
KENYA CASE STUDY

Centering Women's Rights Organizations: Evaluative Research on Oxfam's COVID-19 Response in Kenya

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Oxfam has been calling for the transformation of the humanitarian system to shift power to local/national actors. Concurrent with Oxfam's dedication to local humanitarian leadership (LHL) has been a commitment to women's rights organizations (WROs). This Kenya case study examines how well Oxfam has upheld its commitments to LHL in its COVID-19 response via its WRO partnerships. The study describes the challenges WROs are facing, the ways Oxfam supports them, and the areas where Oxfam can improve. This case study is part of a larger evaluative research project that includes a synthesis report and case studies from Colombia and Iraq.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Note: This case study is part of a larger research report, which includes a synthesis report and case studies from Colombia and Iraq.

This evaluative study provides an understanding of how well Oxfam in Kenya and other INGOs upheld LHL commitments in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic response in partnership with WROs in urban areas in Kenya. It highlights the experiences of WROs in response to the pandemic, the power dynamics between WROs and international humanitarian actors, and the quality and quantity of support provided to WROs by their international partners during the pandemic response.

WROs were active in the response to COVID-19 in Kenya: they delivered aid directly, supported coordination, and advocated for an inclusive response. At the same time, Kenyan WROs faced several challenges, including funding cuts, higher operating costs, movement restrictions, and mental health challenges among staff. The shift to virtual meetings enhanced the participation of WROs in coordination and advocacy forums. Importantly, WROs adopted innovative response strategies to overcome operational challenges and enhance their efforts to promote community resilience.

RESEARCH SCOPE

The study focused primarily on WROs that partnered with Oxfam in Kenya and other INGOs to respond to the COVID-19 pandemic. In this study, WROs are defined as “crucial actors supporting, building and contributing to feminist movements, an organized set of constituents pursuing a core political agenda of protection, promotion and fulfilment of women’s human rights through collective action” (Miller and Jones 2019).

The study was conducted in two urban settings, Nairobi and Mombasa, although the activities of these WROs are not limited to these two counties. Nairobi and Mombasa were selected because these were the locations where Oxfam’s local WRO partners were responding to the COVID-19 pandemic. Nairobi and Mombasa also have the largest urban populations, which enabled the research team to explore the diverse experiences of WROs in delivering aid in urban informal settlements.

The study had three focus sectors closely linked to the pandemic: sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV); water, sanitation, and hygiene (WASH); and social protection. The study considered response activities between March 2020 and December 2021. This study is part of a larger evaluative research project on local humanitarian leadership commitments and the COVID-19 pandemic, conducted in Colombia, Kenya, and Iraq.

RESEARCH METHODS

This evaluative study is based on a country-led, feminist, and participatory approach. It adopted a mixed research method for data collection and analysis, broken into five activities: co-creation, literature review, data collection, data analysis, and validation of the findings.

First, a project inception/co-creation workshop was organized to bring together research teams from Development Initiatives (DI) East Africa Hub, the Centre for Rights, Education and Awareness (CREAW), and Oxfam in Kenya to discuss, review, and agree on a common understanding of the

research purpose, objectives, and research questions. The workshop also provided an opportunity for the team to discuss the criteria for selecting the WROs that would participate in the study and the modalities for data collection and analysis.

Second, we reviewed published and grey literature on local humanitarian leadership. The review covered international frameworks such as the Charter for Change and Grand Bargain, formal and informal LHL commitments, the localization performance measurement framework, and reports and academic papers on LHL and the leadership of WROs in the response to the pandemic in Kenya. The aim of the review was to provide contextual information, ensure value addition from previous evaluative studies, and identify research and knowledge gaps. Based on the literature review and feedback from the co-creation workshop, the research questions and objectives were further refined.

Third, we used key informant interviews (KIIs) to collect data virtually via Zoom (to minimize COVID-19 risks). A total of 15 organizations were involved in this study: 14 local WROs and Oxfam in Kenya. The selection criteria for the key informant WROs were that the WRO must have:

- worked with Oxfam or other INGOs in at least one humanitarian response,
- implemented a program in Nairobi or Mombasa,
- participated in COVID-19 response between 2020 and 2021, and
- implemented programs in at least one of the sectors of focus (WASH, social protection, or SGBV).

Of the 14 sampled WROs, 5 were Oxfam's local partners and 9 were local partners of other INGOs. Selecting a mix of INGOs' partners provided opportunities for documenting local actors' diverse experiences in responding to COVID-19 and in upholding LHL commitments.

Fourth, the research team reviewed data transcribed from KII notes to identify unclear information that required further consultations. This was done either by returning to key informants or by reviewing the literature. The information generated from KIIs was synthesized to produce a report with two case studies in line with the objectives of the study. The interviewees are kept anonymous.

Finally, two validation workshops were organized to bring together the sampled WROs to review and prioritize the findings. Importantly, the participants drew common conclusions and actionable recommendations for advocacy. Initially, the project team planned for only one virtual workshop to validate key findings and draw out recommendations. However, the team believed it was necessary to organize a second, in-person workshop with only WROs present. Apart from creating a networking space for the WROs, the second workshop ensured a safe space for the local WROs to openly air their challenges, including missed opportunities with Oxfam and emerging partnership modalities with bigger national WROs. The in-person meeting provided ample time for further discussions and group work to produce recommendations.

2. WROS AND THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC RESPONSE IN KENYA

While the national and county governments and INGOs/donors endeavored to include the priorities of WROs in COVID-19 pandemic responses, more could have been done to ensure the needs of women and girls were addressed adequately. Areas that were prioritized and received significant support from government and international partners included SGBV, provision of food aid, handwashing facilities, and health programs for women. Nonetheless, WROs noted that more resources could have been allocated to priorities such as economic empowerment of women who lost their livelihoods, establishment of safehouses for survivors of SGBV, reproductive health programs for teenage girls, and implementation of Kenya's commitments under the Generation Equality Forum to advance gender equality and end all forms of GBV (Republic of Kenya 2021).

In government-led coordination structures, consultations are still largely a box-ticking exercise, where the contributions of stakeholders do not necessarily translate into action. A WRO staff member explained this:

Sometimes organizations sit in planning and engagement meetings with government to provide views on what should be prioritized, but when the funds are allocated, the government sometimes shifts priorities to what the leaders want rather than what was suggested by organizations such as WROs.

Also, some donors preferred to align their priorities with those of the government, with the result that the priorities of WROs were not always reflected in national and subnational response plans.

IMPACTS OF THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC ON WROS IN KENYA: CHALLENGES

FUNDING CUTS: DE-PRIORITIZATION OF WROS GENDER AGENDA

WROs had to deprioritize essential programs to focus on emergency response interventions. As the impacts of COVID-19 escalated, WROs redesigned and reprioritized their programs, workplans, budgets, and timelines to address emerging needs. They shifted priorities away from strategic programming in areas such as leadership, education, and the social, economic, and political empowerment of women and toward COVID-19 response activities. While this was a necessary move, deprioritizing programming in areas such as leadership may exacerbate preexisting gender inequalities. The extent to which WROs could repurpose the programs and budgets they had before COVID-19 largely depended on the flexibility of their donors and INGO partners to allow for changes in programming and the demands of affected communities. While some INGOs allowed local WRO partners to shift entire program budgets to COVID-19 response, others allowed only minor adjustments to budgets and program activities to accommodate basic interventions such as provision of face masks and sanitizers to affected communities.

