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Anchored in Local Reality: Case Studies on Local Humanitarian Action from Haiti, Colombia, and Iraq

A JOINT STUDY BY OXFAM AND THE FEINSTEIN INTERNATIONAL CENTER 

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Executive Summary

Critiques of international humanitarian aid have long suggested that it needs to be more inclusive of actors from crisis-affected countries. Increased attention to this issue over the past decade or so has coalesced into a set of agendas often referred to as the “localization” of humanitarian assistance, “local humanitarian leadership” (LHL), and “local humanitarian action” (LHA). However, there is little consensus about key definitions and concepts related to these terms. What does “local” actually mean? Who qualifies as a “local humanitarian actor”? What are the goals of these agendas? In general, these conversations have been led by and focused on the experiences of international humanitarian actors, which in turn has shaped the discourse about both the status quo and necessary reforms. Recently, there have been increased efforts to re-center the voices of local humanitarian actors in these conversations.

In 2019, Oxfam and the Feinstein International Center, Friedman School of Nutrition Science and Policy at Tufts University collaborated on a study to listen to the perspectives of a diverse group of local humanitarian actors on how they define local humanitarian action; what they see as the primary barriers and opportunities for local humanitarian leadership; and what they think are the priorities for future research and discussion. The study was organized around case studies of three different humanitarian response efforts:

1. **The response to Hurricane Matthew in the Sud region of Haiti;**
2. The response to the migrant crisis and displacement from multiple conflicts in Colombia; and
3. The response to mass internal displacement as a result of conflict with ISIS in Iraq and the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI).

The methodology was designed to be flexible and let the local actors drive the direction and priorities of the conversations, which led to three very different case studies. Despite their differences, patterns in

narratives and observations emerged across the three cases. A summary of these findings includes the following:

- Local humanitarian actors are not a homogenous group. It is important to understand the layers of identity and how they contribute to power dynamics and relationships among them. Even the term “local humanitarian actor” does not capture the social and relational aspects of who is considered local; the term also may exclude groups that do not identify as humanitarian but nonetheless play critical roles in crisis response;
- International actors are also not homogenous and can have both positive and negative effects on local humanitarian action and leadership. In the opinion of many local actors, in order to have a positive effect, international actors should engage before (or between) crises on issues that would not typically be considered humanitarian, such as governance or resilience;
- Although the literature focuses on the international systems and actors as barriers to local humanitarian leadership, many local actors saw their governments as posing equal, if not greater, challenges to local humanitarian action. However, frustrations with the state were not generally seen as justification for international actors to bypass state authority during crises. Many saw reforms to government systems as essential to ensuring effective and principled local humanitarian leadership;
- It was often challenging to say whether responses were locally led, because each humanitarian response is made up of countless separate efforts, many of which are locally led. However, in our case studies, it did not seem as if the majority of resources, or even decisions about those resources, were directed by local actors; and

- Although many local humanitarian actors considered funding and resources to be essential in humanitarian action, almost all respondents placed a greater emphasis on having access to, and their voices respected in, spaces of humanitarian decision-making.

Although we cannot draw conclusions beyond the scope of the specific cases we studied, they can contribute to the broader discussion on humanitarian reform related to local humanitarian leadership.

Recommendations include:

- It is important for practitioners, researchers, and policy-makers to be aware of how one defines and understands who is a local humanitarian actor to ensure that important nontraditional or informal actors are not being excluded;
- Significant reforms are still necessary to make international funding, coordination, and partnership structures more transparent, consistent, and accessible to diverse local actors;
- There may need to be greater focus on reforms within affected governments in order to enable more effective local humanitarian leadership and action;
- International actors may need to be more adaptable and willing to play nontraditional roles if they are to support local humanitarian action;
- All types of actors must move away from transactional relationships in humanitarian crises and toward more equitable ones;
- Funders and implementing organizations need to increase investments in partnerships, networks, coordination mechanisms, and mutual capacity strengthening before (or between) crises; and
- Additional research about the roles and experiences of marginalized groups and nontraditional and informal actors in the context of local humanitarian action could help inform localization reforms.

Three years after the World Humanitarian Summit, a range of actors, particularly local actors, have questioned the progress and impact of localization, LHL, and LHA. As the entire international humanitarian community reflects on that progress, this research suggests that more conversations with local actors in a variety of contexts can better inform and shape discussions and decisions going forward.

Section I: Introduction

In theory, international humanitarian response represents one of humanity's better instincts—to help those who are suffering. In practice, because all systems are affected by power and privilege, international humanitarian assistance has not always lived up to those ideals. There have long been critiques that suggest international humanitarian responders do not adequately recognize, respect, or engage with humanitarian response efforts from within the crisis-affected society. At best, that lack of recognition, respect, and engagement may make internationally led humanitarian action less effective; at worst, that may mean international responders undermine local response capacity or deepen divisions in the affected community. Some observers call out what is often seen as neocolonialist tendencies among international humanitarian actors.

This assessment of the problems with much of the current internationally led humanitarian action has led to a rising call for increased recognition, engagement, and resourcing of local humanitarian actors, who typically are from the crisis-affected country, in international humanitarian systems. Although calls for such reform have been around for decades, they have recently coalesced into a loose agenda, often referred to as the localization of humanitarian aid.

Since the 2016 World Humanitarian Summit, in which localization was a major topic of discussion and subject of commitments, there has been a flurry of research and papers about this topic. They have examined diverse issues such as financing, partnership, coordination, and effectiveness. Although there has been significant thought leadership from groups based in crisis-affected countries, the current research and discourse tends to come from, and center on topics that are important to, international actors.

With this tendency to focus on international actors in mind, a group of researchers from Feinstein International Center, Friedman School of Nutrition Science and Policy at Tufts University and Oxfam sought to listen more broadly to the priorities and perspectives of local actors in crisis-affected states and communities. The objectives of the research were to allow local actors to define local humanitarian action on their own terms; explore the nuances of who is considered a local humanitarian actor; identify opportunities and barriers for local humanitarian leadership; and identify priority areas for further research and policy in this area.

Our research focused on actors in southern Haiti, across Colombia, and in Iraq and the KRI. This study design was inspired by the Listening Project,¹ with a relatively open-ended set of questions that allowed participants to raise issues they felt were priorities and reduced the amount that our institutions, which are based in the Global North, shaped the issues that were discussed.

The nature of local humanitarian action and the localization agenda ultimately demands deep analysis of the unique, complex, and ever-changing dynamics in each crisis-affected state, and even in each community. It is impossible to do justice to all of those nuances in a single paper, and so this paper will present the general findings and recommendations from the research. Additional papers, blogs, and presentations may be developed to provide more insight into individual topics and cases.

With this context in mind, this paper does not engage with the question of the comparative effectiveness of local and international actors. Although this issue is a significant focus of the literature and was brought up during fieldwork, it is beyond the original scope of this project. The study

¹ The Listening Project was an initiative carried out by CDA Collaborative Learning between 2005–2009 that included listening to 6,000 people in twenty countries and documenting their analysis of international aid efforts and suggestions for improvements. It resulted in the publication of the book, *Time to Listen: Hearing People on the Receiving End of International Aid* by Dayna Brown, Isabella Jean, and Mary B. Anderson.

team's findings in this area may be developed into a separate paper in order to more fully engage with the complexities of that topic.

In addition, much of this paper challenges the way that the localization agendas are spoken about, including the term "local humanitarian actor," the dichotomy between local and international, and even the idea of a single international humanitarian system. However, because the paper is trying to engage with the current discourse and to respect the voices of the study participants, the authors will be using some of the same terms they are critiquing. The paper will offer suggestions for how these issues may be discussed differently in future conversations and papers.

Finally, it is important to emphasize that by its very nature, localization and local humanitarian action focus on the countless unique local contexts in which humanitarian action occurs. Inevitably, discussions about these agendas on a global level involve generalizations that obscure important nuances. Ultimately, these agendas, and this paper, are not about a "local versus international" battle over humanitarian resources and authority. Unfortunately, the world will never be able to keep up with all of those in need of humanitarian assistance, which means the humanitarian landscape has enough room for actors of all types. By analyzing systems and concepts in action, the authors hope to contribute to the conversation about how different kinds of humanitarian actors can share this fraught space and ultimately provide more effective relief.

Section II: Literature Review

Context and Definition

The international humanitarian system has long faced calls to be more inclusive of local actors from crisis-affected countries. In 1993, a collection of civil society groups in what was then Southern Sudan issued the “Nairobi Joint Statement,” calling for international donors to direct more funding through local organizations (African Rights 1995). The Red Cross/Red Crescent Code of Conduct, published in 1994, establishes as a principle that “We shall attempt to build disaster response on local capacities” (International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies and International Committee of the Red Cross 1994). A decade later, a review of the humanitarian response to the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami would call for “agencies [to] cede power to the affected population” and “promot[e] distributed ownership with the community and different levels of government owning different levels of the response” (Cosgrave 2007, 25).

However, it is only fairly recently that these critiques and calls for reform have been consolidated into a distinct agenda, most often referred to as the localization of humanitarian assistance. This agenda gained prominence in the 2014 Charter for Change framework and the Grand Bargain commitments at the 2016 World Humanitarian Summit in Istanbul, Turkey, and became somewhat of a new hot topic in humanitarian circles. The following literature review provides a brief overview of some of the key concepts and contradictions within the discourse about the localization of humanitarian assistance.

Definitions

Localization has been used somewhat as an umbrella term to refer to any effort to work with local

actors during a humanitarian response (Wall and Hedlund 2016). More recent attempts at defining localization frame it as a process to “recognise, respect, strengthen, rebalance, recalibrate, reinforce, or return some type of ownership or place to local and national humanitarian actors” (Barbelet 2018, 5), primarily by increasing the resources given to and the decision-making power of local governments and civil society. Other terms that typically appear in the localization discourse are: **subsidiarity**, in which external actors only step in to fulfill roles that cannot be done at the local level (Wall and Hedlund 2016); **complementarity**, which describes the different capacities of local, national, and international actors when they are combined for optimal humanitarian outcomes (Barbelet 2017); and **decentralization**, which describes a process of distributing and devolving power to those closest to affected communities. Localization is often summed up by the maxim “making principled humanitarian action as local as possible and as international as necessary” (Grand Bargain 2016, 5).

The localization debate often covers many dimensions of the humanitarian system. A recent paper by Van Brabant and Patel outlined a refined version of the Start Network’s “seven dimensions of localization:” policy, visibility, coordination, capacity, funding and financing, participation revolution, and relationship quality (Van Brabant and Patel 2018).

A general critique of the term “localization” is that it centers international humanitarian response systems and processes (Barbelet 2018). Even the word “localization” itself implies that humanitarian action must be made more local because it currently is not; in reality, most life-saving humanitarian efforts come from actors who would be seen as local. Therefore, the term “**local humanitarian action**” has increasingly been used, which focuses on recognizing the existing and ongoing work of

local actors (Barbelet 2018). In addition, terms such as “**locally led humanitarian action**” and “**local humanitarian leadership**” have increasingly been found within the policy discourse, which places local actors at the center of humanitarian response and reform efforts, with decision-making authority over whether and how humanitarian aid is carried out (Gingerich et al. 2017; Cohen 2016; Wall and Hedlund 2016).

This paper will primarily use the term “LHA” to describe the dynamics of local humanitarian action, “LHL” to refer specifically to efforts by local actors to exert more leadership over external aid efforts, and “localization” to refer to the general policy debate in humanitarian circles.

Local Actors

In addition to the ambiguity surrounding the definitions associated with the localization agenda, there is significant and problematic ambiguity regarding how we define “local actors” (Schenkenberg 2016). The Grand Bargain has defined what qualifies as “local and national actors” for the purpose of tracking commitments to the localization of aid:

Subcategory	Definition
Local and national non-state actors	Organizations engaged in relief that are headquartered and operating in their own aid recipient country and that are not affiliated to an international non-governmental organization (NGO).
National and sub-national state actors	State authorities of the affected aid recipient country engaged in relief, whether at local or national level.

(Grand Bargain Localisation Workstream, n.d.)

However, these definitions are not consistently applied or agreed upon in the broader discourse. “Local” is most commonly applied in opposition to “international,” typically meaning any actor based in the crisis-affected country (Cohen and Gingerich

2015). This usage is fundamentally oversimplified, as it homogenizes the diverse set of actors that could be conceivably listed under both categories and erases the complex interactions and power dynamics within each category (Roepstorff 2019). In addition, there are strong assumptions behind how both words are typically used: “international” is often shorthand for Western/Northern/Eurocentric actors (which leaves out actors from non-Western countries working internationally, such as China, Turkey, Bangladesh, etc.) whereas “local” is often shorthand for actors from the Global South (which ignores power dynamics among and within non-Western countries, as well as local actors in crisis-affected or host/rescue communities in Western countries) (Roepstorff 2019).

Even this oversimplified dichotomy is not as clear as one would think. With an increasing number of national franchises of international non-governmental organizations (INGOs), there is a blurring of the lines and questions about whether having any international affiliation “disqualifies” one from being local (Schenkenberg 2016; Barbelet 2018). Global networks, such as the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC), pose an additional challenge for categorization. Even the high percentage of local staff at international NGOs sometimes calls into question whether these groups can be considered somehow localized (Van Brabant and Patel 2018). In addition, the growing role of diaspora organizations in humanitarian response also challenges the geographic assumptions behind the local/international dichotomy (Wall and Hedlund 2016). The concept of “local” in the context of displacement is highly problematic: displaced people may or may not perceive their host populations as local and/or as agents that have the trust, knowledge, or legitimacy to respond appropriately to their needs. For instance, Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh are forming their own civil society organizations to advocate for their needs, since neither international nor Bangladeshi organizations are seen as local (Milko 2019). People have many identities, some of which may be linked to international identities—such as diasporas, online networks, religious ideologies—which further complicates any application of the dichotomy between local and international (Roepstorff 2019).

