

HPG Commissioned Report

Localising emergency preparedness and response through partnerships

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Acronyms

CHS	Core Humanitarian Standard
CSO	Civil society organisation
DPP	Disaster preparedness plan
DRR	Disaster risk reduction
DRT	Disaster response team
HLDO	Hualngo Land Development Organisation
INGO	International non-governmental organisation
LNGO	Local non-governmental organisation
NGO	Non-governmental organisation
NRD	Northeastern Rural Development
SDF	Swanyee Development Foundation
SPACFI	Socio Pastoral Action Center of Daet
STRIDE	Strengthening Response Capacity and Institutional Development for Excellence
TDSP	Tekdeysovenphum Organization
UN	United Nations
WESADEF	Western Samar Development Foundation

1 Introduction

In recent years, issues related to localisation of aid,¹ partnership, and capacity strengthening² have become increasingly prominent within the humanitarian sector. This is evident both in discourse and initiatives such as the World Humanitarian Summit and Charter for Change,³ as well as within the strategies and approaches of governments, non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and United Nations (UN) agencies responding to crises. Calls for localisation are particularly strong in the disaster-prone region of Asia, with governments responding to humanitarian crises, such as those in Indonesia, Myanmar, Nepal and Bangladesh, limiting the access of international NGOs (INGOs) while encouraging (or requiring) them to work with local organisations. Within the shifting humanitarian landscape, such trends towards greater localisation have led many international stakeholders to reflect on their own organisational structure, and their approach to partnerships and capacity strengthening, and how these may need to adapt in response to structural and normative changes in the humanitarian sector.

It is within this context that Islamic Relief conducted a project titled ‘Strengthening Response Capacity and Institutional Development for Excellence (STRIDE)’. Initiated in 2016, STRIDE is a 33-month project with an overall objective to ‘Improve efficiency and effectiveness of Islamic Relief’s humanitarian response’ in the Asia region. The project was led by Islamic Relief staff at the regional level in Asia and humanitarian focal points from the countries in which the project took place, which meant the project was grounded in a nuanced understanding of what localisation looked like in each context. Overall, the project provided an opportunity for Islamic Relief to take concrete action towards its global policy commitments (such as Charter for Change), while also identifying and strengthening

their own capacity and filling capacity gaps in emergency preparedness and response.

In 2018, following the completion of the first iteration of the project, Islamic Relief Worldwide commissioned the Humanitarian Policy Group (HPG) to conduct a study reviewing outcomes and learnings from STRIDE. This research was accomplished through a desk review and interviews. HPG conducted a total of 20 interviews with Islamic Relief staff (from headquarters, Bangladesh, India, Indonesia, Myanmar, Nepal, Pakistan and the Philippines), as well as eight interviews with staff at local NGOs (LNGOs) (in Cambodia, Myanmar, Nepal, and the Philippines) that participated in STRIDE. The desk-based approach to data collection meant that HPG researchers were unable to visit the local organisations and their communities, which would have allowed a deeper understanding of the context and access to the perceptions of other stakeholders on this project. While field research would have provided this additional information, the desk-based nature of the research did not significantly limit the findings. HPG researchers reviewed over 40 documents (including the project proposal, narrative reports, capacity assessment tools and disaster preparedness and response plans). To situate learning from the project in the context of the broader humanitarian sector, the authors also reflected and relied upon other literature, including recent HPG research related to capacity and localisation in the humanitarian sector (Barbelet, 2018; Wake and Bryant, 2018).

The remainder of the report is structured as follows. Chapter 2 provides an overview of STRIDE, Chapter 3 explores programmatic successes, challenges and learning and Chapter 4 discusses the broader implications of the project and ways forward. The concluding chapter provides recommendations for Islamic Relief as well as the wider humanitarian sector.

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- 1 The STRIDE project defines localisation as ‘the arrangements to enable decision making and taking actions at actual level’ (STRIDE Localisation Framework). For more discussion on the definition of localisation, see Barbelet (2018).
 - 2 The STRIDE project defines capacity building as ‘A continuous process to develop, enhance and sustain the skills, competencies and knowledge base at individual and organizational level to perform day-to-day tasks in an efficient and effective manner’ (STRIDE Localisation Framework).
 - 3 The Charter for Change is an initiative, led by both national and international NGOs, to practically implement changes to the way the humanitarian system operates to enable more locally-led response. The Charter for Change includes eight Commitments that INGOs agree to implement, to address imbalances and inequality in the global humanitarian system. For more on the Charter for Change see <https://charter4change.org/>.

2 STRIDE: an overview

The overall aim of STRIDE was to improve the capacity of select Islamic Relief country offices and LNGO organisations in Asia. It aimed to expand the outreach of Islamic Relief in disaster-prone countries where it was non- or semi-operational by forging partnerships and supporting the capacity development of LNGOs.

The project prioritised target countries based on their hazard profile and vulnerability, low preparedness levels, and Islamic Relief presence. The four priority countries where Islamic Relief has a presence were **Afghanistan, India, Indonesia and Sri Lanka**, while prioritised semi-operational and non-presence countries were **Cambodia, Myanmar, Nepal and the Philippines**.

STRIDE had two intended outcomes. The first was to improve preparedness levels and strengthen links between Islamic Relief country programmes

and national and regional networks for sharing and cross-learning. Key objectives were for country programmes to have: standard operating procedures, policies and systems in place for effective emergency preparedness and response; trained regional and national disaster response teams (DRTs) in place; and an established network of civil society organisations (CSOs), professionals and key stakeholders on emergency preparedness and response in Asia. The second intended outcome (for priority non-presence and semi-operational countries) was to enhance the capacity of local organisations in emergency preparedness and response. Key objectives were for all local organisations in these countries to adopt an effective action plan for organisational development, and to increase the knowledge and skills of key staff on emergency preparedness and response.

See Table 1 for STRIDE's four key deliverables.

