STORIES FOR CHANGE: Elevating Global South Experiences in Humanitarian Knowledge Production

CoLAB

Institute of Innovations for Gender & Humanitarian Transformations inSights

HUMANITARIAN ADVISORY GROUP

Australian Aid

GLOW CONSULTANTS

PIANGO
Pacific Islands Association of Non-governmental Organisations | Association Des Ongs Desiles Du Pacifique

PUJIONO CENTRE

Acknowledgments

About Humanitarian Horizons 2021-2024

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

The research programme 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.

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.

GLOW Consultants, based in Pakistan, is a leading national entity providing practice solutions and field implementation support to donors, their implementing partners and research institutions. GLOW has successfully completed more than 100 third-party monitoring and evaluation assignments.

inSights (the Institute of Innovation for Gender and Humanitarian Transformation) is a Bangladesh-based social enterprise providing insights that challenge the current ways of working in humanitarian aid and gender affairs. inSights aims to transform ideas within the humanitarian, social and businesses sectors, turning them into innovations, knowledge and strategies.

The Pacific Islands Association of Non-Governmental Organisations (PIANGO) functions as a regional secretariat to a network of umbrella organisations or platforms that are registered in 24 countries, territories and states across the Pacific region. PIANGO's primary role is as a catalyst for collective action, to facilitate and support coalitions and alliances on issues of common concern, and to strengthen the influence and impact of non- governmental organisations' efforts in the region.

The Pujiono Centre is a not-for-profit company established by disaster management practitioners in Indonesia as a new modality, institutional arrangement, and platform for obtaining, sharing and disseminating knowledge about disaster management by supporting evidence-based assessments for policymakers.

Humanitarian Advisory Group (HAG) was founded in 2012 to elevate the profile of humanitarian action in Asia and the Pacific. Set up as a social enterprise, HAG provides a unique space for thinking, research, technical advice and training that contributes to excellence in humanitarian practice.

Humanitarian Advisory Group is BCorp certified. This little logo means we work hard to ensure that our business is a force for good. We have chosen to hold ourselves accountable to the highest social, environmental and ethical standards, setting ourselves apart from business as usual.

Contents

Introduction

Analysis and research are part of the process of determining, justifying and evaluating actions in humanitarian settings. The insights gleaned from research that shape decision-making processes need to be based on the priorities and lived experiences of communities and researchers from societies affected by conflict, disaster and global inequality. The Grand Bargain signatories acknowledged this in relation to the "participation revolution" priority, with signatories affirming the need to "include the people affected by humanitarian crises and their communities in our decisions to be certain that the humanitarian response is relevant, timely, effective and efficient."[1]

There is increasing recognition that the humanitarian knowledge and evidence landscape is conditioned by power and inequality. Other researchers have highlighted that power dynamics in knowledge production matter for humanitarian practice because they affect the way humanitarian crisis and responses are imagined and take place. At the same time, these criticisms of the humanitarian knowledge production landscape come overwhelmingly from researchers and actors in Global North institutions.[2] There is little understanding of what this bias means for those from the Global South. Given the power dynamics involved, the research and conversations that are needed to build this understanding are likely to be sensitive, requiring all stakeholders to invest time, build trust and be open to challenges to the status quo.

This report presents insights from a process that aimed to elevate Global South voices and their experiences in humanitarian evidence and knowledge production. This process highlighted the journey of the participants as humanitarian knowledge and evidence brokers in countries in Asia and the Pacific, and contributes to the change towards an equitable humanitarian knowledge and evidence landscape.

The report is structured around the themes that emerged during the process (explored more in the methodology section). It uses stories that highlight both enablers and blockages to Global South actors participating and leading in humanitarian knowledge production: **agenda-setting, responding to needs, partnerships, visibility and credibility.** The theme of accountability to, and relationships with communities is threaded throughout, because most participants cited these issues as crucial outcomes of inclusive approaches to knowledge production.

Photo: Steve Johnson on Unsplash

---

1   IASC, A Participation Revolution: Including People Receiving Aid in Making the Decisions which Affect their Lives.
2   Elrha, From knowing to doing: Evidence use in the humanitarian sector, 2021.

The report explores and unpacks five themes, each starting with a story shared by one of the participants. We conclude by describing the impacts of the experiences related to each theme, and highlight opportunities for good practice that emerged. These opportunities will inform future research for the Power, People and Local Leadership research stream and the resulting tailored guidance notes.

Storytelling was employed as a key method of exploring experiences and connecting them to systemic issues within the knowledge production landscape in the humanitarian sector. By presenting these stories, the report offers insights into the perspectives of Global South knowledge producers in the humanitarian sector – perspectives too often excluded from or downplayed in dominant narratives. These stories also enable humanitarian actors to learn from the experiences shared, and contribute to shaping and strengthening Global South actors' participation and leadership.

