Local Humanitarian Action:
Background, Key Challenges, and Ways Forward

Daniel Maxwell* Henry J. Leir Professor in Food Security, Feinstein International Center, Friedman School of Nutrition Science and Policy, Tufts University

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Background

Members of the Feinstein Center team are grateful for the chance to share some thoughts and some research findings with members of the US private foundation community. This topic is dear to both the agenda and the ways of working of the Feinstein Center. Likewise, the Gates Foundation has championed the cause of supporting local humanitarian action for at least as long as the Feinstein Center has had a relationship with the Foundation. And for some time now, Oxfam America has been leading the call for a different relationship between international and local actors in humanitarian action. Translating this "cause" and this "call" into practical action—actually changing the way the humanitarian community does its work—is what this discussion is about. It is also about recognizing that the relationship between those actors has to be different. Understanding local humanitarian action is key.

This paper will touch on six topics. First, briefly—it asks what is locally led humanitarian action and how is it framed? Different parties discuss this topic in different ways. Second, it asks where does this discussion come from, and why it has gotten a lot of attention only of late? Third, the core of this brief overview addresses some of the major opportunities and challenges about local leadership of humanitarian action—and particularly how outside organizations can support this.

Fourth, it briefly outlines some of the key issues and challenges that have been raised with regard to this whole agenda. Fifth, it addresses the critical question of major gaps in our evidence base on this topic. And finally, it suggests some responses to the obvious question of "where do we go from here?" The intent of the paper is to inform, but also to provoke some discussion.

Framing the discussion

Humanitarian crises are usually defined as shocks or emergencies that overwhelm local capacities to manage the impacts. Typically therefore, the response has been to call on outside capacities to help—hence much of today's formal international humanitarian apparatus. But by now, nearly everyone acknowledges that local actors are the first responders in a crisis.[1]

The whole proposition behind the notion of local humanitarian action (LHA) doesn't question this definition, but puts the default response in a different light: If local capacities are overwhelmed, it doesn't mean they don't exist. Rather, it may mean, "recognize those capacities and build on them." This may mean recognizing and building on those capacities well before and after acute crises—it isn't just a matter of taking advantage of them in an emergency. Even if local capacities are not adequate to fully manage a crisis, they still engage in the response, and local actors should have a meaningful say in how external capacities are deployed. The emphasis on LHA is both about recognizing the rights and responsibilities of local organizations and local leaders in times of crisis *and* about improving the effectiveness of response when crises occur.

But this *is not* what usually happens. Either an international response is mounted that ignores local capacities, to lead, plan and manage the response, or perhaps uses local actors only as sub-contractors and as a means of outsourcing its own risk. Or the crisis is ignored by the international community altogether, leaving local actors largely or entirely on their own. The *former* frequently results in a top-down imposition of programs that ignores or, at best, subjugates local humanitarian action. All of this results in redundancy, overlaps, and gaps—some of which may be invisible to external actors. It can result in inappropriate or poorly designed interventions, the undermining of local response capacity in the future, and an increased lack of accountability.[2] The *latter* results in an ineffective, inefficient response that can do long-term harm to affected communities and to the operating environment, especially in chronic crisis. Obviously, both are problematic.

The "development community" has long recognized the value of locally led action. The humanitarian community is finally recognizing that there is a better way to approach humanitarian crises. First, critiques have increased of the international humanitarian response system regarding the accountability and appropriateness of humanitarian action.[3] Second, local actors have better knowledge and understanding of the context, geography, history, culture, social fabric, politics, needs, and strengths of the affected population than outsiders have. These days, local actors may organize into associations and networks that give them more "voice" in the system. Third, the "international system" as we know it, is badly overloaded, unable to fully cope with the increasing demands for both universal coverage and context specificity.[4] Fourth, in the context of civil conflict, the global war on terror or counter insurgency warfare, it is increasingly difficult for external actors to access affected population. Local organizations are frequently better placed to reach them,[5] and local populations have their own means of accessing support through their social networks, local business communities, and global diasporas. The international community is slowly waking up to these realities. Finally, there is a general acceptance that affected populations have the right and responsibility to lead and drive the way in which humanitarian assistance and protection are shaped.

