TECHNOLOGIES IN HUMANITARIAN SETTINGS: BALANCED, PRINCIPLED, AND COMPLEMENTARY PARTNERSHIPS

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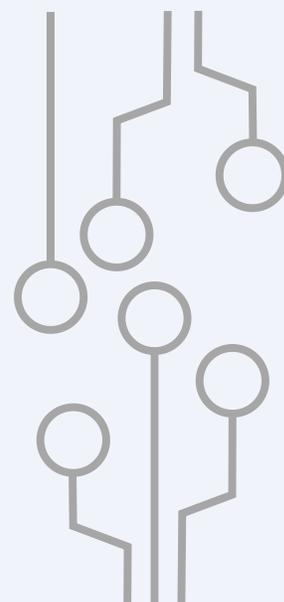
In brief:

- The development and implementation of digital technologies offer opportunities for the creation of new models of quality partnerships. However, it also carries the risk of reinforcing the imbalance of power between international and national or local actors, potentially leading to new forms of "techno-colonialism".

- The overall system and processes are not set up for balanced partnerships in support for the digital transformation of the humanitarian sector. The development of such partnership is hindered by perceptions of lack of capacity of local partners and over-confidence in the abilities of international actors.

- Knowledge-sharing mechanisms between local and global organizations are mostly absent, and efforts to upskill partners are limited to implementation-related activities instead of being focused on more strategic aspects of digital skills, humanitarian innovation and programming.

- Data ownership, rights and responsibilities are becoming key considerations in defining partnerships, often resulting in extractive practices that reduce the role of partners in the interpretation of results and in decision-making processes.

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INTRODUCTION

The goal of this report is to explore how partnerships between international humanitarian actors and local/national organizations are (or can be) established and managed in a balanced, equitable and complementary manner in light of the digital transformation and ongoing digitalization of the humanitarian space.

It focuses on what constitutes a 'quality' partnership in the context of digital innovation and standard uses of technology in humanitarian projects and programs, and sheds light on some of the common challenges and best practices concerning the development of partnerships in these contexts.

While there are a number of stakeholders playing important roles in the implementation and development of humanitarian partnerships, including institutional donors, private foundations, large corporations, and International government organizations, this report focuses primarily on: (1) traditional and new generation International Non-governmental Organizations (INGOs) carrying out operations in one or more aid recipient countries; and (2) National and/or Local Non-Government organizations (NGOs). Given the focus on Information and Communication Technology (ICT), the report also explores the role played by local/national private sector organizations built around the use or deployment of specific technologies for social purposes (i.e. social impact organizations) that are based in and operating within their own aid recipient country and not affiliated with any international private sector organization.

The report is divided into five sections. Following the introduction (section one), the second section, Research Approach, provides a brief summary of the general methodological approach, the period covered, and the type of stakeholders interviewed. The third section of the report, Subject, provides a general overview of digitalization in humanitarian spaces, as the contextual framework for understanding the development of partnerships in ICT innovation and programming. The fourth section, Findings, is devoted to the presentation of the findings based on desk research and more than 30 semi-structured interviews. Findings are broken down into the following components: Technology; Partnerships; People; Policies and Processes; and the Operating Environment. The final section, Key Considerations, provides actionable quick wins as well as more strategic, medium, and longer-term policy recommendations, that address the challenges, needs, and interests of both local and international actors in the development of quality partnerships.

RESEARCH APPROACH

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

The main question this report is designed to address: How balanced, principled, and complementary partnerships between International NGOs and national and/or local NGOs can and should be developed as part of technology innovation and digital programming activities? This report defines balanced, equitable and complimentary (or quality) partnerships as: purposeful and mutually empowering relationships, based on trust, growth, and equality, with a shared vision, accountability for all parties, and which engage the complementary strengths of the actors involved in ways that achieve greater impact than they could achieve alone when they collaborate on specific objectives, challenges or opportunities. [1]

To allow for comparisons between the different case studies, this research is structured around four analytical pillars: technology, people, policies and processes, and partnerships. There is a 5th dimension around the context provided by the ongoing COVID-19 global crisis which has exacerbated some of the challenges and created opportunities to drive change and transformation. These five lenses will be applied to all the case studies to ensure that the complex multidimensional nature of digital technologies' usage in humanitarian assistance are captured within each case study. A number of research sub-questions have been formulated in the context of these five pillars for the partnerships case study

Table 1: Analytical framework and research questions

TECHNOLOGY	How does technology innovation and the use of technology in humanitarian programs affect partnerships dynamics between international and national/local actors?
POLICIES AND PROCESSES	What policies and processes (if any) do organizations use to design, implement, and sustain quality partnerships between international and/or local humanitarian stakeholders in the context of ICT innovation and programming?
PEOPLE	What common challenges (and opportunities) do local organizations face when partnering with global organizations in the context of ICT innovation and programming? What challenges and opportunities do global organizations face when partnering with local organizations?
PARTNERSHIPS	How can ICT innovation and programming contribute to the development and implementation of quality partnerships? What do quality partnerships between global and local organizations look like in the context of ICT innovation and programming?
OPERATING ENVIRONMENT	How has the pandemic (and the digital acceleration in the humanitarian sector) provided opportunities, or resulted in a challenge, to embrace (or intensify) the development of partnerships between international and local humanitarian actors in the context of ICT innovation and programming?

METHODOLOGY

This research was undertaken between the months of January and July of 2022. It is qualitative in nature and uses a hybrid methodology involving the analysis of primary and secondary material and virtual semi-structured, open-ended interviews with key humanitarian stakeholders. A detailed and comprehensive desk review of relevant primary and secondary documents (strategy papers, opinion papers, evaluations, research reports, academic articles, etc.) was initially undertaken. The team then conducted 39 in-depth interviews (virtually) with key informants representing a variety of humanitarian organizations relevant to this case study, including academia (1), donor (2), humanitarian network actors (1), independent advisors (2), staff of international Non-Government Organization (INGO)(20), staff of international for-profit Organization (3), and staff of national/local Non-government Organization (10). [1]

As a result of some evidence gaps in the literature, especially on the issue of digitalization and its impact on partnerships between international and national and/or local actors, gathering primary data through in-depth personal interviews with stakeholders was deemed critical. Interviews were anonymized to ensure the information provided remains confidential and protected. Throughout this report, remarks made by interviewees affiliated with local organizations are identified as such so that their remarks can be contextualized, while all other key informants are affiliated with internationally based humanitarian organizations and donors.

The key stakeholders that this report focuses primarily on are:

(1) National and/or Local Non-Government organizations (NGOs) defined as "Organizations engaged in relief that are headquartered and operating in their own aid recipient country and which are not affiliated with an international NGO." [3] The definition also refers to local organizations that are part of an international network, confederation or alliance, as long as they maintain independent fundraising and governance systems. These organizations can either work in multiple subnational regions (i.e. national NGOs) or operate in a specific, geographically defined, subnational area of an aid recipient country (i.e. local NGOs).

(2) traditional and new generation International Non-governmental Organizations (INGOs) carrying out operations in one or more aid recipient countries, including locally-based organizations or country offices that are affiliated to an international organization through inter-linked financing, contracting, governance and/or decision-making systems. This report uses the term 'new generation humanitarian organizations' to describe humanitarian organizations that have been recently created around the use and deployment of new technologies, such as WeRobotics and the Humanitarian OpenStreetMap Team.

SUBJECT

The importance of partnerships between international and national humanitarian actors has been the subject of discussion for many years now. In 2007, for example, the newly created Global Humanitarian Platform (GHP), which included 40 global humanitarian organizations, developed and adopted the Principles of Partnership (equality, transparency, results-oriented, responsibility and complementarity). Designed to address some of the existing gaps within the humanitarian system, special significance was given to the role played by national actors, often the first responders, and to the need for strengthening their involvement and engagement in

humanitarian assistance and response.[4] Along similar lines, since 2010, Keystone Accountability has been conducting benchmark surveys of international NGOs' local partners with the goal of providing INGOs with vital information about their performance in relation to their work with local partner organizations.