ABOUT THIS RESEARCH

This report is part of a series of interlinked investigations of the politics of humanitarian knowledge and the changes that can bring about more inclusive and equitable approaches to research, analysis and decision-making. The series is the product of a collaboration of research groups and individuals based in Asia and the Pacific, under the Humanitarian Horizons 2021–2024 research program. In the Power, People and Local Leadership stream of that program, we examine inequalities embedded in the humanitarian system, the conditions that perpetuate them, and avenues for change. This series turns the lens onto knowledge production, using a range of methods that offer varying ways of conceptualising challenges and opportunities.

Stories for Change: Elevating Global South Experiences in Humanitarian Knowledge Production.
The People, Power and Local Leadership stream aimed to create a space for Global South knowledge brokers to share their experiences of working in the sector, their analysis of its biases, and their ideas for future action. The report is based on three workshops and nine one-to-one sessions on aspects of the knowledge production cycle. The findings are shared in a narrative form as a response to the sector's failure to recognise and hear a full range of voices.

Needles in a Haystack: An Analysis of Global South Roles in Humanitarian Knowledge Production.
This discussion paper examines the public record of humanitarian knowledge production, based on specific publications and how they cite their sources of information. It uses analysis of these publications' content to reflect on trends in knowledge production in the humanitarian sector and what needs to change.

We will be publishing additional research reports and guidance notes on the humanitarian knowledge production space and challenging existing ways of working. Watch this space!

Methodology

RESEARCH APPROACH

The Power, People and Local Leadership research stream invites critical discussions on ways to enable local leadership and reduce power inequalities within the humanitarian sector. How this research is designed and implemented is just as critical as the outcomes. When designing the methodology for this study (Figure 1, Table 2), Humanitarian Advisory Group (HAG) and research partners committed to working in ways that supported inclusive and constructive discussion and decision-making.

Figure 1: Methods

9 story telling sessions

UNDERPINNED BY ETHICAL RESEARCH APPROACHES, CO-PRODUCTION, TRUSTED AND CONFIDENTIAL SPACE, AND FLEXIBILITY

3 listening workshops with **18** participants across **5** countries

---

A note on language

When the report refers to "the research team" or "we," it means staff members of CoLAB, GLOW, Insights, PIANGO, Pujiono Centre, and HAG, who co-designed the methodology and approach. When it refers to "participants," it means CoLAB, GLOW, Insights, PC, and PIANGO staff, in addition to unaffiliated individuals who joined the workshops and storytelling sessions. In some instances, therefore, the research team members were also participants, although when contributing as participants they may have drawn on experiences outside their current roles.

Photo: Steve Johnson on Unsplash

Table 2: Methodology

| PRINCIPLE	PRINCIPLES OVERVIEW	HOW IT WORKED IN PRACTICE
Co-production	The research was guided by key co-production principles and approaches. This way of working highlights the research team's commitment to building strong relationships to support project outcomes. We aimed to foster an open, honest and brave approach to partnerships, welcoming two-way feedback and real-time adjustments to the way we work together.	The research team conducted two methodology workshops to decide on the approach. GLOW and CoLAB were the lead facilitators, with HAG providing support as requested during the workshop design, facilitation, and debriefing. The wisdom and insights of the research team as a collective was drawn on when making project and process decisions. The co-production approach also meant that the research team agreed on roles. For example, the group decided that partners would lead the design and facilitation, whilst HAG would play a listening role and provide workshop support (e.g. notetaking).
Trusted and confidential space	From the outset, we recognised that tensions and discomfort could arise, so the research team ensured that all engagements were in safe spaces to talk about power dynamics and challenges. This included discussions of hierarchies and value systems – dynamics that touch on race, gender, and national/international relationships.	At the start of the workshop, all participants agreed on the principles to make sure the discussions were conducted in a safe, respectful and participatory manner. Participants acknowledged that they might disagree with other participants' perspectives, and agreed that a diversity of voices should inform discussions.
Iterative and flexible	The research took an iterative approach to data collection, analysis, and write-up. We wanted the research to be co-guided – both by the research team's questions, and also core participants' area of priorities and focus.	The iterative approach allowed us to capture the learnings, adapt focus areas, and build on emerging findings. HAG led the authorship of the report; all participants reviewed the draft and provided feedback that was then integrated into the final report.

METHODS

The research used two methods to create space for these stories to be shared.

1. Listening workshops

Three cyclical and reflective listening workshops were held (in English; in the final workshop, one of the breakout rooms was held in Bahasa Indonesia). As shown in Figure 2, after each workshop, CoLAB, GLOW and HAG analysed and reflected on the key messages that emerged from the workshop discussion. Based on the emerging findings, learning and feedback, GLOW and CoLAB designed the subsequent workshops. The knowledge that emerged through this process was different from that shared through interviewing people separately about their experiences. The collective element of the listening workshops opened up creative possibilities for the research team and participants, including identifying how this research could be helpful, what topics to cover, and key themes and stories to elevate.