“Local” is a fundamentally relative term. Put one way, a community-based actor will be more local than a provincial one, which in turn will be more local than a national one, which in turn will be more local than one coming from a foreign country. Much of the literature will distinguish between local and national actors to capture this relativism, although sometimes these terms are used interchangeably. But even this distinction is overly simple, since geography is only one dimension of identity that is relevant to crises. According to Roepstorff, it is more appropriate to think of the relativism of local as “webs of power and politics” (Roepstorff 2019, 8). Another illustration of this complexity can be found in a briefing paper published by Daniel Maxwell in 2018:

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. (Maxwell 2018, 3)

It is essential to differentiate varying levels of local or else risk homogenizing the affected population and erasing their intersecting identities and power dynamics (Jayawickrama and Rehman 2018; Melis 2019). The local/international binary, for example, overlooks the social distance between the most vulnerable crisis-affected people and local elites (Roepstorff 2019). Even at the community level, it can be problematic to homogenize all actors as local, because communities, and even households, have their own power dynamics. As one explanation puts it, “‘Local’ voices have to be broken down into specific (and sometimes contested) individual and group interests” (South et al. 2012, 21). Particularly if we operate under the assumption that local responses are timelier and more appropriate, as we will suggest, not understanding the geographic, social, and political dimensions of the word “local” may in fact undermine those attributes.

Further, when referring to local actors, the literature and the discourse generally discuss formal institutions, typically government agencies and registered NGOs. These formal actors are easiest for international actors to interact with because they have similar institutional structures (e.g., a clear hierarchy, offices, email addresses, etc.). Informal and nontraditional humanitarian actors are often less visible to international responders (Rutledge 2018). This lack of visibility can be an issue because existing power dynamics often mean that marginalized groups are not represented in or by formal institutions. The cause of this under-representation may be direct (e.g., ethnic politics that exclude one group from government posts) or indirect (e.g., higher illiteracy rates among one group that make it unlikely for them to hold leadership positions in NGOs). Recent research has highlighted how the focus on formal mainstream actors in localization debates often disadvantages women, as women are more likely to organize collectively and informally in many societies (Lindley-Jones 2018; Oxfam Canada 2018). There are also formal institutions, such as faith-based institutions or private sector companies, that are often excluded from discussions on localization because of perceptions about their value systems, mandates, and operational modalities (Gingerich et al. 2017; Taraboulsi-McCarthy, Majid, and Willitts-King 2017). Additional focus on formal institutions that identify themselves as humanitarian further excludes groups that have traditionally been sidelined by humanitarian responses, such as local organizations of persons with disabilities (Buscher 2018).

The literature still generally focuses on governments and formal NGOs, but there is an increasing body of work that discusses nontraditional actors. Although this list of actors and sources is not exhaustive, nontraditional actors mentioned in the literature include: **spontaneous and ad hoc volunteers** (Humanitarian Advisory Group and Pujiono Centre 2019; Wall and Hedlund 2016; Twigg and Mosel 2017; South et al. 2012; Barbelet 2018), **diaspora groups** (Wall and Hedlund 2016; Svoboda and Pantuliano 2015; Talbot 2011); **local researchers and universities** (Humanitarian Advisory Group, Centre for Humanitarian Leadership, and Fiji National University 2017; Bakunzi 2018),

professional associations and student groups (Jaspars 2010; Humanitarian Advisory Group and Pujiono Centre 2019); **the private sector** (Barbelet 2018; South et al. 2012; Tiller 2014; Taraboulsi-McCarthy, Majid, and Willitts-King 2017; Overseas Development Institute 2016); **non-state armed actors** (African Rights 1995; South et al. 2012); **the media** (Centre for Humanitarian Leadership 2017); **livelihoods associations and self-help groups** (Humphrey, Krishnan, and Krystalli 2019; South et al. 2012; Lindley-Jones 2018); **refugees and host communities** (Mason 2018; Fiddian-Qasmiyeh 2016; Sharif 2018; Larsen, Demir, and Horvat 2016); and **traditional leaders** (South et al. 2012). One of the nontraditional actors that has gained significantly more attention in the localization discourse in recent years is **faith groups** (Gingerich et al. 2017; Thomson 2014; Featherstone 2015; Wilkinson and Ager 2017; Ager, Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, and Ager 2015; Fiddian-Qasmiyeh and Kidwai 2017; Wilkinson 2018). Although not necessarily a discrete actor, the role of social networks in humanitarian emergencies has been an emerging area of research (Maxwell and Majid 2016; Humphrey, Krishnan, and Krystalli 2019).

Unpacking the agenda

Although there has been increasing consensus around and momentum toward the localization agenda, there are also significant critiques.

It is challenging even to talk about “the localization agenda,” since this term has been used to cover a range of objectives and goals. There are those who see localization as a practical exercise in decentralizing decision-making power and resources as a means of increasing access, reducing costs, and/or improving the timeliness and appropriateness of aid. Others see localization as a more transformational agenda to address historical imbalances of power between the Global North and the Global South (Van Brabant and Patel 2018). A particular actor’s perspective on these issues may even influence what they would consider as local. Someone more concerned with decentralization may emphasize the importance of actors based in and with operational capacity in an affected/host community, whereas someone more concerned with transformation may emphasize the importance of an identity in the Global South.

Not everyone agrees that the objectives of the localization agenda, as varied as they are, are feasible or desirable in all cases. Perhaps least controversial is the caveat that local actors, particularly affected governments, are not always able (due to overwhelmed capacities) or willing (due to conflict dynamics) to lead humanitarian responses (Cohen and Gingerich 2015). More controversially, there are certain international actors that see their mandate as being solely focused on saving lives, not on building capacity or resilience (Wall and Hedlund 2016; Schenkenberg 2016). This view is part of a pushback against the growing support for bridging the humanitarian-development nexus. Critics of bridging the nexus posit that in order to remain effective, humanitarians must separate themselves from the kinds of political considerations that building resilience or local humanitarian leadership may entail, in order to preserve impartiality and independence (DuBois 2019). In addition, some are concerned that the localization debate plays into the hands of states that want to close humanitarian space for both local and international organizations (Schenkenberg 2016).

As we have mentioned, many feel that the reforms proposed by the localization agenda do not go far enough. There is a critique that instead of using this agenda to talk about fundamentally transforming the top-down (and some would say neocolonialist) power structures of humanitarian aid, the agenda is just being used to coopt local actors into an already flawed system (Fiddian-Qasmiyeh 2018; Jayawickrama and Rehman 2018). An aid practitioner who has recently worked with local actors in the Middle East reflects on her experience: “I have come to recognize that I have given more attention to how I can help local actors adapt to international expectations, than to how aid as I know it needs to transform” (Rutledge 2018). The emphasis on funding streams and increasing local actors’ capacity to manage and spend large amounts of money has reinforced concerns that localization reforms will lead to local NGOs looking more like, and falling into the same traps as, their international counterparts. Marc DuBois cuttingly observes: “A funding model that has already gutted the independence and effectiveness of international NGOs is not best-suited to empower

local organisations within their own nations and communities” (DuBois 2016).

Even those who agree with the objectives of localization are skeptical that it can be achieved. There is a recognition that, ultimately, all organizations must sustain themselves financially, and there simply are not enough incentives for international organizations to truly push for what some see as a loss of resources and privilege (Cohen and Gingerich 2015). There are others who warn that some international organizations may simply be treating localization as a vehicle to gain access to difficult areas, to outsource risk, or to cut down on costs (De Geoffroy, Grünewald and Ní Chéilleachair 2017). Perhaps most significant, there is skepticism that humanitarian agencies are the correct actors to support the kind of civil society transformations that would be necessary to achieve the goals of the localization agenda. In an article written in 1995 about “Sudanization” efforts in what was then Southern Sudan, the authors cautioned against humanitarians taking on “democratic social engineering:”

The responsibility for creating civil institutions lies squarely with the Movements and the people of Southern Sudan. If institutions emerge that play a constructive and democratic role, it will be through the efforts of Southern Sudanese. This point cannot be overstressed. The humanitarian international cannot do it. It cannot even help this process very much. It can fail to obstruct the emergence of institutions, and it can give moral encouragement and some protection to those institutions that do emerge...But civil institutions created by aid will be weak, because they are essentially imposed. (African Rights 1995, 51; emphasis in original.)

Finally, it must be said that, as it stands, localization has been largely shaped from the vintage point of international actors (Fast 2017; Wall and Hedlund 2016). Although local humanitarian actors and diaspora organizations have always made and will always make their voices heard (World Humanitarian Summit Secretariat 2015; Poole 2018; Ramalignam 2015), and there are more research papers that consult local humanitarian actors (Ayobi et al. 2017; De Geoffroy, Grünewald, and Ní Chéilleachair

2017), the vast majority of what is considered the localization literature is written by INGOs and humanitarian research and policy groups based in Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) countries, this report included. One recent study on LHL in the Rohingya response said, “The global conversation on localisation has not supported constructive discussion at country level” (Humanitarian Advisory Group and NIRAPAD 2017, 5). This literature is also primarily focused on crises in which there was an international response, which biases our references to certain types of crises (Wall and Hedlund 2016). In addition, the discourse focuses primarily on reports published in English, which by definition limits the voices we hear. To broaden the conversation, it would be important to engage other forms of documentation and media in other languages, particularly non-colonial languages.

Barriers and challenges to local humanitarian action (LHA)

Despite a lack of clarity on the definition, there is a strong momentum in favor of localizing humanitarian assistance and seeing greater local leadership in humanitarian response. However, significant structural barriers remain that are well documented in the existing literature.

Funding structures

Much of the literature about localization focuses on how funding structures leave local actors at a disadvantage. Generally speaking, there is too little transparency and too much missing data to conclude definitively how much of the global humanitarian funds go directly to local and national actors (Barbelet 2018). The most recent Global Humanitarian Assistance report states that local and national NGOs received 2.7 percent of all NGO funding in 2017, which represented 0.4 percent of all international humanitarian assistance reported (Urquhart and Tuchel 2018). The figure of 0.4 percent (of all international humanitarian assistance going to local and national actors) was echoed in the most recent State of the Humanitarian System report (Knox Clark 2018). Analyses of specific

countries may have a higher number: a recent analysis of funding to Somalia and South Sudan put direct funding of local and national actors at around 4 percent (Willitts-King et al. 2018). The majority of local and national actors receive their funding through intermediaries, such as an INGO or United Nations (UN) agency. Even in the Sulawesi earthquake response in Indonesia, which is being hailed as a locally led response, and where internationals were obligated to work through local partners, more than 65 percent of the funds went to INGOs and UN agencies (Humanitarian Advisory Group and Pujiono Centre 2019).

As much as funding quantity is an issue, funding quality is one as well (Willitts-King et al. 2018). Humanitarian funding is notoriously short term and unpredictable, but international organizations are often able to stabilize themselves, thanks to significant overheads or core funds and the ability to leave a country when funding dries up and move to another emergency where funds are more available, which local actors rarely do (Poole 2014). Whether they receive funds directly or indirectly, local actors often do not receive adequate support for overheads or core operating costs (Willitts-King et al. 2018; Howe and Stites 2019; Humanitarian Advisory Group and Pujiono Centre 2019; Poole 2018). This inadequate support for overheads or core operating costs directly undermines the capacity of local actors—contributing to the relative lack of local actor capacity about which international actors complain—as well as the ability of local organizations to sustain themselves between crises (Barbelet 2018).

There are many barriers that complicate local and national actors' access to international funds. In a 2013 survey, more than 90 percent of local organizations reported a lack of awareness of international funding opportunities, and nearly a quarter cited language barriers (Poole 2014). More than three-quarters cited the challenges in complying with the *priorities* of the funders (Poole 2014), which recalls earlier critiques about the top-down nature of humanitarian funding as a whole. Between 25 percent and 40 percent cited administrative, audit, and reporting requirements as major barriers (Poole 2014), which resonates

with recent studies demonstrating that smaller NGOs bear the greatest administrative burden for the least reward because of high administrative and transaction costs (Stoddard et al. 2017).

International donors often prefer to fund larger international organizations that act as intermediaries for smaller, often local organizations. One reason for this preference is that it is more challenging and costly to administer many smaller grants (Wall and Hedlund 2016; Stoddard et al. 2017). Another reason is donors' risk aversion: although funding INGOs is not without risk, most donors focus on the potential risk caused by working with local and national humanitarian actors and prefer to work with the recognized brands of large international organizations (Stoddard et al. 2017). This risk aversion is compounded in certain contexts by "counter-terrorism" laws and policies that effectively prohibit the direct funding of local civil society (Schenkenberg 2016).

Local and national actors are often better served by pooled humanitarian funds, such as Common Humanitarian Funds and Emergency Response Funds, although each country-based fund operates differently and the process of administration and allocation still needs improvement (Poole 2014). There are also many examples of innovative funding mechanisms, such as the RAPID Fund in Pakistan, and the Ebola Crisis Fund in West Africa, which are seen as potential models for alternative funding structures (Wall and Hedlund 2016). However, local actors are increasingly turning away from conventional international donors and toward alternative sources. These include private and faith-based donations (Humanitarian Advisory Group and Pujiono Centre 2019; Fiddian-Qasmiyeh and Kidwai 2017); funding from diasporas (Howe and Stites 2019); and private sector or non-OECD government donors (Voorst and Hilhorst 2017). Technology also plays a role, with online fundraising platforms allowing virtually anyone to mobilize their own funds entirely outside of the traditional structures (Wall and Hedlund 2016). These funds may not add up to the same amounts that would be available to these groups through more conventional international donor sources; however, the funds may offer other advantages, such as being more flexible. According

to a recent study on the Sulawesi earthquake: “National and local actors will develop innovative ways to work around international systems if they are not made more accessible” (Humanitarian Advisory Group and Pujiono Centre 2019, 15).

Coordination structures

A common barrier cited in the localization discourse is the accessibility of humanitarian coordination mechanisms, particularly the UN-led cluster system. Many humanitarian coordination mechanisms are in English or another colonial language, which local actors do not speak, or which are so full of jargon that local actors with limited exposure to the formal humanitarian system may have difficulty engaging with them (Wall and Hedlund 2016; Barbelet 2017). There is even anecdotal evidence of certain coordination mechanisms—intended to be more inclusive of local groups—falling short of that objective. Participation in coordination mechanisms requires significant investments of limited staff time and transportation resources, which, as we have already suggested, are often in short supply because of the lack of support for local actors’ core budgets (De Geoffroy, Grünewald, and Ní Chéilleachair 2017). Haiti tends to be cited as the model of an exclusive coordination system, in which many Haitians were physically shut out of the UN base where cluster meetings took place (Wall and Hedlund 2016). The response to the Sulawesi earthquake is increasingly cited as an example of a local government-led coordination mechanism in which cluster meetings were almost always held in the local language (with translators for non-Bahasa speakers) and where social media (namely, WhatsApp) was leveraged to facilitate an even broader inclusion among local actors that could not physically attend every meeting (Humanitarian Advisory Group and Pujiono Centre 2019). However, it is important to recognize that most formal decision-making structures, whether led by UN agencies or local governments, tend to be dominated by men and other privileged social groups and tend to exclude nontraditional and historically marginalized actors, such as women’s groups (Parke 2019; Jayasinghe, Khatun, and Okwii 2020).

