



# THE STATE OF LOCAL HUMANITARIAN LEADERSHIP

A learning report on a series of LHL online convenings held in Asia, the Middle East and Northern Africa, the Pacific, and West Africa

From May 2021 to January 2022, Oxfam, in partnership with Sejjajar Indonesia, the Tamdeen Youth Foundation in Yemen, and the Palestinian Agricultural Development Association (PARC) in Palestine, convened a total of 10 learning series through online convenings on local humanitarian leadership (LHL). Approximately 450 people participated, of whom 60% were from local and national NGOs representing approximately 30 countries. This document offers a snapshot report on the state of LHL across the four regions based on discussions, insights, and materials shared by the resource persons and audience members who participated in the series.

### **Oxfam research reports**

Oxfam research reports are written to share research results, to contribute to public debate and to invite feedback on development and humanitarian policy and practice. They do not necessarily reflect Oxfam policy positions. The views expressed are those of the author and not necessarily those of Oxfam.

For more information, or to comment on this report, email Janice Ian Manlutac ([janice.manlutac@oxfam.org](mailto:janice.manlutac@oxfam.org)).

© Oxfam International May 2022

This publication is copyright but the text may be used free of charge for the purposes of advocacy, campaigning, education, and research, provided that the source is acknowledged in full. The copyright holder requests that all such use be registered with them for impact assessment purposes. For copying in any other circumstances, or for re-use in other publications, or for translation or adaptation, permission must be secured and a fee may be charged. Email [policyandpractice@oxfam.org.uk](mailto:policyandpractice@oxfam.org.uk).

The information in this publication is correct at the time of going to press.

Published by Oxfam GB for Oxfam International under  
ISBN 978-1-78748-906-6 in May 2022.

DOI: 10.21201/2022.9066

Oxfam GB, Oxfam House, John Smith Drive, Cowley, Oxford, OX4 2JY, UK.

Cover photo: Scenes from a women's group in Palabek refugee camp—part of an African Women and Youth Action for Development (AWYAD), an Oxfam partner, program focused on women's rights and protection of women and girls. Credit: Elizabeth Stevens/Oxfam America.

# CONTENTS

<b>Contents .....</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>Abbreviations .....</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>Executive Summary .....</b>	<b>5</b>
Progress on LHL .....	5
Persistent challenges .....	5
Recommendations .....	7
Feedback for Oxfam.....	7
<b>1 Introduction .....</b>	<b>9</b>
1.1 Exploring what learning process works by region.....	10
1.2 Regional profiles.....	11
<b>2 Highlights of the LHL Regional Convenings .....</b>	<b>14</b>
2.1 Who are the local humanitarian actors?.....	14
2.2 Putting women at the heart of humanitarian action .....	15
2.3 The evolving role of governments .....	16
2.4. The evolving role of Oxfam .....	17
2.5 Redesigning the aid system to be more local .....	20
2.6 A hybrid model of humanitarian coordination .....	21
2.7 A new way of understanding accountability .....	23
2.8 Barriers to transferring quality funding and decision making to local actors .....	24
2.9 The nature of partnerships .....	26
<b>3 Recommendations.....</b>	<b>28</b>
<b>4 Conclusion .....</b>	<b>31</b>
<b>Annex: Resources by Region .....</b>	<b>33</b>
<b>Acknowledgments.....</b>	<b>34</b>

# ABBREVIATIONS

ABC	area-based coordination
ADB	Asian Development Bank
ADO	Abs Development Foundation
AVAS	Association of Voluntary Actions for Society
AWYAD	African Women and Youth Action for Development
CBO	community-based organization
CSO	civil society organization
DEPROSC	Development Project Service, Nepalese NGO
DRRM	disaster risk reduction and management
ELNHA	Empowering Local and National Humanitarian Actors program
EOI	expression of interest
ERF	Emergency Response Fund
GHT	Global Humanitarian Team
HAF	Humanitarian Action Funds
HCT	Humanitarian Country Team
HRGF	Humanitarian Response Grant Facility
ICR	indirect cost recovery
IDP	internally displaced person
IHF	International Humanitarian Fund
INGO	international nongovernmental organization
LGUs	local government units
LHL	local humanitarian leadership
LNGO	local nongovernmental organization
LNHA	local and national humanitarian actor
NDRRMA	National Disaster Risk Reduction & Management Authority
NGO	nongovernmental organization
NRC	Norwegian Refugee Council
OiP	Oxfam in the Pacific
OiTL	Oxfam in Timor Leste
PARC	Palestinian Agricultural Development Association
PDRF	Philippine Disaster Resilience Foundation
SIDA	Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency
SSDF	Sorouh for Sustainable Development Foundation
UN	United Nations
UNHCR	United Nations Refugee Agency
USAID	United States Agency for International Development
WRO	women's rights organization
YMCA	Young Men's Christian Association



# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In 2021 and 2022, Oxfam and partner organizations and networks in Asia, the Middle East and Northern Africa, the Pacific and West Africa convened 10 online learning events related to local humanitarian leadership (LHL). In all, 450 people from 30 countries attended, of whom 60% represented local and national NGOs and 40% represented international organizations. The goals were to improve and share a collective understanding of the issues surrounding local leadership among learning participants, to get a snapshot of where LHL is now, to improve and expand networks, and to put forward a global agenda to speed and improve the process of localization.

## PROGRESS ON LHL

Participants, especially local actors,<sup>1</sup> reported some good news: there is a growing commitment to supporting locally led humanitarian action, and new calls for international actors to deliver on the LHL commitments and promises they made at the World Humanitarian Summit of 2016. The local leadership agenda has advanced significantly in some countries—including Indonesia, Iraq, Kenya, and the Philippines—where bigger and better grants are being transferred to local actors, and NGOs are increasingly able to participate in joint planning and decision-making. Some NGOs around the world are reporting more opportunities for multiyear funding. Some donors are providing direct funding for local and national actors. INGOs are developing new partner-led models and ways of working. INGOs and NGOs are carrying out joint assessments. Local and national organizations are creating and strengthening their networks and federations. Global South leaders are better represented in the current Grand Bargain Facilitation Group, with a Sherpa<sup>2</sup> coming from Indonesia. Local emergency response funds are enabling resources to reach local and national actors quickly and directly. There is growing involvement of youth in humanitarian action and some participation of the private sector. Increasingly, capacity trainings are addressing the needs of the NGOs, as defined by the NGOs themselves. And as the system shifts to local leadership, some INGOs are understanding that they, too, need training in order to better understand their roles in the transition.

## PERSISTENT CHALLENGES

Nonetheless, the challenges have proven stubborn:

- INGOs continue to capture the lion's share of donations that pass through their hands, and they frequently fail to provide, or share, indirect cost recovery (ICR), the overhead expenses that both INGOs and NGOs require to keep their organizations functioning.
- The response coordination mechanisms built around international actors still fail to embrace local and national NGOs: meetings are not conducted

in or translated into local languages, outputs from the meetings often fail to reach local actors in a timely way, and narrow views about who qualifies as a legitimate humanitarian actor mean that women and the organizations they lead are drastically underrepresented in cluster meetings and on Humanitarian Country Teams. More broadly, many organizations that participate in humanitarian response and other activities—including women’s rights organizations,<sup>3</sup> labor unions, student unions, and faith-based organizations—are currently excluded from the system and thus lack resources and influence.

- Short-term funding cycles and a project-based approach to grant making, particularly in the absence of appropriate ICR, keep local and national organizations off balance, always wondering if they will survive another year.
- INGOs that act as intermediaries between donors and local and national organizations put too much emphasis on ensuring donor compliance and too little on building strong partnerships with local actors and involving them in project design and decision making.
- It is increasingly difficult for NGOs to achieve donor compliance with the current systems of accountability, which involve lengthy reports and frequent monitoring visits. In the face of concerns about terrorism and corruption, requirements are becoming stricter and burdensome for local actors.
- Although local and national NGOs play an enormous role in humanitarian activities, the majority of their INGO partners still fail to reflect that in their public communications.
- Donors and their international intermediaries often fail to understand the pressures and constraints that local and national organizations face and lack the flexibility that would enable NGOs to adapt to real-life conditions on the ground.
- In many countries, civil society is under siege from autocratic governments. This can translate into difficulties registering as an NGO and severe constraints on the flow of international funds to local and national actors.
- INGOs routinely engage in practices that are unfair and harmful to NGOs—for example, capturing exchange-rate gains but forcing partners to absorb losses, offering letters of agreement that only the international partner has the right to terminate, refusing to allow NGOs to treat project staff wages as project costs.
- In some countries, central governments are shifting humanitarian responsibilities and functions to municipalities and villages. Though this could potentially strengthen local leadership, it is often carried out without a parallel effort to build on the capacity of the more local government bodies.

# RECOMMENDATIONS

Participants made recommendations to improve and accelerate the localization process and to boost local humanitarian leadership:

- International actors should adopt policies requiring them to defer to local leadership.
- International actors should provide direct and flexible funding to local and national NGOs.
- International actors need to recognize the full spectrum of local and national actors that take part in humanitarian work, including those whose mission is not primarily humanitarian.
- Response coordination bodies should be inclusive and both welcoming and accommodating toward more local and less traditional humanitarian actors.
- Funding policies and practices that leave effective local and national NGOs in a chronic struggle to survive should be challenged and replaced.
- International actors should examine all their policies in relation to partners through the lenses of fairness and equality.
- International actors should shift the emphasis on compliance to a focus on trust and should support downward and horizontal accountability, not simply upward accountability to their donors.
- Central governments should ensure that local governments are equipped to manage humanitarian disasters.
- Local and national actors would benefit from increased access to training materials and research reports.
- All actors should support development of strong networks to strengthen humanitarian response.
- All actors should support local efforts to handle small crises that have the potential to become catastrophes.
- All actors should work to protect civil society space.

