



Humanitarian Horizons: Power, People and Local Leadership

LOCALISATION AT A PROJECT LEVEL

LOCALISATION LEARNING BRIEF

August 2023

Introduction

In recent years localised humanitarian practices have been increasingly adopted across multiple crisis contexts and with a range of humanitarian actors. 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 learning brief explores patterns in the way that supporting local leadership has been approached in the Asia and Pacific regions that target the project level. These project level practices continue to be one of the key ways in which local leadership is supported across the sector, in particular where agencies are responding without pre-existing partnerships in place. These practices are usually embedded within the cycle of a project or program, are relatively immediate, and are time and output bound. 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, supported by the Australian Government through the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT). 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 Humanitarian Advisory Group's [HAG] previous research stream, [Intention to Impact: Localised Humanitarian Action](#)) and primary data to support humanitarian actors to design and implement localisation practices. 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 [transformative partnership practices in Asia and the Pacific](#) and on localisation through [networks and collectives](#).



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.'¹

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.

¹ 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.



Snapshot of localised practices through projects

Across the Asia-Pacific region, there is a diverse set of examples of how practices adopted through programs and projects focused on humanitarian action have been created to, or supported local leadership. The below section provides a snapshot of localisation practices within programs and projects in three categories:

1. Projects with localisation components
2. Projects with localisation as an explicit overarching objective
3. Emergency financing mechanisms that facilitate implementation of locally led projects

PROJECTS WITH LOCALISATION COMPONENTS

This category includes project components such as flexible and quality funding, equitable decision-making in project implementation, and opportunities for capacity sharing with local and national organisations. Participants outlined how these components had been critical in supporting local leadership, and the importance of investing time and resources into prioritising the most important component with all partners, as well as donors. There is also good evidence of projects across the region adopting and contextualising practices from other projects, however, the value of being able to track the evidence of impact of these practices remains limited. This group of practices continues to be the most commonly identified by research participants, demonstrating opportunities for donors and intermediaries take immediate actions to integrate their localisation commitments in their own respective projects (see learning section). Examples include the following:

- **PHILIPPINES – direct funding:** A Single Drop of Safe Water Inc. (ASDW), together with Roots of Health, Environmental Legal Assistance Center and Palawan Center for Appropriate Rural Technology, implemented relief and cash assistance for communities affected by Super Typhoon Rai/Odette in December 2021. The UN Resident Coordinator and the Humanitarian Coordinator in the Philippines provided an Emergency Cash Grant (ECG) of US\$ 100,000. It was the first time that an ECG had been given to a local NGO and used for cash interventions. 'The financing model allowed a comparatively small local NGO and partners with limited pre-financing capacity to immediately commit to data collection and launch the preparatory phase of project implementation.'²
- **VANUATU – flexible funding:** During the TC Harold response, the Vanuatu Skills Partnership (VSP) requested that DFAT redirect its funding to support its work in mainstreaming disability inclusion in response efforts. The flexibility in funding allowed Vanuatu Society for Persons with Disability (VSPD) to ensure that needs of persons with disability were considered in the response.
- **PAKISTAN – equitable decision making and governance:** The Towards Greater Effectiveness and Timeliness in Humanitarian Emergency Response (ToGETHER) program in Pakistan had a specific focus of empowering local organisations to lead decision-making through the Country Steering Committee (CSC). ToGETHER seeks to shift key roles and responsibilities traditionally adopted by international actors, to local partners.

2 OCHA, Palaweños helping Palaweños: Localisation of aid driving more sustainable humanitarian outcomes in Palawan (May 2022).



Other key examples included intermediaries supporting national and local actors in the financial and compliance aspects of projects;³ local and national actors accessing capacity-strengthening activities through training whilst implementing projects,⁴ drawing on complementary of roles and responsibilities in project-implementation and supporting the technical and contextual expertise of local partners.⁵

PROJECTS WITH LOCALISATION AS AN OVERARCHING OBJECTIVE

Across the region there were also examples of projects and programs that have an explicit objective of supporting local leadership. These are funded projects focused on elevating and support local leadership in country through a range of practices including advocacy work, creating platforms for coordination, providing direct funding to local and national actors, and capacity strengthening opportunities for local and national actors through training, mentorship and peer-to-peer learning.

