



ACHIEVING A MORE EQUITABLE AND IMPACTFUL HUMANITARIAN SECTOR: Platform Paper

Our research direction for Humanitarian Horizons 2021-2024



Acknowledgements

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Humanitarian Horizons 2021-2024

Humanitarian Horizons is HAG's three-year research initiative which adds unique value to humanitarian action in the Indo-Pacific by generating evidence-based research and creating conversations for change. This research initiative is supported by the Australian Government through the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade.

The research program for 2021–24 builds on achievements of the Humanitarian Horizons pilot phase (2017–18), the previous iteration of the program (2018–21) and HAG's experience in supporting the sector for almost 10 years. The research is structured into three interlocking streams: 1) Power, People and Local Leadership, 2) Greening the System, and 3) Real-Time Analysis and Influence. It is underpinned by a fourth stream comprised of governance, accountability, and monitoring, evaluation and learning processes.

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About the partners

Collaborate Consulting Pty Ltd (CoLAB) is a Fiji-based development consultancy company that has delivered projects with diverse partners in the Pacific, Asia, Africa and Europe. CoLAB's vision is to achieve localised responses to development that are inclusive and sustainable, enabled through genuine collaboration amongst all partners.

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Abbreviations

CoLAB	Collaborate Consulting Pty Ltd
DAC	Development Assistance Committee
HAG	Humanitarian Advisory Group
INGO	international non-governmental organisation
inSights	the Institute of Innovation for Gender and Humanitarian Transformation
M&E	monitoring and evaluation
MSF	Médecins Sans Frontières
NGO	non-governmental organisation
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
PIANGO	Pacific Islands Association of Non-Governmental Organisations
UN	United Nations

Introduction

This paper is about the data and evidence that we – a team of researchers and practitioners from organisations in Asia and the Pacific – believe is needed to support a more equitable and impactful humanitarian sector. Our vision is for a sector that recognises the value of different perspectives, respects the contributions of different people, and understands how ethical choices reflect and affect the communities it serves. Our belief is that research that holds our everyday practices to the spotlight and shares evidence that can empower and encourage improved practices will help the sector advance towards that vision.

This paper maps out how we intend to tackle the challenging space of power, people and local leadership in our sector. It provides a research platform to ask and uncover answers over the next three years.

This is the right time to develop a multifaceted analysis of the challenges the sector faces in regard to power inequalities and come up with strategic solutions. Recent global movements are pushing the humanitarian and development sectors to introspectively confront historical and emerging problems in the aid world – problems that show themselves in biases, discrimination and lack of accountability. The localisation agenda and critiques by humanitarian actors in the Global South have also raised challenging questions for our sector. These questions include who sets the humanitarian agenda, who decides on the definition and measurement of effective humanitarian outcomes, and who produces, owns and shares the evidence and knowledge that our sector uses as the basis for decision-making? Exploring these questions and critiques means acknowledging the continuing legacies of colonialism in the aid world and beyond. Many people and organisations have invested enormously in mobilising, educating and reforming, yet even as these agendas have gained strength and attention, structural and transformational change has been slow, with the sector still needing to listen and reflect. Power dynamics play a major role in preventing this from happening.

We are by no means the first to say more change in the humanitarian sector is needed, and the members of our research team have said so many times in various contexts. But despite some progress, current approaches to driving change are too fragmented and too partial. If actors in the sector really do want to reset the terms on which they operate, they also need to reset approaches to promoting local leadership. This means both going deeper and joining the dots more clearly. We believe that it is only through holistic and inclusive ways of thinking that more ambitious change will be achieved.





DEFINING OUR DIRECTION: A MORE EQUITABLE AND IMPACTFUL HUMANITARIAN SYSTEM

The Humanitarian Horizons research program's Power, People and Local Leadership research stream aims to be part of the momentum for change towards a more equitable and impactful humanitarian system. We passionately believe that as knowledge brokers in the system, we have a responsibility to help drive these conversations forward with the aim of supporting the sector to distribute power more equitably and be more accountable to the people it serves. We hope to achieve this by translating research findings into concrete policy suggestions, practical tools for change and guidance on how to challenge embedded inequalities. Effective use of these tools will be supported by deep reflection. We are excited that this research allows us to build on the work we have done across multiple settings and research partnerships, but also opens up new and challenging areas for us to explore, and, as practitioners, enables us to reflect on our ways of working.

INFORMING OUR THINKING

This platform paper is the first in the Power, People and Local Leadership research stream, and outlines the agenda for our research direction.

This paper outlines our position at this point in time: our analysis of the status quo, our diagnosis of the gaps in evidence, and where we anticipate our research will head as the Humanitarian Horizons program progresses. It is based on an inductive process of exploring an initial set of questions, then testing these questions with sector practitioners and researchers, a review of practitioner and academic literature, a citation analysis exercise and many hours of discussion and analysis across the research partners.

The ideas reflected in this paper draw on the experiences and reflections of all research team members. We have invested collectively in the process of exploring these issues as they are playing out in the sector currently, and in identifying opportunities for research that serves priorities in Asia and the Pacific to elevate voices from those regions. We also recognise that others are working in this space on related issues, and we hope to collaborate with these organisations and initiatives in ways that ensure we are complementing existing work and bringing new insights. We recognise there are many conversations around terminology and concepts, and that is something we continue to explore as a research team. We remain open to new concepts, to concepts being challenged, and to tailoring concepts for different actors and contexts.

This paper will provide a platform upon which we will base and shape work throughout the research journey. This paper outlines three interlinked areas of enquiry that are key to a more equitable and impactful humanitarian system. The research on the three areas will happen concurrently, and the three areas will feed off, and build upon, each other.



POWER, PEOPLE AND LOCAL LEADERSHIP: A ROADMAP OF ENQUIRY FOR 3 YEARS OF RESEARCH



CREATING THE EVIDENCE BASE FOR LOCALLY LED RESPONSE

What we hope to explore

- **Understanding impact:** Biases in the knowledge ecosystem have meant Global North actors inform and shape most discussion around locally led response, including how its impact is understood and measured. We want to explore ways to define and measure the impact of localisation that respect and centralise local actor voices, and bridge the gap between Global North understanding and locally informed methods for tracking impact.
- **Creating evidence of positive impact:** While there is widespread conceptual commitment to locally led response, questions about its impact continue to hinder more significant changes to how the sector operates. We want to reframe our thinking about success and impact in localised responses. What evidence exists with respect to the impact of localisation? How can the evidence base be used as an enabler or motivator for action?
- **What approaches work and why:** Even with a strong sense of momentum, driven by a shared understanding of impact, progress will require a systematic understanding of the approaches that work, and why. Various approaches to supporting locally led response have been applied, with varying success, but learning from these approaches hasn't been consolidated. We want to explore what practices support and elevate locally led humanitarian action, what approaches work and why, and how they influence the impact of locally led response.



Who this is for and how it will help:

This area of enquiry and associated research findings will support donors, practitioners and global advocacy actors to advance localisation commitments. By providing strong understanding and evidence of the impact of localised practices it will support increased motivation and momentum for change. At the same time, documenting the practices and approaches that deliver this impact will provide a clear pathway for improved practices that can be encouraged and supported by donors.



CHANGING BEHAVIOURS AND NORMS THAT EMBED INEQUALITIES

What we hope to explore

- **Common practices that reinforce inequalities, prejudices and discrimination:** Established norms within the sector have institutionalised inequalities in day-to-day practice. We want to explore the behaviours and norms that perpetuate inequalities, identify their impacts, and determine how practices might be influenced to reduce biases and create a more equitable and impactful sector.



Who this is for and how it will help:

This work will support humanitarian actors, international and national, to question and challenge embedded biases in their day-to-day work. With a strong focus on behavioural science, the research will provide concrete recommendations on how to address persistent issues such as recruitment biases or staff poaching practices. Recommendations will be based on a clear evidence base and justification for change.