Figure 1: STRIDE-focused countries in Asia

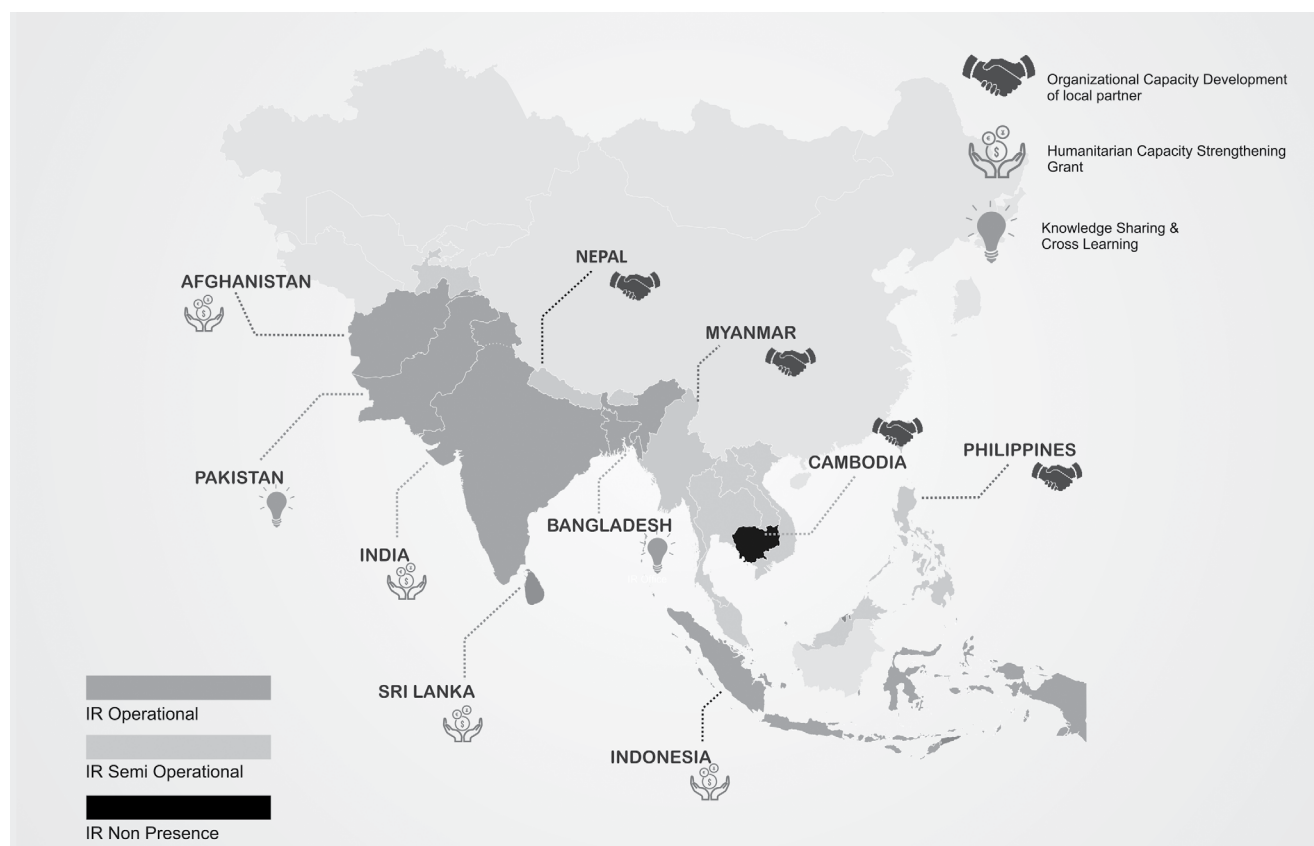


Table 1: The four key deliverables of STRIDE

Outcome 1: Islamic Relief country programmes have improved preparedness levels and strengthened linkages with national and regional networks for sharing and cross-learning	
Deliverable	To be achieved through
Enhanced preparedness at country and regional level	Provision of Humanitarian Strengthening Grant and support to the focus countries
Comprehensive capacity-building initiatives	Capacity building of disaster response teams at Asia regional level through capacity needs assessments and individual action plans
Linkages with regional bodies and specialised institute	Creating a regional network of professional and local civil societies initiated and led by Islamic Relief
Outcome 2: Enhanced organisational capacity of local partners in emergency preparedness and response in priority non-presence countries	
Deliverable	To be achieved through
Organisational development of local partners	Institutional development and capacity strengthening interventions of local partners in semi- and non-presence countries in Asia

While an initial deliverable, the project team quickly decided against the creation of a regional network as several such networks already existed. Instead, they refocused their efforts on providing an opportunity for LNGOs to network and build links with the wider humanitarian community and donors in the region by organising a learning conference in Bangkok, and developing an online platform for STRIDE participants to continue networking.

2.1 STRIDE management

Funding for the project was provided by Islamic Relief USA. To increase equity in the partnership and ownership of the process, LNGOs contributed a portion of their budgets (their contributions ranged between 5% and 28.5% of the total budget). The project was led by Islamic Relief staff and various consultants in Asia – while a few staff worked full

time on STRIDE, many contributed in addition to their existing roles and responsibilities.

Oversight and support was provided by a regional team and headquarters, as well as two formal project structures: the steering committee, who provided strategic guidance and oversight, and technical working groups. There were three working groups – Disaster Preparedness and Training, Organisational Development, and Networking and Collaboration – which emerged organically, based on the impetus of Islamic Relief staff, who were enthusiastic about the project and willing to contribute. These groups were created to ensure ownership of the project within the region and among Islamic Relief staff. By participating, staff volunteered to share their experience and technical insights by leading local organisation selection, providing technical guidance, developing and revising tools, and more. The working groups thus provided fora in which to draw on the experience of staff working across Islamic Relief, troubleshoot challenges, reflect on experiences as the project progressed and adapt plans accordingly.

2.2 STRIDE and Islamic Relief

STRIDE strengthened the capacity of Islamic Relief at both an organisational and individual level. The organisational objective was to enhance preparedness at country and regional level through the provision of grants and support to country offices. Islamic Relief carried out a baseline assessment of their country offices in Asia to assess their disaster preparedness and response capacity. Based on this assessment⁴ (which included ten indicators such as programmes, humanitarian funding and compliance, monitoring, evaluation, accountability and learning), capacity gaps were identified, and Afghanistan, India, Indonesia, and Sri Lanka were prioritised as the Islamic Relief country offices to benefit from the project's capacity-strengthening component. These offices were supported by internal staff from the region and external consultants in revising the emergency response standard operating procedures as well as strengthening – or developing for newer country offices – a disaster preparedness plan (DPP).

At the individual level, the objective was to strengthen the capacity of DRT members through capacity needs assessments and individual action plans.

⁴ The STRIDE preparedness assessment was adapted by Islamic Relief from the minimum preparedness actions and advance preparedness actions developed under the ALERT project (alertpreparedness.org), a consortium led by HelpAge International of which Islamic Relief was a member. ALERT is a project funded by DEPP and managed by the START Network. It was important for Islamic Relief to align work under STRIDE to other initiatives they were involved in on emergency preparedness.

Staff members from the country offices and Islamic Relief's DRT – the surge team Islamic Relief deploys to respond to emergencies – benefited from tailored training. The capacity-building framework and disaster preparedness tools developed by Islamic Relief guided the assessment and development of plans for capacity-strengthening. The cycle of capacity needs assessment and analysis for DRT included:

- core competency mapping (identifying a list of job descriptions and competencies required to respond to an emergency);
- designing the capacity assessment and analysis framework;
- conducting capacity needs assessment and analysis against this framework;
- developing capacity-building plans and training modules based on identified gaps and needs;
- and monitoring of capacity-building interventions.

2.3 STRIDE and LNGO partnerships

STRIDE focused on four countries in which Islamic Relief was semi-operational or non-operational: Cambodia, Myanmar, Nepal and the Philippines. Islamic Relief instigated a competitive selection process and eventually selected seven LNGOs with which to partner – BATAS Foundation in Nepal, the Socio Pastoral Action Center of Daet (SPACFI) and Western Samar Development Foundation (WESADEF) in the Philippines, the Hualngo Land Development Organization (HLDO) and Swanyee Development Foundation (SDF) in Myanmar, and Northeastern Rural Development (NRD) and Tekdeysovanphum Organization (TDSP) in Cambodia. Islamic Relief intentionally selected local organisations to participate in the project, opting to work with small- to medium-sized organisations (7–50 staff) with a historical presence serving their local communities. Rather than opt for larger NGOs, the selection process led Islamic Relief to work with the kind of LNGOs other international agencies might not partner with because they lacked the technical and organisational capacities (such as knowledge of humanitarian standards and strong finance and reporting systems) valued by international actors. Islamic Relief thus demonstrated a commitment to localisation insofar as it selected LNGOs that had shown dedication in serving their

