations designed responses, mobilized residents, negotiated with LGU officials, and implemented delivery of services during the most difficult times.

## **Local knowledge for relevant and sensitive humanitarian action and interactions**

Knowledge of local context allows local actors to weave through the power relationships within the community to enhance the provision of relevant aid and to position humanitarian action within existing social development processes.

Non-local humanitarian actors are more susceptible to conducting rapid damage and needs assessments without necessarily understanding the context. On several occasions, this practice has resulted in distribution of aid that is impractical, inappropriate, or insensitive to culture or gender. Moreover, interactions may inadvertently undermine social capital and progress in the affected community. Several partners shared instances of how inappropriate aid by external actors triggered conflicts within the communities which they were then compelled to help resolve, or how simple coordination lapses by INGOs had strained their own relationships with the community.

Consequently, non-community-based actors enhance their capacities to respond and their local knowledge by hiring local individuals. But this strategy becomes contentious when such recruitment results in the reduced capacity of local organizations.

For instance, during the Marawi siege,<sup>8</sup> humanitarian action needed to be culturally sensitive in order to gain the trust of the affected population and pinpoint the location of internally displaced persons (IDPs). Thus, there was a premium on having local staff. Local partners decried the poaching of their staff – a not-uncommon practice by international humanitarian actors who surge into unfamiliar communities (Featherstone, 2017). Such practice can be easily dismissed as a justified human resource measure, and that individuals should not be prevented from seeking greener pastures. But for local partners who have invested years in developing competence, nurturing relationships, and building a reputable track record around a limited pool of personnel, the impact can be devastating. The recruitment of locals to compensate for the lack of local knowledge of foreign agencies came at the expense of local actors. The competition for limited talent against a resource-rich INGO was not a level playing field for local actors.

## **Ability to identify with affected populations to build trust and participation**

Being local is also about how much the affected community can identify with the humanitarian actor and, as such, build trust in the humanitarian processes. In general, this is an advantage since it allows better coordination and better participation from the community. Coordination provides more efficient and more complementary delivery of services. Better participation enhances social accountability, resulting in better quality of processes and services.

Being local reaches all the way to the gender of individuals. In determining gender-based needs and issues, the partners' experience was that having facilitators of the same sex encourages affected individuals to open up. Being able to identify with the survivors allows the responders access to the private and intimate spheres, which can make humanitarian responses not just more effective but also more powerful.

## **Local actors in conflict-affected communities**

There is a belief among some in the humanitarian sector that local humanitarian actors are unable to exercise neutrality and impartiality because of the closeness described above, especially in complex emergencies.

In reality, the local knowledge and access to communities that local actors have are crucial in complex emergencies. As shown in the case of the Marawi siege, local responders could determine where vulnerable populations were located. Responders could identify and manage risks to facilitate smoother operations. In

other instances, local partners have ensured the security of visits to conflict-affected areas in Mindanao using trusted real-time information.

Another perceived disadvantage of being too close is that responders are exposed to more security risks. For instance, they may become party to internal community conflicts that may be caused by the response itself. Even LGU officials shy away from participating in decisions that will, for instance, exclude less vulnerable constituents from receiving assistance (PDRRN, 2019). Partners also shared experiences of being rebuked for their advocacy work.

But facing opposition and being accountable are part of leadership. Again, best practice and humanitarian standards point towards building trust further – through dialogue, community engagement, evaluations, complaints response mechanisms, etc. – as ways to move forward, instead of confrontation or avoidance.



DEPRIVE, a people's organization, implements locally led initiatives which are products of community consultations. They believe that initiatives must be shaped by community perspectives in order to create genuine ownership. (Photo: Vina Salazar/Oxfam.)



## Case Study: Local Actors Leading the High-Risk Pandemic Response

The COVID-19 pandemic was as large as it could get as a disaster. In the face of a highly infectious virus, the safety risks posed to humanitarian responders were very high. Safety protocols and mobility restrictions necessitated that only local actors already in the community could respond. This compelled humanitarian actors to partner with local actors who were closest to the affected communities.

For Oxfam in the Philippines, presence in the community was key. Local partners already responding to a previous crisis were supported in realigning their budgets or were provided additional resources to address the pandemic in the same communities. A new partnership was forged with a national network that had several NGO members with strong PO partners in Metro Manila. The overall response was complex, with multiple contracts, diverse partnership arrangements, decentralized responses, and complete reliance on virtual communication platforms. Oxfam in the Philippines' advantage was that with its existing commitment to LHL, it already had relationships in place, as well as a commitment to finding the most appropriate mechanisms in a novel situation. This was an opportunity to show how organized communities could mobilize residents, influence decision-makers, and provide a relevant response to affected populations.

POs and NGOs used their existing social capital to negotiate with local government officials and ensure that priority government actions were a product of consultations. Mobility and operational plans were drawn up. Access and handling of sensitive information about infected individuals were agreed upon. Partnerships with local officials and volunteers were formed to include them in the response.

Oxfam in the Philippines' initial response plans and working arrangements were far from perfect, but partners were quick to point out inadequacies of the plans, to adjust ways of working, and to fill gaps accordingly. Partners and POs designed their own safety protocols to be able to immediately resume operations. When online training was not effective for grassroots leaders, local community organizers found innovative ways to conduct face-to-face training. People receiving assistance were redefined based on changing conditions on the ground. Budgets were realigned based on community consultations and changes in interventions. In determining which actions were appropriate and relevant, local knowledge was prioritized over initial plans.

There was much misinformation in the communities. Help was needed but government resources were already low and access to other resources was scarce. Community members were wary of outsiders who could be carrying the virus. Residents trusted only their local officials and CSOs they had previously worked with. Mobilization could only be led by local leaders, e.g., barangay officials who enforce national policies, the community organizer who had been with the community through many struggles, PO leaders who mobilized the previous emergency response, core women leaders who were championing the elimination of gender-based violence, etc. Affected communities were in need, but they had to be able to identify with the humanitarian actors in order to trust their decisions and leadership.

In Metro Manila, difficulties were experienced by PHILSSA and its members in complying with monitoring and evaluation requirements. The rigorous exercise of profiling every person receiving assistance accurately was a frustrating exercise. Such limitations affected the initial design of the response, which involved digital financing. PHILSSA, being the contracting party, heard all the complaints of partners and grassroots leaders and negotiated on their behalf with Oxfam in the Philippines. Flexibility was exercised such that digital financing was applied only where it was appropriate. Oxfam provided Monitoring, Evaluation, Accountability and Learning (MEAL) support to ease the tension. PHILSSA and Oxfam

negotiated with donors on behalf of the local actors who were leading the operations on the ground. In the end, the capacity sharing arrangement was amenable to everyone.

When back donors (the initial donors) specified goods that were unavailable, local procurement management teams were organized among partners and Oxfam. These teams were able to gather information and local ordinances to substantiate Oxfam's negotiations with its back donors. When back donors did not extend deadlines, Oxfam and partners worked together to adapt. Oxfam looked for other sources of funds while the local partner reduced operational costs to make ends meet.

The recognition of Oxfam that the partners were in the driver's seat meant an openness to adaptations in each community. Partners appreciated how Oxfam served as their ally instead of being the "compliance police." More importantly, it allowed local actors to focus on delivering relevant response operations, leaving the negotiations with back donors to Oxfam.

Local actors had to lead the pandemic response – not because they were the only option but simply because they had capacity and it was the right thing to do.

## 2. What Makes Local Actors Humanitarian?

When asked what "humanitarian" means, partners would quickly recite the mantra of "saving lives and alleviating suffering." But what makes local actors humanitarian?