CHALLENGING BIASES IN KNOWLEDGE PRODUCTION

What we hope to explore:

- **Whose voices are heard and why:** In humanitarian knowledge production, some voices struggle to make themselves heard. We want to explore why Global South voices are underrepresented; what are the enablers and barriers to their voice, and which behaviours need to shift at an individual, organisational and sector level?
- **Certain types of knowledge are not equally valued:** Multiple types of knowledge are necessary for effective responses. We want to identify instances in which international and indigenous knowledge has been drawn on in a balanced way, what enabled this practice and how it can be encouraged more often?



Who this is for and how it will help:

This work will support humanitarian donors and decision makers to critically appraise what voices they are listening to, why this is the case, and how they can access different voices and perspectives. This may impact decisions such as what research and knowledge services are commissioned; who is feeding into processes such as evaluations and learning events; and how to appropriately access indigenous knowledge that can support more effective humanitarian action.

Research within these three areas will take place concurrently, with the work that we do under each area complementing and building on the work of the others. This will ensure that we take a more holistic approach to the practical complexities that affect the inequalities we are trying to address within the sector. We also believe it will help us to have a stronger link between our research outputs and will lay an important foundation for the research that we undertake in the second and third years of the program.

FOUNDATIONS OF THE RESEARCH

Two foundational elements will shape the basis for our work and thinking: how we understand and approach the concept of power, and how we incorporate behavioural science into the process of challenging and changing existing norms and biases.

Power Dynamics

Understanding power and the dynamics it creates is essential to understanding the politics and impacts of humanitarian action. In recent years, the Black Lives Matter and #AidToo movements, as well as greater focus on the effects of colonial legacies, have helped to reveal the power dynamics that shape humanitarian action, subtly yet strongly influencing actions, narratives and impact.¹ However, there is still hesitation to engage fully with issues about power and inequality, especially power dynamics affecting how knowledge is produced and used to shape humanitarian policy and practice.²

We have designed this research stream based on the findings of the previous Humanitarian Horizons program. In particular, it draws on the Localisation and Diverse Leadership streams that developed models and approaches for understanding how transfer of power and knowledge occurs in the humanitarian system. The Localisation stream exposed some of the assumptions and inequalities that underpin practice that can and should be challenged, such as the language used in coordination forums and who generates and owns information in the system.³ The Diverse Leadership stream exposed some of the flawed decision-making that occurs by excluding central stakeholders and failing to draw on collective wisdom through inclusive practices.⁴

We recognise that many forms and expressions of power are present in humanitarian practice. Some are more visible or explicit than others, and the most useful way of conceptualising them can vary depending on the context and dynamics. Here are some key concepts that we might use to bring an issue into focus and develop responses:

- **Productive power** – the power to shape concepts and categories⁵
- **Power over** – control of decision-making or resources over those without⁶
- **Power with** – build collective strength through finding common ground⁷
- **Power to** – shape one's life and world⁸
- **Power within** – capacity to have hope and imagine.⁹

1 'The West's humanitarian reckoning,' conversation published in The New Humanitarian, July 1, 2020; Peace Direct, [Time to decolonise aid: Insights and lessons from a global consultation](#), 2nd edition, 2021.

2 A Majumdar and M Mukerjee, 'Research as agitation: Generative activism in the age of resistance,' Global Public Health, 2022; M Lokot and C Wake, 'Research as usual in humanitarian settings? Equalising power in academic-NGO research partnerships through co-production,' Conflict and Health, 2021, 15(64), 1–12.

3 e.g. HAG, PIANGO, CSFT, VANGO, DSE and FCOSS, [Demonstrating change in locally led humanitarian action in the Pacific: Ki Namuka vata ga nikau](#), 2021; HAG and VANGO, [No turning back: Local leadership in Vanuatu's response to tropical cyclone Harold](#), 2020; HAG and NIRAPAD, [Elevating evidence: Localisation in the 2019 Bangladesh Flood Response](#), 2020.

4 e.g. HAG, InSights et al., [Leading for impact: The measurable effect of diverse and inclusive humanitarian leadership teams](#), 2021; HAG, ICRC, IFRC, and GLOW Red, [How diverse leadership shaped responses to COVID-19 within the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement](#), 2021.

5 M Barnett, and R Duvall, 'Power in International Politics', International Organization, 2005, 59(1), 42.

6 Just Associates, [Making change happen: Power. concepts for revisoning power for justice, equality and peace](#). 2006.

7 Just Associates, [Making change happen](#).

8 Just Associates, [Making change happen](#).

9 Just Associates, [Making change happen](#).

Behavioural Science

At the heart of this research stream sits behaviours – behaviours that exacerbate inequalities or call out biases, and behaviours that embed power imbalances or challenge them. Behavioural science is about understanding and changing human behaviour; it is a cross-disciplinary field that incorporates behavioural economics, neuroscience, and social and cognitive psychology. We contend that behavioural science provides a critical lens to achieving a more equitable and impactful humanitarian system.

How staff and leaders in the humanitarian sector behave and why they behave in these ways is informed by context, established sector and structural norms, opportunities to do things differently, and personal beliefs, biases, power dynamics and motivations. Importantly, however, we know that behaviours in our sector do not always reflect stated beliefs or commitments and can seem inconsistent and contradictory. As a research team, we believe that by unpacking these complexities within the structure of behavioural science theory and processes, we can bring new insights to our research.

We will begin by exploring the major issues or challenges of equity within the humanitarian sector and the behaviours that sit at the heart of these challenges. This stage will build on existing work that has identified behaviours in our sector, such as preferencing Global North-led knowledge, or preferentially funding international over national organisations. Having identified relevant behaviours, the next stage of the research will identify their explicit and implicit drivers and barriers. The final critical stage will be proposing and testing behavioural theories to influence change; it is at this stage that the process will go beyond most research on power in our sector. We have intentionally chosen to focus on areas of enquiry that include verbs such as challenge and change; by presenting theories on how behaviours can shift, and testing them in practice, we hope to support sectoral change. We will embed behavioural science in our methods as well as our communications and engagement for this stream.

We believe this research will take us on an enlightening journey, and whilst we have set the direction from our embarkation point, it will twist and turn along the way. In addition, we want this platform paper to be an invitation: if these are areas you also see as important, please reach out. Inclusive conversations are at the heart of this work.



Defining our direction



CREATING THE EVIDENCE BASE FOR LOCALLY LED RESPONSE

Our initial take

Increased attention on localisation and growing calls to shift more power from international actors to national and local actors have helped to shed more light on the way that inequalities manifest themselves in practice. In the sector currently, international actors have predominantly shaped understandings of and knowledge generation around localisation. This has been evident in the processes to define 'localisation' and associated key terminology,¹⁰ in the arguably disproportionate focus on the risks of localisation,¹¹ and in most attempts to understand the impacts of localisation being expected to align with Global North frameworks and concepts (such as Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD] Development Assistance Committee [DAC] evaluation criteria).

The lack of an evidence base for the positive impacts of localisation, coupled with who gets to define how to understand and measure its impact, prevents the sector from moving forward confidently. Recent research suggested that a serious impediment to progress is that the benefits of locally led response are not obvious within the sector,¹² which gives space and airtime to common delay discourses such as suggestions that we should proceed with caution (and maintain established inequalities) for fear of negative outcomes.¹³ In other words, the ability for local leadership to really take hold is still held to ransom by the conversations around the potential risks of localisation, and the assumed bias that potential risks are universal, while positive impacts are isolated.

As a starting point, we recognise that the issue of localisation requires an examination and change to both behaviours and norms that embed inequalities within the aid sector (explored below in the '*Changing behaviours and norms that embed inequalities*' section) and the broader context of biases in knowledge production (explored below in the '*Challenging biases in knowledge production*' section).



We began by asking ourselves: How is the impact of localisation defined or understood by different actors who operate within the sector, and how does this influence the shift to a locally led response model? How can this shift be supported?

¹⁰ Alliance for Empowering Partnership, [IASC definition of local' and 'national actors' – a barrier to achieving Grand Bargain localisation commitments](#), AE4P, 2019.