# FEEDBACK FOR OXFAM

Oxfam requested feedback on its own policies and partnerships.

On the positive side, participating local actors told us:

- Oxfam invests in building the capacity of partners through extensive trainings, coaching, and mentoring and provides small project grants for institutional capacity strengthening;
- Oxfam is flexible with partners in relation to contracts, amendments, and work plans; and
- Oxfam advocates on behalf of LHL with UN agencies, INGOs, donors, and governments and acts as a connector and broker on LHL issues.

On the negative side, they said:

- the percentage of humanitarian funding that Oxfam transfers to partners should be higher; currently, it varies widely from country to country;
- A significant number of Oxfam offices require monthly financial reports from partners before the release of the next tranche of funding, which can result in payment delays;
- Oxfam's support for partner overhead expenses is limited; and
- where Oxfam continues to implement cash programming directly, partners feel it indicates a lack of trust in local NGOs.

Suggestions for improvement include:

- extend funding opportunities to a wider array of NGOs;
- explore and test new ways to fund local and national actors and support their leadership, especially women's organizations, in humanitarian responses;
- broker direct relationships between partners and donors; and
- provide training—including coaching and secondment—not only to help strengthen partners' humanitarian capacity but also to help partners become stronger organizations.

Overall, the LHL learning series showed an improvement in the state of local humanitarian leadership, largely as a result of the actions of local actors, who have become more vocal, more organized, and more sustained in their calls for the humanitarian system to be locally led. Most of these efforts are happening at subnational to national levels; the next stage is to connect these pockets of local movement to each other for a truly powerful force for change. And this is where above-country structures such as INGOs, UN agencies, and other international stakeholders like Oxfam can provide support and complementarity: by offering technical resources, knowledge management, visibility, funding, and a brokering role.



# 1 INTRODUCTION

In 2019 Oxfam organized face-to-face learning events on local humanitarian leadership (LHL) in Nairobi, Mexico City, Jakarta, and Istanbul and captured lessons and recommendations in a learning compendium titled *The Power of Local Action: Learning and Exploring Possibilities for Local Humanitarian Leadership*.<sup>4</sup> There were plans to regularly conduct this learning event, but the COVID-19 pandemic drastically reduced mobility within and between countries. At the same time, the period 2020–2022 was a watershed time for LHL and localization, as calls grew for decolonization of aid and locally led movements for humanitarian action (see Box 1).

## Box 1: How does local humanitarian leadership compare with localization?

Local humanitarian leadership (LHL) is understood by Oxfam as “local humanitarian actors (whether civil society, government or both) leading humanitarian response and ensuring it is fast and appropriate and meeting the needs of the affected population.”

Localization is different. It refers to the “process through which a diverse range of humanitarian actors are attempting, each in their own way, to ensure local and national actors are better engaged in the planning, delivery and accountability of humanitarian action, while still ensuring humanitarian needs can be met swiftly, effectively and in a principled manner.” In localization, the point of reference is the international system, with international actors as the center of action and power. Like “globalization,” “localization” adapts a global concept to a local setting. (Quotes are from *The Power of Local Action*.)

To continue these learning exchanges in a safe environment, Oxfam and local partners and networks convened 10 online learning events on LHL from May 2021 to January 2022. The convenings were held in four regions—Asia, the Middle East and Northern Africa, the Pacific, and West Africa—and drew about 450 participants, of whom 60% were from local and national nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) from approximately 30 countries (see Table 1). These convenings used and built on lessons from the previous learning events, but whereas those events had been organized largely by Oxfam, these recent events were mostly organized jointly by Oxfam and its partner organizations.

The convenings were designed to provide regional platforms to raise understanding of LHL and to put forward an agenda from the regions before aggregating the results into a global LHL agenda. Among the key objectives of the learning series were the following:

1. Advance knowledge and understanding of LHL by Oxfam staff based in country offices and local partners.
2. Increase accountability of Oxfam’s Grand Bargain and Charter for Change commitments.
3. Listen and learn with and from others outside of Oxfam about challenges and opportunities in LHL.

4. Take stock of the state of LHL in each region, and identify areas that need to be strengthened, adjusted, or replicated
5. Promote networking among LHL allies and champions.

This document synthesizes the discussions, insights, and materials shared by presenters and audience members in the convenings to provide learning for the online participants and others. It also offers a snapshot of the state of LHL across the four regions from 2021 to early 2022.

**Table 1: List of LHL regional convenings**

Where	Title	When
<i>Asia</i>	Area-Based Humanitarian Leadership and Action	March 25, 2021
	Area-Based Coordination as a Complement or Alternate to the Humanitarian Cluster System	June 8, 2021
	Asian Leadership: Priorities for Action	December 14, 2021
<i>Middle East and Northern Africa</i>	Demystifying Local Leadership: Understanding LHL and Partnership Agenda	July 6, 2021
	How to Be a Better Partner: Oxfam and Local Actors	January 18, 2022
<i>Pacific</i>	LHL in the Pacific	October 20, 2021
	LHL and the Disaster Ready Project	October 21, 2021
<i>West Africa</i>	Global Commitments and Oxfam's Approach	May 3, 2021
	Challenges and Opportunities (Internal and External)	May 10, 2021
	Improving Our LHL Practices and NEAR Performance Assessment Tool	May 19, 2021

## 1.1 EXPLORING WHAT LEARNING PROCESS WORKS BY REGION

In planning and preparing for the regional convenings in Asia, the Middle East and Northern Africa, the Pacific, and West Africa, each region formed its own organizing team composed of Oxfam staff and partners from countries, purposively attempting to be diverse in terms of geographic, cultural, and gender representation. It was important that local actors lead or co-lead the design and development of content, and this happened in most of the convenings. The preferred time zones and languages of participants were taken into consideration, and, where needed, interpretation, including sign language, and translation were provided. Across all four regions, organizing teams drew on basic content on LHL but developed most of the content after consultation with their constituencies through, for example, online surveys and email blasts. They also embedded consultations within each webinar to inform the subsequent ones.

## 1.2 REGIONAL PROFILES

**Asia:** Asia, the most populous continent, is home to about 60% of the world population and more than two-thirds of the world's poor, who remain vulnerable to disasters, climate change, economic shocks, and conflict. It consistently has the highest number of disasters from natural hazards and the most disaster-affected people of any region in the world. According to the *2020 Global Natural Disaster Assessment Report*, Indonesia experienced 29 natural hazards leading to disasters in 2020, more than any other country.<sup>5</sup>

Over recent decades, the number of disasters has risen at an alarming rate. The region is vulnerable to climate change, and countries there have experienced or face persistent risks of sea-level rise, saline intrusion, changing seasonality and rainfall patterns, increasing temperatures, and more frequent and intense extreme weather events. Natural hazards such as earthquakes, floods, and landslides are occurring more frequently, often with massive adverse impacts on the lives, property, and livelihoods of the most vulnerable, particularly women and children. Moreover, several countries in Asia are affected by or are recovering from political violence and civil war, including Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Myanmar, Pakistan, the Philippines, and Sri Lanka. Poverty, gender inequality, and exclusion based on ethnicity or religion are deep-seated in many countries, exacerbating the risks for the most vulnerable. Further, the COVID-19 pandemic pushed as many as 80 million people in Asia into extreme poverty in 2021, according to the Asian Development Bank (ADB).<sup>6</sup>

Even with this grim backdrop of vulnerability to risks and hazards, Asia strongly demonstrates how local people are leading and organizing themselves to respond during natural hazards and/or conflict. There are many narratives of local organizations, including women's organizations at the forefront, influencing humanitarian responses and pushing for policy changes. The COVID-19 pandemic, despite leaving people without aid and increasing the need for people, especially women and girls, to perform unpaid care and domestic work,<sup>7</sup> provided opportunities for local leadership to flourish.

In all of these areas, Oxfam promotes and practices local leadership approaches across its programs and partnerships, shifting power and encouraging, facilitating, and supporting Southern organizations to be on the front lines of relief operations, influencing, and development work.<sup>8</sup>

**Middle East and Northern Africa:** The Middle East and Northern Africa, which contains some of the most fragile states in the world, is characterized by protracted political crisis, high inequality, weak and sometimes nonexistent democratic processes, international and non-international armed conflicts, climate-related resource crises, dependence on extractives, recurrent natural hazards, corruption and elite capture, shrinking civic space, millions of refugees and internally displaced persons (IDPs), and widespread human rights violations.

Nonetheless, civil society is strong throughout the region, and local actors are often on the ground responding to sudden-onset disasters before international actors can gain access. The countries where Oxfam is active vary in terms of their progress toward realizing LHL commitments, but all are on the path. Particularly interesting work is being done in Iraq, Lebanon, the Occupied Palestinian Territories (OPT), and Yemen, where Oxfam facilitates feminist network building, runs comprehensive capacity-strengthening programs for first-phase responding local organizations, promotes local actors to lead on consortia, and advocates for local actors to have a seat at the table in coordination structures and decision-making bodies.