Some definitions

Before we go further, let's step back and define some basic concepts. What is "locally led humanitarian action?" What does "local humanitarian action" mean? Who or what is "local"? Trocaire defines "localization" as the "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."[6] Oxfam uses the term "local" (local actors, local partners local government) to signify the crisis-affected country—in contrast to" international."[7] But "local" is a relative concept—it relates largely to the proximity to crisis-affected people. But what kind of proximity does this imply? It can be based on geographic proximity ("I live in the affected area"), proximity to the disaster ("I was directly affected by the disaster"), social proximity ("My family was directly affected by the disaster"), ethnic or religious proximity ("I speak the same language as the affected people"), or national proximity ("I have the same passport as the affected people"). Any and all of these may be applicable. There is no single answer; it depends on who is asking these questions and the context in which they are being asked. Remember throughout all these conversations that crisis-affected people are not homogenous and that power dynamics exist among affected populations and among local responders.[8]

When we talk about "local humanitarian actors," who are we talking about? Frequently, this is mostly about local government and local NGOs (because they are recognizable to external institutions). But local actors can also include informal, ad-hoc responders ("responders of first resort"); informal networks of families, clans, diasporas; informal community associations (farmer's cooperatives, women's lending groups, etc.); religious groups; customary or traditional leadership structures; and of course the local private sector (formal or informal).[9] And—perhaps problematically, but not unusually—non-state armed actors.[10]

Local governments and local NGOs often represent local power and privilege, and not all affected populations might feel represented by them. They tend to be male-dominated. They may represent a dominant ethnic or social group that marginalizes others or that is aligned with a certain side of a conflict.[11] We often say the opposite of "local" is "international." But sometimes, there are such significant divisions within a country that even someone responding from the central government is considered an outsider and presents significant challenges.[12] Perhaps the best opposite of "local" is "external."

Comparative advantages and constraints of local humanitarian actors

"Local actors" are characterized by a great deal of diversity, but very broadly speaking, the literature on LHA summarizes the relative strengths and constraints of local actors. The broad consensus is that local humanitarian actors have the following advantages over international or external responders:

- They are on the ground as soon as crisis hits[13] and often have greater access to the affected population[14].
- They have better knowledge of culture/context—which can make aid more appropriate and relevant.[15]
- They have the necessary language skills to communicate effectively with the affected population.
- They have stronger accountability to the affected population and may have greater bonds of solidarity with and more trust from the affected population. This gives them greater capacity to mobilize and organize the affected community.[16]
- They may have more holistic (multi-sector) skills and experiences and are more likely to form bridges between the development, humanitarian, and recovery realms.[17]
- They are less costly and use fewer resources.[18]
- They are more likely to stick around after the crisis ends and humanitarian funding dries up.

While debate continues about the primary constraints facing local humanitarian actors, some of the primary concerns cited are as follows:

- The assumption is that many local actors have weaker administrative and financial systems[19], have less logistical capacity, and perhaps less technical expertise.
- Often, they have been affected by the crisis themselves (their members' families may be injured or lost, their offices may be damaged, etc.).
- They may face challenges in scaling up quickly (especially after sudden-onset crises).[20]
- While they may be more likely to stick around after a crisis, they may have trouble sustaining themselves financially between crises.[21] A local NGO may scale up during a crisis, then face a major challenge finding funding, and may not be operational by the time the next crisis hits.
- International responses can also weaken local capacity because local NGO and government staff tend to be "poached" by international organizations that can pay much higher salaries. This can weaken local organizations at precisely the moment they need their most senior and experienced staff.[22]
- Some local actors may replicate internal power dynamics within their societies; they can be exclusive of certain castes, ethnic groups, genders, sexual and gender minorities, etc.[23] However, a counter argument is that local actors who represent marginalized populations are ultimately the best placed to serve their needs.
- Local organizations are, by definition, going to be most concerned with local trends and events. This means when a humanitarian emergency or crisis strikes, they will respond to it. But unlike some international organizations, local organizations are not—for the most part—specialized humanitarian organizations. They may have roles in development, in advocacy, in human rights and governance issues, or in peace-building more akin to a definition of civil society. This means that they may not have certain technical specialties important to a humanitarian response, and new technical capacities may have to be developed in a hurry. But conventional humanitarian donors may be reluctant to fund the broader range of activities that these agencies undertake.

Key topics in the local humanitarian action agenda

1. Coordination

There are several key issues in the debate over LHA. The first set of issues with local actors is around **coordination**. Local groups have often been largely left out of coordination and decision-making mechanisms in humanitarian response. This may be because of **physical barriers**: coordination meetings often take place in capital cities, and local groups are often, by definition, based in the affected communities. Even if they are based in the capital, they may not have access to efficient or affordable transportation options.[24]

It can be because of **political barriers**: local groups may not have permission or credentials to access spaces for coordination (during the response to the Haiti earthquake, it was infamously difficult for Haitian nationals to access the UN base where coordination meetings happened). There may also be **language barriers, staff-time barriers** and a variety of other obstacles.[25]

2. Partnership

A second set of issues is around **partnership**, and these raise the question of meaningful, workable, equitable relationships. While being a "local partner" might bring resources to local organizations, and might result in local organizations doing much of the actual work on the ground, it does not necessarily mean an equal or meaningful voice in decision-making related to how humanitarian aid is planned and delivered. Local actors may be invited to coordination spaces or into partnerships for show—the token "local actor"—but have no voice in the decision-making process. True partnership involves a shared vision, transparency, communication, and complementarity.

This is particularly true if a local actor is a subcontractor to an external actor—they may be visible on the ground and in meetings, but may not have a meaningful role in decision-making. Being stuck in the role of sub-contractor to an external agency is a significant complaint of many local organizations involved with humanitarian response. These agencies may do most of the actual work, and bear a substantial part of the risk in humanitarian operations, but are given no real autonomy or decision-making power in shaping those operations, setting priorities etc.

There is an element of accountability here as well. "Accountability" in the humanitarian world is mostly still about accountability to donors for the use of resources received—so called "upwards" accountability. Much has been made of the imperative for accountability to beneficiaries—sometimes called "downward accountability." But a parallel argument could be made about the accountability of external actors to local partners or local actors, and accountability of local actors to affected communities ("360 accountability").

3. Capacity building

This raises the third issue, which is **capacity building**. This word is used often in reference to local humanitarian action, so unpacking it is important. Capacity building often happens in an ad hoc way over short periods of time; international NGOs may decide to build local capacity in the last months of a project once they learn they are not getting any new funding and need to carry out some kind of exit strategy. Or they may be doing rushed on-the-ground capacity building during the beginning of a partnership so that the local partner can help implement the project. But for any capacity building to be effective, time and resources must be invested over a sustained period of time, not in a "one-off" set of trainings.

Capacity building needs to be tailored to the context in which local organizations are working. It requires significant knowledge of the logistical, political, and social challenges that local actors face so that the capacity-building efforts are actionable. Advanced accounting software would be inappropriate for an organization working in a remote mountain community with limited electricity and Internet. Capacity building is often driven by what the international partner needs from the local partner, not necessarily by what local partners need from the external agency, or the needs of people the local agency will serve. Ensuring that local actors have a voice in defining the capacities they want built is essential. Both (or all) parties should share a vision of the purpose of the capacity development: to deliver a response or to become a stronger partner in a response and more accountable to the people?