- **Accelerating Localisation through Partnerships (ALTP)** was an ECHO-funded program implemented over Nov 2017 – Oct 2019 in Myanmar, Nepal, Nigeria and South Sudan. Christian Aid led a consortium of six international NGOs (Christian Aid, CARE, Tearfund, ActionAid, CAFOD and Oxfam); in each country, a national steering committee of local and national NGOs and consortium members guided program implementation. In Nepal, ALTP brought together national (both government and non-government) and international actors to discuss localisation and published the [Pathways to Localisation](#) report.
- The **Locally Led Disaster Preparedness and Protection (LLDPP)** is a project implemented in Indonesia that aimed to strengthen humanitarian response at the sub-national level and cluster coordination capacities. There were also [a series of trainings](#) for humanitarian workers and government agency representatives on nutrition in emergencies, child protection, education, WASH, and adaptive social protection reaching about 830 participants from 21 provinces. It also supported the recruitment of 96 national roster members in Indonesia to provide surge support when required.

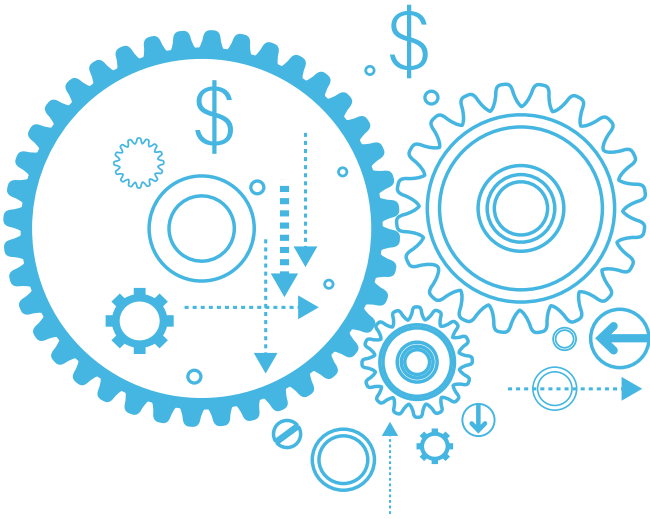
Other key projects or programs with an explicit focus on local leadership included the FCDO-funded [Disaster and Emergencies Preparedness Program](#) in the Philippines and the [Strengthening Response Capacity and Institutional Development for Excellence](#) in various countries across the Asia region.

3 Interview 15

4 Interview 7, 8

5 Interview 3, 8, 53





EMERGENCY FINANCING MECHANISMS

Examples of funding mechanisms or facilities that allow local and national actors, including NGOs, to access funding and other resources to support their implementation of emergency response continue to grow. Whilst not a project per se, these emergency financing mechanisms facilitate implementation of locally-led projects and ensure leadership of local and national actors through their representation in governance bodies.

- The **Humanitarian Response Grant Facility** is a core funding model of the Empowering Local and National Humanitarian Actors Project, managed by Oxfam. It has supported local and national actors to access funding to strengthen their capacity to independently design and implement quality responses (according to minimum standards), conduct needs assessments, design project proposals, manage funds, monitor and evaluate, and meet reporting compliance. It was used in Bangladesh to respond to seasonal flooding in 2017.
- New Zealand's **High Commission Emergency Fund** is a dedicated fund managed by their Post in Fiji, with decision-making delegated to the High Commissioner. Prior to the onset of COVID-19, the fund amount was NZD 50,000 per response. It was increased substantially after the onset of COVID-19 to NZD 500,000 in the response to Tropical Cyclone (TC) Ana (2021), and reached FJD 1 million (approximately NZD 680,000) during the COVID-19 outbreak response. The fund allows local NGOs to engage in a direct funding relationship (rather than working with intermediaries) with the local post of the High Commissioner.
- The **Change Fund**, managed by Network for Empowered Aid Response (NEAR), is a standby mechanism that funds local organisations to respond to emergencies quickly, efficiently and cost-effectively. Its oversight body, nominated by NEAR members, monitors humanitarian situations in 27 priority countries and directs resources to local organisations. The mechanism aims to disburse funding within eight days. It has allocated 13 grants in 11 countries since its inception.

Other examples include the START Fund and country-based pooled funds that already demonstrate increasing percentage of funding that went to local and national actors such as the case of Pakistan Humanitarian Pooled Fund and Myanmar Humanitarian Fund. There are funding mechanisms that provide entry points for small national organisations active in humanitarian work, such as Humanitarian Assistance and Resilience Programme Facility (HARP-F) launched in 2016.



Key learning

By presenting a discussion of potential benefits and trade-offs as well as areas of good practice, this learning paper series helps decision-makers to identify practices to support localisation that are most likely to be transferable or appropriate at different scales, without ignoring the associated challenges.