### Humanitarian action as part of development work

Local NGOs generally do not see a divide between humanitarian and development work. To them, the humanitarian-development nexus is supposed to be obvious in the same way that LHL is evidently the right approach. Local actors closest to the community would rather regard their work as part of development or disaster risk reduction that aims to address underlying issues of vulnerability, poverty, and inequality in the community. Disasters – small or large – are simply part of the many issues that aggravate poverty. Capacity development of the community to address issues including disasters thus became part of development work. For this very reason, several local partners would not consider themselves to be humanitarian organizations even if they have been involved in a humanitarian response, which is what their definition of "humanitarian" is. They would even consider humanitarian responses that are undertaken without any reference to existing development programs in the community as potentially undermining long-term strategies.

Thus, while the vision of international actors may be of an enhanced humanitarian architecture, what many local NGOs yearn for is better linking of life-saving humanitarian efforts with sustainable development work. This will include, for instance, easing the situation in geographically isolated and depressed areas (GIDA) which suffer from diseases because of their lack of access to potable water. It will include minimizing the constant threat of eviction and arson to informal settlements, which impact their livelihoods, health, food security, education, and access to basic services. It will require addressing the plight of small fisherfolk who suffer weeks of hunger during the entire monsoon season when strong waves prevent them from fishing. It should lead to much needed resources being allocated to the dialogue and peace development processes of local actors that can prevent escalation of conflict.

### Discerning strategic impact of humanitarian projects in development work

Will local development actors always respond to disasters? The bonds established between the community and local development actors have typically led to a response, be it formal or informal. But will local actors

undertake a humanitarian response if they were to be measured against humanitarian principles and standards, and if they had to work within the parameters of humanitarian financing? The answer is not straightforward. It is nuanced in every context, even when funding is scarce for local actors.

NGOs are wary about how a disaster response can easily overrun an ongoing development project, draw away limited personnel, and strain administrative and financial capacity. Funding is highly restricted – with little or no provision for local actors' institutional support. A response project can compel local actors to surge into new communities about which they may have limited knowledge. Moreover, partners consider the risk that the disaster response could compromise their role and security in the community (e.g., get entangled in conflicts created by the response, establish a culture of dependency, be seen as marketing private sector products, etc.).

In the case of Oxfam in the Philippines partners, their humanitarian engagements are led by organizational principles. For instance, SIKAT, which promotes community-based coastal resource management, will act to ensure that the response will not lead to more overfishing but instead promote sustainable livelihoods in coastal communities. Advocacy partners will consider disaster response if it can push their development agenda (e.g., land and housing tenure improvement, human rights, natural resource management, elimination of gender-based violence, peace, etc.). UPA and KABALIKAT will engage if the response is in line with community development plans of POs. UPA and COM will even take on a supporting role and allow strong POs to lead the response. Local organizations will prefer to respond in communities where they have established substantial social capital with different stakeholders. If local partners will surge, they ensure that they have expertise to contribute to the consortium of partners. COM will engage in new communities if the response is at least one year and/or if the community context is in line with its institutional strategy. COM estimates a year is sufficient time to ensure substantial capacity development in the community. On occasion, Oxfam in the Philippines approaches partners with offers of resources or the opportunity to participate in humanitarian funding consortia. Partners respond to these offers using various parameters. SIKAT considers proximity of response to its current or target areas of operation, adequate staff availability, and alignment with strategies, principles, and ways of working. SIKAT claims that it will be difficult for it to say no if it does not have other sources of funds. COM uses a spectrum of community interventions ranging from Welfare to Community Planning to Community Development to Community Organizing. This informs its board if the engagement is worth pursuing within the timeline of the project. PDRRN is now more conscious about engaging in humanitarian action where it has already established its presence. IDEALS and AMDF would have to see the contribution of their expertise to commit to a project. Financial independence, strategic direction and a sense of self-identity are elements that guide local actors in negotiating with Oxfam in the Philippines and other donors. In sum, local development partners will respond if it is in line with their strategic intent.

### Case Study: Shaping Humanitarian Action Towards Strategic Development

In May 2017, armed men attacked the city of Marawi. The staff of Al-Mujadilah Development Foundation (AMDF) – a women's rights organization (WRO) based in Marawi – found themselves among the thousands of internally displaced persons (IDPs). Yet, they also took on the challenge of organizing an emergency response – again belying the usual narratives that local organizations, being victims themselves, are unable to act, that women are the most vulnerable, or that local organizations cannot be impartial during a conflict.

AMDF had no previous experience in humanitarian action, but it was sought out to respond because of its local knowledge and presence. It knew, for instance, where the most vulnerable IDPs took refuge.

It was in the thick of coordination meetings with other local CSOs, humanitarian organizations, and local government units. It was vocal in advising external humanitarian actors against installing tents. It knew that tents were not only culturally inappropriate, but that these would also increase cases of gender-based violence. AMDF tended to the urgent needs of women and children by providing them “care kits.”

The AMDF executive director later felt that its identity as a WRO had a very specific role within the response. It was clear to AMDF that its mandate and strength was not in distributing “dole-outs” but in advocating the rights of women.

The staff explored the possibility of conducting conversations with the IDPs before or during distribution of relief goods. At a practical level, these conversations would allow them to surface the gender-based needs of the IDPs. But beyond this, it allowed AMDF to gain the trust of men, women, boys, and girls to talk about their fears and hopes. By entering the private and intimate realms, AMDF was also analyzing how gender constructs were being formed and negotiated during a crisis. Such analysis would help shape more strategic and transformative action that it can pursue even after the response.

The AMDF staff knew this approach would slow down the response and were afraid that they would not be able to rationalize the initiative with Oxfam in the Philippines. To AMDF’s relief, Oxfam did not hesitate to support the proposed action.

AMDF thus implemented Family Conversations to provide a safe space for IDPs to discuss mental, sexual, and reproductive health issues. The men and women also shared their plans and ideas for the recovery and rehabilitation of Marawi City.

Women, men, teenage girls, and boys were grouped into separate clusters. AMDF assigned facilitators of the same gender in each group so that the IDPs could easily identify with them. Women and men let down their defenses and shared personal and intimate experiences, needs, issues, and aspirations. After the cluster session, the groups gathered in a plenary to share the aggregated results of the conversations. This face-to-face gathering allowed a level-headed dialogue among family members without the threat of personal retribution against “complainants.”

Some women and men broke down during the conversations, especially when topics around the different types of violence were discussed. Mothers who said they were experiencing domestic violence were approached by AMDF staff after the conversations for further counselling or referral. A referral pathway was discussed with all participants in case they wanted to voluntarily seek further psychosocial support.

The conversations were a breakthrough, especially for the women. AMDF was able to create a profile of individual women who had experienced gender-based violence before and during the siege. As such, AMDF was able to monitor these households more closely to avoid the escalation of violence.

AMDF consolidated the results of the family conversations and presented them to the local consortium of Oxfam partners. The other partners initially scoffed at the “wish list” from the conversations, which appeared impractical given the limited budget. AMDF rationalized every item on the list, elaborating on the stories of why women and men needed those items. Recognizing the significance, Oxfam in the Philippines scoured through potential donors and was able to mobilize resources for the wish list. The joy on the faces of the men and women receiving their wishes more than made up for the frantic search

for more funds. Beyond the practical functionality of the goods, the women and men expressed their gratitude for being listened to and heard.