In 2016, partnerships became a key topic of discussion across themes at the World Humanitarian Summit, from the improvement of humanitarian effectiveness and efficiency to the transformation of the humanitarian system through responsible innovation. Finding better ways of working with local and national actors was a big part of these discussions, which resulted in hundreds of commitments.[5] Most notably, core responsibility #4, 'Working Differently to end the need,' proposed a shift to reinforce, not replace, national and local systems, and to make humanitarian response and assistance "as local as possible, as international as necessary." [6]

A number of initiatives came out of the WHS with the goal to strengthen the role of national and local actors and improve the nature of their relationship with global organizations. Some of these efforts involved innovation, such as the Center for Humanitarian Data and the Global Alliance for Humanitarian Innovation. Others revolved around localization, defined as the process designed to improve the way the humanitarian system prioritizes, works with, engages, and supports national and local actors wherever there is a need, while also enabling local humanitarian leadership.[7] An important milestone in the pursuit of implementing the localization agenda within the humanitarian sector involved the Grand Bargain, but other initiatives have also been significant, including the Shifting the Power project by the Start Network (designed to strengthen the capacity and influence of local and national humanitarian actors), the Network for Empowered Aid Response (a consortia of local

and national organizations established to innovate and empower local communities), and Local to Global Protection (an initiative by humanitarians of different backgrounds committed to the transfer of power and agency to local and national actors). [8]

In 2019, the last Synthesis report on achievements and challenges to implement commitments to the 'Agenda for Humanity,' indicated that some progress has been made in relation to improving the quality of relations between international and local actors, but there is still a long way to move beyond pilot approaches and achieving systems-level change. According to the report, "much remains to be done to create a more balanced and equal relationship between international, national, and local responders." [9] This is primarily the result of challenges to operationalize all commitments and a lack of political will at the global level.

It is in this context that the process of digitalization started to transform humanitarian assistance. [10] The term digitalization in the humanitarian context refers to various technology related processes such as digital transformation, digital development, and digital innovation that can happen in parallel or in sequence, depending on each organization's vision and capacity. *Digital transformation* is often associated with IT level transformation (i.e. efforts by organizations to improve their internal processes and systems to make them more effective, efficient, accountable, and secured). *ICT4D* or digital development (which despite the use of the word 'development' has historically implied the use of digital technologies in both development and humanitarian assistance) refers to the specific use of digital technology tools, services and solutions in humanitarian projects and programs. Lastly, *technology Innovation* refers to efforts by humanitarian organizations to leverage ICTs as part of the wider humanitarian

Innovation processes, and allow programs to scale operations, respond faster, and be more effective and predictive. [11] Regardless of the term used, the goal for leveraging digital or ICT tools in humanitarian contexts involves the improvement of the quality of assistance, which can be measured according to a series of performance areas (i.e. effectiveness, efficiency, complementarity, locally led, accountability, relevance, etc.). [12]

While digital transformation was initially slow, [13] it experienced an acceleration with the COVID-19 pandemic; given international organizations' increasing reliance on the use of technology and local partners to design and execute their programs. Today, discussions around international and local partnerships have gained momentum, especially around the shift of power to local and national actors. A survey from Keystone involving 280 local partners in sub-Saharan Africa from 8 international NGOs, showed that 72 percent of local partners believed they had achieved better – more equal – ways of working with their international counterparts, and 73% believed the pandemic had made it easier for international actors to understand and support locally led priorities. [14]

This is an exciting and critical moment in the nexus between technology and partnerships in the humanitarian system. For the first time in five editions, ALNAP's Sate of the Humanitarian System (SOHS) report, [15] which covers the period from 2018-2021, delves into technology and innovation issues, and the impact these have in humanitarian assistance performance; including issues of complementarity and connectedness. [16] It is also a pivotal moment for digitalization. As Jonathan Donner argues, the pandemic "is an important moment in which behaviors, norms, and policies can shift as much in a few chaotic months as they did in a more stable decade. It is also a moment in which deliberate pressures, applied now, can

determine whether further, accelerated digitization leads towards inclusion and fairness and shared community, or not." [17] Although evidence is limited on how the use of digital technology impacts the development of partnerships or how a focus on balanced partnerships can contribute to responsible, inclusive, and ethical uses of digital technology in the humanitarian sector, there are signs showing that this might be changing.

All in all, while the pandemic has highlighted the importance of working with local partners, and provided an opportunity to develop more equal relationships between local and international actors in the context of ICT innovation and programming, much remains to be done. Furthermore, discussions on how digitalization may contribute or impact the development of balanced partnerships with local organizations have been scarce, with some exceptions, [18] and the process is not well documented. Most partnership discussions revolve around the private sector or the local governments, with little attention paid to local NGOs. This report aims to generate new evidence and bring attention to how partnerships between global organizations and local/national NGOs are affected by the increased adoption and use of digital tools to both support humanitarian assistance and enable innovative approaches.

FINDINGS SUMMARY

- Many humanitarians express concern that digital innovation in humanitarian assistance may lead to potentially new forms of "techno-colonialism."
- Local organizations' digital infrastructure capacity remains another important challenge.
- Considering existing local gaps in digital modernization - which can have negative impacts on quality partnerships - systems have not been configured to support digital transformation of local partners.
- The use of specific technologies or platforms can have positive impacts in the development of quality partnerships.
- Local actors also argued that technology offers an opportunity for complementarity in the context of quality partnerships.
- Technology can also be a catalyst for the creation of new models of quality partnerships.
- There are no sector-wide or organization-wide standards that effectively define quality partnerships in the context of ICT innovation and programming in humanitarian contexts.
- International organizations face additional challenges that are not specific to their digital transformation, such as historical trajectories.
- There is a problem of incoherence and a significant disconnect between policy and practice.
- There are also significant gaps in the development of indicators to define and measure quality partnerships.
- One of the key constraints in the development of balanced partnerships in the humanitarian sector involves restricting funding structures which affects both ICT and non-ICT programming.
- There are some promising donor initiatives that have been recently designed to bring local actors into the humanitarian

ecosystem. More efforts are however needed, particularly in the ICT innovation and programming area.
- Channeling small grants directly to local/national NGOs could represent a first step in the right direction to start building trust.
- Another problem associated with funding is related to time constraints that are typical in humanitarian assistance, and which are exacerbated in the context of ICT innovation and programming.
- There are significant questions around data rights and data responsibility that need to be resolved for the development of balanced and equitable partnerships in the ICT space.
- There is a fixation among international humanitarian organizations with data ownership only partly warranted by issues of data protection. This often is associated with exclusion in data-based decision-making and lowers the potential value of the data collected.
- Data protection is relevant in the context of equitable partnerships in ICT innovation and programming.
- INGOs have remained unprepared to face directly, or through their partners, the growing complexity and frequency of cybersecurity threats.
- One of the most prominent challenges in the development of balanced partnerships involves perceptions of lack of capacity of local partners and over-confidence in the abilities of international actors.
- Training to local actors tends to be mainly related to implementation-related activities instead of being focused on more strategic aspects of humanitarian innovation and digital programming.
- Knowledge-sharing mechanisms between local and global organizations, especially around innovation, are mostly absent.
- Local actors are at greater risk when technologies are used in humanitarian

- contexts, especially in dangerous environments where global organizations need to rely on remote management.
- There is no habit or capacity from local branches of international organizations to build network locally and assess the specific digital needs of potential partners.
- Humanitarian actors tend to build and maintain partnerships with local actors they already know and have worked with in the past, regardless of whether or not they have the appropriate digital skills.
- Given that Key Performance Indicators of global humanitarian organizations are related to growth, shifting power to local organizations becomes contrary to their survival.
- There is a low appetite for risk, which negatively impacts local innovation and balanced partnerships.
- The overall system and processes within the sector are not set up for balanced partnerships between local and international organizations to develop or take root in the area of ICT innovation and digital programming.
- There are significant gaps in evidence around what quality partnerships between global and local organizations look (and should look) like in the context of ICT innovation and programming.
- There is still a wide gap in terms of giving more agency and digital capacity to local partners in humanitarian partnerships.
- Co-creation and equal collaboration has to start at the design phase, be intentional, and be maintained throughout the different phases of the humanitarian program cycle. [59]
- Best practices are starting to emerge, especially among new generation humanitarian organizations, for example through inclusive network models and innovation labs.

- Partnerships can be created around social impact organizations and international (or local) humanitarian organizations.
- The use of digital tools can potentially open opportunities for INGOs to redefine their roles within the humanitarian system.
- The pandemic has triggered both a digital acceleration in the humanitarian sector and increased collaboration and coordination with local partners.
- Unless localization and the development of quality partnerships are perceived as strategic goals rather than operational needs, systemic change will be unlikely to happen.

FINDINGS

(unless otherwise specified, quotes are from key informant interviews)

TECHNOLOGY

There is consensus among humanitarians that technology is a key enabler that can significantly improve the efficiency, effectiveness, and timeliness of humanitarian response, and make it more people centered. But to succeed, humanitarians must first understand how technology is positively or negatively impacting local partners and how it is affecting the development of quality partnerships between international and local organizations. Discussions on this issue have so far been limited

Many humanitarians express concern that digital innovation in humanitarian assistance may lead to potentially new forms of "techno-colonialism." [19]

According to some interviewees, digital innovation can be a double-edged sword for the development of quality partnerships. As a key informant argued, "technology is one of those addictive things because [it] doesn't really allow you to exit. It allows you to do things more effectively, more efficiently. … It gives you a reason to stay because now we can improve what we've done over the past. … Now we have a new reason to stay and to train people." Other challenges mentioned by key informants included potential hackings into local or international systems, or information collected being traced or copied, which may become a breach of trust and cost the organization reputation, resources and future partnerships.