¹¹ H Slim, '[Corruption and the localisation of humanitarian action](#),' Humanitarian Practice Network, 2021; The New Humanitarian, '[Exclusive: Congo aid scam triggers sector-wide alarm](#),' 2021; V Barbelet, G Davies, J Flint and E Davey, [Interrogating the evidence base on humanitarian localisation: A literature study](#), ODI, 2021.

¹² J Lees, J McCommon, K Sutton, J Flint, [Bridging the intention to action gap: The future role of intermediaries in supporting locally led humanitarian action](#), Humanitarian Advisory Group, 2021.

¹³ P Saez, J Konyndyk and R Worden, '[Rethinking humanitarian reform: What will it take to truly change the system?](#)' Centre for Global Development, 2021.



What we know and what we need to find out to support change

1. The sector's approach to understanding the impact of local leadership has been dominated by Global North actors.

While local and national actors have always championed the concept of locally led response, the Grand Bargain positioned localisation as an important focus area in the global reform agenda. However, most global discussions and movement around localisation continue to place international actors at the centre, with insufficient space given to local and national actors to challenge and reform the norms and practices that shape how the system functions.¹⁴ A perpetuating factor for this imbalance of voice and influence is that Global North actors tend to take the lead on knowledge generation and have more opportunities and resources to profile their work and evidence on localisation. We explore this further below in the 'Challenging biases in knowledge production' section on the inequitable representation of Global South actors in Grand Bargain reports.

Within this scope of knowledge generation on locally led response, Global North researchers continue to lead efforts to understand the impact of local leadership, primarily informed by a Global North understanding of impact (such as the OECD DAC evaluation criteria) – feeding off and perpetuating the biases in the global knowledge production landscape. As a review of literature on localisation found, evidence is currently lacking on 'how local and national organisations have defined their own localisation organisational priorities – outside of specific partnerships – or of the impact of this'.¹⁵ A more holistic understanding about the impact of local leadership requires insights into affected communities, and for local and national actors to determine if locally led responses lead to better or worse (or similar) outcomes than traditional internationally led models. This requires new approaches to research, developed in an inclusive and equitable way, that minimise the biases in current knowledge generational practices. The need to rethink how we understand impact and ways to measure it, also presents an opportunity for an honest assessment of the validity of current methodologies,

¹⁴ V Barbelet, G Davies, J Flint and E Davey, [Interrogating the evidence base](#); S Robillard, T Atim and D Maxwell, ['Localization: A "landscape" report'](#) Boston, MA: Feinstein International Center, Tufts University, 2021.

¹⁵ V Barbelet, G Davies, J Flint and E Davey, [Interrogating the evidence base](#), June 2021.

which often are used to hype up the performances of international actors due to the exclusion of meaningful input from affected people and local and national partners.

There are already moves towards more inclusive and culturally diverse and appropriate ways to conceive and measure impact and deliver monitoring and evaluation (M&E). For example, in the Pacific, there have been ongoing efforts to build wider understanding and recognition of the Pacific ways of evidence gathering.¹⁶ In 2020, the Pacific Community launched the [Pacific Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning Capacity Strengthening Rebbilib](#), which brings together existing concepts and practices from across the region related to gathering, understanding and sharing evidence, based on Pacific principles and contextually relevant and culturally responsive practices.¹⁷

In discussions, and as reflected in the 'Challenging biases in knowledge production' section of this report, the research team agreed that there is a growing recognition within the sector of power inequalities and inherent biases in how knowledge is captured and produced, while noting that more remains to be done to shift the power meaningfully. However, this recognition has promoted greater efforts to co-produce research and evidence. Using such approaches in humanitarian contexts can result in 'more relevant research that bridges the gap between knowledge and action'.¹⁸ Therefore, when it comes to research on locally led response in particular, the way the research is conducted becomes as relevant as the research itself.¹⁹ By building on various initiatives that are in motion, different voices and perspectives can be brought to meet the challenge of understanding and improving the benefits of locally led humanitarian response for affected people.



What we want to explore in future research:

What are ways to define and measure the impact of localisation that respect and centralise affected communities as well as local actors' voices and perspectives? How can we bridge the gap between Global North understanding and approaches for tracking impact and more locally informed methods? How can we share and promote the positive impacts of local leadership in a way that provides traction for devolution of power?



Who this is for and how it will help:

This work will support the interests of affected communities to hold the humanitarian sector accountable by challenging top-down definitions of impact. It will support local actors to develop and advocate for M&E approaches that reflect diverse approaches to knowledge and evidence. The research will provide a space to discuss alternative understandings of the concept of impact and how this applies to local leadership.

This research will be the basis for the momentum for change to policy and practice in understanding impact that elevates marginalised voices, helping humanitarian agencies to meet their goal of more accountable, appropriate and effective aid.

16 M Timotei, 'Talanoa research methodology: A developing position on Pacific Research,' *Wakaito Journal of Education*, 2016.

17 Pacific Community, '[Pacific MEL Rebbilib report on MEL capacity available for download](#),' PC, August 2020.

18 M Lokot and C Wake, '[The coproduction of research between academics, NGOs and communities in humanitarian response: A practical guide](#),' London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine, 2021.

19 Humanitarian Advisory Group and Pacific Islands Associations of NGOs, '[Walking Together in Partnership: Exploring the impact of localisation of humanitarian action research in the Pacific](#),' HAG, 2021.



2. The lack of evidence for the positive impact of localisation has become an obstacle to progress on breaking down power imbalances in the system

Discussions of the impact of locally led practices often make general statements or assumptions about the benefits (and the drawbacks) of localised practice. In most instances, these are based on anecdotal evidence or reviews of individual projects;²⁰ some are also based on aspirational or normative reflections, revealing a clear gap in generalisable evidence on the impact of locally led response.²¹ To date, efforts to promote local leadership have mostly used the approach of defining and measuring progress within identified domains of localisation. While this is important as a way of encouraging accountability and the shift from ambition to action,²² another shift is needed to focus on impacts. Most indicators of localisation that are prioritised and discussed at a global level are linked to the Grand Bargain – with the main one being in relation to delivering at least 25% of funding to local actors. However, this again only serves the purpose of tracking progress and does not look to at the impact and benefit of localised response (particularly in relation to affected communities).²³ Moving beyond measuring progress in ‘localisation’ to better understanding impact will help ensure the focus stays on the realities and outcomes for affected people – not just on tracking the sector’s own actions and indicators.

As outlined above, the sector is currently lacking a broader definition of impact that goes beyond the traditional Global North definitions.²⁴ Examining the impact of locally led response will require exploring how aspects such as significance, differential impact, unintended effects and transformational change²⁵ that form the OECD definition are contextualised and applied. Further thinking will also be needed on how to move beyond looking at individual project/intervention-based impact in isolation. It will be important to look at the longer-term benefits of locally led responses, such as capacity strengthening and building local structures

20 K Howe, J Munive, and K Rosenstock, *Views from the ground: Perspectives on localization in the Horn of Africa*, Feinstein International Center, Tufts University & Save the Children Denmark, 2019.

21 V Barbelet, G Davies, J Flint and E Davey, *Interrogating the evidence base*.

22 Progress measurement frameworks include Global Mentoring Initiative’s ‘Seven Dimensions of Localisation’ (Van Brabant and Patel, 2018) developed for the START Network, HAG and PIANGO’s ‘Measuring Localisation Framework’ (2019), the ‘Accelerating Localisation through Partnership’s Global Localisation Framework’ (2019), and the Network for Empowered Aid Response’s (NEAR’s) ‘Performance Measurement Framework’ (NEAR, 2017).

23 V Barbelet, G Davies, J Flint and E Davey, *Interrogating the evidence base*; K Howe, J Munive, and K Rosenstock, *Views from the ground: Perspectives on localization in the Horn of Africa*.

24 OECD defines impact as ‘positive and negative, primary and secondary long-term effects produced by a development intervention, directly or indirectly, intended or unintended’ (p. 11); see OECD, *Better criteria for better evaluation: Revised evaluation criteria definitions and principles for use*, 2019.