Beyond being a psychosocial support intervention, the family conversations also enabled women to manifest their “power within.” The active mother participants became the core leaders and champions in successive AMDF initiatives on ending violence against women and girls and forced early marriages. These were the same women leaders who would later mobilize the community for the COVID-19 response.

The results of the family conversations were critical input for the gender snapshot of the Marawi crisis, which Oxfam in the Philippines and its partners produced, and which helped provide the humanitarian community with a crucial gender lens to guide their existing and future responses in Marawi.

The ideas for the recovery of Marawi were consolidated as part of a position paper submitted to the government, providing the much-needed perspective of the affected communities to the rehabilitation plans for the city.



In 2017, AMDF organized Family Conversations, or listening sessions involving fathers, mothers, youth, and children who were displaced during the Marawi crisis. At least 240 families were engaged in these Family Conversations, which helped shape the development of a “People’s Agenda” for the recovery and rehabilitation of Marawi. Here, a community facilitator conducts a debriefing session with women in an evacuation center. (Photo: Genevive Estacaan/Oxfam.)

### 3. Why Leadership?

Defining leadership is critical since it is the operative term in Local Humanitarian Leadership. Is leadership a competence of local actors that must be increased through capacity building? Is it a way of behaving or voicing of local actors to shape outcomes of the disaster response? Is it a relationship between local and non-local humanitarian actors? Is it an impact of local actors on the affected community and other stakeholders? If there was one thing that the different respondents agreed upon, it was that the term “leadership” connoted a change in power relationships in favor of local actors.

## **Challenging leadership as “power over”**

Given the life-saving objective of humanitarian action, emergency responses should be swift and decisive. It has become the norm that the structures and processes for responding are typically hierarchical, top-down, and centralized. Unfortunately, this hierarchical leadership model has resulted in power becoming concentrated where resources lie, and affected communities as well as local actors being mostly reduced to passive, compliant recipients (PDRRN, 2019). It should be noted that such a “power over” relationship has been noted even among local actors (e.g., LGUs over community and CSOs, constituents, local NGOs over POs, POs over non-organized community members).

In this situation, formal social accountability mechanisms have become very important, and are thus encouraged through humanitarian standards such as the Core Humanitarian Standard on Quality and Accountability. This aims to put affected communities at the center of humanitarian action.

## **Enabling power by drawing leadership from the capacity to represent**

Across all stakeholders interviewed, the dominant sense of local leadership is that of local actors having power with other stakeholders.

Being closest to the affected population puts a responsibility on local actors to serve as a representative voice of the community. In turn, such representative voice elicits respect from other stakeholders. It is within this horizontal relationship that local actors expect their leadership to emerge.

Local actors have defined leadership as having more voice in partnerships, especially in funding relationships with their immediate donors. Most partners describe leadership in terms of having more voice in formal processes. Having more voice in the project development phase (i.e., emergency assessment and response designing), response implementation, and monitoring and evaluation would distinguish partnerships from subcontracting arrangements. Having pre-positioned strategic partnership agreements with donors reduces the uncertainty among local actors and allows them to develop capacities and anticipate humanitarian action proactively and jointly.

## **Local leadership in community-based action**

Where a response consortium was composed of Oxfam in the Philippines partners, partners could co-design the response together with Oxfam and other local partners. As seen in the COVID-19 response, even if the initial proposal to back donors was drafted by Oxfam in the Philippines to expedite access to emergency funds, local partners were able to substantially change parameters of the response (e.g., the people who received assistance, the type and modality of response, strategies, budget allocations).

Such arrangements are tenable to local actors. Grassroots organizations and small local NGOs prefer to focus on community-based operations rather than attend to the reporting requirements of donors. Moreover, the burden of negotiating operational adjustments and budget realignments with donors is carried by the lead organization. While formal leadership is often not held by them, local actors still view it as LHL if they are able to determine terms and negotiate for adjustments based on changing contexts and assumptions in the community.

Even in the most difficult conditions, grassroots leaders have repeatedly shown their ability to prepare, mobilize neighbors and make critical decisions with minimal guidance from NGO partners. Core women leaders of IDPs from Marawi did not have the machinery of a people’s organization. But still, they were able to coordinate with AMDF for a limited response during the pandemic lockdown. Core women leaders determined who were the most vulnerable women and delivered care kits as well as information and education materials, all without provoking conflict in the community.



## **The power of locals to influence**

Participation in a consortium allows small local actors with limited coverage to access large funding opportunities. On the part of donors, consortium arrangements help reduce transactional costs. For local actors, it allows them to share capacities with each other in order to provide quality responses for affected communities. However, forming a consortium introduces significant complexities that range from consolidating financial terms (e.g., organizational allocations, overhead costs, procurement policies and arrangements, audit terms) to ways of working (e.g., strategies, selection criteria for people receiving assistance, priority response, level of community engagement, visibility, security protocols, decision-making processes, safeguarding, consolidation of deliverables, monitoring and evaluation).

Relationships are always tested during a fast-moving response. While familiarity and trust are identified as enabling factors in forming a successful consortium, membership is ultimately determined by the value-added contribution of each organization to the consortium (e.g., field of expertise, work in a specific locality). The capacity of local actors to traverse the intricacies of a consortium is necessary as this is increasingly the modality for accessing large funding calls.

When only INGOs are eligible for a consortium, partners rely on Oxfam in the Philippines to represent their sub-consortium of partners. Again, LHL is seen as the ability of the local actors to influence Oxfam in negotiating for their terms in the INGO consortium.

## **A bottom-up call for humanitarian action**

The struggle for local actors is to lead humanitarian action that is defined on their terms. A Single Drop of Safe Water (ASDSW) described local leadership as community-based stakeholders being able to build “their own theories of change, design their programs and mobilize resources.” This demand-driven response should be more relevant to the community. These initiatives arguably save lives and alleviate suffering. Yet, they are often categorized as development projects that are either too small and should be addressed by local authorities or too local to require humanitarian aid. However, these are the vulnerable contexts and disasters that local actors face and lead. There is a need to recognize how local actors display leadership in these everyday disasters.

While there is a global clamor for more direct funding to local actors, humanitarian aid will remain inaccessible if humanitarian crises continue to be defined and determined mainly by international actors. As it is, local actors are expected to lead within an internationally designed humanitarian system geared towards large scale response, centralized decision-making, centrally determined humanitarian standards, and external surge capacity. If the system is not appropriate for or relevant to local actors to start with, then they may be doomed to fail when they are invited to lead it. Instead, local actors need to define the humanitarian system that is appropriate to the community risks, resources, and ambitions.



Kagawad Maricar Mangune of Batasan Hills, Quezon City braved the risks of contracting the COVID-19 virus at the onset of community lockdowns in Metro Manila. As a public servant and community frontliner, she made sure that vulnerable populations were reached in the pandemic response. (Photo: Basilio Sepe/Oxfam.)

### Case Study: Bottom-up Leadership

Kabalikat sa Pagpapaunlad ng BASECO (KABALIKAT) is an urban poor people's organization in BASECO Compound, which sits on reclaimed land in Manila Bay and is home to 21,000 informal settler families. KABALIKAT has around 700 members who participate in various community development initiatives that include land and housing tenure improvement, enterprise development and savings mobilization, mangrove afforestation and community urban gardens, disaster risk reduction, tutorial services for children, and advocacy for urban poor rights. KABALIKAT was organized by the Urban Poor Associates (UPA) which is a member of the national network Partnership of Philippine Support Service Agencies (PHILSSA). PHILSSA is a humanitarian partner of Oxfam in the Philippines in the COVID-19 response.