Figure 2: Listening and reflection process
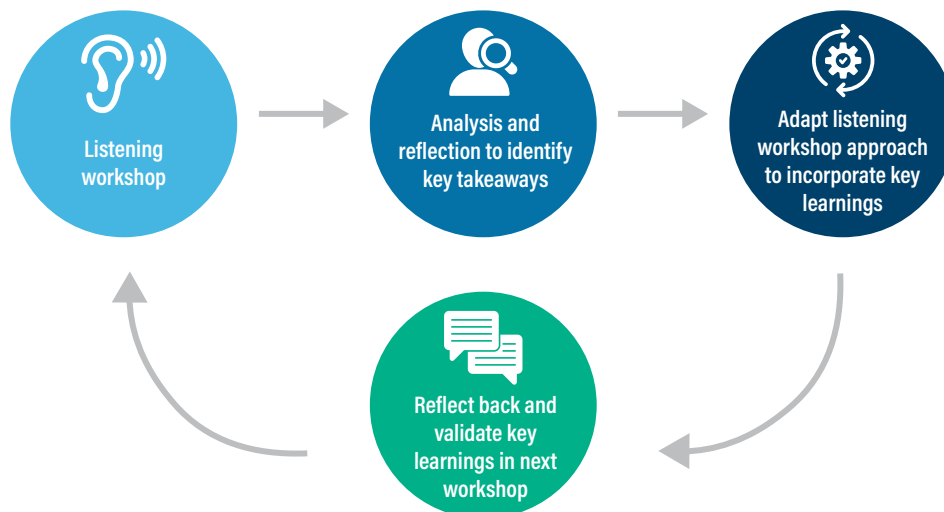
The following topics were covered:

- In Workshop 1, participants shared their experiences in each stage of the knowledge production cycle (see Figure 3)
- In Workshop 2, participants examined the impact they observed when research is produced with less engagement from Global South actors. They also shared their views on local leadership in knowledge production
- In Workshop 3, participants explored the themes of credibility, visibility and partnership in research.

Figure 3: The knowledge production cycle that guided the workshops and storytelling sessions

2. Storytelling sessions

Nine individual storytelling sessions were held, involving HAG researchers and individual participants. The objective of the storytelling sessions, which lasted 90–120 minutes, was to allow participants to elaborate on the stories and themes raised in the listening workshop, exploring important nuance and detail that the listening workshops lacked time to cover. Storytelling sessions were chosen as a method as it is an important way of sharing information, learning, experiences, and knowledge. The sessions also allowed participants to share personal stories, such as what got them started in the humanitarian sector, whether they think humanitarian research is an appealing career, and the differences they observed when working as a researcher/consultant for different humanitarian organisations. Some participants chose to share written reflections in their first language.

A note on scope:

The stories shared do not necessarily reflect the experiences of all participants or all Global South knowledge brokers, but are indicative of the key themes arising from the research. The report aims to illuminate these issues, rather than imply they are universal. This report does not capture all stories and experiences shared. The stories that are elevated are those that describe common experiences amongst the participants.

We have intentionally not triangulated our data with the literature, because we did not want to imply that participants' data needed to be justified or explained through external validation. For more on how these issues have been examined in previous research, however, see the Achieving a More Equitable and Impactful Humanitarian Sector Platform Paper and other pieces in this knowledge and evidence series.

PARTICIPANTS

The project involved 18 individuals from Bangladesh, Indonesia, Fiji, Pakistan and the Philippines. All participants have experience in the humanitarian sector, with expertise in gender, protection and inclusion, shelter, WASH, disaster risk reduction, community development, and peace and conflict. Their professional experience includes work in program implementation, design and management, research and evaluation consultancies, academic research and government. Participants reported professional experience spanning 5–35 years. Whilst some participants have experience working for Global North organisations, none were employed by one during the research period.

All participants were invited to the workshops because of their intensive research experience and work in the humanitarian sector. Most have worked with HAG on multiple projects, and these working relationships helped establish trust and openness. These characteristics allowed the HAG team to step back and allow the participants to conduct the process on their own terms, as a collective.

Photo: Steve Johnson on Unsplash

The stories shared

The sections below present the stories from participants, arranged according to themes that emerged from the discussion: agenda setting, responding to need, partnership, visibility and credibility.

Each section opens with a detailed account of one of the participants' stories in relation to the theme being explored. Some parts focus on Global South actors' experiences in humanitarian knowledge and evidence generation and use. Other parts present analyses of strengths, weaknesses and biases in humanitarian knowledge production as revealed by these experiences.