25 OECD, *Applying Evaluation Criteria Thoughtfully*, OECD Publishing, 2021.

that have a compounding effect on future responses.²⁶ This is particularly important where local actors continue to function and support long-term development and resilience within their communities – and not just short-term humanitarian response. Building a model that enables consideration and integration of these multiple aspects presents a challenge that will require thinking beyond established OECD and other Global North evaluation methods.

Weaknesses in analysis contribute to weak motivation. The insufficiency of evidence on the impact of locally led response has prevented progress on localisation efforts, especially those that require systemic shifts in the sector. Seeing clear benefits and impacts of locally led response is an important motivator for those in power (particularly donors and intermediaries) to support greater shifts in power and changes in practices.²⁷ As a [partnership-based study on the role of intermediaries](#) found, 'in the absence of stronger evidence of consistent and visible benefits, many in the sector will remain unmotivated to change approaches', and therefore 'more evidence is needed to energise a broader group of stakeholders'. The availability of clear evidence of impact will enable stronger communication and engagement to drive more systemic change and power shifts; this evidence may take different forms, although how this evidence is packaged and presented will also need to be considered in terms of how international actors (used to standard ways of tracking impact and reporting) consume information.



What we want to explore in future research:

How should we think about success/impact in localised responses? What evidence exists with respect to the impact of localisation? How can the evidence base be used as an enabler or motivator for action?



Who this is for and how it will help:

This work will support humanitarian practitioners passionate about spotlighting evidence on the impact of local leadership. It will offer local actors an advocacy tool and international actors a framework for reviewing programming. The research will directly apply the new model for measuring impact to the question of how localisation shapes humanitarian responses, helping the sector to confront the enduring challenge of understanding the outcomes of its actions.

3. Even with a strong sense of momentum, driven by a shared understanding of impact, progress will require a systematic understanding of what approaches work and why

To date, the drive to enable local leadership has been advancing on two fronts – one looking at a transformation or reshaping of the system, and the other a more steady inclusive process of incremental change.²⁸ The transformational approach comes from those who believe the sector is too flawed to shift to a more power-diffuse model and are calling for radical overhaul of the current system.²⁹ The incremental approach seeks to make gradual changes at a practice level (be it individual projects, organisations or

²⁶ V Barbelet, G Davies, J Flint and E Davey, [Interrogating the evidence base](#); Research partner discussions and reflection papers

²⁷ J Lees, J McCommon, K Sutton, J Flint, [Bridging the intention to action gap](#).

²⁸ S Robillard, T Atim and D Maxwell, '[Localization: A "landscape" report](#)'.

²⁹ A Al-Hardan, '[Researching Palestinian refugees: Who sets the agenda?](#)' Alshabaka: The Palestinian Policy Network; J Jayawickrama, '[Humanitarian project aid system is a continuation of the colonial project](#),' Aljazeera, February 2018.

countries) with the aim of creating a critical mass of momentum to tip the sector into broader reform.³⁰ They have both contributed to progressing change in international frameworks and in selected countries, but this has not yet been sufficient to fundamentally transform the way the sector operates or to consistently promote more effective action. Because of the biases in knowledge production and established norms that perpetuate inequalities (both explored in following sections), the sector lacks the strategic and systemic insights and operational momentum to enable meaningful behavioural change that will advance local leadership. Discussions and efforts to progress local leadership have tended to be ad hoc and reactive (at project or organisation level), rather than being more reflective to understand what models and approaches work in what contexts and why. Progress on local leadership can be tackled at multiple levels (such as project, organisational, partnerships, country, response and global) and various approaches and models can be applied in each of these contexts. For example, at the organisational level, developing a localisation strategy at the headquarters level can be viewed as a 'centralised approach', while a 'decentralised' approach will see the decision-making on localisation be handed across to the country office level or in-country partners. We reflected that both approaches are critical to create sustained and consistent reform across the global sector.

More recently, there have been efforts to consolidate some of the different approaches to support local leadership and lessons they offer,³¹ although application of such practices remains inconsistent within contexts and even the same organisations. However, these efforts have not looked at the potential the impact of these different approaches observable on the ground – which will (as stated earlier in this section) require a more nuanced and locally informed definition and methods to track impact. We believe we must explore if different approaches and models of progressing local leadership have had impact, and why. This requires us to investigate some of the practices that various actors have used in 'localising' their responses. By reflecting on these models and approaches, we want to identify tangible actions that different stakeholders can take to integrate these practices into their operations.



What we want to explore in future research:

What are the current practices and models for supporting locally led response? Which approaches work and don't work, and why? How do these approaches and models influence the impact of locally led response?



Who this is for and how it will help:

This research is for humanitarian policy and decision-makers who focus on driving forward the localisation agenda. It will concretely link specific models, practices and approaches to their impact on humanitarian action. Presented through a series of case studies, the research will unpack what positive impact localisation has had in various settings, and what has led to the positive impact, through different lenses such as sectoral practice (e.g. WASH), context (e.g. rapid onset disaster or protracted), or organisational strategy.

³⁰ Humanitarian Advisory Group and Myanmar Development Network, [Localisation through Partnership: Shifting Towards Locally-Led Programming in Myanmar](#), 2020

³¹ A Baguios, 'Localisation re-imagined: Localising the sectors versus supporting local solutions,' ALNAP, October 15, 2021; V Barbelet, G Davies, J Flint and E Davey, [Interrogating the evidence base](#).

CHALLENGING BEHAVIOURS AND NORMS THAT EMBED INEQUALITIES

Our initial take:



In the humanitarian sector, the end does not necessarily justify the means. Despite humanitarian action being based on values such as the recognition of shared humanity, there are persistent inequalities in how the sector operates and how different people within the sector are treated.³² Most of these inequalities are engrained in the day-to-day operation of the humanitarian sector and often considered normal in how the sector functions. Despite increasingly vocal critiques, power dynamics have reinforced a discriminatory status quo.

Faced with these challenges, we believe that change is both necessary and possible. The humanitarian sector is made up of people who make decisions, who are affected by systems, structures and biases, and those who perpetuate these structural inequalities through their behaviours. It also includes people who feel or witness the impact of these behaviours, who form their own strategies for navigating and mitigating the impacts, and who want to be part of creating a more equitable and impactful sector. Advocates of change have argued that the imperative to improve internal ways of working does not conflict with the sector's mandate to support the needs and rights of affected people.³³ In fact, these two goals are linked: deep biases and inequalities within the humanitarian system and its workforce have implications for the quality of humanitarian responses, because they are tied to outside actors' perceptions of affected people.



We began by asking ourselves: How do inequalities manifest in the humanitarian sector? How do they affect people's experience in the sector?

What we know and what we need to find out to support change

1. Common practices reinforce inequalities, prejudices and discrimination

Historical legacies in the aid sector and beyond continue to shape unfair practices in humanitarian organisations. Colonial dynamics were integral to European and North American-dominated humanitarianism when the sector emerged.³⁴ The continuation of these dynamics in the present – which some scholars describe as 'coloniality' – also drives racism and other forms of discrimination in wider society.³⁵ Aid organisations are not exempt. Coloniality affects the humanitarian local/international dichotomy described

32 Project Fair, [Case study: Concern Worldwide](#); S Carr and I McWha-Hermann, 'Mind the gap'; I McWha-Hermann, J Jandric, S Wakefield, S Carr, C Grund and M Moutou, [Project FAIR: Exploring practical pathways for reward fairness in international NGOs](#), University of Edinburgh, 2017; Humanitarian Advisory Group, [Data on diversity](#); JC Ong and P Combinido, 'Local aid workers in the digital humanitarian project: Between "second class citizens" and "entrepreneurial survivors"', *Critical Asian Studies*, 2019, 50(1): 86–102.