Initially, KABALIKAT simply wanted to stop the spread of the virus in its community. The idea was to follow the usual template – advocate mass testing, identify infected residents and isolate, and trace contacts.

Consultations with residents revealed other issues, however. Residents were afraid of the stigma associated with COVID-19 and thus did not want to be tested. In addition, the community isolation facility was in a deplorable condition and no one wanted to be isolated. In effect, no one wanted to be traced. KABALIKAT realized that the deeper problem was not the killer virus but the discrimination that was dividing the community. A more nurturing strategy other than an advocacy campaign was needed.

KABALIKAT was clear about its identity. It was a development, not a humanitarian organization. It would coordinate with other humanitarian CSOs and mobilize the community during distribution of aid. But it did not necessarily see these as strategic actions for it to lead the response.

If it did lead, it was because it was strategic to its cause of organizing the community. For instance, in a fire that had left hundreds of families homeless, UPA and KABALIKAT led the humanitarian action since it was an opportunity to promote an alternative approach to urban housing. This would contribute to the People's Plan – an alternative site development plan drafted by the residents that was proposed to local

authorities in an effort to achieve land and housing security. The People's Plan was a symbol that the community had the power to self-organize and develop its own community.

With the pandemic, KABALIKAT realized that the community needed to return to its roots of community organizing. It needed another kind of People's Plan that would demonstrate that collective action plus social distancing would better address the pandemic. The goal of the response was to remove the stigma of COVID-19 by providing emotional support.

When the COVID-19 response was offered by PHILSSA, KABALIKAT and UPA redesigned the initial response plan to fit into their own People's Plan. They negotiated with government officials. They used the disaster response plan to leverage access to COVID-19 testing results and permission to mobilize volunteers during the lockdown. The LGU provided for the needs of isolated individuals and improved the isolation facilities while KABALIKAT tended to the needs of the other family members.

KABALIKAT provided Php5,000 for the food needs of the quarantined family members. This amount was deemed sufficient as a supplement for the family during the 14-day quarantine period. The original design of the response was to transfer the cash through digital financing. But other than a 24/7 convenience store selling grocery products at a steep price, community stores were not set up for digital financing. Moreover, the cash distribution was deemed inappropriate since the intention was to limit the movement of the family members. KABALIKAT redesigned the strategy to enable households receiving assistance to have a credit line with the KABALIKAT community grocery that could deliver goods to them. Volunteers could be easily mobilized to purchase products since the store was inside the BASECO compound. This was an opportune time to showcase the aims of the KABALIKAT grocery when it was originally set up, which were to generate income and to install pre-positioned goods in the hazard-prone<sup>9</sup> community.

KABALIKAT formed four teams to profile the different households. Each team had a KABALIKAT member, a barangay (village) health worker, and a volunteer from other POs in BASECO. Each team had a trained health worker plus an interviewer and documenter. Because the design now incorporated frontliners, the budget was realigned to provide them with Personal Protection Equipment (PPE). Since people panicked when the frontliners came in full PPE, they coordinated with the families to provide space in the house for them to put on their PPE before the families met them.

KABALIKAT mapped households where families with infected persons lived. Volunteers were discreetly stationed to secure and monitor clusters of houses of the target families. Volunteers not only ensured that the household would stay in quarantine, but they also delivered the relief goods requested by the families. As the main link to the outside world, the volunteers were obliged to provide psychosocial support. They regularly checked the conditions of families and provided moral support. Such action became useful as UPA observed a surge in cases of anxiety and other mental health concerns among the quarantined family members.

Volunteers had to be trained to gather data, provide psychosocial support, and ensure safety vis-à-vis COVID-19. Since residents had difficulty accessing the internet and were uncomfortable with online training, UPA community organizers instead attended the training and recorded it. They then set up a safe environment in the community where the volunteers and BHWs could view the recording.

KABALIKAT fed their inputs to strategies through UPA which coordinated with PHILSSA. In turn, PHILSSA negotiated with Oxfam in the Philippines, which explained the strategies to its back donors. Even if there were three layers between the back donors and KABALIKAT, it was clear to all stakeholders that the direction of the response was being determined by KABALIKAT.

After the response, the families who received assistance expressed their gratitude. While others were turning their backs on them, KABALIKAT sought them out to provide much needed support. The families lost the feeling of being isolated and felt very much connected with the community again.

KABALIKAT was also able to identify active volunteers who could serve as potential community leaders. They noted the enhanced relationship among the barangay officials, KABALIKAT, various volunteer groups, and households receiving assistance. Subsequent emergency responses in the community saw KABALIKAT, the LGU, and the volunteer groups collaborate anew to install handwashing facilities and distribute relief packs. Such joint efforts demonstrate how enhancing existing community social capital resulted in sustained collective action beyond disaster response projects.

Other INGOs took notice of KABALIKAT's emergency response and became interested in replicating the KABALIKAT grocery. They recognized that it was effective in plowing income back into the community. Unfortunately, the plan did not materialize since it failed to pass strict procurement policies.

## LOCALIZATION OF OXFAM

Oxfam's global commitments to localization are expressed through various pledges, such as signing up to the Grand Bargain and Charter for Change, and its own Oxfam Commitment for Change during the World Humanitarian Summit in 2016. These commitments affect Oxfam's allocation and transparency of funding; principles of partnership; support to partners' capacity strengthening, coordination, representation, promotion, and visibility; recruitment processes; and inclusion of women's rights organizations in humanitarian actions.

In the Philippines, Oxfam re-committed to a Strategic Partnership Model in 2017. Since then, it has been able to:

- Allocate more of its emergency response funds to partner organizations.
- Co-create emergency response strategies with partner organizations.
- Support national coordination mechanisms.
- Support the standing humanitarian capacity of partners and capacity development in areas identified by partner organizations.
- Intentionally support women's rights organizations in emergency responses.
- Make the work of local partners visible through various communications materials.

This section looks into the experience, lessons and challenges of Oxfam in applying the pillars of its LHL agenda: 1) **Voice** of local humanitarian actors;<sup>10</sup> 2) **Strength** of local humanitarian actors;<sup>11</sup> 3) **Space** for local humanitarian actors;<sup>12</sup> and 4) **Oxfam Change**<sup>13</sup> to fully actualize the strategy (Oxfam, 2017).

# A. Voice of Local Actors

## 1. Strategic Partnership

By the mid-2000s, Oxfam had established a significant presence in the humanitarian sector in the Philippines. As founder and convenor of the Philippine International NGO Network (PINGON), it became an influential voice of INGOs in the Humanitarian Country Team (HCT) and with the national government. It had established its expertise in Water, Sanitation and Hygiene (WASH) in disaster responses. It supported the establishment of the HRC, composed of local humanitarian organizations that could surge to different parts of the country (Oxfam Pilipinas, 2019). But despite these efforts, local partners expressed dissatisfaction, describing the partnership as transactional, top-down, and based entirely around short-term projects (Oxfam Pilipinas, 2017). Oxfam was seen as micromanaging partners' work, and as having teams that worked in silos, which had knock-on effects on the work of partners. It also did not help that Oxfam had multiple restructuring processes and staff turnover that implied restarting the relationships with partners.

The situation changed after a substantive review of the country's operations. With the adoption of the Strategic Partnership Model (SPM) in 2017, there was a shift to invest more in local partnerships.