Table 2: Themes explored

AGENDA SETTING	The decision-making process when knowledge outputs are needed, including scope of work and research questions to explore; the factors shaping those decisions and the impacts of top-down agenda-setting processes.
RESPONDING TO NEEDS	How Global South knowledge brokers highlight local issues and needs in humanitarian response, but their leadership is often unsupported.
PARTNERSHIP	The manner in which researchers work with other researchers or institutions or commissioning agencies; enablers and barriers to establishing equitable partnerships.
VISIBILITY	Acknowledgement (or lack thereof) of involvement of Global South actors in research outputs.
CREDIBILITY	The skill sets, expertise and assets (e.g. social networks) that Global South actors bring or are perceived to bring.

🖥️ AGENDA-SETTING

STORY 1

This participant's experience highlights the links between research processes, participation of affected communities, and response decision-making. An organisation was conducting initial scoping and assessment with communities about what research was needed, but it became clear to the participant that this exercise was tokenistic and would only confirm or explore needs that the donor had identified already. The participant asserted that this predetermined approach to building knowledge and evidence prevented the community from informing the response, and created the impression that community requirements come last. Although the participant's organisation is occasionally successful in arguing for communities' perspectives and priorities to be meaningfully considered, this is not always the case.

This story is an example of an external agenda driving the production of research and evidence. It goes to the heart of why power dynamics in knowledge production matter for humanitarian practice. Participants explained that being involved in agenda-setting can influence the research process and outcomes. Opportunities to shape the research agenda, the terms of reference and scope of research meant methodologies and approaches were contextualised from the outset, data collection was sensitive to the needs and context of communities, and conducted appropriately. Participants linked the involvement of Global South actors with the degree to which affected communities' voices were at the centre of the research.

 However, most of the stories highlighted that the scope and objectives of humanitarian research (including needs assessments, evaluations, and other forms of analysis) were meeting organisational objectives and agendas (often Global North organisations), rather than being informed by communities' needs. For example, a participant reported that during the response to Tropical Cyclone Winston in Fiji, women said that if they had been consulted, they would have suggested more effective ways to meet their needs.

> 66 There's already a pre-built intention for the research, what questions could be answered, what do I need to prove in order to maintain [the] status quo.[3]

The issues surrounding agenda-setting were also discussed in the context of power and money – that money often determines research agendas, priorities and objectives. For example, one participant reflected that *"the demands of the community, they don't always come first ... money makes decisions on what knowledge is needed."*[4] Participants stated that international non-governmental organisations (NGOs), United Nations (UN) agencies, and donor institutions, as well as governments of crisis affected countries, were in charge of the money. Viewed this way, one participant raised that it is critical to ask 'What the knowledge is for, and for

---

3   Workshop 1
4   Workshop 1

whom?' For them and other participants, the standard answers to this question underscore how research, evaluation and other knowledge outputs are entangled in the politics of humanitarian aid.[5]

Participants described how top-down agenda-setting creates burdens on affected communities. We heard about a response to a large-scale crisis that resulted in a mass influx of international actors conducting research for research's sake because money was available. Local humanitarian actors regarded the research as unethical because the agenda was not informed by affected communities.[6]

Participants shared that the impact of this top-down approach is twofold. Firstly, it put communities at risk, because international researchers flown into a country do not necessarily understand the complexity of both the crisis and the response. Therefore, researchers sometimes put affected populations at risk if they unwittingly tackled sensitive or taboo issues.[7] Secondly, this created what one participant called a *"dust pit"* of information[8] – a huge amount of information created with very little coordination, and duplicated in many instances. In the words of another participant, this meant *"just making PDFs no one will read."*[9] Some reflected on how excluding local communities and researchers from agenda-setting can result in program decision-makers and implementers basing their work on research that ignores the priorities of local communities.[10]

Whilst many participants generally felt that agenda-setting is donor-driven, some shared instances of strong engagement and community representatives defining the scope.[11] In practice, this means *"... a lot of negotiations,"* a participant shared.[12] One researcher shared their experience of working to persuade donors to retain or drop research topics. *"We have to negotiate with all of the different stakeholders and funders and 'control-holders,' while trying to ensure that the actual research is relevant and empowering for local players,"* they explained.[13]

Participants agreed that strong, trusting relationships between funders and researchers can ease the agenda-setting process.[14] They enable Global South researchers to argue for changes that achieve better balance between local priorities and donors' interests.[15] Several participants noted that conversations around localisation helped create awareness of unequal partnership dynamics and shifts in the way research is produced and conducted.[16]

> **"** "We felt the benefit as well from the localisation commitment so that we have [a] better position to say that we have the right people, we have the right organisation to do that research."[17]

Top-down agenda-setting was a major topic in both workshops and story sessions. It influences key aspects of knowledge production such as perception of credibility, Global South researchers' visibility in research outputs, and partnership arrangements (as will be explored below). Whilst participants agreed that it had been less common during the COVID-19 pandemic, when restrictions meant commissioning agencies needed to rely on local researchers, there was a general consensus that humanitarian knowledge production favours those who have or who are closest to power and money, and this has to be resolved.