Local organizations' digital infrastructure capacity remains another important challenge.

There are many different layers of technology that are needed in humanitarian contexts.

Generally speaking, in situations where the use of some form of technology is needed, a key informant noted, "most partners do not have the needed infrastructure, bandwidth, capacity, power surge/breakdown and space to host digital tools … this limits communication, collaboration, and achieving some objectives." Technology can thus widen the gap between local and global organizations in the absence of appropriate and needed digital support. In fact, local actors interviewed for this report indicated that technology has increased the inequity between local and international organizations. As a local actor stated, "Gaps are increasing and I think technology is responsible for that … Those organizations that already have access and opportunities are having better access and better opportunities and those organizations that don't are being left behind."

All in all, and in spite of existing local gaps in digital modernization - which can have negative impacts on quality partnerships - systems have not been configured to support digital transformation of local partners.

One key informant contended that their organization did not provide direct funding to support IT modernization of local partners: "we would like them to adopt what is feasible, affordable, and sustainable for them." This can lead to system inefficiencies and situations where, for example, people at headquarters are designing very sophisticated GDPR policies for data protection but on the ground, a key informant indicated, data is being "collected in paper logs, being photographed, and transferred via WhatsApp for digitization because there are no computers."

Quality partnerships should ensure local partners have a digital infrastructure in place so that they can participate on an equal basis. As a local actor argued, technology projects need to come with different enabling conditions for local partners, especially when gaps are pronounced.

The most basic and important one is connectivity, but capacity building and digital tools that are appropriate for context are equally important.

The use of specific technologies or platforms can have positive impacts in the development of quality partnerships.

Some see opportunities, rather than drawbacks, in the use of innovation and technology, [20] which in their view can help change existing asymmetries, shift power dynamics, and contribute to both greater local humanitarian leadership and locally led innovation and development. [21]

As a local actor noted, "technology can help us understand the real problems, the root causes, so that we can seek sustainable solutions." This said, local key informants argued, the use of technology in the humanitarian context should never be about creating the fanciest ICT platform but going to the ground and using digital tools that are appropriate for the local context, that can be used and maintained by local organizations; the goal is to "find durable, sustainable solutions."

While this report does not focus on any digital technology or ICT service in particular, some digital tools used to enable certain humanitarian activities (such as Cash and Voucher Assistance) or designed in a certain way (i.e. Open Source technology) have become particularly relevant to discussions about balanced partnerships and localization efforts. Giulio Coppi, for example, notes that no-code systems have the potential to strengthen technology democratization "by reducing some of the access barriers faced by local NGOs in the access to technology." [22] Open source can also more easily lead to local retention and sustainability, following the exit of international partners, given its flexibility, relative low cost and minimal learning curve. [23] All in all, given the existing power and

resource asymmetries in the humanitarian system, "the lack of budget for licenses at the local level is a comparatively small obstacle and – alone – won't be enough to change the paradigm." [24]

Local actors also argued that technology offers an opportunity for complementarity in the context of quality partnerships.

Every local organization need not have drones and drone pilots, because it's unsustainable. But, and that's why partnerships are so important... When we fly drones in a disaster context, we assemble a group of villagers [...] Once we have captured the data, we do some preliminary findings, we make a presentation to the Farmers Group or Women's group, and then they often correct what is interpreted by the IT engineers. So the application of this technology can be [improved] when it is used together with local actors. [...] And data should be accessible to everyone so that it can help [locally-led] programming.

Technology can also be a catalyst for the creation of new models of quality partnerships.

WeRobotics represents an example of how a technology-based humanitarian organization, centered around the use of drones, can become the catalyst of a new localization and partnership model. WeRobotics' *Inclusive Networks Model* has been designed to empower their locally based Flying Labs Network and the ecosystem of local and international actors around it. [25] The key question is whether this model can be adapted to traditional humanitarian organizations with radically different business models and modus operandi and legacy issues (see section on Partnerships).

POLICIES AND PROCESSES

Stated commitments to build and develop strong partnerships with local organizations have been abundant for the past few years, but making sure those commitments are matched with effective processes, resources, and efforts to bring local partners into equal relationships with global organizations has been challenging. There are still important power imbalances that are present in the humanitarian system that have a significant impact in the way partnerships are developed and implemented in the area of ICT innovation and programming. These manifests themselves most prominently in three policy areas or levels: (1) standards and processes, (2) funding, and (3) data management.

STANDARDS AND PROCESSES

There are no sector-wide or organization-wide standards that effectively define quality partnerships in the context of ICT innovation and programming in humanitarian contexts.

While a number of global humanitarian organizations have developed frameworks and policies on partnerships, these have yet to incorporate the way in which technology may impact these partnerships, or how balanced partnerships should be defined and implemented in the digital space. Part of the problem relates to the prevalence of significant gaps in evidence around how organizations are implementing their digital transformation (which is only starting in many cases), and how they are working with local partners in ICT innovation and programming. Given the divergent experiences and differing procedures and legal frameworks, harmonization and standardization of digitalization and partnerships becomes complicated.

International organizations face additional challenges that are not specific to their digital transformation, such as historical trajectories.

Organizational legacies are difficult to change, especially in the absence of strong commitment by the leadership. As a key informant contended, "it's so much more than just a mindset; it's about all the systems that are not fit for that purpose …. It's human resources, it's the financial system, it's the legal system. It's all these systems that we have in place basically to make sure that we're not taking on any risks or that the donor takes risks, and all of that needs to be revisited and updated in order for localization to be true localization."

Barbelet suggests that progress is "being held back by a lack of prior investment and years of reluctance by large international organizations to adapt their partnership policies and practices beyond remote programming and sub-contracting." [26] Furthermore, most INGOs do not have a clear idea or have reached consensus within their organization about what the end goal is in terms of localization and developing quality partnerships. As one informant indicated, "it's one thing to say that we work for localization … but if you want to see the full picture of what that means to us as an international organization, then it becomes a little bit more complicated … [it] takes a while to conceptualize, [to harmonize], and even more to practice." And even when consensus is reached and a policy is adopted, which can take a long time in large humanitarian organizations with different members and different traditions, it usually takes years to fully implement.

There is a problem of incoherence and a significant disconnect between policy and practice.

As a case in point, while the Principles of Partnership were endorsed by members of the Global Humanitarian Platform in 2007, implementation has been challenging given the lack of accountability mechanisms, incentive structures, and political will. As a key informant argued, there is still a big gap between policy

and practice in the humanitarian sector, which is particularly acute in the development and implementation of partnerships (and which extends to the area of innovation and ICT programming). As he described in relation to a global humanitarian organization, "the [partnership] policy was great. The talk was great. The way they described partnerships was, you know, maybe not perfect, but it was really good and really forward thinking. The few partners that we did speak to [however] described it exactly the same as you would imagine […] It was like, no it it's not a partnership, it's service delivery. And so, I think there's that gap between the policy and the practice"

There are also significant gaps in the development of indicators to define and measure quality partnerships.

While a number of measurement tools and frameworks have been developed in recent times both at program level and organization-wide, they lack ICT indicators and they are not been widely used by global organizations. The Network for Empowered Aid Response (NEAR), for example, has developed a tool, the Localization Performance Measurement Framework, [27] designed to measure different localization dimensions, including the development of equitable partnerships. While the tool is designed for NEAR members (and other local and national actors), it can also be used by global actors in the sector. It is however unclear how widespread the use of this tool is among international humanitarian organizations.

FUNDING

One of the key constraints in the development of balanced partnerships in the humanitarian sector involves restricting funding structures which affects both ICT and non-ICT programming.

The humanitarian funding ecosystem makes partnerships between local/national and international organizations challenging to attain as funds continue to be concentrated in a small clique of UN agencies and big international NGOs. According to the latest Global Humanitarian Assistance Report, direct funding to local and national actors fell significantly in 2021, in volume and as a share of total assistance, from 3% in 2020 to 1.2% in 2021, with most of the funding reaching national and local organizations through intermediaries (although indirect funding remains limited and the gap between direct and indirect funding is likely bigger). [28]

There are several problems with this system. Some major donors are not permitted to fund NGOs that are based outside of their territory, and most of the funding is thus redirected via intermediaries such as the UN and INGOs, divesting local organizations of critical funding needed for organizational and IT sustainability and innovation. [29] If local organizations are to play a more active role in humanitarian innovation and digital programming, they must be provided with enough funding to invest in their own innovative programs and digital transformation. [30] As a local informant stated, donors and international INGOs should ensure that "part of the indirect cost and overhead goes to technology and to the digitalization" of local partners. Instead, a local practitioner contended, local organizations continue to survive project to project. "You need machines and know how, but also people who understand and can work with digital tools … You can't have this unless you have multiyear, predictable and flexible financing. "

If you have a website, you need a web manager. You need one communication manager who knows technology and knows how to put the content across. Local organizations don't have that kind of [resources] … They don't have enough

funding even to renew the domain name [...] That's why ... the gap is widening because UN agencies and INGOs have the power to be very aggressive to digitalize, to have fancy websites, to have presence on social media, to come up with campaigns on Facebook, LinkedIn, Twitter, etcetera. Where is the money available for local organizations to do all of that? I haven't seen a single example where INGOs have helped their local partners on that.