### **Joint decision-making**

Joint platforms were set up for partners to have a more significant voice in shaping humanitarian processes and projects. Oxfam in the Philippines and partners jointly drafted contingency plans. A Humanitarian Clock was developed with partners to define each one's roles and responsibilities during different phases of specific disasters. The load of each party was then estimated to define capacity-sharing strategies. Partners determined the roles they expected from Oxfam in the Philippines, namely: raising funds, communicating about the emergency and the response, and providing technical support in specific sectors as well as in monitoring and evaluation. More than simply gathering inputs, the process gave partners an informal commitment from Oxfam to work together in case of an emergency.

For their strategic partner HRC, a Quick Response Fund (QRF) and initial pre-positioned stockpile were set up. The intent was to provide HRC annual allocations for their business operations, subject to the availability of funds.

During a disaster, Oxfam in the Philippines and partners teamed up to prepare and conduct assessments. The joint response strategy development provided a collaborative platform to shape the humanitarian action. Partners identified their roles and areas for capacity-sharing. Oxfam informed partners of the available budget and partners allocated it among themselves based on their strategies. Oxfam looked for alternative funding sources together with the partners in case there was a budget gap. Response time was reduced since bilateral project appraisals were no longer needed, proposals were directly finalized by Oxfam, and response operations were immediately set up by the partners.

In terms of quality, it was noted that joint strategies had more depth, connectedness with resilience and development work, and more variety. Timelines, targets, and budgets became clearer. It was also observed that in terms of allocation, partners preferred to have relatively equal distribution of resources amongst themselves and to work within these resources.

An obstacle shared by partners in designing response strategies was the preference of Oxfam in the Philippines for specific types of response (e.g., WASH). This preference aligns with priorities determined by Oxfam globally, which are, in turn, historically rooted in Oxfam's role in the global humanitarian cluster system, among others. By focusing on the specific expertise of Oxfam globally, Oxfam in the Philippines was better able to provide support and ensure the quality of service delivered to affected communities. Knowing

Oxfam's priorities beforehand, partners were able to anticipate which other sectors, such as shelter, needed funding from other donors.

Partners generally appreciated a more wholistic response, but in fewer communities over providing specific types of responses in a wider geographic area. Aside from avoiding overstretching their capacities, this option was also seen as more facilitative of the transition to strategic recovery and development work.

Stocktaking is conducted together with specific response evaluations. This allows the pool of partners to learn together from their experiences, identify ways to improve their performance, and enhance LHL.

Joint evaluations and real-time reviews (RTR) were appreciated by partners. It was an opportunity to surface issues and synthesize learnings. But learning activities, particularly the RTR, were usually delayed, if not foregone, for smaller responses due to lack of funds. This was found to be disadvantageous for local actors who tackled small-scale responses on their own. Partners recommend that the RTR format be revised to be less rigid and comprehensive to reduce costs. Hopefully, this will make RTRs a regular part of all emergency responses.

Oxfam in the Philippines' commitment to joint strategy development, resource mobilization, and accompaniment, as well as its effort to allocate funds from its country budget for business support for strategic partners, helped reduce uncertainties and enabled partners to sustain operations and continuously develop capacities.

## 2. Visibility

### **Affirming and promoting the power of local actors**

Visibility of local actors was another area that needed to be enhanced. For their voices to be heard, others needed to know of their presence and role. Visibility to other donors was essential for the humanitarian NGO People's Disaster Risk Reduction Network (PDRRN) if they were to diversify their funding sources. Local partners bemoaned how their work was lost in aggregated reports or was simply all attributed to Oxfam. For COM, their own visibility was immaterial to them as community organizers, but it was important to acknowledge the grassroots leaders they work with to enable their empowerment.

Oxfam in the Philippines is now more deliberate in naming partner organizations and grassroots leaders in their reports and communication materials. Beyond mere compliance with its C4C commitment, Oxfam recognizes that increasing partners' visibility affirms the partners' role in the response, makes partners known to potential donors, and builds the partners' track record with other stakeholders. Oxfam also reflects its local partners in the 3W<sup>14</sup> reports which are consolidated by UNOCHA for the Humanitarian Country Team. While the impact of these may not yet be apparent in terms of partners' ability to access more funds, it does make their work more visible to donors. Also, the increased acknowledgment of the presence and initiatives of local humanitarian actors challenges the notion that local actors do not have the capacity to respond. This is fundamental to changing the discourse for LHL.

## 3. Feminism in Humanitarian Action

Like poverty and inequality, disasters affect women and men differently. Being blind to these differences can lead to disparate impacts of humanitarian action, most often to the disadvantage of women and girls. One of the commitments of Oxfam in the Philippines is to include women's rights organizations (WROs) and human rights organizations (HROs) in humanitarian responses.



## **Enhanced quality of the response by partnering with WROs**

Oxfam in the Philippines' longstanding approach of partnerships with local actors who subscribe to gender equality has led to a strong gender dimension in its humanitarian response. Women-led households were prioritized as people identified for assistance. Women-sensitive hygiene kits and other special practical gender needs were included in relief packs. Protection measures were enhanced, especially in the context of preventing sexual exploitation and abuse. Referrals to government agencies were made in incidents of gender-based violence.

This was further strengthened by purposive partnerships with WROs. Since partners were already conducting gender-sensitive programming and organizing women leaders, it was initially difficult for them to see the significance of supporting WROs as partners in a response. But the benefits of this approach became apparent when WROs further enhanced the responses with their contributions. Cash for care work was introduced alongside cash for work, for instance. There is also a growing emphasis on enabling access to sexual and reproductive health and rights within responses. Moreover, the leadership role of women in the community was given more recognition as they led their families, unorganized IDPs, women's economic empowerment organizations, and POs.

Oxfam in the Philippines has delivered on its commitment of conducting gender snapshot studies for its bigger responses.

## **Gender transformation through strategic structural analysis**

The goal in supporting a feminist approach to LHL is to rectify power inequities by focusing on the dismantling of harmful structures and the decentralization of false hierarchies (Kergoat, et al., 2020). While gender-sensitive programming is the first step forward, WROs and HROs are expected to lead critical analysis of structures and narratives that promote or sustain oppressive gender constructs. When the "tyranny of the urgent" rules, such critical analysis is often set aside, and humanitarian actors settle for gender-sensitive action.

WROs and HROs have been hardwired to conduct critical gender analyses and translate these to gender-sensitive, -responsive, and -transformative interventions. Through their own responses, AMDF, UNYPHIL, and IDEALS have raised awareness of women's rights through local mass media, distribution of reading materials, and other knowledge-sharing activities. But the core of their work has gone beyond emergency response and into policy advocacy where they promote gender equality and prevent gender-based violence.

Like development partners, it is difficult to appreciate the contribution of WROs and HROs if the evaluation lens is focused only on their role during the disaster response timeline. Stocktaking must investigate community dynamics beyond project periods in order to appreciate the changes in power structures. Similarly, the presence of WROs in the response consortia can be maximized by facilitating sharing among partners on the norms and constructs that shape gender relations.

## **B. Strength of Local Humanitarian Actors**

In its Strategic Partnership Model, Oxfam in the Philippines states it can add value to partners through resource mobilization and linking partners to donors, technical inputs, and capacity development, and building relationships [Oxfam Pilipinas, 2017].

## 1. Funding

### Funding follows partnership

Increased direct funding to local humanitarian actors has become one of the markers of localization.

Globally, Oxfam has committed at least 20% of its humanitarian funding to direct local funding.<sup>15</sup> In the Philippines, by the end of fiscal year 2018–2019, national and subnational partners received 85% of Oxfam in the Philippines' humanitarian budget (Oxfam Pilipinas, 2019). This was made possible by its commitment to a Strategic Partnership Model and the corollary changes to its organizational structure, which saw a leaner Oxfam humanitarian team.