Finally, there is a question of who builds whose capacity? We consider that international NGO efforts to teach local actors about technical standards, administrative processes, and programmatic strategies are important and worthy of compensation. However, we tend to take for granted all of the knowledge that local actors give to external actors about social dynamics, cultural sensitivity, and political processes. It is important to consider who values what knowledge and what capacities are seen as worthy of funding.[26, 27]

4. Financial flows

The fourth set of issues is about **financial flows.** Under the current system, only a tiny percentage of donor funds go directly to local organizations. Before the World Humanitarian Summit, the figure being cited was a measly 0.2 percent of the total global humanitarian budget (or about USD 49 million).[28] Larger proportions went to local organizations as subcontracts (perhaps as much as ten times the amount of direct funding).[29]

Given this, one of the major proposals of the LHA discourse is to increase direct funding flows to local organizations. There have been multiple pledges around this issue, but the most recent and prominent is the "Grand Bargain" announced at the 2016 World Humanitarian Summit. This was a voluntary commitment to channel 25 percent of funding "as directly as possible" to national and local actors as of 2020[30]; certain NGOs, like Oxfam, have made commitments beyond that. However, while the aspirational goal of 25 percent sounds good to many advocates of LHA, the phrase "as directly as possible" still leaves a large loophole with regard to the direct funding of local organizations.

Several barriers exist to increasing levels of funding for local organizations. These are related to the financial administrative capacity noted above: the ability to handle large flows of money in an accountable, transparent, and effective way. They may have to do with proposal-writing capacity: having the dedicated staff time, expertise, and donor language proficiency to quickly turn out proposals and responses to calls for proposals. These can lead to issues of visibility and trust: donors may be less likely to fund groups whose track record they don't know, particularly for large contracts. Local organizations that are less visible may have significantly higher hurdles to getting funding, even with strong technical capacity and experience.

However, the elephant in the room with regard to funding flows is that the constraints may have more to do with donor capacity than with local agencies' capacity. Donors often just do not have the staff to handle many modest sized grants going *directly* to local actors, preferring an umbrella grant through an INGO/UN agency[31]—which in turn, almost by definition, confines local organizations to the role of sub-contractor.

Likewise, donors are often unable to fund organizations that may be less formal, that may function without typical administrative structures. Or, other arms of donor governments may not allow donors certain kinds of flexibility in funding mechanisms (for example, counterterrorism policies severely restrict which agencies can be funded in a context like Somalia or Syria). Some donors just do not have the ability or willingness to actually invest the time and energy to get to know local actors (as opposed to INGOs or UN agencies with whom they have a long-standing relationship). They may prefer to outsource the risks of partnership to INGOs/UN agencies, just as the latter outsource much of the actual risk of engagement to their local partners. And finally, while humanitarian donors may be very interested to harness the capabilities of local organizations when they are needed in a crisis, they may have little incentive to invest in capacity building to address issues noted above during non-crisis times. All of these issues tend not only to *lock* local organizations in a sub-contractor role, they also *fail to unlock* the maximum potential of local organizations and actors.[32] This brings up the issue of challenges more broadly.

Key challenges facing the local humanitarian action agenda

A number of key challenges face the LHA agenda. Some relate to how the local humanitarian action agenda will deal with the question of humanitarian principles. Others relate to issues already raised, such as funding

support. A third is the question about isomorphism, or turning local actors into versions of international actors. And finally, there are fundamental questions about the engagement of outside agencies with local actors because, inevitably, that interaction will pick "winners" and "losers."

1. Humanitarian principles

The first concern is about LHA during conflicts, and the humanitarian principles of **neutrality and impartiality.** The argument is that the very factors that make local responders more accountable and better able to serve local populations—their close connections to certain members of an affected community as defined by family, clan, livelihood group, etc.—may make it more challenging for them to be impartial.[33] Of course, impartiality— the principle that assistance in emergencies should be offered solely on the basis of need and not any other criterion such as ethnicity, gender, caste, religion, political affiliation or nationality—is core to the humanitarian ethic as it has developed in the past 150 years. Certain critics ask what will happen to the principle of impartiality if local actors lead.

