



Humanitarian Horizons: Power, People and Local Leadership



# LOCALISATION THROUGH TRANSFORMATIVE PARTNERSHIPS

LOCALISATION LEARNING BRIEF

August 2023

# Introduction

Localised practices have been adopted across multiple contexts and actors, resulting in complex and rich data that has not yet been analysed consistently for learning. These practices and approaches have resulted in rich and complex data that can be drawn on for learning purposes and used to inform future approaches.

This paper explores patterns in the way that localisation has been approached in the Asia-Pacific region, focusing on transformative partnership approaches. The brief focuses on partnership practices that research participants describe as enabling equitable decision-making, capacity sharing, and other practices that support them in achieving their visions and priorities.<sup>1</sup> The learning brief provides some examples of these practices, followed by an overview of the benefits and challenges, and discussion on key learning for the future.

## ABOUT THE LOCALISATION LEARNING BRIEF SERIES

This brief is one of a series of learning papers that collate practices of humanitarian actors across Asia and the Pacific, offering practical ways for operational actors to consider localised approaches in their own programming. The learning briefs document what has already been shown to be possible in supporting local leadership, highlighting some of the most effective or important features that support ethical and effective ways of working. The briefs are intended as a source of inspiration that can help in practical decision-making to shift power imbalances, supporting, and complementing the use of strategies and frameworks to implement localised practices.

### About this research

This report is part of the People, Power and Local Leadership (PPLL) stream of Humanitarian Horizons 2021–2024, a Humanitarian Advisory Group (HAG) initiative supported by the Australian Government through the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade. The PPLL research stream aims to be part of the momentum for change towards a more equitable and impactful humanitarian system. It aims to create an evidence base for approaches to supporting locally led humanitarian action, and promote the positive impacts of local leadership in a way that provides traction for devolution of power.

This learning paper draws on existing research (including HAG's previous research stream, [Intention to Impact: Localised Humanitarian Action](#)) and primary data to support humanitarian actors to be intentional in designing and implementing localisation. The study used a qualitative approach underpinned by co-production principles and HAG's partnership approach (see Figure 1). Other learning papers in the series focus on [localisation through networks and collectives](#) and [localisation at a project level](#).

<sup>1</sup> Interviews 10, 13, 18, 25, 28, 39, 48, 45, 53



Figure 1: Learning paper methodology



## DEFINITION

The terms 'localisation' and 'locally led humanitarian action' are used throughout the learning briefs to emphasise the importance of not just recognising or respecting local humanitarian action, but also that humanitarian action needs to be owned and led from the ground up. These terms continue to be contested and there remain limitations and challenges in their use.

The paper draws on PIANGO and HAG's work to define **localisation** as 'a process of recognizing, respecting and strengthening the independence of leadership and decision making by national actors in humanitarian action, in order to better address the needs of affected populations.'<sup>2</sup>

## LIMITATIONS

**Geographic scope:** The learning briefs examined practices in Asia and the Pacific, focusing on select countries from these regions. Therefore this paper does not capture examples outside of this geographic region.

**Diversity of examples:** This piece intended to capture a diversity of examples within and across different countries, as well as of different practices for supporting localisation. This piece does not intend to capture all possible examples in the region.

**Definition:** The learning brief does not make an assumption that projects/partnerships/networks that support local leadership have not existed prior to the more recent focus brought by initiatives such as the Grand Bargain. Rather, these are modes of practice to which localisation practices have been adapted, in the same way that other partnerships/networks/projects focus on gender, protection or climate change for example.


<sup>2</sup> Ayobi, Yaseen, Ayla Black, Linda Kenni, Railala Nakabae, and Kate Sutton, [Going Local Achieving a More Appropriate and Fit-for-Purpose Humanitarian Ecosystem in the Pacific](#), Humanitarian Advisory Group, 2017.