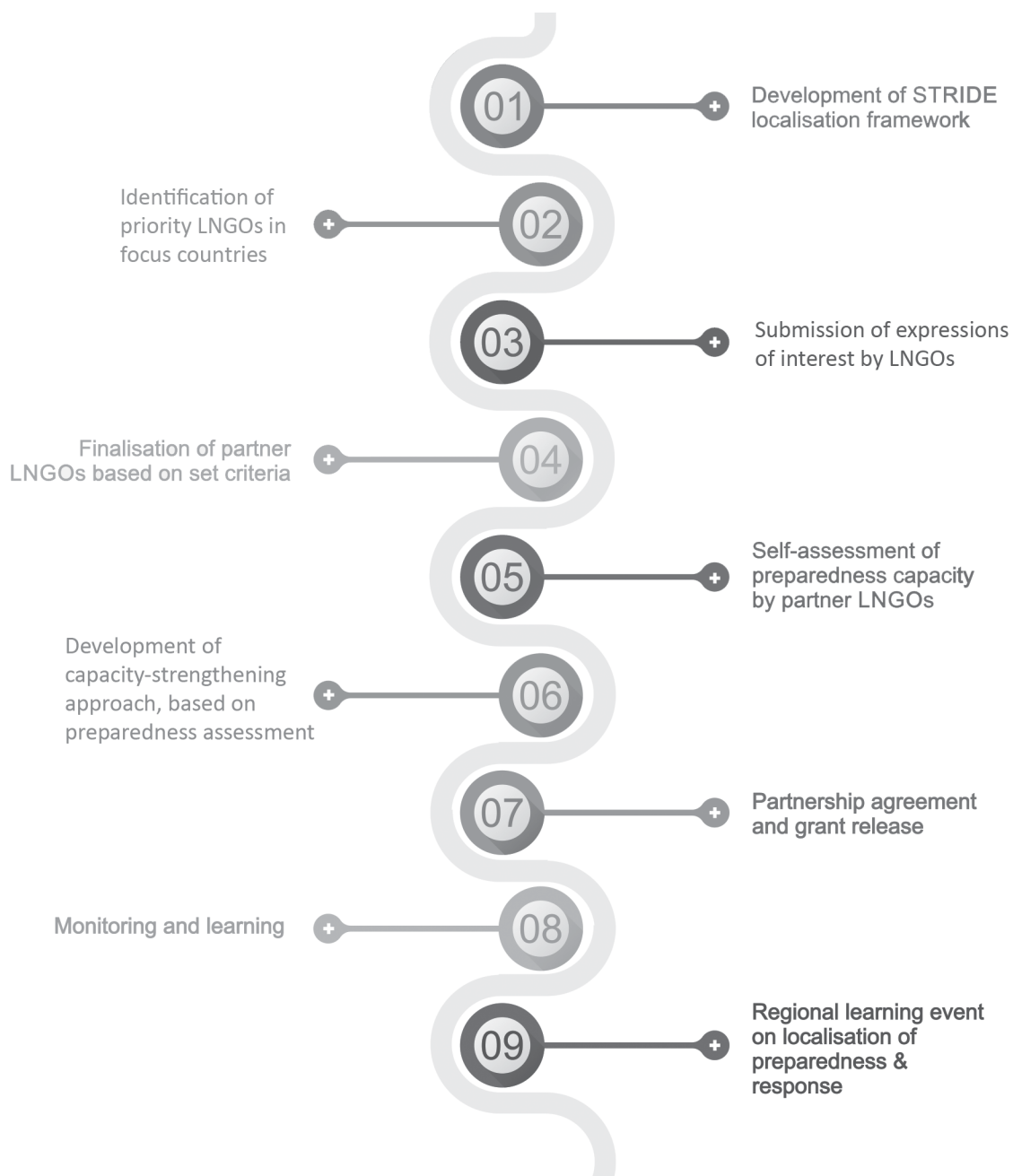
communities, but were not necessarily experienced in partnering or working in accordance with international standards and stakeholders. As will be discussed below, Islamic Relief chose such types of organisations on purpose.

The process through which Islamic Relief engaged LNGOs comprised:

- Submission of expression of interest by LNGOs.
- Selection of LNGOs according to set criteria based on a review of background information on the organisation, humanitarian mandate and experience, and existing partnerships and network membership.
- A comprehensive self-assessment of preparedness capacity (carried out by LNGOs, with support from Islamic Relief).
- Developing capacity-strengthening approaches based on the preparedness assessment (known as capacity-strengthening trajectories).
- Developing partnership agreements and grant release.
- Ongoing mentoring and learning.
- Convening a regional learning event attended by the LNGOs, Islamic Relief and international stakeholders.

A range of tools were used to guide these processes (including the capacity self-assessment tool, capacity-strengthening trajectory and budget templates), and over the course of the project LNGOs developed plans and outputs to serve their organisational needs (including disaster preparedness and response plans, standard operating procedures and strategic plans). The capacity-strengthening trajectories sought to strengthen overall organisational capacity for humanitarian work by developing policies and standard operating procedures in emergencies, as well as increasing knowledge of and adherence to international humanitarian standards. The objective of strengthening organisational capacity was to ensure that local organisations increased their ability to attract and manage funding for humanitarian response. Each LNGO had different organisational strengths, capacity gaps and mandates, and thus it was important that the project was flexible so that LNGOs could adapt and focus it according to their own context. Further details and reflections on the process of partnership selection, capacity assessment, and the experience of STRIDE from the perspective of LNGOs is set out in the following chapters.

Figure 2: The localisation process flow under the STRIDE project



3 Programmatic successes, challenges and learning

The research focused on learning from the partnership with local organisations and the approach to strengthening the capacity of local organisations that Islamic Relief implemented through STRIDE. Where relevant, the internal capacity strengthening part of the project is highlighted below. The below section highlights the successes, challenges and learning from the work implemented with local organisations.

3.1 Successes

Overall, the feedback on STRIDE from local organisations and Islamic Relief staff was very positive. Islamic Relief staff viewed the project as benefitting a range of stakeholders in both presence and non-presence countries. Local organisations said that they benefited from training on capacity self-assessments, humanitarian standards, finance, project management, and preparedness planning; that the project would contribute to the sustainability of their organisation; and that they remained ‘highly committed to utilising these significant experiences with [the local organisation’s] community and key stakeholders in the targeted areas’ (LNGO interview). The following section discusses what the research identified as the project’s key strengths and successes.

3.1.1 The selection of small- to medium-sized LNGOs was beneficial for both local organisations and Islamic Relief

For many of the LNGOs that participated in STRIDE, this was the first time they had experienced capacity-building of any kind; as one LNGO respondent told us, ‘In my 10 years no INGOs or donor agencies came with this concept of strengthening of LNGOs. In [this country], there are many INGOs that only support the project that they have decided before’. Another LNGO noted that, while there are many INGOs and UN agencies in their country, they ‘are not funding [Disaster Risk Reduction (DRR)] capacity-building to rural and remote areas, they just provide national level, but it doesn’t translate into rural or community level, this is the reason STRIDE is so excellent’. This illustrates the value of the selection

criteria, as they ensured that the organisations chosen had not previously received much (or any) capacity-strengthening support, and thus stood to benefit significantly from the project. This meant that the organisations Islamic Relief worked with were perhaps smaller and more locally connected to communities affected by crises than organisations that had already grown to become national-level actors.

From the perspective of Islamic Relief, STRIDE helped attract and forge partnerships. This is of particular value in countries such as Myanmar, where partnerships between LNGOs and INGOs are often strained and INGO access is extremely limited. It is important to recognise that it was not simply a matter of Islamic Relief selecting who to partner with – some

Box 1: Spotlight on the impact of STRIDE on a small LNGO

It is informative to consider the impact of STRIDE on one LNGO that participated in STRIDE, which was formed in 2013 and comprised only seven staff. Before taking part in the project, the LNGO did not have an operational manual in place and had never heard about disaster preparedness or emergency response plans. After participating in STRIDE the organisation had developed a five-year strategic plan, and produced its own DPP and standard operating procedures that it introduced to the local government, which was then motivated to prepare their own DPP. STRIDE also increased the capacity of the LNGO in terms of its financial and project cycle management, financial and computer software, monitoring and evaluation, and proposal development, as well as developing an emergency response team. Furthermore, the LNGO was able to build on another project they were working on with an INGO to strengthen the capacity of youth community leaders from 30 villages in disaster response – the youth have shared their learning back with their communities.

local organisations were cautious about partnering with Islamic Relief, and carefully considered the objectives of the project and consulted their boards of directors and the community they serve before deciding to do so. STRIDE provided a strong basis for forging partnerships and enabled Islamic Relief to expand the quantity and quality of its partnerships, which are now well positioned to support humanitarian responses in the event of a disaster.

Learning: Islamic Relief worked with LNGOs that had shown a commitment to serving their communities, yet had limited experience of capacity-strengthening and partnership with INGOs in disaster response. This ensured that the project benefited LNGOs that needed capacity support, while also helping Islamic Relief forge new partnerships and extend its reach, particularly in challenging contexts.

3.1.2 Flexible, organisational capacity-strengthening was valued and raised LNGOs' profiles

For both local organisations and Islamic Relief offices, STRIDE was inclusive and provided opportunities for a range of staff to participate. Rather than train one or two individuals, LNGOs said that most people in their organisations had been involved in the project. While the whole-of-organisation approach was facilitated by the small size of the local organisations, an element of this was also adopted by Islamic Relief in the project. The involvement of most of an LNGO's staff helped to mitigate the knowledge gap between programme staff/technical experts and staff who support the rest of the organisation. More importantly, the project strengthened organisational development – not just the capacity of the individuals who work there – by supporting the development of policies for finance, human resources, programmes, preparedness plans, and more.