With such high allocation rates, there is an opportunity to publicly raise the commitment of Oxfam in the Philippines to 80% or even 90%. Raising the bar this high sets an example for other Oxfam country programs and partnership-based INGOs. More importantly, it shakes up the incremental reform narrative of localization to demonstrate that the humanitarian architecture can be overhauled.

### Resource mobilization support

In addition to eligibility requirements and established track records with donors, large funding calls necessitate not just a feasible and relevant proposal but also entail having in place the governance, program support and accountability policies and systems, all of which require significant investments that are usually beyond the reach of smaller local actors. In addition, funding calls would generally be for a large beneficiary reach and a wide geographical spread, which small actors could not deliver if they were to work on their own.

Resource mobilization for partners is thus a key role for Oxfam. Having a global standing in the humanitarian system, and a network of Oxfam partner affiliates across the world, with access to back donors, allows Oxfam in the Philippines a relatively steadier source of funding for disaster response. Where funding calls require an international identity or partnership brokering, Oxfam steps in as lead proponent.

Given such conditions, another goal is for local partners to directly access other funding opportunities. Oxfam in the Philippines staff check if local partners are aware of funding calls and if they need support or need to build a consortium. Oxfam in the Philippines also has a standing policy of not competing with local actors for calls that are accessible to the latter.

### Funding models

From the study, several funding “models” have been employed by Oxfam in the Philippines to enhance the access of local actors to financing and/or support resource mobilization and donor compliance. These include the following:

- Direct funding to individual partners from Oxfam's internal funds.
- Including partners in consortia funded by external donors such as ECHO.
- Re-directing donations to local partners when donations can only be coursed through Oxfam.

Partners find all these different funding models can demonstrate LHL. The elements they considered critical were local partners' role in decision-making processes (e.g., joint assessment, strategy development, and evaluation), influence over “lead agencies,” and independence in core humanitarian action.

Each funding model fits a particular purpose, a set of diverse local partners, and financing opportunity. The objective is not necessarily to define the best practice or model, but to recognize that LHL is about co-developing context-specific mechanisms and arrangements. It is ideal that local actors exercise leadership in facilitating and developing these funding models. However, the earlier discussion on perspectives of local actors showed a preference for spending their time more on core activities (i.e., community-based humanitarian action) instead of front-end (e.g., fundraising) or back-end functions (e.g., donor compliance). Until local actors have prioritized and developed these front- and back-end functions, Oxfam in the Philippines and other INGOs will need to continue their role of brokering partnerships, resource mobilization, and donor compliance support towards LHL.

## 2. Technical Inputs and Capacity Development

### Capacity sharing with local actors

Annual stocktaking and this study revealed that Oxfam in the Philippines added value to partners' work through resource mobilization for different disaster phases and by increasing the visibility of partners' capacity and humanitarian action through its communications work. It also added value by co-designing, guiding, and supporting the monitoring and evaluation done by partners and by the sharing of technical expertise and capacity building on various aspects such as disaster preparedness, gender mainstreaming, child safeguarding, prevention of sexual abuse and exploitation, psychosocial support, WASH, cash programming and financial inclusion. These roles were, in fact, jointly identified with partners.

Because of the strict requirements of back donors, Oxfam in the Philippines provides MEAL support for partners. This is widely appreciated as a valuable contribution from Oxfam in ensuring that partners can access larger-scale funding opportunities. In addition, some local partners observe that stronger MEAL capacity enables local organizations to access other donors.

Oxfam in the Philippines, in turn, had to enhance its capacity in working within a strategic partnership rather than its former, more directly operational model – to work in a more equal manner with partners, to be more facilitative, to listen and be sensitive to partners' contexts, and to effectively represent and negotiate on their behalf with other stakeholders, such as donors.

### Contribution to global localization discourse

Oxfam's global strategy on LHL continues to be defined by learning from experiences and projects that promote localization. The Financial Enablers Project (FEP) implemented in the Philippines by an Oxfam-led consortium under DEPP was ground-breaking. The project invited a wide array of local actors to collaborate in consortia and propose self-determined humanitarian capacity development projects. HRC was able to enhance its pre-positioned stockpile. A quick response fund was also established so that HRC could immediately conduct emergency assessments and provide initial relief assistance during rapid assessments.

More than the actual change in capacity of the local consortia, the FEP provided an alternative way to resource local actors according to their terms and needs. The different consortia allocated among themselves the pooled grant based on their respective proposals.

### Shifting capacity needs with place-based partnerships

Various training and learning activities have been highly appreciated by partners. Strategic partners who have been attending similar training over the years urge Oxfam to develop sharper learning capacity and needs assessments. This will allow better targeting of activity participants and deepen workshop designs by enabling more sharing of learning by experienced partners.

The current effort, driven by the pandemic, to expand place-based partnerships in hazard-prone regions, will require a change in capacity development strategies. In addition to supporting stockpiles and QRFs, capacity development will also mean orienting local development actors to humanitarian principles, standards, and practices.

Moreover, it will be good to explore how organizational development can be supported alongside individual capacity development. When development organizations undertake a humanitarian surge, it is the entire organization – from the board of directors to frontliners to administration and finance teams – that is engaged and mobilized. An organization-wide assessment of humanitarian response readiness will need to be done to identify capacity development interventions for systems, teams, and individuals.

The goal is not necessarily to convert development actors into humanitarian ones. Instead, capacity development can be geared towards developing or strengthening the links between humanitarian and development work to build disaster-resilient communities. The DEPP project Linking Preparedness, Response, and Resilience outlines six core principles to do this<sup>16</sup> (Murphy, Pelling, Di Vicenz, & Visman, 2017). These core principles are already considered areas of expertise of local development actors.

Local development actors also want to develop long-term solutions to complement life-saving humanitarian actions. In the COVID-19 response, for example, local partners found that psychological first aid was insufficient, since engagement with people with trauma needed to be long-term. So, they sought advanced training on developing a community-based psychosocial support program. In another case, the aim was to develop WASH capacities that could be applied even in non-disaster-affected communities. These examples show that there is a need to look into humanitarian training programs and make adjustments in the areas that assume only short-term engagement of responders.

## C. Space

The problems in the humanitarian sector point to structural issues that require more than a few willing donors and empowered local actors. Structures and policies and processes currently provide incentives for centralized large-scale responses. Such a situation tends to foster a culture of exclusiveness among humanitarian experts and encourages accountability primarily towards donors. For LHL to succeed, it will require “trust in the leadership and capacities of local actors and support an enabling environment for their leadership in preparedness and response” (Oxfam, 2017).

### **Challenging invisible power that disenables local humanitarian leadership**

For Oxfam in the Philippines, medium-scale disaster responses could be led by local partners. Larger-scale responses may involve surge from the regional or international teams. The assumption is that local actors are also affected and may not be able to immediately respond. But historically, localization issues arose when international humanitarian actors ran over local actors in the aftermath of major disasters. In the case of Tropical Storm (TS) Ketsana, partnership with local actors was initiated primarily to reinforce the response being carried out by Oxfam in the Asia region. It was similar during STY Haiyan, when partners recounted that they were asked to commit staff to the Oxfam response.

Supporting the LHL space requires challenging the assumption that local actors do not have the capacity to lead, and instead look at the barriers to local leadership.