# Localisation through transformative partnerships

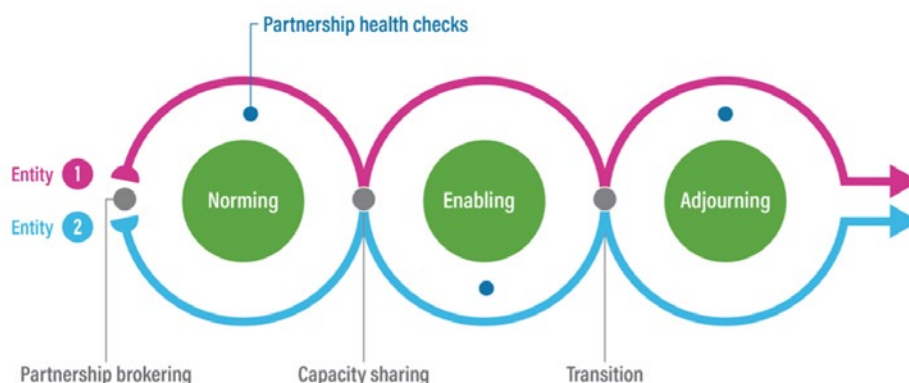
This section outlines three transformative partnership practice examples that have supported localisation in various ways. These centre on the identification and implementation of quality partnership practices that are substantially different in scope, approach and power dynamics in comparison to 'sub-contracting' partnerships or relationships. This includes a focus on equitable decision-making, capacity sharing, and other practices that enabled to achieve the visions and priorities of each partner.<sup>3</sup>

We have grouped these examples in three phases of the partnership journey, broadly categorised as follows.

 **THE NORMING PHASE** is about establishing expectations, identifying clear roles and responsibilities, and jointly agreeing on their goals often through a partnership brokering process.

 **THE ENABLING PHASE** focuses on partners identifying capacity sharing opportunities (e.g. technical and organisational support) and ensuring equitable decision-making in the partnership direction and co-implementation of a project.

 **THE ADJOURNING PHASE** focuses on the phase before the transition out of the partnership. This can involve developing strategies to support organisational stability and handing over to national and local partners.



## THE NORMING OR PARTNERSHIP BROKERING PHASE

Respondents identified several practices that supported local leadership and equitable partnership development. This includes examples of intentional processes to build trust and engage in dialogue, set expectations and build frameworks and ways of working that reflected mutual priorities. Examples include the development of the following:

- **Foundations of dialogue and trust:** The Joint Secretariat Team (JST) and Oxfam have a decade long partnership and have worked together on development and humanitarian projects in Myanmar. JST and Oxfam used a 'partnership dialogue' in their initial engagement, which has set the tone for a well-governed relationship. These dialogue processes have continued as the partnership has evolved, and were based on open conversations and reflective practice, and on what is needed for the collaboration itself, acknowledging how the different parties benefit from the process.

<sup>3</sup> Interviews 10, 13, 18, 25, 28, 39, 48, 45, 53



- **Pre-established partnership frameworks:** The Association for Volunteer Action Society (AVAS) and Action Aid initiated a partnership in implementing development projects in Bangladesh. The relationship they developed over time through a partnership framework enabled them to leverage on each other's strengths and build a trusting relationship. Intentionally setting up partnership frameworks and processes to reflect mutual priorities also enabled the partners to pivot and respond to humanitarian crises in a timely way, as core partnership pillars were in already place.

## THE ENABLING PHASE

Respondents identified several practices that supported local leadership as part of the partnership enabling phase. This includes examples of partners identifying capacity sharing opportunities (e.g. technical and organisational support), partnership health checks, visibility to donors, and ensuring equitable decision-making in the partnership direction and co-implementation of a project. Examples the following:

- **Peer-to-peer capacity sharing approaches:** In the Pacific, Australian Red Cross (ARC), IFRC, New Zealand Red Cross, and the Pacific National Societies are working together in partnership to strengthen the organisational capacity of national societies through initiatives that support their financial sustainability and independency as local entities. This has involved working with national societies to determine core costs required for the society to fulfill its functions, and to jointly decide on an approach for financial management support. Activities focused on supporting the financial management capacity of national societies through a peer-to-peer approach among finance managers and leadership. Initiatives that support resource mobilisation such as through the Pacific Red Cross Mobilisation Network also exchange learnings and best practices on local income generation.
- **Partnership health checks:** In Bangladesh, Social Assistance and Rehabilitation for the Physically Vulnerable (SARPV), Oxfam and CARE have established and implemented processes for conducting partnership reviews. This includes informal processes between the partnership such as partnership meetings and check ins, as well as formal third party assessments of targets set for partnership activities in system strengthening support to SARPV.
- **Joint representation to donor agencies:** As an intermediary, Oxfam had an intentional focus on enabling opportunities for JST's leadership to meet with donors and communicate directly. A key goal identified for the partnership was for JST to build their relationship with the donor in order to support access to direct funding.

