

**Oxfam America**  
Research Backgrounders

# **Local Capacity in Humanitarian Response: Vision or mirage?**

Michael Delaney and Jacobo Ocharan

# Contents

Oxfam America's Research Backgrounders .....	3
Author information .....	4
Acknowledgements .....	4
Citations of this paper .....	4
Abbreviations .....	5
Introduction .....	6
Research summary .....	6
Examples of local capacity at work .....	6
Going beyond anecdotes: Absence of empowered local participation in the major humanitarian responses .....	9
A brief documentation and analysis of the latest responses .....	9
Questions raised .....	10
Why multiple initiatives to improve quality are not improving local participation .....	11
Red Cross/Red Crescent Code of Conduct and its application .....	11
Sphere Standards and local participation .....	13
Further reasons we have not advanced on greater investment in local capacity .....	15
Analysis of a vicious cycle: Need for immediate results in humanitarian response .....	16
Recommendations .....	19
Changing the criteria to create an empowering humanitarian response .....	20
Key recommendations .....	21

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To the hundreds of thousands of people who, despite the difficult conditions that they were living in after a disaster, teach us that our responsibility is to support them in their desire for reconstruction.

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# Abbreviations

ALNAP	Active Learning Network for Accountability and Performance in Humanitarian Action
CBO	community-based organization
CDA	Collaborative for Development Action
COCIGER	<i>Convergencia Ciudadana para la Gestión de Riesgos</i>
CRGR	<i>Concertación Regional de Gestión de Riesgos</i>
DEC	Disasters Emergency Committee
DFID	Department for International Development
DRR	disaster risk reduction
HAP	Humanitarian Accountability Partnership
IDP	internally displaced person
MNGR	<i>Mesa Nacional de Gestión de Riesgo</i>
MNIGR	<i>Mesa Nacional de Incidencia en Gestión de Riesgo</i>
MPGR	<i>Mesa Permanente para la Gestión del Riesgo</i>
NGHA	nongovernmental humanitarian agency
NGO	nongovernmental organization
OFDA	Office of Foreign Disaster Assistance
TEC	Tsunami Evaluation Coalition
USAID	US Agency for International Development
WASH	water, sanitation, and hygiene

# Introduction

The world is demanding greater humanitarian response due to a rise in conflict and natural disasters. The humanitarian community has been slow to evolve and multiply the methods of response or the actors needed to respond to the increasing demand, although we have seen glimpses of local capacity building by the international community in recent years. Examples of capacity building include:

- In Central America, nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) formed a four-country network dedicated to disaster risk reduction (DRR) and preparedness, an important initiative for the region.
- In Darfur, Sudan, national and local organizations stepped into roles of providing services to more than 2 million internally displaced persons (IDPs) after the expulsion of 2009.

Yet for the amount of “lip service to build local capacity” and money being invested into the sector, we should expect much more.

## Research summary

For this paper we reviewed recent sector evaluations and analyses. We conclude that the humanitarian sector is not using the proper indicators or measurements to build local capacity systematically in humanitarian responses and therefore is losing ground in the battle of tackling the root causes of disaster, namely poverty. Thus, the humanitarian sector is leaving itself underprepared to respond to increasing demands worldwide by not building up and supporting the key actors who could multiply the effectiveness of the sector.

## Examples of local capacity at work

In Central America, where at least 25 million people are living in poverty and some 10 million are living with a high risk of disasters, a highly innovative approach has emerged that brings together local and national actors in a regional approach. The Regional Network for Disaster Risk Reduction (*Concertación Regional de Gestión de Riesgos*, CRGR) was created in 2002 with the intention of improving DRR practices in Central America and to expand the participation of the vulnerable population in decision making and as actors in creating their own

solutions. The CRGR is composed of approximately 110 civil society organizations in El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, and Nicaragua. Each of these organizations carries out concrete actions to support at-risk communities in their respected countries. The following national networks (*mesas nacionales*) make up the CRGR:

- El Salvador - Mesa Permanente para la Gestión del Riesgo (MPGR)
- Guatemala - Convergencia Ciudadana para la Gestión de Riesgos (COCIGER)
- Honduras - Mesa Nacional de Incidencia en Gestión de Riesgo (MNIGR)
- Nicaragua - Mesa Nacional de Gestión de Riesgo (MNGR)

The CRGR coordinates with other networks of civil society organizations that work on humanitarian response, DRR, and climate change adaptation.