Funding cuts by donors and INGOs affected the ability of local WROs to sustain their operations. Shifting donor priorities and associated funding cuts affected the resilience of WROs in a manner that is likely to have had knock-on effects on the communities they serve. Access to funding became increasingly difficult as donors diverted funding from strategic programming to COVID-19 emergency responses in their countries and abroad. A staff member from a WRO that partnered with Oxfam¹ explained:

Our funding shrank because the partners who would give us funds for strategic programmes were responding to COVID-19. As an organisation we are very strong in politics and governance issues. However, to some partners, these were not a priority during the COVID-19 pandemic.

This was echoed by another WRO respondent (not Oxfam's partner), who explained:

Italy, where our key funders are based, was really affected by the COVID-19 pandemic, making it difficult for us to access funds for the response. The resources that we would ordinarily access during an emergency situation were not available during the COVID-19 period.

WROs that had achieved financial sustainability by organizing regular events, such as sports activities, to fundraise suddenly became unstable as the pandemic prevented such events. One WRO that relied on events to raise funds was not able to pay rent for its safehouse, which was hosting more than 50 women, girls, and children who were survivors of SGBV.

As priorities changed, donors canceled their funding commitments and, in some cases, demanded the return of funds that had already been disbursed to WROs. Cancellation of funding commitments meant that WROs had to reprioritize their budgets and make tough decisions to try to continue their work. Following the cancellation of the 2020 Devolution Conference owing to the pandemic, a WRO that had received funds for the event and used them to prepare had to look for resources to refund their donor, leading to financial distress. WROs that worked with Oxfam and other INGOs had to adopt cost-cutting measures such as reducing their number of employees, scaling down the scope and coverage of their programs, merging program activities, using reserve funds to implement unfunded activities, and working with volunteers or part-time consultants. While these measures were taken out of necessity, they have negative impacts on WROs' organizational capacity and long-term sustainability.

Operating costs increased during the COVID-19 pandemic response, straining WROs' already scarce resources. For instance, because of the need for social distancing, WROs had to hold several smaller engagement meetings rather than fewer large ones with affected communities, leading to higher spending. WROs had to bear additional costs, such as providing personal protective equipment to their staff and the communities they served and providing equipment like laptops and smartphones for their staff to work remotely. New public transport rules that were introduced by the government to curb the spread of COVID-19 led to an increase in travel costs (WFP 2020), which affected WROs and their staff who relied on public transport to deliver their services (WFP 2020). However, as will be explained in the next section on funding, limited support for indirect costs and limited flexibility to adjust response budgets meant that WROs had to use their reserve funds or adopt cost-cutting measures to cope with increased these operating costs.

STAFF WELL-BEING

WROs' staff were affected by COVID-19 directly and indirectly. WRO staff faced a high risk of contracting the virus due to frequent interactions with the communities they served. Only a small number of WROs received self-care training for their staff on how to avoid contracting COVID-19. For instance, CREAM, with funding from Oxfam and Mastercard, provided self-care training to one of its local partner WROs. During the validation workshops, WROs recounted how most of their staff and their families contracted COVID-19, with some losing their relatives, leading to emotional and mental health challenges such as stress. This stress was exacerbated by increased pressure from donors and INGOs to have aid delivered by WROs to the affected communities on time. While INGOs recognized the additional burdens and risks their local WRO partners had to bear, they did not provide adequate financial and technical support for dealing with the COVID-19 risks. During validation workshops most WROs explained that their staff and volunteers had no medical insurance and they lacked funds to provide psychosocial therapy or counseling services to their staff. The funds that WROs received were mainly earmarked for response activities and did not include a budget for expenses related to staff welfare. Also, WROs' staff, particularly employees

who received pay cuts or were working as volunteers, needed financial assistance to cope with the pandemic. During the validation workshops WROs noted that to avoid conflict of interest, their staff who were in need could not benefit from the assistance on offer (food and nonfood items and cash transfers), and this led to low motivation.

MOVEMENT RESTRICTIONS

WROs faced difficulties delivering aid owing to movement restrictions. For instance, before being recognized as essential services providers, WROs responding to SGBV faced difficulties rescuing survivors during curfews and lockdowns. Also, the government did not allow WROs that were providing temporary shelter to survivors of SGBV to admit new survivors to their safehouses without facilitating COVID-19 tests.

DIGITAL INEQUALITY

Digital inequality limited provision of services through virtual platforms. While the shift to virtual meetings was successful in Nairobi and Mombasa, where the infrastructure is better, WROs with operations in remote areas experienced interruptions in electricity supply and internet connectivity. WROs noted that women, girls, and other marginalized groups, such as persons with disabilities, lacked access to smartphones, could not afford internet costs, and lacked the skills to use information and communication technologies (ICTs) and platforms such as Zoom or Skype to engage in virtual meetings. A key informant from one of Oxfam's partner WROs explained:

It was difficult to meet our beneficiaries through virtual meetings because of their limited access [to] and knowledge of using ICT. It often took them a lot of time to connect, and in some cases we had to hire people to help them to connect to virtual platforms such as Zoom, adding on to our operating costs.

For some WROs, providing services through virtual platforms was simply not an option because of the nature of their programming. For instance, WROs that were responding to SGBV had to interact face to face with survivors in order to deliver services such as care in safehouses.

WROs shifted to working remotely, albeit with limited resources. They shifted to working from home to reduce the risk of COVID-19, but this was challenging owing to the high cost of acquiring equipment such as laptops and smartphones and the fact that donors and INGOs did not always provide funding for acquiring such equipment.

IMPACTS OF THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC ON WROS: OPPORTUNITIES

BETTER PARTICIPATION IN COORDINATION AND ADVOCACY FORUMS

The shift to virtual meetings created important opportunities for WROs to engage in planning, coordination, and advocacy forums. Virtual forums eliminated travel costs and time constraints that had previously hindered WROs' participation in these meetings.

NEW PROGRAMMING AREAS

Though local WROs had limited resources and expertise and faced a steep learning curve, they ventured into new programming areas. In Nairobi one of Oxfam's local WRO partners started learning by doing when it began providing referral services to women and girls in informal settlements who needed mental and reproductive health assistance.² In Mombasa, a WRO (not Oxfam's partner)

provided cash transfers for the first time and had opportunities to learn how to manage technical processes such as beneficiary targeting and data protection while implementing the program.

INNOVATIVE RESPONSES

WROs adopted innovative response strategies to overcome operational challenges. They repurposed digital tools for advocacy and service delivery in areas such as SGBV reporting. One of Oxfam’s WRO partners developed a Unstructured Supplementary Service Data (USSD) code that enabled women with basic phones to report SGBV cases and access assistance. In areas where entry to courts was limited, WROs (including one of Oxfam’s partners) helped survivors of SGBV participate in court processes through virtual platforms such as Zoom. They also established a network of community champions, volunteers, and committees that facilitated needs assessment and implementation of response activities in hard-to-reach locations.

ALTERNATIVE INCOME-GENERATING ACTIVITIES

Rising uncertainty over access to funding provided a new push for WROs to start exploring alternative ways of achieving financial sustainability. Many WROs had launched—or were planning to start—alternative income-generating activities to raise funds. For instance, a WRO in Nairobi (not Oxfam’s partner) was working with its partners to construct its own premises, which upon completion will be partly rented out to generate additional income. Also, WROs started strengthening their traditional fundraising strategies by exploring new partnerships, mapping donors, developing new fundraising strategies, and working with local foundations or the private sector to raise funds through events.

PROMOTING COMMUNITY RESILIENCE

The severity of the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on communities motivated WROs to rethink their programming to ensure community resilience. Some of the WROs responding to SGBV started planning how to go beyond response to address the root causes of violence against women, such as lack of economic opportunities. In the WASH sector, rather than solely providing temporary handwashing stations, WROs installed durable water supply systems such as community water tanks in partnership with county governments, including in Mombasa County.