Strengthening organisational capacity facilitates business continuity planning, ensuring that organisations could continue functioning during disaster, and enabling them to scale-up the delivery of humanitarian interventions during emergencies. It also allows these organisations to work more effectively, respond faster during emergencies and attract funding by meeting donor requirements. One LNGO said they were overwhelmed by project implementation and had not had time to focus on organisational development before STRIDE. Local organisations involved in the project were able to, among other things, improve governance through diversifying their board, develop five-year strategic plans, develop DPPs, set up standard operating procedures in emergencies for finance, human resource management and logistics,

make provision for emergency funding reserves, and establish an emergency response team.

LNGO respondents – many of whom work for NGOs with more experience in development than humanitarian work – also highlighted the value of focusing on humanitarian and emergency response. While the LNGOs involved in STRIDE had in the past responded to disasters as development-focused organisations, they recognised that their ad hoc approach to disaster response lacked expertise and know-how and thus welcomed the opportunity to develop their knowledge of humanitarian and emergency response through the project. They were able to develop structures and mandates as well as acquire specific humanitarian knowledge around international standards such as Sphere and the Core Humanitarian Standard (CHS). In a global context where many NGOs work at the humanitarian–development nexus, improving the ability of staff across departments to respond to humanitarian crises was greatly valued. Lastly, both Islamic Relief and LNGOs appreciated STRIDE's adaptability. While the overall project framework and tools provided a sound structure to the project, activities and tools were adapted for the specific needs and opportunities in each country. This flexibility was evident in the number of partners in each country and the variable number of people included in emergency response teams; one LNGO aligned their activities with the capacity-strengthening activities of an INGO partner to maximise synergies and impact.

Learning: Organisational capacity strengthening was greatly valued by local organisations, who felt it strengthened their ability to conduct both humanitarian and development work. Flexibility was highlighted as a key strength of the project, as it enabled country offices and LNGOs to decide what was needed based on the reality on the ground.

3.1.3 The steering committee and working group: enhancing participation, reflection and learning

The steering committee and working groups enhanced participation from across Islamic Relief and provided a mechanism for reflection and learning throughout. The steering committee and working groups capitalised on the skills and experience of Islamic Relief staff. By picking the members of the steering committee and working groups from the region, Islamic Relief drew on localised knowledge and staff members' in-depth understanding of regional and local realities and challenges. Involving more staff members also allowed Islamic Relief to share responsibilities and capitalise on opportunities across the region.

It also helped galvanise energy and commitment across Islamic Relief. The working groups helped connect each region's country offices and provided a forum for discussing challenges, learning and best practice when implementing projects. Similarly, the steering committee provided space for reflection and consultation as STRIDE progressed. While the working groups faced challenges at times – other commitments and time pressures were cited as causing delays and limiting participation and potential impact – they nevertheless provided valued support during crucial moments of the project.

Learning: The steering committee and working groups provided important, structured opportunities for staff across Islamic Relief to participate in STRIDE. It should be recognised, however, that participation was constrained because it was voluntary, and because staff members already had busy roles. In future, it may be pertinent to explore if and how staff who participate could be recognised for their contributions.

3.1.4 STRIDE had a multiplier effect beyond its initial objectives

Both Islamic Relief and local organisations described how STRIDE had a ripple or multiplier effect – it transferred knowledge and capacity to LNGOs, who then shared these benefits with their communities, authorities, and other NGOs. This often took the form of inviting others (such as community leaders, volunteers and members) to participate in training alongside them, or using their own resources to offer training. Islamic Relief staff also mentioned the synergy and added value of growing and learning together with LNGOs participating in the project, as capacity strengthening for emergency preparedness and response was happening at the same time. For example, one country office invited the local organisations to join them when they developed their own DPP, and they exchanged views and learning. Both Islamic Relief staff and LNGOs said that they wished there had been more opportunities and funding for them to engage with and conduct training for the communities they served, authorities, and the private sector, and thus communicate what they had learned.

A ripple effect of the project was the increased profile of LNGOs. Numerous LNGOs noted that participating in STRIDE had increased their capacity

as well as enhanced their reputation with other NGOs and authorities, who now recognised their knowledge and expertise (such as on Sphere standards). As a result, LNGOs had been approached by authorities and other NGOs to share their learning with them.

Learning: The potential impact of STRIDE reaches far beyond Islamic Relief and LNGO partners. The knowledge and capacity generated through the project stands to be shared with affected communities, local authorities, and others – it is worth considering how such a project could further support such sharing. This could be done by adding an element enabling the community's and other stakeholders' participation in the activities outlined by the project. Possibilities could include: consultation in drafting the DPP; participation in training; convening of the community and other stakeholders at the beginning of the project to identify opportunities for participation; end of project presentation; and discussions with communities and other stakeholders. In line with the values of project ownership and flexibility, such activities could be proposed and decided on by local organisations.

3.1.5 The event marking the end of STRIDE was an opportunity to learn and network

On completion of the project, an event was held in Bangkok bringing together 30 participants from Islamic Relief and LNGO partners, and 10 other stakeholders (including INGOs and donors). The objectives were two-fold – to provide an opportunity for participants to give feedback on their experience of the project, and to provide an opportunity for local organisations to interact with a variety of international actors. LNGOs were consistently positive and enthusiastic about the event, citing it as a good chance to learn among partners and discuss challenges and lessons learned, and a rare opportunity to speak with INGOs and donors. After the Bangkok meeting, several international actors asked Islamic Relief to put them in contact with local organisations that had participated in STRIDE.

Learning: The event in Bangkok marking the end of the project was widely felt to be an excellent way to tie together the learning accrued during the project. It was also seen as a good networking opportunity, particularly for LNGOs. Such events could be organised more frequently throughout the duration of the project.

3.2 Challenges for Islamic Relief

While the project received positive feedback from both Islamic Relief staff members and LNGOs, challenges were raised during our research in relation to human resources, timing and delays, and roles and responsibilities.

3.2.1 Recruitment challenges and stretched human resources

Human resources were consistently mentioned as a challenge, and can be broadly categorised in three ways: difficulty and delays recruiting project staff; difficulty and delays recruiting consultants at country level; and Islamic Relief staff being stretched to complete project-related work on top of their normal responsibilities. Difficulties in recruiting staff led to delays and backlogs (discussed below), and a larger amount of project work was at times taken on by Islamic Relief staff (for example, staff who were part of the working groups). Some staff felt torn between their full-time role and the additional responsibilities of STRIDE. This proved a difficult balancing act, particularly for country offices involved in emergency response, and left some feeling that they were constantly racing against time. This manifested in variable availability for and commitment to some of the working groups, which limited the contribution they made to the project. While additional human resources brought in midway through the project helped, to be most effective this should have been in place from the project's inception.

At one country office, Islamic Relief staff felt it was challenging to build their internal capacity at the same time as support the capacity of LNGOs that were looking to Islamic Relief to technical support that they may or may not be able to provide. In other country offices staff were comfortable embarking on capacity strengthening alongside local organisations, indicating a need to ensure that those implementing the project feel confident and supported in strengthening their own level of capacity. It also highlights the importance for Islamic Relief teams as well as local partners, of being willing to adapt and engage flexibly.

Learning: Having key staff in place at the outset of the project would have ensured a more balanced division of labour and reduced delays. Clarifying roles and responsibilities as well as investing in the human resources needed to support a programme such as STRIDE is essential to ensure the best outcomes for all parties.

3.2.2 Timing issues and delays

Project delays were predominantly linked to lack of human resources (discussed above). They were also caused by the due diligence and partnership process, which in some cases took over a year of the 33-month project. While thorough due diligence is a requirement when forging contemporary humanitarian partnerships, and is therefore somewhat beyond the control of Islamic Relief, partner identification (which took time as Islamic Relief created new partnerships with all but one local organisation) and selection also took several months. As such, efforts should be made to streamline both processes where possible. As other INGOs face similar challenges, Islamic Relief should ensure that its due diligence process is standardised with other international organisations and limited in scope, so it does not take up a large amount of the time allocated to the intervention.