In March 2009, in the Darfur region of Sudan, more than half of the humanitarian services being provided to over 2 million IDPs were curtailed overnight with the expulsion of 13 international NGOs. While the world expected to see a disaster within a disaster, an important transition happened: local and national NGOs stepped up their game and moved in from the periphery of the humanitarian operation to become key and central aid providers. Within two months of the expulsion, partners of Oxfam America, which had established and strong relationships at the time of the crisis, were able to provide clean water, sanitation facilities and hygiene supplies to more than 200,000 displaced people in camps. To achieve this, Oxfam backstopped partners on the technical and strategic side of water, sanitation, and hygiene (WASH) activities. Partners also were provided with flexible grants and training in various sectors – such as finance, logistics, security and risk management – to become more versatile in the emergency. In addition, local organizations were introduced to one another and encouraged to work in connection with other humanitarian actors and networks. All these activities fall in the basket of what we understand as building local capacity. As the Oxfam America Sudan country manager commented:

Building on local capacity is a principle that extends beyond partners to community members themselves. Oxfam aims to ensure that disaster-affected people – not just partner organizations – gain capacity to handle the future emergency situations they are most likely to face. Community participation is central to our “WASH” programs, for example, and our humanitarian livelihoods work focuses not simply on producing incomes but on building skills that will last a lifetime. If we hadn’t known it already, the expulsion of

2009 would have driven home the importance of fostering independence at all levels of the aid response.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> El Fateh Osman, "Local Participation and Capacity-Building in Protracted Crisis: The Case of Sudan" (Boston: Oxfam, 2011).

# Going beyond anecdotes: Absence of empowered local participation in the major humanitarian responses

## A brief documentation and analysis of the latest responses

The humanitarian sector has been extensively evaluated over the last 10 years. In Haiti alone, as of January 2011 the Active Learning Network for Accountability and Performance in Humanitarian Action (ALNAP) had identified at least 45 evaluations of various aspects of the international response to the 2010 earthquake. Based on these documents, we observed how the sector can learn from experience and does improve on the issues that it really wants to change, while at the same time remains stagnant in many other aspects. We observed clear overall progress in areas having to do with internal workings of the humanitarian systems – such as coordination mechanisms, funding instruments, and assessments tools – while at the same time some fundamental issues, such as leadership and the system’s engagement with and accountability to beneficiaries, remain weak.<sup>2</sup>

Identifying these weaknesses is not new. Following Hurricane Mitch in 1998, the UK-based Disasters Emergency Committee (DEC) concluded:

The dominant vision in many humanitarian organizations is that victims of major disasters are only passive recipients of aid, and are defined essentially by their needs. An approach including coping strategies would place greater emphasis on designing exit strategies for stricken families and communities involving and enhancing local capacities and organizational skills.<sup>3</sup>

Moving through the decade to one of the sector’s greatest challenges, and subsequently most evaluated natural disasters, the Indian Ocean Tsunami in 2004, we observed a similar statement:

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<sup>2</sup> ALNAP, “The State of the Humanitarian System: Assessing Performance and Progress,” 9 (January 2010), [www.norad.no/en/tools-and-publications/publications/publication?key=158357](http://www.norad.no/en/tools-and-publications/publications/publication?key=158357).

<sup>3</sup> *Espacios Consultores S.A.*, “Independent Evaluation of Expenditure of DEC Central America Hurricane Appeal Funds,” 26 (March 2000), [www.alnap.org/pool/files/erd-2873-full.pdf](http://www.alnap.org/pool/files/erd-2873-full.pdf).