In summary, WROs learned lessons and embraced new ways of operating, such as working from home, leveraging digital platforms for advocacy and coordination, and effective scenario planning, which they intend to use in future humanitarian responses.

COVID-19 PANDEMIC RESPONSE BY WOMEN’S RIGHTS ORGANIZATIONS

The WROs interviewed for this study consider themselves crucial humanitarian actors because they play a key role in preventing or alleviating human suffering when disasters strike. They implement a wide range of interventions aimed at socioeconomic empowerment of women; improved access to basic services such as WASH, education, and health; and SGBV prevention. During emergencies, they scale up these programs to address humanitarian needs. For instance, during the contested 2007 general elections, which led to violence in some parts of the country, three WROs interviewed in this study responded by providing survivors of SGBV with temporary shelter and facilitating their access to legal aid and health services.

Kenyan WROs scaled up their efforts to fill gaps in service provision during the COVID-19 pandemic. WROs were involved in the response in three ways: (1) direct aid delivery, (2) support to government-led planning and coordination initiatives, and (3) advocacy on COVID-19-related issues.

DIRECT AID DELIVERY

Direct aid delivery by Oxfam's local WRO partners included:

- cash transfers to SGBV survivors in informal settlements;
- facilitation of SGBV survivors' access to medical and counseling services;
- distribution of dignity kits, face masks, and sanitizers to affected communities, especially women and girls in informal settlements;
- awareness creation on the COVID-19 pandemic, including the measures being implemented by the Ministry of Health to prevent the spread of the disease;
- legal aid to survivors of SGBV; and
- facilitation of reporting of SGBV cases through innovative methods such as mobile phone USSD codes and toll-free hotlines.

Direct aid delivery by WROs that worked with other INGOs included:

- distribution of food and nonfood items such as dignity kits, sanitizers, and face masks to women and girls experiencing poverty, survivors of SGBV, and teenage mothers;
- improved awareness of the COVID-19 pandemic through social and mainstream media, particularly local FM radio stations and community health champions to deliver preventive and life-saving messages, curtailing the spread of COVID-19 in high-risk areas such as informal settlements;
- cash transfers to survivors of SGBV to meet their basic needs;
- rescues of survivors of SGBV and provision of temporary shelter in safehouses;
- facilitation of access to justice for survivors of SGBV through counseling and reintegration of survivors with their communities and families;
- provision of water and handwashing facilities to prevent the spread of COVID-19;
- rehabilitation of livelihoods through provision of seed capital to women to start or revive their businesses and skills training to help them access employment; and
- prevention of SGBV through social media messages, radio talk shows, and community forums, and provision of toll-free hotlines for reporting of SGBV cases.

SUPPORT TO GOVERNMENT-LED PLANNING AND COORDINATION INITIATIVES

In both Nairobi and Mombasa WROs actively provided advisory and technical support for planning and coordination processes led by county and national governments and international humanitarian actors. Oxfam's local WRO partners were involved in coordination in various ways. For example, one of Oxfam's partners was part of a coordination committee in Dagoretti North Subcounty in Nairobi, where it worked with government and other partners such as WFP to coordinate the delivery of aid to affected communities. The WRO also worked with other local CSOs to coordinate the receipt of donations such as food from various actors, including private sector foundations and companies, and delivering it to affected communities. Also, Oxfam's local WRO partners responding to SGBV worked with the National Police Service to coordinate and facilitate reporting of cases, collection and presentation of evidence, and prosecution of the perpetrators through the court system.

WROs that worked with other INGOs supported coordination efforts through different interventions, including capacity-strengthening support to government to ensure gender-sensitive planning, coordination and response, and provision of data on needs. Examples of these interventions include:

- In Mombasa County, a WRO that was a member of the Mombasa County COVID-19 Emergency Response Committee played a key role in identifying, on behalf of the government, the specific needs in various locations and the target beneficiaries for assistance. It also advised on the appropriateness of the government's response modalities.
- In Kibera, Nairobi, a WRO that was part of the National COVID-19 Emergency Response Committee led the collection of needs data and identification of the beneficiaries of cash transfers provided by the national government.
- In Kitui, Kirinyaga, and Bomet Counties a local WRO trained decision-makers, particularly female Members of County Assembly (MCAs), on gender-sensitive planning to ensure county response plans were responsive to the needs of women and girls.

ADVOCACY ON COVID-19-RELATED ISSUES

Local WROs were active in lobbying and advocating for gender-responsive and inclusive COVID-19 responses. They used a mix of strategies, including webinars, collaborative online platforms, and physical meetings with decision-makers, to advocate for prioritizing the needs of women and girls in the COVID-19 response by the government and international actors. WROs advocated for reduction of SGBV, gender-sensitive responses, and economic empowerment of women whose livelihoods were affected by COVID-19 pandemic. They also demanded accountability in the use of public funds to ensure that available resources reached the affected communities.

All the WROs consulted in this study had membership in at least one network, alliance, consortium, or coordination structure where they aimed to inform humanitarian response decisions. These bodies included:

- the national government's coordination platforms such as the National COVID-19 Emergency Response Committee;
- county governments' coordination forums, such as the Mombasa County COVID-19 Emergency Response Committee;
- donor and UN agency-led planning, advocacy, and coordination forums;
- consortiums and coalitions of civil society organizations (CSOs) with common advocacy and programming interests;
- national, regional, and international networks established by CSOs such as the Child Rights Network, the Global Survivors Network, the Network for Survivors of SGBV, the CSO Reference Group (Nakuru County), and the National Shelters Network; and
- sector-specific forums established by the government, such as the National/County GBV Working Group, the Gender Sector Working Group, and Court Users Committees.

The participation of WROs in various advocacy platforms had positive outcomes. For example, one of Oxfam's partners worked with other CSOs at the national level to advocate for elimination of SGBV during the pandemic. This led to a directive by the national government to law enforcement officers to take action against perpetrators of SGBV and the government's establishment of a toll-free line to facilitate reporting of SGBV cases. The advocacy work conducted by WROs working with other INGOs achieved other positive outcomes:

- In Mombasa County, a WRO and its CSO partners prevented violation of human rights through advocacy and advice to the government to stop certain punitive measures, such as arrests, beatings, or forced quarantine of women who did not adhere to COVID-19 prevention protocols.
- In Kilifi County, where the government discouraged movement to reduce COVID-19 risks, a WRO in collaboration with other CSOs successfully pushed for the entry of humanitarian responders in rural areas and the provision of personal protective equipment (PPE), handwashing facilities, and sanitizers as part of every response intervention being implemented in the county by government and CSOs.

- In Nakuru County, a WRO in collaboration with other local CSOs successfully advocated for the establishment of a government-led safehouse for survivors of SGBV. This led to allocation of resources for the construction of the shelter by the county government of Nakuru.

3. EVALUATING OXFAM'S RESPONSE IN KENYA: WROS AT THE CORE

PARTNERSHIP

In the response to the COVID-19 pandemic, Oxfam made considerable effort to form equitable partnerships with local WROs in line with its policy commitment to local humanitarian leadership. Before COVID-19, Oxfam had focused on building trust and relationships with local organizations and had adopted a long-term policy of working with local partners to respond to humanitarian crises rather than engaging in direct delivery of aid. Therefore, while most international humanitarian actors relied on local partners to respond to COVID-19 out of necessity (due to movement restrictions), for Oxfam, working with local partners was a deliberate effort underpinned by its LHL policy commitment. This below section also includes information on the relationship between WROs and other INGOs.

