

MISSED OPPORTUNITIES:

the case for strengthening national and local partnership-based humanitarian responses



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Front cover photo:

Christian Aid partner CCSMKE supported the community in Parkinshon village, Marsabit district, during the 2010 Kenyan food crisis. They focused on raising levels of nutrition, distributing animal feed, providing water and monitoring the health of the most vulnerable

Contents

Executive summary	4
Introduction	6
Focus and methodology	8
Findings	10
Can partnerships realise their potential?	24
Conclusions and recommendations	26

Executive summary

Partnerships with national and local actors have long been identified as a source of problems in international humanitarian aid. Major evaluations of numerous high profile humanitarian crises – most notably that of the Indian Ocean tsunami – have identified insufficient investment in, and commitment to, such partnerships as the biggest hinderance to effective performance. The reality is that efforts to work with national and local actors do not play a central role in the majority of international humanitarian work. This amounts to a longstanding systemic issue for the sector as a whole, which has persisted despite the efforts made by individual agencies to invest time and effort in this area.

This study is the first output of a research project commissioned by five UK-based international humanitarian non-governmental organisations (INGOs) – ActionAid, Cafod, Christian Aid, Oxfam GB and Tearfund. The main purpose of the project was to look at the current and future potential of partnerships with national non-governmental organisations (NNGOs) in humanitarian response, based on lessons from across the commissioning agencies in four major emergency settings. The project is part of an ongoing effort to build the future of humanitarian assistance, which has already seen publications in 2011 from Christian Aid and Oxfam GB. The research process involved interviews with INGO and NNGO staff, workshops and meetings with INGO representatives, and a review of relevant documentation.

A number of the INGO organisations have used partnerships – partly or exclusively – as the means by which they respond to new and emerging humanitarian crises. Some of the partnerships looked at for this research date back several decades. However, the approach taken to partnerships in the majority of humanitarian responses tends to be reactive, driven by emergency, and shaped by ad-hoc interactions that take place at the point of crisis. The sector is not yet systematic about partnerships: how they are thought about, designed, implemented or assessed.

Despite this, and the well-known constraints faced in many response settings, the research found a significant number of benefits that stem from working through such collaborative mechanisms.

Such partnerships were identified as helping to:

- enhance the **relevance** and **appropriateness** of humanitarian responses. National and local actors' understanding of context and internal dynamics allow them to shape programmes accordingly.
- enhance the **effectiveness** of assistance, by ensuring accountability to disaster-affected populations.
- smooth the transition between the different elements of the disaster cycle. Unlike the international system where tasks such as resilience, response and recovery might be undertaken by different teams and organisations, local

NGOs (LNGO) and NNGOs typically work in all of these spaces. This enables them to enhance **connectedness** and ensure that responses take place in ways that respect longer-term perspectives.

On other issues, however, the picture is more mixed:

- Partnerships take time and resources to set up and manage, and require a complex engagement which is not amenable to simplistic measurements of **efficiency** and value for money.
- The majority of partners are relatively localised, and have small-scale operations, meaning that issues of **coverage** were not straightforward – except in those few cases where the national partner happened to be a large-scale NNGO.

Both the pros and cons need to be put in context. There is a general lack of financing for partnerships and capacity both before and after major crises, despite the efforts of some partnership-based agencies to address this. Many of the benefits that have been realised to date have been achieved with minimal investments, and little in the way of official donor support outside of emergency contexts. This clearly suggests that, across the board, the potential benefits of partnerships in response have not been maximised.

Of course, there are a number of wider factors that alternately support and prevent partnerships being a more

central part of humanitarian policy and practice. These relate to the incentives in organisations, the capacity and willingness of INGOs and NNGOs to work in partnerships, and broader system-wide issues around funding, visibility and norms. That said, there does seem to be scope for greater efforts in working through partnerships with local and national actors. Given the anticipated rise in the number and complexity of emergencies, it is becoming clear that the formal international system cannot be expected to respond in all settings, all the time. Strengthening partnership approaches should be seen as key to fulfilling the humanitarian imperative, both now and in the uncertain future.

The study concludes that there are four areas where the commissioning organisations might consider further investment. These are:

- Investing in change
- Setting the agenda
- Building knowledge and shared understanding
- Strengthening practices.

There are a number of process implications for humanitarian agencies working in partnerships. These will be explored more fully in a second report.

Introduction

The diversity of the humanitarian community is an asset if we build on our comparative advantages and complement each other's contributions. Local capacity is one of the main assets to enhance and on which to build. Whenever possible, humanitarian organisations should strive to make it an integral part in emergency response.

Principles of Partnership,
Global Humanitarian Platform 2007¹

There has been a great deal of debate, and rhetoric, in recent years on issues of southern capacity and the development of north-south humanitarian partnerships. Much of this stemmed from the massive response to the 2004 Indian Ocean Tsunami, and the *Tsunami Evaluation Coalition's Synthesis* report (July 2006) which called for a '*...fundamental reorientation in practice... a change in the organisational culture of humanitarian aid providers... that agencies cede power to the affected population... and that agencies... meet this problem by promoting distributed ownership, with the community and different levels of [national] government owning different levels of the response...*'²

Recent studies point out the current and potential benefits of partnership with southern actors.³ However, little has been translated into the formal humanitarian policies that shape the system. One recent exception at the global level is the Department for International Development (DFID) 2011 Humanitarian Emergency Response Review (HERR) led by Lord Paddy Ashdown into the UK government's humanitarian aid efforts, which espoused the principle of southern capacity building for humanitarian preparedness, response and recovery. The report clearly presented the view that working through southern partners helps to improve response, coverage and build resilience. However, in many instances, 'global' humanitarian policies make little or no explicit mention of southern partnerships. Typically the term is used to refer to relationships between members of the international community, rather than between those members and national and local actors.

This is an interesting gap given the apparent desire for change in the sector in general. There are, for example, increasing efforts in innovation, leadership and resilience, with commensurate increases in the funding available for such work.

The role of local partners in providing aid in humanitarian crises is a major systemic issue for the sector. It does not affect all humanitarian agencies equally; some are organised with the aim of maximising the potential of local and national actors, but

it is evident across much of the international humanitarian aid system.

This may be because partnership-working demands *transformative changes* in the way things are done – which pose threats to the status quo of the sector, in terms of resource distribution, power and control. It is interesting to note that many of the most successful change efforts in the sector have been characterised by incremental changes: tinkering with the existing system, and a focus on business, more-or-less, as usual. To take a prominent example, much has been made of the potential of mobile technology to transform humanitarian aid, especially in the context of empowering disaster-affected communities. However, the majority of investment in this area has sought to improve international agencies' use of such technologies within their organisation, to improve efficiencies rather than to fundamentally transform the relationships with disaster-affected people.