To a significant extent, local ownership of the tsunami response was undermined by the actions of international agencies. In some cases, recognition and engagement with local capacity was totally lacking, particularly where capacities were not visible in the form recognized by international agencies. In other cases local capacities were rendered even more vulnerable by the response. CBOs [community-based organizations] and NGOs became contracted organisations, corruption spread and inappropriate forms of leadership were able to flourish.”<sup>4</sup>

Coming to present day Haiti, a country well known in the international community and one that has received heavy investment over the course of a long history of interventions, amazingly we see little progress. While evaluations are still ongoing, initial conclusions from some organizations, such as ALNAP, have summarized key findings from evaluations and reviews of the international humanitarian response to the 2010 earthquake, among them:

The quality of the initial response was hindered by:

- A limited understanding of the context, particularly the urban setting;
- By-passing of local authorities and civil society groups;
- Insufficient communication with affected populations.<sup>5</sup>

## Questions raised

Obviously these are but three snapshots of long and insightful evaluations, however we believe that they represent what has also been our experience during this past decade. Despite correctly identifying this vital issue of local participation as an enormous gap in the approach to providing emergency relief, we don’t observe overall improvements from one emergency to the next. What is it that holds the humanitarian community back from advancing on something that is repeatedly called to its attention? Why is the humanitarian community able to improve in some areas but not this one?

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4 Tsunami Evaluation Coalition (TEC), “Impact of the Tsunami Response on Local and National Capacities,” 43 (July 2006), [http://ochanet.unocha.org/p/Documents/TEC\\_Capacities\\_Report.pdf](http://ochanet.unocha.org/p/Documents/TEC_Capacities_Report.pdf).

5 ALNAP, “Haiti Earthquake Response: Mapping and Analysis of Gaps and Duplications in Evaluations” (February 2011), [www.oecd.org/dataoecd/41/54/47501750.pdf](http://www.oecd.org/dataoecd/41/54/47501750.pdf).

# Why multiple initiatives to improve quality are not improving local participation

Over the last two decades, the humanitarian community has been attempting to increase performance by improving quality of response, impact, and accountability. The increase of the number of crises and, more importantly, the significant growth of actors responding to these crises, has generated multiple initiatives to try to improve humanitarian aid by trying to increase the professionalization of the sector. The Humanitarian Accountability Partnership (HAP) International quantifies this trend in a recent document: there are 13 general initiatives led by organizations and more than 60 sectorial initiatives to improve aid quality.<sup>6</sup> While we cannot dissect all of these quality initiatives, let us examine why two of the most commonly used standards are not helping us improve in this area.

## Red Cross/Red Crescent Code of Conduct and its application

The Code of Conduct for the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement and NGOs in Disaster Relief is the most accepted guide by national and international organizations working on humanitarian issues. Fifteen years after being created, more than 400 organizations have signed the code, acknowledging their willingness to incorporate its principles into their work. The code was a product of its time, the mid 1990s, when complex emergencies – such as those in the Horn of Africa or in the African Great Lakes – were the main focus of humanitarian response around the world. Although soon after the humanitarian community turned its attention to “natural disasters,” the Code of Conduct was still the underlying guide for the ethical procedures of humanitarian actors.

The Code of Conduct had rapid success in being put forward and accepted by the larger humanitarian community. Looking back on a key to its success, we are able to see how it effectively brought together the two, somewhat opposing, philosophical approaches to humanitarian response of the day. In the one hand,

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6 Humanitarian Accountability Partnership (HAP) International. “Quality Initiative Reference,” [www.hapinternational.org/pool/files/qia-reference-document.pdf](http://www.hapinternational.org/pool/files/qia-reference-document.pdf) (accessed April 2011).

there were the specific humanitarian mission organizations that were worried about the “invasion” of the humanitarian space; for those organizations, the crucial principles of humanitarianism, impartiality, and independence were clearly recognized in articles 1 to 4. In the other hand, a second wave of organizations was defending the “developmental relief” that represented disaster as the tip of an iceberg of deeper elements, such as poverty, injustice and vulnerability; for this set of organizations, articles 5 to 8 underline enough key elements, such as beneficiary participation, vulnerability reduction and capacity building. Peter Walker, one of the Code’s authors, explained in the tenth year anniversary that “the Code, drafted by development NGOs that also engaged in relief work, reflects the prevailing belief that relief can and should be done in a developmental way.”<sup>7</sup>