CO-CREATION

Oxfam collaborated with its local WRO partners throughout the response, but more opportunities could have been created to enhance the voice and participation of local partners. The response interventions were designed through co-creation processes in which the local WROs and Oxfam had discussions and agreed on what would be funded, ways of delivering aid, and locations where aid would be delivered. For instance, in the response to SGBV, Oxfam proposed the implementation of cash transfers, but its WRO partners noted that more interventions were needed to address the needs of the survivors. During the co-creation stage, Oxfam and its partners agreed to implement cash transfers to promote the dignity of the survivors of SGBV by allowing them to decide how to use the aid. Importantly, local WROs proposed additional interventions to Oxfam, such as legal aid and support for medical and counseling services, to address the other needs of the SGBV survivors. While Oxfam adopted WROs' suggestions for additional interventions, key informants believed that, to promote local leadership, Oxfam could have played a smaller role in the co-creation by initiating discussions with WROs around what they wanted to implement, based on their understanding of needs, rather than suggesting a specific intervention (cash transfers) in the first instance.

An area identified for improvement was the involvement of local partners in scoping funding opportunities and initial discussions with donors on funding modalities, especially at the concept development stage, to ensure that WROs' inputs were considered from the outset. Key informants also noted that when deadlines for submitting proposals were very short, Oxfam tended to take a greater role, limiting opportunities for the participation of local partners in co-creation and funding processes. This highlights the need for both Oxfam and its local partners to ensure efficiency so that all parties have adequate time to contribute to developing funding proposals or designing programs in an equitable manner.

OPEN COMMUNICATION

Open communication and regular feedback sessions were integrated in the partnerships, enabling Oxfam's local WRO partners to seek clarifications or technical support. Regular interactions through email and virtual and physical meetings facilitated consultations and discussions, particularly on progress in implementing response activities and emerging challenges. WROs noted that they had access to Oxfam's different departments, enabling them to obtain quick responses whenever they needed clarifications or technical support on, for instance, program or financial reporting. However,

communication channels such as email and Zoom meetings did not work well for all WROs. One WRO preferred physical meetings with Oxfam’s finance team rather than email communications to enable them to have a better understanding of reporting requirements. This highlights the need to tailor communications to the needs of WROs to ensure efficient and open discussions, which facilitate equitable partnerships.

SHORT-TERM VERSUS LONG-TERM

While Oxfam has committed to building long-term partnerships with local organizations in line with its LHL principles, its collaboration with local WROs during the COVID-19 pandemic response was short term or project based, limiting opportunities for strengthening local leadership. Promoting LHL requires a long-term commitment in which international organizations work collaboratively with their local partners to enhance capacity in areas such as leadership, advocacy, networking, and gender justice. This long-term commitment must be backed by flexible, multiyear funding, which Oxfam continues to struggle to raise. The short-term nature of the partnerships (between three to six months) limited opportunities for continuous provision of capacity-strengthening support to WROs, joint fundraising for future programs, and strengthening of WROs’ networks. Nonetheless, some of the local WROs had initiated discussions with Oxfam for an extended partnership to respond to, for instance, SGBV during the 2022 general elections. One WRO reported submitting joint proposals with Oxfam for funding from the Danish International Development Agency and the government of Finland.

WRO RELATIONSHIPS WITH OTHER INGOs: PARTNERSHIPS

NEED FOR FLEXIBILITY

A review of the partnerships between local WROs and other INGOs revealed that the COVID-19 pandemic and efforts made by local and international actors before the pandemic promoted partnerships between local and international actors, but significant challenges abound. Limited presence on the ground meant that INGOs had to rely on local partners to understand needs and the best way to deliver assistance. This led to regular consultations between local WROs and their INGOs partners. However, the increased consultations did not always lead to influence. During the validation workshops, WROs noted the unwillingness of some of their international partners to allow them to repurpose or change the objectives of their pre-pandemic programs to enable them address emerging needs during the pandemic. This was a key challenge that undermined efforts to promote LHL. Also, while partnerships integrated regular feedback sessions, mainly through virtual platforms, these rarely provided an opportunity for WROs to discuss with their INGO partners key issues such as capacity strengthening and support for advocacy and networking; the focus was mainly on progress implementing response programs.

Another partner of the national WRO shared that while they were able to use the budget template easily and their initial budget estimates were accepted, their participation in the COVID-19 pandemic response was limited by the lack of flexibility in the funding arrangement. The budget was fixed, making it impossible to accommodate emerging or unforeseen expenditures in a budget that was approved by the national WRO at the partnership formation stage.

OPPORTUNITIES TO LEAD

Movement restrictions provided an important opportunity for local partners to lead needs assessment and propose interventions. The restrictions also meant that program implementation and monitoring and evaluation activities were mainly led by the local partners. While this improved involvement of local WROs was mainly due to necessity, it provided a rare chance for local partners to demonstrate their ability to lead responses based on the functional and operational knowledge that they had acquired through field experiences, capacity-strengthening support provided by international actors, learning from best practices, and understanding of humanitarian principles. A WRO in Nairobi explained, “The power and influence of WROs improved because we had a chance to

implement response activities based on the knowledge that we had to design programmes in collaboration with affected communities.”

UNEQUAL POWER DYNAMICS: RESOURCE CHALLENGES

While efforts to shift power to local actors advanced during COVID-19, these gains were still affected by WROs’ weak financial positions. Power dynamics within partnerships is still shaped, to a great extent, by control over funding. During validation workshops, WROs described how competition for funding weakened their ability to negotiate for adequate funding and to push back when programs were imposed on them by their international partners. Many WROs reported that they were willing to accept programs that were proposed or imposed by their international partners to avoid losing funding.

The involvement of several intermediaries in the funding chain limited the participation of some WROs in decision-making processes as equal partners. This was particularly the case where there were two or more intermediaries: for instance, an INGO that receives funds from a donor, which is channeled to a national WRO, which works with community-based WROs to implement programs. In such partnerships, decisions were always made by the INGOs and to a limited extent by the national WRO. Community-based organizations were often brought on board to implement activities after funds had been raised and programs had been designed and were therefore excluded from participating in decisions at key stages of the program cycle.

Just as with Oxfam’s partnerships, local WROs that worked with other INGOs had short-term and project-based partnerships with their international partners. A key challenge for WROs was how to sustain their operations after short-term humanitarian funding. This led to challenges such as loss of staff, which weakened the capacity of local WROs to implement programs going forward.

Another key challenge was WROs’ limited involvement in fundraising. WROs did not always have information on total funds available for the response. Even where they were involved in fundraising, time constraints occasioned by lengthy and bureaucratic processes meant that WROs did not always have a chance to review and inform the final funding proposals submitted to donors by their INGO partners. Communications with back donors also often excluded WROs, limiting opportunities for local partners to influence decisions and to create visibility for their work at the donor level.

LACK OF TRUST

Lack of trust between local WROs and their international partners slowed efforts to promote LHL. This lack of trust led to transactional relationships rather than equitable partnerships, particularly when the local and international organizations were working together for the first time. WROs noted that their INGO partners were concerned about fiduciary or fraud risks and their ability to ensure high-quality aid delivery. This led to micromanagement and strained working relationships, where the international partner had greater control over funding and partnership decisions. For instance, a WRO was referred by one of its former staff to a Denmark-based organization, which provided funding for the COVID-19 pandemic response. As a result of mistrust, however, the WRO noted that its international partner opted to transfer funds to it through a Danish consultant based in Kenya. Furthermore, according to the local WRO, the budget estimates proposed by the consultant were not realistic and led to disagreements between the partners on the implementation of programmed activities. Also, the international partner entrusted the consultant to purchase equipment such as laptops on behalf of the WRO, limiting the local partner’s ability to take a leadership role in decisions. This example illustrates that without trust, mutual respect, and strong work relationships, the LHL ambition will not be achieved. However, building trust and relationships takes time and commitment from both local and international partners to identify risks at the partnership formation stage and to jointly agree on how to address them over time.