---

5   Workshop 1
6   Storytelling session 4 & 9
7   Storytelling session 4
8   Storytelling session 9
9   Workshop 1
10 Workshop 1
11 Workshop 1
12 Workshop 1
13 Workshop 1
14 Workshops 1 & 2
15 Workshop 1
16 Workshop 1; Storytelling sessions 2 & 5
17 Story telling session 2

➡️ RESPONDING TO NEEDS

STORY 2

A humanitarian research organisation operating in the midst of a humanitarian response identified the need for all actors, particularly national and local actors, to share knowledge more effectively to support their work. They established a database, with categories such as situation reports, legislation and meeting minutes, and shared this information through WhatsApp groups. "It's become a platform for visibility [of the information and knowledge]," a representative from the organisation reflected.[18]

This story draws attention to how local actors are vital in identifying analysis and knowledge-sharing needs and brokering access to information. The researcher recalled that they wanted to support a crisis response by improving data access for the public and humanitarian agencies to inform better decision-making. They added, *"What's also interesting as well is they [humanitarian agencies] started to rely on me, they ask stuff, 'Do you have updates on this? On child protection?' We've started to share information from one source to another."*[19] As discussed in relation to agenda-setting, Global South organisations and researchers respond in ways that prioritise local issues in humanitarian responses and help to translate this knowledge into policy and action.

"When we were founded, it was based on [...] concern [about] the way humanitarian crisis response was conducted," said one participant.[20] They were referring to a tsunami response in which humanitarian actors had been previously largely uncoordinated, to the detriment of crisis-affected communities. *"We were built from the disappointment (from previous response)"* they continued.[21] Since then, their work has been focused on learning the perspectives of communities, ensuring these are heard and driving decisions, and promoting sharing of ideas and lessons learned across agencies.

> **❝** We decided that we will not be 'carrying a sack of rice' or providing clean water (or any direct humanitarian intervention) but rather play a role to ensure that the knowledge that appeared from humanitarian crisis both internally and externally can be shared through a facility such as us ours.[22]

In other examples, participants described responding to needs in a way that challenged (or validated) existing crisis responses. For example, a consultant shared that their work had highlighted how humanitarian agencies' provision of targeted aid was exacerbating community tensions, resulting in social division and harm.[23] They shared these findings with international NGOs (INGOs) and donors to influence their existing

---

18 Storytelling session 2
19 Storytelling session 2
20 Storytelling session 8
21 Storytelling session 8
22 Story telling session 8
23 Storytelling session 3

ways of working. Whilst targeted aid was still common practice during that response, agencies began to embed their staff in local communities to resolve disputes and respond quickly to problems.

These stories highlight how Global South knowledge brokers and producers have stepped in to fill gaps in research and analysis during a response, elevated local issues to influence policy and action, and ensured that cultural sensitivities are respected. However, as will be discussed in the succeeding sections, they must often overcome many obstacles to do so.[24] Removing these barriers, particularly in partnerships, credibility, visibility and top-down agenda-setting, can support more equitable ways of working in the sector.

🤝 PARTNERSHIPS

STORY 3

A Global South actor had an excellent working relationship with an INGO staff member responsible for research. Whilst not a formal partnership, the INGO often engaged the Global South actor very early in projects, including in developing terms of reference (ToR) based on the actor's technical and geographical expertise. However, the staff member left the INGO, and the informal relationship was lost because that collaborative style of working was not institutionalised. The actor was no longer involved in ToR development or invited to lead or make decisions about research.

Partnerships are at the core of how knowledge is produced in the sector, and participants agreed that this is an area in which unequal power dynamics are often observed. How partnerships are established affects Global South actors' ability to contribute. *"Partnerships can really support or undermine more equitable knowledge generation processes,"* one participant reflected.[25] Participants gave examples of problematic partnerships as well as positive and empowering ones, and reflected on their impacts on the research process.

When discussing research partnerships, participants emphasised the critical role of relationships between individuals, particularly involving donors or contracting organisations. For example, one participant reflected that *"Yes, it's a whole ecosystem, but also tied to institutional cultures and the relationship between different actors. It's less technical but relational"*.[26] Many participants asserted that positive practice is not always institutionalised, but often the result of individual efforts. Hence, when those individuals move on, as in the example above, relationships often deteriorate or lapse.