Setting aside for a moment the observation that international humanitarian response often falls short of this principle as well, evidence shows that where local actors have played a major role in responses, they are indeed more inclined to serve the communities they represent (international actors often fail this principle for different reasons). For example, much of Somali social organization is built on a clan basis, from very local lineages all the way up to the five major clan groupings that dominate political space in the country. Some of the more powerful clans not only have their own organizations, they have in many cases come to dominate the national staff of international organizations as well. In a crisis where either local organizations or the national staff of international agencies were the only ones who had contact with affected communities, this caused problems, with aid being funneled preferentially to some groups at the expense of others—and not surprisingly the most vulnerable groups were the least able to direct aid to themselves.[34]

At the same time, concerns are that local organizations will be more involved in local politics and therefore be unable to play a neutral role between belligerent parties in a conflict—which is strongly believed to be important in gaining access to vulnerable groups on both (or all) sides of a conflict emergency. The predominant role played by the Syrian Arab Red Crescent Society in the Syrian crisis is a case in point—although it is nominally part of the International Federation of the Red Cross and Red Crescent, it works hand in glove with the Assad regime, which caused serious issues in terms of neutrality and impartiality.[35] The result may be that some affected populations get assistance while others are left out—inadvertently or deliberately.

As a result, some agencies—notably those that rely the least on local partners—argue strongly that an international presence is needed to uphold the principles of both impartiality and neutrality.[36] All these concerns led to the tag line about "as local as possible, as international as necessary"[37] (the "as international as necessary" bit refers not only to finance and capacity, but also to the necessity of a "neutral and impartial" international presence).

Proponents of LHA are quick to point out that international humanitarian agencies are frequently neither impartial nor neutral. Given the preponderance of conflict-related emergencies in terms of contemporary global humanitarian action, these concerns have to be taken seriously. However, this discussion may not be so much about principles, or who is better at protecting them, as it is about reframing a number of issues. The presumption has long been that principles have to be adopted and adhered to in totality at the level of the individual humanitarian actor or agency. The international humanitarian effort is already up to its neck in local politics and the politics of local organizations through partnerships, sub-contracts, and other relationships—and

the assumption is that each agency or partner should embrace the same principles. But when choosing a local partner based on its close association with a particular community, it is unreasonable to expect the local actor to jettison that association in times of conflict when help is needed most.

Rather than ensuring every actor behaves the same, adherence to humanitarian principles needs to be reframed at the level of the whole of the response: Does the whole response address the needs of all affected people (even if some actors are themselves not impartial)? Does the whole response avoid favoring any one party to the conflict? In this way, some of the concerns about principles—and especially the nearly sacrosanct principle of impartiality, can be protected. But it will require coordination at a scale usually not seen.

2. Local independence

A second concern involves the independence of local actors and is especially focused on the question of donor resources. Much is made of the fact that currently, local organizations are stuck in the role of subcontractors to UN agencies or international NGOs, and the rallying cry of LHA is for more direct access to donor funding. However, some observers wonder whether that will actually serve the purposes of local organizations.

Humanitarian funding tends to run in cycles—lots of money in a crisis and very little in "normal" times or after a crisis ends (or is forgotten). More than one reputable local organization has scaled up rapidly with donor funding in a crisis (even as a sub-contractor) only to face a severe funding shortfall and precipitous decline in its aftermath. One observer, who is fundamentally supportive of LHA notes "a funding model that has already gutted the independence of international NGOs is not best-suited to empower local organizations. . . "[38] He strongly recommends that local organizations develop links with their own donors, rather than deliberately making themselves dependent on the major humanitarian donors. This is a critical point: any engagement with local organizations or local groups around LHA should, almost by definition, be much longer in time frame than simply the response phase of an acute crisis.