When funding is available for local actors, barriers are too high, in terms of reporting but also in terms of regulations. A local actor described a grant opportunity offered by a donor as too cumbersome to complete; "We started and we gave up because most of the language was not understood by us. The language for compliance we couldn't understand. […] It's again a power imbalance." [31] Locally-based social impact organizations or startups face additional challenges given their lack of familiarity with the application process and stringent financial requirements. As a key informant noted, "The application process is completely foreign to them. We've had people get furious at [the degree to which] humanitarian NGOs are expected to look at their [financial books] … that is not normal in the private sector."

The system also rewards only certain types of innovation (not necessarily the ones that meet local needs). [32] As a key informant contended, if donors were more inclined to fund interoperable, open-source solutions, local organizations would benefit significantly. It would allow easier access to technology, better targeting to local needs, and a more sustainable local ecosystem.

Open source [...] is low cost, it helps to build up the skill sets, [and] it's a lower barrier of entry. You don't need to be a PhD to

basically do some integration work, but it does build a local economy and that becomes really exciting and a really interesting way of navigating those two tensions towards reusability and scalability with local ecosystems. [...] At the moment, the rules of the market are let's give big chunks of money to a small number of organizations, which means it's all going to [big organizations] and they're not going to make it interoperable.

There are some promising donor initiatives that have been recently designed to bring local actors into the humanitarian ecosystem. More efforts are however needed, particularly in the ICT innovation and programming area.

USAID, for example, has pledged to target 25 percent of USAID assistance to local partners, and DFID introduced a new requirement during the pandemic whereby INGOs had to pass on equal or greater levels of indirect cost recovery to their local and national NGO partners when funded via its Covid19 response [33] (the UK's Rapid Response Facility is now requiring grantees to include overhead costs for local partners, "recognizing that they too need to finance the running costs of their organizations." [34]).

Some European countries, such as Norway, Finland and Denmark are starting to require grantees "to demonstrate how their projects build local capacities and how affected people are included in planning and implementation." [35] Lastly, USAID Administrator Samantha Power has pledged that by the end of the decade, 50 percent of USAID programming, "will need to place local communities in the lead to either co-design a project, set priorities, drive implementation, or evaluate the impact of our programs." [36]

More efforts are however needed, particularly in the ICT innovation and programming area

"to strengthen the environment for fair, equitable and ultimately effective innovation partnerships." [37] Furthermore, Some of these donor initiatives have been tied to covid19 responses, leaving funding for other types of humanitarian assistance unchanged. [38]

Relaxing financial regulations and reporting, however, means introducing risks. As one key informant argued, by making financial reporting more streamlined, you are increasing the potential for fraud; "It's hard to get large donors to make a decision like that … but that would be one way that would make a difference in the use of local partners. Whether it's possible or not, that's the question." Similarly, a local actor contended,

> *"There's probably a reason why the donor community gets [intermediaries] to manage a grant. Of course we have challenges, and whenever money is involved donors rather have someone who they trust, and has a particular skill set to handle certain things […] but there has to be some knowledge [sharing], some capacity building in grant management. Institutional support is very important … [And] there has to be some trust building."*

Another local actor suggested donors should stop working exclusively with global organizations and develop new grant modalities where local and global organizations are brought together under the grant agreement. As he contended, "It should be a tripartite agreement: Local actors, intermediary organizations, and the donor."

Some humanitarian organizations have managed to overcome some of these barriers. One key informant, for example, described a funding situation as follows:

> *We thought the emergency [funding] was too small. … but nobody else wanted to bid*

> *on it either and the response was really needed. And [the donor] just wasn't comfortable, there were some due diligence issues and compliance issues [in terms of contracting to national NGOs]. So what we did in this case was we ran all the digital cash through the local partner, we taught them how to manage it. We taught them how to track it and we had the money go through them and they had to manage it instead of it going through us and us managing it. So that is really the end goal … we're really pushing a mindset change. By modeling it and showing them actually how to manage the technology, I think that is really pushing even a change in the way that they respond.*

While the above represents a solution designed to address a particular context,

> *Channeling small grants directly to local/national NGOs could represent a first step in the right direction to start building trust.*

As a key informant noted, "We have pushed [donors] to get to a place where [they] can eventually contract directly to national NGOs because it's actually not cost effective for an INGO … to manage a $63,000 grant or $150,000 grant if the emergencies are relatively small." Some donors are starting to think more strategically about how they can find ways to integrate local partners into international funding structures; some are even in the process of putting in place systems that will allow them to directly contract local NGOs. But for these systems to work as intended, concerted efforts are needed to bring local NGOs to a place where they can manage donor funding and ensure that donors, for their part, relax some of their financial and reporting requirements.

Another problem associated with funding is related to time constraints that are typical in humanitarian assistance, and which are exacerbated in the context of ICT innovation and programming.

As Barbelet has noted, building quality partnerships and supporting capacity of local actors takes valuable time, which oftentimes is not available in humanitarian crises. [39] Moreover, short-term funding cycles are not conducive to the type of long-term investment that is required to build quality relationships and partnerships, and support capacity, especially in the ICT4D space. [40] Also the lack of funding for preventive and preparedness work does not allow for this type of work to happen before a crisis. [41]

DATA MANAGEMENT

There are significant questions around data rights and data responsibility that need to be resolved for the development of balanced and equitable partnerships in the ICT space.

There are still big power imbalances, especially in contexts where international humanitarian organizations come with resources that are attached to the use of specific data management systems, leaving local implementing organizations with little say. If an international organization comes with funding that has strings attached, there is no room for negotiation or collaboration, and no basis for the development of balanced partnerships.

There is a fixation among international humanitarian organizations with data ownership only partly warranted by issues of data protection. This often is associated with exclusion in data-based decision-making and lowers the potential value of the data collected.

As a key informant contended, "it's less about giving a system like LMMS [Last Mile Mobile

Solutions] to a local organization to help them with their digital transformation, or to help them manage their data better. It's more like, 'here, use this, but that data then is ours'' … I've personally found that a huge dilemma." Often times, there is lack of clarity as to what happens with the data local partners collect from the communities, or the findings simply never reach local partners and local communities. In this sense, "data acts as a form of internal colonization." [42] One local actor acknowledged that they were not able to see the actual impact of their research, and "local communities rarely see the results of research."

When you collect data, you tell the community that it will inform policy makers but whether [INGOs] actually use these research findings, we never get to know.

There is also the issue of local knowledge and local needs. It is common practice among humanitarian organizations to work with local partners and local communities in data collection but given the absence of the latter in the decision-making process, it is unclear the degree to which the data collected can be useful to local partners and/or local communities. As a key informant wondered:

"We can provide them with data, but is that data useful to them if they are not engaged and involved in the decision-making process on an equal footing?"

Data protection is relevant in the context of equitable partnerships in ICT innovation and programming.

How do you support local partners with respect to data management and data protection? What is the balance of responsibility across those different types of partners for data and data protection? What are the most feasible, sustainable, locally relevant ways to train people on data protection? Local

partners may also be working for different implementing agencies, with different funding sources. In these contexts, "whose responsibility is it to cover the data to make sure that this organization is protecting data and which data? All the data they collect or the data just from this one project?"

There is also confusion among the global partners about how to address some of the local digital challenges in the area of privacy and data rights. A local actor argued:

"Almost every international player wants to come up with a particular tool to track privacy violations, to try to be seen doing something towards that, and you find that this creates confusion locally … on what to prioritize. … [ultimately] if you're developing advocacy [around these issues] the state and the big platforms, they don't take you seriously."

Notwithstanding the complexity around data management and data protection, local and international key informants argued that few INGOs use responsible data guidelines or policies consistently, not because they do not understand them but because they find it difficult to move from the principle of responsible data to the practice. Indeed, while many INGOs have developed responsible data policies and related guidelines, operationalizing these at the field level remains a challenge.

INGOs have remained unprepared to face directly, or through their partners, the growing complexity and frequency of cybersecurity threats.

Given the challenges faced by humanitarian organizations, and the complex array of organizations and partners working on the ground, some are calling for collective efforts to address some of the challenges associated with data protection and data management. As a case

in point, a local actor argued that humanitarian organization cannot manage data on their own.

"[Both local and global organizations need to] come together to collectively develop the capacity to collect and safely store and use data. It's storage, software development, analysis, data privacy, data protection, etc. It's a number of things. One organization cannot do it all."

