



[Illustration by Christine Harrison]

CAN WE INFLUENCE THE LOCAL GOVERNMENT THROUGH AN EMERGENCY RESPONSE?

My experience in Bangladesh – by Jannat Noor

This paper examines the experience of the flood relief programme implemented in Bangladesh in 2015. It highlights the need for humanitarian partners to have the capacity to undertake the local-level influencing that is vital to working effectively in humanitarian contexts.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Jannat has been working in Oxfam in Bangladesh for the last five years, with a specific focus on partnership management for the past three. Her many responsibilities include capacity building, developing common strategies, and activity and financial reporting. She managed the partnerships with NGOs and the private sector for emergency response and recovery work in Bangladesh.

PARTNERING FOR IMPACT SERIES

To do the work it does, Oxfam works closely with partners at all stages of the programme, in all kind of contexts: humanitarian, influencing, development, etc. But what does it mean for our staff? Each day brings new challenges and opportunities, so how do they do it? Following a reflective and productive writeshop¹, this Partnering for Impact series was developed to share and explore learning from experienced practitioners about what it takes to “work well in partnership”.

1 INTRODUCTION

Heavy rainfall hit Bangladesh on 23 June 2015, causing landslides and flooding, with the south-eastern districts of Cox's Bazar, Bandarban and Chittagong worst affected. The situation became more serious when cyclone Komen hit the area less than a month later.

A three-month, DFID²-funded consortium project led by CARE³ in Bangladesh was established to help affected communities, with Oxfam working as a member of the consortium and delivering flood relief through local partners. At Ramu in Cox's Bazar, Oxfam partnered with **Young Power in Social Action (YPSA)**, which had been selected as a humanitarian partner only one month before.

YPSA was identified as a potential humanitarian partner as it had already worked with Oxfam on gender and long-term development projects. It also had more than 20 full-time staff and 500 youth volunteers in the project location and seemed to be well networked to other development organizations, partners and local government entities.

2 WHAT HAPPENED

YPSA faced strong pressure from local political leaders to include their own families and supporters as beneficiaries.

As part of a transparent beneficiary selection process, the draft beneficiary list was displayed in public for cross-validation. Local political leaders, however, produced a separate list of political allies, supporters and relatives (around 400 households) and demanded they also be included.

YPSA attempted to revise the list to remove non-eligible households, but faced continued pressure to include them. YPSA tried to resolve the issue by directly addressing national-level political leaders, but tension increased and threats were issued both to their staff and Oxfam staff. It became clear that YPSA did not use the appropriate influencing channel, bypassing the local leaders. Other partner organizations in the project that encountered similar political pressure did manage to resolve the situation locally.

Oxfam found that YPSA was not able to resolve the situation by itself, and it was eventually necessary for an Oxfam senior manager to draw on their own influencing skills and personal contacts to do so. Oxfam stressed to national leaders that what was being proposed was contrary to humanitarian principles and was harming those in urgent need of help by delaying the project. In this way, Oxfam was able to persuade national leaders to press local actors to withdraw their demands. The project was able to go ahead and was implemented within the initial timescale.

3 KEY LEARNINGS

The key learning to come from the project experience was the importance of humanitarian partners having the local-level influencing skills needed to work in complex relief situations.

In humanitarian contexts, power is often held by a variety of actors and entities with which partners may not have ongoing working relationships. This may affect their access to resources or ability to get things done, their ability to remain impartial and adhere to humanitarian values, or even whether they are allowed to operate at all.

The ability to quickly build and maintain relationships with and influence local leaders and power holders is therefore vital to effective work in humanitarian contexts. Oxfam's experience in this case in Bangladesh clearly illustrates the importance of local-level influencing to the implementation of relief projects, and the difficulty of working with a new partner that proved not to have adequate capacity to influence in this context.

As a result of this experience, the Bangladesh team would recommend:

- **working, whenever possible, with long-term humanitarian partners** with proven skills, experience and ability to undertake local-level influencing;
- **that capacity for local-level influencing is considered in the selection of new partners;**
- **continued capacity building for potential humanitarian and development partners** in the fields of influencing and advocacy. Oxfam campaign and advocacy teams can have a positive role to play in the capacity building of partners in this area.

Where a partner may lack influencing skills, it may be necessary and appropriate for Oxfam to intervene, drawing on ongoing relationships with national-level humanitarian actors and other stakeholders. In some cases, it may be better not to respond in certain project locations where an appropriate partner with influencing skills is not available.

Overall, the Bangladesh team found that selecting, training and developing relationships with long-term partners with the skills and experience to undertake local influencing is vital to effective humanitarian response and will increase its impact and quality.

NOTES

- ¹ A 'writeshop' is an intensive, participatory process that brings together experts and process facilitators under one roof to produce simple, user-friendly materials in a short period of time.
- ² DfID: Department for International Development: United Kingdom government department responsible for administering overseas aid.
- ³ CARE (Cooperative for Assistance and Relief Everywhere) is a major international humanitarian agency delivering emergency relief and long-term international development projects.

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For further information on the issues raised in this paper please email programme learning team at programmelearning@oxfam.org.uk

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