3. Isomorphism

A third concern is about the lingering tendency towards "isomorphism" or the expectation that local actors will model themselves on the familiar structure and organization of Western NGOs. In the critical words of Antonio Donini, the message local organizations often hear is "*you* can join *us*, but only on our terms*."*[39] A fundamental challenge facing supportive external actors is how to support local humanitarian actors without turning those local actors into "look-alike" agencies that simply come to embody the shortcomings of the current international system.

4. Picking winners . . . and losers

A final challenge in the sheer number and diversity of local actors. The "localization" agenda will inevitably pick "winners and losers" among local actors, but outsiders who are selecting partners may not have the ability (especially if they are new on the scene and inexperienced in the context) to tell which organizations are truly grounded in the community and have its best interests at heart, which might be captured by one faction or by elites, and which are "briefcase" NGOs.

No universal test exists to measure the effectiveness of local actors (the metrics currently used to measure international humanitarian actors may not be appropriate—that is, how many millions of dollars have they managed in the past). No universal database of effective local humanitarian actors has been created (country-specific ones, such as Charity Navigator in the US, can be found). Country-specific databases on local organizations do exist that international agencies can use (or are even obliged to use), but these are frequently

more about risk management than about identifying positive capacities. Therefore, while calls have been made for a whole new humanitarian governance system, the actual changes will be very country- and crisis-specific.

Gaps in the evidence base on LHA

This is a complex topic with many nuances, and the evidence base on LHA is still limited. Conclusions about LHA are often too broad—making general statements about humanitarian action and humanitarian actors—and sometimes too specific—small case studies that are interesting but not comprehensive enough for broader comparisons or lessons learned. Policy makers and practitioners will need more nuanced analysis across contexts in order to make informed decisions.

Investing in more evidence is important, to parse out the unique challenges and opportunities of LHA in different kinds of crises. In sudden-onset natural disasters, it is generally accepted that local organizations will be first responders but may struggle with scaling up quickly. With a conflict, the concerns are more about the principles mentioned above. However, much more could be done to explore the differing dynamics of LHA in different crisis types, the most supportive roles for external humanitarian organizations, and the best ways for donors to engage in these different contexts.

Little research has been done about LHA at different phases of crisis response, particularly in the kinds of chronic and complex emergencies where the lines between emergency assistance, relief, and recovery are blurred. While we know that funding levels for immediate response are much greater than for capacity building or transitional programming, we don't have a good evidence base about the unique priorities, needs, and challenges of local actors at these later phases of response.

The current (limited) evidence tends to assume that "local humanitarian actor" means "local NGO" or "local government." But these two groups by definition have power and privilege, so by ignoring other kinds of local actors (particularly informal community groups and associations), one danger is reinforcing existing hierarchies and power structures that might disadvantage the most vulnerable. Or, by ignoring other forms of power (customary power structures, armed groups, even the financial power of the diaspora and social networks), it is possible to miss out on understanding and leveraging other kinds of resources during moments of crisis.

Unfortunately—but perhaps not surprisingly—there is much less evidence on means of engaging with these other kinds of local actors: what their relative strengths and weaknesses are (including their adherence to humanitarian principles), what the best practices for partnering or even coordinating with these groups are, and how to deal with the new power dynamics these groups represent.

Evidence about the strengths and challenges of different local actors in different sectors of humanitarian response is limited. Certain areas require more technical expertise and less cultural sensitivity (like trauma surgery after an earthquake) where there may be comparative advantages to flying in specialists from abroad. Other sectors demand great amounts of contextual, cultural, and political knowledge (such as conflict sensitivity or livelihoods programming), where having strong local leadership brings significant advantages. Analyses of sector-specific LHA will also change based on the in-country workforce. For instance, a health response in a country with a high number of doctors would look different than in a country where nearly all the medical personnel have emigrated or have been targets of armed violence.