It is in this second group of principles that we should find the mandate and guidance for true empowerment of local actors, but upon closer examination, we find noticeable gaps and perhaps some explanation of why it has not helped transform local participation. First, despite its universal aspirations, “the Code is implicitly written for international agencies; for people who are essentially recent guests in someone else’s country.”<sup>8</sup> Second, the Code’s wording sets a much different tone in the first four articles than in subsequent articles. Articles 1 to 4 inspire an obligatory action with statements such as, “when we give humanitarian aid it is not a partisan or political act and should not be viewed as such,”<sup>9</sup> “Aid will not be used to further a particular political or religious standpoint,”<sup>10</sup> and “We therefore formulate our own policies and implementation strategies and do not seek to implement the policy of any government.”<sup>11</sup> On the other hand we observe a “good faith” approach in the following articles, such as “we will endeavor to respect culture...,”<sup>12</sup> “where possible, we will work through local NGHAs [nongovernmental humanitarian agencies]...,”<sup>13</sup> “We will strive to achieve full community participation...,”<sup>14</sup> or “Relief aid must strive to reduce future vulnerabilities....”<sup>15</sup>

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7 Peter Walker, “Cracking the Code: The Genesis, Use and Future of the Code of Conduct,” *Disasters Magazine*, Vol 29, Issue 4, 324 (December 2005).

8 Ibid., 326.

9 Code of Conduct Art 1: [www.ifrc.org/Global/Publications/disasters/code-of-conduct/code-english.pdf](http://www.ifrc.org/Global/Publications/disasters/code-of-conduct/code-english.pdf)

10 Code of Conduct Art 3: [www.ifrc.org/Global/Publications/disasters/code-of-conduct/code-english.pdf](http://www.ifrc.org/Global/Publications/disasters/code-of-conduct/code-english.pdf)

11 Code of Conduct Art 4: [www.ifrc.org/Global/Publications/disasters/code-of-conduct/code-english.pdf](http://www.ifrc.org/Global/Publications/disasters/code-of-conduct/code-english.pdf)

12 Code of Conduct Art 5: [www.ifrc.org/Global/Publications/disasters/code-of-conduct/code-english.pdf](http://www.ifrc.org/Global/Publications/disasters/code-of-conduct/code-english.pdf)

13 Code of Conduct Art 6: [www.ifrc.org/Global/Publications/disasters/code-of-conduct/code-english.pdf](http://www.ifrc.org/Global/Publications/disasters/code-of-conduct/code-english.pdf)

14 Code of Conduct Art 7: [www.ifrc.org/Global/Publications/disasters/code-of-conduct/code-english.pdf](http://www.ifrc.org/Global/Publications/disasters/code-of-conduct/code-english.pdf)

15 Code of Conduct Art 8: [www.ifrc.org/Global/Publications/disasters/code-of-conduct/code-english.pdf](http://www.ifrc.org/Global/Publications/disasters/code-of-conduct/code-english.pdf)

Although the entire Code of Conduct recognizes that “these guidelines are presented for guidance, they are not legally binding,” the “let’s try” tone of these articles with respect to the work with local organizations and to community participation has had important repercussions on the fact that many years later most of the humanitarian community still understands local community participation as something peripheral or tactical for their actions, instead of a pillar for their actions.

## Sphere standards and local participation

The other widely accepted guide to improved practice for the humanitarian community is the Humanitarian Charter and Minimum Standards in Disaster Response, known as the Sphere Handbook or Sphere Standards. The Sphere Standards “reflect a continuing determination to ensure that human rights and humanitarian principles are realised in practice.”<sup>16</sup> Developed in a highly participatory global process with different phases of development and practice, the Sphere Standards are the most recognized set of standards, indicators, and guidance notes to ensure that the rights of people in need of adequate assistance are fulfilled by those trying to provide humanitarian help. In fact, we can consider that the manual puts into practice what is recognized as principles under the Code of Conduct.