## THE TRANSITION PHASE

There remain less examples in practice of partners intentionally setting objectives and transitioning once these objectives for local leadership or partnership transition have been met. Partners identified that these objectives are important, and can be more intentionally considered and tracked. A key example includes the following:

- **Role swapping:** The 'localisation transition' focused on enabling KMSS to take up management of a large multi-year grant as a primary recipient, under the FCDO-funded Humanitarian Assistance and Resilience Programme (HARP) in Myanmar. Trócaire provided close support to KMSS throughout the transition to take up direct grant management.



# What are we learning?

## THE BENEFITS OF LOCALISING THROUGH PARTNERSHIPS

Ethical partnership practices that support local leadership have a number of key benefits in terms of positive outcomes for humanitarian response activities, shifting the power and the opportunities to test out different approaches.



### **POSITIVE OUTCOMES IN TIMELINESS AND CONNECTEDNESS OF HUMANITARIAN RESPONSE**

**ACTIVITIES:** In the context of disaster response where there is unpredictability in identifying specific areas that will be severely affected, some national and international organisations shared that existing partnerships allowed them to focus on humanitarian response activities without being delayed by administrative processes such as establishing agreements or conducting due diligence.<sup>4</sup> Collaborative partnership practices often facilitate easier mobilisation of resources and more timely implementation of activities. Longer term partnerships also support partners to work across the nexus of development, humanitarian and peace building interventions.

“ [International organisation partner] usually works in a long term projects. The period of which is about ten years. Other organisations usually work for 3, 6, 9 months or a year... Therefore, when a sudden situation or emergency occurs in the project areas, although that is not in the project... they can take immediate actions based on the requirements (Local NGO representative).<sup>5</sup>”



**OPPORTUNITIES TO ‘SHIFT THE POWER’ IN CONCRETE WAYS.** The idea of ‘power’ can be an elusive, albeit integral, concept in the discussion of localisation.<sup>6</sup> Concentrating on terms of collaboration can bring power out in the open and use it to inform the direction and potential outcome of the partnership.<sup>7</sup> Partnership practices push humanitarian actors to think concretely about where power sits in the partnership and ways to transfer power and elevate the leadership of local and national actors. In our research, we saw this playing out when intermediaries have less control in the decision-making of program implementation and the gradual shift of direct donor funding from the intermediary to local and national partner.<sup>8</sup>

“We want to improve partnership localisation practices, especially in humanitarian action. Because one of our critical values now is rebalancing power. Rebalancing power means even decisions on what programs and projects to take (International NGO representative).<sup>9</sup>”

4 Interviews 35, 39, 50, 59, 83

5 Interview 39

6 A Baguios, M King, A Martins and R Pinnington, *Are we there yet? Localisation as a journey towards locally led practice*, ODI (October 2021).

7 Partos, and The Spindle. 2020. *‘Power Awareness Tool: A Tool for Analysing Power in Partnerships for Development’*

8 Interviews 6, 17, 48, 50, 51, 53, 54

9 Interview 48





**OPPORTUNITY TO TRY DIFFERENT APPROACHES.** Time is a big advantage and is necessary to build trust in the partnership. These practices create opportunities for humanitarian actors to try different ways of working in partnership including ways to navigate misunderstandings and establishing ways to promote open and honest conversations.