Not all Global South actors have opportunities to build relationships and deeper understanding and familiarity with how donors and their decision-making processes operate. The lack of this critical background hinders

---

24 Workshops 1, 2, 3
25 Workshop 3
26 Workshop 2

Stories for Change: Elevating Global South Experiences in Humanitarian Knowledge Production

the design, initiation and conduct of research, and reduces the likelihood of being invited to participate. As one researcher (project lead in a Global South organisation) reflected:

> **If I'm going to lead the process, I need to understand these actors who are guiding us. That's why, if we are thinking about how we have led, we have to consider their perspective and what they want to be reflected in the knowledge product.**[27]

One participant shared that positive research partnerships with international research partners occurred when they had worked together previously, giving time to build the trust that made engagement reciprocal.[28] All participants agreed that the underpinnings of research – including trust building, mutual learning, equitable contracting – were critical to building a partnership for equitable knowledge production. They acknowledge that this takes time and requires openness, listening and learning from each other: *"As you go on with regular partnership with organisations, the trust building and flexibility coming from a local partner and international partner is important, partnership improves in time."*[29]

When participants discussed research partnerships, whether with donors or other research organisations, they noted the importance of clear and equitable contracting, including influence on the ToR. *"Understanding of the ToR of the contracting organisation – frankly, this is the key,"* one participant said.[30] There was consensus that the ToR should clearly articulate the scope, roles and responsibilities, working days and budget at the minimum. However, some participants claimed that agreements on paper are not necessarily followed in practice. Many mentioned a frequent disconnect between the ToR and project inception discussions, blamed on both negotiation power and lack of clarity in the content. One participant stated:

> **The issue is then during the inception phase when the scope is then refined and it's not the same as what we've agreed in the proposal, we have to accommodate it in the contract accordingly, and whatever happens in the inception phase, you more or less agree to it.**[31]

Another participant contended that a fair contract clearly states the number of days and budget allocated to international and local researchers.[32] This was noted as critical to facilitating open dialogue between partners, particularly about resource allocation. Some participants shared experiences of INGOs asking local partners to undertake time-consuming tasks, such as engaging in-country stakeholders, that were not budgeted.[33] One participant speculated that this was due to poor understanding of country contexts and dynamics.[34] *"[ToRs] need to be developed by those who understand the research processes,"*[35] one participant argued.

The quality of partnerships between commissioning agencies and research institutions/researchers, particularly those involving Global North and Global South institutions, was highlighted as crucial to the research process, particularly in establishing meaningful engagement with local researchers, communities and other in-country stakeholders. Participants agreed that the research process is just as important as the output.

---

27 Workshop 2
28 Storytelling session 5
29 Workshop 3
30 Workshop 1
31 Workshop 1
32 Workshop 3; Storytelling session 5
33 Workshop 1; Storytelling session 4, 9
34 Storytelling session 4
35 Story telling session 4

◉ VISIBILITY

STORY 4

A participant from a Global South organisation described a Global North INGO engaging them in research in a way that took advantage of their reputation, networks and prominence in the Asia-Pacific region. The participant claimed that once the INGO had access to global platforms, the Global South organisation was excluded, and said "we don't know what happened to their research at the global level." The participant stated that their contribution and work were invisible.

The message in this story – that visibility of Global South actors is often insufficient, inconsistent, or even completely absent – was familiar to most participants. Lack of acknowledgment of contribution – in products' authorship or list of contributors, and even logos – was a key and consistently raised issue. One participant said, *"You are still invisible in the end product because they are going to highlight the use of the international consultant or exclude you entirely."*[36]

Whilst there were some examples of co-branding and acknowledgment, this was certainly not the norm, and often came only after negotiation. One Global South consultant said they often worked with community-based researchers for projects,[37] and described having to "sell" the funders the concept of acknowledging the local researchers as authors.[38] Sadly, the consultant claimed that few of their community-based research collaborators could even conceive that they could be a co-author, saying *"It's a shift in perspective. I'm hoping to instil this more and make it common."*[39]

Similar stories were shared about Global South organisations' logos being deliberately or neglectfully excluded from research outputs or being portrayed smaller than those of donors.[40] A participant related that a Global South organisation's logo was not included in a draft publication but added when the commissioning agency realised that doing so would improve dissemination.[41] This story can be regarded in a moderately positive light, but nonetheless illustrates that Global South roles are sometimes instrumentalised rather than being integrated equitably and holistically. Overall, participants concurred that "equal visibility" in publications and final products is an indicator of fair research partnership.[42]

The issue of visibility is, of course, linked closely to the participation of affected communities, and reflects a commissioning organisation's willingness to engage meaningfully with and acknowledge not only Global South researchers but community-based researchers. Most participants regarded this as a "sell" – that meaningful