TENSIONS BETWEEN THE NATIONAL AND THE GRASSROOTS

During validation workshops, participants also shared their concerns over partnerships of bigger national WROs with grassroots WROs, a modality that mirrors the relationship of many INGOs with

local and national actors. Smaller WROs noted that although working with larger national WROs as grantees provided them with an opportunity to participate in the response to COVID-19, these arrangements rarely promoted LHL. Some national WROs tended to subcontract with community-based WROs to deliver specific services with tightly earmarked funding rather than working with them as equal partners and in ways that promoted capacity sharing. In one of the validation workshops, a WRO respondent that had partnered with a national WRO in one of its COVID-19 response interventions described their partnership:

It was chaotic and frustrating. Our partner (a national WRO) subcontracted work to us. We did not have opportunities to negotiate on the budgets, and we had to fit into their programme by meeting their objectives. We had to use their reporting templates, which were confusing and hard to use. We were providing shelter to survivors of SGBV, but our partner did not allow us to include a budget for rent. We had a deficit because we were admitting a lot of women into our safehouse, but the budget was fixed.

National WROs also often excluded their grantees from engagement or communication with funding partners (donors or INGOs). Several participants highlighted during the validation workshops that INGOs and national WROs do engage community-based WROs during needs assessment to obtain data and ideas, which they use to fundraise. However, when the funding is received, the community-based WROs are either brought on board as subcontractors or excluded from implementation. Promoting LHL, therefore, requires equitable partnerships, not only between local and international partners but also between local partners themselves.

FUNDING

Oxfam adopted a participatory and flexible funding approach to work with its local WROs in the response to the COVID-19 pandemic. A key strength of the funding arrangement was the shift of decision-making power to local WROs that were involved in identifying the response activities and proposing a budget to Oxfam for implementation. Through consultations and negotiations, Oxfam and its partners agreed on the budgets that were available and the activities that received funding. Furthermore, WROs had the flexibility to adjust budget lines and/or negotiate for additional funds to address emerging needs. For example, one WRO was able to save in certain activities and used the accrued funds to strengthen implementation of activities that required more resources. Also, a WRO that was responding to SGBV noted that Oxfam agreed to its request for additional funding to expand the coverage of its program by including more informal settlement areas in Nairobi, particularly Kayole and Dandora.

SHORT-TERM AND LIMITED FUNDING CHALLENGES

However, the short-term nature of Oxfam's funding was a key challenge that limited the participation of WROs in the COVID-19 pandemic response. Short-term funding made it difficult for Oxfam's partners to adequately address the needs of affected communities that had not recovered by the time the funding came to an end. A staff member from an WRO in partnership with Oxfam explained:

The impacts of SGBV are long term, but humanitarian funding is short term. When the program ended, we had to look for additional resources and work with volunteers to do follow-ups and ensure the survivors had continued access to services to avoid causing harm.

While this challenge was attributed, to an extent, to limited availability of funding, WROs highlighted the importance of better collaboration with Oxfam for joint fundraising to access more funding for continued support to affected communities and sustenance of the operations of the local partners. WROs pointed out one missed opportunity: Oxfam set aside only 5% of its funding for cash transfers for survivors of SGBV, which was delivered by WROs. Key informants believed that

while this strategy guaranteed WROs access to funding, a greater proportion of the budget could have been allocated to ensure better participation of WROs in the COVID-19 pandemic response.

ICR CHALLENGES

Oxfam's WRO partners also identified limited support for indirect costs as a challenge that slowed progress on LHL. WROs acknowledged that the funding they received from Oxfam had a budget for indirect costs, but this was not adequate. In one of the partnerships, a WRO noted that Oxfam funding only partially covered staff costs. The WRO had to resort to using its internal resources to sustain the staff who were working on the program, leading to financial strain.

Discussions with both Oxfam and its WRO partners attributed the limited support for indirect costs to several factors. First, Oxfam has yet to develop a policy to guide sharing of indirect cost recovery (ICR) budgets with its local partners. While the country office acknowledged this challenge, they had limited power to develop their own ICR policy, as the headquarters was expected to develop a standardized ICR policy to guide sharing of indirect cost budgets with local partners in the various countries where Oxfam operates. Second, the funding that Oxfam received from its donors and affiliates did not always include a budget for ICR, limiting the extent to which Oxfam could provide funding for indirect costs to its local WRO partners.

WRO RELATIONSHIPS WITH OTHER INGOs: FUNDING

TRANSACTIONAL RELATIONSHIPS INSTEAD OF EQUITABLE PARTNERSHIPS

Like the WROs that worked with Oxfam, those that partnered with other INGOs had opportunities to participate in financial decisions and processes such as planning and budgeting. However, these opportunities were constrained by subcontractual or transactional relationships. At the program level, most of the consulted WROs had the flexibility to influence how funds were allocated to the specific activities that they agreed with their partners to implement. Still, decisions on the overall budget ceilings or funds available to a WRO sat mainly with the international partners, in part due to the limited involvement of WROs in fundraising processes. In four partnerships, WROs did not have much influence on funding decisions as they were simply contracted to implement certain activities based on a budget developed by their international partners.

BUDGET FLEXIBILITY

The extent to which WROs could make reasonable adjustments to budget lines in response to the COVID-19 pandemic was limited and depended mainly on the willingness of their international partners to approve the adjustments. The logistical constraints caused by the pandemic necessitated regular review of budgets to enable WROs to address emerging operational challenges, including increases in operating costs. In a few partnerships, WROs only needed to write an email to their international partners to get approvals to adjust budgets whenever changes were needed. For most WROs, however, justifying adjustments to budgets was a significant challenge, as donors and INGOs were keen on reducing fiduciary risks and ensuring efficiency, leading to scrutiny of financial management by international partners. While this scrutiny was aimed at ensuring accountability, it also led to delays in approving adjustment of budgets, which in turn delayed the delivery of aid. Also, discussions in the validation workshops and KIIs indicated that only program activity budgets could be adjusted. The budgets for administrative expenses were fixed, creating operational challenges for WROs, such as the inability to provide adequate allowances to allow staff to use taxis rather than public buses to avoid contracting COVID-19.

TRUST DEFICIT

A key challenge to accessing funding is the trust deficit between local WROs and INGOs/donors. This challenge predates the COVID-19 pandemic and is attributed in part to past experiences when donors/INGOs' local partners either did not deliver aid appropriately or mismanaged funds. While

challenges such as corruption are not unique to local organizations, WROs acknowledged the need for local actors to enhance transparency and accountability in the ways they implement programs and manage funds. Also, donors lack the capacity to ensure scrutiny of the financial management practices of local organizations. As a result, they prefer to work with INGOs or national WROs as intermediaries that manage the risks associated with working with local partners. Access to funding is more challenging for smaller and community-based WROs owing to several challenges, including lack of antifraud policies and financial management systems, limited access to donors/INGOs, and lack of experience managing large grants.

DOMINANCE OF “PREFERRED PARTNERS”

Discriminatory funding modalities also constrain access to funding by local WROs. A major concern raised by WROs was the fact that some donors/INGOs have prequalified organizations that they prefer to work with based on their past working relationships. Accordingly, such donors/INGOs often make calls for proposals that are aligned to the objectives and capabilities of their preferred partners rather than providing equal opportunities for funding to all local organizations. Limited visibility of smaller WROs’ work means that larger national WROs, which are often vocal and have better visibility, have a better chance to access funding than their smaller counterparts. While participants in validation workshops noted that donors are increasingly willing to work with local organizations, success depends on the extent to which INGOs and large national WROs will work with smaller or community-based WROs to mentor them and strengthen their capacity to effectively manage grants through strategies such as joint fundraising and programming. Also, WROs emphasized that referrals by their international partners enabled them to access funding, but this effort needed to be scaled up by providing them with more opportunities for direct interactions with donors to speak about their work.