The Sphere Standards have specific declarations oriented to ensure participation of disaster-affected people. For instance, Standard 1 of the “Minimum Standards Common to all Sectors” discusses participation of the disaster-affected population in all different phases of a humanitarian program. The indicators created to support the fulfillment of this standard focus on information sharing, the need to reflect concerns and values of the affected people, and creation of opportunities to comment on the project implementation. The guidance note goes on to share initiatives on how to achieve these indicators. However, on the whole, we observe again the lack of compulsory language. If we compare it with other indicators in the handbook that clearly state the number of liters of water per person per day or grams of soap to be distributed, the markers for participation can be interpreted in multiple ways.

On the effort to cross cut, we also appreciate how the mandate to ensure participation is diluted. To illustrate this point, we look at the article “Sphere and Sustainability Paper: A Matter of Time,” which details dilemmas faced by

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<sup>16</sup> The Sphere Project, “Humanitarian Charter and Minimum Standards in Disaster Response,” 6 (2004), [www.bb.undp.org/uploads/file/pdfs/crisis/Sphere%20handbook.pdf](http://www.bb.undp.org/uploads/file/pdfs/crisis/Sphere%20handbook.pdf).

humanitarian organizations around sustainability issues.<sup>17</sup> Authors Pinera and Boshier illustrate the dilemma by using the example of choosing between dug wells and boreholes, based on the quality and durability of the systems. They test both technical options against Sphere Standards and come to the conclusion that neither the specific indicators related to water supply nor the ones related to participation help define the sustainability of the systems in the long term. Indeed, while the contents of both these indicators are supposed to facilitate the measurement of sustainability, they are so cluttered with other ideas, such as technical feasibility or use of the system, that the authors are thus unable to see their purported purpose. The Sphere Standards insist on the need to include the knowledge, the capacity, and the preferences of both the hosting and the refugee population – which should be a good recipe for sustainability – yet Pinera and Boshier are unable to see this relationship and make their analysis trapped on a common point of view of most humanitarian organizations: the accuracy of the solution brought from the West, the Sphere Standards, that talk about participation and that relying on local knowledge should lead to sustainable systems because (for example) the people needing water today in Chad will need it in 10 and 20 years. But the particular standards need to be more explicitly underlined, both for practitioners and for those that will later on evaluate the operations. This example highlights that by “crosscutting” key elements of local participation in other areas, we risk focusing on sectorial standards and forgetting about the essence.

The element that is most worrisome in the Sphere Project, however, is the paternalistic way in which local participation is understood by who holds the money. When an indicator is set that says that disaster-affected people “are given the opportunity to comment to the assistance agency during all stages of the project cycle,”<sup>18</sup> you are clearly setting a context that says “we provide and you can make an observation,” which is very far from the approach of “you are in the driving seat of the project that is trying to relieve the suffering of your own community.”

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17 J.F. Pinera and L. Boshier, “Sphere and Sustainability: A Matter of Time,” *The Journal of Humanitarian Assistance* (January 2011).

18 The Sphere Project, “Humanitarian Charter and Minimum Standards in Disaster Response.” 28 (2004), [www.bb.undp.org/uploads/file/pdfs/crisis/Sphere%20handbook.pdf](http://www.bb.undp.org/uploads/file/pdfs/crisis/Sphere%20handbook.pdf).

# Further reasons we have not advanced on greater investment in local capacity

Consultation does not need to occur because it would be rude to do otherwise, but because it is essential for success – provided that success is defined as long-term reduction in vulnerability. If success is defined in term of gratitude for aid received and likelihood that more will be needed in the next disaster, then consultation as a matter of politeness will be enough.<sup>19</sup>

One of the most extensive reviews of people affected by aid has been the Collaborative for Development Action (CDA) initiative called the Listening Project. The Listening Project has interviewed participants in 20 countries, over 6,000 local recipients, stakeholders, or observers of international aid, and came away with a clear conclusion that local people want a more active role in their own development:

They want to “discuss together, decide together, and work together.” In calling for more ownership and effective participation, people in recipient societies want aid providers to be transparent and open to discussing all aspects of their assistance efforts, including: the local context; agendas (external and internal); mutual expectations, theories of change and the assumptions behind different approaches; process and criteria for beneficiary/project selection; constraints/limitations; implementation plans; the changing dynamics/context; and finally, exit strategies.<sup>20</sup>

Interestingly, this clear conclusion is not prioritized in ALNAP’S recent review of the sector. ALNAP has attempted to set the state of the humanitarian system today with a review of findings from 100 evaluations and interviews with 89 people representing major actors of the humanitarian system. “Connectedness and capacity building” is included as one of the six areas of assessment. Although ALNAP recognizes that there is “a lack of investment in local and

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19 TEC, “Impact of the Tsunami Response on Local and National Capacities,” 42 (2006), [http://ochanet.unocha.org/p/Documents/TEC\\_Capacities\\_Report.pdf](http://ochanet.unocha.org/p/Documents/TEC_Capacities_Report.pdf).

20 CDA: Collaborative Learning Projects, “Initial Findings from the Listening Project,” [www.cdainc.com/cdawww/pdf/other/lp\\_2page\\_\\_initial\\_findings\\_from\\_the\\_listening\\_project\\_20100803\\_Pdf.pdf](http://www.cdainc.com/cdawww/pdf/other/lp_2page__initial_findings_from_the_listening_project_20100803_Pdf.pdf) (accessed April 2011).

national capacities for response,”<sup>21</sup> it does not list this as one of its seven “most difficult challenges” in its main conclusions.

Why does this prevalent issue, which has been discussed for the past decade, not rise to a priority concern? Most likely, the contradiction comes from the source of information. The Listening Project goes directly to beneficiaries and local actors; it focuses on the perspective of those impacted by international aid. On the other hand, in the ALNAP study, only 9% of those interviewed are from local NGOs. Unfortunately, this is a common pattern when we analyze the quality of the work in the humanitarian sector. John Holmes, a former United Nations Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs and Emergency Relief Coordinator, recognizes that humanitarian work is a Western-dominated enterprise.<sup>22</sup> Western organizations dominate the sector as well as its analysis, where southern voices are not heard.

An additional conclusion coming out of the ALNAP study is that priorities differ depending on who is asked. When we read the answers of many international organizations, greater involvement of local organizations does not emerge as a priority; however, priorities set by the sector will not be the same as priorities set by vulnerable people.

## Analysis of a vicious cycle: Need for immediate results in humanitarian response

The humanitarian business is the business of saving lives. Although the sector has made a valuable improvement on quality standards and guidelines, as we have already mentioned, quite often it appears Machiavellian, as in ‘the end justifies the means’.

While development work has permanently established itself within a process-oriented approach, the humanitarian sector remains fundamentally within the “results-oriented approach”. It is not that development neglects the importance of impact, but that many lessons from the past have taught us that change is only generated through a sociopolitical transformation. This transformation is the fruit of processes that promote self-reliance through participation, governance, and entrepreneurship.

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21 ALNAP, “The State of the Humanitarian System,” 9 (2010).

22 John Holms. “Humanitarian Action: A Western-Dominated Enterprise in Need of Change,” [www.fmreview.org/FMRpdfs/FMR29/4-5.pdf](http://www.fmreview.org/FMRpdfs/FMR29/4-5.pdf) (accessed in May 2011).

The process-oriented model minimizes the role of the external agent, accentuating community mobilization to overcome local development constraints. The model builds on partnerships between the community and the development agent to overcome local, national, or international development constraints.<sup>23</sup>

When we flag the humanitarian mantra of “we exist to save lives,” it is very difficult to allow us to move away from the results-oriented approach. What a more-superior result than a life saved? Humanitarian workers do not ignore the importance of the process, but such an imperious result gives us the illusion that we are allowed to take shortcuts in the process. Unfortunately, the part of the process that we forget is often the one that includes the opinion and the power of those that we try to save.