A range of events also caused delays – while some were unforeseen (such as a new disaster or humanitarian crisis), others could have been anticipated and planned for (such as NGOs being restricted from working in the lead-up to a national election and on national holidays). Trying to proceed with the project during the rainy season proved difficult for one LNGO, whose most experienced staff were on standby to respond to any disasters arising and thus had limited availability and capacity. In some countries, delays on the Islamic Relief side resulted in key activities being pushed back, ultimately leaving less time for them or having them cancelled altogether (this seemed to particularly affect one LNGO, who did not have sufficient time to complete Objective 1). Adapting to the pace of local organisations is necessary for the project to work well, and while this was done by Islamic Relief during implementation it was not initially integrated into the plan and duration of the project.

Learning: Streamlining the partnership process, where possible, would help ensure that partnerships and necessary staff are in place and mitigate delays at the start of the project and subsequent constraints to project activities. In addition, the experience with STRIDE demonstrates the need to consider extending the project beyond its current duration and planning for additional time to adapt the project to local organisations' own working and learning pace.

3.2.3 Roles and responsibilities between headquarters, regional team and country offices

The contributions made by a diverse range of Islamic Relief staff are a key strength of the project, with the enthusiasm and inputs of many across the

organisation contributing to its success. However, the number and disparate location of Islamic Relief stakeholders, combined with limited structures in place for certain decisions to be made at a regional level and thus a need to regularly seek approval from headquarters (particularly regarding budget and grant transfers), contributed to inefficiencies, delays, and challenges with expectation management. Specific difficulties cited include lack of shared understanding of requirements, policies and timing, as well as challenges around procurement and payments.

Learning: Ensuring all staff (including legal, finance, and human resources) are well briefed on the project from the outset (through meetings, workshops and correspondence) will generate interest, manage expectations, and create the shared understanding required for the project to run smoothly. Where possible, delegating decision-making and oversight responsibilities to country offices may help improve efficiency and reduce delays.

3.3 Challenges for local organisations

3.3.1 Forging initial partnerships

Some LNGOs weighed risks against potential benefits when deciding to partner with Islamic Relief on STRIDE. This included perceived risks associated with the Islamic Relief brand, particularly in countries where the primary religion is not Islam. A local organisation conducted research on Islamic Relief to convince their board to enter the partnership. While this highlights that the due diligence process goes both ways when forging partnerships, which is positive in terms of power dynamics between local and international actors, it was framed as a challenge for this local organisation. Another LNGO mentioned engaging with their communities to ensure that their mainly Christian community agreed with the partnership with a Muslim faith-inspired organisation. While different faith affiliations were perceived as an initial risk, a more general risk was associated with exposing small organisations to the scrutiny of a larger counterpart. In doing so, some LNGOs felt they needed to consider potential risks involved in their participation in the project.

Once they decided to apply, some LNGOs were surprised by Islamic Relief's due diligence process, which they found long and complicated. It was noted that some of the information requested (such as a business plan) was misaligned with some LNGOs'

level of capacity, especially those who had under 10 staff. Indeed, from the perspective of at least one LNGO, the partnership selection process felt contradictory to the goal of the project.

Learning: Considering current due diligence processes by donors, Islamic Relief should use their due diligence process as a learning opportunity for local organisations, explaining and communicating why it is done and how it links to donor policies and due diligence requirements. It is also important to recognise that LNGOs may have questions and concerns about becoming part of a capacity-strengthening project due to the scrutiny it involves. Thus, creating an open dialogue in which these issues can be discussed becomes critical to support the foundation of a supportive partnership.

The initially perceived risks associated with partnerships between Islamic Relief and local organisations of different faith affiliations call for Islamic Relief to consider, for a project such as STRIDE, how to ensure that time and resources are dedicated to presenting Islamic Relief to local organisations. This could include organising face-to-face meetings with potential local organisations before launching a call for partnership. Given the experience and partnerships Islamic Relief has gained with this first phase of the project, they should also consider inviting their current local partners to talk about their partnerships with Islamic Relief and how they approached the difference in faith affiliation.

3.3.2 The need for greater orientation and communication

LNGOs valued their interactions with Islamic Relief staff, particularly week-long visits from the project coordinator, without which one LNGO said they might not have felt able to fulfil the project. It was noted, however, that once the partnership was formalised the project was expected to kick off quickly, which was challenging because some LNGOs had competing priorities and did not have requisite staff in place. LNGOs said that they would have benefited from more orientation, both generally (with regard to the work of Islamic Relief in their country and globally) and specifically related to STRIDE (including the Islamic Relief staff they could be in touch with for support for planning and procedures, and what to expect as the project unfolded). Communication gaps were also noted between LNGOs and the regional humanitarian team.

Learning: It was noted that communication and support increased once more staff joined the

project, but LNGOs missed this at the outset. Ensuring a comprehensive orientation and project launch phase will help lay the foundation for subsequent project activities.

3.3.3 Difficulties finding skilled staff and consultants

The structure of the project encouraged LNGOs to hire trainers within their country, ensuring contextual understanding. While this is a welcome change to flying in expatriates, who are often expensive and may lack contextual knowledge, many LNGOs struggled to find technically skilled staff and local experts who could provide training. One LNGO noted: ‘because we are new in the humanitarian sector we did not have the networks and we had difficulty finding the right people for the training’. While Islamic Relief country offices assisted in some instances, in some countries challenges in recruiting suitable consultants caused LNGOs to delay training and project implementation. As will be discussed in the next section, this calls for more investment in increasing local and national trainers’ capacity as part of interventions that aim to support localisation.

Issues of staff retention and poaching are at the forefront of discussions surrounding capacity and localisation in humanitarian response. While most local organisations did not report losing staff, they did struggle to retain their trained staff. STRIDE helped strengthen their capacity, and in doing so raised the profile of individuals within the organisation and the organisation itself – not only in the humanitarian sector but also on the job market.

Learning: It may be helpful to map technical experts and local resources in each country; having this information to hand could help mitigate recruitment challenges and delays. Islamic Relief has an important role to play in linking LNGOs with networks, resources, people and institutions that may be able to support them. LNGOs should be supported in developing resources and strategies to retain their staff.

3.3.4 Late transfers of funds

Numerous LNGO partners noted that funds were transferred to them later than agreed, despite fulfilling requirements from their side. For some, this meant delayed project implementation and adapting plans once funds were released, while others were asked to use their own money until the transfer went through. With headquarters holding budget approval and disbursement responsibilities, this left country offices trying to explain delays, and worried that such

financial issues could undermine the relationships they were trying to develop with local organisations.

Learning: Late distribution of funds risks delaying project implementation and undermining partnerships. Where country offices exist, one suggested way forward would be to transfer funding to the country office at the outset of the project, to ensure that it is disbursed in a timely manner.

3.3.5 Short project timeline

A common concern among LNGOs was the relatively short time they had to implement project activities – the partnership and capacity-strengthening element of the project ranged from nine weeks to a year, despite the overall project lasting 33 months from inception to finalisation within Islamic Relief. Some LNGOs described having high hopes for what they wanted to accomplish during the partnership, but felt rushed to accomplish it all within the timeframe, and sometimes falling short. Beyond the delays discussed above (unforeseen events, late disbursement of funds, difficulty recruiting), issues such as translation and having to acquire the local government’s DPP (so they could align their own plans with it) also slowed progress. Such factors and delays, while inconvenient, are expected in this type of work, and there was a strong sense among Islamic Relief staff and LNGOs that more could have been achieved if the timeline had been longer.

Learning: The scope of work undertaken in STRIDE – from assessing and strengthening individual and organisational capacity to building new networks and ways of working – involves processes that take time. While there is a need to simplify and streamline where possible, this alone is unlikely to create the time savings necessary to attain maximum impact from the project. Future iterations of STRIDE should consider extending the timeline of the project. This is especially necessary to maintain the tailor-made approach that requires adapting the project to each local organisation, local context and local processes, such as aligning disaster response plans to government plans.