This paper builds on existing research and collates the practical experience of partnership in humanitarian crises gleaned from over 65 face-to-face and telephone interviews with INGO practitioners from five major agencies: ActionAid, Cafod, Christian Aid, Cafod, Oxfam GB and Tearfund and staff from partner organisations. The research focused on these agencies' engagement with national and local NGO partners in four significant emergency settings. These were the crisis in Kivu, Democratic

Republic of the Congo (DRC); the Haiti earthquake; the Horn of Africa food crisis in Kenya, and the Pakistan floods of 2010.

The overwhelming conclusion from this work is that the international humanitarian community is missing significant opportunities to strengthen its performance. This is especially the case given the current interest in resilience as a means of militating against crises. The paper presents the case for greater policy-level and operational engagement with issues of southern capacities and partnerships for humanitarian work, focusing on disaster response. It also presents some of the challenges of such engagement and how these might be overcome.

The rest of the report is structured in three parts: the focus and methodology of the research process; the findings (under the broad categories of Relevance/Appropriateness, Effectiveness, Efficiency, Coverage, Connectedness); and a Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, Threats (SWOT) summary analysis of what partnerships might bring in the future. The report concludes with key points about the relevance of this work in the humanitarian sector and presents recommendations to be taken forward.

¹ The Global Humanitarian Platform (GHP) is a forum of humanitarian organisations that aims to support collaboration between actors to increase the effectiveness of humanitarian aid. For more information, see <https://icvanetwork.org/pop.html>

² www.alnap.org/ourwork/tec/synthesis.aspx

³ *Building the future of humanitarian aid: local capacity and partnerships in emergency assistance*, 2012, Christian Aid; *Crises in a New World Order. Challenging the humanitarian project*, 2012, Oxfam; *NGOs and Humanitarian Reform Project Phases 1 and 2*, 2008-present, ICVA.

Focus and methodology

Focus of the report

The study synthesises the partnership experiences of five major international humanitarian agencies in four distinct emergency contexts. The agencies are, in alphabetical order: ActionAid, Cafod, Christian Aid, Oxfam GB and Tearfund. The four emergency contexts were: Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) conflict 2009-2012, Haiti earthquake 2010, Kenya food crisis 2010 and Pakistan floods 2010. These were selected through extensive discussions with representatives of the five organisations. The focus on large-scale emergencies was deliberate, as it was widely felt that these were the settings in which partnerships were most challenging, in concept and in practice. This rationale led to a focus on emergency response efforts, although issues of resilience and recovery were also addressed in the analysis.

The case studies were based on a consultative process, in which the organisational representatives identified a number of staff members and partner representatives, across the four emergency contexts, and shared contacts with the research team, or in some instances helped set up the interviews. The research team then proceeded to investigate these case studies for specific and general lessons, using a number of common hypotheses gleaned from a review of documentation and the literature.

Methodology

The research study employed a number of standard research and evaluative methods, as follows:

Document review: the study undertook an extensive review of the literature, including internal documents.

Key informant interviews: over 65 staff across the five agencies and partner organisations were interviewed over the course of six months. Interviews, spread across the five INGOs, included senior leadership, national office and technical staff, with the bulk undertaken by telephone.

The team sought to speak to people with experience of partnerships in response, or who had leadership positions that were influential in shaping such efforts.

Iterative enquiry: the team, the study and, critically, the steering group of the study took a flexible and iterative approach, in which the envisaged outputs changed in focus and scope over the duration of the study, as did the timeline. During the period of the study, the focus for the report broadened from gathering lessons about partnerships to identifying key advocacy messages for use in influencing the partnership agenda.

The framework of hypotheses used for the research process and interviews

Inputs	Activities	Intermediate outcomes	Outcomes	Impacts
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Partnerships bring together relevant actors in a timely manner. - Partnerships are focused on specific, high priority humanitarian issues before, during and after crises. - Partnerships require a blend of resources – human, financial, technological. - Partnerships require effective preparedness on the part of all parties. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Partnership development involves well-understood and clear processes and instruments. - Partnerships require the right people and institutions, at the right level, to be connected in appropriate ways. - Partnerships benefit from strong pre-existing relationships. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Partnerships lead to raised awareness of possibilities for enhanced humanitarian efforts. - Partnerships strengthen level of cross-organisational consensus, teamwork, coalitions and networks. - Partnerships contribute to new and improved capacities, knowledge and skills for better humanitarian responses. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Partnerships catalyse response and recovery. - Partnerships make a contribution to improved development decisions and actions. - Partnerships enhance community relations. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Partnerships can contribute to improved humanitarian results (OECD-DAC criteria). - There is scope to get better assessments of value for money/ cost-benefit analysis.

Material was collected across all five areas of the hypotheses, however this report focuses primarily on the impacts of partnerships, drawing on the other areas where relevant. (The findings from the other areas will be the focus of a subsequent report.)

Findings are organised according to the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) and Development Assistance Committee (DAC) criteria for evaluating humanitarian assistance, and relate to how partnerships in the different settings contribute to the relevance/appropriateness, effectiveness, efficiency, coverage and connectedness of response

efforts in different settings. This framework is increasingly used in evaluations and major studies of humanitarian aid effectiveness, most notably in the Active Learning Network for Accountability and Performance⁴ (ALNAP) *State of the Humanitarian System (SOHS)* reports.

The core of the report provides a synthesis of lessons from across these five areas. Each sub-section concludes with an assessment of the potential of partnerships to address each area of performance. These are based on combining the research team's assessments of the partnership work in each emergency response setting. This is intended as

a qualitative summary assessment of the findings from the team. It is set against the team's assessment of how the sector is performing in this area overall, which is based on analysis of the landmark 2012 ALNAP *SOHS* report.

This process was shared with the ALNAP secretariat, and was endorsed as a sensible approach. Indeed, ALNAP is planning to undertake a similar scoring in the next *SOHS* report. The summary scores themselves are based on the independent analysis and conclusions of the research team.

Five OECD-DAC criteria for evaluating humanitarian aid used in this report

Relevance/Appropriateness

How well humanitarian activities are tailored to local needs.

Effectiveness

How well an activity has achieved its purpose, or can be expected to do so on the basis of existing outputs.

Efficiency

A measure of the outputs, qualitative and quantitative, achieved as a result of inputs.

Coverage

The extent to which assistance reaches all major population groups affected by the crisis.

Connectedness

The extent to which short-term emergency response steps take longer-term and interconnected problems into account.