Partnerships

The structure of many international-local/national partnerships is seen as a major barrier to the

goals represented by the localization agenda. Because most funding to local actors passes through internationals, the relationship is more of a subcontracting arrangement, in which local responders are paid to carry out pre-determined tasks, with little room for input or innovation based on local knowledge (Wall and Hedlund 2016; De Geoffroy, Grünewald, and Ní Chéilleachair 2017; Voorst and Hilhorst 2017; Lindley-Jones 2018). In one study from Syria, the authors conclude that “the formal humanitarian sector finds it extremely difficult to establish genuine, inclusive partnerships” (Svoboda and Pantuliano 2015, iii). Some actors prefer the term “accompaniment” to “partnership,” because it emphasizes a more equal relationship (Wall and Hedlund 2016). These tensions about control are intensified in conditions of “remote management,” in which security risks or other restrictions prevent international organizations from implementing programs directly on the ground. Accountability and monitoring become more challenging in these scenarios, and in the absence of meaningful underlying trust, tension and frustration are likely to arise (Jaspars 2010; Howe and Stites 2019).

There is also the question of who gets to be a partner in the first place. Because of a tendency for risk aversion, there are many examples in the literature of international actors all relying on, or even competing over, a few local or national NGOs that are seen as particularly competent by international standards and experienced at working with the international system (Willitts-King et al. 2018; Parke 2019; African Rights 1995; Wall and Hedlund 2016). In an article from 1995 about what was then Southern Sudan, the authors described: “The most attractive [Sudanese indigenous NGOs] had got[ten] paired up with the keenest foreign NGOs. Many Cinderellas were left over” (African Rights 1995, 47).

Some international actors tend to favor organizations that resemble them: groups that have offices, hierarchies, and similar institutional values and practices, and that function well in a colonial language, such as English or French. The practice has been shown to reinforce the elitism of well-established or urban national groups that are often set up by former INGO staff or by people who have

strong connections within the cosmopolitan elite centered in the capital. It also tends to exclude nontraditional or historically marginalized actors, such as women's organizations (Jayasinghe, Khatun, and Okwii 2020), as well as subnational and much smaller and indigenous groups, which are closer to the affected communities but have not attended the latest standards workshop (Anderson, Brown, and Jean 2012). These tendencies also demonstrate that most international partners are unable or unwilling to make investments in local civil society, preferring instead to work with larger organizations that already meet international standards. Similar debates about what qualifies as a local partner have emerged in the context of efforts to "decentralize" or "nationalize" international NGOs, some of which may still be seen as national or local chapters of INGOs, as opposed to "legitimate" domestic and local actors (Obino 2013).

This rush for a few established local partners is often the case in sudden-onset emergencies where there is little time to identify, vet, and build relationships with local organizations. Trust is an important factor for successful partnerships (Howe and Stites 2019). As a result, the most effective humanitarian partnerships are typically those that were formed before an emergency strikes (Wall and Hedlund 2016; Humanitarian Advisory Group and Pujiono Centre 2019; Corbett 2010).

There are a few tensions that underlie many partnerships between international and local/national partners. There is commonly a sense of competition for the limited available donor resources (D'Arcy 2019; Poole 2014). In addition, even when international organizations want to be more supportive partners, the fact that funding comes through the partner changes the power dynamics. As Barbelet writes: "The donor-partner identity of international actors continues to mean they hold the power in bilateral partnerships with local organisations. As such, bilateral partnerships may not be the best model for supporting complementarity" (Barbelet 2018, 18).

Key takeaways:

- There have long been critiques of international humanitarian aid as needing to be more

inclusive of actors from crisis-affected countries. Increased attention to this issue over the past decade or so has coalesced into a set of agendas often called the localization of humanitarian assistance, LHL, and LHA;

- There is little consensus about key definitions related to localization, LHL, and LHA, and these definitions affect what people and priorities are included in, and excluded from, the conversation on this aspect of humanitarian reform; and
- According to the literature, the primary barriers to greater participation in and leadership of local actors in humanitarian systems are found in the inaccessible, exclusive, and top-down nature of conventional funding systems, coordination mechanisms, and partnership structures.

Section III: Methods

This study was a joint effort between Oxfam and the Feinstein International Center. The study team was composed of two representatives from each institution and one independent consultant, all of whom had previously researched and published on topics related to local humanitarian action.

The goal of this research was to allow local actors to define LHA in their own terms, based on their own priorities, whether or not those priorities related to the localization agenda. The specific research objectives were:

- To provide greater clarity about the nature of LHA in different contexts, including what are considered local humanitarian actors, their respective actions and priorities, and the power dynamics among and between them and international and external actors;
- To identify the primary opportunities for and barriers to local humanitarian leadership as defined by local humanitarian actors; and
- To identify priority areas for LHA and LHL research and policy agenda going forward.

Based on Oxfam and Feinstein experiences and past research, the study team identified four case studies that represented different types of humanitarian crises in different contexts, each with very different state and civil society structures and experiences with international humanitarian action:

- The response to Hurricane Matthew in the Sud region of Haiti;
- The response to the migrant crisis and displacement resulting from multiple conflicts in Colombia;
- The response to mass internal displacement as a result of conflict with ISIS in Iraq and the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI);² and

- The response to food security crises and displacement stemming from conflict in South Sudan (this case was ultimately not carried out, due to logistics and security constraints).

In an approach inspired by the Listening Project, the study team developed semi-structured interview protocols and focus group guides that used open-ended questions, which allowed the participants to direct the conversations and focus on the issues they felt were most important (see Annex 1). Participants were identified through a mapping process carried out with colleagues in the study region, as well as through referrals by study participants while the research was being carried out. We endeavored to speak with a broad and diverse set of local actors with experience in the aforementioned humanitarian crises, including nontraditional and/or informal humanitarian actors, such as faith-based actors, women's rights organizations, and spontaneous volunteer groups (see Annex 2). Where the team felt it was relevant, some international actors were also consulted to provide insight into specific issues. At the end of the fieldwork for each study, research participants were invited to take part in a feedback and listening event during which the study team presented its initial findings and analysis for review and additional input.

The field research for each case study was led by one member of the study team, supported by at least one local researcher. There were varying degrees of local Oxfam involvement in each of the three case studies. The support provided was focused on logistics and identification of potential key informants. We indicate the institutional associations of the researchers and local Oxfam involvement for each country, since they may have an influence on the actors the researchers had access to and the responses received.

² Most of the fieldwork for this case took place in and around Erbil, the capital of the KRI; however, several interviews took place outside of the KRI and/or with actors based or working outside of the KRI. Given that the geopolitical identities of the region are complicated, and some actors would not consider themselves Iraqi, the authors are using the term "Iraq and the KRI" for this case study.

Table 1. Background information for each case study

	Haiti	Colombia	Iraq
Geographic scope	Sud Department	National	Iraq and the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI)
Disaster type	Hurricane	Conflict-related internal displacement, Venezuelan migrant crisis	Conflict-related internal displacement
Days in the field	7 days	7 days	10 days
Date of field research	April 2019	May 2019	April and May 2019
Research lead	Female American working for Feinstein	Male Colombian-American working for Oxfam America	Female American working for Oxfam America
Research support	Male Haitian academic (former Oxfam employee) from Port au Prince; male Haitian from Les Cayes	Female Colombian academic from Bogotá	Staff of Oxfam's Erbil office, including female Sudanese national, male Syrian national, and male Iraqi Kurd; female American working for Oxfam America

The table above outlines some of the primary characteristics of each case study.

The types of respondents engaged in each case differed based on the social, political, and geographic access of the research team, the nature of who was involved in the crisis response being studied, and idiosyncratic constraints of the particular field visit (such as the Haiti fieldwork coinciding with the Easter holiday). Response rates were also different in each case: the Haiti and Iraq and the KRI teams had high response rates, whereas Colombia had a relatively low response rate. The types of actors that participated in the study in each site influenced the perspectives heard, which will be analyzed in the individual cases.

As the literature review indicates, creating broad categories of local actors can be problematic, and these categories reflect the authors' working definitions and classifications. It is important to note that certain important types of stakeholders, such as women's rights organizations, may range from

informal community groups to international NGOs. A more detailed breakdown of the actors spoken to in each location, as well as participants in the validation workshops, can be found in Annex 3.

Limitations

The cases for this study, and the individuals and organizations identified within them, were not chosen randomly. The cases were selected to provide a range of response types, geographic areas, strength of civil society and governments, and international presence, but they cannot in and of themselves cover the even broader range of contexts in which humanitarian responses occur. Therefore, this study is neither universally generalizable nor representative of all humanitarian response.

Rather, it is a snapshot of particular responses by particular actors. Humanitarian crises and their aftermaths are dynamic; therefore, this study does

Table 2. Types of actors we spoke to in each context

Actor Type	Working definition of actor type	Haiti	Colombia	Iraq and the KRI
Affected communities	Members of a community who were convened based on their experience of the crisis, not necessarily based on their association with a particular group.	2	0	0
National NGO³	A formal, registered NGO based in and primarily operating in one province	2	2	7
Red Cross/Red Crescent	Local chapter of Red Cross/Red Crescent Societies	1	0	1
Local NGO	A formal, registered NGO based in and primarily operating in one province	3	5	9
Local community-based groups	Formal and informal organizations and associations based in and primarily operating in one community	2	0	0
Religious entities	Formal and informal groups serving members of a particular faith, not including faith-based NGOs	2	0	0
Private sector	A non-governmental entity whose primary goal is generating profits.	2	0	1
Affected government	Representatives of local, regional, and national governments	3	0	3
International agencies	A formal, registered NGO with its headquarters in a country other than the one where they are working	1	5	2
Total		18	12	23

not claim to be representative of the current reality in any of these areas.

In Colombia and in Iraq and the KRI, the researchers were visibly identified with Oxfam, which has an active presence in the study areas. This identification could have influenced the researchers' access to certain potential participants, certain actors' decisions about whether to participate, and the answers they gave. The research leads in Haiti and in Iraq and the KRI were not from those regions and, as Americans, were associated with power structures

that have had controversial effects in those regions. This association could have had similar effects on participation of and discussions with different actors.

Because the approach and lines of inquiry were intended to be broad and directed by the particularities of each context, the case studies vary in important ways. In terms of scope: in Haiti, all the interviews and research except one interview took place in a single municipality; the research in Iraq and the KRI, on the other hand, took place across an entire region, and Colombia's participants came

³ For the purpose of categorization in this study, a local NGO will be one whose offices and programs remain primarily within one province (called "departments" in Haiti and "governorates" in Iraq). A national NGO will be one whose offices and programs cover more than one province. Any national NGO with international projects will be called a "national NGO with international projects" to distinguish it from international NGOs that have their headquarters in a foreign country.

from across the country. In terms of actors: more nontraditional and informal actors were consulted in Haiti, whereas in Iraq and the KRI, all respondents were formal organizations; in Colombia, there was a larger number of international respondents. These variations, and others, make it more difficult to compare topics and analyses across the three cases. One area where this variation posed a challenge was in conducting an adequate gender analysis of the research. Although each study engaged respondents of diverse gender and age groups, some cases had a greater number of organizations representing women and gender and sexual minorities. The cases will indicate when members of organizations representing specific marginalized groups are speaking; a more detailed breakdown of the genders and affiliations of study participants can be found in Annex 3.

Section IV: Case Presentations

This section will present a very brief overview of the context of each response and the primary findings in each of the three cases. This section aims to summarize and present important information and trends as they were conveyed in the interviews and focus groups; synthesis, analysis, and framing of the data in a larger contextual framework can be found in Section V. Therefore, certain themes and topics may be emphasized more in some cases than others because they were addressed more by certain groups of participants.

Haiti

Context

Haiti is the most exposed to natural disasters (World Bank 2015) of any Latin American or Caribbean country. It is frequently affected by hurricanes and tropical storms, the impacts of which are exacerbated by widespread environmental degradation, particularly deforestation. Chronic political instability, weak governance, and resource constraints further undermine the capacity of the Haitian state to adequately prepare for, respond to, and mitigate natural disasters of any size. The state's low capacity has led to and allowed for international organizations, many of which have a semi-permanent presence in the country, to take a prominent, and some would say dominant, role in both disaster preparedness and response. The strong role played by international organizations in turn may undermine the capacity and willingness of the state and other local actors to manage disasters. The earthquake that struck Haiti on January 12, 2010 was seen as a strong illustration of those dynamics: the massive humanitarian response that followed has been strongly criticized for systematically sidelining local actors of all types.

Hurricane Matthew made landfall in Haiti as a Category 4 hurricane on October 4, 2016. The

southwest of Haiti was particularly hard hit, including the departments⁴ of Sud, Grand-Anse, and Nippes. Official reports put the death toll at above 500, with more than 175,000 persons displaced (UN OCHA 2017), but the numbers were likely greater (Marcelin and Cela 2017). Access to the entire affected areas of the southwest was obstructed by damage to critical bridges and roads (Harrup 2016), and even months after the hurricane, damaged bridges and roads still impeded access (UN OCHA 2016). This lack of access meant that all initial responses to Hurricane Matthew, and most of the immediate lifesaving aid, were local, since it was physically impossible for external actors to reach the affected areas.

Many saw the response to Hurricane Matthew as an opportunity to learn from the lessons of the 2010 earthquake (Grünewald and Schenkenberg 2016). Although there is consensus that there was more government leadership in the 2016 Hurricane Matthew response than in the 2010 earthquake response, challenges in coordination, communication, and community participation and accountability were still seen as widespread (Grünewald and Schenkenberg 2016). The response was further complicated by the fact that presidential and parliamentary elections were due to take place within a week of Hurricane Matthew's landfall (Grünewald and Schenkenberg 2016; Marcelin and Cela 2017).

⁴ "Department" is the Haitian equivalent of province or state.

This case study focuses on Les Cayes, which is the capital of the Sud department, and one neighboring municipality. Hurricane Matthew directly affected Les Cayes, which was one of the areas initially cut off from external aid. Les Cayes is considered the third city of Haiti; it has a robust civil society and economic sector, although by definition it is peripheral to the center of political power and foreign aid, which are concentrated in the capital, Port au Prince.

Main findings

What are “local actors”?

Key informants’ opinions varied about who could be considered a local actor.