The recent launch of a collective initiative intended to support global humanitarian organizations in cybersecurity preparedness [43] represents a step in the right direction. But local NGOs and local networks need to be more firmly brought into this type of initiatives given that they face similar, and often greater, risks on the ground. As a local key informant suggested, local NGOs need urgent support in data safety and data safety solutions, especially in contexts where local NGOs are regularly broken into or become the target of cyber-attacks. Capacity building around data safety is also needed so that local organizations can protect data and identify and use safety tools based on needs and context. It is about "investing in the whole transformation of an institution […] and building the knowledge and the skill set" that is needed in data protection.

PEOPLE

Different actors face different challenges and opportunities. This section discusses separately (1) local and national organizations, (2) Country Offices, and (3) INGOs / IGOs.

LOCAL/NATIONAL ORGANIZATIONS

One of the most prominent challenges in the development of balanced partnerships involves perceptions of lack of capacity of local partners and over-confidence in the abilities of international actors.

As one local actor noted, there is a mistrust or misconception in terms of understanding local capacity, which promotes a heavy involvement on the part of the international organization rather than a collaborative effort to identify strengths and weaknesses of both the local and the international partner, and ways to empower local partners. As a result, priorities and preferences are forced upon local partners by international actors with minimal input. Conversely, a key informant from a study on Cash and Voucher Assistance (CVA) noted that "some local stakeholders have a negative perception of their own capacities and potential role … creating a further barrier to change." [44] According to informants from the same study on CVA, international organizations use these perceptions as an excuse to sustain their leading role in CVA, posing a "challenge to integrating local stakeholders in operational models for scaling the delivery of CVA." [45]

Training to local actors tends to be mainly related to implementation-related activities instead of being focused on more strategic aspects of humanitarian innovation and digital programming.

Irrespective of the perceived lack of capacity and expertise, which tends to be influenced by INGOs' priorities and preferences, a local actor noted that there is "a lack of proper contextualization in terms of what the actual [technology] needs are." Ultimately, when capacity building to local organizations is discussed within the humanitarian sector, it is more often than not guided by international organization's standards and less so by local organizations' interests. As Veronique Barbelet has argued, "defining and assessing capacity is not a technical exercise but a political one. … past efforts at capacity strengthening have not necessarily resulted in more locally-led humanitarian action, in part because they have tended to focus on making local organizations a better fit for partnerships, rather than better or

more effective humanitarian actors in their own right." [46] There is also reluctance from local organizations to challenge the status quo "for fear of losing funding;" [47] which further aggravates dependency relations with global organizations, and, as a local informant contended, competition among local actors. Another local informant noted,

> They are controlling funding, … and if I have to continue receiving funding because I have to sustain my organization, I just say yes to them. I don't think on my own. Instead, whatever thinking is coming from the top, we just go and implement. This is a very dangerous mindset.

As a result of these dynamics and given the absence of an analysis to understand what organization is best placed to respond to a particular situation, international NGOs are assumed to have the capacity and the digital knowledge in a crisis and are trusted by donors – irrespective of their familiarity with (and readiness to respond in) certain contexts – and local organizations are generally presumed to lack digital capacity and overall capacity across the board. [48] Capacity should instead be understood as an actor's contribution to alleviating the suffering of the target population as opposed to its ability to use certain technologies or systems that are designed to report to donors or to partner with an international organization. [49]

There are some additional barriers local actors face that further undermine the development of balanced partnerships. One involves the exclusion of local NGOs from the sources of funding for humanitarian research and innovation, which results in the underrepresentation of these organizations in research and innovation outputs. [50] This often leads to a situation in which locally based solutions or locally-led innovations are not discovered or recognized because they have not

been created or financed by the Global North. [51] But even when local innovations are provided with funding, they are sometimes taken up by international organizations, not allowing local actors to benefit from the scaling of their innovations. As a local actor argued,

> *There's no balance. … The amount of work, the amount of initiatives or new ideas that we bring to the table on the partnership is huge …. But [they are not] extended or scaled up by [us]. It is scaled up by another international organization. So there is that feeling, if you like, that there is a copying of ideas. [...] International organizations [should] identify the local initiatives … and build the capacity [of the local actor to scale those ideas] instead of seeing an initiative and saying this one I can manage. And then taking the initiative out of the local actor.*

Knowledge-sharing mechanisms between local and global organizations, especially around innovation, are mostly absent.

Another problem includes existing "asymmetries of knowledge" [52] caused by both a lack of exposure to other humanitarian contexts, and the exclusion of local organizations from knowledge creation. This lack of exposure and experience limits the ability of local communities that are affected by a crisis to identify common challenges and digital strategies that have previously been used, whether these were successful or not. As one key informant from Newman et al. observed, the "body of knowledge around innovation [in humanitarian contexts] is very remote to local organizations." [53] At the same time, capacity and knowledge cannot be understood outside of context, as specific contexts will require specific knowledge that only local organizations can provide (while international actors' capacity and knowledge is rarely questioned or critically assessed). [54]

Local actors are at greater risk when technologies are used in humanitarian contexts, especially in dangerous environments where global organizations need to rely on remote management.

As noted by a local actor, risk is often transferred to partners on the ground – usually without proper protection – when the physical conditions or conflict dynamics become too dangerous for the presence of international staff. In these contexts, the military roots of certain ICTs can "make their use suspicious to armed groups and render local humanitarian staff 'legitimate targets'." [55] Even when international staff remains on the ground, local partners are always at greater risk of digital surveillance and retaliation, with volatile and rapidly changing situations becoming particularly unsafe for local aid workers. [56] Ensuring local partners are provided with proper support and resources to manage risks associated with the use of data and other digital technologies (and involving them in risk management decisions) should be a key component of balanced partnerships between local and international organizations.

COUNTRY OFFICES

There is no habit or capacity from local branches of international organizations to build network locally and assess the specific digital needs of potential partners.

In the context of country offices, there are a series of challenging factors and capacity gaps that make people overlook the possibility of seeking or even considering local partners. While some organizations have adopted local engagement practices in ICT innovation and programming, there are two persistent problems. One is related to a widespread mindset within certain humanitarian circles that there is no local digital capacity that is worth engaging or an elitist approach to local

knowledge and local expertise. A key informant noted that even when local organizations are encouraged to interact with country offices, "it often goes not very far."

Local offices [...] They don't have that kind of muscle ... to feel the pulse of the local tech environment. They start from the assumption that they need a big company to sell them a product. They don't think that maybe Cameroun is one of the most thriving tech environments in the region. And Nigeria is the same and Dakkar is pretty active as well. And Kenya. ... they don't see it as part of their job to actually create a local ecosystem or cultivate that kind of local environment, the local ecosystem that will one day allow them to find partners, to build projects, or that will make people feel comfortable to knock at their door and say, look, I've got this ... project or I wrote the script that allow you to do analysis in remote areas. Why don't we test it?"

Humanitarian organizations should also be prepared to understand and support the digital needs of their local partners and provide any needed capacity. As a local informant noted, if a humanitarian organization is using satellite imagery to collect data, country offices should know whether local partners have the resources to use the technology. If local organizations lack such capacity, humanitarian organizations should ensure local partners can also collect, analyze, and benefit from this technology. A key informant also argued that international organizations should come prepared with a list of questions to reflect on the ICT situation at the local level. For example, what is the digital infrastructure in the location? What is the cost for local organizations to use data? What digital tools are best suited for the local context and for the local partners?

It's really about ... making sure that the approach is really bottom up and asking what they need and then start from there. Then you can say: 'There's this other technology available, which is a bit of an upgrade from what you have access to. What do you think? Is it appropriate for that location?' If you come from there, you would have a much better outcome in terms of real change and it can transform those relationships actually."

Humanitarian actors tend to build and maintain partnerships with local actors they already know and have worked with in the past, regardless of whether or not they have the appropriate digital skills.

This not only creates an inherent bias, undermining other local actors that may be better fit, but it also creates two-way dependency relationships. This is partly because country offices are overburdened and overstretched, which, as a humanitarian actor from a country office argued, gives them insufficient time to complete proper scoping of local organizations and stakeholders on the ground. There are also no systems and/or processes in place to vet local providers of technology and to identify appropriate local partners. As a result, "either they go with local providers who aren't a good choice, or they don't know about them or they don't give them credit for being able to do what it is they do because they're more aware of global north solutions." As another key informant argued, the problem is not engaging with a local partner, the challenge is to identify an appropriate partner that is fit for the work. As a result, there is an 'over indexing' with certain partners,

"We're trying to work on crypto in East Africa and what I found from some of our colleagues is they've identified the one company that's doing crypto in this East African country. And because that relationship is the only one that currently exists that they know ... we're completely over indexing on that company and building out a project that's really based on them... We need to take a step back and actually identify what the problem is." (KII -INGO).