Source: ALNAP

⁴ ALNAP is a unique, sector-wide network that supports the humanitarian sector to improve humanitarian performance through learning, peer-to-peer sharing and research.

Findings

This chapter sets out the research findings for the contribution of the partnerships looked at in the study to improve humanitarian aid effectiveness. It analyses these findings using five of the OECD-DAC criteria for assessing humanitarian aid: Relevance/Appropriateness, Effectiveness, Efficiency, Coverage and Connectedness (see page 9).

Each sub-section starts with an assessment of the current performance of the humanitarian sector as a whole for each of the criteria. This is provided in blue text. Performance is rated as strong, good, moderate, poor or weak – where strong is the highest rating and weak is the lowest. These scores are based on the research team’s independent analysis and assessment of the key findings and summaries in the ALNAP *SOHS* report 2012, which uses the same OECD-DAC criteria to analyse system-wide humanitarian performance. The main text of each sub-section describes how, if at all, partnerships were found to have contributed to a given criteria of performance.

The potential of a partnership-based approach to improve aid performance is then included at the end of each sub-section – also in blue text – using the same rating system as above.

Assessing the research findings in this way allows a comparison between the overall performance of the sector and the potential of partnerships to improve how the sector currently performs. This is presented, in visual form, in the diagram at the end of the chapter.

1. Do partnerships enhance the relevance and appropriateness of aid?

Relevance and appropriateness are central to aid effectiveness. Research findings and beneficiary surveys frequently find that aid is not always relevant to the needs and aspirations of affected populations. The reasons given include:

- weak understanding of local contexts
- inability to engage with the changing nature of need
- poor information gathering techniques
- inflexibility of response.

Analysis of the ALNAP *SOHS* suggests that overall sector performance in this area is moderate. This is based on the fact that although the sector has seen ‘modest improvements in relevance/appropriateness’ there was a ‘persistent weakness in consultation [of communities]’.

These issues were reiterated by the organisations participating in the research. For example, there was widespread acknowledgement that, in many settings, international operational staff members are unfamiliar with the specific country context and culture:

‘Many INGOs are based in [capital cities] and send people to do work [where crises hit]. They don’t know the language, the culture, and cannot easily become acceptable to the people because of the lack of understanding. As a result, they end up targeting the wrong community...’

Many interviewees emphasised that partnerships can enhance the relevance and appropriateness of a response by addressing the persistent shortcomings mentioned above. In the best examples looked at, the information and knowledge held by local partners is successfully used to improve the design and delivery of aid responses. This can help both with the process – for example, designing effective and culturally appropriate needs assessments – and the outputs of aid – for example, food assistance efforts that respond to specific contexts. Numerous examples were given across the five study organisations of how local and national partners were able to ‘find their own solution to the problems we collectively faced’ (see box opposite).



Christian Aid/M Gonzalez-Noda

In the Haiti emergency, Christian Aid partner APROSIFA recruited street food vendors such as Figaro Alourdes (left) to be food distributors. She provided free, hot meals to 80 vulnerable people each day and was able to sell what she had left over for a small profit.

Making food assistance more relevant in Kenya and Haiti

At the onset of the drought crisis in north Kenya in early 2010, Kitui was designated a red alert district by central government. It was assumed that the failure to plant grain was due to the drought, but in fact a fear of an aflatoxin contamination had prompted farmers to retain stocks longer than usual for domestic food consumption. This delayed the alert period until July 2010. Discovering this issue through sustained engagement between Caritas Kitui and farmer groups allowed Cafod a lead-in period of three to four months for the purchase of appropriate relief supplies for distribution through the partner entity.

In the Haiti emergency, Christian Aid partner APROSIFA started a programme of work based on their understanding of the limitations of space for cooking, and the dangers of many small fires in close proximity to each other and to plastic sheeting.

The programme identified networks of cooks who could cook for designated groups of families, and be paid for it. There was a means for direct feedback from the families to the service providers about quality and quantity. This provided sustenance to more than 1,000 families, and was done in a way that was locally acceptable, supported small businesses, and was accountable.

Tearfund in Pakistan found that working with good local partners helped address some of the inherent biases and 'accepted wisdoms' of an international response. This included, for example, widening engagement with stakeholders, so as to reach the very poorest and most affected by the crisis. When Tearfund launched their own operational response to the Pakistan floods, it was achieved through close working with, and the support of, existing partner organisations.

One INGO operational manager's eyes were opened by their experience in Pakistan: 'I'd always worked with direct delivery [NGOs], and so the first partner-led response I worked on was a remarkable change. It was so clear what the value was – the partners helped us have better analyses of the context on the ground...'

In addition to relevance in the context of specific aid programmes, there was also a widely-made point about the political and societal relevance of partnership-based responses. The humanitarian sector will need to be sensitive to the consequences of shifting attitudes towards, or negative perceptions of, international aid delivery. These may include:

- national governments choosing to reduce international involvement in aid operations on their territory
- concerns about the lack of independence of INGOs as agents of donor governments or their military objectives.

In many cases, working with local partnerships is emerging as a more acceptable face of humanitarian action. This is especially so in settings where access is limited (for example, in Myanmar following Cyclone Nargis) or where the security context is too challenging for an extensive international presence (for example, Somalia).

Of course, the 'local equals acceptable' principle does not hold true in all settings. From the perspective of affected country

governments, for example, some national NGOs may be perceived to be more aligned with 'global powers' than with affected communities.

National NGOs may also be aligned with military powers in a particular context. INGOs frequently express discomfort about how well national partners are able to fulfil the humanitarian principles of independence and neutrality. And beneficiaries in a crisis, especially conflict, will inevitably make their own judgements as to whose 'side' a local or international NGO represents.

Key messages

1. Conventional aid delivery approaches are often criticised for their lack of relevance and appropriateness, and the evidence shows that well-designed partnerships can militate against these issues.

2. Partnerships can do this by ensuring programme design that is contextually appropriate, culturally sensitive, responsive to needs, and based on communities' own understanding.

Potential of partnerships to enhance performance

Across the agencies in the four emergency settings, 'relevance/appropriateness' was the criterion most strongly identified by respondents as a beneficial outcome of partnerships in response efforts. This was also the area where there were fewest ambiguities, apart from the obvious one that potential partners do need to be screened for

their commitment to humanitarian principles. **For this reason, this area was scored as strong.**

2. Do partnerships enhance the effectiveness of aid?

The most common questions posed in the literature on effectiveness of aid are:

- whether aid is responsive, prepared, fast and flexible
- whether it is well coordinated
- whether it includes mechanisms to learn from experience
- whether human resources are adequate.

Analysis of the ALNAP SOHS suggests that overall sector performance in this area is moderate.