WHAT ARE THE BENEFITS OF LOCALISING AT A PROJECT LEVEL?

Project-based practices are directly tied to day-to-day work and can assume shorter engagements. Key benefits of this approach are outlined below.

»» **ACTION NOW.** Identifying candidate projects for increased local leadership can create opportunities for action in the short term, allowing organisations to show commitment to localisation even if they are still grappling with systemic issues.⁶ For example, one international organisation, responding to a category 5 typhoon, changed their funding practices for that response. The organisation's representative noted that investing in local NGOs was unusual for it, but the urgency of the situation drove the change in approach.

“ We had to decide in a few hours – we were keen to test this approach in investing local NGOs and decide where we could go. [Our agency] is a bit sensitive, especially the procurement process. But we didn't have time. The affected area is so isolated ... We decided in a very quick way. It was a fantastic experience for both our organisation and the local partner. (International organisation representative)⁷”

💡 **CAPTURING LEARNING WHEN PILOTING AND EXPERIMENTING.** Project-based localisation practices allow humanitarian actors, notably donors and international humanitarian agencies, to 'tweak' or test ways to integrate localised practices in projects based on their existing capacity and priorities.⁸ Building in stocktaking and intentional reflection with local and national actors can capture what approaches are working and develop features to be replicated in other projects.

“ As Pacific Islanders, we know we are being watched – seeing that if we are successful ... [the donor] will replicate this (locally led) model across other programs. We are conscious of this and are aware this is our power. (Local organisation representative)⁹”

🙌 **TAKING STEPS TOWARDS MORE HOLISTIC MODELS.** If thoughtfully managed, project-based practices can inform a new or revised organisational strategy on localisation, based on context-specific experience and iterative learning. This approach can also help to improve partners in working together in new ways, building trust for more long-term and ambitious commitments. This is reflected in the experience of some international organisations piloting localisation programmes as a way of taking concrete actions towards their global policy

⁶ Interviews 52, 53, 57, 58, 59

⁷ Interview 52

⁸ Interviews 58, 59

⁹ Interview 47




commitment to support localisation.¹⁰ The learning from the pilot phase, when provided enough support such as additional funding, have shaped policies, practices and the institutionalisation of localisation in their organisations moving forward.¹¹


“ We didn't have funding anymore to do [the] piloting, but in some countries, they integrated their learning into a strategy. (International organisation representative)¹²”

WHAT ARE THE TRADE-OFFS AND CHALLENGES?

Many project-based practices can be unsustainable, in particular for local and national organisations, due to a range of trade-offs and challenges such as those outlined below.

 **AVAILABLE FUNDING AND SHORT TIMEFRAMES LIMIT THE SCOPE OF ACTION.** The potential achievements from projects seeking to support localisation may be affected by short-term planning or rapid timeframes for implementation, as well as the dynamics of improvisation. For example, there may be insufficient time to build best partnership practices, which require clear and honest communication to overcome obstacles.¹³ Previous research has found that capacity sharing approaches based on the limited focus of a project's intended outcomes results in a narrow focus on the technical expertise necessary for completing specific project tasks, rather than building broad capacity applicable to multiple and varied tasks.¹⁴ Some interviewees also questioned whether piecemeal practices could be considered as promoting local leadership.

“ We do not know how localisation is really advanced in Myanmar. It is a so-called sub-grantee approach being applied here. It is just a project-based partnership, not localisation yet. (Local organisation representative)¹⁵”

 **MODEST CHANGES STILL REQUIRE SUPPORT AND INVESTMENT.** Many localisation practices will conflict with traditional standard operating procedures or approaches such as financial and audit systems that have rigid requirements.¹⁶ This may make them hard to implement, especially if they fail to align with staff members' habits and training or institutional incentives. Managers need to create and protect the space for specific projects to open up new ways of working such as allowing local and national actors to lead decision-making and this needs leadership buy-in and engagement. Successful implementation of localisation practices requires adaptive management which includes leaders negotiating with donors about the new approaches they are taking in the project implementation, and then obtaining buy-in from powerful stakeholders (e.g. donor or board members) for experimentation.¹⁷

¹⁰ Interviews 13, 44, 57

¹¹ Interview 57

¹² Interview 57

¹³ See, for example, short-project timeline challenges encountered in the [STRIDE project](#), in which 'LNGOs described having high hopes for what they wanted to accomplish during the partnership, but felt rushed to accomplish it all within the timeframe, and sometimes falling short' (p. 12).