3.4 Conclusion: replicating and informing a second phase of STRIDE

We hoped to identify the critical elements to replicate if STRIDE was to be expanded beyond its current form. A few respondents pointed to the importance of having the steering group and working groups in place

to create ownership within Islamic Relief, as well as providing guidance and internal learning during implementation. However, few respondents identified critical elements to be replicated, and instead discussed what needed to be changed and improved.

As outlined in our analysis of the successes and challenges, the main improvement to STRIDE would be to consider a longer duration. Many respondents felt that the project should have been between three and five years, instead of 33 months. With tools having been developed, replicating STRIDE will take less time in the future. However, local organisations felt that the project only provided the basics to strengthen their humanitarian capacity. A longer project duration would allow local organisations to test their learning in emergencies and be accompanied by Islamic Relief in responding and identifying additional actions to further strengthen their capacity.

A second opportunity to improve STRIDE is to consider how to enhance its sustainability. Two elements of sustainability are critical: access to funding and staff retention. In addition, Islamic Relief must consider the dynamic nature of capacity and how a one-off intervention may not be enough. Increasing the project's duration could potentially increase sustainability by capitalising more on the investment and allowing local organisations more time to diversify their donor base. The aim of the Bangkok event was to increase the visibility of local organisations and initiate links with international organisations and donors. Alongside the investment in making local organisations more 'donor-able', as one Islamic Relief respondent termed it, having more than one such networking event during the project would help to increase access to funding and thus support a more sustainable outcome. Islamic Relief is also aiming to implement a plan for an online community of practice through a web portal that would facilitate continued learning and future partnerships. Alongside such improvements, managing the expectations of local organisations in terms of further funding from Islamic Relief and future partnerships is critical.

STRIDE also aimed to be as light as possible on process and develop approaches that could readily be used by local organisations. Learning from other localisation projects, Islamic Relief aimed to make their tools, in particular the capacity self-assessment for LNGOs, as simple as possible. One respondent from Islamic Relief requested further simplification of tools including the DPP template. Reflecting on the balance between processes and flexibility, Islamic Relief respondents also highlighted the importance

of keeping compliance levels high as a way for local organisations to adapt to current donor policies. The current trend for compliance within donor policies, but also more widely of a risk-averse world (bank de-risking, counter-terrorism legislation), is a challenge for a humanitarian sector that aims to localise further, but is a reality that needs to be integrated and managed by local organisations.

Given the shortcomings identified here – in particular the short-term nature of the partnerships and capacity-strengthening – as well as the value of the project, there is a strong argument for a STRIDE 2 that continues to work with the same local organisations to capitalise on the investment already made. This call came from both Islamic Relief and local organisations. Additionally, local organisations felt strongly about expanding the project to other community-based organisations, volunteers, civil society networks and local government.

Capacity permitting, Islamic Relief could also begin to expand STRIDE, or a revised version of the project, based on learning, to other organisations in Asia and other regions. If STRIDE were to be expanded beyond current local organisations, it should build on initial experience by convening graduating local organisations with new local organisations. STRIDE 2 could start with an experience-sharing event where LNGOs can talk to each other about their journey. The regional dimension of the project was felt to be an asset, and should be replicated moving forward.

As Islamic Relief learns from this experience, it should further consider how to mainstream the values, approaches and learning from STRIDE into all aspects of their humanitarian work. The localisation commitment from Islamic Relief should translate beyond this one-off project. As part of the follow-up to the project, Islamic Relief plans to create a community of practice that includes both Islamic Relief staff and local organisations. This would support new practices of emergency surge deployment, as experienced during recent emergencies in Nepal and in Indonesia. Indeed, instead of deploying full surge teams to these emergencies, Islamic Relief worked closely with local organisations, asking them what gaps in capacities they had and deploying staff to local organisations to support their emergency response. This is a great example of how humanitarian action can be as local as possible and as international as necessary.

In order to mainstream partnership and capacity-strengthening of local organisations, Islamic

Relief should integrate partnership and capacity strengthening as central to the internal part of the project. Many of the job descriptions for the DRT – the Islamic Relief team to be deployed as surge capacity during emergencies – include responsibilities for and commitments to capacity-strengthening and partnership with local organisations. Internal capacity strengthening objectives in STRIDE included strengthening the capacity of finance managers to be deployed during emergencies to build partnership and conduct capacity assessments.

However, these commitments and responsibilities are not systematically included at all levels of DRT job profiles; in particular, there is currently no responsibility by Heads of Mission for capacity-strengthening and partnership with local organisations. By making capacity-strengthening and partnership an objective at the highest level, Islamic Relief would make clear the strategic importance of their localisation commitment. Similarly, communication managers deployed during emergencies should include working with local organisations to increase their visibility, in line with Islamic Relief's commitment to the Charter for Change.

4 Opportunities and ways forward

4.1 STRIDE: a unique approach

As part of this learning exercise, we aimed to identify what made STRIDE a unique approach to partnership, capacity-strengthening and ‘localisation’. Except for one local organisation respondent who felt that there was nothing different about the approach, all other respondents stated that STRIDE had been a unique experience for them. For most LNGO respondents, the project was the first time they had experienced such investment in partnerships and whole-of-organisation capacity-strengthening. They highlighted that partnerships are usually based around programmes that they must implement with no opportunity to give input or suggest changes – an issue that is highlighted in literature on partnerships (Featherstone and Antequisa, 2014; Howe et al., 2015). They also stated that capacity-strengthening tends to happen within short-term projects that focus on individual rather than organisational capacity. As one local organisation respondent stated, STRIDE ‘did not give us fish but taught us how to fish’. For most Islamic Relief staff, the project was also their first experience of working in partnership with local organisations on a capacity-strengthening initiative. This is partly because Islamic Relief has historically been a direct implementing organisation in humanitarian settings.

Our analysis and review of the project highlight several unique elements from STRIDE: the flexibility and adaptability of the approach to the project as well as the multifaceted approach to capacity-strengthening; the nature of partnerships and relationships between Islamic Relief and local organisations; the criteria for selecting local organisations; and the recognition of capacity gaps within both Islamic Relief and local organisations.

4.1.1 Flexibility, adaptability and individuality

The literature on good practice in capacity-strengthening (Dichter, 2014; InterAction, 2014; Scott et al., 2015; Cohen et al., 2016) notes the

importance of being flexible as well as contextualising – both in terms of setting and organisation – when approaching capacity-strengthening. These elements were integrated into STRIDE from the outset. The project began with a self-assessment that allowed local organisations to identify and prioritise their own capacity gaps. While the self-assessment could be seen as prescriptive because it provides a set list of indicators against which local organisations evaluate their capacities and gaps, local organisations were left to decide which gaps they would prioritise and how they would address them. As one Islamic Relief respondent stated, STRIDE was ‘extremely partner centric: we sat with them and helped them identify what they wanted rather than come with a prescription on how it should be’.

This resulted in not one STRIDE programme but many different and individualised versions of it, and was best demonstrated through how gaps in capacities were addressed. Islamic Relief staff worked alongside local organisations, proposing different examples of policies, standard operating procedures and other processes, rather than imposing the ones adopted by Islamic Relief. The final narrative reports from local organisations show that many other organisations and resources were brought in, including other local organisations or INGOs, to review the policy changes, mission updates and other reforms that LNGOs adopted through participating in the project. As mentioned above, when training was identified as a need, it was carried out by trainers who were local to the context and thus able to shape training to the realities of the local organisation. Local organisations were identifying trainers themselves, which was cited above as a challenge, but at the same time allowed them to take ownership of the process and identify their exact training needs. The STRIDE team also adapted tools and approaches during the programme. For instance, the capacity self-assessment tool for local organisations was revised three times following feedback from local organisations.