Objectives are seen as largely met, but there are serious issues around leadership and timeliness – which were seen as lacking in the sector overall. The report notes that 'Each major emergency during the reporting period had a mixed review in terms of effectiveness.'

A common view from across the case studies was that partnerships can, and do, help to strengthen responsiveness and speed, especially in relation to preparedness and in the immediate aftermath of a crisis. No matter how large and well-resourced an INGO, it cannot be everywhere all the time. Issues of timeliness were highlighted by almost all participants.

It is clear that local presence can enable partners to be 'the true first responders', getting to affected people in, some cases, days or weeks before the international community arrives. This was apparent in Haiti and Pakistan in particular, where Christian Aid partners were able to set up food assistance several days ahead of the formal humanitarian system. As well as initial response activities, local partners play a vital role in gathering contextual information, assessing damage and needs – all of which contribute to greater responsiveness and therefore effectiveness.

Responsiveness was largely framed in terms of engagement with disaster-affected communities. The need to build responses on community understanding of their own path out of crisis was evident in the research. This is essential not just as a means to ensure accountability, but also to ensure that aid is matched to the priorities on the ground rather than those perceived by international aid actors (see box adjacent).

The majority of respondents felt that the introduction of accountability standards to the work of funding both agencies and local partners has improved programming; empowered communities to lobby for their rights; and increased transparency at the local and higher levels between partners. This was typically related to the perceived legitimacy of implementing partners in the eyes of communities and other national and local actors.

Helping communities meet their priorities in DRC and Kenya

In eastern DRC, much INGO and donor policy is focused on breaking the cycle of violence. Work with local partners has allowed INGOs to focus more attention on how communities cope, and how they can be supported to find their own durable solutions.

Katana commune bordering the Kahuzi Biega National Park in south Kivu, DRC, is under constant threat of displacement due to the activities of diverse armed groups. In response to this threat, the community, supported by Caritas Bukavu, developed their own risk-reducing measures.

These include:

- The distribution of tools to raise the alert of an imminent attack.
- An informal alliance forged with the staff of the park (many of whom are from a different ethnic group) to warn of imminent insurgent activity.
- Starting a dialogue with the local Forces armées de la République démocratique du Congo commander to ensure the early movement of troops into the area, to reduce the likelihood of attack.

The product of these measures has been a substantial reduction in attacks on the community, far fewer casualties and far less displacement (and, by implication, greater economic stability – albeit at a very low level).

In Kenya, Oxfam GB works with two partners, WASDA and ALDEF, that have a long history of engagement with particular communities. This long and sustained engagement means that they are optimally positioned to facilitate a more equitable access to limited aid resources. Inherent to all of these were efforts to build trust between Oxfam GB and implementing partners, and between implementing partners and communities. In both cases this involved partnerships that spanned decades of interactions with Oxfam GB.



With CAFOD support, the Association of Women's Awareness and Rural Development is helping train women affected by the 2010 Pakistan floods to make a living again through rearing goats. The project also promotes education, healthcare and women's rights.

In the most effective cases, this is not just left to chance. Many partnerships were explicitly built on the notion of strengthening the use of common standards and tools such as the Humanitarian Accountability Partnership (HAP) Standard⁵ and Sphere.⁶ It was found that some partners are actually more fully engaged in such standards and tools than the funding partners. These frameworks, used effectively, can lead to better dialogue between funding and implementing partners on shared humanitarian goals and how to achieve them in ways that are

both meaningful and respectful to affected communities.

Three broad mechanisms were apparent across the partner responses:

- Enhanced beneficiary consultation.
- Appropriate assistance prompted, in particular, by a better understanding at community level of individual and collective rights and how to attain them.
- Challenges to traditional power structures, including those of partners themselves.

The 'Building accountability through partnerships' box, opposite, gives some examples of all of these. However, accountability standards are not always beneficial for the partners in question. In DRC, for example, some church partners felt that externally imposed accountability processes impinged upon their existing traditional authority systems. In other contexts, governments also expressed a degree of hesitancy about INGO accountability frameworks. More common than either of these responses was the feeling from partner organisations themselves, that new results frameworks were being imposed on them by INGOs without adequate support or investment.

As well as potentially enhancing quality, partnerships can directly lead to new practices and policies and can open up the space for new kinds of operational approaches.

That said, it was widely felt by respondents that partners in general tend to 'tick fewer technical quality boxes in responses than international direct delivery'. To some extent this is because partnerships are limited by resource constraints; existing levels of skills cannot simply be increased or upgraded overnight. It was also observed that the preferred approach of INGOs is to strengthen capacity through dialogue and demonstration not instruction, which is a plus point, but also takes time.

⁵ The HAP Standard is a practical and measurable tool that represents a broad consensus of what matters most in humanitarian action.

⁶ The Sphere Project has established one of the most widely-known and internationally recognised sets of common principles and universal minimum standards in life-saving areas of humanitarian response.

Building accountability through partnerships

ActionAid's drought relief effort in north-east Kenya in 2011-12 included an advocacy campaign that aimed to link local knowledge with advances in science. Participatory research was undertaken by partner organisations on community perceptions of the impact of drought and coping mechanisms to combat it. The partner also asked what aspirations communities had in terms of policy change, having translated national policies for local appropriateness, and understood what communities felt was missing. A set of issues was developed, published in a citizens' report and presented at a national forum of decision-makers and influencers to prompt appropriate change.

Cafod's inclusion of local government in the accountability process in Kivu, along with the central involvement of partners, allowed government to see what the demands on local partners are, and has become a leverage point for advocacy efforts to make government itself more accountable.

When it comes to coordination, learning and human resources, the picture is rather more mixed.

Coordination: There are obvious difficulties with partner organisations not being included in coordination mechanisms such as the Clusters.⁷ Funding partners are developing ad-hoc ways of circumventing these issues, including giving the partner freedom to attend as the INGO representative. There is also an issue around the coordination of partners and partnership processes. Although there is ongoing discussion about a networked approach to partnership, in practice this was not apparent in many settings. One notable exception was the work of Tearfund in Kivu, DRC.

Tearfund building a networked approach to partnerships in the DRC

In east Kivu, Tearfund worked to bring together three organisations to design and implement assistance efforts. Because of the challenges of facilitating dialogue, this required more inputs and support than a simple bilateral partnership might have done. However, by bringing together organisations that were on different sides of cultural and religious divides, the resulting response was found to be more effective, meeting the needs of diverse communities and contributing to a sense of localised reconciliation.