“As a result of [the international organisation’s] long-term engagement with other local partners, trust, respect, attitude, and professional relationship have developed. Other groups formed a short-term connection, which does not foster confidence (Local NGO representative).<sup>10</sup>”

## WHAT ARE THE TRADE-OFFS?

The resources required for building and sustaining humanitarian partnerships are a key consideration when adopting collaborative practices. A mindset shift is required so that these are not presented as ‘negatives’ but as essential investments in equitable and effective ways of working. However, if they have not been planned for, the demands on resources can present a challenge. For humanitarian actors, it is important to recognise that:



**IT TAKES TIME AND FUNDS TO BUILD RESPECTFUL COLLABORATIONS WHERE ALL PARTNERS CONTRIBUTE FULLY.** Implementation costs include partnership agreement/MoU development costs and an increase in or realignment of resources dedicated to partnership management. This includes joint decision-making meetings with partners during a transition and running costs such as periodic consultations and compensation of partners for their time and inputs.<sup>11</sup>

“Successful approaches where there are mutually identified goals and objectives – that’s really hard to achieve without trust and relationship. So it would take a lot of very tender listening and very intentional time. That’s the problem, the time element. How do you build that trust and how do you listen? (National NGO representative).<sup>12</sup>”



**OPERATIONAL AND ORGANISATIONAL RESTRUCTURING TAKES VISION AND COMMITMENT.**

A key consideration for both partners is adapting to how the partnership positions them as humanitarian actors in country contexts, and globally. For many intermediaries, this model would require them to adopt a leaner organisational structure – necessitating changes in internal direction, policies, and ways of working – focused on supporting national and local partners rather than directly implementing projects. For local and national partners, this would require an understanding of how their existing capacities can further evolve as the transition happens and how they can best leverage areas they require technical support on.

“We made a really bold and fantastic step but there’s a lot of reluctance to change and a lot of it comes down to system, compliance, donor requirements... (International organisation representative).<sup>13</sup>”

<sup>10</sup> Interview 21

<sup>11</sup> Interviews 17, 21, 39, 41

<sup>12</sup> Interview 62

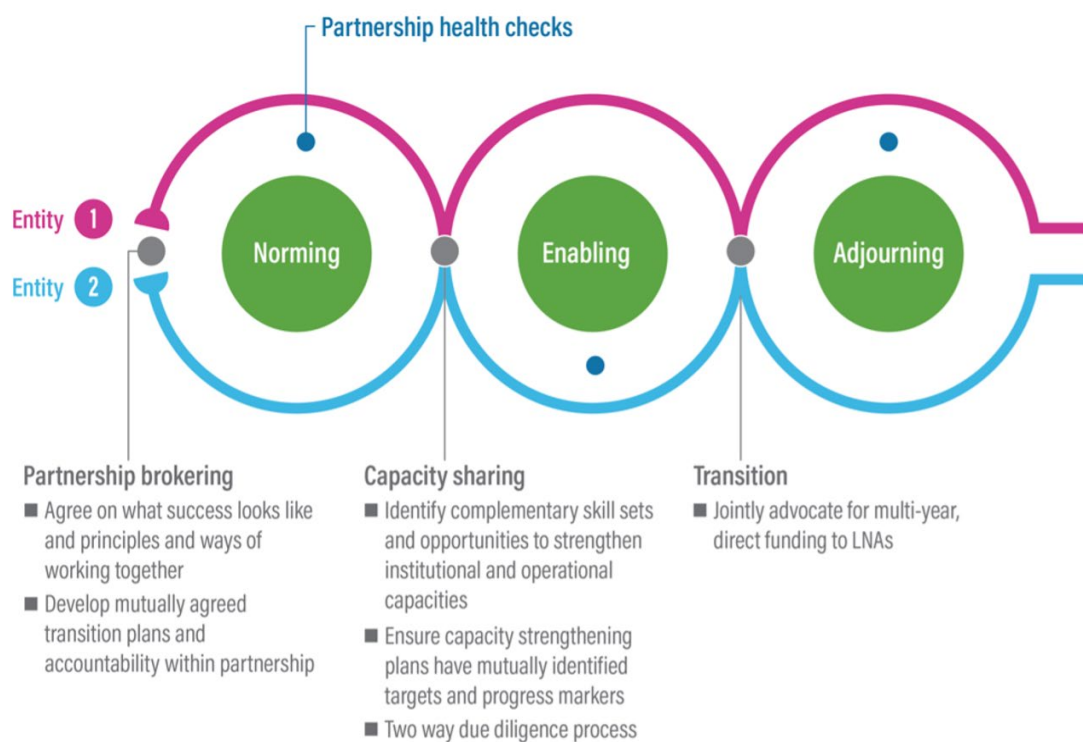
<sup>13</sup> Interview 60



# Where to now?

We hope this learning brief helps decision makers in international organisations to reflect on their own practices and take inspiration from what others have done; and for leaders in local and national organisations to analyse their own partnership experiences and draw evidence with which to advocate for further change. The power imbalance between international and national/local actors has been raised as the fundamental question determining the extent to which an initiative or practice is transformative.<sup>14</sup>