33 See blog series hosted by Humanitarian Policy Group, [World Humanitarian Day 2020: Confronting Systemic Inequality in the Sector](#), HPG (2020); S Rejali, 'Race, equity, and neocolonial legacies: Identifying paths forward for principled humanitarian action,' ICRC July 16, 2020; E Pascucci, 'The local labour building the international community: Precarious work within humanitarian spaces,' *Environment and Planning A: Economy and Space*, 2018, 51(3): 743–760

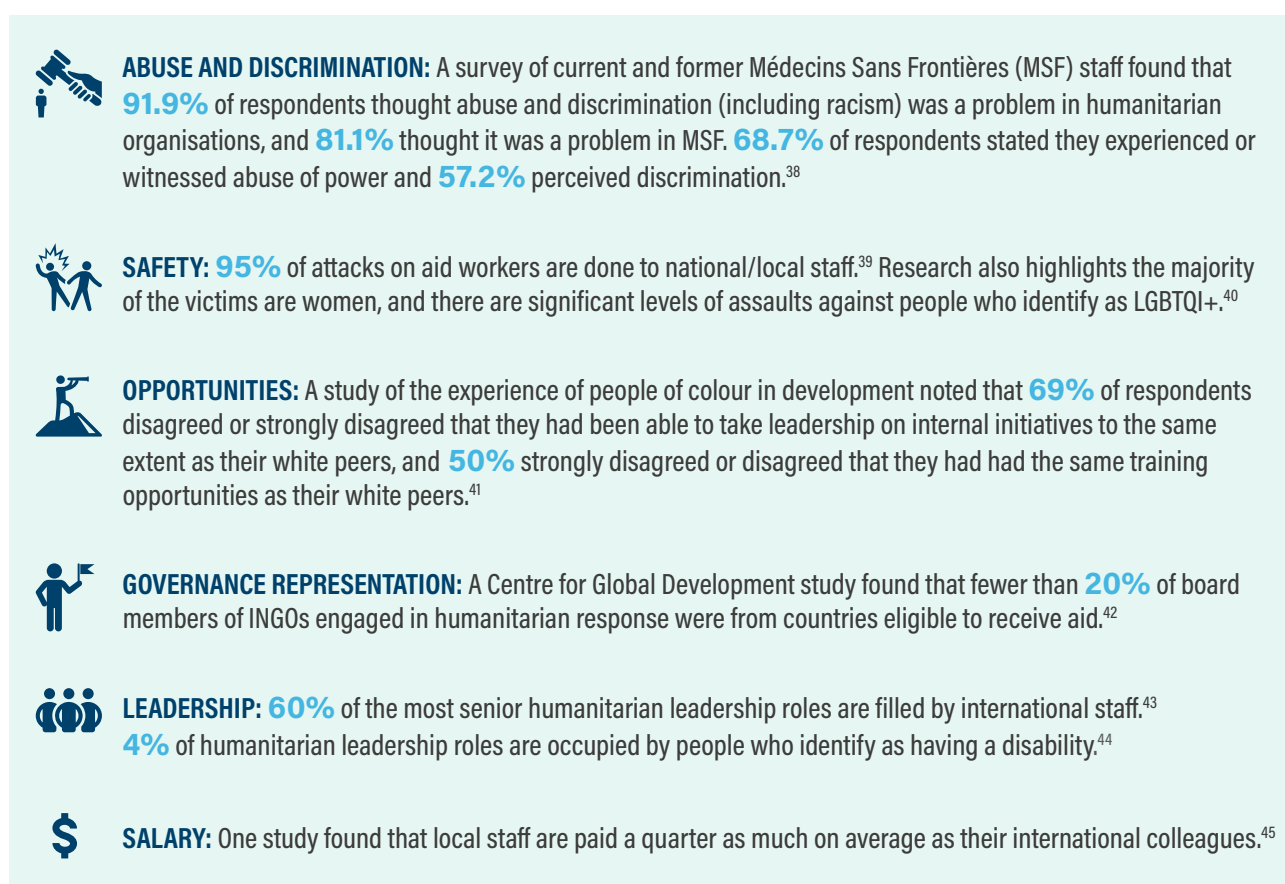
34 E Davey with J Borton and M Foley, [A history of the humanitarian system: Western origins and foundations](#), HPG Working Paper, 2013.

35 Peace Direct, [Time to decolonise](#).

throughout the paper, but is not limited to issues around race and nationality – it also interacts with considerations related to gender, class, disability and sexual orientation, among others.

People affected by colonial dynamics, including researchers, have recently helped to shine a spotlight on some of the consequences. When it comes to leadership and governance of humanitarian organisations, people from crisis-affected countries are dramatically under-represented. When it comes to day-to-day work, despite representing the vast majority of workers in the humanitarian sector, 'local actors are faced with additional procedural challenges as a consequence of the systemic racism and discrimination that legitimises the centralisation of power in the Global North'.³⁶ Local aid workers have seen a greater increase in targeted attacks and also often have lower rates of reporting on abuse, harassment and other threats.³⁷ Some indicators of these issues are captured in Figure 1.

Figure 1: Selected Statistics on Inequalities in the sector



36 Peace Direct, [Time to decolonise](#).

37 A Stoddard, P Harvey, M Czwaro and M Breckenridge, [Aid Worker Security Report 2019—Updated](#), Humanitarian Outcomes, 2019.

38 Decolonise MSF, [Dignity at MSF: A report by Decolonise MSF on abuse and discrimination at Doctors Without Borders](#), 2021.

39 A Stoddard, P Harvey, M Czwaro, MJ Breckenridge, [Aid worker security report 2021](#), Humanitarian Outcomes, 2021.

40 D Mazurana and P Donnelly, [STOP the Sexual Assault Against Humanitarian and Development Aid Workers](#), Feinstein International Centre, 2017.

41 Bond, [Racism, Power and Truth: Experiences of People of Colour in Development](#), 2021.

42 R Warden and P Saez, [Shifting power in humanitarian nonprofits: A review of 15 NGO governing boards](#), Center for Global Development, 2021.

43 Humanitarian Advisory Group, [Data on diversity: Humanitarian leadership under the spotlight](#), 2019.

44 Ibid.

45 S Carr and I McWha-Hermann, [‘Mind the gap in local and international aid worker’s salaries.’](#) The Conversation, April 18, 2016.

These harms will not change unless approaches to them include major change in power dynamics. To date, instead of mitigating the impacts of historical and social inequalities, humanitarian organisations have allowed inequalities to become baked into their practices and have sometimes even written them directly into policy. For example, in relation to human resources (salary structures and leadership opportunities),⁴⁶ risk management and exposure,⁴⁷ and coordination and representation opportunities (meeting structures and formats).⁴⁸ Areas in which change could be targeted are listed below.

- **Denial of opportunity:** There is an assumption that local staff (both in international organisations, but predominantly in local organisations) lack certain skill sets. Compounding this, the skills and competencies of local staff are often undervalued or not recognised. This often stems from international staff viewing 'essential' or 'baseline' skills from a Western lens.⁴⁹ Even when individuals have achieved the status or markers of holding expertise, prejudices may affect whether others recognise their knowledge.⁵⁰
- **Staff Poaching:** Poaching of local staff undermines local capacity. Local NGOs and other organisations invest in identifying, recruiting and building the capacity of staff. International organisations, who receive more funding and can offer higher salaries, poach staff from local organisations, then criticise local NGOs as lacking capacity to deliver programs. Localisation efforts then take the form of 'capacity building' instead of other forms that would require greater transfer of power.⁵¹
- **Unfair risk distribution and risk mitigation approaches:** In insecure contexts, local humanitarian workers face greater risks compared to others in their communities, yet in most instances do not receive a proportionate security support or duty of care. With increasing localisation of aid in high-risk areas due to access issues, local partners and staff are experiencing greater risk transfers and facing more attacks.⁵² The way the level of risk is assessed for different groups (mainly between local/national actors and international actors, but also among staff groups within organisations), and the way mitigation strategies are put in place highlight how these unfair processes have been institutionalised.
- **Flawed rewards and remuneration structures:** This includes dual salary and benefits systems, in which local/national staff and international staff within the same organisation are rewarded on separate (and often different) salary and benefits scales, and entire systems. The difference in rewards and remuneration between community-level organisations, local/national organisations and international organisations (with further differences with INGOs, United Nations [UN] organisations and donors) within the same country also highlight significant inequalities in terms of how work and skills are recognised and valued.⁵³

46 Project Fair, [Case study: Concern Worldwide](#); S Carr and I McWha-Hermann, 'Mind the gap'; I McWha-Hermann, J Jandric, S Wakefield, S Carr, C Grund and M Moutou, [Project FAIR](#); Humanitarian Advisory Group, [Data on diversity](#); JC Ong and P Combinido, '[Local aid workers](#)'.

