**Guidance note on capacity strengthening for localisation**

The World Humanitarian Summit pledged in 2016 that humanitarian responses should be ‘as local as possible, as international as necessary’. Yet a key challenge to meeting this goal lies in how the sector currently recognises, assesses and strengthens the respective capacities of local and international response actors. Far from a technical exercise, capacity strengthening is a process intertwined with issues of power dynamics, trust deficits and perceptions of legitimacy and abilities. Rather than reinforcing the status quo, how could capacity strengthening be made to support a humanitarian response that is more localised?

This guidance note collates recommendations on capacity strengthening from the participants of three regional workshops conducted by the IFRC and SDC as part of the Grand Bargain Localisation Workstream, including representatives of local and national NGOs, international NGOs, government and regional donors, and UN agencies. It also includes key findings from a research project carried out by the Humanitarian Policy Group of ODI between 2017 and 2019 that explored the issue of capacity and complementarity between local and international actors, including how capacity could be better understood and applied to support more collaborative responses[[1]](#footnote-1). The study and its thematic recommendations were divided into three key areas:

**Defining capacity**

* The capacity needed to alleviate human suffering should be defined in relation to specific contexts and crises, and includes the knowledge of context as well as technical skills. Developing an understanding of what capacity entails in specific crises needs to be an inclusive process that involves local actors through meaningful engagement.
* Terminology matters. Capacity is usually defined as ‘lacking’ and needing to be ‘built’. Instead, the terms ‘capacity strengthening’ or ‘capacity exchange’ acknowledge existing skills and assets that can be supported and shared.

**Assessing capacity**

* The current process by which different organisations consider the respective contributions and value of others is largely limited to that of international organisations assessing local organisations for the purpose of funding and partnerships. To get beyond risk assessments and capacity gap assessments, a context-wide mapping of existing capacities could inform the extent to which humanitarian action can be local and how gaps in local capacity could be addressed.
* Each organisation’s ‘capacity’ is dynamic and evolving, and often dependent upon individuals and context. For example, an organisation that has capacity to respond to flooding, may not have the capacities needed to respond to an influx of refugees. It should also be recognised that every organisation requires investment to grow in a sustainable manner.

**Strengthening capacity**

* Capacity strengthening should be a two-way process, whereby international actors also have the opportunity to learn from local actors, including technical skills, operational considerations and a better understanding of the political, social and cultural context.
* ‘Training’ is not the only means of carrying out capacity strengthening. Many organisations have reported successes in shadowing and mentoring initiatives that allow a more organic process of peer-to-peer learning.
* Linked to this, secondment could allow more two-way learning as an alternative to emergency surge teams in times of crises. As far as possible, capacity strengthening should be an activity conducted in advance rather than following a crisis.

**Recommendations for key actors**

1. **Donors**

* Whenever possible, donors should engage directly with local organisations either individually or through consortia or fora representatives, rather than only through international partners or intermediaries. This would allow local and national organisations to have more of a direct relationship without overburdening donor agencies.
* Donors should provide additional flexible and unearmarked multi-year funding to local organisations to enable them to cover their core costs and sustain operations. Enabling access to such funding will also require donors to ease current restrictions and mitigate the impact of counter-terrorism legislation.
* In addition to assessing the risks of working with a local organisation, donors should consider the risks of not investing in strengthening the capacities of local responders.

1. **UN agencies and INGOs**

* INGOs should seek to harmonise capacity assessment and reporting requirements for local organisations. For example, international actors could agree to accept each other’s assessments, a process that would start with the development of common minimum standards.
* International actors should encourage and enable local organisations to participate actively in coordination structures by holding meetings in local languages or providing translators, ensuring meeting venues are easily accessible, including them in decision-making, and addressing any other practices which explicitly or implicitly impede their meaningful participation.
* International actors should also critically interrogate their own ability to capacity-strengthen local organisations, and look beyond short-term training as a means of carrying this out.
* Where international actors require a risk or capacity gap assessment to be conducted in order to provide funding and work in partnership, investment should be provided to address any gaps identified.

1. **Local and national actors**

* Prior to seeking partnerships, local and national actors should assess their own organisational capacity strengths and weaknesses. This will encourage local NGOs to take ownership of their capacity gaps and how to address them.
* Local actors should also use the power of networks and peer review exchange to share knowledge and increase their collective voice in advocating for more equitable partnerships and capacity strengthening. Such approaches include Oxfam’s *Empowering Local and National Actors* programme, which assesses capacities at the level of ‘networks’ of organisations in a given context, and conducts joint discussions on capacity gaps and existing expertise available across these groups[[2]](#footnote-2).

1. The project drew upon case study findings from the conflict in South Kivu and Kasai Central in the [Democratic Republic of the Congo](https://www.odi.org/publications/11292-local-humanitarian-action-democratic-republic-congo-capacity-and-complementarity) (DRC) and the Rohingya refugee crisis in [Bangladesh](https://www.odi.org/publications/11251-capacity-and-complementarity-rohingya-response-bangladesh), as well as a [literature review](https://www.odi.org/publications/11238-local-possible-international-necessary-understanding-capacity-and-complementarity-humanitarian). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Further examples of effective capacity strengthening approaches to further more localised humanitarian responses can be found in section 3.2 of the [Grand Bargain annual independent report 2019](https://www.odi.org/sites/odi.org.uk/files/resource-documents/12734.pdf). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)