This is the way that the vicious cycle for the lack of inclusion of local capacity in humanitarian response is built. The need for immediate results in the aftershock of the disaster by saving and protecting lives makes it imperative not to bypass local capacities. Even in protracted crises, where the results are not even immediate, the importance of meeting higher results leads to the illusion of the never-ending feeling of constant emergency. In this context, very few organizations are capable to transfer leadership to the local actors. Because this handover of responsibility never happens, there is a lack of capacity, not only for the next emergency but also for current protracted ones.

While our short-term assessments and after-action reports tell us that we have fulfilled our desired outcomes, what does the long-term impact look like? Are the communities we work in, or with, better able to respond the next emergency? Are they in a better position to tackle long-term issues and to demand that their government fulfill their rights to jobs, education, and health services? While our evaluations are more frequent and more precise, we may be evaluating impact too early and moving on to the next emergency too quickly, with the result that we forget about the long-term impact. We need to put more emphasis on evaluations that go back and look at communities months and years later.

If we plant our focus highly in monetary concerns, we will find further evidence of why the sector has stagnated on building local capacity. Funding for the humanitarian sector is dominated by a small amount of influential actors. The obligation of saving lives in the short term is often highly prioritized, so funds toward the efforts of building local capacity remain depleted. Despite the fact that the humanitarian donor governments are committed to “request implementing humanitarian organizations to ensure, to greatest possible extent,

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23 Jerry Buckland, “From Relief and Development to Assisted Self-Reliance: Nongovernmental Organizations in Bangladesh,” *Journal of Humanitarian Assistance*, 4 (August 1998).

adequate involvement of beneficiaries in the design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of humanitarian response,”<sup>24</sup> very few results are seen within their funding policies, which could mandate local involvement.

If we pay attention to the indications that some donor governments give to the organizations seeking their financial support, we find that aid organizations have few requirements to involve beneficiaries or to strengthen the capacity of affected countries and local communities to respond to the existing and future humanitarian crises.<sup>25</sup>

The UK Department for International Development (DFID) discovered when assessing the adequateness of a humanitarian proposal that out of the 25 indicative questions made to describe how the project will meet the quality standards related to issues such as coordination, sustainability, participation, protection, risk reduction, and conflict sensitivity, only one is related to participation: “to what extent and how will beneficiaries and other local actors be involved in the design, decision-making, implementation, management, monitoring and evaluation of the project.”<sup>26</sup> We cannot stress the importance of this question enough, but if we weigh it against many other aspects of humanitarian response that need to be justified to get the money from DFID, it is assumed that a project is not going to be denied for funding if it does not show a good commitment on local involvement or previous contacts and knowledge of local partners.

On its guidelines for organizations intending to receive funding, the US Agency for International Development (USAID) Office of Foreign Disaster Assistance (OFDA) provides a total of 290 indicators on different response sectors/sub-sectors and cross-cutting themes.<sup>27</sup> The only reference made in these guidelines regarding beneficiary issues is on counting heads. Several indicators refer to the number of people reached by any of the sectorial activities. However, organizations seeking funding are not asked to demonstrate improvements on how a disaster affected people participating in a project or to say how local communities were empowered. A couple of cross-cutting themes were given as examples of how USAID/OFDA understands local participation. Capacity

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24 Principle #7 of “Principles and Good Practice of Humanitarian Donorship,” [www.goodhumanitarianandonorship.org/gns/principles-good-practice-ghd/overview.aspx](http://www.goodhumanitarianandonorship.org/gns/principles-good-practice-ghd/overview.aspx). Endorsed in Stockholm, June 17, 2003, by 17 donor government, the US and the UK among them.

25 As suggested in Principle #8 of “Principles and Good Practice of Humanitarian Donorship,” [www.goodhumanitarianandonorship.org/gns/principles-good-practice-ghd/overview.aspx](http://www.goodhumanitarianandonorship.org/gns/principles-good-practice-ghd/overview.aspx).

26 DFID, “Humanitarian Funding Guidelines for NGOs,” 23 (October 2007), [www.dfid.gov.uk/Documents/funding/humanitarian\\_funding\\_guidelines\\_ngo.pdf](http://www.dfid.gov.uk/Documents/funding/humanitarian_funding_guidelines_ngo.pdf).