Decisions on (whether and) who to partner with are ultimately dependent upon the will of the people on the ground. As a key informant noted, "those who want are actually building projects [and empowering] their own staff and local actors while managing data and building analytical skills and frameworks … Those who don't think that's important, they're not going to do it anyway. It's a matter of priorities. … It's just a matter of how important this thinking is."

INGOS/IGOS

Given that Key Performance Indicators of global humanitarian organizations are related to growth, shifting power to local organizations becomes contrary to their survival.

There is a dissonance in the humanitarian international system. On the one hand, international NGOs are publicly talking and making commitments about shifting power to local organizations and local communities. On the other hand, these organization's boards and leadership are pushing for growth, and the only way for international humanitarian NGOs to grow is to increase their footprint by either doing more projects, larger projects or expanding into new countries. If international organizations engage in such behavior without modifying the business model, they risk undermining local partners.

This becomes exacerbated with the use of technology. As noted above, technology allows humanitarian organizations to become more efficient. But it also provides them with an opportunity to use new and emerging digital tools that attract more funding from donors and reinforce local dependency relations. As an interviewee noted, if the incentive structures of an organization are not geared towards change and if the vision of change is not shared and consistently endorsed by the leadership, it will never happen, or it will happen slowly. As a result, instead of driving change, "international organizations will become driven by change. This is why some organizations, instead of saying … let's spend the next five years supporting others to do what we've done and then say goodbye, they federate, and we can always justify it."

There is a low appetite for risk, which negatively impacts local innovation and balanced partnerships. [57]

Indeed, the role of INGOs' leadership and boards is to manage and decrease organizational risk in order to maintain the life of the organization longer. How can global organizations reconcile a risk management framework designed to uphold the organization's survival and the basic principle that power needs to ultimately return to local actors? The survival of the organization thus "becomes more important than the vision for which it was originally created. That kind of tension, I'm not sure is either well acknowledged or even well talked about in our sector." As one key informant notes.

The overall system and processes within the sector are not set up for balanced partnerships between local and international organizations to develop or take root in the area of ICT innovation and digital programming.

More and more humanitarians from INGOs are eager to develop quality partnerships and engage in better local action. They recognize the opportunities offered by technology and local innovation, but as one key informant contended, "If you're going to add a local partner into a complex workflow, the systems of traditional organizations might not necessarily be ready for it …. The processes and the bureaucracy actually hold people back from large institutions, working with local partners." Another key informant argued, "Unfortunately we don't exit as often as we should because there's always a way to reinvent yourself and to do more."

There are also no clear models in place, which creates additional challenges. As an informant suggested, "You can't tell people you have to [build more balanced partnerships in digital programming] without showing them how, giving them some guidance and part of the playbook." What are the questions that need to be asked? What does success look like? What are the digital needs of local partners? How can you work collaboratively to address them? What are the risks local partners face when partnering with global organizations in digital innovation and programming? What kind of technologies are local actors more likely to adopt? What does capacity building for local partners look like in the digital space? These are some of the questions that need to be addressed within the humanitarian sector so that more effective partnerships can developed in the digital space.

PARTNERSHIPS

There are significant gaps in evidence around what quality partnerships between global and local organizations look (and should look) like in the context of ICT innovation and programming.

While the humanitarian sector is starting to better understand what quality relationships and partnership practices mean, [58] there is little information available about the way in which technology innovation is helping INGOs fulfill their mission, and how the use of technology in partnerships may be (or may not be) impacting the quality of these.

Based on the level of digital transformation and innovation, and the engagement with local organizations as part of these processes, humanitarian organizations can be placed in a continuum from organizations that are highly hierarchical (and which favor direct implementation and do not seek to partner with local organizations) to others that have adopted policies and operating procedures intended to establish collaborative systems as part of their digital and innovation processes (including some new generation humanitarian organizations discussed below). Most organizations are however still in a transition period, trying to determine what balanced partnerships may look like more broadly and how these should be integrated into their organizational DNA and in the different technical areas, including ICT innovation and programming. As a key informant from an INGO indicated,

> *"We have a commitment to reduce headcount so that we're moving more towards our local staff and then towards contracting or working with local organizations to do more work, not just technology related but various sectors in general. We don't really have that now, but we have the explicit organizational goal to develop it. Again, some countries do better than others."*

There is still a wide gap in terms of giving more agency and digital capacity to local partners in humanitarian partnerships.

Local actors interviewed for this project argued that the relationship is not equal – there is not a co-creation process in place – and more can be done to establish a collaboration on a more equal footing in ICT innovation and programming.

One local actor described situations in which the relationship was fraught with power imbalances, affecting simple, daily operations. As he noted,

"if there is a cyclone and there is a disruption of electricity for 3 or 5 days, have INGOs given power banks for staff from local organizations? They haven't. So if my mobile battery is lost ... I have no system to recharge it and I'm in the middle of a cyclone as a humanitarian worker. I'm supposed to send information to everyone [but I have no power]. It's just the simple things."

Another local actor contended that when donors fund local organizations directly, using a bottom-up approach, it allows local actors to innovate and identify solutions that are a better fit for the local context, taking into consideration local needs and local capacities. When an international organization is involved in managing the grant however, "they get to dictate [terms] and there's more control of the local partners … There's a lack of flexibility in terms of letting that local partner decide what they're supposed to do. […]In most cases … you are given an activity … it's something that is already dictated to you. And you only account for that." As a key informant argued,

"I see a lot of Service delivery type contracts with local partners. I don't see a lot of genuine partnerships.... [There are] some pockets of excellence, but as a general rule, ... when people talk about their partner, what they mean is they've subcontracted a

piece of work to somebody, that they've kind of told them how to do it and what to do ... Digital aside, I think they might use local developers but it still tends to be the bigger organization that is going for the big scaled platform they can use across multiple countries, which inherently if you're looking at doing something across multiple countries, limits the opportunities to then really bring on local partners in a meaningful way, because you'd have to do it in 10, 20 different places, and that gets complicated, so they tend not to bother."

Several key informants from local organizations also stated that international organizations are primarily interested in strengthening their country offices. When they work with local organizations, "decision making is far removed from them." A local actor described a situation where they were brought in to help local actors collect data and get feedback from the beneficiaries:

"...but these NGO's were not aware of that, and so we had to spend a lot of time building with them and in some cases, actually having the donor coming and saying you must work with this group, which is not the ideal situation. The ideal situation would be a case where you've had a conversation with the local NGO and they identify a gap .... And they want to be able to do this."

Co-creation and equal collaboration has to start at the design phase, be intentional, and be maintained throughout the different phases of the humanitarian program cycle. [59]

Instead, a local actor noted that, typically, priorities are set by international organizations and the search for a local partner happens after that priority setting process is over; "or the priorities are set, and the decisions are made,

then gets passed down, as opposed to having conversations prior to this [so that you can identify] what the problems are based on what [their] expertise is. … Ultimately what you end up having is … a bit of a clash between what the international organization and the donor wants and what the local person actually thinks." This is one of the reasons why "we are seeing so many of their projects failing and not meeting their goals and for some of us who've been in advocacy, we feel we keep saying the same things and pointing at the same problems."

Best practices are starting to emerge, especially among new generation humanitarian organizations, for example through inclusive network models and innovation labs.

It is the new generation humanitarian organizations, those created around the use and deployment of new technologies, that have made the greatest progress in developing models and practices of balanced partnerships in the context of ICT innovation and programming. WeRobotics, for example, has designed a localization model, the 'Inclusive Networks Model,' [60] as part of their Shift the Power vision, to empower their locally based Flying Labs Network and the ecosystem of local and international actors around it. [61] Other innovative approaches around the use of technologies include the creation of local innovation labs, as separate but affiliated entities of international humanitarian organizations, which are designed to support locally based innovation and serve as an open space for collaboration between local and international actors – with the intention of ultimately gradually shifting the power to the local community.

Another example is the Nepal Innovation Lab, created in the aftermath of the earthquake in 2015 after the realization that innovation was not scaling consistently within the sector and that humanitarian responses were systematically

excluding local innovators. At the time, Nepal had a burgeoning tech scene with numerous social enterprises and startups and some humanitarians noticed that none of the local innovators were taking part in discussions about humanitarian response. As a key informant recounted:

> *"you don't see any of those people in the cluster meetings, they're actually quite well excluded from the system because, in order to go to a cluster meeting, you need to be invited ... it's happening in a compound behind barbed wire. And it's really hard to bridge that gap. It's even hard within the humanitarian sector to get health and education people together in the same room because of the silos that are built into the system."*

Ultimately, the Nepal Innovation Lab was created to serve as an open space for collaboration where people (from local and global organizations) could walk in and look at problems together to find solutions. The goal was, and continues to be, to focus on some of the fundamental challenges of humanitarian assistance and develop solutions using local expertise. Following Nepal's template, the newly minted Response Innovation Lab opened five labs in Jordan, Iraq, Puerto Rico, Somalia and Uganda with the support of a number of international organizations. Each lab has been designed to map the local tech ecosystem (academics, private sector, funders, innovators, implementers, etc.), convene the different stakeholders, and ensure common humanitarian challenges are met with potential solutions.