Learning and evaluation: There are two omissions that need attention. The first is that there are few lessons from partners themselves and what there is is largely anecdotal. The second relates to the evaluation of partnership-based responses. These happen as a matter of course in the participating agencies, but there is not always sufficient attention paid to the partner-related issues around the response.

Human resource capacity: This is an enduring problem for partners. Whether international or partner-based, a skilled staff base is the central determinant of effective response. There is seldom a big enough pool of available staff – internationally or nationally – to meet the demand. This problem can be especially pronounced for partners, not least because of the impact on staff members and their families. The high demand for experienced staff in a crisis means that a NNGO staff member can be paid much more for doing the same job with an INGO. These two factors, combined with the tendency of INGOs to 'draw from the top of the pack', create serious staffing and capacity issues, which are hard for partners to overcome in the short-term. The research showed that where this was mitigated it was typically because a specific individual, usually the founder of an organisation, had a firm commitment to keep the organisation going in the face of better, potentially more lucrative, offers. Such individuals can

⁷ Clusters are the UN-led coordination mechanism for groups of humanitarian organisations working in specific sectors (eg. WASH, food, shelter) to coordinate their activities when responding to an emergency.

often act as a source of motivation for local and national staff to work for their organisation despite the financial benefits being smaller than for an INGO. This highlights a further important human resources issue for local partners, which is how to broaden leadership capacities beyond individuals – something which, obviously, is as much an issue for the international response system.

Key messages:

1. Partner-based responses can be fast, responsive, and well prepared for action.
2. Partner-based responses can contribute to accountability and community engagement.

3. Issues of coordination, learning and human resources are as much an issue for partners as they are for the wider system.

Potential of partnerships to enhance performance

There are some very positive aspects to how partnerships can contribute to effectiveness of response. These include speed, accountability and engagement. However, this positive picture is mitigated by the challenges partners face in areas such as coordination, learning and human resources. **For this reason, the overall potential of partnerships is scored as good.**

3. Efficiency – do partnerships enhance the outputs that can be achieved for a given input?

The key questions on efficiency of humanitarian aid relate to the amount of outputs that are generated for a given input.

The analysis of the ALNAP SOHS suggests that the overall sector performance in this area is moderate. This is based on the fact that there was ‘no marked progress’ in this area, despite the recent interest among donors in ‘value for money’ and economic, cost-benefit based appraisals of assistance.

One of the enduring arguments about local and national partnerships is that they can be cheaper than direct delivery. This came up time and again in interviews, from both sides of partnerships. It is evident that implementing partners typically have much lower staff costs and overheads than their INGO equivalents. The salaries for staff can be lower by anything up to a factor of 10. Implementing partners will also have lower staff subsistence costs (although there will be exceptions); and overhead costs are also lower. Security tends not to have the premiums that are common with international presence. Local knowledge can help to reduce the transaction costs of undertaking humanitarian work – for example, through understanding of markets for required goods, or the best route for logistical operations.



Richard Hanson/Tearfund

Building new houses at Saleh Jath village, with support from Tearfund, following the 2010 Pakistan floods.

The costs of partnerships

Partnerships require time and investment on the part of the funding partner. For example:

- Not all INGO employees have experience of working in partnership and may require support and mentoring.
- Partners too may need sensitisation to the partnering process.
- Investment is needed to establish good quality operational work – a large number of LNGOs are resource-poor in many areas.
- Bringing in technical staff to address short-term capacity needs can be challenging for all parties – there are steep learning curves on all sides, and issues of integration of cultures.
- There is often a need to clarify strategic intent, which takes time and resources. Partnerships are not a shortcut for efficient responses, and treating them as such can generate new problems.
- Despite numerous exceptions highlighted by the participating organisations, the majority of resources tend to be targeted at response and – sometimes – recovery, rather than preparedness and resilience, and partnerships are inherently more challenging to establish in such settings.

Against all of this, the cost of operations and of goods will typically be the same for INGOs and LNGOs. Moreover, partnerships can incur costs and constraints that are far from trivial. These costs have been identified by some agencies as factors to be taken into account (see 'The costs of partnerships' box, above).

Respondents felt that efficiency should not be reduced to a simplistic assessment of cheapness, but should be based on an understanding of the relative strengths and weaknesses of partnership work. Many were aware of the data challenges of calculating the efficiency of response – for example, crises tend to send input prices spiralling at the early stages, which can limit comparability even within the same response.

There was also widespread appreciation that value has softer, more qualitative aspects that a 'bean counting' approach does not capture: 'In the context of local partnership, value for money takes on a less explicitly economic measure'.

In general, agencies have employed a series of proxies and estimates for efficiency in the context of partnerships. Among other things, these include:

- Retained learning and the degree of employee/community member retention.
- Replication of successful approaches due to retained community knowledge.
- Time and lives saved in starting at a higher point on the learning curve.
- The long-term investment in national and local capacity to respond.

Some of these are illustrated in the 'Different interpretations of value for money through partners' box, overleaf.

Key messages

1. Efficiency should not be reduced to a simplistic assessment of how cheap a response can be, but should be based on an understanding of the relative strengths and weaknesses of partnership work in different settings.
2. Cost savings of partnerships can be considerable, in terms of staff costs, but most other aspects of financing a humanitarian response are at parity with international efforts.
3. Costs of partnerships that need to be considered in any efficiency assessment include setting up, maintaining and ongoing capacity support.

Different interpretations of value for money through partners

One of the criteria Christian Aid DRC uses to estimate the value for money of partnerships focuses on reduced employee and management costs, as well as the reduction in security costs. Although this is a sensitive issue, it is clear that the logistical requirements for security are lower for implementing partners than for funding partners. Estimates were that these costs were reduced by a factor of ten for partners. This is not to say that Christian Aid expects partners to run risks that international staff would not, and indeed Christian Aid has very well-developed plans for partner staff security. That said, it is unarguably true that the cost of addressing such risks is typically far higher for an international staff member than for a local organisation.

Cafod partner Caritas Kitui in Kenya considers increased wellbeing and satisfaction within the community to be a clear value for money measure, while ActionAid Pakistan believes that measures of individual and community empowerment, the ability to advocate for individual and community rights, and increased individual and community independence are as important as a simple estimate of money saved.

Cafod adds reach to inaccessible and particularly vulnerable communities to the mix of less easily quantifiable benefits, whilst pointing out that, if funding relationships between donors and local implementers were more direct, a clear value for money measure would accrue through cutting out the 'middle-man' (the northern NGO).

growing fast enough to keep pace with rising needs'.

One of the enduring challenges of the sector is that it has yet to find a middle ground between partner-led, small-scale response and rapid, large-scale international efforts.