27 USAID/OFDA., “Guidelines for Unsolicited Proposals and Reporting,” 18 (2008), [www.usaid.gov/our\\_work/humanitarian\\_assistance/disaster\\_assistance/resources/pdf/updated\\_guidelines\\_unsolicited\\_proposals\\_reporting.pdf](http://www.usaid.gov/our_work/humanitarian_assistance/disaster_assistance/resources/pdf/updated_guidelines_unsolicited_proposals_reporting.pdf).

building is understood just as training, and the indicators proposed to demonstrate the quality of the proposal are the “number of people trained, number of people hired post-training, and percentage of beneficiaries using their skills training within their livelihood activity.” Under a “host government,” the indicators measure “numbers of activities involving collaboration with the host government” and “total amount of funding devoted to supporting the host government.”

## Recommendations

These are just two examples of how back donors have little interest in how our humanitarian interventions empower local communities. Good intentions are admired, but a stronger system needs to be put in place in terms of program implementation. Since we need to “ensure, to greatest possible extent, adequate involvement of beneficiaries,” the international humanitarian sector remains trapped in the notion that *we* need to be the ones saving all the lives. As a community, we are unprepared to assume the new increasing demands due to climate change. We must build up and support other key local actors who can multiply our effective impact.

# Changing the criteria to create an empowering humanitarian response

Humanitarians believe their ideas and principles are universal – and there is substantive evidence to support this – but from this they construct a global humanitarian community by inviting others to join them; and this essentially means inviting others to join a Northern club.<sup>28</sup>

The pledge for diversity has become more widespread in numerous sectors as we evolve to a more global society. This pledge is not only ethical, it is also more effective. It is difficult to comprehend how we can accept a top-down business model in a field that intends to support communities in their own struggle against conflict and natural disasters.

The understanding of the need to change the business model for humanitarian assistance is spreading. The new business model will retain the traditional characteristics, ethical and legal principles of humanitarian action and link them to the broader context of poverty, vulnerability, and poor governance. “The default mode of a new vulnerability and protection model should be self-reliance. A requirement of this new model is to enhance the capacities, readiness, and resilience of exposed societies so they can better handle extreme events.”<sup>29</sup>

We do not want to reopen the discussion on the rights and principles that obligate us to empower local communities as we intend to support them. This is already recognized by standard laws and by the Code of Conduct. What we need to do is to develop clear criteria to identify appropriate humanitarian responses that improve the capacity and readiness to go even further by empowering local communities.

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28 Peter Walker, “The Future of Humanitarian Action,” Feinstein International Center Briefing Paper, 6 (2011).

29 Simon Maxwell, “A New Business Model for Humanitarian Assistance?” 6 (World Economic Forum Global Agenda Council on Humanitarian Assistance, February 22, 2010).

# Key recommendations

Our review of the recent sector evaluations and analyses produced eight recommendations:

1. We need to provide and monitor investments in national organizations as a key indicator. We need to be able to track progress of local and national organizations over time. The examples coming from Darfur and Central America need to be strengthened and replicated in different regions throughout the world.
2. We must move from consultation to partnership and develop the proper standards that support that nuanced difference. It is not enough to ask opinions; international and local actors need to work through the issues together, both prior to and during the time of an emergency. This must be the new standard that we hold ourselves to.
3. Our reports and evaluations must be inclusive of local people and stakeholders. Otherwise, we are only reporting on our activities and not our impact.
4. We need to assess and implement reviews several years after emergencies happen to truly evaluate our impact on communities' vulnerabilities, otherwise we will never break out of this response cycle.
5. As funders are a primary driver for the sector, we need to do more in advance. Major funders, such as DFID and USAID/OFDA, need to demonstrable capacity building of local organizations in their programming and insist on certain levels of participation.
6. Other reinforced criteria for empowering local communities through humanitarian interventions, in a form acceptable to local populations, need to be included on standards for good humanitarian response.
7. We need to build partnership based on solid ground, with shared values and sense of mission.
8. We must honestly address the capacity of each international agency to identify and sustain a certain number of stable partnerships.

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