Partnerships can be created around social impact organizations and international (or local) humanitarian organizations.

In this type of partnership, the social impact organization acts as the innovator – because they understand what solutions can potentially

scale within their country – and the humanitarian implementer acts as the bridge to the international financial system and can provide access to vulnerable communities. This formula has been successfully used by The Response Innovation Lab in Uganda, where innovators from Kampala were brought to different refugee camps to interact with people and better understand their problems, preferences, and purchasing behavior. As a key informant familiar with the initiative noted, "this has to be one of the lowest cost, highest impact interventions ever [done]. The innovators were highly energized. They understood how to design their products for those populations. And on the refugee side, they were telling us this is the first time anyone's come to us asking questions without knowing exactly what they would be providing us, without a prepackaged solution. It really was an exercise we want to replicate."

These types of practices are happening in some contexts, especially when leadership is intentional about shifting power imbalances, but it is inconsistent and mostly ad hoc. As a key informant argued,

> "I think this is happening on a regular basis but … there's no standing platform for that. They're all kind of ad hoc, for ephemeral spaces that get created for one project then disappear when the project is done."

Ultimately, pairing local innovators with local NGOs should be the goal given that local NGOs are more embedded into the local context and can ensure sustainability. One way to accomplish this would involve supporting local NGOs to act as convenors in the local digital space. A key informant suggested that

> "[local organizations could] convene the ecosystem around things like AI to try to demystify some of these things [and] to see what's available for various levels of funding

and … programming. That opens the door to these conversations."

> **The use of digital tools can potentially open opportunities for INGOs to redefine their roles within the humanitarian system.**

The experiences with new generation organizations or innovation labs can provide important lessons to more traditional humanitarian organizations in terms of shifting power and developing quality partnerships with local actors. More specifically, there is an opportunity for humanitarian organizations to leverage the use of digital tools in two different ways. First, given that humanitarian organizations are not designed to develop digital solutions, there is an opportunity for INGOs to collaborate and co-create with local actors that are already developing digital solutions on the ground. Second, given the relative size and connections of INGOs, there is an opportunity for these organizations to act as convenors between international donors and local actors, and between local startups (or social impact organizations) and local NGOs, and to advocate to funders on behalf of local actors.

As convenors, INGOs can not only facilitate formal and informal activities to connect the different humanitarian stakeholders on the ground (including governments, donors, the international community, local NGOs and local social impact organizations), but they can also survey the local marketplace for ICT solutions and provide recommendations, guidance and capacity to local partners. As Matt Haikin and George Flatters note, "There are significant opportunities for a convener, adviser and capacity builder to help people avoid waste and duplication and co-ordinate (or spark) collaborations, thereby delivering wider benefits to the sector. There is widespread confusion about what products are available and the extent to which they can be customized." [62]

OPERATING ENVIRONMENT

The pandemic has triggered both a digital acceleration in the humanitarian sector and increased collaboration and coordination with local partners.

This has created new opportunities for local actors. As a case in point, a humanitarian actor based in DRC argued in a 2020 study about localization that the relationship between donors and local actors has never been so close and direct as during the pandemic. [63] The increased collaboration has also provided an opportunity to learn and discuss how digital humanitarian responses can benefit from more "balanced" partnerships between international and local actors. [64] Conversations about how humanitarian organizations can become more resilient and capable of adapting in situations with limited access have increased in the past two years with the subject of partnerships and digital collaborations as common denominators.

The ongoing COVID-19 crisis has also accelerated the use of emerging technologies and increased reliance [65] on certain digital technologies like mobile phones [66] to enable and support humanitarian operations and program activities. The rapid adoption and use of digital technologies to support humanitarian responses, has come with many risks however, including the exacerbation of existing "digital divides." [67] As a key informant noted, the pandemic created a new world for local organizations that most were unprepared for. For example, the amount of data needed was much larger than before. Some international partners were quick to adapt, allowing budget lines to shift so that more digital resources were available to local partners to operate online, but as indicated by a key informant, "there were others who were less

understanding about these things and that created a bigger gap in terms of inequity."

Risk can also be transferred to front line local actors when physical presence is deemed too perilous for international staff. During covid, a local actor argued, funding was transferred to local actors together with risk, without providing proper support to manage it. To mitigate some of these risks, working collaboratively with local humanitarian actors who understand the ecosystem and their specific needs, has never been more important. Ensuring local actors are provided with proper support and resources to manage risks on the ground should also be a priority.

Unless localization and the development of quality partnerships are perceived as strategic goals rather than operational needs, systemic change will be unlikely to happen.

COVID-19 has ultimately helped demonstrate the critical importance that locally led humanitarian action and leadership play in sustaining support to affected populations; especially in the ICT programming side. [68] As Barbelet et al. note, "access restrictions have pushed international actors … to shift their operational practice towards partnering with a more diverse range of local actors, increasing complementarity between international and local actors and leading to a greater appetite for risks and flexible funding." [69] There are, however, concerns that any progress made during the pandemic towards more digitalization and collaboration with local actors will dissipate as soon as humanitarian access is fully restored across the globe and trends in humanitarian assistance revert to pre-pandemic times. [70]

KEY AREAS FOR CONSIDERATIONS AND ACTION

CONSIDERATION #1. DEFINING BALANCED PARTNERSHIPS IN DIGITAL INNOVATION AND PROGRAMMING

International organizations should consider providing more information about their current state of technological innovation in humanitarian assistance, and how the use of technology is both helping the organization fulfill its mission and impacting the quality of partnerships with local actors. This can only be led by the organizations themselves, ideally in the form of a thorough independent evaluation like the one recently carried out by the WFP. [71] INGOs should also clearly define what partnerships between international and national/local actors should look like in the context of ICT innovation and programming, in close collaboration with local actors. While some organizations have developed policies and resources in this area, it is unclear how involved local partners have been in this process. Others are still operating without clearly defined frameworks, and gaps between policy and practice are still significant.

Donors, INGOs/IGOs and local NGOs

- **Develop a framework to categorize, define and describe the relationship between international and national and/or local partners.** These frameworks should clearly categorize who are the international, national and/or local actors, define the nature of the relationships with local (or international) actors, describe and elaborate on the key features of these relationships (including what are the key needs and responsibilities in the digital space), and make this information publicly available. Doing so not only will pave the way for a robust research agenda but will also allow for other programs within the organization (including technology and innovation), to use or adapt these frameworks.

- Consider developing **clear definitions** and criteria for digital transformation and digital innovation in the context of balanced partnerships and what the benchmarks and baseline criteria are in order to measure progress over time.

- Engage in sector-wide discussions and achieve consensus on what the **criteria and benchmarks** are **for digital transformation and innovation as part of a balanced partnership.** These discussions should include donors, international humanitarian organizations, and local actors.

INGOs/IGOs

- International organizations that have not adopted **clear standards and processes around work with local partners** should draw from the experience of other INGOs, and adjust best practices, lessons learned, and models accordingly. There are partnership frameworks and research that organizations can draw from when defining their own frameworks. For example:

  ► International humanitarian organizations such as the International Committee of the Red Cross and CARE have published resources on partnership development. Oxfam America's "Top Tips for Partnerships that Enable Local Humanitarian Leadership,' [72] describes how principled, equitable and effective humanitarian partnerships can enable local humanitarian leadership. This resource also highlights the importance of enhancing both the quality and quantity of funding;

strengthening local capacities where most needed; working on inclusive and diverse collaborations and increasing the visibility of local actors. These resources could be used as templates and adjusted for innovation and technology programming contexts. [73]

► New generation humanitarian INGOs such as WeRobotics have gone a step further as part of their Shift the Power vision and created a localization model - 'Inclusive Networks Model' [74] - to drive their Flying Labs Network and the ecosystem of local and international actors around it.

- While some of these models have been developed by and for new generation humanitarian organizations (which tend to be more agile and are less influenced by legacy issues), there are important lessons learned and best practices that can potentially be adopted and/or adapted by traditional humanitarian organizations. **Conversations between traditional and new generation humanitarian organizations around how these new models could be integrated in more traditional humanitarian organizations should be encouraged.** While some of these conversations are starting to happen on the sidelines, progress has not been shared.

- The development of frameworks and processes designed to implement balanced partnerships in the area of ICT cannot be undertaken overnight. International organizations should consider starting with templates that, as a first step, are designed and tested on specific projects or used by technical teams whose area of work is well advanced in terms of digital integration and localization. Based on the successes (and

failures) of these early initiatives, these frameworks could be gradually adopted in other areas of ICT innovation and programming.