Within Oxfam, the Middle East and Northern Africa is also leading on an initiative to create partner framework agreements for emergency response. The initiative aims to address some of the internal bureaucratic barriers within Oxfam to allow Oxfam country teams and their partners to deliver humanitarian response in partnership from day one of a response. At national and regional levels, many advocacy initiatives are working, with global support, to collectively influence donors and multilateral institutions to meet LHL commitments as part of the Rights-in-Crisis campaign work.

**Pacific:** The Pacific<sup>9</sup> is home to 14 independent island nations<sup>10</sup> that are custodians of more than 155 million square kilometers of ocean—more than a third of the Earth’s surface. Kiribati alone has a landmass of 800 square kilometers but an exclusive economic zone that covers 3.5 million square kilometers of ocean—an area greater than the overall size of the United States. While the Pacific Ocean is the single greatest asset of Pacific nations, it is deteriorating at an alarming pace. It is battered by the human-caused threats of overfishing, pollution, destruction of habitat, seabed mining, climate change, and resulting sea-level rise. Pacific Island countries share common strengths as well as their oceanic, climatic, geophysical, and sociocultural heritage and experience, which give rise to common governance challenges related to climate change. These factors call for approaches that are regional and transboundary.

The Pacific contributes 0.03% of worldwide carbon emissions yet is experiencing devastating effects of climate change while being dependent on big polluter countries for adaptation and mitigation funding. Pacific countries are among the most disaster-prone places on Earth and islanders face cyclones, tsunamis, earthquakes, volcanic eruptions, flooding, landslides, and droughts, with women and children being most affected when natural hazards strike in terms of vulnerability and lives lost.

Underpinning Oxfam’s work in the Pacific is a commitment to self-determination within regional and transboundary approaches. This means leadership by Pacific Islanders for Pacific Islanders in Oxfam management teams, which will also draw on the experience and expertise of Oxfam’s international network and counterparts. By adopting this strategy, Oxfam in the Pacific aims to follow a networked partnership model where the resources, influence, programs, and capacities across the network underpin a common change agenda. Oxfam in the Pacific will shift its implementation focus, transitioning from supporting service delivery to communities (e.g., services related to gender-based violence, disaster risk reduction, livelihoods, and humanitarian needs) to working in solidarity with

local actors to strengthen inclusive, transparent, and accountable regional, national, and potentially subnational governance and humanitarian responses.

**West Africa:** In recent years the West Africa region has transitioned from a situation of relative stability to one of increased fragility, political instability, a proliferation of armed nonstate actors, armed conflict, shrinking civic space subject to access constraints, massive human rights violations, international armed interventions, a sharp rise in displacement, climate hazards, and cyclical food insecurity. The countries of the Lake Chad basin and the Central Sahel are particularly affected, with high levels of vulnerability.

Oxfam in West Africa's commitment to the LHL agenda was consolidated during the response to COVID-19 and is further illustrated by a number of solid partnerships with local humanitarian partners. Oxfam has acted as a connector by successfully facilitating the participation of local humanitarian organizations in key humanitarian events. At the Central Sahel Senior Officials Meeting of 2020, for example, a side event co-organized by Oxfam was led by a local humanitarian partner. Oxfam in West Africa contributes to knowledge and evidence on LHL by producing policy research that is used as evidence to advocate for equal partnerships and a shift in the power balance. Recently, Oxfam published a report on the status of LHL in Burkina Faso<sup>11</sup> and disseminated its findings in regional convenings and in-country events. The report identified the challenges local actors still face and the solutions they foregrounded to bring about a system change.

# 2 HIGHLIGHTS OF THE LHL REGIONAL CONVENINGS

## 2.1 WHO ARE THE LOCAL HUMANITARIAN ACTORS?

Understanding who the local actors are has implications for Grand Bargain and Charter for Change commitments, because it can determine which “local actors” can receive funds as directly as possible or can have decision-making power. The Inter Agency Standing Committee (IASC)—an interagency forum for coordination, policy development, and decision-making involving the key United Nations (UN) and non-UN humanitarian partners—defines local and national actors as actors who are headquartered in their countries, work in multiple geographies within that country, and are not affiliated with any international NGO.

In the Middle East and Northern Africa convenings, an Iraqi local organization reported issues with registering local organizations, especially for community-based organizations (CBOs) at the grassroots level. In some instances, the registration process is not clear or not communicated widely, or the rules keep changing. In the Asia convenings, participants raised similar issues with processes within the humanitarian system.

Many civil society organizations (CSOs), like faith-based groups, labor unions, women’s rights organizations, women-led organizations, and student unions, are outside the humanitarian system and are generally not considered humanitarian leaders or actors. This situation makes it difficult for these groups to access capacity strengthening beyond ad hoc “volunteer” responder training. More important, it limits their mandate to become official implementers of humanitarian programs and thus prevents them from having input on program design and decision-making.

### Box 2: When disaster strikes

During this online learning series, a survey was administered to Oxfam partners in the Middle East and Northern Africa from January 9 to 16, 2022. The survey showed that out of the 31 respondents, 44% were from the development sector, 39% were humanitarian, and 17% identified as both development and humanitarian organizations. Later in the survey, when asked if they respond to crises, 98% of respondents said they did. While many local actors may not have humanitarian work in their core mandate or do not identify as humanitarian per se, when disaster strikes they are on the ground as responders and are drawing from their organizational expertise and resources. (For details of the survey, see the Middle East and Northern Africa synthesis report #2 in the annex.)



In the Asia convenings, a study by the Pujiono Center among 60 local NGOs and CSOs in Indonesia showed that, in the opinion of those surveyed, local actors are individuals or organizations who are from the village and who live among the locals. They may be called religious leaders or women leaders, but they are rarely called humanitarian leaders, even though they have characteristics that are needed by the community to address humanitarian response concerns.

According to Aisha Thawab, executive director of Abs Development Foundation, Yemen (ADO),

*Local NGOs are generally good at making timely decisions, and most have standard strategic plans. In addition, a common strength amongst the local NGOs is that they have a good understanding of disaster risk reduction (DRR) concepts, the conflict-sensitive approach, and gender issues. Several NGOs have good knowledge and acceptance of the main humanitarian standards. Besides the humanitarian capacity of the LNGOs in the diverse contexts, the local actors can reach local communities in difficult-to-access areas to provide humanitarian response.*

It is important to acknowledge, however, that not all local actors can be first responders given that humanitarian action requires certain skills different from normal times. As Kailash Rijal of Development Project Service (DEPROSC) Nepal commented in one of the open fora in the convenings, “In this, we need international actors to facilitate cross learning above countries and help with adaption of core humanitarian principles and standards such as the principle of neutrality, which is a value add of international agencies. Whatever the mechanism is, the important thing is [that] aid and resources reach the most vulnerable and that local organizations can decide and effectively deliver humanitarian action that is most appropriate for their locality.”

## 2.2 PUTTING WOMEN AT THE HEART OF HUMANITARIAN ACTION

Rahima Sultana Kazal, executive director of the Association of Voluntary Actions for Society (AVAS) Bangladesh, highlighted that an inclusive response maximizes the potential of everyone, especially women leaders, to design plans for disaster management and emergency response. According to discussions in the convenings, few women’s rights organizations or women-identified organizations call themselves “humanitarian.” Upon further examination, these organizations often blur the line between humanitarian action and development; they deal with all issues, regardless of where they are along the spectrum of humanitarian responses. Kazal pointed out that as a local NGO, AVAS deals with cyclones, refugee crises, internal displacement, gender-based violence, and more. No issue is too small or too big when an organization is embedded in a community. They recognize, Kazal reports, that basic humanitarian response training and an understanding of humanitarian principles could give women-focused organizations a different set of skills. Some INGOs, however, offer this

capacity-strengthening support only to humanitarian response organizations, which automatically excludes these women-focused organizations from gaining additional capacities that would make them more effective in a humanitarian response setting.

Hening Parlan shared the journey of the 20-million-member Aisyiyah women’s organization of Indonesia in the Asia convening. Members of Aisyiyah are located in branches and networks all over the country’s 33 provinces. Aisyiyah is active in all aspects of life, including humanitarian action. Even though this organization does not have humanitarian work as its primary mandate, it has been a pillar of humanitarian response and resilience building. Aisyiyah is not properly recognized for this work, however, and its efforts have not been acknowledged by the humanitarian sector. Parlan emphasized that women’s local humanitarian leadership should be not only recognized but given appropriate space in decision making, planning, capacity building, and funding at local, national, and international levels. She argued that the international community should provide opportunities and capacities instead of ignoring, undermining, or suppressing local women’s organizations’ values and wisdom. She made several recommendations for transforming the humanitarian sector to be more inclusive of women’s leadership (Figure 1).

**Figure 1: Transforming the humanitarian sector to include women’s leadership**

TRANSFORMING FROM:	TO:
The sociocultural “traditional” roles that exclude women’s organizations from the formal humanitarian system.	Political recognition for women’s organizations, which would all be equipped with basic humanitarian competence.
The typical ad hoc humanitarian approach that fails to accommodate women’s leadership.	Better alignment of the humanitarian approach with women’s organizations’ comprehensive and continuing development perspectives and mandate.
Local women’s organizations that are disconnected from the mainstream humanitarian system.	Systematic inclusion of local women’s organizations in decision-making, coordination, and capacity development.
A humanitarian funding system that overlooks local women’s organizations when planning programs.	Involvement of local women’s organizations in humanitarian needs assessment, analysis, and resource mapping.