4.1.2 Multifaceted approach to capacity strengthening

STRIDE enabled a multi-faceted approach to capacity strengthening. In the humanitarian sector, capacity-strengthening has long been carried out through training, although there is a growing recognition of the need to employ coaching and mentoring approaches (Christoplos, 2005; Fenton et al., 2012; Few et al., 2015; Cohen et al., 2016). The whole-of-organisation focus of STRIDE meant that different types of capacity-strengthening were needed, and the project delivered on this. Local organisations invested time, including consulting experts and other organisations, when revising their missions, mandates and vision to better reflect their humanitarian work. A significant proportion of capacity-strengthening efforts went towards adapting existing policies and procedures to better respond to the needs of affected people during crisis: elaborating emergency human resources, finance, procurement and logistics sections of their policies and procedures, for instance.

Another significant focus of STRIDE's multifaceted approach was on developing an emergency response capacity through establishing an emergency response team as well as developing a DPP. Training on humanitarian standards (Sphere, CHS etc.) was considered a foundational element of STRIDE in supporting the revisions of policies and standard operating procedures, as well as establishing an emergency response capacity. However, while significant, training was a small part of overall capacity-strengthening activities.

4.1.3 The nature of partnerships and relationships

The flexibility, adaptability and individuality of the STRIDE approach also allowed collaborative partnerships between Islamic Relief and the local organisations they worked with. Most of the LNGOs involved had no previous relationship with Islamic Relief and yet, through the project, a strong partnership and trust were established. As one local organisation told an Islamic Relief staff member during the learning event in Bangkok, Islamic Relief had invested in the 'unsexy stuff', the kinds of things other organisations do not want to fund, like governance, which, while not as exciting or practical as aid delivery, is still essential. For one local organisation respondent, the partnership was 'very smooth'. Another LNGO respondent said that Islamic Relief staff were available to help whenever they had difficulties, and that the partnership was 'really supportive', adding: 'guidance was very good ... It is a good partnership. Sometimes our

capacity was very ... you know ... kind of a small baby and Islamic Relief was giving us parenting'. This respondent spoke very positively about the partnership with Islamic Relief, while also highlighting a certain hierarchy and a trainer-trainee relationship. For another local organisation, the cost-sharing aspect of the partnership (local organisations contributed a percentage to the overall cost of the project) led to a 'mutual partnership'. Overall, interviews with local organisations highlighted the close and supportive relationship that existed through the partnerships, which enabled formal and informal support including through working closely together, mentoring and coaching.

4.1.4 Partner selection

The selection criteria for partners also made STRIDE unique. Islamic Relief wanted to partner with small-to medium-sized organisations with little experience of humanitarian work as they thought they would benefit most from STRIDE. This was challenging for Islamic Relief, especially in their strict due diligence and screening process with organisations that did not have the relevant strategies, plans and policies in place. The selection process helped Islamic Relief understand how to maintain standards while appreciating other perspectives (for example, learning that some organisations may have a different pace of work) and finding ways to adapt to the realities of local organisations.

The focus on small- and medium-sized organisations embedded in communities affected by crises also meant that Islamic Relief was supporting and strengthening the capacities of organisations that often feel obliged to respond to crises despite not always having the necessary expertise. For at least a couple of organisations we interviewed, in previous large-scale crises such as Typhoon Haiyan or the 2015 Nepal earthquake, the imperative to support their communities had pushed them to act without a supporting process in place, based on an understanding of international standards. Islamic Relief, through targeting these organisations, is focusing on the local capacities that are deployed in crises, and thus increasing the reach and quality of humanitarian assistance.

4.1.5 Recognising capacity gaps at all level

While this learning report focuses on the part of STRIDE that involves strengthening the capacity of local organisations, there is something unique about doing so in parallel to critically examining the capacity of Islamic Relief to prepare for and respond to emergencies. In a recent report published by HPG (Barbelet, 2018), we argued that one problem is that defining, assessing

and strengthening capacity is often in the hands of international organisations who do not usually reflect on their own capacity, leading to an uneven power dynamic between international and local organisations. In this sense, STRIDE is unusual. The dual internal and external examination of capacity has potentially contributed to the positive dynamics in partnerships between Islamic Relief and local organisations. As one Islamic Relief respondent highlighted, ‘the STRIDE project also provided assistance to our office as we are a new office in the Islamic Relief family and we are journeying with the partners’.

As mentioned in the previous chapter, in one country the local organisation participated in the development of the Islamic Relief country office’s DPP, allowing another learning and capacity-strengthening opportunity, which was made possible by this dual approach. Partnership development was highlighted as an area in which Islamic Relief needed to strengthen its capacity, and STRIDE gave Islamic Relief the opportunity to increase their confidence and practice of working with local organisations. As one Islamic Relief respondent stated, ‘STRIDE changed a lot of perception ... a very welcoming one was that [Islamic Relief staff] are confident they can work with partners effectively; they were doing this in the past here but [STRIDE] gave them confidence’.

4.2 The impact of STRIDE on the effectiveness and efficiency of humanitarian response

While this research is not a formal evaluation of STRIDE, it has allowed us to reflect on its impact on the effectiveness and efficiency of Islamic Relief’s and local organisations’ humanitarian response. The time delays highlighted earlier meant that the project was probably too short-term to have a significant impact. For some respondents, this project feels unfinished and needs further accompaniment and coaching through the next few emergencies to really capitalise on investment. In many ways it is too early to say. The local organisations we interviewed felt they needed to test the impact of the interventions in the next humanitarian crisis before reflecting on STRIDE’s impact and whether it had improved their organisations’ effectiveness and efficiency.

Despite the implications of time delays and the need to wait for the next crisis, we were able to identify some impact. STRIDE increased the ability of local organisations to address the needs of affected

populations with the support of Islamic Relief in areas where Islamic Relief would not have been able to support humanitarian action before. It created humanitarian capacity in organisations that did not have this capacity before. Before the project, most partners had a limited or ad hoc involvement in humanitarian response, but they now have the policies and procedures in place (through DPPs and emergency funds) that would allow timely interventions in case of a disaster, and a trained emergency response team. Perhaps more importantly, local organisations highlighted that they are now recognised by local authorities, communities, peer organisations and, to some extent, international organisations as having these policies and procedures in place to respond to disasters. This multiplier effect or spill-over of STRIDE is evident, not only through this recognition and strengthening of networks for local organisations, but also – as outlined in the previous section – because local organisations have transferred some of their learning to local authorities, peer organisations and communities.

Islamic Relief respondents who have worked closely with local organisations during and after STRIDE have witnessed ‘a huge difference’ in the way they work. As one Islamic Relief respondent highlighted, ‘[the local organisation] was very mindful of important things such as setting up complaint mechanisms, in terms of communication with beneficiaries and engaging beneficiaries’. As one local organisation respondent reflected, they now have ‘an emergency response team of 34 members who are trained and ready to be deployed for any emergency in the country: we achieved this during STRIDE’.

However, a few local organisations reflected that, without funding to support their organisations, deploying emergency response teams or putting their DPP into action would be difficult. While the project strengthened the organisational capacity of local organisations, including their ability to attract and manage funds, there is no guarantee that these local organisations will be able to maintain their humanitarian capacity or secure funding. The impact is ultimately linked to questions regarding the sustainability of investment made in capacity-strengthening. While there are enough indications that investment made through the project is worthwhile and has greatly benefited both local organisations and Islamic Relief, it is critical to think about other elements that could enhance the sustainability of the intervention. Finally, as mentioned in Section 3.3, now that local organisations have highly trained staff there is also a risk of losing capacity through losing staff.

4.3 Wider learning for localisation and humanitarian action

STRIDE demonstrates how INGOs that have historically favoured direct implementation in humanitarian settings can move towards a different operational approach. The project highlights Islamic Relief's flexible approach and their system of learning from experience. Respondents from Islamic Relief repeatedly mentioned how STRIDE was a new way of working for them – moving from direct implementation to a partnership approach as part of their emergency preparedness and response. While Islamic Relief view the investment in STRIDE as part of their commitment to localisation following the World Humanitarian Summit and their commitment to the Charter for Change, they also see the partnership approach and localisation aspect of the project as the way the humanitarian world is moving. In this sense, especially based on experience in Asia, Islamic Relief understands the need for organisations to adapt to the realities of contemporary humanitarian settings. This reflection was partly triggered by Islamic Relief's experience in the Nepal earthquake, where the government required all international organisations to work through local organisations.⁵ A series of disasters in Indonesia further convinced Islamic Relief that their revised approach will help build a network of community-based small- to medium-scale organisations that they can work with during future emergencies.