All of the participating INGOs concurred that partnerships for response have clear limitations of scale and coverage for the delivery of programmes. Interestingly this point was made regardless of the business model and partnership approach taken by the funding NGO in question.

As one informant from a partnership-based INGO noted: 'At a certain level it is difficult to scale up. For the kinds of organisations we work with, it would be difficult to handover £7-8m. We can typically run between £0.5m to £5m. After that, we find it just becomes too risky. We are trying to find ways of giving more... for example, we can second people into the organisation for a substantial amount of time, and try and build up the overall organisational system, but we face some natural limits...'

Direct delivery agencies see limits to partnerships for exactly these reasons. It is useful here to reflect on the Oxfam GB experience. The organisation does explicitly work in partnership mode, using many of the same principles espoused by the other four partnership-based INGOs. However, from respondents it is clear that much of this work is on the development side of the

Potential of partnerships to enhance performance

Based on the work across the agencies in the four settings, there may be less scope for partnerships to enhance efficiency in the short-term. This is because partnerships are not a silver bullet – they require time and effort to be invested in strategic and intelligent ways. **For this reason, this area was scored as moderate.**

4. Do partnerships enhance coverage?

Coverage relates to whether humanitarian assistance can address all the needs created by a crisis. Key elements of coverage relate to sufficiency of inputs, as well as the scale of operational responses.

The analysis of the ALNAP SOHS report suggests that the overall sector performance in this area is weak. The report highlights the 'poor showing' of the sector, which is seen as 'largely a consequence of financial, human and material resources not

system. On the humanitarian side, the interactions with national and local organisations across the four emergencies were largely described as 'sub-contractual'. This was justified internally in accordance with the humanitarian imperative, namely that Oxfam GB had a duty to respond as best it could, and that humanitarian crises – almost by definition – are situations where local capacities are overwhelmed, and Oxfam GB needed to respond directly.

On the surface of it, this seems to be a very different approach to the other organisations, which work exclusively in partnership. However, on the issue of coverage a similar set of parameters appear to inform

the decision-making process among these organisations. The basic message is that regardless of the business model employed, INGOs need to find ways to work around the coverage issues faced when working with partner organisations.

Feedback from the partner-based organisations on this issue clearly highlighted the fact that there is a coverage-related difference between what they are able to mount through typical partnerships and the operational capacities and scale of larger 'direct delivery' INGOs; and that they often need to develop strategies to deal with this difference. Such strategies are illustrated in how the four partnership-based

organisations operate in settings where such partnerships are not possible, or where they might be limited. These situations might, for example, involve working not with local partners but with established INGO national offices. It may mean establishing a small direct delivery unit or having an eye on the long-term, and seeking to build up partners to the point where they can indeed deliver at scale.

Partner perspectives contrasted on this issue, with a tendency to be rather scathing about the coverage problem and the way it is framed by INGOs. From their perspective, this tension between the imperative to deliver at scale and the



Kate Holt/Shoot The Earth/ActionAid

A woman in eastern Congo returns home with her family and animals after fleeing fighting between Congolese military and rebels.

partnership principle can, at best, be disempowering to local partners and, at worst, damaging. They see the issue as less about INGOs delivering at scale, and more about spending at scale. The latter, of course, may not be especially beneficial to the affected communities. The adjacent box provides an example of this issue in Haiti.

One area in which there is potential to address this issue is in partnerships with large-scale NNGOs such as BRAC in Bangladesh. In some settings, these NNGOs have considerably greater capacity and coverage than most INGOs. However, such organisations were noticeable by their absence from the discussions of coverage, and indeed in the research as a whole. Similarly, few if any informants raised the potential of government ancillaries or government bodies to help address scale and coverage issues.

Key messages

1. Coverage is a major limiting factor for partnerships, as seen by partnership-focused agencies and direct delivery organisations alike.
2. Partners themselves suggest that the issue is less about delivering effective programmes at scale, and more about spending.
3. There is a need for the humanitarian sector to engage more closely with large NNGOs and governmental ancillaries and bodies on issues of scale and coverage.

Coverage issues in Haiti

A well-supported local Haitian NGO operated 10 fee-paying health centres prior to the earthquake in 2010. The arrival of a large international emergency health NGO operating free mobile clinics saw the almost immediate closure of five of the health centres. At the end of the year-long emergency intervention, the INGO left. The LNGO has been unable to recover the resources needed to reopen their facilities. There has been a net loss to the community as a result.

Potential of partnerships to enhance performance

Coverage was perhaps the area most challenging for the partnerships looked at in the study. Issues of scale of delivery cannot be addressed simply by pumping funds into national and local organisations, as all of the participating agencies have at different times learnt to their cost. Based on the work of the agencies in the four settings, this is the most challenging area for partnerships, and currently contributes least to overall performance. However, it is worth noting that, with a few exceptions, none of the partnerships looked at involved larger NNGOs and, where this was the case, the agencies in question could deliver at comparable levels to international agencies. **For this reason, the potential of partnerships was rated as moderate.**

5. Do partnerships improve connectedness?

The extent to which short-term emergency response steps take longer-term and interconnected problems into account.

The analysis of the ALNAP SOHS suggests that the overall sector performance in this area is moderate.

There have been some improvements in how humanitarian response activities link to longer-term objectives, but these have largely come about thanks to the efforts of host country governments and institutions rather than the international system itself.

The strength of partnership-working in humanitarian response should be that decisions taken in the short-term are viewed through a long-term lens and take into account the impact that action has on the community.

By working with local partners who already have presence on the ground, there is also the scope to link better to pre-disaster efforts in development and resilience. All organisations and partners consulted espouse this principle, but with nuances and caveats.

On linking response to recovery and development, the message was clear: 'They [local partners] are there for longer, they can go in, they can smooth the response'. As one implementing partner put it:



Christian Aid/Anna de Farrant

Kabale Ture, a widow from Moyale, northern Kenya, received four goats from Christian Aid partner CCSMKE during the drought, and training to feed them.

‘Everything you [the humanitarian responder] talk about is what we do in our long-term development programming anyway’.

However, attempts to link development and humanitarian activities are often met with little enthusiasm within INGOs. This is of course a common problem. Most INGOs have experienced some form of silo working in the past, and the explicit separation of donor development and emergency funding only serves to exacerbate the problem. Many INGO staff acknowledge that they need to find a new way of working that joins up their own dots at community level, and which does not force internal institutional tensions onto partners. Attempts are being made to bridge the gap through the new agenda on resilience (see box overleaf). Resilience approaches place vulnerability at the centre stage of all steps of the emergency cycle, and seek to extend such an understanding into development efforts.