## 2.3 THE EVOLVING ROLE OF GOVERNMENTS

Mayor Melchor Llego Mergal of Salcedo Municipality, Philippines, shared his insights on the role of local governments in galvanizing local and external talent and resources to shape the humanitarian landscape to be more sustainable and link it to longer-term development programs and the mandate of local institutions. Throughout the years, he said, his municipality has learned the art of partnering with various stakeholders, including international humanitarian actors. Key to being in control is having a clear road map and plan that others can use as a reference when offering support to the municipality. Interventions cannot take a “strike anywhere”

approach. Outside support must build on the municipality's long-term vision; otherwise the municipality will be pulled in various directions and the time and energy of his team will be spread too thin, resulting in less impactful outcomes.

Laisa Masuhud-Alamia, minority floor leader of the [Bangsamoro Transition Authority, Philippines](#), said procurement is another area where government can play a critical role. This is especially the case for life-saving items such as water, medicines, and equipment not available in country. She highlighted a World Bank report<sup>12</sup> showing that procurement is one of the bottlenecks in implementing disaster risk reduction and management (DRRM) and response actions, such as in the COVID-19 pandemic. As many countries start to decentralize their institutional response and preparedness for emergencies, it is important to develop stronger emergency procurement guidelines.

Alamia also emphasized the need for governments to consolidate emergency issuances and policies and simplify and strengthen them to facilitate quick use during disasters. She added, "It is very important that government works with civil society organizations. We need to expand and cultivate critical spaces for them. We need to improve coordination between government and CSOs for disaster preparedness, response, and management because CSOs often act as the primary responders during disasters. National government and local government units (LGUs) should be aligned in their emergency work. We need to strengthen the network approach of civil society to emergency response. This includes improving knowledge management and learning of aid relief projects. In turn, this will improve implementation.

In the convenings in the Pacific, participants pointed out that the region's climate vulnerability intersects with other natural hazards. They noted that governments, assisted by faith-based groups and other elements of civil society, play a leadership role in sustaining efforts that go beyond project-based approaches. According to participants in the online discussion, the region's central and subnational governments have capacity, but as functions devolve to municipalities and villages, there is a need to support more capacity strengthening on humanitarian response for these entities.

This issue was also raised in the West Africa convenings, where participants called for collaboration with decentralized and local authorities, which often do not have the same level of knowledge as staff in the central government.

## **2.4. THE EVOLVING ROLE OF OXFAM**

The LHL learning series took a critical look at Oxfam's role in transforming the humanitarian system and its performance as a signatory to the Grand Bargain, Charter for Change, and other commitments to local humanitarian leadership. Oxfam has closed 18 country offices in the last two years while expanding its partnerships into new locations and exploring new partnership instruments. In the coming years, Oxfam is expected to have a

smaller footprint. This means fewer and smaller physical offices around the world along with more partners and more diverse partnerships.

Oxfam is committed to LHL, but its progress along the journey to equitable partnerships and local humanitarian leadership varies widely across contexts. One of the four pillars of Oxfam's humanitarian approach is LHL, including a target of providing 30% of direct humanitarian funding to local actors. In terms of actual achievement in relation to this target, the organization's performance varies: a few country offices transfer no resources to local actors, whereas others transfer up to 90% of the total humanitarian budget. That is not the only indicator of Oxfam's commitment to LHL, however, which can also be measured by staffing, support for local federations or alliances, and influencing and advocacy work with fellow international actors and donors, among other things. In these different contexts, Oxfam is continuously trying to meet its commitment to LHL.

Online learning participants identified other positive efforts by Oxfam on LHL and partnering:

- **Open bid process for partnerships:** Oxfam is trialing an open bid process for local actors in a few country offices. In this process, Oxfam calls for expressions of interest (EOIs) among local actors even without any donors lined up. In such a process, everyone has an opportunity to present their organizational capacities. This also helps build a culture of healthy competitiveness among local actors and thereby promotes continual improvement. Currently, these invitations for partnerships and EOIs are sent to organizations that have been mapped by Oxfam. In the Middle East and Northern Africa, Oxfam is exploring how to expand this process to those that are not yet mapped so it can extend partnerships and opportunities to new organizations as well.
- **Continual improvement:** Oxfam still has many details to unpack and roadblocks to overcome with regard to advancing LHL. It is experimenting with various mechanisms, especially for provision of direct funding to local actors and for joint design and development of programs. One example is in the Empowering Local and National Humanitarian Actors (ELNHA) program, implemented in Bangladesh and Uganda from January 2016 to March 2021,<sup>13</sup> where Oxfam provided direct funding to a consortium of local actors to respond to emergencies and to have their own capacity-strengthening program.
- **Funding for local actors and women's organizations:** Although Oxfam does not have a lot of unrestricted resources for humanitarian funding, it should ideally work with local actors to access funds and put forward proposals with them. Oxfam staff are also trying new ways of working, such as developing products and programs even before donors issue bids for proposals, in a more proactive approach to fundraising and partnerships. They are exploring humanitarian funding facilities and mechanisms geared toward local and community-led actions, such as Emergency Response Funds (ERF)<sup>14</sup> in Bangladesh, El Salvador, Guatemala, Indonesia, Iraq, Myanmar, Nicaragua, Philippines, Puerto Rico (United States), and Uganda, among other countries. As shown in a recent Oxfam research report,<sup>15</sup> ERFs managed by local actors are particularly advantageous because local actors not only obtain flexible funding but also hold decision-making power over all aspects of the

fund. In a current initiative involving support to three locally managed ERFs, Oxfam requires that a women's organization be involved in leadership and that indirect cost recovery (ICR) for local actors be provided. Another recent funding mechanism being piloted in Asia is the Feminist Local Humanitarian Leadership (FLHL) Action Grant.<sup>16</sup> This rapid response mechanism aims to provide flexible and responsive small grant funding (from \$21,500 to \$107,700) for local humanitarian actions and/or initiatives of women's organizations, women-led collectives, indigenous women, women with disabilities, young women's groups, and LGBTQI organizations in the communities affected by Typhoon Odette (Rai) in the Philippines.

In the Middle East and Northern Africa convenings, keynote speaker Ihsan Albazi highlighted the positive experiences his organization, Sorouh for Sustainable Development Foundation (SSDF) from Iraq, had in partnership with Oxfam:

1. Oxfam invests in building the capacity of its partners through extensive training, coaching, mentoring, and the like, and by providing small project grants for institutional capacity strengthening.
2. The relationship with Oxfam is flexible, particularly with regard to, for example, contracts, amendments, and work plans.
3. Oxfam advocates for LHL with UN agencies, INGOs, and the Iraqi government's directorate of NGOs.
4. Oxfam plays a complementary role with different stakeholders and is a connector and broker between local NGOs and donors, UN agencies, and INGOs in their efforts to facilitate localization.

He also mentioned several weaknesses in partnerships with Oxfam:

1. Oxfam's requirement for monthly financial reports from partners leads to delays in payment.
2. Oxfam has provided limited financial support to partner's operations and overhead cost
3. Oxfam still implements cash programming and grant activities directly in Iraq, which local NGOs view as indicating a lack of trust.

The participants in the Pacific convenings suggested the following roles for Oxfam:

- Facilitator and broker
  - Mobilize confederation-wide resources for partners
  - Broker direct relationships between partners and donors/governments
- Training and technical and monitoring support
  - Capitalize on sectoral expertise on gender; water, sanitation, and hygiene (WASH); cash transfers, etc., and not just on compliance support
  - Include support on strengthening local humanitarian leadership
- Mentoring and coaching

- Offer peer-to-peer coaching for partners
- Provide one-on-one coaching
- Offer secondments on financial management and donor compliance

## 2.5 REDESIGNING THE AID SYSTEM TO BE MORE LOCAL

Historically, the humanitarian system has been organized largely around international actors and around big and dramatic disasters. The sector starts with big problems and solutions designed at the global level. The large-scale disasters need to get media mileage to support responses. The direct implementation modality of many INGOs and multilateral institutions has its advantages, such as speed and the ability to move with economy of scale and negotiate special arrangements when a response needed to mobilize more resources. More and more, however, as these learnings highlight, speed and scale come at the cost of meaningful partnerships and high-quality interventions. An alternative therefore is to start with small problems at the village level. Often these are development issues that represent underlying causes of vulnerability and risks.

Aisha Thawab of Abs Development Foundation added, “In our point, localization in humanitarian aid is very important and essential. Moreover, enhancing community participation will achieve a lot of rationalization of resources—well-managed resources arising from a sense of community ownership that drives them to ensure that these projects remain continuous and in good condition.”

Often the humanitarian system is designed to respond to crises in unstable states, where governments may be unable or unwilling to address the suffering of citizens, where no resources are present on the ground, and where civil societies are disorganized. According to Puji Pujiono of the Pujiono Center, however, 90% of the world’s countries have stable states with existing systems, structures, and resources. Occasionally, communities may need external support, but even then, this support should complement existing capacity. He added, “In Asia, most of the countries are used to disasters, and the assumption that there is no capacity or resources is unfounded. It is about time that crisis-affected and/or at-risk governments and civil society organizations (CSOs) be part of the power structure, decision making, and planning in the humanitarian system that is predominantly designed for ‘internationals.’”