A bias exists in the evidence base regarding the kinds of countries and crises that are documented: namely, crises with heavy international presence and/or geopolitical interest. Less research has been done into what

people do in the absence of external assistance. This may be during crises that are "too small" to attract international attention, during the early moments of sudden-onset disasters before external assistance arrives, and among groups that may live in areas deemed inaccessible because of security or counter-terrorism concerns.

A small but important body of literature exists on the way communities self-organize during crises that rather belie the current assumptions about crises and people's response to it.[40] Work at the Feinstein International Center has highlighted this set of activities under categories of self-protection (how people stay safe in conflicts), autonomous response (how people self-organize during crises), and coping (how people protect their livelihoods during times of stress). But this is a limited body of evidence, and its general absence from the broader research literature means understanding is limited of how people protect themselves and their livelihoods in the absence of external assistance. These dynamics are important to understand so that if and when assistance arrives (whether from formally organized local NGOs or external actors), the aid will not undermine people's efforts to take care of themselves or inadvertently reinforce survival strategies that put certain parts of the affected community at undue risk. Yet, with few exceptions there is little information on these dynamics.[41]

Perhaps most importantly, current evidence shows real gaps around the guidance that can help external actors translate their concerns for supporting LHA into recommendations for action. There are many idiosyncrasies and variables to take into account—the type of crisis, the strength of civil society, the strength of the private sector, access, the dynamics of latent or active conflict. Taking all of these variables into account to develop a plan for how to engage with local actors will be particularly challenging in sudden-onset disasters when an organization has little prior experience in the affected area and in protracted conflict-related crises in which local political dynamics may be difficult to understand. Understanding the way local communities attempt to protect and provide for themselves in crisis is very important—through their own social networks, their own initiatives and their own organizations. External support to build on these capacities is critical; understanding them first—and not undermining them—is imperative.

And finally, the "success stories" are so very few. There are many critiques and endless stories of people getting it wrong, but few good case studies of people getting it right. This limits the extent to which broader patterns and conclusions on best practices can be based. There simply aren't enough data points for good comparison and critical analysis.

Overall, this calls for more dedication to sustained, in-depth research into the countries that are most crisis-prone to appropriately understand the dynamics of different kinds of actors in different sectors in different types of crises at different points of time. It calls for good, in-depth case studies *and* comparative analysis across cases for generalized learning. Without this investment in building the evidence base, the challenges of translating knowledge into nuanced and actionable guidance for policymakers, donors, and implementing agencies will continue.

Where does the LHA agenda go from here?

The international humanitarian response system is—and should be—adapting to rapidly changing realities on the ground. Demands on the system are severely challenging its capacity to deliver. In the current context, there is increased recognition of the role of local humanitarian actors, both formal and informal. But their role is still not well understood and not well supported. US private foundations have a unique and important opportunity to be proactive and shape the way in which the international humanitarian system engages with diverse kinds of

local actors in a more constructive and respectful way. US private foundations can help to promote local leadership in humanitarian crises in a number of ways.

First, private foundations should evaluate their own internal policies to note barriers to meaningful local engagement and leadership. These include language requirements, how funding opportunities are advertised, whether certain institutional standards are reasonable, whether risk aversion policies are preventing the organization from engaging with new partners, etc. Do foundations have the capacity to engage with local groups that may not have the organizational structure of international NGOs? Are policies governing international grantees—rigid deadlines, time-consuming reporting requirements, or lack of flexibility in adapting project goals to local priorities—preventing them from developing meaningful, respectful local partnerships?

Second, private foundations can lead in developing innovative ways of funding local actors, particularly unconventional local actors. This may include setting up special funds that can support humanitarian response when required but, more importantly, can bridge post-disaster funding gaps from more conventional sources (funding for response is often *not* the critical problem in acute disasters). It may include setting up innovation funds and working alongside local actors to develop and test ideas and bring them to scale.