Not surprisingly, the first dimension of what could be considered local was geographic. One key informant from the local Red Cross chapter classified a number of INGOs as local because they had been working in Les Cayes for a long time before the hurricane, including one INGO, Catholic Relief Services, that has been in Les Cayes since 1954. However, others rejected this idea. At the Learning and Feedback event, all participants rejected the notion that an actor is determined as local solely because of where its office is located or the length of time it has been in a community. Participants discussed the phenomenon of pocket organizations with longstanding local offices but no action, emphasizing that an organization needed to be active and continuously responding to local needs to have any kind of legitimacy. In other words, a longstanding physical presence in the affected community was seen as necessary but not sufficient to qualify one as a legitimate local actor.

The broadest consensus among key informants, particularly during the Learning and Feedback event, was that a local actor had to be “anchored in the logic of the community” to listen to and be listened to by the community, and to be able to exercise leadership in the community. There was also a lively debate about the role of funding in

determining whether an actor was local. Most people agreed that organizations that depended entirely on external funds could not be considered local (though it was not clear what would actually qualify as external funding). However, a minority view was that accessing any kind of external funding precluded an organization from being local, because it then was accountable to people outside the community. Interestingly, when asked to define local humanitarian actors, no participant mentioned any requirements relating to experience responding to humanitarian crises or identifying as a humanitarian organization.

This case study illustrated how “local” is itself a relative concept. One of the mayors we spoke to viewed members of the national government, including elected officials from his municipality, as external agents who undermined and complicated his disaster response efforts because of their lack of local knowledge and accountability. In turn, several of the members of the affected communities and community-based organizations (CBOs) saw their mayor as being an external, inaccessible actor who had forgotten about their existence and needs. One focus group revealed that even within the same communal section,⁵ the members of one village saw the local CASEC⁶ as an outsider because he allegedly favored his village over theirs when distributing relief items. There is a Russian nesting doll of layers of identity that becomes apparent in humanitarian crises.

Power dynamics between local actors were illustrated by the interviews as well. As we have suggested, almost all focus group participants and key informants expressed deep frustration with the state and accused the state of “politicizing” aid.⁷ A vodou priest we interviewed felt his religious community was excluded from participating in decision-making structures because of the historical marginalization of the vodou community. One CBO expressed resentment that both local and international NGOs used relief funds to pay staff salaries, when the CBO could have put all of that money into relief work, since the organizations were

⁵ The smallest administrative division in Haiti.

⁶ Conseil d’Administration de la Section Communale (CASEC) is the most decentralized local authority in Haiti.

⁷ This accusation, though not uncommon in Haiti, may have been exacerbated by the closeness of the elections, and was also highlighted in Marcelin and Cela (2017).

run by volunteers. A representative of the local private sector did not trust NGOs, either Haitian or international, to make strategic decisions about aid, since he believed they were too blinded by their own missions and resource needs. Certain local actors were dismissive of others, seeing them as insignificant or irrelevant because of the relatively small size of the resources they mobilized.

However, the interviews also illustrated the strength of the relationships within affected communities and among various local and national actors, particularly relationships that existed pre-hurricane. Many people survived because of their ability to leverage (largely informal) relationships with other local and national actors (see section below), and there were several examples of resource and information sharing among local and national actors. For instance, a local child-protection organization in Les Cayes had the community offer them a temporary office after theirs was destroyed, and they were in turn instrumental in providing information and guidance to other local and national actors. Our conversations with local residents illustrated that the concept of a local actor in the context of the response to Hurricane Matthew is complex and often relative. It is essential to understand both hyper-local dynamics (such as the mistrust between village representatives) and the broader context (national elections and the post-earthquake humanitarian reforms) in order to appreciate who is local to whom and when this matters.

Was the 2016 response to Hurricane Matthew locally led?

The case study confirmed that in the first days and even weeks after Hurricane Matthew, the response was not only locally led but exclusively local, since external actors could not access the affected areas. Every single interview and focus group featured examples and stories of ordinary citizens acting as humanitarians to save lives and provide basic necessities to their neighbors. Any house still standing after the hurricane immediately became an emergency shelter for those who had lost their housing, and neighbors shared any available food and water with one another. One key informant described sheltering more than 20 families in his

home for over two months after the hurricane. Many roads and ravines were cleared by crisis-affected communities in the days following the hurricane. Most of these actions were spontaneous and self-organized, although some activities—particularly road clearing—were coordinated by local authorities. One key informant said of those immediate relief activities: “If there was no solidarity, people would have died.”

There was an example of local leaders forming community protection clusters to identify vulnerable children. One spontaneous volunteer group from Les Cayes managed to raise more than USD 10,000 and distribute aid to affected rural areas without engaging with international actors (although they did attempt, somewhat unsuccessfully, to participate in a coordination meeting).

When it comes to local leadership in the formal humanitarian response, the picture is more mixed. People described examples of individual partnerships and coordination forums that were locally led. Several local NGOs and the Haitian Red Cross, which had existing relationships with international actors, felt they were listened to by their international partners and had a voice in how the response was being shaped. Each mayor we spoke to cited one or two international partners that were open, collaborative, and responsive to local guidance in how they organized their assistance programs. Multiple key informants mentioned the protection sub-cluster as being a model of post-disaster coordination: it was led by a technical government agency⁸ with support from UNICEF and other international actors, and had a strong and active presence of a diverse group of local actors, which ranged from the police to local non-governmental organizations (LNGOs), all of whom effectively shared information, referrals, and actions. Local actors such as the Chamber of Commerce, the Catholic Church, and the civil protection agency organized an effort to deliver a boat of humanitarian relief supplies (although this particular venture did not end well).

However, as a whole, many local actors felt that they could not call the response, as a whole,

8 Institut du Bien-Être Social et de Recherches (IBESR), the government child and family welfare agency.

locally led because the structures in place were not strong enough to ensure all external actors were coordinating with and accountable to local leadership. Both mayors we spoke to felt they had limited control over the aid that was brought to their municipalities—many international actors simply decided not to participate in coordination structures. The local Red Cross chapter confirmed that though some international actors were helpful and respectful partners, many others bypassed the official coordination channels. The director of the local radio station (who did investigative reporting into the response efforts) stated categorically that the response was not locally led, since the international actors had the most control over what aid went where; although local civil society was certainly active, their comparative lack of resources made most of them “insignificant” players in the larger scheme of the response. None of the affected communities, organizations, informal leaders, and spontaneous volunteers we spoke to felt there was a system by which their voices could be heard; access to resources and decision-making structures seemed to depend on personal pre-hurricane connections.

Although there was no shortage of complaints about the behavior and operational choices of many international actors during the response, there was a widespread sense that it was simply in the nature of international actors to prioritize their own agendas, objectives, and programs. The consensus was that it was the state’s responsibility to create structures that would bring international actors in line with local priorities and needs, and that failures in the response to Hurricane Matthew were ultimately failures of governance. Throughout the interviews, there was limited awareness of the broader reform processes among international actors associated with the localization agenda or Grand Bargain commitments made three years earlier.

What are the main opportunities and barriers to locally led humanitarian action?

All local actors with whom we met or spoke were proud of their efforts in response to Hurricane Matthew while aware of the individual and structural limits to their effectiveness. There was widespread belief that the humanitarian response structures should be reformed to better respond to local priorities and realities.

According to the local and national actors we spoke with, the primary barrier to more effective locally led humanitarian response in and around Les Cayes was the lack of capacity of the state to manage disaster response. However, most key informants and focus group participants still rejected the notion that these weaknesses justified bypassing the state for the delivery of aid; only the CBOs seemed to indicate that external agencies should bypass the state to engage directly with grassroots organizations. The most widely accepted recommendation for change was reforming state disaster management entities through 1) decentralization and 2) replacing political appointees with professional civil servants who have relevant technical expertise. Even a representative from Haiti’s civil protection department recognized that the Haitian government had politicized the aid process to such a degree that it was unable to fulfill its role. All participants in the Feedback and Learning event believed the state should play the role of a coordinator rather than handle aid delivery directly.

In most of the interviews and focus groups, and certainly in the Learning and Feedback event, there was a widespread sense that international actors needed to learn to listen better to affected communities and local organizations, adapt their programming to local realities, and invest in pre-disaster and longer-term disaster recovery initiatives. There was also consensus during the Listening and Feedback event that the involvement of so many foreigners was not necessary in a response, that Haiti already has significant human capacity and expertise. Interestingly, none of the people we spoke with explicitly called for more direct funding; the priority appeared to be in having more of a voice in how aid was organized and distributed.

In the Learning and Feedback event, participants came to a consensus that coordination structures should be composed primarily of local civil society actors, with the state in a monitoring and overall coordination role, and international organizations as invited participants. These structures should exist permanently; that is, they would have pre-disaster functions, including surveying various local actors to understand which ones had an active presence, so it would be clear whom they should cooperate with once a disaster hit.

Context

Colombia experiences humanitarian crises stemming from a complex set of factors. The long-running conflict between the Colombian government and numerous armed groups, including but not limited to the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (Spanish: Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia; FARC) and the National Liberation Army (Spanish: Ejército de Liberación Nacional; ELN), displaced millions of people, resulting in Colombia's designation as the country with the most internally displaced persons (IDPs) in the world (UNHCR 2018). The official end of the war with the signing of the 2016 Peace Accords has not led to an end to displacement: other conflicts, with both ideological and criminal motivations, led to more than 145,000 new displacements during 2018 (Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre 2018). There have been recent increases in attacks on civilian populations, particularly attacks on social and human rights leaders, as well as the large-scale confinement of communities due to armed conflict and unexploded ordinances, which disproportionately affects indigenous, Afro-Colombian, and rural communities (UNHCR 2018). Illegal and criminal activities, including drug trafficking and coca cultivation, have also increased in the past few years, which is one factor behind the increased attacks on civilians (UNHCR 2018; Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre 2019).

Colombia is also a high-risk country for natural disasters, including earthquakes, floods, landslides, volcanic eruptions, wildfire, and droughts, which are exacerbated by environmental exploitation and degradation for both legal and illegal commercial interests (UNHCR 2018; Saavedra 2016). More than 1.8 million people were affected by natural disasters between 2016 and 2018, with 67,000 persons displaced by natural disasters in 2018 alone (Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre 2018; UNHCR 2018). The total number of internally displaced people in Colombia, including those displaced by the civil war who have not yet returned home, was 5.8

million as of the end of 2018 (Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre 2018). Colombia has also been affected by the crisis in Venezuela, which has led more than a million Venezuelans to flee to Colombia, in addition to pushing approximately half a million Colombians living in Venezuela to return to Colombia (Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre 2019).

Given this long exposure to armed conflict, natural disasters, displacement, and confinement, Colombian organizations have significant experience in humanitarian response as well as a unique understanding of the intersection among humanitarian, governance, peacebuilding, and human rights issues (Saavedra 2016). Although Afro-Colombian and indigenous Colombian communities are disproportionately affected by humanitarian and human rights crises, they are home to many strong local organizations, thanks to decades of social mobilization (UNHCR 2018).

Because of the widespread and overlapping nature of crises in Colombia, this case study cast a broader net and did not focus on one geographic area. It therefore brings perspectives from national and local humanitarian actors across several regions of the country.

Main findings

What are "local actors"?

Many of the local groups we spoke to for this research do not identify as humanitarian. They are motivated by their core mission (advocating for women's rights, protecting vulnerable children, etc.) and provide social services at all times—but these services become urgent and lifesaving during and after a crisis, thereby falling into the humanitarian category. Often the arrival of armed conflict or refugees into a community is what pushes activities that had been human rights, development, or accompaniment activities into the realm of humanitarian ones, but local actors see it as a continuation of their normal work. One

local foundation expressed some annoyance that international actors seem so focused on defining their work as humanitarian.

The definition of a local actor by participants in this research was largely based on an understanding of and respect for community processes and autonomy. Although one international actor interviewed for this study emphasized the importance of territorial presence and spending significant time on the ground, that could be seen as just one factor in determining who is seen as a legitimate local actor. Key informants from both national NGOs spoken to for this study emphasized that local actors are invited by affected communities to act as allies and in turn respect the decision-making processes of these communities.

There is also a recognition among these actors of the nuances of the term “local.” One local NGO illustrated this understanding with the comment: “We cannot put everything in one sack.” There are longstanding community processes that define who is and who isn’t local, and that looks different from place to place. In the various discussions of this study, local actors mentioned indigenous organizations, ancestral authorities, peasant organizations, Afro-Colombian organizations, and women’s organizations. Other actors described as local in this study included churches and related faith-based organizations, including Caritas, as it was seen as a part of the Catholic Church; educational actors, such as teachers, rectors, researchers, and universities; and the Colombian Red Cross. Many state actors were also cited as local: mayor’s offices and municipalities, governors’ offices, ombudsman offices, various technical state offices, such as the Colombian Institute of Family Welfare and the Risk Management Unit, among others, as well as the armed forces and the police. Independent, altruistic civilian actors were also mentioned. Although discussions did not focus extensively on the role of the private sector, large Colombian companies, such as Ecopetrol, were mentioned as having a strong influence in certain areas, as were private sector foundations. Many of the actors mentioned above do not fit the model of what is considered a local humanitarian actor.

Perhaps because this case study spoke to formal organizations spread out over a broad geographic area, we did not hear as many reports of conflict among local non-state actors. One local NGO commented on examples of elites exerting control over local decision-making and criminal hijacking of a council of elders that was established to manage land restitution processes. Another local NGO discussed the fact that limited funding can lead to competition for resources among local groups. However, most of the interviews pointed to evidence of collaboration and solidarity. A national NGO described the importance of investing in networks: “We believe in networks...[Four] years ago we started a Latin American network of organizations working in the field of adoption. It has been very complicated, but I will die with the flag raised convinced that this is the way...In the end, we are all companies. We may have the best of intentions, but if we do not have a structure, a common north, a definition of where we want to contribute value, we will end up dispersing.”

