



RESPECTFUL RECRUITMENT IN HUMANITARIAN RESPONSE: Why we need it and how to do it



Acknowledgments

Research team: Suman Ahsanul Islam, Nahid Siddigui (inSights); Hendra Wijaya, Panji Dimas (Pujiono Centre); Ziad Antonios, Kateryna Korenkova, Dmytro Kondratenko (independent consultants); Jesse McCommon, Eranda Wijewickrama, Atarah Senn, Kate Sutton (Humanitarian Advisory Group)

Authors: Jesse McCommon and Kate Sutton

Editors: Eleanor Davey and Josie Flint

Copy Editor: Campbell Aitken

Design: Jenny Moody, A&J Moody Design

Cover photo: Shutterstock

Suggested citation: HAG, InSights, Pujiono Centre (2023) *Respectful Recruitment in Humanitarian Response: Why we need it and how to do it*. Humanitarian Horizons. Melbourne: HAG.

This publication was funded by the Australian Government through the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade. The views expressed in this publication are the authors' alone and do not necessarily reflect those of the Australian Government.

Humanitarian Horizons 2021–24

This report is part of the Power, People and Local Leadership stream of the Humanitarian Horizons 2021–2024 research program. Humanitarian Horizons is a three-year research initiative that adds unique value to humanitarian action in the Indo-Pacific by generating evidence and creating conversations for change. It is supported by the Australian Government through the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade.

The research program for 2021–24 builds on the achievements of the Humanitarian Horizons pilot phase (2017–18), the previous iteration of the program (2018–21) and Humanitarian Advisory Group'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 that considers governance, accountability, and monitoring, evaluation and learning processes.

About the partners

Pujiono Centre is a not-for-profit organisation established by disaster management practitioners in Indonesia as a new modality and platform for obtaining, sharing and disseminating knowledge about disaster management, humanitarian response, and climate change adaptation by supporting evidence-based assessments for policymakers.

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.

Independent consultants

Ziad Antonios is an internationally certified SME financing, microfinance, and renewable energy financing expert and monitoring & evaluation specialist with more than 17 years of experience in development and humanitarian assistance in Lebanon, Syria and Jordan.

Kateryna Korenkova is an evaluator based in Kyiv, Ukraine. She has a Masters degree in social work and another in evaluation. She has extensive experience in monitoring and advisory roles in the humanitarian and development sector in Ukraine.

Dmytro Kondratenko is an evaluator from Ukraine and has nine years of experience in humanitarian and developmental evaluations. He is a member of the Board of the Ukrainian Evaluation Association (Chair 2018–2020). His expertise is in locally led humanitarian response evaluations, localisation of humanitarian and developmental assistance, and power imbalances between local and international actors.

About Humanitarian Advisory Group

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.

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.



Contents

Acknowledgments	II
Abbreviations	V
Executive summary	VI
Introduction	1
The big picture: Current recruitment approaches fall short of respectful practice	6
The need for a fresh approach	10
Exploring opportunities for contextualised solutions: The scenarios	14
Working together towards respectful recruitment	28
Annex A. Ethical recruitment guidelines	31
Annex B. Using the scenarios: Activity guide	33

Abbreviations

C4C	Charter4Change
CBPF	Country-Based Pooled Fund
DRC	Democratic Republic of the Congo
HAG	Humanitarian Advisory Group
HCT	Humanitarian Country Team
HQ	Headquarters
HR	Human Resources
INGO	International Non-Governmental Organisation
KII	key Informant Interview
LHDF	Lebanon Humanitarian and Development NGOs Forum
NEAR	Network of Empowered Aid Response
NGO	Non-Governmental Organisation
TSCP	Transforming Surge Capacity Project
UN	United Nations

Executive summary

The recruitment of local and national humanitarian staff into international organisations aligns with the sector’s commitment to better include and elevate local voices and perspectives in humanitarian response. However, such staff movements can also have unintended consequences for local organisations and for local and national capacity more broadly.

Myriad factors contribute to this type of staff movement in the humanitarian sector. This includes positive opportunities for professional growth as well as the consequences of innate inequalities in the system that continue to treat national and international staff differently. The nature of humanitarian work requires a certain level of staff mobility; however, current poor recruitment practices have the potential to undermine and erode local capacity.