As such in adopting new practices or strategies organisations will need to think through the process associated with change. Strong relationships as well as creating spaces for local and national actors to identify what partnership success look like are paramount. Other specific practices need to be identified based on an assessment of what is relevant, local priorities, and opportunities and risk. Some of these practices are included in the figure below:



This learning brief shows that intermediaries, local NGOs and community-based civil society organisations have much to learn from each other about ways to achieve equitable and transformative partnerships. It is important to identify how these partnership practices produce better outcomes for affected communities.<sup>15</sup> Additionally, these examples are by no means exhaustive, and some partnership practices occur at the project level and were not captured here. If you can offer other examples of high-quality partnership practices or would like to know more about the research, collaborate, partner or simply stay up to date, please contact HAG – [info@humanitarianadvisorygroup.org](mailto:info@humanitarianadvisorygroup.org).

<sup>14</sup> Interviews 6, 17, 48, 50, 51, 53, 54

<sup>15</sup> Humanitarian Advisory Group, GLOW Consultants, CoLAB, inSights & Ziad Antonios, *Bridging the Intention to Action Gap: The Future Role of Intermediaries in Supporting Locally Led Humanitarian Action*, 2021.





# Acknowledgements

**Research team:** Iris Low and Leaine Robinson (CoLAB), Muhammad Tanveer Amjad, Saeed Ullah Khan, Aaftab Ullah, Zaki Ullah (GLOW Consultants), Suman Ahsanul Islam, Nahid A Siddiqui, Niger Rahman (inSights), Seini Bukalidi (PIANGO), Anggoro Budi Prasetyo, Putu Hendra Wijaya, Dimas Panji Agung Rohmatulloh (Pujiono Centre), Thura Tun (Myanmar consultant), Prem Singh Nayak (Nepal consultant), Ninoy Balgos (Philippines consultant), and Madeline Baker, Pamela Combinido, Pip Henty, Idha Kurniasih, Kate Sutton and Eranda Wijewickrama (Humanitarian Advisory Group)

**Editor:** Eleanor Davey

**Copy Editor:** Campbell Aitken

**Design:** Jean Watson

**Cover graphic:** Vectorium / Shutterstock

**Suggested Citation:** HAG, CoLAB, GLOW Consultants, inSights, PIANGO, Pujiono Centre, N Balgos, PS Nayak & T Tun (2023), *Localisation Learning Brief: Localisation Through Transformative Partnerships*. Melbourne: Humanitarian Advisory Group

## About Humanitarian Horizons 2021-2024

Humanitarian Horizons 2021–2024 is a three-year research initiative that adds unique value to humanitarian action in the Indo-Pacific by generating evidence-based research and creating conversations for change. Humanitarian Horizons is supported by the Australian Government through DFAT.

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 has 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.

This publication was funded by the Australian Government through DFAT. The views expressed in this publication are the authors’ alone and are not necessarily the views of the Australian Government.



## About the Project Team

**Collaborate Consulting Pte Ltd (CoLAB)** is a Fiji-based development consultancy company with a vision of achieving 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.

**Humanitarian Advisory Group** 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.

**inSights (the Institute of Innovations for Gender and Humanitarian Transformations)** 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 registered in 24 countries, territories and states across the Pacific region.

**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.

**Prem Singh Nayak (Nepal consultant)** is an experienced consultant with a history of working in international affairs. Pem has worked in humanitarian assistance, conflict, food security, policy analysis and capacity development projects in both Nepal and Sudan.

**Ninoy Balgos (Philippines consultant)** is a lecturer at Ateneo de Manila University and an experienced research and evaluation consultant of initiatives focusing on disaster risk reduction and humanitarian action in Asia Pacific region.

**Thura Tun (Myanmar consultant)** is an experienced humanitarian practitioner with over 10 years of experience working in community and international development in Myanmar.

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