Most local crises are small or medium-scale occurrences in the terms of the priorities of the international humanitarian sector, but they are locally devastating nonetheless. Local responders are people’s associations and advocacy or development CSOs, with few if any self-styled humanitarian organizations. In responding to crises, they rely on coordination mechanisms that already exist. International actors, if and when they see fit to intervene, should refrain from supplanting or undermining such local coordination mechanisms. External support from international actors, especially technical expertise, adds great value in terms of mobilizing



resources and facilitating learning from one country or region to another. But it is best to leave the coordination to locals unless the coordination mechanisms have been temporarily disrupted.

Instead of “localization,” which suggests that something is not local and needs to be localized,<sup>17</sup> Pujiono proposed the terms “nationalization” and “internationalization” for responses that go beyond a local response. All responses are local, he said; some become national and a few, which need international assistance, become international especially when the severity of impact is beyond local capacity.

Critical to supporting local response is the provision of indirect cost recovery (ICR) to local actors to keep their organizations functioning. Currently, most ICR obtained by INGOs through grants is retained by them, leaving local organizations with limited budgets apart from direct costs for implementing humanitarian programs, such as the actual costs of shelter kits, for example, or the operational costs of implementing a program. Even in a consortium arrangement, according to local actors, of the usual 7% overhead costs provided by donors such as UNHCR, only 2–3% goes to the local lead organization; the rest is retained by the INGO intermediary.

## 2.6 A HYBRID MODEL OF HUMANITARIAN COORDINATION

Coordination during responses is critical in reaching the affected population and providing effective, lifesaving services. “The UN cluster approach is part of the 4-point humanitarian reform agenda to enhance predictability, accountability, and partnership. It is the UN way of improving their system that should recognize the existing national and local structures. I believe the UN aims to augment and further enhance local system, not overtaking the leadership,” according to Esteban “Bong” Masagca of the [People’s Disaster Risk Reduction Network in the Philippines](#). There has, however, been a growing critique of the UN cluster system, which is dominated by expatriates and international actors. More and more, many humanitarian responses will be led by governments, as shown in the COVID-19 pandemic. The international community should thus reconsider the role of the cluster system.

In all four regions, language was mentioned as a key factor in enhancing inclusion and shifting power between international and local actors. Coordination meetings should be conducted in local languages, according to Asif Ali Sherazi, global disaster preparedness and capacity building specialist at Islamic Relief Worldwide (IRW), based in Pakistan. In the Middle East and Northern Africa, participants agreed that all stages of the humanitarian cycle—from program development to final exit report to donors and communities—should at a minimum include a key local language understood by the affected communities. In the Pacific, where the oral tradition is still practiced, participants noted that the form of language—written or oral—should also be more inclusive.

In the Middle East and Northern Africa, the UN-led Humanitarian Country Team (HCT) is often made up mostly of international actors and national line agencies. The HCT leads the cluster approach, which organizes humanitarian responses by technical sector, each led by a UN agency. To local people, the organization and the coordination that goes with it are alien, sudden, and ad hoc. The language, standards, and systems being rolled out are geared toward international agencies.

In Asia, participants explored strengths and areas for improvement in the humanitarian cluster system. Speakers and panelists presented examples of area-based coordination (ABC).<sup>18</sup> Overall, the discussions showed that existing models and structures from both the humanitarian cluster system and locally led models have good practices that can be replicated. The convening concluded with a proposed hybrid model based on two pillars: (1) reinforce and strengthen existing coordination systems at the local levels, and (2) international actors can align and enrich these coordination systems with humanitarian principles, competence, and complementary resources instead of the other way around.

Learning participants recognized that there is a role for everyone. Now more than ever, with the increasing emergence of complex crises, there is a need for governments and global humanitarian commitments and platforms such as the Grand Bargain to establish an enabling environment to foster solidarity and complementarity between international and local actors.

Other challenges of the current humanitarian cluster system, according to local actors who participated in the convenings, include the following:

- Local actors do not attend cluster meetings because there are too many of them and they do not have enough people to attend.
- At times, local actors are not invited to cluster meetings. If they are invited, often they do not have a legitimate voice or decision-making power. In the Middle East and Northern Africa convenings, some participants said they do not get detailed information on when these meetings are happening, or they get it at the last minute.
- Often a UN-led HCT is made up mostly of international actors and national line agencies.
- Coordination spaces restrict women's participation and leadership on women- and gender-specific issues. Often INGOs, instead of local women's organizations, speak on and represent these issues.

Instead, local actors who participated in the convenings recommended the following:

- Reinforce the existing national to local coordination system. International actors can align with this system instead of the other way around.
- International actors are important, but locals request that they do not impose their templates and systems, especially if existing systems are working. Instead, locals can tap expatriates' expertise to manage these crises even better.

## 2.7 A NEW WAY OF UNDERSTANDING ACCOUNTABILITY

In the Middle East and Northern Africa convenings, keynote speaker Mai Jarrar, director of the Women's Development Program, Young Men's Christian Association (YMCA), East Jerusalem, raised an important point: "Do calls for proposal or bidding really respond to real life priorities and capacities of people affected by crisis?" Accountability starts at the onset of call for proposals. She pointed out that the complicated requirements, sectoral aid, language barriers, and other challenges mean that such calls are not intended to increase local people's participation but to attract an international intermediary. Until this system and the structure around it is dismantled, change in the humanitarian sector will not be realized and accountability based on top-down relationships and donor compliance will persist. She also pointed out that INGOs that act as intermediaries between donors and local actors should not act as "agents" to donors so locals will "comply" with the many requirements; rather, they should support a real and equitable partnership. Finally, she called for a new model of advocacy, where LHL advocates demand new policies and working groups to update laws to give more legitimate power to local NGOs.

Another approach to accountability is to build strong community oversight mechanisms—not just upward accountability to donors, who are often focused on compliance with deadlines and prescribed reporting formats. This accountability to the affected populations would consider whether the intervention matched their needs, was delivered with quality, and was sustainable or involved a responsible handover to local actors.

Fatma Jaffar, policy and advocacy lead for Oxfam in Sana'a during the open forum in the Middle East and North Africa convenings, stated:

*The main thing that local NGOs should be clear on is their advocacy plan around the main stakeholders such as donors, government, UN, international actors, and others, and how they will target them to address their Grand Bargain and Charter for Change commitments. It's not only about funding, but also about participation in all phases of the project, direct access to donors, and access to decision-making forums. We do a lot of capacity building, but we should also look at the impact of our capacity building—does it really enable local actors to play more of a leadership role in the humanitarian sphere? We need to be much better at looking at the impact of our work.*

In her presentation in the Asia learning event, Hening Parlan highlighted the crucial need to strike a balance between standards and values. She explained that the humanitarian sector follows international standards such as SPHERE,<sup>19</sup> which is a good way to set minimum quality across the board. Apart from standards, which often come from international actors that require heavy compliance, local actors have for decades also nurtured and co-developed values with fellow local actors and with partner communities that they adhere to. These values, such as solidarity, trust, accountability, equality, and togetherness, are needed to keep communities together. She

recommends that in any humanitarian action or community intervention, external experts need to learn, respect, and even sustain these values as they transfer skills, so locals can easily adopt international standards where applicable without losing their local strengths and identity. Standards and values can be strong only if they are well understood and lived by communities.

In West Africa, participants suggested providing opportunities for local partners to evaluate Oxfam's collaboration and support in terms of what has been useful and what needs to be improved. They explored using the [NEAR Localisation Performance Measurement Framework](#), which provides a system for scoring partners on identified indicators. This tool was designed to allow local actors to assess their international partners—an uncommon occurrence, as it is often INGOs that assess local NGOs to see whether they comply with requirements. A similar suggestion emerged from the Pacific convening, where the audience identified a need for mutual assessment and even suggested using a “reverse partnership assessment tool,” which Oxfam partners used to assess Oxfam’s value added for the partnership.

Learning event participants recommended several other areas for improving accountability:

- a. **Risk assessments and risk sharing.** The webinar audience suggested that partnership assessments should include the risks faced by implementing partners (not just issues of compliance), since those partners will be the ones in the field, directly in touch with the affected communities. Risks could involve not only their health and security but also, on the financial side, their capacity to absorb large amounts of money during a rapid response scale-up.
- b. **Assessment of NGOs.** The assessment of NGOs should be based on a clear mechanism and the formation of an independent accountability committee for the two parties—the donors and the local partner.

## 2.8 BARRIERS TO TRANSFERRING QUALITY FUNDING AND DECISION MAKING TO LOCAL ACTORS

Changes in policies and procedures to enable local humanitarian leadership are slow. According to Mai Jarrar of YMCA Jerusalem, “Funding is political, and there is always the possibility of stopping funding for any country for political reasons, regardless of humanitarian needs.”

Policies designed to combat terrorism and corruption can reduce national and local institutions' ability to localize humanitarian responses and undermine confidence in local institutions. Jarrar pointed out that there is heavy competition for financing. Raising the bar for professionalism increases the required paperwork, and the requirements for local actors are often higher than the requirements for donors themselves. This certainly leads to a gap between the international and local partners, in addition to the language barrier.

