Supporting the humanitarian leadership of local actors to respond effectively to crises represents a uniquely promising way to have deep and lasting impact on the lives of people and their communities. Local actors are first responders in a disaster, have closer contact with vulnerable populations, and comprehend fully the needs, priorities, geography, culture and history of their affected region.

Factors driving increase in global humanitarian crises

- Changing politics and shifts in donor countries have had a significant impact on commitments to international support.
- The current proposed US federal budget seeks to reduce international aid by over one-third from the prior year, and calls for rechanneling funding from development assistance to programs affiliated with national security.
- Climate Change combined with conflicts has disproportionately affected poor communities, resulting in three famines in Africa (Somalia, Nigeria, South Sudan) and one in southwest Asia (Yemen), and increased the number of floods and droughts around the world.
- Crises are becoming more protracted and increasingly complex, with 65 million refugees and internally displaced persons in need of relief.
- Less than US$ 50 million was awarded by the top 1000 U.S. private foundations to international humanitarian needs in 2013; the majority of funding went to events, e.g., Ebola outbreak, rather than to capacity building. Only 7 percent of World Humanitarian Summit commitments come from the private sector, and only 1.3 percent of total funding is directed to local actors.

7 keys for effective leadership of local humanitarian actors

“Aid localization is a collective process involving different stakeholders that aims to return local actors, whether civil society organizations or local public institutions, to the center of the humanitarian system with a greater role in humanitarian response.”

(Time to Let Go)

Strengthening leadership opportunities for local actors depends on increasing:

1. Institutional capacity development, identifying and implementing fair compensation to local organizations for staff-time required
2. Coordination mechanisms and greater presence and influence of national actors
3. Participation of representatives of affected communities and other minorities
4. Direct funding
5. Partnerships based on peer relationships
6. Visibility of the roles, results, and innovations by local actors
7. Influence of national actors on policy
Why philanthropy should invest in local actors

The Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation argues that investing in building the capacity of local actors to lead humanitarian response could ultimately help to reduce the gap between communities’ needs and responses by:

• Shifting power and resources to local actors
• Redefining the role for international actors
• Saving more lives through more comprehensive approaches
• Strengthening partnerships between governments and civil society
• Increasing impact through effective and efficient responses with lower costs

Private and corporate foundations are uniquely structured and positioned to take collaborative action to strengthen local humanitarian leadership and develop generative philanthropic initiatives.

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Challenges facing donors supporting local humanitarian actors

Despite the tremendous progress that has been made in recent years, gaps in response sectors and challenges in service delivery remain.

• Obstacles to local actors obtaining funding: policies and requirements of donors, governments and UN agencies; insufficient investment in multi-year plans; U.S. grants from small foundations that are sudden and often burdensome to grantees; concern about corruption and neglect of humanitarian principles.

• Internal and external demands on donors: pressure to show immediate results, e.g., “lives saved,” and to be perceived as responding to crisis rather than to be investing in the longer term; complex processes and procedures and anti-corruption and anti-terrorism requirements for tax-payer funding that impact private donor models; funding from organizations, groups and individuals is often outside financial tracking and accounting mechanisms.

• Resistance to change: greater risk and higher transaction costs to give money to more and currently unidentified and unvetted recipients; some INGOs fear that their role as intermediaries will be lost.

• No clear evidence of success: lack of assessment systems in place to document the impact of local humanitarian leadership; models for effective leadership have not been disseminated to humanitarian funders.

“Investing in strengthening local leadership is the core of an effective humanitarian system. The local actors cannot be neglected anymore, and must be recognized as partners with a direct role in decision making processes and implementation.”

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