---

36 Storytelling session 6
37 Storytelling session 1
38 Storytelling session 1
39 Storytelling session 1
40 Workshop 3
41 Storytelling session 9
42 Workshop 3

engagement would improve the research process, data and outcomes – but "selling" was often challenging. One example involved a Global South actor missing out on a program assessment once they started to push for engagement with community-based researchers within the affected population. The funder contracted Global North based consultants instead, with the participant reflecting *"they didn't want the perspectives from the locals."*[43]

Visibility matters and is an indication of fair and equitable research partnerships. Participants shared good practices they experienced that could be promoted. Some described instances of international actors asking them how they wanted to be acknowledged, particularly when research findings were sensitive. Participants also noted that the conversation should not stop once they have been acknowledged.[44] Equitable visibility also means discussing effective ways of disseminating the research and ensuring Global South actors participate in or lead dissemination via dialogues, advocacy events, forums and blogs (or other avenues). Global South actors' experiences show that their participation in dissemination can ensure research findings are shared with communities and other in-country stakeholders to influence change, particularly at the operational level.[45] They are also able to accommodate the needs of their target audiences, for example, through translation and consistent stakeholder engagement.[46]

CREDIBILITY

STORY 5

An INGO engaged a Global South organisation to conduct a needs assessment in response to a rapid-onset crisis. The INGO insisted on including an international consultant, asserting that donors and decision-makers would not accept the report without (in their words) an "international, white person's name included." However, the Global South organisation performed the bulk of the needs assessment; the international consultant was merely an advisor, yet was the public representative of the process.

The message in this story highlights misperceptions about Global South knowledge brokers' credibility, and their implications for perpetuating inequalities. It shows the potential for established international actors to engage Global South actors in a tokenistic way, while effectively undermining or devaluing their credibility, knowledge and skills. One participant stated, *"[We are not seen] as credible enough or viable to bring the knowledge into products that will be seen as legitimate."*[47]

---

43 Storytelling session 1
44 Workshop 3
45 Workshop 3
46 Workshop 3; Storytelling sessions 1, 2
47 Storytelling session 9

Another issue raised was the tone and language sometimes used when international actors engage with Global South knowledge brokers. One Global South organisation described being amused by some INGO employees' surprise that they could *"speak such good English and also write well"*[48] and deliver quality products, despite being educated in their own country. Whilst this was an uncommon occurrence, it encapsulates the perception that Global South actors lack crucial research abilities.

> **❝** We've had people who take a tokenistic approach to engaging with national consultants. They talk down at you ... [But we are] able to push back and say it should be done this way, or this is how we would like to be engaged ... Fortunately it's rare, sometimes the individuals give off that vibe or it's in the things they say. It's linked to the perception of local consultants' experience, fitted in a certain category – soft skills, contextual skills – but we do bring skills that can contribute to delivering the whole product.[49]

Organisational credibility was linked to leadership within the knowledge and evidence product process. *"Credibility is the same as visibility – technical and relational. Credibility can change depending [on] the stage."*[50] Almost all participants from Global South organisations reported both participating in and leading data collection, often because they were seen as having credibility and assets – their connections and networks. Some reflected that this was their strength, because they had links to local communities, and humanitarian actors more broadly. However, others claimed that data collection is often extractive because it is not co-designed, meaning poorly constructed tools and instruments can be tweaked only minimally before use.

Participants gave examples of how expectations and norms related to knowledge and evidence production can have significant exclusionary impacts. One participant said, *"Consultancies are still advertised and expected to produce a product in a certain way and certain criteria for a donor, and based on international standards. There are still those parameters."*[51] For example, research development processes, such as methodology workshops, are conducted primarily in English. Preferred research methods are often non-negotiable, and insufficient time is allocated for Global South actors to be part of co-production. Contracts often require researchers to have Masters-level qualifications (with degrees from Western universities preferred), ignoring other ways of gaining or demonstrating expertise. One researcher reflected,

> **❝** "It's an additional cachet when you have [a] Western university [degree] ... It's just a piece of paper but gives additional currency."

The discussion around credibility is linked to how Global South actors are valued. Participants noted that the norms and expectations of credibility must be challenged to obtain (for example) equal pay for local and international researchers. Participants noted that this issue is difficult to raise, but some international actors are already on board. *"Some of us come to this field not knowing how to pitch rates – in the spirit of localisation, managing contracts, working in that space, it should be about supporting local people."*[52]

---

48 Storytelling session 5
49 Storytelling session 5
50 Workshop 3
51 Storytelling session 5
52 Storytelling session 5

Using the stories for change

The stories shared in this project amplify the experiences of Global South knowledge brokers and producers in humanitarian knowledge production. The participants' experiences include stepping in to fill gaps in research and analysis during a humanitarian response, elevating local issues to influence policy and action, and ensuring that cultural sensitivities are respected. However, many examples suggest they often have to overcome considerable obstacles to do so.[53] Removing these obstacles, particularly in partnerships, credibility, visibility and top-down agenda-setting, will support more equitable ways of working in the sector.