According to convening participants, other barriers hindering more quality funding and decision making for local actors include the following:

1. **Budget shares.** INGOs keep a large share of the budget for themselves (up to 75%) and pass less of the budget to local NGOs, even when the activities are more appropriate for local NGOs. International intermediaries also fail to provide ICR with local actors even when the bulk of the work falls into the hands of those local actors. INGOs and local partners do not have a relationship of equal partners, and they still use a subcontracting relationship.
2. **Country pooled funding.** Ideally agencies like the UN would create country pooled funding to support local efforts in country. Although there have been improvements in this direction, often this pooled funding does not prioritize consortia led by local NGOs. Ihsan Albazi from the Middle East and Northern Africa convening mentioned that the International Humanitarian Fund (IHF) in Iraq does not prioritize consortia led by local NGOs. Consequently, local NGOs are excluded from direct funding from the pooled fund.
3. **Unequal contracts.** In the letter of agreement template used by international organizations, including Oxfam, in some cases the local partner does not have the same right to terminate the contract as its international counterpart has.
4. **Risk sharing, especially on currency losses and gains.** The issue of risk sharing was raised with specific reference to exchange rate gains or losses. In some cases INGOs, including Oxfam, keep exchange rate gains, but the partner must bear losses when they occur.
5. **Staffing for local partners.** In some cases local partners had difficulties charging project staff as a project cost rather than a support cost. This forced some organizations to bring in more volunteers.

Online learning participants in all four regions agreed that people want to change the short-term funding cycles and the preference for established NGOs. This preference leads some of the more established local NGOs to become overloaded with competing and heavier workloads while discouraging the development of a wider pool of local actors able to access and/or lead programs. Furthermore, the lead consortium is the only one that can charge for overhead support; the rest must deal with shoestring budgets, which adversely affect the quality of their interventions.

It is crucial to change mindsets at the international lead organizations that often act as donors and have a top-down approach to project design. For some online participants, parts of Oxfam's model, despite some challenges, were moving in the right direction. These include the commitment to increase funds directly managed by local actors to at least 30% and to have a joint program design and development process. These changes, it was argued, should be shared with other INGOs, who could replicate and/or modify them. There was an observation that UN agencies, which should be part of the picture, were missing in the dialogue between local and international actors. This dilemma, the participant pointed out, can be resolved through regular meetings and dialogues among these stakeholders.

## 2.9 THE NATURE OF PARTNERSHIPS

Participants in the Pacific convenings called for upholding the culture and traditions of the Pacific people, finding local solutions for partnerships, respecting self-determination in ways of working, and creating tools that emanate from locals but could be enhanced with help from international actors. This resonated with participants from West Africa, where local actors called for more strategic partnerships that give more responsibilities to local partners and ensure international support for all phases of program development and implementation when needed. Participants pointed out that such an arrangement will require flexibility, trust, and risk taking, not only from donors and intermediaries but also from local actors. This will require a clear LHL roadmap that reflects the partnership portfolio at the country level and where both parties, local and international, can have mutual respect and power sharing.

Furthermore, in the Pacific convenings, it was noted that financial partnerships are common. Transactional in nature, they offer funding in exchange for a service. Participants in the convenings advised rethinking partnerships beyond the usual “funder and implementer” set-up. In the future, partnerships could be multisectoral and should become more strategic and innovative. One innovative partnership identified in the Pacific convenings was the cash transfer programming rolled out in the Ambae earthquake response in Vanuatu in 2018 (see Box 3).

### **Box 3: Cash transfer program response in Vanuatu**

The cash transfer program response to the earthquake in Ambae, Vanuatu, was the first of its kind and was conducted at a large scale. The Oxfam country team could carry out this program only with the help of its local partners, who leveraged their relationships and knowledge of the emergency response system. The response team established a partnership with a local accounting firm for the financial transaction and processing component of the cash transfer operation. It allowed locals to explore this intervention as front liners and to learn and grow with this new approach. The program leveraged in-country financial and accounting expertise to increase the country office’s capacity to process cash transfer payments in bulk for the purposes of this program. After the first pilot, the New Zealand Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade (MFAT) gave an additional NZ\$2.2 million to cover all remaining host and displaced households with multipurpose cash grants. Not only did this cash transfer program provide new technology, but it also opened new ways of doing things in Vanuatu, with local actors at the helm.<sup>20</sup>

In the Middle East and Northern Africa survey, participants identified the following international actors as having good partnering practices: Care, Oxfam, Swedish International Cooperation Agency (SIDA), Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC), United States Agency for International Development (USAID), United Nations Development Program (UNDP), United Nations Refugee Agency (UNHCR), NEAR,<sup>21</sup> ICVA,<sup>22</sup> and Netherlands Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

According to survey respondents, the top three areas that have been working well in partnerships between local and international actors have



been “Funding our activities” (66%), “Visibility” (53%), and “Write proposal and training support” (28%). They identified the top three challenges in these local and international partnerships as “Project-based funding,” “Limited decision-making power,” and “No overhead in the funding given to us.” (For full survey results, see links in the annex.)

In the Pacific region, participants want to focus on indigenous ownership and leadership of change processes. They refer to the i-Pasifica<sup>23</sup> value-based partnership system, which describes how partners can be involved in developing mutually beneficial partnership boundaries that reaffirm custodianship, self-determination, solidarity, respect, and humility. Appreciative and active listening should take place in all partnerships. Pacific learning participants also emphasized the need to promote a practice of continued reflection. International actors (or actors with resources) should not identify and develop the local leadership using the lens or framework of international standards alone, but build on the organic strengths of local actors.

To Oxfam, Pacific partners said there is a need to provide a meaningful definition of its role as convenor, broker, and facilitator from a Pacific perspective. Oxfam must also realize that local actors can and must eventually fill these roles.

# 3 RECOMMENDATIONS

“Is there proof that an LHL approach has positive and significant impact on the quality of a humanitarian response?” asked one learning participant in West Africa.

It is everyone’s responsibility to answer this question. All can start by purposively tracking what LHL approaches they are using and assembling indicators of their effectiveness vis-à-vis feedback from key stakeholders—affected communities they must work with to design a response strategy, donors, other INGOs, the government, and fellow local actors in the ecosystem.

It will not always be easy and is likely to get more difficult before it gets better. As the humanitarian sector pivots to new ways of working and as power changes hands, there will be tensions and a steep learning curve along the way. However, these shifts will open opportunities for rethinking and for inventing new pathways to improve the humanitarian system and make it more sustainable.

As the learning series showed, there are pockets of innovations and good practices happening all over the world. They include policies in favor of localization, emerging donors with programs specifically for local actors, new partner-led models from INGOs, joint assessments done by LNGOs and INGOs, establishment of local networks/local federations, capacity training tailored to local actors, and training for international actors to adjust to the new locally led response model. There have been flexible funding and support to women-led organizations and women’s rights organizations such as the one in Cox’s Bazar, Bangladesh, and local emergency response funds in El Salvador, Kenya, Puerto Rico, and Uganda. Recently, the NEAR network received funding for innovative financing directly accessible to local actors. There is also growing involvement on the part of youth and even, in some cases, the private sector.

Below are some recommendations to further advance LHL collated from the webinar series:

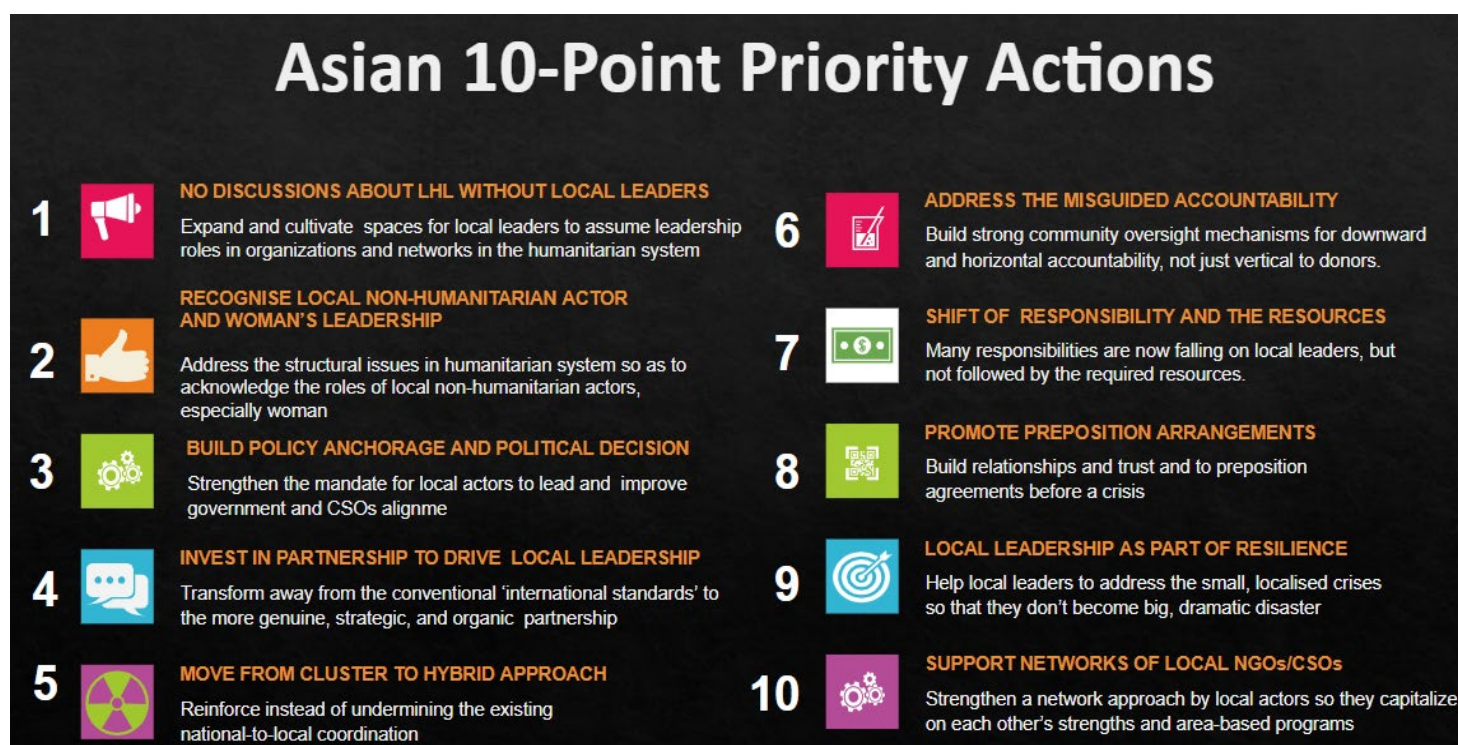
1. **Mandate the leadership of local actors.** In terms of legitimacy, there is a need for policies to mandate that local actors must lead. This should include leadership in coordination and governance systems, even if support and complementarity come from external actors.
2. **Build the humanitarian capacity of local actors.** Often local actors address all issues, including development and humanitarian action. However, the two areas of work demand different technical capacities and set-ups, and all actors need to be better at working along the whole spectrum.
3. **Build trust.** The humanitarian system often suffers from distrust; hence, there is a massive array of accountability mechanisms such as lengthy reports and regular monitoring visits. This situation could be because on-the-ground implementation is often being directed, shaped, and