¹⁴ Vielajus M, Bonis-Charancle J-M. 2020. [Aid Localisation: Current State of the Debate and Potential Impacts of the Covid-19 Crisis](#).

¹⁵ Interview 17

¹⁶ Interviews 47, 52, 53, 59

¹⁷ Interviews 17, 52, 53, 58, 59, 82



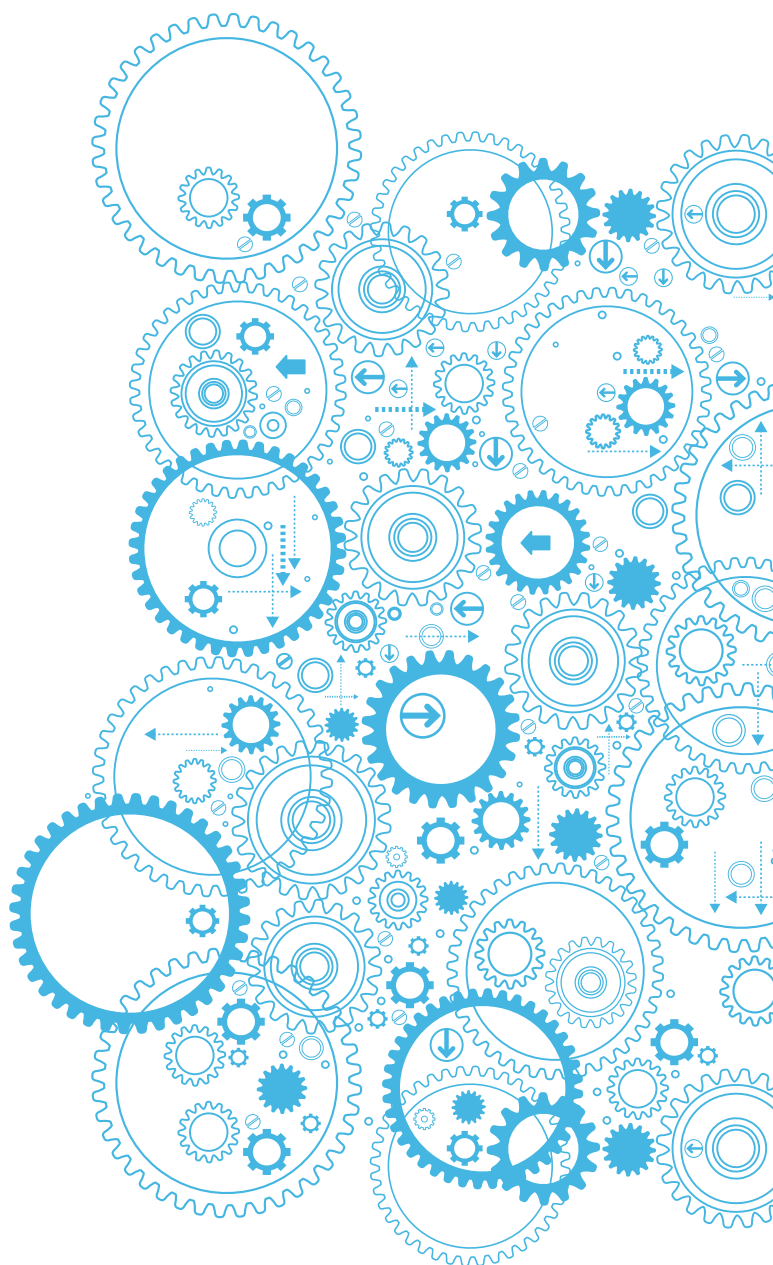
“ Organisational leaders are crucial to drive their country program by including relevant approaches to promote localisation. (Local organisation representative)¹⁸

“ Normally humanitarian responses are run by [our headquarters] team – but in both Fiji and Timor it was the local posts that really made the change happen. They are the ones who were passionate about localisation – compared to other countries. But there are trade-offs. Local staff had more work to do, more contracts to manage. (International organisation representative)¹⁹



BENEFITS NEED INSTITUTIONAL SUPPORT TO BE SUSTAINABLE. The effectiveness and sustainability of project-based localisation practices can be undermined by their short-term and contractual nature. With planning, however, key practices could facilitate long-term strategic support for localisation. For example, building sustained partnerships with local NGOs²⁰ can capture shared ambitions and goals and institutionalise localisation practices.²¹