There were, however, pronounced divisions between civil society actors on the one hand and the Colombian state on the other. At best, the Colombian government was described as largely absent and “out of touch;” at worst, it was described as instrumentalizing aid for votes or to distract affected populations from the root causes of their suffering. Despite operating in different geographic corners of the country, most of the women’s and indigenous organizations we spoke to shared similar experiences of the state being absent from or late to the humanitarian response, unable to fulfill its responsibilities both in terms of service delivery and coordination, and of it failing to use gender-sensitive approaches. There was a broad sense of mistrust of the government due to corruption and a “clientelist” approach to aid delivery. One national NGO explicitly stated they would prefer to work with international actors rather than the government out of the desire to safeguard their independence. The one time the army’s presence in humanitarian action was brought up, it was seen as problematic, both due to lack of knowledge of basic humanitarian practice—for instance, no sex-segregated bathrooms in army-run camps in Putamayo—and in terms of their role in the conflict. However, respondents also recognized that

the state was not a homogenous entity: one NNGO described a lack of communication and coordination between the central and regional government. There were individual accounts of good collaboration, such as with the state Child/Family Welfare Institute—the Instituto Colombiano de Bienestar Familiar—and coordination with local authorities in the Alliance for Good. One local NGO affirmed that there were good people in government who were patriotic and would not divert or manipulate aid, but “you would have to look for them sometimes with a magnifying glass,” their numbers were that small.

Are humanitarian response efforts in Colombia locally led?

It is difficult to respond to this question in the context of Colombia, since there are so many overlapping crises: multiple conflicts, small-scale natural disasters, development-driven and extractive industry-driven displacement, and the current Venezuelan refugee crisis. This case study also focused on actors from several different regions of Colombia, as opposed to the Haiti study, for instance, which had a single geographic focus.

However, as a whole, there seem to be two parallel systems of humanitarian response, one of which is locally led and one of which is not. The formal humanitarian coordination mechanisms based in Bogotá, such as the humanitarian country team, appear to be composed primarily of UN and INGO members. However, outside of the capital, given the relative weakness of the state in Colombia’s regions and the longstanding traditions of social mobilization among indigenous and Afro-Colombian communities, there are examples of strong local humanitarian leadership, although it may be identified by different terms. An important example is the response led by a local Colombian women’s rights organization in Guajira that took immediate action at the start of the Venezuelan refugee crisis by providing services to refugee women and working within local systems to combat rising xenophobia in host communities.

However, the extent of local leadership is a matter of perspective. A Colombian national working for a UN agency in Bogotá provided us with a different take. In her view, decades of conflict had deepened

divisions to an extent that made local leadership of humanitarian action a challenging endeavor: “After so much violence, so much manipulation, so much pain, so much death, so much blood, the communities...are not in a position to decide.” She contested the definition of local leadership, indicating that those whom the international system calls leaders are often those who get things done, not necessarily those who represent the affected population. As this generalization is a broad one, and the case study did not examine a distinct response, it would be impossible to affirm or refute this particular assessment.

What are the main opportunities and barriers to locally led humanitarian action?

Despite the mistrust of the state cited above, the research participants broadly agreed on the state’s fundamentally important role. State presence, and particularly state coordination among local, regional, and national levels, is seen as essential for effective and sustainable responses to humanitarian crises. A common recommendation was for international actors to focus their work on advocacy relating to the government to ensure more effective and accountable state intervention in humanitarian disasters.

The most common barrier cited by local key informants and focus group participants was the unwillingness or inability of the broader humanitarian system to reckon with the structural causes of humanitarian crises. Every single local and national actor we spoke to asserted that the barrier between humanitarian work, on the one hand, and development and human rights work, on the other, was artificial. This artificial barrier has the effect of distancing local actors from the formal humanitarian system that international actors and government subscribe to. One LNGO said, “What people live in is a continuous emergency, and the structural problems are not solved.” Another said, “The humanitarian crisis, we all know, is not born of something spontaneous but is born of something... broken.” Other LNGOs cited dignity, structural injustice, poverty, armed conflict, and other “vital issues for community life” as humanitarian issues. They see addressing the root causes of poor

governance as part of their mission to relieve and, ultimately, prevent suffering. Even a Colombian national working for a UN organization affirmed the futility of looking at local humanitarian action without examining the broader contextual issues: “There are many problems that are local, but [are] not resolved locally.” A representative of a regional women’s NGO stated that she believes the government also subscribes to this division between humanitarian and more fundamental human rights and governance work in a way that she finds counterproductive.

Given the artificial barrier between humanitarian and development work, there was a strong consensus among the local actors we spoke to for this study that the most important opportunity for local humanitarian leadership lies in dismantling the humanitarian intervention framework. There were many calls for organizations to do their homework before emergencies by identifying, preparing, and establishing trust with partners, so that when emergencies begin, they are working with a common understanding of the context, local culture, and communal systems. There were calls for international actors to identify partner focal points that can build trust before emergencies and facilitate relationships during emergencies. Others discussed the importance of investing in “strengthening of the local social fabric” before and after crises, which would support local leadership during crises.

However, even if this kind of pre- and post-crisis investment does not happen, there are still reforms that can be made to facilitate local leadership. Local actors still deserve a voice at the table during humanitarian responses, even if they do not identify as humanitarian and thus lack humanitarian training and vocabulary. One local NGO said: “If there is a sudden emergency...the decisions [should be] made by those actors who are in the territory even though they do not know anything about the humanitarian sector, even though they have zero [training]. I believe that local humanitarian leadership involves sitting with these people...and involv[ing] them in making decisions about the response.” Another representative of a national NGO believes that the key to locally led humanitarian action lies in involving the affected communities from the very

beginning of the response, including in the design of the intervention. For this reform and many others to occur, local actors recognized that donor practices and policies would have to change and become more open.

In terms of opportunities, many of the local and national actors we spoke to in the study cited the decades of community organizing and social mobilization work done across Colombia, particularly in indigenous and Afro-Colombian communities. One focus group participant even talked about the generational transfer of knowledge about humanitarian response within communities that had been affected by repeated and multiple crises. One local NGO mentioned the power of indigenous concepts to mobilize people around humanitarian causes. The chronic nature of conflict, displacement, and disaster in Colombia has built up the operational capacity of both formal and informal groups to respond to humanitarian crises, and this capacity represents an important opportunity for future local humanitarian leadership, both as it currently exists and in formal/international systems.

Context

Iraq is recovering from decades of armed conflict, civil and sectarian strife, and a recent war against ISIS, a group that captured and had controlled a sizable portion of northern Iraq and the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI) until late 2017. According to the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (UN OCHA), across Iraq there are “approximately 1.8 million internally displaced persons and 6.7 million people in need of humanitarian assistance. Insecurity, lack of social cohesion and livelihoods, and destroyed or damaged housing hamper people’s ability to return home” (UN OCHA n.d.). The scale of the displacement resulted in a significant mobilization of resources by humanitarian organizations. According to the Humanitarian Response Plan (HRP) managed by UN OCHA with input from national and regional government officials and humanitarian partners, the total amount requested for the current response stands at USD 701.2 million, of which USD 288.3 million has been received to date (UN OCHA n.d.). The scale and scope of the response covers multiple provinces of Iraq and depends on multiple humanitarian actors in service provision roles: “[B]etween January and December 2018, 170 partners reached 2.9 million people out of the 3.4 million targeted (85%) with humanitarian assistance, including 1.3 million children and 1.4 million women and girls” (Humanitarian Response Plan 2019, 102). Although local and national actors have played a significant role in the response, the 2018 Iraq Humanitarian Fund (IHF; a pooled emergency response fund administered by UN OCHA) report indicates that only 9 percent of the Fund went to Iraqi NGOs (Iraq Humanitarian Fund 2018, 18). In this period of transition from active armed conflict to recovery and reconstruction, the priorities and programmatic approaches of the humanitarian community in Iraq are evolving as well (Humanitarian Response Plan 2019). The response

during the active armed conflict had focused on the immediate lifesaving needs of people fleeing violence. Currently, the IDPs who are starting to return face significant challenges, and those who want to return sometimes cannot.⁹ Different groups of IDPs need different types of support (e.g., protection, legal assistance, livelihoods). In Erbil, the capital city of the KRI, humanitarian organizations operate in relative safety, and their services may cover the neighboring regions of Nineweh and Kirkuk, among others.

Main findings

What are “local actors”?

As the Iraq and the KRI study primarily spoke to formal local actors who had experience interacting with more formalized humanitarian mechanisms, there was less debate about who qualified as a local humanitarian actor.

Given the longstanding geopolitics of the region, there was some significance given to distinctions between different governorates and, more importantly, the difference between Kurdish areas and Iraq more broadly. For instance, many would reject the federal government in Baghdad as being a local actor because the region sees itself as distinct from the rest of Iraq. One national NGO pointedly said that no one knows a region better than the “local locals,” and they would try to attract staff from any governorate they worked in to be able to leverage truly local knowledge. However, beyond this kind of regional distinction, the research participants had a fairly conventional view of local actors, focusing on the so-called professionalized sector, such as NGOs—including women’s organizations—government, and the Iraqi Red Crescent. This view may be due to the prominent and visible role that local and national NGOs have played in Iraq for so long, which leaves less room for seeing informal and nontraditional actors in this space. The exception

⁹ One interviewee emphasized that even when IDPs want to return, there are usually no basic services such as health, schools, or electricity. Hence, many are choosing to stay put where they currently are and wait until basic services are restored.

was a local development NGO in Erbil, which described the importance of religious groups, tribes, families, social networks, and political groups in civil society in crisis situations. However, though all the groups interviewed were formal, many of them would not typically categorize themselves as humanitarian, having served a human rights and/or development agenda before the displacement crisis.

There is evidence of both tensions and collaboration between local and national actors in Iraq and the KRI. There was a general sense of competition and tension among many local NGOs based on size, resources, experience, and connections to the ruling party. A proliferation of local NGOs in the wake of the crisis has led to distrust in some affected communities. One development NGO said, “People had a negative view of NGOs...because the NGOs were getting so much money, and there was no transparency as to where it is going. People think NGOs (both international and local) are rolling in cash. In fact, people barely distinguish between the local and international on this topic.” However, we also saw evidence of multiple platforms, alliances, umbrella groups, coordination groups, and networks of local and national groups across Iraq and the KRI.

Are humanitarian response efforts in Iraq and the KRI locally led?

Many local actors demonstrated a strong familiarity with global commitments to localization made by the humanitarian community at the World Humanitarian Summit, and specifically the Grand Bargain commitments. One women’s LNGO said, “[T]here is now attention to localization by locals themselves. They’re raising their voices.” Examples of local advocacy for localization include one Iraqi NGO mobilizing peer organizations and organizing a discussion with donor representatives on Grand Bargain commitments and the slow progress on increasing funding allocations to local actors. Coordination platforms also made efforts to increase local involvement in such platforms. In addition, we saw several examples of local NGOs leveraging their own resources, volunteers, and relationships to reach volatile communities where there is no external or international presence. However, the overall sentiment expressed by most of those interviewed was that formal humanitarian response mechanisms, and the resources associated with them, continue

to be dominated by international actors. This view was borne out in interventions, partnerships, and coordination mechanisms.

Several local and national NGOs expressed frustration with what they perceived as unilateral intervention by international actors. One local NGO said: “International actors decide to implement alone where local actors have been in a place and working for years, [and] this results in tension. Because the internationals have funding, they drop in, hire local staff, and eliminate the locals’ role...As a local community, we prefer to always be included in operations. We have capacity, standards, systems, resources, etc. We are here—partner with us.” This sentiment was echoed by many of the study’s other local and national responders, many of whom feel ignored or sidelined by international actors in the response to ISIS-related displacement.

Many local and national NGOs felt that when they did partner with INGOs, they were treated like sub-contractors rather than equals in the decision-making and financing process. According to one local NGO analysis, “There is an absence of human principle when it comes to our relationship. Our relationship is as a service provider. Even if you come across [the] urgent needs of a group, if it is outside the mandate of the INGO, there’s nothing they can do. This makes [a] local group feel trapped and paralyzed in that you can’t respond to your community’s needs because someone else has decided on what to spend money on.” This sentiment was echoed by many other local and national actors, including this sentiment from another local NGO about their experience entering a consortium with international actors: “Sometimes the international actors don’t want to change anything or make room for the local NGOs. We had to get mediation in one instance. Only one organization is the lead, and it’s always an international one. The INGOs absorb so much of the funding before it gets to the ground and to local groups.” However, it should be noted that not all partnerships were seen this negatively. One national NGO staff person said: “There are two types of partners: those who begin collaborating with the local actor right from the start of the concept note, and those who show up with everything already planned and then dictate the work, looking only for implementation.”

Coordination and funding mechanisms were seen largely as excluding or marginalizing local and national NGOs. The country-based pooled-fund process, called the Iraq Humanitarian Fund (IHF), was described as opaque and exclusionary of local organizations. Even the national NGOs that have received direct funding and partnered extensively with international agencies felt that they are the exception. Some local organizations described being “hand-picked” to attend a donor conference; others were invited to initial coordination meetings and later left off distribution and follow-up lists. There was concern that the coordination mechanisms, particularly the cluster system, were not effective or conducive to local actors’ meaningful inclusion and participation. Some interviews distinguished between equality and equity, noting that though cluster meetings are open to everyone, local NGOs face barriers to access, including language differences, transportation issues, and the time required to attend cluster meetings, let alone lead them. For some, previous experience with disrespectful behavior and “humiliating treatment” in such meetings has led to the decision not to return. One person noted, “We have a crisis with the clusters right now. In our community, the national NGOs are basically not willing to participate due to the favoritism shown to INGOs.” One local actor cited the sub-cluster for addressing and preventing gender-based violence as being among the exceptions, noting that it was a successful and inclusive coordination mechanism with strong referrals and communication among local NGOs, INGOs, the UN, and the government.

A unique feature of the Iraq case was the role of the NGO Coordination Committee for Iraq (NCCI), a coordination mechanism for all NGOs engaged in the humanitarian response, one of whose goals was to increase local involvement in the mechanism itself and elsewhere. There were contradictory statements about its role. On the positive side, as a result of NCCI advocacy, three Iraqi NGOs now have three seats out of six on the humanitarian country team, and they have served as a link among national, local, and international groups. However, people we spoke with disagreed about the extent to which NCCI represents the diversity of Iraqi organizations. Some argued that because NCCI is “not on the ground and not in every governorate,

it is not near any operations.” Because of a lack of staff, restricted travel budgets, and long distances, many organizations struggle to attend regular NCCI meetings.

What are the main opportunities and barriers to locally led humanitarian action?

The primary barrier for local humanitarian leadership in Iraq and the KRI was an underlying sense of competition between international and Iraqi actors. One aid worker in Erbil noted, “The ugly truth is that the aid sector is a competitive market like a business sector.” People suggested that international organizations perceive strong local organizations as a threat. The INGO operational presence often overshadowed and sometimes eliminated the role and work of local actors, especially during the height of the crisis. In a context of limited funding, local actors see INGOs as taking the funding they need to stay open and operate. Local actors expressed dismay that the requirements and incentives needed to advance localization get neglected in the current funding and partnership process, noting that only 5 out of 100 points on IHF funding applications are allotted for established local partnerships. Several interviewees felt that the UN-led organizational assessment and auditing processes applied different standards for international and local actors, which signaled a double standard. For example, it was suggested that local NGOs face deeper penalties for mistakes in financial reporting.