monitored by international actors sitting far from the action in compliance with donor requirements. To increase trust, local and international actors should jointly create accountability mechanisms.

4. **Improving knowledge management and literature on LHL.** Although there are pockets of research and materials on LHL, there are no standard training materials available across regions and at the global level. At times there is duplication of effort in producing tools and guidelines, and these efforts need to be more joined up. Production of these important documents must include local actors instead of being carried out only by international actors. Furthermore, there is a gap in the availability of and access to research, knowledge products, and tools on women’s local humanitarian leadership and approaches to promoting feminist local humanitarian leadership.
5. **Support LNGOs through global humanitarian response plans.** Local NGOs, as front-line responders, should receive direct and flexible funding in line with the Grand Bargain commitments and the Grand Bargain 2.0 framework, under the outcome pillar on “Prioritisation and Coordination.” This pillar states that quality funding targets the most vulnerable with what they need the most, based on inclusive consultative processes and gender analysis with affected populations. Such funding uses effective coordination that promotes increased representation and, where possible, leadership of local responders, including women-led organizations.

In the Asia convenings, participants came up with regional priorities for action that they want to focus on in the next two to three years (Figure 2). They plan for annual periodic reviews led by a network of local actors who came forward to be part of working groups as next steps after the learning series.

Figure 2: Collated takeaways from the Asia series



Note: For full documentation, see the link in the annex.

Participants in the West Africa convenings identified key learning questions for programs wanting to engage in LHL:

- If it is necessary to integrate LHL into proposals, what types of actions/activities can be taken up?
- How do you manage to integrate LHL activities into project development?
- What were your challenges in the partner-centric operational response where you didn't set up an Oxfam office?
- Did you also have to pressure/influence your donor to do things the way you did?
- How to ensure a climate of trust between local and international NGOs?
- Do you think the changes in laws related to the LHL will go beyond COVID-19 trends?
- Is the LHL strategy applicable in an emergency program of less than six months?
- Is the establishment of a strong group of local actors a prerequisite for the work of the LHL?

## 4 CONCLUSION

The humanitarian system is going through a journey of change. In the past two years, there have been numerous talks, events, trainings, activities, and studies about local humanitarian leadership. If you Google “LHL” these days, it produces at least 46,000,000 results in 0.41 seconds. Around 75% of this content was generated in the past three years alone, which reveals the unprecedented interest in the topic.

Central to the change in the humanitarian system is the need for responses to be locally led and in turn for power and decision making to be vested largely with local actors. One learning participant pointed out that this means dismantling decades of thinking and ways of working often geared toward an international aid approach. “There is fear of changing roles. If responses become locally led, what will the international actors do? If response is locally led and the funding landscape changes, will local actors sustain these responses, especially in poorer countries? Will both sides keep our jobs?” These were some of the questions raised during the convenings.

The keynote speaker for the Asia convening, Pansy Tun Thein, executive director of [Local Resource Center, Myanmar](#), spoke of solidarity, from local to global, vertical and horizontal, as part of a whole-of-society approach to dealing with risks and hazards before they become disasters. “In our connected humanity, we are invited to build relationships to understand what life is like for others who are different from us. In doing so, we need to stress on partnership, accountability, and transparency,” she said.

Many of the issues raised in these LHL learning series have practical solutions, such as giving exchange rate gains to local actors, inviting them to meetings and sharing key information on time, investing in humanitarian technical preparedness skills for women’s organizations even if they are not exclusively humanitarian, providing translations and interpretations during meetings and calls for proposals, and many other small but important changes that could create a better environment for local actors to operate in. But these will require rethinking of ways of working on the part of international actors and donors and an attitudinal change that sheds the old model of a top-down international aid system.

Local actors recognize that they too must be open to change—improving their financial and monitoring systems, boosting their technical skills, and more—to be able to serve multiple stakeholders, efficiently identify real needs, and ensure that requisite resources are in place to serve their communities.

Local humanitarian leadership does not mean that the response involves only local actors, with no outside support. It means that local actors, governments, and civil societies, including women’s organizations, are leading or are in the driver’s seat, in collaboration with external actors, including INGOs. As resource persons in the learning series pointed out, in

humanitarian action, effective response should always be context-specific and locally based with deep understanding and appreciation of community situations, needs, and capacities, even if the mobilization of resources—funds, technologies, and process support—is global.

The LHL learning series showed that there is indeed awareness and understanding of the commitments to shift the humanitarian system toward local leadership. Now is the time to operationalize the commitments made by international actors in the Grand Bargain, the Charter for Change, and other treaties. The learning series also made clear that in the meantime local actors are finding ways to act independently and to fast-track the process of achieving local leadership to serve their communities better. Disasters are not going to stop; rather, they will intensify and become more frequent, especially as climate change impacts exacerbate the situation. As the community-led effort continues, it should not stop a more joined-up preparedness planning process between local actors and their governments and between local actors and their international counterparts. Local actors should not, and likely will not, wait.

It is time for action.



# ANNEX: RESOURCES BY REGION

Table A.1: LHL Regional Convenings and Resulting Documents

Where	Title	Link to documents/reports
<i>Asia</i>	Area Based Humanitarian Leadership & Action	<a href="#">Asia LHL Webinar 1 Synthesis</a>
	Area Based Coordination as a Complement or Alternative to the Humanitarian Cluster System	<a href="#">Asia LHL Webinar 2 Synthesis</a>
	Asian Leadership: Priorities for Action	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <a href="#">Asia LHL Webinar 3 Synthesis</a></li> <li>• <a href="#">Asia 10 Point Priority for Actions</a></li> </ul>
<i>Middle East &amp; Northern Africa</i>	Demystifying Local Leadership: Understanding LHL and Partnership Agenda	<a href="#">Middle East and Northern Africa LHL Webinar 1 Synthesis</a>
	How to Be a Better Partner: Oxfam and Local Actors	<a href="#">Middle East and Northern Africa LHL Webinar 2 Synthesis</a>
<i>Pacific</i>	LHL in the Pacific	<a href="#">LHL Deep Dive Materials in the Pacific</a>
	LHL and the Disaster Ready Project	
<i>West Africa</i>	Global Commitments and Oxfam's Approach	<a href="#">Report on the West Africa LHL Webinar Series of 2021</a>
	Challenges and Opportunities (Internal and External)	
	Improving Our LHL Practices and NEAR Performance Assessment Tool	

# ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This learning report was written and prepared by Janice Ian Manlutac, Local Humanitarian Advisor for Oxfam America.

Oxfam acknowledges peer reviewers (and also organizing team members) Jameel Arbo, Raman Kumar, Ruth James, and Jocelyn Villanueva. Special mention should be made to the members of the organizing teams across the four regions—Saskia Harmsen, Azer Asanli, Nida-a Abul Al-Ata, Tamman Amin, Jermaine Bayas, Puji Pujino, Nia Aulia Kurniati, Disya Marianti, Anna Pelkonen, Vili Caniogo, Alexandra Shearn, Niklas Størup Agerup, Ingrid Kamikaze—and Elizabeth Stevens, Tara Gingerich, and Heidi Fritschel for editing.

Finally, we are thankful to all the resource persons, Oxfam staff, and local partners who generously shared their time, insights, and experiences with us during the learning series.