Third, private foundations can invest in supporting context-sensitive capacity building with clear objectives that are negotiated on an equal basis with partners and with clear criteria for "graduation" or for when it is time for the external partner to step back.

Many of these efforts require investing time, energy, and resources in deeply understanding a context. This includes building the evidence base and developing deep knowledge of the places where your funding is going, in order to better understand the complex dynamics that shape what local humanitarian action does and could look like in each context. And it may include extending the evidence base not only on "what works" but also on the relationship between context, actor, and intervention. This requires building a unique lexicon for each disaster to even understand what the word "local" means in each context. Underlying these efforts means getting better at listening to crisis-affected populations, examining who sits at the decision-making table, and evaluating whether or not diverse perspectives of crisis-affected populations are being represented.

In addition, private foundations should develop robust metrics for measuring the success of efforts to support local humanitarian action. This needs to go beyond simply a percentage of the total amount of funding that goes to NGOs based in the affected country. The end goal of all of these changes to humanitarian action is to better serve the actual priorities of crisis-affected people in a dignified and effective manner. Changing the architecture of humanitarian funding to support local leadership must be guided not only by a concern about where the funding goes but also what institutional capacity has been built, and how outcomes in a crisis are changed.

Finally, what "humanitarian" means in the context of donor relations may require some rethinking. The big institutional donors clearly define emergency response as excluding some of the activities that local organizations do (which might fall under the category of "recovery" or "development"—or even "peace-building" or "civil society strengthening"). While there are good reasons for having these categories, accepting the blurring of some of these boundaries in certain contexts may be important. Private foundations have an opportunity to push these boundaries in ways that large institutional donors might be reluctant or unable to try.

This is the beginning of a longer conversation—and one that needs more voices from crisis-affected communities at the center. There is little doubt that general support exists for the idea of greater leadership

from local actors in humanitarian action. Still missing is the critical mass to make this a reality. A consortium of well-informed and empathetic donors could make a huge difference.

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Endnotes

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2 Ramalingam, Gray, Cerruti 2013 (p 13–15), Smillie 2001 (p 7), Harvey and Harmer 2011 (p 7).
3 Ramalingam, Gray, Cerruti 2013 (p 10–13).
4 Gingerich and Cohen 2015 (p 11).
5 Gingerich and Cohen 2015 (p 19).
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8 IASC 2013 (p 1), Brown, Donini, Clarke 2014 (p 23).
9 Wall and Hedlund 2016 (p 14).
10 Maxwell and Majid 2016.
11 Schenkenberg 2016 (p 17).
12 Wall and Hedlund 2016 (p 15).
13 Ramalingam 2015 (p 5), Gingerich and Cohen 2015 (p 5, 18).
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15 Ramalingam, Gray, Cerruti 2013 (p 10–13).
16 Gingerich and Cohen 2015 (p 20).
17 Ramalingam, Gray, Cerruti 2013 (p 20–23).
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21 Caritas, CAFOD 2014 (p 18).
22 Featherstone 2017 (p 5).
23 Anderson, Brown, Jean 2012 (p 63).
24 ALNAP 2016, Wall and Hedlund 2016 (p 20).
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26 Eade 2010 (p 203).

[27] Pardington and Coyne 2007 (p 22).

[28] Els and Cartensen 2015 (p 3).

[29] Ibid.

[30] WHS Secretariat 2016 (p 28).

[31] Street 2013 (p 7–8).

[32] Ibid.

[33] Schenkenberg 2016.

[34] Maxwell and Majid 2016.

[35] Howe 2016.

[36] Schenkenberg 2016.

[37] Ki Moon 2016 (p 57).

[38] Dubois 2016.

[39] Donini 2012.

[40] Majid et al. 2016, Solnit 2010, South and Harrigan 2012.

[41] Els and Carstensen 2015.