ICR CHALLENGES

The WROs that worked with other INGOs also grappled with inadequate support for indirect costs, which greatly affected their operations and ability to take a lead role in the COVID-19 response. For instance, in one WRO in Mombasa, staff had to use their own money to pay for travel expenses to deliver aid to affected communities, leading to low morale. Apart from the challenges discussed previously (raised by Oxfam’s partners), WROs also attributed limited access to indirect cost budgets to increased competition for funding during the pandemic. Increased competition meant that WROs had weak bargaining power and were willing to enter partnerships with INGOs even if the funding arrangements were unfavorable, such as those that have little or no budgets for indirect costs. The increased focus on efficiency by INGOs forced some local WROs to agree to budgets that were not realistic to ensure that a greater proportion of the funds went to affected communities rather than to the local partners’ administrative expenses. During validation workshops, WROs noted that they faced difficulties in estimating their indirect costs due to lack of skills in areas such as budgeting, costing activities, and forecasting possible increases in operating costs. Also, the COVID-19 pandemic was evolving quickly, and WROs were not able to identify all direct and indirect costs beforehand. For instance, a WRO that was rescuing survivors of SGBV realized that they needed bigger vehicles to transport survivors after they had started implementation, but their international partner could not allow them to increase the budget for transportation.

CAPACITY SHARING AND STRENGTHENING

Efforts to strengthen the technical capacities of local WROs, pre-COVID-19, paid off during the pandemic response. Notably, WROs leveraged the power of local knowledge and a human-centered approach to ensure that the response was appropriate and timely. The affected communities were at the center of the response, working with local WROs to identify needs and interventions that were relevant to their local context. Situational and contextual knowledge held by local WROs, including indigenous know-how, community-generated data, and understanding of local social, political, and cultural factors, informed the planning, program design, and delivery of aid by local partners.

It was evident from interviews, however, that WROs are at different levels of capacity development. While five WROs had strengthened their organizational capacity to the extent that they were already playing an intermediary role and had direct access to funding from donors, others were still young organizations with limited staff, experience in programming, and financial management. This underlines the need to strengthen the capacities of smaller WROs to avoid the risk that a few large national WROs will dominate the local humanitarian system, thereby perpetuating power imbalances.

Promoting LHL requires local, national, and international actors to share capacities in ways that ensure mutual learning, partnerships, and complementarity. In the response to the COVID-19 pandemic, Oxfam helped its local WRO partners enhance their technical skills and capacities for humanitarian response. At the partnership formation stage, Oxfam conducted organizational capacity assessments in collaboration with its local partners to identify capacity-strengthening needs. Oxfam earmarked part of its funding for providing capacity-strengthening support in different ways. These include providing funding to retain program staff and hire specialists such as a monitoring and evaluation officer; providing training in areas such as safeguarding, senior management and board leadership, fundraising, monitoring and evaluation, and financial reporting; and technical support to WROs to develop organizational policies.

While Oxfam had the funding to respond to the COVID-19 pandemic, it lacked the networks and experience that it needed to deliver aid in informal settlements. Partnering with local WROs that were already working in informal settlements provided an opportunity for Oxfam to learn from its local partners the dynamics of delivering aid in such locations. To ensure complementarity and capacity sharing, Oxfam relied on the expertise and experience that local WROs had gained in areas such as SGBV and humanitarian response to deliver aid while it played a supportive role.

A key challenge was the lack of efforts to ensure the sustainability of capacity strengthening. In the absence of reliable long-term funding, Oxfam's WRO partners faced the risk of losing their experienced staff to other organizations, thereby eroding their capacities. Additionally, the project-based, short-term nature of the partnerships limited opportunities for monitoring the effectiveness of the capacity-strengthening support provided by Oxfam.

WRO RELATIONSHIPS WITH OTHER INGOS: CAPACITY STRENGTHENING

Partnerships between local WROs and other INGOs suggest that capacity-strengthening efforts should be focused on enhancing technical skills, improving organizational policies, and acquiring equipment for program implementation. These included short online training sessions on program implementation, consultations on how to use reporting templates, and provision of funds to WROs to acquire equipment such as laptops or technologies such as Zoom accounts. Three WROs were supported by their partners to review or develop organizational policies. Other key areas for LHL such as strengthening capacity for leadership, advocacy, gender justice, networking, and participation in policy discourse did not receive much support.

Interviews with local WROs indicated that capacity-strengthening needs were mainly identified through organizational capacity assessments conducted before partnership formation. These assessments were often led by the international partner, which determined what gaps needed to be filled and how to address them. A WRO staff member explained: "Our funding partners usually conduct organizational capacity assessments before funding us. They come, review, and identify gaps, and give us recommendations and timelines to address them."

This approach may perpetuate a power imbalance by limiting the ability of local WROs to play a lead role in determining their capacity-strengthening needs and how to address them.

OVERALL TAKEAWAYS: CAPACITY SHARING AND STRENGTHENING

Overall, efforts to provide capacity-strengthening support to local WROs, including Oxfam's partners, are slowed by several challenges. These include:

- Limited involvement of local WROs in organizational capacity assessments leads to discrepancies between the capacity-strengthening priorities of INGOs and those of their local partners.
- Poor measurement of the effectiveness of capacity-strengthening support provided to WROs results from a lack of effective monitoring, evaluation, accountability, and learning frameworks for documenting progress, lessons learned, challenges, and achievements.
- Donors/INGOs do not allocate enough resources to facilitate provision of required capacity-strengthening support.
- Sustainability is not always integrated into capacity-strengthening support. For instance, owing to funding constraints, WROs continue to face capacity erosion by losing their experienced staff to other organizations that provide better salaries.
- Overreliance on traditional methods of capacity strengthening such as training limit opportunities for exploring alternative approaches such as exchanges and peer learning.

Overall, international partners have yet to transition from a capacity-building approach that focuses on identifying technical gaps or deficits that need to be filled to a capacity-sharing approach that promotes collaborative and mutual learning. While international partners still consider local WROs mainly recipients rather than a source of capacity-strengthening support or technical guidance, during COVID-19 there were some instances when international partners learned from their local grantees. Specifically, the community-level needs data collected by WROs provided key insights that INGOs learned from to design appropriate response interventions in collaboration with their local partners. Adaptive programming during the COVID-19 pandemic is another area where international actors learned from their local partners. For instance, one WRO documented its successes and lessons learned in repurposing its programs to address emerging community needs and operational challenges. These lessons informed programming in other countries where their donor was working with other local partners to respond to COVID-19 pandemic.

INFLUENCING

Pre-COVID-19 investments in building relationships with national and county governments and CSO networks were a key asset for advocacy during the pandemic. International humanitarian actors have always been unwilling to engage with the government, especially at the local level, out of concern that close working relationships with authorities may compromise their commitment to the principles of independence and neutrality in delivering humanitarian aid. To fill this engagement gap, WROs focused on building close working relationships with national and county governments over the years, which enabled them to access policymakers during the COVID-19 response. Moreover, during the COVID-19 period, WROs actively sought opportunities for influencing decisions by mapping existing coordination and advocacy forums.