47 Win Tun Kyi-Kuno Platform, 'Towards a risk-sharing approach in Covid19 response and beyond – Perspectives from a national NGO in Myanmar,' Charter4Change, June 2020; Z Ullah, SU Khan, E Wijewickrama, [COVID-19: Implications for localisation, a case study of Afghanistan and Pakistan](#), HPG Working Paper, 2021; E Wijewickrama, N Rose and Thura Tun, [Two steps forward one step back: Assessing the implications of COVID-19 on locally-led humanitarian response in Myanmar](#), Humanitarian Advisory Group, 2020.

48 Z Ullah, SU Khan, E Wijewickrama, [COVID-19: Implications for localisation](#); J Jayawickrama, '[Humanitarian project aid](#)'; E Davey with J Borton and M Foley, [A history of the humanitarian system: Western origins and foundations](#), HPG Working Paper, 2013.

49 A Benton, '[African expatriates and race in the anthropology of humanitarianism](#),' *Critical African Studies*, 2016, 8(3): 266–77.

50 P Tawake et al., [Decolonisation and locally led development: Discussion paper](#), ACFID, 2021.

51 Partner reflection conversations; A Featherstone, [Time to Move On: National perspectives on transforming surge capacity](#), Christian Aid, 2017; R Antequisa, '[A Paradox in Practice: To localise aid international agencies needs to address practices that undermine national capacity](#),' Charter for Change, 2015.

52 A Stoddard, P Harvey, M Czwarono and M Breckenridge, [Aid Worker Security Report 2019—Updated](#), Humanitarian Outcomes, 2019.

53 Project Fair, [Case study: Concern Worldwide](#); A Strampel, '[Mind the gap](#)'.



What we want to explore in future research:

What are the behaviours, norms, and structures that perpetuate inequalities? What are the impacts of operational inequalities? How might practices be influenced/shifted to create equal operational spaces? How might eliminating these operational inequalities contribute to a more equitable sector?



Who this is for and how it will help:

This work will support humanitarian actors, international and national, by providing concrete recommendations - through policy briefs, guidance notes, and presentations – on how to ensure policies reflect equitable values and how to best translate these policies into practice. Through the improvement of everyday operations, this aims to contribute to better experiences of staff members working for humanitarian organisations, better relationships between different organisations, and stronger respect for the sector's moral, ethical and legal commitments.

CHALLENGING BIASES IN KNOWLEDGE PRODUCTION

Our initial take



Knowledge production and use are vital for effective and sustainable humanitarian action, but they are also deeply entangled in power structures and politics. They help to make and justify choices, such as presenting some options as more logical or providing a rationale for a decision already taken (as in the case of agencies verifying what they already expect to be the main issues during monitoring and evaluation).⁵⁴ If biases and inequalities are preventing a full range of perspectives from informing decision-making, then we believe as a team that the quality of knowledge is reduced, and the resulting decisions are less likely to be effective and accountable to affected people. For example, as introduced in the 'Creating the evidence base for locally led response' section above, despite the efforts of local and national actors to champion stronger local leadership in their own countries and communities, knowledge about localisation has mostly been constructed by dominant players in the global space: large, international NGOs, UN agencies, mostly Northern donors, and research groups based in the Global North. If different voices are not informing the response, how can different needs and priorities be understood and addressed effectively?

Over the past few years, reflection on knowledge production has gained more prominence, fuelling more self-reflection and the development of techniques to mitigate some of the harmful dynamics in the production of humanitarian research.⁵⁵ Whilst we do see some slowly occurring change in areas such as community mobilisation, strengthened engagement with affected communities, and the increased emphasis on representative research teams, members of this research team reflected that this is ad hoc and personality driven, rather than systemic reform.⁵⁶ This, combined with increased attention on power, presents a timely moment to target opportunities for change in humanitarian knowledge production.



We began by asking ourselves: What is currently known about how power dynamics shape which voices, forms of knowledge, and types of evidence are heard? Which voices and contributions are not heard?

⁵⁴ M Lokot, 'The space between us: Feminist values and humanitarian power dynamics in research with refugees,' *Gender & Development* 27(3), 2019, 474; J Glasman, *Humanitarianism and the quantification of human needs: Minimal humanity*. Routledge, 2020.

⁵⁵ ALNAP, *Evidence & knowledge in humanitarian action: Discussion paper*, 2013; M Clarke et al, *What evidence is available and what is required, in humanitarian assistance?*, 3ie Scoping Paper 1, International Initiative for Impact Evaluation (3ie), 2014; HAG, *Localising the research process*, 2017; L Fast, *Researching local humanitarian action through partnerships with local actors*, ODI, 2019; J Smith and K Blanchet, *Research methodologies in humanitarian crises: Review*, ELHRA, 2019; I Ormel et al, 'Key issues for participatory research in the design and implementation of humanitarian assistance: A scoping review,' *Global Health Action*, 2020, 13(1); F Carden, T Hanley and A Paterson, *From knowing to doing: Evidence use in the humanitarian sector*, ELRHA, 2021; M Lokot and C Wake, 'Research as usual in humanitarian settings?'

⁵⁶ Partner reflection conversations

1. Biases in the knowledge production process determine whose voices are heard

In the arena of humanitarian knowledge production, some voices struggle to be heard. Significantly, research from the last decade has highlighted that decision-makers often neglect information and expertise held in Global South institutions.⁵⁷ Multiple issues contribute to this exclusion. While different kinds of knowledge are necessary in a response, more privilege is attached to knowledge produced by the Global North. For example, the idea that situation reports represent the 'humanitarian consensus' is the view of the international community, rather than of affected communities.⁵⁸ As explored below, research teams often lack representation from Global South institutions, individuals and stakeholders.⁵⁹ Additionally, there is a lack of channels for sharing 'local' or background information during a disaster, as seen during the 2010 Haiti earthquake response, when international agencies assumed there was no local data or knowledge available.⁶⁰ Some researchers and other knowledge producers have already shared their experiences of being pigeonholed or marginalised, and others have shared lessons from their work to change these dynamics.⁶¹

After finding that existing literature documents an underrepresentation of Global South institutions in the research and analysis that informs our sector, we wanted to test this conclusion for ourselves. We examined evidence use and citation practices in key documents produced to support humanitarian action and reform in the sector. We aimed to determine which particular kinds of knowledge producers were engaged with most often, by analysing three sets of data: reports on progress on the Grand Bargain since the World Humanitarian Summit in 2016, joint humanitarian response plans in Asia and the Pacific published in 2021, and joint evaluations of the Rohingya response published between 2018 and 2021.⁶²

Overall, our work showed that co-production between Global South institutions and Global North institutions was the exception, not the norm, both in the creation of these core documents and in the written publications they drew upon (see figures 2 and 3). Potential causes for this include unequal access to financial resources to undertake or promote research, the dominance of certain languages (above all, English) making it harder for some actors to share their expertise, and the influence of pre-existing networks between knowledge brokers and other power-holders in the sector such as donors or large international non-governmental organisations (INGOs).⁶³

57 B Piquard, 'What knowledge counts? Local humanitarian knowledge production in protracted conflicts: A Central African Republic case study,' *Peacebuilding*, 2021, 1–16.

58 M Finn, and E Oreglia, 'A fundamentally confused document: Situation reports and the work of producing humanitarian information.' In Proceedings of the 19th ACM Conference on Computer-Supported Cooperative Work & Social Computing, 2016, 1349–62. San Francisco California USA: ACM.