STRIDE raises several issues for localisation and humanitarian action more widely. While Islamic Relief had a very flexible programmatic approach, it remained strict on compliance. Current trends in compliance run counter to the call for a more localised humanitarian action. Strict compliance is a challenge for local organisations, and one that Islamic Relief was aware of during implementation. While LNGOs felt the due diligence and strict compliance processes were a burden for them, the uncompromising focus on strengthening organisations to receive and manage humanitarian funding to meet compliance standards was the right one in our opinion. For Islamic Relief this was also a way to ensure that local organisations, in their own words, became more 'donor-able', therefore creating opportunities for local organisations to attract and manage funding. In a recent HPG report (Barbelet, 2018), we provide some critical examination

of the focus in the humanitarian sector on organisational capacity to meet donor requirements, which can prevent local capacities being harnessed. Islamic Relief's decision to partner with organisations that would not previously have been able to meet such donor requirements unlocks the existing capacities of these local organisations, in particular their link and presence in the community. Thus, the project supports the kind of local humanitarian action that we should want to see in emergencies.

A second challenge met by Islamic Relief and local organisations was to increase local training capacities, which is necessary to support a more local humanitarian action. Without this, capacity-strengthening will either not happen, or will take place through uncontextualised capacity-strengthening. Islamic Relief's use of in-country trainers and consultants is critical to making capacity-strengthening more relevant to local organisations and to harnessing local capacities. However, it requires supporting and investing in local capacity-strengthening, rather than seeing capacity as something to be flown in.

Current discourse around localisation is highly polarised, and the complexity of implementing the localisation agenda in active humanitarian responses raises a range of challenges for local and international stakeholders. While such difficulties were not identified in our research, they are nevertheless important for Islamic Relief to understand, as it solidifies its commitment to localisation and plans how to take STRIDE forward. For example, recent research on capacity and complementarity in the response to Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh (Wake and Bryant, 2018) identified challenges between local and international actors. Beyond technical and contractual issues, there were difficulties around organisational ethos and understanding of refugee rights and protection, as evident in a lack of shared understanding regarding the proposed repatriation of refugees to Myanmar. Other stakeholders such as the ICRC have considered the challenges posed by localisation in conflict settings (Labbé, 2018). While others have taken a critical view of the perception of such challenges within the sector (Van Brabant, 2017), it is important to recognise that refugee and conflict settings pose different challenges for localisation in humanitarian response than in natural hazard-related disasters. Islamic Relief will need to consider how STRIDE can be adapted further to address the requirements of various different settings.

5 The attitude of Islamic Relief differs slightly from other international organisations who saw this as an imposition (see Featherstone with Bogati, 2016).

5 Conclusion

The STRIDE programme was a response by Islamic Relief to changing operational circumstances in Asia (the requirement to work with local organisations) and the organisation's commitment to supporting a more local humanitarian action. Through this research, successes and challenges were identified. This learning is useful to Islamic Relief as well as organisations that want to shift from a direct implementation approach to partnering with local organisations to support overall capacity-strengthening.

STRIDE was a stand-alone programme dedicated to building partnerships and strengthening the capacity of local organisations outside of partnerships for implementation during an emergency. It was an investment in identifying local organisations that could benefit the most from an organisational capacity-strengthening approach, coupled with increasing knowledge of humanitarian standards. We found that the project had enabled local organisations to feel better prepared to respond to the next emergency, better networked with other organisations in the humanitarian sector and with their local authorities, and (to a lesser extent) better placed to attract funding from a more diversified pool of donors. For Islamic Relief, these new partnerships have not only operationalised their localisation commitment, but also allowed them to build relationships and networks among local organisations that they can work with in future emergencies.

Islamic Relief, through STRIDE, was purposeful in partnering with organisations that were grounded in their communities, and yet had limited experience of humanitarian response or exposure to capacity-strengthening interventions with INGOs. The focus on organisational capacity-strengthening and on increasing organisations' humanitarian expertise was greatly valued by local organisations. The flexibility of the project, as well as the way that partnerships between Islamic Relief and local organisations unfolded, were critical to its success. The project was contextualised as much as possible: first by being a regional programme within Islamic Relief, but also through giving ownership and decision-making power to local organisations on how they prioritised different aspects of their capacity-strengthening. Through sharing knowledge at the regional level at

the Bangkok learning event, as well as locally, the project extended beyond the seven LNGOs it worked with. Local organisations' visibility and expertise has already been recognised by their communities, peers and local authorities, leading to knowledge and expertise being transferred, although Islamic Relief could do more to integrate local authorities and communities from the outset.

STRIDE would have benefited from a longer duration, more dedicated human resources from the start, clearer management of funds, and better communication within Islamic Relief and with local organisations regarding the roles and responsibilities of different Islamic Relief structures. While these challenges were all internal to STRIDE, the project also highlighted some obstacles to localisation more generally. The continued trend of donors' strict due diligence processes has permeated the way INGOs work, and thus their partnerships with local organisations. While a project such as STRIDE can become a learning ground for local organisations to work with current processes, strict due diligence can be cumbersome, potentially damaging and unfit for most small- and medium-sized local organisations. Donors have also committed, through the localisation workstream of the Grand Bargain, to address barriers to local organisations accessing more funding. Yet securing funding continues to be a major obstacle for local organisations.

The humanitarian sector's commitment to localisation also requires specific investments. One highlighted by STRIDE is the need to increase training capacity at the local level. Islamic Relief encouraged organisations to seek trainers that were local to them and that understood the dynamics within which organisations would have to apply Sphere standards and the CHS.

Moving forward, Islamic Relief must consider two important aspects. On the one hand, the message from current LNGO partners was clear: they have called for the project to continue with the same local organisations to capitalise on the investment made, while further incorporating communities, local authorities and peer organisations in the same regions. On the other hand, Islamic Relief needs to think about how to expand on STRIDE to truly

adapt the organisation to operate more locally and build partnerships. Expanding the project to another region could allow them to gather more learning on capacity-strengthening and on partnership. However, STRIDE 2 needs to consider how Islamic Relief can start a process of change to ensure this is not a stand-alone project, but instead reflects a change to the way the organisation works. In this report, we have advised that capacity-strengthening and partnership should be strategic objectives that form part of every job description, both in Islamic Relief and within their DRTs. Additionally, Islamic Relief should continue reflecting on how surge should be deployed through, for instance, seconding Islamic Relief staff to local organisations to fill capacity gaps identified by these organisations. Finally, Islamic Relief must consider how to dedicate funding to continue supporting emergency preparedness that focuses on partnerships and capacity-strengthening of local organisations.

STRIDE demonstrates how an INGO can move from being a direct implementer to investing in local humanitarian action, partnership and capacity-strengthening. Other INGOs should consider adopting similar approaches to begin changing

their operational model to fulfil the commitment to humanitarian action that is ‘as local as possible and as international as necessary’. While we recognise other actions, changes and investments are required to fulfil the commitment to localisation within the humanitarian sector, approaches such as STRIDE contribute to the localisation agenda.

Donors should also examine the findings from this research. Flexible funding from Islamic Relief USA allowed STRIDE to integrate learning and keep the initial plan open to being contextualised and driven by local organisations’ priorities. While there are obstacles to easing strict due diligence processes, an open dialogue between donors, INGOs and local organisations on what may be possible could allow solutions to emerge. Donors should consider how they can introduce more dedicated funding for emergency preparedness that focuses on identifying, partnering, and strengthening the capacity of local organisations. Donors should also consider investing in the development of local training for humanitarian capacity, supporting organisations such as Sphere to further develop their network of trainers in countries most at risk of natural hazard-related disasters, conflict and displacement.

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Cover photo: Self-recovery efforts start immediately after the earthquake in Nepal, 2015.
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