Local WROs earned a seat at the decision-making table owing in part to the large constituency of marginalized groups (women, girls, teenage mothers, children, and women with disabilities) that they represent. Women account for 50.5% of Kenya's population (Kenya National Bureau of Statistics 2019), and poverty levels are higher in female-headed households (30.2%) than in male-headed households (26%) (Kenya National Bureau of Statistics 2016). The pandemic compounded the challenges that women and girls faced, creating a new urgency for their representation in humanitarian response decision-making.

The shift to virtual planning, coordination, and advocacy opened more engagement opportunities for WROs by reducing barriers to participation such as time and financial constraints. A WRO respondent explained: “Virtual platforms gave us a voice. We have been heard, understood, and considered in places we never thought we could access.”

WROs noted that following the relaxation of movement restrictions, government and nongovernment actors increasingly adopted a hybrid approach, allowing both physical and online engagements, further enhancing opportunities for participation in coordination and advocacy forums.

Oxfam leveraged its resources, knowledge, and connections to play a convening role to enhance the participation of its local WRO partners in advocacy. For instance, Oxfam facilitated the establishment of a consortium that brought together two of its local WRO partners, one national humanitarian actor, and two INGOs to conduct advocacy, while also implementing other COVID-19 response activities such as cash transfers. The consortium advocated for a gender-sensitive response at the national level, including making recommendations for equitable rollout of government-led response activities. The consortium also organized a high-level forum that brought together leaders from the Parliament and the ministries responsible for gender and social protection to discuss the needs of women and girls, issues such as SGBV, and how best to address them.

As individual organizations, Oxfam’s local WRO partners were engaged in various advocacy activities, including collecting data and preparing advisory opinions, which they used to engage with international humanitarian actors and national government ministries to highlight the challenges that women faced. The WROs also leveraged their strengths and networks to complement their advocacy capacity. For instance, one of the WROs that partnered with Oxfam noted that because of its limited capacity for advocacy, it collaborated with a national NGO that had expertise in women’s rights advocacy.

WRO RELATIONSHIPS WITH OTHER INGOs: INFLUENCING

Local WROs received financial and technical support from their international partners for advocacy, but not at a scale that reflected their true contribution to advocacy efforts during the pandemic. Only half of the consulted WROs received funding specifically dedicated to advocacy as part of their COVID-19 response. A few WROs also received technical support, including training on advocacy skills and access to policymakers through joint organization of advocacy forums and invitations to INGO, UN, and donor forums. Local WROs that did not receive funding for advocacy had to rely on their own scarce resources to advocate for the protection of the rights of women. This not only limited participation in advocacy but also led to financial strain among WROs.

Working in silos is still a key hindrance to joint programming and advocacy that could allow WROs to achieve impact at scale. Discussions in validation workshops revealed that many WROs were implementing similar interventions targeting the same beneficiaries in various locations, leading to duplication of effort. For example, toll-free lines/ USSD codes developed by individual WROs and their international partners proliferated, leading to uncoordinated documentation of SGBV cases and statistics that local and international actors needed for advocacy to reduce violence against women and girls during the pandemic. This demonstrates the need to scale up efforts by WROs and their international partners to form long-term coalitions and networks that can promote evidence-based advocacy and synergies in programming.

While virtual platforms enhanced access to forums, they did not automatically lead to influence. Local WROs noted that virtual forums can be crowded, with hundreds of participants trying to contribute to a discussion within a limited time. This means that in some cases, only the most vocal organizations could speak and be heard. While the national and county governments were open to discussions on the COVID-19 response, in some cases they either did not implement the recommendations made by WROs or changed the agreed response strategies without further

consultations with WROs. In some cases, government officials gave directives on response activities without consultation. This is illustrated by the following excerpt from a WRO respondent: “In government-led coordination committees, directives are sometimes given from above, limiting opportunities to influence how response is done.”

Invitations to participate in government-led consultation meetings on the COVID-19 response were not always extended to all stakeholders in an equitable manner. This was particularly a challenge to small WROs, as national and county governments tended to invite large organizations, such as the Kenya Red Cross or a few large or vocal WROs, to contribute to decision-making processes.

PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT

Creating visibility for the contributions of local WROs was an integral element of programming during the COVID-19 pandemic response. Oxfam integrated measures to acknowledge and promote the contributions of its local WRO partners in the response to the pandemic. At the outset, Oxfam made it clear to its donors that it was working with local partners who were to play a lead role in delivering aid to affected communities. Oxfam enhanced the visibility of WROs’ work in several ways, which include the following:

- Oxfam funded two WROs to revive or develop their websites to enhance the visibility of their work beyond the COVID-19 response.
- A WRO used part of the funding that it received from Oxfam to work with mainstream media, particularly the *Daily Nation*, to cover its work. This was a great opportunity for enhancing visibility for the local partner’s work, as mainstream media such as *Daily Nation* have a nationwide audience.
- Oxfam facilitated direct interaction and networking between its donors and local WRO partners through meetings and site visits. For instance, Oxfam worked with a consortium that included two of its local WRO partners, a national humanitarian actor, and two INGOs to organize a forum in which the consortium members met with the Danish ambassador in Mombasa and showcased their work, particularly their response to SGBV in informal settlements. Also, Oxfam facilitated access to the representatives of the European Union and the Danish Embassy, enabling its WRO partners to showcase their work in informal settlements in Nairobi.

A WRO noted that Oxfam involved it in media briefings and acknowledged its contributions to the pandemic response in reports and publications, including information, education, and communication materials that it was using for the response. A key area highlighted for improvement is the need to monitor and evaluate the effectiveness of the various strategies that were used to create visibility for the local WROs’ work. This would ensure that efforts to enhance the visibility of local partners are contributing to LHL in beneficial ways, such as promoting local partners’ access to new partnerships and direct funding from donors.

WRO RELATIONSHIPS WITH OTHER INGOs: PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT

Other INGOs also actively sought to create visibility for their local WRO partners’ contributions through a mix of strategies. These included acknowledging WROs’ contributions in social media platforms and donor reports, jointly branding aid and information, producing education and communication materials, highlighting the achievements of local partners in INGOs’ websites and newsletters, and involving local partners in media briefings as spokespersons. However, WROs emphasized the need for improved joint branding to ensure the local and international partners have equitable opportunities to create visibility for their work. For instance, WROs noted that in some cases their logos were excluded from the materials that were being used for the response.

Efforts to create visibility for local partners’ contributions are beginning to show signs of success. WROs noted that they had identified several partnership opportunities as a result of the visibility support provided by their partners. For instance, one of Oxfam’s WRO partners reported receiving

funding from the Heinrich Boll Foundation owing to the visibility of their work. Also, a WRO (not Oxfam's partner) was at an advanced stage of securing funding from IrishAid and Kenya Commercial Bank Foundation after direct introduction by its INGO partner. Importantly, WROs documented their achievements in the COVID-19 pandemic response and used that documentation to explore partnership and funding opportunities.

4. CONCLUSION

The findings from consultations with Kenyan WROs show that important progress has been made to promote the leadership of local humanitarian actors, but greater effort is still required to realize the LHL ambition. International partners facilitated local WROs' leadership of the COVID-19 response. WROs received financial and technical support from international humanitarian actors, which enabled initiation, design, implementation, and monitoring and evaluation of COVID-19 response interventions. The contributions of local WROs in the COVID-19 response were acknowledged by their international partners through different strategies aimed at enhancing the visibility of the local partners' work. Notably, Oxfam played a convening role by supporting its local partners in organizing high-level advocacy forums, thereby enabling WROs to amplify the voices of women and girls in policy and humanitarian response processes.