There was an observable tendency for partnership efforts to sit on top of existing institutional divides and silos rather than resolving them. The constant pressure to deliver in emergency operations and the separation of development funding means that this problem is unlikely to go away any time soon.

So, although there is potential for partnerships to ‘smooth the sharp edges’, this is ultimately down to how committed the funding partner

is to supporting their partner to do so. The research found that despite some rhetoric to the contrary, and the often considerable efforts of partners themselves, the dilemmas and dysfunctions of a connected approach to response – that are often put at the door of the ‘supersized’ international response system – are as evident in those organisations that espouse a softer and more contextually driven approach.

Key messages:

1. National partners can clearly help to smooth the links between resilience, preparedness, response, recovery and development.
2. They cannot do this unless funding NGOs and donors put their house in order – otherwise the institutional divides simply get transferred down the system.
3. The resilience agenda has potential to address this issue, but more needs to be done to position it as a means of bridging the humanitarian development divide if it is going to tap this potential.

Potential of partnerships to enhance performance

Based on the work across the agencies in the four settings, this is another area where partnership-based responses come into their own. Because of the continued presence of national and local partners, and ongoing engagement with the communities in question, there is much more scope for these actors to bridge the gaps between the different silos apparent in the international system. However, this will not happen automatically in all settings, and there were instances of international actors ‘passing on’ their internal divisions to partners.

For this reason, this area was scored as good.

Oxfam GB in Kenya, working with partners across the disaster cycle

One feature of working with partners that are committed to working in specific communities and regions is that they are able to better bridge the divides that are often apparent between development and humanitarian efforts, and between the different phases of humanitarian work. Across Oxfam GB’s portfolio, one of the best examples of this is the work of WASDA in Kenya, who have been a longstanding partner. WASDA work in development efforts, focusing on long-term food security and agricultural development issues. They also work in disaster risk reduction, ensuring that communities can be aware of, and respond to, hazards; offer life-saving interventions through cash transfers and cash for work programmes, which aim to enhance purchasing power by diversifying income streams; and work on recovery efforts, helping to move communities back towards pre-existing development trajectories. By working across all of these areas in the same communities, WASDA is able to greatly enhance the connectedness of the response effort, and ensure that there are strategic and operational linkages across these different areas.

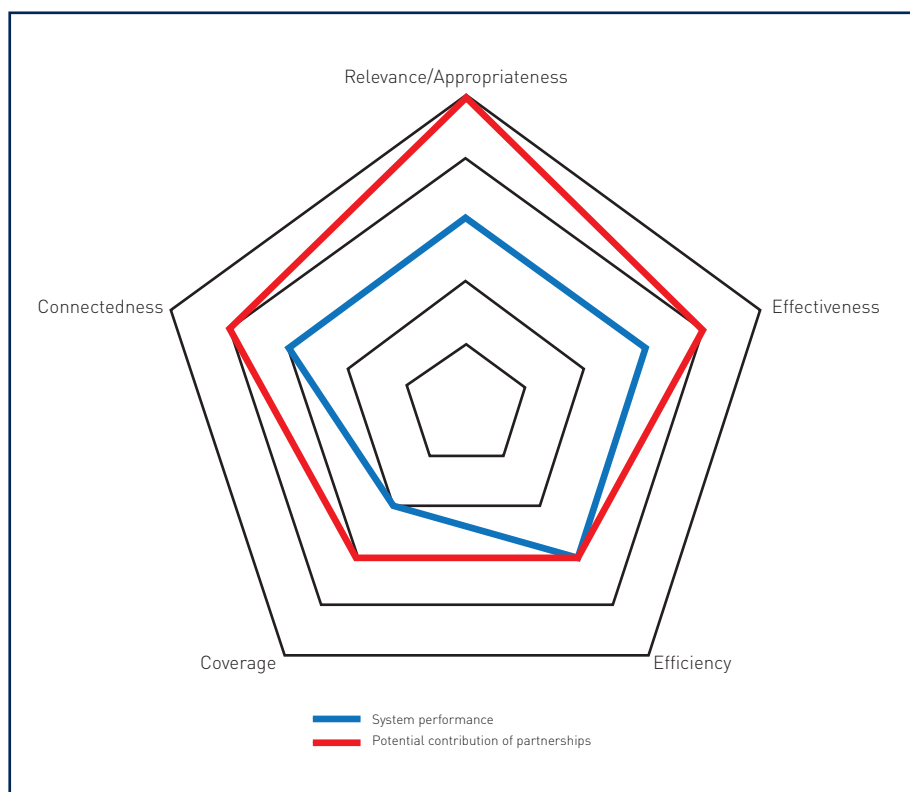
Summary of the potential of partnerships against performance of the system

Based on the research findings summarised in this report, it is useful to compare the potential of partnerships with the indicative assessments of sector-wide performance given in the research team’s independent analysis of the ALNAP 2012 *SOHS* report. The diagram below sets out this illustrative comparison and indicates that partnerships have the potential to address some of the key issues facing the sector.

The diagram shows clearly that the potential for the partnership approach is strongest in three specific areas: relevance/appropriateness, effectiveness and connectedness.

It is in these areas, across the 20 contexts looked at in this research, that partnerships were making the most consistent and unambiguous contribution to humanitarian performance. In the other two areas, the picture was rather more nuanced and involved both potential and also some considerable challenges.

This illustrative diagram should not be taken to mean that by investing in partnerships these problems will be simply or easily resolved. Nor, equally, should it be taken to mean that partnerships couldn’t contribute positively to coverage or efficiency. Rather, the comparison is to show that there are clearly areas where the sector as a whole is not performing as might be wished, and where partnership efforts – on the basis of evidence from five agencies in four major emergency responses – have potential to help enhance performance.



Can partnerships realise their potential?

It seems clear from the findings that national and local partnerships are under-used as a strategy for strengthening humanitarian performance. The system is currently missing some significant opportunities to make long-called-for improvement in how aid works.

Despite this evidence, which has been supported by numerous major evaluations over the past two decades, it is not clear if partnerships with local and national actors can make the contribution that many observers have long felt they should, unless some strategic changes take place within the sector.

Many of the levers for such strategic changes do not solely sit within partnership processes. There are wider global and contextual issues that have a bearing on the role of national local partners. There are also sectoral factors that influence whether local partnerships will get the attention and resources they deserve.

These are presented here in the form of a SWOT analysis.

Strengths

- Growing engagement by national and local civil society in humanitarian and disaster risk reduction issues.
- Growth of middle-income countries and 'assertive states' is placing limits on INGO responses, and creating more demand for partnerships with local and national actors.
- The growing focus on resilience makes the need for better working with partners even more important, because it demands continuous engagement which is prohibitively expensive for many INGOs.
- There is growing evidence that partnerships can address key performance issues for the sector.
- Partnerships enable the sector to deliver on promises of community engagement and downward accountability.