The issue of ethical recruitment in humanitarian organisations has gained attention in recent years, in large part due to global initiatives such as the Charter4Change.¹ However, there is little quantifiable evidence of the impact of poor recruitment practice on local organisations or the impact of current approaches to mitigate the issue.

WHAT THIS PAPER DOES

This paper explores recruitment in humanitarian organisations, and proposes that a fresh approach is needed to encourage the sector to adopt respectful recruitment practices. Respectful recruitment extends beyond ethical recruitment by acknowledging ethical and fair processes as a starting point, but also encourages humanitarians to develop a better understanding of how the sector can more holistically support local organisations facing challenges from the loss of staff. It seeks to open a wider conversation about respectful recruitment in order to explore how a combination of collective and context-specific solutions can enable the sector to make progress on these issues and better support local systems.

WHY RESPECTFUL RECRUITMENT IS IMPORTANT

Evidence suggests that current approaches to recruitment in the humanitarian sector are falling short of respectful practice. This includes poor practices such as unethical headhunting and attempts to poach local staff, as well as generally fair processes that nonetheless detrimentally affect local organisations. These practices continue to harm local and national organisations, including through disruption and delays in program implementation due to loss of key programming staff, and consequent reputational damage in the community and/or with donors; financial strain; and diminished strength of civil society due to loss of leadership and weakened institutional capacity.

There is little evidence that high-level global initiatives and headquarters-level policies are shifting practice. This is a complex problem that will require reflection and investment on solutions grounded in local realities. Humanitarians must move beyond short-term thinking to consider in what shape the system is left when humanitarian operations cease. Respectful recruitment is essential in order to walk the talk in relation to localisation and not undermine efforts to support local leadership.

1 See: [Charter 4 Change](#)

SHIFTING PRACTICE

Improving recruitment practices requires context-specific approaches. No one-size-fits-all solution can cover the complex influences and impacts of staff movement across humanitarian contexts. This paper uses research-informed hypothetical scenarios to allow the reader to scrutinise the factors, incentives, processes, and systems that shape decision-making and contribute to or minimise harm related to staff recruitment. Each scenario is accompanied by a brief contextual analysis and a list of possible actions to promote respectful recruitment.

Exploring the drivers and impacts of staff movement across scenarios allowed the researchers to identify and propose options for actors to consider according to context and circumstance. Opportunities are presented with each scenario to suggest what options may be of highest priority and/or most feasible according to contextual factors, but this does not negate their applicability in other circumstances. The paper concludes by bringing these opportunities together to propose recommendations to different actor groups to support respectful recruitment across contexts.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Recommendations include targeted actions for larger intermediary organisations – the primary audience for this report – disaggregated by team function to provide additional clarity around roles and responsibilities. These are supported by recommendations for donors to incentivise and hold intermediaries accountable for these shifts, acknowledging their key role in creating change in the sector. Finally, the paper gives recommendations for smaller local and national organisations that focus primarily on collective advocacy.



Larger organisations and intermediaries

Country Directors and leadership teams

- Prioritise ongoing dialogue and collaboration with all actors to understand the contextual factors that influence recruitment practice and develop strategies for respectful recruitment in context.
- Ensure that respectful recruitment is embedded in organisational policy, human resources (HR) procedures, localisations strategies and M&E frameworks.
- Make a senior manager responsible for raising awareness and monitoring respectful recruitment strategies and approaches.
- Prioritise investment in long-term institutional partnerships with local actors to build trust and share capacity over time.
- Increase the percentage of funds allocated to local partners when transitioning out of context to enable them to attract and retain high-level staff.

Program teams

- Prioritise respectful recruitment in program design and staffing.
- Jointly develop and implement long-term capacity development programs with partners and local actors.
- Invest in supporting national surge capacity through peer-to-peer capacity exchange or secondments and supporting local and national surge mechanisms.
- Collaborate with local actors to develop respectful exit strategies to maintain a healthy local humanitarian system.