# NOTES

- 1 For the purposes of this document, “local” means country level, inclusive of subnational levels within it, and encompasses civil society and public/government organizations and entities operating at these various levels.
- 2 The Sherpa, a local actor representative in the Grand Bargain Facilitation Group and is a Grand Bargain signatory. This seat is occupied by one of the local actor consortia that represent many different local actors, thus ensuring adequate representation.
- 3 “Women’s organizations, particularly local groups, are often best placed to respond to humanitarian emergencies, have the trust and knowledge of their communities, and have a greater understanding of women’s and girls’ gender-based needs, fulfilling a frequently acknowledged service and knowledge gap in humanitarian action”; *Women Leading Locally: Exploring Women’s Leadership in Humanitarian Action in Bangladesh and South Sudan* (Oxford: Oxfam International, 2020), p. 5, <https://policy-practice.oxfam.org/resources/women-leading-locally-exploring-womens-leadership-in-humanitarian-action-in-ban-620937/>.
- 4 Lourdes Benavides de la Vega, Amy Gray, Namalie Jayasinghe, Alain Kergoat, Raman Kumar, Mariana Merelo Lobo, and Michelle van den Berg, *The Power of Local Action: Learning and Exploring Possibilities for Local Humanitarian Leadership* (Boston: Oxfam America, 2020), <https://policy-practice.oxfam.org/resources/the-power-of-local-action-learning-and-exploring-possibilities-for-local-humani-621187/>
- 5 Academy of Disaster Reduction and Emergency Management, Ministry of Emergency Management–Ministry of Education; National Disaster Reduction Emergency Center of China, Ministry of Emergency Management; and International Federation of the Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies, *2020 Global Natural Disaster Assessment Report* (2021), <https://www.preventionweb.net/publication/2020-global-natural-disaster-assessment-report>.
- 6 Arturo Martinez and Joseph Bulan, “We Are Just Now Discovering How Devastating Covid 19 Has Been for the Very Poor,” Asian Development Blog, August 27, 2021, <https://blogs.adb.org/blog/we-are-just-now-discovering-how-devastating-covid-19-has-been-for-the-very-poor>.
- 7 This refers to non-market, unpaid work carried out in households (primarily by women but also to varying degrees by girls, men, and boys). This work includes both direct care (of persons) and indirect care (such as cooking, cleaning, fetching water and fuel). These tasks constitute essential work, including heavy and time-consuming tasks that must be reduced and redistributed. Jorge Moreira da Silva, “Why You Should Care about Unpaid Work,” OECD Development Matters blog, March 18, 2019, <https://oecd-development-matters.org/2019/03/18/why-you-should-care-about-unpaid-care-work/>; Patricia Miranda, *Care Work Matters: A Participatory Approach to Advocating for the Recognition and Redistribution of Unpaid and Domestic Work in Local Legislation* (Manila: Oxfam Philippines, 2021), <https://philippines.oxfam.org/latest/policy-paper/care-work-matters-participatory-approach>.
- 8 Oxfam in Asia, *One Oxfam Asia Strategy Framework* (Manila, 2021).
- 9 Oxfam in the Pacific, *Oxfam in the Pacific Regional Strategy: Inclusive and Accountable Governance for a 1.5°C World 2020–2030* (Suva, 2021).

- 10 Papua New Guinea, Vanuatu, Solomon Islands, Fiji, and the Polynesia/Micronesia country cluster comprising Samoa, Tonga, Tuvalu, Cook Islands, Niue, Kiribati, Palau, Nauru, the Federated States of Micronesia (FSM), and the Republic of the Marshall Islands (RMI) (Micronesia).
- 11 Magali de Biolley, *Local Humanitarian Leadership in Burkina Faso: Translating Rhetoric into Action* (Oxford: Oxfam International, 2021), <https://oxfamilibrary.openrepository.com/bitstream/handle/10546/621347/bp-local-humanitarian-leadership-burkina-faso-131221-en.pdf>.
- 12 World Bank, *Opportunities and Challenges for Public Procurement in the First Months of the COVID-19 Pandemic: Results from an Experts Survey* (Washington, DC: World Bank, 2021), <http://documents.worldbank.org/curated/en/565021618898683492/pdf/0ppor-tunities-and-Challenges-for-Public-Procurement-in-the-First-Months-of-the-COVID-19-Pandemic-Results-From-an-Experts-Survey.pdf>.
- 13 ELNHA was a five-year flagship program that advocated for a fundamental change in the international humanitarian system, based on more equitable, collaborative partnerships between international and local responders. ELNHA comes with Humanitarian Response Grant Facilities (HRGFs) that local actors can access. Oxfam, "Transferring More Funds Directly to Local Actors," <https://www.oxfamnovib.nl/donors-partners/about-oxfam/projects-and-programs/elnha/transferring-more-funds-directly-to-local-actors>.
- 14 In line with the humanitarian sector's commitment to LHL, the ERF is focused on providing more flexible funding to local actors, supporting their capacity to prepare for and respond to emergencies as well as their development and sustainability.
- 15 Janice Ian Manlutac, *Funding the Frontlines: How an Emergency Response Fund Facilitated Local Action*, Research Report (Oxford: Oxfam, 2021), <https://policy-practice.oxfam.org/resources/funding-the-frontline-how-an-oxfam-emergency-response-fund-facilitated-local-hu-621178/>.
- 16 It is hoped that by directly supporting women-led local actions, this mechanism will enable the timely and responsive delivery of emergency and recovery support to the most affected and marginalized members of the communities.
- 17 Remarks of Puji Pujiono, referring to Rose Worden, Jesse McCommon, Puji Pujiono, and Shahida Arif, "Turning the Grand Bargain Upside Down: Views from Indonesia," Humanitarian Advisory Group blog, February 11, 2021, <https://humanitarianadvisorygroup.org/turning-the-grand-bargain-upside-down-views-from-indonesia/>.
- 18 ABC is a coordination structure at the local level based on geography rather than technical sector and aims to better ensure participation of affected communities and to channel resources more effectively. Proponents of this approach are quick to point out that it does not mean removing clusters, but rather refocusing their role on providing technical oversight. Rose Worden and Patrick Saez, "Adapting Humanitarian Aid Coordination to an Area-Based Model Could Improve Future Responses," blog post, May 21, 2021, Center for Global Development, <https://reliefweb.int/report/world/adapting-humanitarian-aid-coordination-area-based-model-could-improve-future-responses>.
- 19 The SPHERE standards are a set of principles and minimum humanitarian standards in four technical areas of humanitarian response: water, sanitation, and hygiene; food security and nutrition; shelter and settlement; and health. For more on SPHERE, go to <https://spherestandards.org/humanitarian-standards/>.
- 20 Oxfam in Vanuatu, *Vanuatu Ambae Response Final Report*, Emergency Response Fund (Port Vila, 2018), unpublished report.

- 21 NEAR is a movement of local and national civil society organizations (CSOS) from the global South rooted in communities that share a common goal of a fair, equitable, and dignified aid system.
- 22 ICVA is a global network of nongovernmental organizations whose mission is to make humanitarian action more principled and effective.
- 23 Denoting or relating to the indigenous peoples of Polynesia, Melanesia, or Micronesia.

# OXFAM

Oxfam is an international confederation of 21 organizations, working with its partners and allies, reaching out to millions of people around the world. Together, we tackle inequalities to end poverty and injustice, now and in the long term – for an equal future. Please write to any of the agencies for further information or visit [www.oxfam.org](http://www.oxfam.org)

Oxfam America ([www.oxfamamerica.org](http://www.oxfamamerica.org))

Oxfam Aotearoa ([www.oxfam.org.nz](http://www.oxfam.org.nz))

Oxfam Australia ([www.oxfam.org.au](http://www.oxfam.org.au))

Oxfam-in-Belgium ([www.oxfamsol.be](http://www.oxfamsol.be))

Oxfam Brasil ([www.oxfam.org.br](http://www.oxfam.org.br))

Oxfam Canada ([www.oxfam.ca](http://www.oxfam.ca))

Oxfam Colombia ([lac.oxfam.org/countries/colombia](http://lac.oxfam.org/countries/colombia))

Oxfam France ([www.oxfamfrance.org](http://www.oxfamfrance.org))

Oxfam Germany ([www.oxfam.de](http://www.oxfam.de))

Oxfam GB ([www.oxfam.org.uk](http://www.oxfam.org.uk))

Oxfam Hong Kong ([www.oxfam.org.hk](http://www.oxfam.org.hk))

Oxfam IBIS (Denmark) ([www.oxfamibis.dk](http://www.oxfamibis.dk))

Oxfam India ([www.oxfamindia.org](http://www.oxfamindia.org))

Oxfam Intermón (Spain) ([www.oxfamintermon.org](http://www.oxfamintermon.org))

Oxfam Ireland ([www.oxfamireland.org](http://www.oxfamireland.org))

Oxfam Italy ([www.oxfamitalia.org](http://www.oxfamitalia.org))

Oxfam Mexico ([www.oxfammexico.org](http://www.oxfammexico.org))

Oxfam Novib (Netherlands) ([www.oxfamnovib.nl](http://www.oxfamnovib.nl))

Oxfam Québec ([www.oxfam.qc.ca](http://www.oxfam.qc.ca))

Oxfam South Africa ([www.oxfam.org.za](http://www.oxfam.org.za))

KEDV ([www.kedv.org.tr](http://www.kedv.org.tr))