Weaknesses

- Funds for capacity building and preparedness are limited and time bound; and many partners are 'living on borrowed capacity', in that they do not get to strengthen or build capacity but simply import it for the duration of a crisis.
- National governments are at varying degrees of preparedness for disaster.
- Where donor funds are made available, it is often following a disaster, rather than before – when they are most needed.
- There is a notable ambivalence across many parts of the international community towards the issue of partnerships with local and national actors.
- There are limited initiatives and equally limited funds to support the rhetoric with action.⁸
- Partnerships take time to develop and are as dependent upon the 'chemistry' between organisations as upon the skill set each can share.
- Capacity building takes time and, at times, that means that INGOs will rightly choose to work more directly.
- Capacity building is poorly resourced, often depending upon individual partner agencies' limited unrestricted funding.
- Monitoring and evaluation frameworks and information systems are ill-adapted for mutual learning between northern and southern partners.
- Good partnerships also call for strategic focus from the local partners, investment of time and resources, and the ability to engage with international actors.

Opportunities

- The Good Humanitarian Donorship⁹ process is under review, an explicit objective being to ensure that the 'new donors' influence the humanitarian response framework from within.
- DFID's HERR makes a powerful case for a review of the nature of partnership in its many forms, accepting that the status quo in response must shift to reflect the changing world.
- The UN Secretary General has called for a World Humanitarian Summit in 2015.
- There is potential for greater engagement with large NNGOs, southern international NGOs and National Disaster Management Agencies.
- Partnerships can bridge the resilience, response and recovery divides at community level and above.

Threats

- The growing scale and frequency of disasters is demanding more localised responses because the international community cannot be everywhere all the time. This challenges partnerships and local actors, but also presents opportunities for more nationally-led responses.
- There are strong pressures to maintain the current status quo of the humanitarian sector, which is northern-centric and largely shaped by northern actors. A strategic shift towards southern actors is not a neutral one, but will potentially see northern/western humanitarian agencies lose out in terms of resources. Therefore any suggestion of a more localised approach to response is likely to meet with resistance, even if the humanitarian imperatives are clear-cut.

The key for advancing the role of partnerships with national and local actors is to build on these strengths, find ways to mitigate the weaknesses, capitalise on opportunities and see off threats.

Key messages

1. Factors beyond the sector are pushing for a greater localisation of aid – these include the range and complexity of disasters, growing numbers of middle income countries, and the perceived performance of the international community.
2. Within the sector, while there has been some rhetorical attention to partnerships, funding and organisational structures still largely give preference to international actors over national ones.
3. There is scope and space for a renewed focus on capacity and partnerships as a result of the attention being paid to resilience and innovation.

⁸Where preparedness funding is sourced through NGOs' own (unrestricted) resources, it is limited by the demands placed upon their reserves by the regular management and other recurring costs of the organisation not covered by institutional grants. While institutional grants are rarely made directly available for national partners to develop their operational capacity, funding for capacity building of these same partners to influence policy on humanitarian response and recovery at national level and above is even leaner.

⁹A network which promotes principles and practice which enhance the coherence and effectiveness of donor action.

Conclusions and recommendations

This report concludes that a step-change in the sector's efforts in southern capacities and partnerships is needed as a means to address longstanding issues in humanitarian performance.

At the present time, partnerships between international humanitarian actors and national and local actors do not achieve their full potential to enhance humanitarian performance. This is for a variety of reasons, as set out in this report. Continuing to miss this opportunity in the face of growing vulnerability and risk is a potential tragedy among the other inevitable tragedies that will occur.

The evidence collated here shows a number of areas where national and local partnerships can significantly contribute to humanitarian performance. These are areas where the sector as a whole has been underperforming because of systemic problems in the way that international responses are conceived and delivered.

Partnerships are still conditioned and shaped by the existing humanitarian system; so many are largely reactive, poorly funded and weakly documented, with often uncertain impact. But a significant number do help to achieve humanitarian objectives in ways that are more relevant, appropriate, effective, efficient and connected.

Even if the humanitarian sector was to largely retain the shape and form it has today, there is scope for national and local partnerships to contribute more to aid performance.

But the real transformative vision for southern partnerships lies further into the future, when such efforts are part of the day-to-day realities of humanitarian aid. The vision expressed by many of those interviewed was for a humanitarian sector which is a more democratic, balanced and accountable endeavour, where capacities are fully considered as well as needs, and where the emphasis is less on assistance and more on cooperation.

The report authors concur with this vision. No one doubts the challenges of realising this vision. Progress will inevitably be at different speeds in different regions. But, as this report has demonstrated, the need for such transformative change is beyond question. The poor and vulnerable of the world deserve nothing less from those who set out to help them.

There are four broad areas of recommendations for the next 12 to 24 months that will help advance the partnerships agenda.

Investing in change

1. Enhanced investments in national and local partnerships should be a priority for humanitarian donors, including, wherever possible, through their contributions to current and emerging crises.

2. Substantial and sustained funding should be given to a multi-donor fund for disaster management capacity building. Examples of a structure for this include the Africa Capacity Building Foundation.

Setting the agenda

3. Southern partnerships for humanitarian aid must be a central plank of humanitarian policy agendas, including that of the Good Humanitarian Donorship process, and the World Humanitarian Summit, with a view to influencing new policy frameworks and instruments.

4. The vital role of partnerships with local and national actors in building resilience needs to be included in current debates and emerging new practice on resilience and integrated approaches to development and disaster prevention.

Building knowledge and shared understanding

5. Humanitarian aid agencies, donors, UN agencies, and their local and national partners must build the evidence base on local and national partnerships, undertaking more case studies of the work of partnership-based INGOs, direct delivery INGOs, NNGOs, UN agencies, and southern INGOs, building on the present study and, for example, recent studies by Christian Aid and Oxfam.

6. Humanitarian actors across the sector should build on current networks and establish a sector-wide knowledge platform to support the documentation and exchange of information, experience and ideas on capacity and partnerships. This could be supported and housed by existing networks such as ALNAP.

Strengthening practices

7. Humanitarian aid agencies and their local and national partners must strengthen the application and use of capacity assessments in humanitarian responses, building on the progress already made in the area of needs assessments. These should ideally be done prior to emergency events, and seek to build shared capacity maps of known crisis hotspots.

8. Partnerships need to move from a series of 'bilateral' to networked efforts, with more information exchange and coordination on partner response. Greater coordination between INGOs, donors and local and national networks should be prioritised to support this.

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