59 A Swaine, 'Enabling or disabling paternalism: (In)attention to gender and women's knowledge, capacity and authority in humanitarian contexts,' in *Paternalism beyond Borders*, ed. M Barnett, Cambridge University Press, 2017, 185–223; E Cirhuza, 'Taken out of the picture? The researcher from the Global South and the fight against "academic neo-colonialism",' *The Bukavu Series blogs*, April 27, 2020.

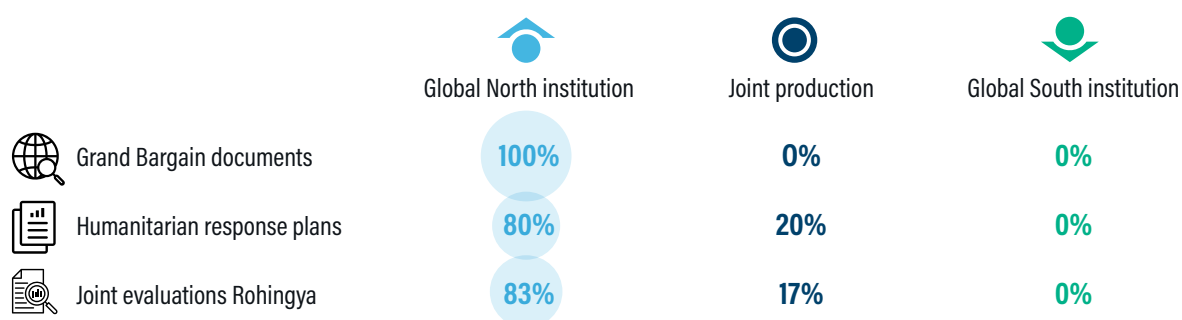
60 N Altay and M Labonte, *Challenges in Humanitarian Information Management and Exchange: Evidence from Haiti*, ODI, 2014; cited in Lydia Tanner, 'Annex 1: Draft Landscape Report,' *Humanitarian Leadership Academy*, 2016.

61 M Shuayb, 'Localisation only pays lip service to fixing aid's colonial legacy,' *The New Humanitarian*, February 2022; *The Bukavu Series*, hosted by the Governance in Conflict Network, featured a series of blogs authored by researchers sharing their experiences in producing research as well as navigating and challenging power dynamics in the process.

62 The core documents were selected on the basis that they are supposed to capture sector-wide dynamic and collective discussion to inform humanitarian action or what Finn and Oreglia (2016) describe as 'humanitarian consensus'. Twenty-nine documents were analysed: seven Grand Bargain reports, 10 response plans, and 12 joint evaluations of the Rohingya response. To ensure that the list was exhaustive, we used the digital libraries of ALNAP and ReliefWeb, the Humanitarian Response webpage hosted by OCHA and IASC. We used search terms 'response plans', 'evaluations', 'Grand Bargain' and excluded documents that did not meet our criteria. We analysed all 1,049 references from these core documents, coding by authorship type (Northern or Southern institution), institution type (e.g. NGO, research institution, government agency), publication type (e.g. research report, press release, meeting document) and language used.

63 Partnership consultations; M Beerli, 'The power to count and the stakes of counting: An inquiry into the quantified production of humanitarian insecurity,' *Global Governance: A Review of Multilateralism and International Organizations*, 2017, 23, 63–64.

Figure 2. Analysis of 29 key humanitarian documents – authorship



Instead, Global South institutions primarily contribute to the knowledge process as data collectors (e.g. carrying out surveys or interviews) or data sources (e.g. by sharing their views or being used as practice examples – see Figure 4). In response plans, in which they are most fully represented, Global South institutions are mainly acknowledged as doers, implementers and desirable partners. In the Grand Bargain core documents, engagement with national NGOs is included as examples of ‘good practices’ of donor agencies or international NGOs in meeting the Grand Bargain commitments. These are often written in box texts and highlighted as examples.

Figure 3: Analysis of 29 key humanitarian documents- REFERENCES CITED

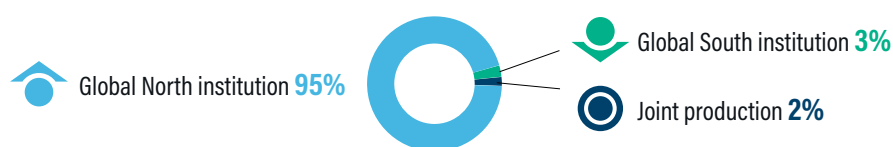
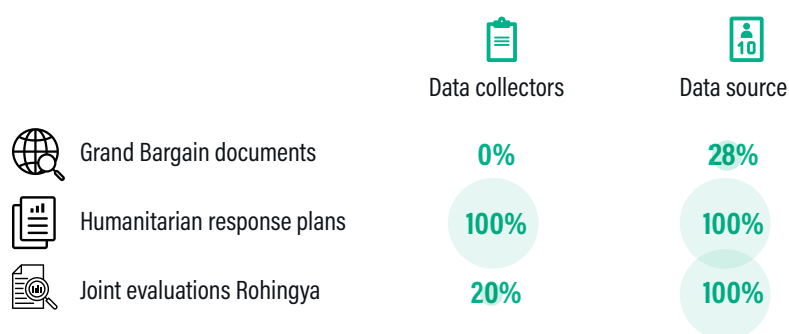


Figure 4: Representation of Global South institutions in the data collection process



Although the aim of drawing attention to good practice by or involving Global South actors is a positive one, when combined with minimal roles or visibility of analysis and authorship, the effect can be, paradoxically, to place them even further from an equal footing with Global North actors when it comes to knowledge production.

Biases and inequalities have also affected how the sector is tackling its own approach to knowledge and evidence. Whilst there is now increasing commentary about the inequalities in humanitarian knowledge and evidence, these are – as many acknowledge – still dominated by researchers and actors in Global North institutions.⁶⁴ A key issue is ensuring greater diversity of voices shapes changes to knowledge production in the sector.

⁶⁴ ELRHA, *From knowing to doing*.



What we want to explore in future research:

Why are Global South voices excluded or underrepresented? What are the enablers and barriers to changing the current knowledge landscape? What behaviours and structures need to shift at an individual, organisational and sectoral level?



Who this is for and how it will help:

This work will support less visible knowledge producers to share their experiences and present their agenda to power-holders in the sector. It will support humanitarian donors and decision makers to critically reflect on organisational policies and practices that include and exclude certain voices. The results may include developing guidance on how to ensure humanitarian knowledge products are informed and referenced by a diversity of voices, advice on how to incorporate knowledge production co-design principles into all stages of research, or how consultancy terms of references or scope may marginalise or exclude certain voices being heard and incorporated.

2. Certain types of knowledge are not equally valued

The biases described above reflect a pattern that others have also observed, in which Global South actors are seen less as experts and analysts who can produce or co-produce knowledge on their own terms, but rather the object of study or a source of 'contextual' knowledge.⁶⁵ This relates to another power dynamic in which certain types of knowledge are privileged over others. The literature agrees that multiple types of knowledge are necessary for effective humanitarian responses, and that often this means diverse actors need to contribute equitably, yet power inequalities prevent this.