There were also internal barriers. The slow pace of federal and KRI bureaucracy in registering local organizations and approving their access for work in certain areas continues to be a source of frustration. One person noted, “There are political parties, armed parties, provincial parties, etc. You need to get letters from many authorities, and it takes much more time and hassle.” Some local organizations successfully navigate these complicated government procedures because they have established relationships. Those without political and professional ties are left at a disadvantage. The favoritism extends beyond procedural processes and has been described as a wider issue of politicization of local actors and decision-makers. Although some people noted that local organizations’ independence has increased, overall they described the government as still structured along ethnic and political affiliation

lines. People noted that across Iraq, and in Diyala province specifically, many decision-makers in the humanitarian response are connected to security forces and political figures. However, there is also evidence that the KRI government is trying to help support localization by issuing a directive requiring international actors to demonstrate local partnerships and limiting tenure of international staff. Some recalled that another indication of government support was the increased funding that the KRI government provided directly to local NGOs, approximately USD 13 million in 2013. But this funding was discontinued once the armed conflict with ISIS escalated and the displacement crisis began.

Interestingly, in terms of opportunities for increased humanitarian leadership, the significant international presence in the region has been positive. A predominant thread throughout most interviews was that many local NGOs believe their experience working with INGOs has built their capacity, in terms of not just technical capacity but also deeper exposure to lessons and experience from other complex emergencies and international standards. Some local organizations received targeted support to improve their organizational systems, policies, and procedures, strengthening their overall institutional capacities. Although there were certainly ways in which capacity strengthening could be improved (such as investing in capacity before emergencies and focusing on longer-term accompaniment), there was widespread recognition of the improvements in technical competencies brought about by exposure to international groups. In turn, this technical capacity strengthening has led to an expectation that the increased competence of local actors should contribute to shifting power and resources toward local actors, paired with continued collaboration with international partners. As one local human rights group described: “We believe INGOs shouldn’t stick around forever. Besides, it’s our own responsibility, not that of the INGOs...Crises never finish here. We need to learn how to do this.” A national NGO in Erbil said: “We need a shift in power, but we don’t want it to be messy and unsustainable. We need more capacity building first.”

Several local and national actors also saw opportunities for international actors to support

better local humanitarian leadership by shifting their efforts to governance challenges. There was a recognition that international groups were less subject to pressure from political and security forces and could therefore tackle issues such as political influence over aid, corruption, and weak governance. One local NGO noted: “There is still a huge need for international actors, both for funding and capacity building. And the pressure they bring by shedding light on things has more impact than if locals shed that light. The watchdog role is real. If the internationals pull back, the checks and balances disappear. Local NGOs could feel more pressured because they are more susceptible to pressure from the government.” Another local NGO shared the following call to action: “One day you [INGOs/the UN] will leave; how will you sustain what you’ve built unless you are supporting the capacity of the government, building the internal structures and systems, and reducing political tension?”

Overall, there was a widely shared aspiration to see local actors in the lead and international actors in support roles offering their technical expertise, proposal writing, research, mentoring, and capacity development, such as software, systems, procedures, and anti-corruption. Specifically, the ideal role for the government agencies at both federal and regional levels was described as coordination, supervision, and monitoring of emergency, recovery, and reconstruction aid—although this ideal seemed a long way off for almost all interviewees. This vision came with a caveat—“The government should have a bigger role, but it should be able to fill it”—and a recognition that government staff needs to be better trained and responsible for reining in corruption and favoritism. Some suggested that the government should continue to provide direct funding to local actors in order to support localization and ensure sustained attention to these issues: “Local civil society should get more support in leading local communities to find solutions.” The desire to see the government as the main provider of essential services (e.g., health, education, social guarantees) was coupled with the suggestion that civil society actors can boost government capacities and support its work by conducting assessments, identifying gaps, and advocating on behalf of vulnerable and marginalized populations.

Section V: Synthesis

This section will present our primary findings. It is not an exhaustive analysis of every comparison among the cases but rather a summary of commonalities and divergences across the themes that emerged. The order in which they are presented does not indicate any priority or strength of the finding.

Challenging the definition of “local humanitarian actor”

The case studies demonstrate the issues with the definition and even the use of the term “local humanitarian actor.” Across the three studies, there were significant variations among different types of actors typically categorized as “local.” At the most basic level, there were distinctions among actors based in the affected country and actors with closer social and geographic ties to the affected population, such as the federal government in Iraq as compared to the Kurdish Regional Government. At a deeper level, “local” becomes a relative term as a function not only of geography but also of identity and relationships; for instance, belonging to or being invited as an ally of indigenous or Afro-Colombian groups in Colombia. “Local” describes legitimacy in a community, such as the discussion about whether an INGO with 50 years in Les Cayes could be considered local in Haiti. And the term refers to accountability to a community, as with the debate in Haiti about whether reliance on international funds precludes a group from being local. The term “local” seems in many ways connected to whether one was affected by the crisis or how strongly one is connected to those affected by the crisis.

Interestingly, to differing extents, the cases also challenged the use of the word “humanitarian.” This challenge was most clearly articulated by local actors in Colombia, many of whom rejected the term “humanitarian” to describe their activities. In addition, though they did not explicitly reject the term, many local actors in Haiti and Iraq and

the KRI did not identify as humanitarian, and their normal scope of activities would not be categorized as such. Overall, most local and national actors across all three cases serve populations and carry out activities that only become humanitarian in emergency conditions. Even in the context of chronic or recurring crises, as with Colombia, local groups’ responses to local needs may not always fall into what is typically considered humanitarian activity. Therefore, they may be better categorized as “local/national actors in a humanitarian context” than “local humanitarian actors.” This distinction has implications for how these actors are understood by, and engage with, more traditional humanitarian actors during crises, which we discuss below.

Finally, to a lesser extent, there was some evidence in these studies for putting an emphasis on the word “actor” in the term “local humanitarian actor.” Just having an office in, or even being a part of, a crisis-affected community did not necessarily confer on an individual or group the legitimacy to lead or make decisions about humanitarian response. In Haiti, participants specifically excluded “pocket organizations”—which exist on paper but are not active unless donor money is available—from their definition of a “local humanitarian actor.” In several regions of Colombia, the state was largely not seen as a legitimate actor because of its absence during periods of crises.

Taken as a whole, these cases bolster the argument for more precise terms to describe groups seen as legitimate actors in humanitarian crises. Expanding the definition could make room for actors that are not typically included when discussing LHA, such as informal and nontraditional actors that provide different forms of aid and support in humanitarian crises. In this study, nontraditional actors mentioned in the cases included the media, the private sector, host communities, youth groups, spontaneous volunteer relief groups, universities, religious institutions, networks of mutual aid within a religious sect, women’s rights and indigenous people’s organizations, and traditional leaders.

Key takeaways:

- The word “local” has geographic, social, and relational dimensions, which differ from context to context;
- Not all local actors in a humanitarian crisis will identify themselves, or be identified by others, as “humanitarian”; and
- The term “local humanitarian actor” may need to be adapted or redefined in different contexts to ensure it respects local dynamics and does not exclude nontraditional and informal actors.

Relationships and power dynamics among local actors

Given the diversity of the category, it is not surprising that the three case studies demonstrated the complexity of relationships among “local humanitarian actors.” In Colombia and Iraq and the KRI, there were references to a sense of competition for funding among local and national NGOs. In Haiti and Colombia, there were tensions between more traditional power structures and local humanitarian response efforts; and in Haiti and Iraq and the KRI, there was some resentment between more informal, community-based actors and more formal NGOs. Different groups had varying levels of awareness of, access to, and interest in coordination mechanisms and other decision-making and resource-distributing humanitarian structures. This complexity reinforces the importance of not homogenizing the category of local actors and instead recognizing the power dynamics and assumptions that run beneath conventional discussions of localization and LHA.

By contrast, in all three contexts, there was evidence of the rich and constructive relationships within ecosystems of local actors. The localization debate tends to focus on the flow of funds and capacity from larger, international groups to smaller, local ones, like the branching out of roots. However, there was also evidence of local actors passing resources, connections, information, and capacity from one to another, which was not necessarily predicated on any international involvement. Continuing the metaphor, this would be the complex web

of connections and communication among tree roots below ground. Actors in the three countries emphasized the importance of building networks and coordination bodies among local actors that could diminish the sense of internal competition and allow them to stay focused on their common goals.

Key takeaways:

- Local humanitarian actors are not a homogenous group;
- Power dynamics among local humanitarian actors can contribute to competition, resentment, and conflict, and are important to understand; and
- Networks of partnership, cooperation, and capacity building among local actors, which do not depend on international resources, are real and important components of humanitarian action.

The role of the state in LHA

In general, the state was the elephant in the room during most of our discussions about LHA in all three cases. In theory, the state is responsible for and should lead humanitarian responses. The reality is that these three cases, at least, show the situation is more complicated. The state is not a homogenous entity, and participants across all three cases brought up gradations and tensions between local, regional, and national levels; political appointees and civil servants; technical bureaus and elected offices, etc. How legitimate each state actor perceived the others to be varied significantly within a response.

For these reasons, discussions about the role of the state in LHA were complex and at times contradictory. In all three cases, there was more or less an acknowledgement that the state should be leading the humanitarian response and should be creating an enabling environment for local humanitarian responders. However, there were equally significant critiques about the way in which the state was seen to be carrying out this charge. These were strongest in Haiti, where the quality of the response was largely seen as a failure of

governance. The critiques in Iraq and the KRI focused primarily on unhelpful bureaucracy, gaps in state capacity, and favoritism, but were more moderated. In Colombia, the state was simply less present in the areas where the local and national actors we spoke to were working; in general, in the areas where it was present, the state was seen as ineffective at best and a hindrance at worst. Actors in all three cases had specific reforms they wanted to see from their governments: in Haiti, it was a more professionalized and decentralized disaster management approach; in Iraq and the KRI, it was less bureaucracy and a return to government funding; and in Colombia, it was better presence in remote regions and anti-corruption reforms.

It is fair to say that across all three cases, the state is not seen as a universally legitimate or competent local actor in humanitarian crises, but it is not seen as completely illegitimate or useless. Therefore, the success of locally led humanitarian action in the long run in contexts such as these depends somewhat on reforms to and strengthening of humanitarian governance. However, it is worth noting that the three cases we selected, though differing in many ways, all had relatively high levels of distrust of national governments; other cases might have produced different findings about the state.

Key takeaways:

- Depending on the country, the state may be a significant barrier to principled and effective local humanitarian action, as much as or even more so than international humanitarian systems;
- However, many local actors do not think these frustrations should be used to bypass the state in humanitarian action; and
- The state is itself not a homogenous entity: different levels and branches may be perceived differently by affected communities and play a different role in the implementation of a localization/LHA agenda.

The role of international actors in LHA

As with all other broad categories of actors in humanitarian crises, international actors are themselves not homogenous and have differing roles, resources, and relationships. All three cases presented both positive and negative examples of the work done and support provided by international actors. There were respectful international partners and exploitative international partners; internationals that coordinated and internationals that did not; and internationals with decades of experience in an area and those that arrived in the middle of an emergency. Although local and national actors in all three cases had critiques of structures that favored international actors and agendas, there was much more nuance in how they spoke about individual relationships with and behaviors of international groups. In some instances, in Haiti and Colombia, local and national actors saw their states as more problematic than international responders during humanitarian crises. In Iraq and the KRI, many local and national actors found concrete benefits to working alongside international groups. These findings reinforce the idea that just as one cannot generalize about local actors, one cannot generalize about international ones. Instead, it is more constructive to speak about systems that favor international actors and the outcomes of those systems.

To a significant extent across all three cases, a broad array of local and national actors wanted international actors to break out of the traditional bounds of what is considered “humanitarian.” In both Iraq and the KRI and Colombia, there were explicit calls for international actors to take on advocacy and governance issues, since they were less vulnerable to pressure from political and security forces. Most explicitly in Colombia, there were calls for international actors to move beyond the humanitarian programming paradigm to engage in human rights and development work. Across all three cases, there were calls for international actors to extend their work beyond the typical humanitarian time frame: primarily by investing in partnerships and vulnerable communities *before* emergencies, as

well as transitions of resources and power *after*, or in many cases, *between*, emergencies.

Key takeaways:

- Like local actors, international actors are not homogenous; and
- Many local actors want international actors to engage before (or between) crises on issues that would not typically be considered humanitarian, such as governance or resilience.

Defining whether a response is locally led

When asked whether they thought a response was locally led, local actors had no simple answers, because there is no single humanitarian response to any given crisis. In all cases, there was no shortage of examples of local actors leading important and life-saving humanitarian work on the ground, particularly in contexts where external actors were not present; for instance, in the immediate aftermath of the hurricane in Haiti, along the Venezuelan border in Colombia, and particularly in conservative and volatile areas in Iraq and the KRI. There were also examples of local actors leading and/or participating in the leadership of more formal humanitarian response systems, such as the state-led child protection cluster in Haiti. However, because local and national actors controlled such a small percentage of the resources coming into the crisis area, when they were asked whether the response as a whole was locally led, the answer tended to be “no” in Haiti and Iraq and the KRI. The exception was Colombia, where some of the responses in question were happening in remote areas without any major international presence and therefore, by default, were seen as “locally led.”

Key takeaways:

- When the majority of resources are not controlled or coordinated by local actors, many such actors do not, in general, consider a response to be locally led; and
- However, because there is no one single response to a crisis, there is always significant

local leadership happening across, and often at the front lines of, the humanitarian crisis.

“More than the money:” barriers to LHA

Findings from this study echoed the title of a recent Trocaire report on the localization agenda: “More Than the Money” (De Geoffroy, Grünwald, and Ní Chéilleachair 2017). Indeed, in all three cases, the funding of local actors was brought up far less than the research team initially anticipated. It was discussed mostly in Iraq and the KRI, where the actors seemed to have much stronger knowledge of and interactions with international humanitarian funding mechanisms, as well as knowledge of the commitments that have been made regarding certain funding benchmarks. A more universal and pressing concern was a lack of dignity, equity, and space to make their voices heard in their engagements with international humanitarian actors in their countries—including partnerships, coordination, and agenda setting. Most local and national actors wanted more transparent, consistent, and equitable ways of accessing the places and processes where decisions about aid are being made. There was a high value placed on having a stronger say in decisions about how aid was organized, targeted, and delivered. There was also a widespread call for better recognition of the contributions and capacities of local and national actors, both by international actors and by more central national ones. The primary takeaway is that the concerns of local and national actors in humanitarian contexts are limited not to how funding flows through humanitarian systems but to how power is organized within them.