The stories also draw attention to many opportunities to learn from experience to develop more equitable norms and behaviours when generating and sharing knowledge. Supporting change starts with paying attention to whether Global South actors are engaged in and leading knowledge sharing and production and the impacts of their exclusion. Change continues by amplifying good practices. The sections below highlight practical recommendations for change. Throughout this knowledge and evidence series, more tailored guidance and recommendations will be produced as the research team dives deeper into issues and roles.

PAYING ATTENTION TO IMPACT

How Global South actors are engaged and able to lead in knowledge production and sharing is important because it can have very real consequences for the humanitarian action. Partners consistently noted that more equitable knowledge production and sharing can spur progress towards localisation and greater Global South engagement and leadership.

Table 3 outlines participants' responses when asked about the impacts of their experiences from the perspective of knowledge production – that is, when Global South actors have few opportunities to lead and engage in research, what are the effects?

---

53   Workshop 1, 2, 3

Table 3: The impact of inequalities in knowledge production

For communities

- The community can become fatigued – they can be interviewed by multiple actors without clear results or outputs that benefit them
- Community members, in some instance, have to rely on contextually ill-informed, poor-quality or biased analysis
- Decision-makers involved with communities (e.g. governments or implementing agencies) neglect opportunities to understand their views and fail to respond to community priorities

For researchers

- Local actors are relegated to passive, transactional enumerators or respondents
- Poor visibility in parts or all of the process can perpetuate negative assumptions about credibility
- There are few opportunities to improve skills, knowledge and network development

For research outputs

- Research outputs are not contextually relevant or do not reflect communities' voices/priorities
- Research outputs are not contextualised and risk not being utilised
- Outputs have little ownership and uptake by the communities they were intended to serve
- Poor or no translation means people who do not understand English cannot access the research
- Outputs are not returned to the local respondents and actors who provided data

For the sector

- If the research questions, frameworks and instruments are not fit for purpose, then the outputs will be irrelevant
- There are few opportunities for good practice and innovation; research outputs become "dead documents" that are not used
- Responses do not reach some sub-groups of the population, particularly those that are most vulnerable

AMPLIFYING GOOD PRACTICE

The list below summarises the opportunities identified in this research. Many of these relate to the power dynamics shaping aspects of knowledge production and use. It is not meant to be an exhaustive list of recommendations, but offers strategies and practical steps Global North actors can consider when producing and sharing knowledge.

Visions and engagement

- Use a localisation lens to highlight biases in the knowledge production process; co-design research and evaluation to ensure that Global South actors' voice and credibility are recognised and valued
- Think about audience needs: research actors from affected countries are likely to have specific insights into practitioners' and policymakers' priorities

Partnerships

- Recognise the relational element: establish and support relationships beyond specific tasks or projects to allow diverse actors to build trust
- Find ways to institutionalise individual good practices: for example, include a feedback process in all ToRs to encourage contractors to raise any problems
- Be flexible: knowledge production and sharing should be treated as processes capable of real-time adjustment – this should be built into the contract, timelines, ToR and methodology

Credibility

- Look at the skill sets of all stakeholders: instead of assuming that Global South actors should fill any gaps (such as lack of language skills), ask how Global North actors can improve their skill sets relevant to research in humanitarian settings
- Be an ally: if you hear or see something that suggests biased attitudes towards diverse actors, call it out and work to mitigate its impacts

Agenda setting

- Build connections beyond the usual networks: strong mutual understanding and respect is important if actors, including Global South research actors, are to collaborate on setting and shaping agendas
- Strengthen the link between research ethics and accountability to affected populations: for organisations commissioning research, whether donors or operational agencies, this means ensuring research among affected communities is strictly necessary, is not dominated by predetermined organisational priorities, and is shared with participants when completed
- Make research accessible to non-English speakers: translation of research tools, methodologies and products should be resourced and incorporated into timelines

Visibility

- Make all contributors visible: ensure final outputs capture the contributions and/or roles of all actors, and that Global South actors can use jointly produced outputs with minimal restrictions (e.g. putting them on their website)
- Challenge tokenism: are research actors being asked to be the public face of a project despite minimal input to knowledge production and decision-making?

Abbreviations

HAG   Humanitarian Advisory Group

INGO   International non-governmental organisation

NGO   Non-governmental organisation

PIANGO   Pacific Islands Association of Non-Governmental Organisations

TOR   Terms of reference

UN   United Nations

WASH   Water, sanitation and hygiene