The sidelining of indigenous knowledge in humanitarian analysis and response planning has significant negative consequences for effective humanitarian action.⁶⁶ Members of our research team highlighted that indigenous knowledge, such as knowledge of weather patterns and traditional construction systems, is often less well recognised in the dominant humanitarian knowledge and evidence ecosystem. Because powerful stakeholders are determining what knowledge is considered useful, 'much indigenous knowledge – of people, practices and the perception of the environment for instance – is at best not recognised and at worst is discarded as useless by virtue of not corresponding to the values of learners'.⁶⁷ Current understandings and applications of indigenous knowledge in the humanitarian sector have so far been criticised as limited or inappropriate to the detriment of indigenous communities.⁶⁸ Such minimal appreciation of indigenous knowledge prevents the sector from developing sustainable and intelligent solutions to crises – solutions designed to restore people's livelihoods and to mitigate humanitarian crises before, as and after they occur.⁶⁹

Several reasons why the sector lacks the ability to systematically identify and listen to indigenous knowledge have been identified. Currently, 'international' and 'local' knowledge are not given equal space and weight in the sector.⁷⁰ Often, knowledge associated with international actors is considered to be universal – applicable everywhere – and presented in terms of thematic or technical expertise. This kind of knowledge is associated with standards, norms and guidelines, and often relies on knowledge that can be expressed and measured by numbers ('quantitative' knowledge, as often captured in metrics and indicators). It occupies a privileged position – that is, it is considered legitimate by key decision-makers, money-holders, and leaders.⁷¹ 'Local' knowledge, including indigenous knowledge as well as other ways of knowing that don't adhere to Northern knowledge frameworks or disciplines, is at risk of being treated as having little operational relevance, of not being fully trusted 'as "valid and reliable" by international humanitarian actors',⁷² and of not being seen as transferable beyond its context of origin. Overall, this hierarchy of knowledge 'legitimizes outside interference and leads to an outsider bias', encouraging paternalism and undermining accountability.⁷³

65 KB Sandvik and J Lemaitre, '[Internally displaced women as knowledge producers and users in humanitarian action: The view from Colombia](#),' *Disasters*, 2013, 37, S36–50; B Piquard, '[What knowledge counts?](#)'

66 A Kirby-Reynolds and P Gunaratnam, '[Indigenous knowledge: Learning and sharing for the humanitarian industry](#), HLA Case Study. Humanitarian Leadership Academy, no date; W Hoffman, '[Indigenous data in effective humanitarian response](#), Center for Humanitarian Leadership, 2021.

67 A Kirby-Reynolds and P Gunaratnam, '[Indigenous knowledge](#).'

68 W Hoffman, '[Indigenous data](#)'; Kirby-Reynolds and Gunaratnam, '[Indigenous knowledge](#).'

69 W Hoffman, '[Indigenous data](#).'

70 R Lund, R Khasalamwa and S Tete, '[Beyond the knowledge-action gap: Challenges of implementing humanitarian policies in Ghana and Uganda](#),' *Norsk Geografisk Tidsskrift–Norwegian Journal of Geography*, 2011, 65(2), 63–74; L Tanner, '[Annex 1: Draft Landscape Report](#)'; M Barnett, '[The humanitarian global colour line](#),' ALNAP, July 28, 2020; G Daoust and SD Dyvik, '[Knowing safeguarding: The geopolitics of knowledge production in the humanitarian and development sector](#),' *Geoforum*, 2020, 11, 96–99; M Lokot and C Wake, '[Research as usual](#)'; B Piquard, '[What knowledge counts?](#)'; M Barnett, A Vanderboss-Peeler, and S Patel, '[Power & solidarity in humanitarian governance – What aid workers really think](#),' CHS Alliance, August 23, 2021.

71 B Lawson, '[Quantification and humanitarianism](#),' *Journal of Humanitarian Affairs*, 2021, 3(1): 53–60; J Glasman, '[Humanitarianism and the quantification of human needs](#).'

72 B Piquard, '[What knowledge counts?](#)'

73 S Autesserre, '[Paternalism and peacebuilding](#).'

As a whole, the aid sector is still inexperienced in making use of different kinds of knowledge on their own terms, a challenge that was explored in discussions among our research team. Research team members recognise that the data, evidence and knowledge that global institutions generate can bring considerable strength to a humanitarian response, especially feeding into response plans and structures. However, it can only be really effective if combined with the strengths of indigenous knowledge, which is not necessarily documented and structured, and therefore requires effort and engagement to weave into planning and response.



What we want to explore in future research:

Are there instances in which international and indigenous knowledges have been drawn on in a balanced way? What can be learnt from these practices? What barriers do practitioners come up against when trying to incorporate indigenous knowledge into their work? What enables use of indigenous knowledge? How can we encourage more frequent use of indigenous knowledge?



Who this is for and how it will help:

This work will support humanitarian practitioners, particularly those leading and managing information systems as well as donor agencies, by providing recommendations on how to meaningfully engage with and ensure inclusion of Indigenous peoples' experiences and knowledge in humanitarian action. As this platform paper has discussed, indigenous knowledge has largely been left out of focus of frameworks for analysing humanitarian crisis and the sector is yet to learn how to include and share indigenous knowledge within and between emergencies. This research can help understand these barriers and enablers and provide evidence of practices where indigenous knowledge has been drawn on in a meaningful way – one that benefits indigenous communities beyond the humanitarian response. This work aims to amplify the work already being done by customary and cultural knowledge brokers.

Where to from here?

Much is known about the broad spectrum of unequal power dynamics in the sector and some of the ways they manifest, but as this paper demonstrates, important gaps in knowledge remained to be filled; doing so will support movement towards a more equitable and impactful humanitarian sector. Whilst there seems to be general interest and some effort from those in power to make the system more equitable and focused on those in need, as highlighted in the previous sections, this does not translate fully into practice. Humanitarian actors are generally positive about making shifts to promote equality and inclusion of marginalised actors, but the behavioural reality does not always match intention. This is not a failing of individuals on their own, but also product of the context in which they operate within the humanitarian system.

This platform paper is our launching pad; it initiates and will guide our research over the next three years. We will continue to test and challenge the assumptions, approaches and logic captured in this paper. We believe that while this paper lays a solid foundation for our work, it gives us the flexibility to navigate and explore unexpected themes relevant to power, biases in knowledge generation and influence, sector norms that inform inequitable practices and the impact of locally led approaches. We anticipate that this will enable us to respond to emerging findings and reflect on needs and priorities.

HOW WE PLAN TO GET THERE

We aspire to build on reflexive, equitable, partnership-based approaches of supporting more just production and use of knowledge in the humanitarian sector, and believe that taking concrete action is part of the process of driving operational and policy change.

Our partnerships are the key to this research stream. This three-year research program is a collaboration between six research partners across the Asia and Pacific regions, who make up the core research team: Humanitarian Advisory Group (Australia), GLOW Consulting (Pakistan), inSights (Bangladesh), the Pujiono Centre (Indonesia), CoLAB (Fiji), and the Pacific Island Association of NGOs (PIANGO, a regional organisation linked with national organisations). HAG, an enabling and facilitating organisation, manages the program. The Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade funds the program, and is a partner invested in exploring how the findings from this research can better inform them and other international actors to make practical progress on the aid reform agenda, particularly on localisation.

We believe that each member of the team brings unique insights, skills and knowledge, and that working together allows us to rigorously test our assumptions and biases, and to question our privileges and ingrained ways of working. We know topics that confront power are challenging: they require open and robust discussions and analysis, and we believe that our diversity of perspectives, background and knowledge can facilitate this. We've based our partnership on a set of principles that articulate why and how we want to work together: it is based on trust, openness and transparency, shared areas of interest, capacity sharing, effective communication, and reflection and learning. For this new iteration of Humanitarian Horizons, we have applied the lessons learned from the first iteration and revised the program's governance to increase two-way accountability between research partners.

Opportunities to engage

At the heart of this stream is a collaboration designed to contribute to the formulation of innovative, fit-for-purpose approaches that help to build sector-wide knowledge and evidence. As research partners, we are keen to ensure our research informs and influences practice and thinking within the humanitarian sector at all levels – from global, regional, country and community levels to individuals and organisations. For our research to have maximum reach and influence, we know it is important that we connect and work collaboratively with the 'right' stakeholders in the sector. For us, such stakeholders are those willing to engage constructively and challenge our thinking while also challenging their own assumptions and ways of working, open to discussing, shaping and absorbing new approaches and ideas, happy to open pathways to increase the reach and influence of our work, and above all, committed and passionate about creating a more equitable and impactful humanitarian system with the aim of better serving people in need.

We see this as a journey taken with various partners, from the Global North and the Global South, from the biggest donors to the smallest community organisations. If you are keen to understand the research more, collaborate, partner or stay up to date, please reach out to:

HAG

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Achieving a more equitable and impactful humanitarian sector: Platform paper