Key takeaways:

- Access to adequate and appropriate funding is a concern for many local humanitarian actors and is considered essential to their playing a full role in humanitarian action in their countries; and
- Yet, in this research, local actors placed more emphasis on greater access to and respect within spaces where decisions about humanitarian aid are made.

Section VI: Conclusions and Recommendations

As we have noted repeatedly, by its very nature, the debate about localization, local humanitarian leadership, and local humanitarian action defies generalization. If anything, this study should help to illustrate the idiosyncratic nature and nuance of examining how local humanitarian action is organized and how it relates to other actors in different contexts. In this sense, the main conclusion of this study is that all discussions about local humanitarian action and leadership, and discussions about related agendas, at the country and global level, need to involve a broad range of local actors. Even in a study focused on listening to diverse local voices like this one, there is inevitable interpretation and synthesis that may obscure important nuances. There must always be space for local actors to speak for themselves, since humanitarian contexts are unique and ever-evolving. However, for the sake of presenting the knowledge shared with us over the course of this research, there were several consistent themes that came up in the literature and among the three cases that we outline here as conclusions and recommendations. These recommendations will not apply everywhere, but they are important principles and considerations that inform potential points of action to facilitate more equitable and effective local humanitarian action. As it is beyond the scope of this paper, and given the unique nature of each context, the recommendations are not formulated as specific policy or implementation proposals; the recommendations present more of the *what* than the *how*. We hope that subsequent discussions can help to translate these findings into context-specific actions.

Discourse

Language, meaning, and terminology matter and can limit or include the diverse actors that are considered “local” during the humanitarian response.

Commitment to localization is accompanied by terms, concepts, and boundaries that shape decisions and actions aimed at supporting locally led humanitarian action. Humanitarian organizations should strive to understand contextual and cultural notions of “local” before shaping partnership and assistance strategies.

The nuances of the term “local” are why it is challenging to talk in broad terms about localization, LHL, or LHA on a global level, because terms such as “local” lose their meaning on a global scale. “Local” should be understood as a relative term of proximity to a crisis-affected population, with that proximity being either geographic or social. The dichotomy of “local” versus “international” essentially implies that any actor not from another country is local to the affected community. Labeling all people from an affected country as “local” erases important regional and intersectional identities, power dynamics, definitions of elites, and histories. In a sense, the proper dichotomy may be “local” versus “external,” or “insider” and “outsider,” Roepstorff (2019) suggests, though always defining what qualifies an actor as local or an insider. Or, focusing on the proximity to the impacts of the crisis, it may be more helpful to categorize groups as “affected,” as in, the group itself and/or the population it serves was directly affected by the crisis; “connected,” as in there are some ties to the affected population, such as clan or nationality; and “external,” when there was no meaningful engagement with the affected population before the crisis. It is also important to ask people in the affected community what language and distinctions are most meaningful to them.

Inevitably in broader policy discussions, “local” and “international” may be shorthand for much more complicated sets of identities. Even this paper uses these terms to make general statements, particularly when engaging with the current discourse as it stands. However, when we consider a specific crisis

or context, it is imperative for researchers, policy-makers, donors, and practitioners to be specific about how terms are defined and to be aware of how defining of those terms may include and exclude, or favor and disfavor, specific groups. These terms, and the power dynamics underlying them, are not static and so must continuously be reexamined and evolve. Similarly, it is important to better understand the gendered and intersectional issues as they relate to localization.

In addition, it is important to recognize the limits of terms such as “local humanitarian actor.” Not all local actors that play, or have the potential to play, an important role in emergencies identify as humanitarian. This characterization may be true of a range of formal and informal local actors that primarily identify themselves by their non-emergency functions. It is particularly true for religious institutions, the health sector, and private sector actors, as well as social and economic development-focused organizations that mobilize resources during a humanitarian crisis but do not change their overall mission, principles, or long-term objectives. It may also be true of state actors and the public sector that, though they are central to almost all humanitarian responses, they have primarily non-emergency mandates and responsibilities. Alternative descriptions could be: “local actor in a humanitarian response,” “local actor in an emergency context,” or, taking into account some of the critiques of the word “local,” “actors from a crisis-affected community,” and “actors from a crisis-affected state.” These phrases are longer and more awkward, and so may never realistically replace “local humanitarian actor” in the discourse. Again, in each crisis, terms and definitions should be adapted for the local context, and they should be inclusive.

Key takeaways:

- The current use of the term “local humanitarian actor” often homogenizes actors in a crisis-affected area; and
- It is important to be aware of how this term is defined and used in different contexts in order to be inclusive and mindful of local dynamics.

Policy

As the literature often suggests, this research reaffirms the idea that the current structure of and policies concerning international humanitarian funding and coordination systems are not conducive to local humanitarian leadership and action. There must be more opportunities for multi-year funding and funding for core costs, overheads, and organizational development and institutional strengthening, which may include financial management, monitoring and evaluation, fundraising skills, and other internal systems support that helps make local organizations more competitive and viable. Funding, auditing, and reporting policies need to be transparent, consistent, and free of the double standards that some participants in this study described. Coordination mechanisms need to be more inclusive, open, transparent, and accessible—in terms of time, physical access, and human resources—to local actors, particularly informal, nontraditional, and community-based actors. We have seen examples where the humanitarian country team and other decision-making bodies have reserved seats for local actors that are expected to represent their peers in these fora. Again, a context analysis with sensitivity to local power dynamics is critical to understanding how certain local actors are perceived and how they wield their influence, and to find ways of approaching coordination that are more accessible, equitable, and inclusive.

Although continued research, evaluation, and policy involving international humanitarian systems are essential for reforms that favor strong local humanitarian action, there should be a recognition that not all reforms will, or should, center on international actors. In many cases, the greatest barrier to effective local humanitarian action is internal to the affected country, particularly state structures. Analysis of, and technical support and advocacy to overcome the challenges of, state crisis management systems deserves more attention by policy-makers. Such focus may mean directing more funding and resources to strengthening the institutional systems and technical capacities of national disaster management authorities and providing on-demand seasoned experts to be seconded in these structures during emergency

responses. There is an existing body of work and guidance on supporting national disaster management agencies, including several resources from ALNAP, the global network focused on learning and improving humanitarian response.

On a related note, one challenging and potentially controversial recommendation concerns affected government policies regulating humanitarian action. Although there were some calls for states to take a more active role in regulating international actors and protecting local ones, as well as providing more funding to local actors, there is the potential for this more active government role to compromise humanitarian principles of independence, neutrality, and impartiality. The risk of compromising the humanitarian principles is particularly true in contexts where the state is party to an armed conflict and/or is seen as illegitimate by the affected population. It is also true in contexts where civil society space is shrinking and NGOs advocating for rights of minorities and marginalized and vulnerable populations are seen as a threat to the status quo or state legitimacy. Regardless, whether and how affected states enforce policies and regulations regarding the actions of international actors should be considered an important policy area.

It is important for international and external actors to develop policies that allow them to adapt their role to specific contexts and to do so with input from a diverse group of local actors. It may be surge support, quality assurance, or even advocacy. There is an issue of comparative advantages in established skill sets, but that should be balanced with the actual assessments of what is the most appropriate role for an external actor on the ground.

International organizations need to address the issue of outsized and prolonged missions where external actors that arrive during an emergency period find themselves staying past their initially set time frames because funding is still available, thus providing an incentive to stay and keep designing new programs. If donors and international actors are truly committed to local humanitarian leadership in crises and to supporting local capacity, they need to reassess and revise how their policies either facilitate or hamper this level of adaptability to local contexts and priorities.

Although the literature review refers to the ongoing debate about this topic, this research clearly points to the importance of going beyond the typical humanitarian/development divide applied to local actors. In fact, engaging with issues not typically seen as humanitarian, such as human rights, livelihoods resilience, governance, gender equality, and children's rights, among others, was perhaps the most consistent finding across all three contexts and all actor types. It is noteworthy even if it cannot be generalized beyond the cases in the study. If one looks at the localization agenda from a transformative lens, it overlaps significantly with what is often referred to as the "triple nexus" agenda, which looks at the intersection of development, humanitarian response, and peacebuilding.

Key takeaways:

- Reform is still needed to make international funding, coordination, and partnership structures more transparent, consistent, and accessible to diverse local actors;
- Greater focus on reforms within affected governments is needed to enable more effective local humanitarian leadership and action; and
- International actors may need to be more adaptable and willing to play nontraditional roles if they are to support local humanitarian action.

Practice

In a humanitarian emergency, relationships among all actors—not just between international and local/national actors—should be informed by the principles of inclusion, transparency, and mutual accountability. Transactional relationships and partnerships in which either actor feels used for instrumental purposes and not fully respected are harmful to all involved, including the affected populations the partners aim to serve. Equity should be built into partnerships. This equity includes provisions for mutual capacity building, fair sharing of resources, more transparent and equitable decision-making processes, and internal feedback mechanisms. Evidence from elsewhere in the literature suggests that to assess the health

of relationships and partnerships, organizations can conduct an anonymous relationship audit or a climate survey within a network or consortia; convene an open feedback session with partners; arrange for independent partnership surveys; and conduct exit interviews.

As we have suggested in various places in the literature and in this report, we must reconsider the concept of capacity strengthening. This research reinforces the idea that capacity strengthening is most effective when it goes beyond a single training, for instance, and becomes something more like side-by-side learning and longer-term accompaniment and mentorship. The research also underscores that capacity building should not be assumed to be “internationals strengthening the capacity of locals.” Local actors build the capacity of international counterparts, a contribution that often goes unrecognized and uncompensated. They also build each other’s capacity, peer learning that needs to be better supported. Stronger capacity strengthening includes nuanced knowledge of local contexts and dynamics, expertise on locally tailored models and solutions, and the intellectual property and knowledge that is generated and shared during partnerships.

One of the clearest findings from this research is the importance of investing in local humanitarian action during the times before, or often between, crises. This investment is important across all actor groups. Local actors can invest in themselves by forming or strengthening networks and coalitions, engaging in peer learning and capacity strengthening, and advocating, when possible, for more effective and equitable national, regional, and local humanitarian policies. International actors can identify potential partners before active responses and invest in building trust, shared values and systems, and complementary skill building. In some contexts, such collaboration may take the form of a federation. Partnership focal points may be effective ways of building and maintaining relationships between partners between and during crises.

It should be noted in this section that these recommendations echo existing ones; this research does not suggest a meaningful shift in power from international to local actors has occurred since the World Humanitarian Summit and the Charter for

Change. Although changing a complex ecosystem of international humanitarian response mechanisms will take longer than three to five years, it is important to keep revisiting these recommendations to avoid losing focus.

Key takeaways:

- All types of humanitarian actors must move away from transactional relationships and toward more equitable partnerships;
- Capacity building needs to be reconceived as a longer-term, demand-driven, and mutually reinforcing endeavor between partners; and
- It is important to invest in partnerships, networks, and coordination mechanisms before and between crises, among and between all types of humanitarian actors.

Research

It is worth noting that we had originally hoped to hear from local actors about what they perceived as the research gaps and priorities as they relate to LHL, LHA, and the broader localization discourse. However, this topic did not generate interest or engagement. It is likely that many of the local actors do not have access to, or a particular interest in, the debates happening primarily in English-language PDF files that are heavy or expensive, when behind a paywall, to download, and difficult to comprehend. The local actors were much more focused on questions related to the practical issues raised in this research. In the absence of clearly articulated research gaps identified by local actors, the study team is offering its own thoughts based on the field research and literature review.

The role of informal and nontraditional actors, and how they can be effectively engaged by an increasingly professionalized and standardized humanitarian response system, merits more research. Even though this topic interested the research team, it was not discussed as much by participants. Even among local actors, there is often a bias toward actors that are formal, official, and/or traditionally associated with humanitarian systems. This bias may be due to the types of stakeholders that this study engaged, as well as

the research team's institutional identities. Future research to identify and better understand informal and nontraditional actors may need to focus more on consulting affected populations about who responded to the crisis.

More research also needs to be done on how different interpretations of and reforms in favor of local humanitarian leadership and action affect various marginalized groups. There is beginning to be more research on how the localization discourse and accompanying reforms affect women and feminist humanitarian goals; however, there is virtually nothing on how these policies and practices may affect other marginalized groups, such as sexual and gender minorities, people with disabilities, and ethnic and religious minorities, among others. Many research participants discussed these dynamics, but they are so specific to each context and actor that they defy any general conclusions. In addition, though each case study engaged with a set of groups that would be considered marginalized in that context—women's and LGBTQIA+ groups in Iraq, women's and indigenous groups in Colombia, and rural and vodou groups in Haiti—we did not speak to a comprehensive and diverse set of people from all relevant marginalized groups in these spaces. More research needs to be done in specific contexts, centering on the experiences of these groups, to provide guidance to ensure that current reforms do not reinforce problematic local power dynamics.

Additional inquiry is needed into how humanitarian principles are understood and applied in the context of reforms favoring local humanitarian leadership and action. Some of the most fascinating conversations in this study were those that challenge the common conceptions about local actors and humanitarian principles, and this area is one where there has been little in-depth exploration. It is worth investigating whether and how humanitarian principles apply to groups that represent and serve a distinct population (for instance, a shelter for battered women, a farmers' cooperative, or a traditional or customary leader). There is room to explore how different cultural principles either reinforce or contradict the conventional understanding of humanitarian principles (e.g., "equal distribution of aid" and "impartial distribution of aid"). It is also important to understand how the perception of international actors' application of

humanitarian principles, or perceived failure to do so, influences how different kinds of local and national actors see and apply those principles.

We need to see more research on how effective local-international, or local-external, partnerships function over longer periods of time. It is important to develop a better understanding of how various partnerships evolve between crises, during surges and prolonged responses, and long after the acute crisis phase has ended. It is especially important to understand how local actors evolve and sustain themselves during the boom and bust phases of humanitarian funding.