“ Donor and international communities should [recognise] that localisation is not just the capacity building, funds transferring.... It needs long-term investment and promotion of the intermediary role of local organisations in fund monitoring and decision-making. (Local organisation representative)²²



18 Interview 17

19 Interview 58

20 Interviews 48, 50, 51

21 Interview 57

22 Interview 18

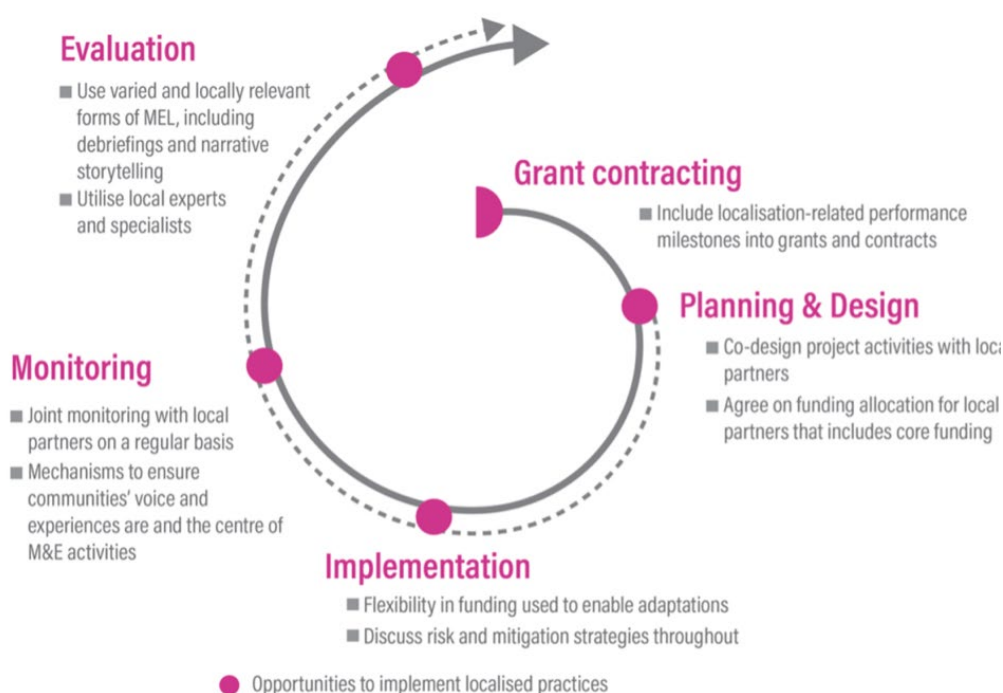


Where to next?

Donors and implementing organisations, especially those at early stages of their localisation journey, can use project-based localisation as a step towards translating their localisation commitments into concrete action. Our analysis shows that project-based practices are relevant when project teams and their partners have the flexibility and creativity to try something new, particularly in the absence of a fully developed strategy for localisation. They can enable testing of new approaches or adoption of new ways of working to support localisation. Making change on a project level can create opportunities to design and scale up long-term localisation practices at an organisational level.

Figure 2 shows how localisation principles and techniques can be integrated in the life cycle of a project, creating the conditions for local leadership at an operational level. Specific practices need to be identified based on an assessment of what is relevant, local priorities, and opportunities and risk.

Figure 2: Localisation throughout the project cycle



Our examples show that supporting an overarching project or a specific practice within a project is a crucial way to promote localisation. Supporting localisation at different stages of the project cycle – from planning and design to monitoring and evaluation – is also important, because this lowers the initial barrier that prevents intermediaries and donors from supporting localised strategies. Partners should strive to support local partners throughout the entire project cycle, including to define the desired localisation outcomes at commencement.

We hope that these concrete examples of how organisations are supporting localised projects will encourage intermediaries and donors to increase support for localised practices. If you can offer other examples or would like to know more about the research, collaborate, partner or simply stay up to date, please contact HAG at info@humanitarianadvisorygroup.org.



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: VLADGRIN / Shutterstock

Suggested Citation: HAG, CoLAB, GLOW Consultants, inSights, PIANGO, Pujiono Centre, N Balgos, PS Nayak & T Tun (2023), *Localisation Learning Brief: Localisation at a Project Level*. 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 functions as a regional secretariat to a network of umbrella organisations or platforms registered in 24 countries, territories and states across the Pacific 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.

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 on disaster risk reduction programs.

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

Certified



Corporation

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.