### **Affirming power of local actors, not just partners**

By recognizing strategic partners, Oxfam in the Philippines purposively built relationships for its portfolio of humanitarian partners. Various consortia have also been facilitated by Oxfam to enable teaming up of

partners working in a common area or to bring in specific areas of expertise for a funding opportunity. Familiarity with each other and trust have been cited as facilitating factors to ensure good working relationships. However, the selection of partners is often based on what they can contribute to the response and their relationship with Oxfam in the Philippines, rather than their relationships with each other.

To push for LHL, change cannot be limited to individuals or a narrow set of partners but must extend through bonding (like-minded organizations) and bridging networks (different interest groups).

The experience with the COVID-19 response illustrates this. At the time the pandemic broke out, HRC's capacity was already stretched with several simultaneous disaster responses. This situation exposed the limitations of the model of having a few strong partners that could surge anywhere. Due to the restrictions on travel and mobility during the pandemic, it instead became necessary to have more place-based local partners. National or regional networks are good sources of access to more local actors in different hazard-prone areas of the country.

### **Enabling community-based social development actors**

Many community-based actors employ the strategy of organizing the community towards developing the local capacities of residents; this strategy has led to the formation of people's organizations (POs). For NGOs who employ this strategy, their ideal model is for the POs to be active in any response. Recognizing community organizing as a long process, some partners would accept surging into a new community only if the duration of the project is sufficient for building the capacity of community members to respond.

Some partners said that humanitarian response, when delivered by international NGOs, tends to focus only on the delivery of services. There is barely any capacity-building of humanitarian systems of the local government. There is also hardly any follow-up after distribution is done.

Ultimately, it is government that has the mandate for leading a response; thus, NGOs have to engage local government units in order to ensure coordinated actions. For some, supporting local governments in improving their systems and capacities is actually a preparedness strategy. Community organizing is a complementary strategy, to ensure that community members are able to engage with government through their organizations.

In terms of relationships with the private sector, several partnerships have been forged over the years, particularly in facilitating financial inclusion in humanitarian projects. Such financial inclusion efforts have resulted in enhanced security in cash programming, savings in transactional costs, developing new services such as insurance models, and faster processing in case of repeat emergencies.

However, the initiative specifically of digital cash transfers has encountered a number of issues such as compliance challenges, technical and connectivity issues, and linking with small markets. There was also some resistance from partners, especially new ones and those who were not digital natives. One partner even felt that they would be used as the marketing arm of the private sector. New partners during the COVID-19 response shared the same apprehension and said it was their primary issue with the partnership.

But other partners saw the potential benefits. During the Marawi siege, PDRRN noted how people receiving assistance appreciated it. Through the response, they gained access to identification cards that were necessary for mobility during the enforcement of martial law in the city. COM appreciated the technology after asking all their responding community organizers to patronize the platform first before rolling out to the community. The benefits became even more pronounced when the pandemic forced a large part of the population to switch to digital transactions.

While it brought a lot of birthing pains for partners, most of the partners also appreciated that Oxfam was open to other modalities in case they did not see the platform fit their local context.

### **Towards supporting LHL movements**

Much of the LHL strategy is already applied with Oxfam in the Philippines' existing partners. To create a larger impact, however, Oxfam maximizes opportunities to engage with local CSO initiatives that promote locally led responses. As mentioned earlier, many of these were an offshoot of the DEPP projects of the Start Network. These include formal and informal consortia of local actors for various localization themes. Balik Lokal undertakes advocacy work for localization and supports DRRNetPhils in its DRR policy advocacy. PPERR facilitates coordination among local NGOs during emergencies and is part of the HCT together with DRRNetPhils. SAFER is a local pooled fundraising initiative. Not surprisingly, many of the leaders of these initiatives include local partners of Oxfam in the Philippines such as HRC, PDRRN, ASDSW, IDEALS, CDP, DRRNetPhils, and PHILSSA.

## **D. Oxfam Change**

### **Localization as programmatic instead of project-based change**

The Grand Bargain brought numerous humanitarian actors on board with the process of localization. However, the process of change has been uneven across the different international humanitarian actors or even within them. There is still uneven understanding of the definitions and indicators of localization. Many INGOs have approached localization as a budget reallocation exercise, a project (i.e., fixed resources, time-bound interventions, activity assigned personnel, etc.) or an enhancement of bilateral partnership with local actors. While these are important changes in the right direction, the ambition of LHL is a paradigm shift that will change the systems of humanitarian action.

Oxfam in the Philippines has endeavored to internalize the spirit of LHL. This commitment can be attributed to the broader Strategic Partnership Model it has adopted and which is strongly subscribed to by its leadership. The strategy necessitated changes in internal direction, policies, ways of working, and building partnerships for it to promote the voices of local actors and create an enabling space for LHL. It undertook an action-learning process in applying LHL in the Philippine context.

### **Localization influenced by local leadership**

An alternative measure of success of LHL is to determine how much of the beliefs, practices, or behaviors of the local actors have been adopted by Oxfam in the Philippines. There have been many changes that may not necessarily be attributed to partners, but are certainly reflective of how partners practice LHL. The biggest transformation is the shift to a Strategic Partnership Model. As mentioned earlier, valuing social interactions – not just the project outputs – is a fundamental characteristic of LHL.

There is an increasing appreciation of the humanitarian-development-peace nexus. While earlier partners complained about project-based silos, the purposive shift towards a portfolio approach was an attempt to understand contexts from a local actor's perspective.

The expansion to more place-based partners is an acknowledgement of the need to be as close as possible to affected communities. While facilitating the formation of the HRC was a big step in terms of localizing Oxfam in the Philippines' humanitarian action, the model still resembles Oxfam's surge approach. Strategic partnerships that are now being explored with local networks in high-risk regions are expected to further change Oxfam's ways of working in terms of supporting capacity development and coordination.



## **Southern affiliation as an opportunity and challenge to localization**

The process within Oxfam International of increasing the number of its affiliates in the global South requires, among others, the national registration of its country affiliates. This adds to the trend of INGOs registering locally as local organizations, a trend which has received mixed feedback from internal and external advocates of localization. Southern affiliation provides a much-needed national voice in the global decision-making processes of INGOs. However, it is also viewed by many as an attempt to circumvent localization by providing a platform to generate resources earmarked for national actors. It can also ease local actors out of national political, social, and economic platforms by fundraising locally or influencing policies using their global brand.

Given such a situation, Oxfam in the Philippines' national registration becomes a double-edged sword on localization. In the spirit of its LHL strategy and commitment to the C4C, Oxfam in the Philippines still defines itself as an international NGO since it is part of an international network. It will also remain faithful to its long-standing policy in the Philippines of not competing with local actors for funding opportunities but to serve as a resource mobilization asset for local partners.

During the pandemic, Oxfam's digital financing partner in the Philippines included Oxfam in its array of charities that could receive donations directly through the digital platform. This created an internal dilemma, given Oxfam in the Philippines' commitment to avoid competing with local partners for resources. It managed the situation by using it as an opportunity to communicate the work of local partners, and 100% of funds raised via this platform were dedicated to these partners.

## **Localization and empowerment as an evolving struggle**

The pressure now is for local partners to hold Oxfam and other international actors accountable for their commitment to localization. Even while structures and processes are being reformed, more challenges come, especially when staff and leadership transitions happen.

A vision of empowering local humanitarian actors is daunting since it compels international actors to ask the existential question, "Do we have a role to play in a humanitarian system led by local actors?" But this is not unique to international actors since all NGOs subscribing to an empowerment approach strive to render themselves obsolete as they cede power to the people they serve.