However, the pandemic also created significant challenges for WROs that may delay the realization of LHL. A key challenge was access to funding, which forced WROs to adopt cost-cutting measures such as laying off staff, reducing the scope of programs, and relying on volunteers to deliver aid. WROs also did not receive adequate support for their indirect costs and used reserve funds to implement unfunded response interventions, leading to financial strain. While there was some element of capacity strengthening in partnerships, key areas for LHL, such as strengthening capacity for leadership, gender justice, networking, and participation in policy discourse, did not receive sufficient support.

The momentum created by the pandemic represents an opportunity for local and international actors to strengthen WROs' leadership in humanitarian responses. Promoting LHL out of necessity is not enough. Deliberate and urgent efforts are needed to promote the leadership of local WROs through equitable partnerships, flexible funding, spaces for active participation in advocacy and networking forums, and collaborative strengthening of organizational capacities.

5. RECOMMENDATIONS

The following overall recommendations from the Kenya case study connect to the LHL principles. These recommendations target international actors, such as INGOs like Oxfam, donors, and UN agencies:

PARTNERSHIPS

- In partnerships where intermediaries are involved, donors should prioritize working with organizations (INGOs/UN agencies) that clearly demonstrate involvement of local WROs as equal partners in their programs. At the outset, intermediaries should clearly indicate to donors the local WROs that they work with, their roles in various stages of the program cycle, and the proportion of funding earmarked for them. Importantly, the intermediaries should always consult and involve WROs in communication with back donors to ensure the participation of WROs in decisions as equal partners.
- Donors and INGOs should provide opportunities for local WROs to review and inform their country strategic plans to ensure alignment of objectives. Inclusion of WROs' feedback in donors/INGOs' country plans will ensure that funding priorities are aligned with the priorities and work that WROs do. This will promote power balance by reducing instances where programs are imposed on WROs by donors/INGOs despite a lack of alignment with their priorities and objectives.
- Donors and INGOs should create the space for WROs to review partnership contracts and provide feedback, if necessary, before signing. The opportunity to negotiate for partnership terms and conditions will ensure that the partnership agreements are aligned to WROs' objectives, mandates, and standard operating procedures to ensure equitable partnerships.
- INGOs should promote the leadership of local WROs by creating more space for them to play a lead role in needs assessment, program design, implementation, and monitoring and evaluation. This requires adopting a community-led approach in which INGOs/donors shift decision-making power to WROs to identify needs and design appropriate interventions for the women and girls they represent, while INGOs provide technical support when necessary.
- INGOs should adopt policies that promote LHL, such as shifting from direct implementation of programs to working with local WROs as their implementing partners.

FUNDING

- INGOs should shift from project-based to multiyear, long-term strategic partnerships with WROs. Long-term working relationships provide opportunities for partners to gradually build trust and mutual respect, enhance capacity for implementation, and strengthen the leadership, advocacy, and networking capacity of WROs.
- Donors/INGOs should remove restrictive conditionalities and discriminatory funding modalities, such as calls for proposals to prequalified and preselected local organizations.
- Donors should dedicate a proportion of their funding for WROs, especially small WROs working at grassroots levels, to implement programs in areas where they have expertise. This will ensure access to funding by grassroots WROs that lack the capacity to compete with INGOs or national WROs.
- Donors should provide funding information, including calls for proposals, in ways that are accessible to WROs (especially those working at the grassroots levels or led by persons with disabilities), which often lack information on available funding opportunities and how to access them. This information should include simplified procedures for applying for funds to enhance access by WROs that have limited capacity in areas such as writing proposals.

- Donors and INGOs should commit to provide core funding based on a threshold jointly agreed with WROs to ensure that indirect and administrative costs, particularly staff costs, are adequately covered so that WROs have enough staff to deliver programs.
- In emergency contexts where community needs and operational challenges evolve rapidly—as was the case during the pandemic—donors and INGOs should provide greater flexibility to local WROs to make reasonable adjustments to budgets for both direct and indirect costs. This will enable WROs to reallocate resources effectively to address emerging unforeseen needs or challenges.

CAPACITY SHARING AND STRENGTHENING

- Donors should always include a budget for capacity strengthening to enable INGOs and their local WRO partners to address organizational needs identified by the WROs themselves, including leadership, networking, and advocacy.
- Donors and INGOs should ensure that capacity-strengthening support is aimed at promoting gender justice by enhancing the capacity for leadership among women. This includes equipping women with the skills to engage in humanitarian response and coordination and to conduct advocacy on women’s rights.
- Donors and INGOs should empower WROs, through training and technical support, to conduct their own capacity assessments to identify their organizational development needs and develop a plan for addressing these needs. This strategy will enable WROs to lead in identifying their own needs and seeking appropriate support.
- INGOs should conduct organizational capacity assessments in participatory and objective ways that provide opportunities for WROs to have a voice in deciding how these needs should be addressed. A participatory approach will ensure alignment of WROs’ and INGOs’ capacity-strengthening priorities. Also, INGOs can work with donors and WROs to develop a standardized, harmonized approach for conducting organizational capacity assessments and for sharing the outcomes, to prevent WROs from being subject to multiple assessments.
- INGOs and donors should consider building on the strengths and systems of WROs rather than imposing new ways of working. This will ensure that local partners are empowered to lead humanitarian responses while still working with INGOs/donors to address their capacity-strengthening needs.
- INGOs should collaborate with WROs to develop and use an effective monitoring, evaluation, accountability, and learning framework to monitor the effectiveness of capacity-strengthening support.
- INGOs should enhance the capacity of their local partners by giving them opportunities to learn by doing. Accordingly, WROs should be actively involved in all stages of the program cycle so they can gain skills and knowledge and take a lead role in areas where they have skills and expertise.
- Donors and INGOs should provide technical support to WROs in areas such as budgeting to enable them to accurately estimate their indirect costs.

PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT

- INGOs should work with their local partners to strengthen their communication capacity. Currently, most small WROs do not have websites, communication departments, or channels they can use to promote their work effectively. For instance, WROs could have garnered more support from stakeholders based on the SGBV caseloads they handled during the COVID-19 lockdown with increased visibility.

- INGOs should support their WRO partners to document their achievements and promote their work at national and community levels.
- INGOs and donors should strengthen local WROs' capacity for monitoring, evaluation, accountability, and learning. This will ensure that WROs are able to document their achievements and lessons learned, which they can showcase to enhance the visibility of their work.
- WROs should identify and document their unique expertise and achievements in humanitarian responses that differentiate them from other local actors. This will help them bargain or negotiate for better partnerships and funding arrangements with INGOs and donors.
- INGOs should facilitate WROs' direct access to donors through, for instance, introductions and referrals. This will enable WROs to showcase their work and explore opportunities for direct funding. Direct engagement with donors will also enable WROs to discuss the needs of women and girls with donors to ensure aid is delivered in appropriate way.

INFLUENCING

- INGOs and donors should play a convening role by providing technical and financial support to their partners to network and form coalitions for joint advocacy, particularly with WROs across the country.
- Funding should have a component for advocacy. This will ensure that local partners are able to participate actively in advocacy forums.
- INGOs should deliberately create opportunities for WROs to participate in humanitarian responses. For instance, by earmarking a proportion of budgets for WROs to implement programs in their areas of expertise, they would ensure that the needs of women and girls are adequately addressed.
- INGOs should work with government at local and national levels to ensure that coordination committees are gender-sensitive, with adequate opportunities for women to lead, participate, and influence decisions. Currently coordination committees, especially at the county level, are male dominated.

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NOTES

- 1 Unless otherwise stated, by Oxfam, this case study is referring to Oxfam in Kenya.
- 2 The WRO had to be innovative, establishing a working relationship with a doctor who provided support to those who needed reproductive health support.

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