- Once partnership models have been designed and introduced, consider **setting up accountability and self-assessment mechanisms** within the organization to allow teams to self-assess their implementation of quality partnerships in the digital space.

CONSIDERATION #2. LOCAL ACTORS ARE INCLUDED IN CONVERSATIONS ABOUT BALANCED PARTNERSHIPS IN THE AREA OF ICT INNOVATION AND PROGRAMMING

The humanitarian system continues to be dominated by international humanitarian organizations, while local actors remain mostly absent from debates on balanced partnerships. The development of balanced partnerships cannot move forward unless all the key stakeholders are sitting at the table. National and local organizations thus need to be part of the conversations that are happening both at the sector level and within organizations.

Local Actors

- Consider **partnering with other local organizations** so that local actors' voices are amplified in international fora.
- Advocacy. Engage in advocacy efforts, bilaterally and multilaterally, for the inclusion of local actors in partnership discussions.

INGOs and donors

- Ensure that INGO and donor discussions on localization and balanced partnerships **require the participation of local actors**.
- **Actively pursue discussions around ICT innovation** and programming in

international fora such as the Grand Bargain and other similar initiatives (with the participation of local actors, ensuring their input and suggestions are fully considered).

CONSIDERATION 3#. OVERCOMING BARRIERS FACING LOCAL ACTORS

Local NGOs continue to face numerous barriers, especially in terms of capacity perceptions and digital access, that undermine their engagement in the international aid system. As Harrison argues, "international actors [continue to] have greater access to funds and greater influence over humanitarian funding decisions," which translates into power imbalances in partnerships between local and international actors. [75] All major humanitarian stakeholders, including INGOs, donors, and local organizations, must work together to ensure inherent power imbalances are eliminated and international standards are adjusted so that local actors can more fairly participate in the system. Shifting power means creating a true balanced partnership, but it does not necessarily mean the disappearance of INGOs. It is about recognizing local actors' expertise and experience and finding how INGOs can promote and support that expertise in a way that is not extractive or in a way that can help overcome some of the systemic barriers that preclude local organizations from participating in the humanitarian system as equal partners.

Donors

- Donors should **consider relaxing financial regulations and reporting** to allow for more streamlined processes and in turn reduce the burden on local organizations.
- Donors (and INGOs) should **provide capacity building in ICT4D** areas that are identified by local actors as needed.

- Donors should **consider using their influence and monetary incentives to encourage further collaboration** in the digital space between international organizations, local/national NGOs, and social impact organizations.
- Donors should consider more flexible funding and grants in the ICT space in order to:
  - ► Fund local/national organizations directly (i.e. start with small grants directed to NGOs and gradually build relationships with local actors) or through intermediaries with strict conditionality in terms of overhead sharing for example.
  - ► Provide additional, flexible resources so that INGOs can build local capacity and support digital modernization, connectivity, and organizational development of local partners.
  - ► Allow both local and international humanitarian organizations to allocate funding for research and learning and build evidence-based knowledge that can be fed back into the system and inform future ICT programming.

INGOs/IGOs

- **Ensure capacity building is informed by local digital needs.** There is a problem when capacity building is designed for local actors to be capable of doing work that has been defined internationally rather than locally or based upon local needs.
- **Training for local organizations should thus move beyond implementation-related activities** and cover strategic aspects of innovation and ICT programming as identified by local actors in order to sever dependency relations with international actors. As Jodar argues, there needs to be a "shift from a paradigm of local

actors being implementing partners working at the instruction of international agencies to one based on full partnership, which includes hand over of power, responsibilities and funding." [76]

- Set up **digital skills centers** to help develop certain capabilities for specific projects and, over time, to create a sustainable model for capacity building for local organizations in the ICT4D space.
- Consider **empowering national/local organizations and social impact organizations to replace INGOs as capacity builders** and encourage local to local (peer to peer) mentoring and knowledge sharing in the digital space. [77] This is a trend that has been adopted in other humanitarian contexts in support of community-based and smaller local organizations. The NEAR Network, for example, has become a 'go-to' intermediary for international organizations such as UNHCR. [78]
- Support the digital transformation, modernization, and connectivity of local partners either with **resources or advocacy**, as part of the development and implementation of quality partnerships.
- Consider serving as **mentors to local partners**, allowing them to build the digital (and non-digital) skills they need to become partners that donors can contract directly. As one key informant noted, international organizations "can help to bring those organizations along. It's not necessarily easy and it costs more, it takes more resources to be mentoring alongside. … Maybe that's not the best solution today because in order to help them you need to build the capacity. But it is the best solution [for] tomorrow."
- Rather than replacing local capacity, **consider seconding humanitarian staff to national/local NGOs for knowledge sharing** and to assist with digital transformation and modernization. [79]

- Ensure local partners are provided with proper **support and resources to manage risks associated with the use of digital technologies**
- Actively advocate on behalf of local actors in support of better funding mechanisms designed to support local actors and local digital ecosystems, and in support of improved connectivity and digital modernization.
- Actively advocate for the development of local public policies that promote and support the digital transformation of the local non-profit sector.

Country Offices

- Country offices should **identify and support local digital initiatives** that are effective and trusted by the community and avoid replacing or replicating efforts.
- Country offices should **recognize local partner's digital capacities** and use digital tools are most appropriate for the local context and are best suited for local partners in terms of sustainability.
- Country offices should **consider involving local partners in risk management decisions related to the use of digital technolog**y.
- Ensure local partners are provided with proper support and resources to **manage risks associated with the use of data and digital technologies**

Country Offices and Local/National NGOs

- Country offices and Local/National NGOs are empowered to **identify local organizations and social impact organizations** and understand how to build balanced partnerships in the ICT space and support local actors' innovations.
- Country offices and Local/National NGOs should **conduct local and digital**

ecosystem and mapping analyses to identify relevant local partners to partner with in the ICT space and support local innovations.

- Country offices and Local/National NGOs should be encouraged to **convene** social impact organizations around different humanitarian challenges or digital opportunities.
- Actively **advocate in favor of (direct or indirect) funding for connectivity and/or digital transformation/modernization** as part of partnership agreements with international organizations.
- **Advocate for the inclusion** of local actors in humanitarian coordination mechanisms in the ICT space (i.e. a cluster system or ad hoc coordination mechanisms).

CONSIDERATION #4. DATA MANAGEMENT, DATA PROTECTION, AND KNOWLEDGE SHARING

Working with local partners in data management and knowledge sharing involves collaborating not only in data collection but also deciding what data is needed and for what purpose and engaging local actors in knowledge sharing.

Donors

- **Ensure funding for data management** is provided to all members of a partnership, not just first tier recipients.
- **Ensure local organizations are included** in collective initiatives designed to address data management and data protection issues.

INGOs/IGOs

- Consider coordinating with other INGOs and local NGOs about how to **collaborate**

in data protection and data management (i.e. collection, storage, analysis, etc.), especially those working for different agencies simultaneously.
- Consider building and using technology for data management and data protection in partnership and close collaboration with local actors.
- Ensure **standards around data protection and data management** are included in partnership agreements in collaboration with local partners.

Local/National NGOs

- When entering a partnership, consider asking questions around **data sharing and data protection**, and ensure these questions/answers are incorporated in the partnership agreement, along with capacity building and training.
- Consider **joining other local organizations in advocacy efforts** to ensure partnerships between local and international organizations include clear standards around data management, data sharing, and data protection. Balanced partnerships need to ensure that local organizations not only can benefit from knowledge creation but are also provided with the tools and capacity to protect the information of the people they serve.
- Local/National NGOs should **actively seek, promote, and support local to local (peer to peer) capacity building** and knowledge sharing on the ground.

CONSIDERATION #5. MARKET SYSTEM DEVELOPMENT WITH SOCIAL IMPACT ORGANIZATIONS

There should be a shift towards ecosystem driven thinking. It is fundamental not to start from a preconceived idea of what the problem and/or the solution is. The goal is to first and foremost consult with local organizations and

local communities, understand what their highest priority is, what their idea of a solution might be, and who else should be involved in developing a solution.

Donors

- Consider providing **incentives for the development of interoperable, open-source digital tools** so that local organizations have easier access to these tools and can tailor them to the local environment. Changing some of the rules of the market can help lower the entry barriers and help build the local ecosystem.

INGOs/IGOs

- Consider providing small funding and engaging in exploratory mappings and discrete conversations with local actors.

INGOs/IGOs/Local NGOs

- When launching a pilot: 1) **build interest** from other organizations at the onset; 2) **rationalize demand** and do not assume it exists. It is important to understand the context and identify what and how many organizations (both local and international), share the same problem, are in the market for a solution, and have the resources to commit.
- Ensure solutions are **not too costly or too cumbersome for other organizations** to adopt when/if resources are no longer available.
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