It is essential to conduct more research that centers on relationships among local actors, including questions relating to whether and how local actors work together during crises, effective local coordination mechanisms, and local capacity-building approaches. Understanding the underlying power dynamics is a critical piece of this analysis, particularly the interface between more formal and informal actors, between state and non-state actors, and even between various branches and levels of state actors. There is some emerging work in the literature about the importance of networks, both social and organizational ones, that merits further inquiry so we can understand how these can be leveraged for effective local response and/or how these may also be inequitable or exclusive. A related area of inquiry could be how both social and organizational networks affect who receives what kinds of assistance during and after emergencies.

Key takeaways:

- More research is needed on humanitarian principles in the context of the discourse on LHA;
- More research is needed on the role and experiences of marginalized groups, including women, sexual and gender minorities, ethnic and religious minorities, and persons with disabilities and syndromes, in the discourse on LHA; and
- More research is needed on the roles of nontraditional and informal actors, such as grassroots organizations and social networks, in the discourse on LHA.

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Annex 1: Interview and focus group guides

Research group 1: Government and formalized organizations that self-identify as humanitarian

1. Describe your experience in/responding to [specify crisis].
 - a. What role do you think you played in the response?
 - i. Probe about what they feel their accomplishments were.
 - ii. Probe about what they feel their challenges and shortcomings were.
 - iii. Probe about any experience they had of being affected by the crisis (personally, family, etc.).
 - b. Do you think the response to the crisis was/is successful?
 - i. Probe about the factors that enabled the response to be successful.
 - ii. Probe about the factors that presented major challenges.
 - c. Would you consider the crisis response to be “locally led”? Why or why not?
2. What, if any, other local actors did you interact with?
 - a. How would you define “local” in the context of this humanitarian response?
 - i. Probe to get a sense of who they consider (legitimate) local humanitarian actors and their strengths/weaknesses.
 - ii. Probe about non-traditional actors if they don’t bring them up.
 - iii. Probe about how different marginalized groups might be served differently by different actors.
 - iv. Probe specifically to get a sense of whether and how they interacted with community-based response/self-protection efforts.
3. Did you interact with the international humanitarian system?
 - a. If so, what was that experience like?
 - i. If direct partners: probe to get a sense of the funding model, the partnership model, the challenges and successes they experienced.
 - ii. If not direct partners: probe to get a sense of how much interaction and what type there was (collaboration, coordination, nothing) and the challenges and successes they experienced.
 - iii. What were the specific challenges, and how did you overcome them?
 - b. What are the relative strengths and weaknesses of different local actors compared to international counterparts?
4. What would a successful humanitarian response look like?
 - a. Is there anything different about what successful locally led humanitarian response should look like?
 - i. Probe to see what they think the roles of the state and civil society should look like.
 - ii. Probe to get a sense of how they see community self-protection/response.
 - iii. Do not probe for the role of international funding or coordination systems—let participants bring that up on their own.
5. What would have to change in order to achieve the successful local humanitarian response you just described?
 - a. Let the participants direct the discussion towards international, national, and/or local factors. Do not probe in any one direction.
 - b. Probe for specific and/or actionable changes. Not just “they need to make it easier,” but who needs to do what to make what easier?
 - c. How would you prioritize those changes? Have the participant rank them if possible.
6. What questions haven’t we asked you that we *should* be asking?

Research group 2: Formal organizations who may not identify as humanitarian, informal organizations, private sector

1. Describe your experience in/responding to the crisis.
 - a. What role do you think you played in the response?
 - i. Probe about what they feel their accomplishments were.
 - ii. Probe about what they feel their challenges and shortcomings were.
 - iii. Probe about any experience they had of being affected by the crisis (personally, family, etc.).
 - b. Do you think the response to the crisis was/is successful?
 - i. Probe about the factors that enabled the response to be successful.
 - ii. Probe about the factors that presented major challenges.
 - c. Would you consider the crisis response to be “locally led”? Why or why not?
2. What, if any, other local actors did you interact with?
 - a. How would you define “local” in the context of a humanitarian response?
 - i. Probe to see how they were treated by more traditional local actors (i.e., local government, NGOs).
 - ii. Probe specifically to get a sense of whether and how they interacted with community-based initiatives.
3. Did you interact with the international humanitarian system?
 - a. If so, what was that experience like?
 - i. Probe to get a sense of how much interaction and what type there was (collaboration, coordination, nothing) and the challenges and successes they experienced.
 - ii. Probe to get a sense of how they think they were perceived by international actors.
 - b. What were the specific challenges, and how did you overcome them?
 - c. What are the relative strengths and weaknesses of different local actors compared to international counterparts?
4. What would a successful, locally led humanitarian response look like?
 - a. Probe to see what they think the roles of the state and civil society should look like.
 - b. Probe to get a sense of how they see community self-protection/response.
 - c. Do not probe for the role of international funding or coordination systems—let participants bring that up on their own.
5. What would have to change in order to achieve the successful humanitarian response you just described?
 - a. Let the participants direct the discussion towards international, national, and/or local factors. Do not probe in any one direction.
 - b. Probe for specific and/or actionable changes. Not just “they need to make it easier,” but who needs to do what to make what easier?
 - c. How would you prioritize those changes?
 - i. Have the participant rank them if possible.
6. What questions haven’t we asked you that we *should* be asking?

Research group 3: Members of the crisis-affected community

1. Describe your experience in the crisis. What did you and your family do to survive and rebuild/recover what you could?
2. Who helped you during the crisis?
 - a. Probe for more traditional actors (INGOs, governments, etc.) and less traditional actors (especially role of social networks).
 - b. Probe to get specifics of who did what (based on their experience and perception) and their sense of the effectiveness of those actions.
3. Whom do you trust most to respond to future crises? Why?
 - a. Probe to get a sense of the relative strengths and weaknesses of international versus local, traditional

- (i.e., government, NGO) versus nontraditional (i.e., religious communities, diaspora and social network groups, informal and traditional associations, private sector, affected community) actors.
- b. Probe to get a sense of what they think the roles and responsibilities of various actors are.
 - c. Probe to get a sense of how different actors might treat marginalized community members.
4. How would you define a “local humanitarian actor”?
 - a. Probe about how the concept translates to local context and language, and the nuances of who might be more “local” than others.
 5. How would you describe a successful humanitarian response?
 - a. Probe to see what they think the roles of the state and civil society should look like.
 - b. Probe to get a sense of how they see their role (meaning what they would like to be responsible for in a response, not what they are forced to do because no one else is).
 - c. Do not probe for the role of international funding or coordination systems—let participants bring that up on their own.
 6. What do you think are the current barriers to achieving what you described to us as a successful humanitarian response? What would need to change to achieve what you described in the previous question?
 - a. Probe for both idiosyncratic (e.g., “our current mayor is a political enemy of the person who controls the government’s aid money”) and systemic issues (e.g., “people need to stop giving out tarps after hurricanes and give us money to rebuild our homes”).
 - b. Let the participants direct the discussion towards international, national, and/or local factors. Do not probe in any one direction.
 - c. Probe for specific and/or actionable changes. Not just “they need to make it easier,” but who needs to do what to make what easier?
 - d. How would you prioritize those changes? Have the participant rank them if possible.

Annex 2: Stakeholder Selection

1. Government actors
 - a. National, regional, and local government agencies with responsibilities explicitly related to humanitarian response and disaster management
 - b. National ministry of women or a branch of the national civil protection agency focused on women
 - c. Local authorities who have mandates over humanitarian response in their jurisdictions
2. Formalized organizations who self-identify as humanitarian
 - a. NGOs that are implementing partners of INGOs
 - b. NGOs that are not implementing partners of INGOs but explicitly have humanitarian response in their mandates/missions
 - c. Other NGOs that have significant experience in responding to humanitarian crises
3. Formal organizations who may not self-identify as humanitarian
 - a. NGOs focused on development or human rights
 - b. Women's organizations and organizations working with LGBTQIA+ populations
 - c. Social service institutions (hospitals, schools, etc.)
 - d. Religious institutions and faith-based NGOs
 - e. Private foundations
 - f. Universities and research institutions
 - g. Non-state armed actors (if possible)
4. Informal organizations and associations
 - a. Traditional or customary leadership forums and persons
 - b. Informal religious and cultural institutions
 - c. Identity-based groups (youth groups, women's groups, etc.)
 - d. Humanitarian-focused community-based organizations (e.g., community DRR and preparedness committees, WASH groups)
 - e. Livelihoods-based groups (farmer's cooperatives, fishermen's collectives, market savings groups, etc.)
 - f. Diaspora groups
 - g. Social networks and kinship-based groups
5. Private sector:
 - a. Businesses who have formalized or informal charitable programs
 - b. Businesses who have in the past responded to humanitarian crises
6. Members of crisis-affected communities, particularly:
 - a. Women
 - b. The elderly
 - c. Those living with disabilities (e.g., physically handicapped, blind) or chronic illness (e.g., HIV/AIDS)
 - d. Other marginalized sub-sectors of society (e.g., low-caste individuals, people who identify as LGBTQIA+)

Annex 3: Interview lists

Haiti—interviews and focus groups

Actor	Based in	Gender of interviewee(s)	Total per category
Community and local authority	Tolière (accessible rural area)	Women and men	2
Peasant cooperative	Poste Droit (relatively inaccessible rural area)	Women and men	
National NGO with development focus	Camp Perrin (accessible rural area)	Man	1
Haitian Red Cross	City of Les Cayes	Woman	2
Civic group (local chapter of national organization)	City of Les Cayes	Man	
Local NGO (child protection focus)	City of Les Cayes	Woman	3
Local NGO (family welfare focus)	City of Les Cayes	Woman	
Local NGO (humanitarian focus)	City of Les Cayes	Man	
Spontaneous volunteer group	City of Les Cayes	Man	2
Community-based organization	Laurent (somewhat remote but accessible rural area)	Man	
Vodou priest	City of Les Cayes	Man	2
Archbishop's office	City of Les Cayes	Man	
Chamber of Commerce	City of Les Cayes	Man	2
Local radio station	City of Les Cayes	Man	
Mayor's office	City of Les Cayes	Man	3
Mayor's office	Arniquet (conditionally accessible rural area)	Man	
Department of Civil Protection	City of Les Cayes	Man	1
Catholic Relief Services	City of Les Cayes	Man	
Total			18

Haiti—validation/listening workshop

Actor	Based in	Gender of participant(s)	Number of participants
Vodou priest and colleague	City of Les Cayes	Men	2
Community-based organization	Laurent (somewhat remote but accessible rural area)	Men	2
Haitian Red Cross	City of Les Cayes	Woman	1
Local NGO (family welfare focus)	City of Les Cayes	Woman	1
Local NGO (child protection focus)	City of Les Cayes	Man	1
Civic group (local chapter of national organization)	City of Les Cayes	Man	1
Total			8

Colombia—interviews and focus groups

Actor	Based in	Gender of interviewee(s)	Total
National NGO (focus on human rights and peacebuilding)	Bogotá	Man	2
National NGO (focus on child protection and family welfare)	Bogotá	Man	
Local NGO (focus on women's empowerment and human rights)	Santander	Woman	5
Local NGO (focus on peace-building and poverty alleviation)	Magdalena Medio	Man	
Local NGO (focus on women's empowerment and social justice)	Putumayo	Woman	
Local NGO (focus on women's empowerment and sustainable development)	Chocó	Woman	
Local NGO (focus on indigenous women's empowerment and human rights)	La Guajira	Woman	
United Nations agency (focus on women)	Bogotá	Woman	5
United Nations agency (focus on refugees)	Bogotá	Woman	
International NGO (focus on refugees)	Bogotá	Man	
International NGO	Bogotá	Woman	
Foreign government aid agency	Bogotá	Man	
Total			12

Colombia—validation/listening workshop

Actor	Based in	Gender of participant(s)	Number of participants
Local NGO (focus on women’s empowerment and human rights)	Santander	Woman	1
Local NGO (focus on peacebuilding and poverty alleviation)	Magdalena Medio	Woman	1
Local NGO (focus on women’s empowerment and social justice)	Putumayo	Woman	1
Local NGO (focus on women’s empowerment and sustainable development)	Chocó	Woman	1
Local NGO (focus on indigenous women’s empowerment and human rights)	La Guajira	Woman	1
Local NGO (focus on women’s empowerment and human rights)	Santander	Woman	1
Total			6

Iraq and the KRI—interviews and focus groups

Actor type	Actor	Based in/ Headquarters	Gender of participant(s)	Total
Regional (KRI)/ National NGO	National NGO (focus on human rights and peacebuilding)	Erbil	Man	14
	National NGO (humanitarian and development focus)	Erbil	Man	
	National NGO (with development and humanitarian focus)	Suleymania	Woman	
	National NGO (humanitarian focus)	Erbil	3 men	
	National NGO (focus on development)	Erbil	Man	
	National faith-based NGO	Erbil	Man	
	National faith-based NGO	Baghdad, Erbil	2 men	
	National NGO with international projects (humanitarian focus)	Erbil	Woman	
	National women's NGO	Erbil	Woman	
	National NGO (focus on legal assistance)	Salahaddin	Man	
	National NGO (humanitarian and human rights focus)	Erbil, Baghdad	Man	
Other regional/ national actor	National organization (humanitarian and development focus)	Erbil	Man	5
	National organization (humanitarian coordination focus)	Baghdad, Erbil	2 men	
	National organization, part of international federation	Baghdad, Erbil	Man	
	Private sector organization, branch of national organization	Erbil	Man	
Local NGO	Local NGO	Diyala	1 man, 1 woman	5
	Local NGO	Anbar	Man	
	Local NGO (humanitarian and development focus)	Erbil, Mosul	Man	
	Local NGO (focus on women and LGBTQIA+)	Suleymania	Man	
Government	Regional government agency (manages NGO registration)	Erbil	2 men	5
	Regional government agency (humanitarian coordination role)	Erbil	2 men	
	Regional government agency (disaster management role)	Erbil	Woman	
Total				29

Iraq and the KRI—validation/listening workshop

Actor	Based in	Gender of participant(s)	Number of participants
National women's organization	Erbil	2 women	2
National NGO (humanitarian focus)	Erbil	Man	1
National organization, part of international federation	Baghdad, Erbil	Man	1
National NGO (with development and humanitarian focus)	Suleymania	Woman	1
National NGO (with development and humanitarian focus)	Salahaddin	2 men	2
Oxfam	Erbil	3 men, 2 women	5
Total			12

Oxfam is an international confederation of 20 organizations networked together in more than 90 countries, as part of a global movement for change, to build a future free from the injustice of poverty. For further information, visit www.oxfam.org.

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