Yet it has been shown time and again that it is not necessarily the presence or existence of actors that is in question, but the roles they take. INGOs currently provide bridging functions in terms of financing, coordination, and capacity development to local humanitarian actors in a path towards LHL. Where local actors are taking the lead in humanitarian action because of their power to represent affected communities, INGOs are best positioned to represent local actors, if not facilitate their actual participation, in international platforms.

**Localization and empowerment are evolving actions and decisions taken by people to uphold principles they believe in.** Local humanitarian leadership, rather than being an end-state, is a continuous journey and challenge for all actors – for international agencies to recognize the power that local actors already demonstrate, and for local actors to be critical of the narratives that have kept them marginalized and to animate their power within.

## CONCLUSION AND WAYS FORWARD

The study shows the unique perspectives of local actors regarding localization and local humanitarian leadership. For local partners, local humanitarian leadership is about local institutions – present in and empowered by the trust bestowed upon them by vulnerable communities and having a development rather than humanitarian focus alone – having more voice in humanitarian partnerships and response development.

The premium on institutions being as local as possible goes beyond having local knowledge of the contexts, relationships, and ambitions of the community. It also involves having a reliable presence before, during, and after a crisis. This also becomes critical in establishing an identity that vulnerable people can trust to own the lifesaving, poverty-reducing, and inequality-ending decisions made on their behalf. Such a perspective entails international actors putting more emphasis on partnering and capacitating actors present in vulnerable communities and less on the capacity of institutions to surge. It implies reconfiguring humanitarian funding opportunities to be more accessible to smaller and simpler local organizations. Humanitarian strategies would have to capitalize on small organizations' strength in consolidating services to get affected communities back on their feet, instead of delivering goods and services to as many communities as possible.

This perspective means that these local organizations are mostly development-oriented. International and national actors must recognize that the humanitarian system is embedded in and not separate from local development systems. The capacity of vulnerable communities to absorb stresses, recover from shocks, and self-organize emanates from pre-existing social capital. Various local actors play complementary and balancing roles that directly impact lives or the enabling environment, capacity development, governance and economic discourse, knowledge development, and solidarity and collaboration. Social capital must be recovered, and development systems must continue to function as quickly as possible when disaster strikes.

Promoting LHL entails a shift in power relationships from international to local actors. This implies more voice from local actors in the partnership and in the response project development process. The emphasis of response projects should shift to enhancing the quality of humanitarian interaction between affected populations and the responding local actors. This swings the partnership goals towards capacitating local frontliners to be effective responders and become genuine representatives of affected communities.

Shifting the power from international to local actors to address deep-seated issues in the humanitarian system is a difficult and long, drawn-out process. However, donors and international actors have much to learn from the practical experience of Oxfam in the Philippines in promoting LHL.

- **Develop a holistic strategic partnership model with local organizations or networks present in vulnerable communities.** Being strategic requires the partnership to go beyond project-based disaster responses. This allows the partnership to capitalize on the development orientation of local actors to address underlying causes of the vulnerabilities of communities. This involves conducting due diligence, contingency planning exercises, relationship building engagements, and capacity sharing agreements before the onset of crises. Moreover, refraining from direct implementation to ensure local partners lead radically shifts budget allocations towards more direct local funding.
- **Support women's rights organizations and rights-based organizations.** Beyond having a gender-sensitive response, the impact of promoting feminist and right-based strategies in the affected communities spills over to long-term development work.

- **Install joint decision-making mechanisms in all phases of project development.** These joint mechanisms allow local humanitarian actors to influence the project design while immediately securing commitments to respond immediately and manage expectations accordingly.
- **Provide inclusive financing and support.** Diverse, devolved, and decentralized financing requires more windows for local actors to access funds. This may involve arrangements wherein networks or other local stakeholders accompany more local actors to comply with financing requirements. Revised terms, reduced conditionalities, and support for compliance allows local partners to strengthen their capacity and build their confidence. Multi-year funding commitments that include budgets for institutional sustainability enables local partners to invest in building capacity to respond. Tracking and publishing fund allocations enable greater accountability to affected communities and the localization agenda.
- **Champion localization both locally and globally.** International actors have the potential to serve as models for localization and advocates for localization amongst their peers and partners. This entails demonstrating and promoting good localization practices and strategic local partnerships amongst international actors through effective communication strategies. Increasing the visibility of local partners with donors enhances the sustainability of partners. Endorsing the capacity and credibility of local partners breaks down narratives that disempower local actors and rationalize internationalization of humanitarian action. This will also push donors to more aggressively demand accountability from their international partners to establish quality partnerships with local organizations.
- **Redefine success to be more reflective of localization reforms and the development-humanitarian nexus.** The above actions reorient and expand the indicators of success of humanitarian actions. Indicators should also include the recovery of social capital of affected communities, the connectedness of humanitarian action to community development, the quality of humanitarian interactions between responders and the community, the quality of relationships between the local responders and funders, the visibility of local humanitarian actors, effective incentives for localization and local humanitarian leadership, etc.

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## NOTES

- 1 United Nations humanitarian agencies, the International Committee of the Red Cross, and large INGO confederations.
- 2 25 Member States, 22 NGOs, 12 UN agencies, two Red Cross movements, and two inter-governmental organizations.
- 3 Project-based Partnership, Three-Layered Partnership, CSO-led Consortium-based Partnership, and Survivor and Community-Led Crisis Response.
- 4 Aksyon sa Kahandaan sa Kalamidad at Klima (AKKMA) or Action for Disaster and Climate Preparedness.
- 5 Disaster Risk Reduction – Climate Change Adaptation.
- 6 Shared Aid for Emergency Response.
- 7 Localization is described 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” (Oxfam in the Philippines, 2020).
- 8 Armed conflict between the government and pro-ISIS militants in the Islamic City of Marawi. This resulted in the bombardment of the city and the displacement of hundreds of thousands of residents of Marawi and adjacent towns.
- 9 BASECO is prone to storm surges and fire and is vulnerable to liquefaction in the case of earthquakes.
- 10 Local humanitarian actors exercise leadership by influencing or having power over the humanitarian priorities in their country through their participation, advocacy, and relationships.
- 11 Local humanitarian actors have the capacity to deliver humanitarian response through organizational (including systems, management, standards, and mission) and leadership capacity (including the ability to mobilize stakeholders together and create synergy).
- 12 Key stakeholders in the humanitarian system recognize and trust in the leadership and capacities of local actors and support an enabling environment for their leadership in preparedness and response (including access to greater direct and indirect funding, equitable partnerships, technical expertise, political space to operate, information, and decision-making spaces).
- 13 The LHL agenda impacts on our own systems and ways of working, and Oxfam is committed to pursue the internal changes required for Oxfam – especially at central or headquarters levels – to support this agenda and to fulfil its Charter for Change commitments.
- 14 *Who does What Where (3W)* tool is being used in information management for coordination and activity gap analysis. According to UNHCR (n.d.), “Raw data from 3W can support emergency programme monitoring, and contribute to overall gap analysis by representing capacity that can be compared to needs.”
- 15 There are varying minimum fund allocation commitments, namely: 20% for C4C, 25% for Grand bargain, and 30% for Oxfam’s WHS commitment.
- 16 1. Allow and enable the community to co-run the response; 2. Where feasible, coordinate interventions and work with the government; 3. Support community cohesion and establish effective two-way communication between crises survivors and implementing organizations; 4. Address underlying causes of vulnerability: protect and prepare; 5. Recognize psychosocial support; and 6. Livelihoods and savings.



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