HR teams

- Update and socialise recruitment policy and procedure that includes respectful recruitment.
- Align recruitment processes with national policy, regulations and mechanisms.
- Work with local partners to codify terms to reduce unethical or damaging recruitment practice.
- Support local partners to develop HR and institutional capacity by providing resources and training.
- Develop and resource training programs for entry-level local staff.
- Document and share best practice in respectful recruitment.



Donors

- Incentivise and engage in proactive conversations at the country level about contextual factors shaping staff movement, and develop strategies for respectful recruitment.
- Incorporate respectful recruitment in donor localisation strategies and policies. Hold intermediaries to their commitments and to follow-up and implementation.
- Include respectful recruitment in conversations with partners to raise its profile.
- Hold intermediaries accountable to the Grand Bargain commitment to transfer 25% of funding to local partners.
- Incentivise increased funding to local partners when international organisations are exiting.
- Support pooled fund initiatives to promote respectful recruitment.



Smaller local and national organisations

- Establish forums for collective advocacy (e.g. through consortia or single-issue coalitions).
- Collaborate with all actors to identify the contextual factors that influence recruitment practice and develop strategies for respectful recruitment.
- Include clauses in partnership contracts to reduce unethical or damaging recruitment.
- Support and participate in mechanisms to strengthen national surge capacity.
- Collaborate with international and intermediary organisations to organise capacity exchange.
- Collaborate with large humanitarian organisations to develop exit strategies that include a respectful transition.
- Invest in strengthening HR systems.
- Collectively advocate that national governments and actors create a mechanism to develop the humanitarian capacity of job seekers.
- Document and share best practice in respectful recruitment.

Introduction

The movement of people is a cornerstone of humanitarian operations. When an emergency overwhelms the resources at hand, support arrives from elsewhere – starting with communities aiding each other, and continuing with the roles of local responders, national organisations, and – when necessary – international agencies. As these organisations interact, mobility between them has become increasingly common. The humanitarian sector’s push for localisation has resulted in an increasing presence of local and national staff in international organisations. This has many benefits for the sector, but also can bring unintended consequences for local organisations.

Staff mobility can be beneficial to individuals, advancing their careers and/or giving them experiences in new contexts, and to their employers, who gain new skills, perspectives and capacities. However, staff mobility can also harm organisations. Its impacts can usually be mitigated in large and well-resourced organisations, but for small, local and national organisations, they can be severe.

“ It’s a constant process of recruiting, training and doing it again. UN and INGOs make us unsustainable. (National actor, India)²

This issue has attracted attention in recent years and is linked to a wide array of inequalities in the system.³ However, little is known about ways to tangibly reduce its negative impacts. Conversations around inequality in humanitarian staff recruitment typically centre on pay scales – including the stark differences in salary and benefit packages between international and national staff that lead many local staff to seek work with larger international organisations.⁴ This fundamental systemic problem is well documented in existing research, and is not the focus of this paper.⁵ Whilst acknowledging that salaries are a key driver of staff movement, this paper argues that the problem must be understood more holistically, and its solutions will need to reach beyond efforts to rectify salaries.

This paper proposes that a fresh approach is needed to push the sector to adopt respectful recruitment practices. Existing approaches have generally been led by policy groups and international headquarters (HQs). This type of top-down approach has not produced meaningful change in practice. In some contexts, a sense of powerlessness has set in. The paper argues that in order to realise meaningful solutions, actors operating together in a particular response must collectively assess the contextual factors that drive poor recruitment practices and then take collective action to address them.

“ Solutions need to change depending the context and the organisational work. Generic solutions will not help in moving this discussion. (National actor, Bangladesh)⁶

2 Interview 31

3 See: Charter 4 Change; CHS Alliance, *Transforming Surge Capacity Project: HR Good Practice for Surge Response*; Grand Bargain Localisation Workstream, *Localisation Guidance Notes*; NEAR, 2019, *Localisation Performance Measurement Framework*.

4 Miceli, M. (2023) Brain drain in the aid sector: Unpacking the barriers of the dual-salary system, *The Humanitarian Leader*, Working paper 033, doi: 10.21153/thl2023art1752; Thurn, J., The Taboo of Humanitarian Inequalities: What can be learnt from the 2010s, *Humanium*, 4 February 2020; Carr, S. and McWha-Herman, I., Mind the gap in local and international aid workers’ salaries, *The Conversation*, 17 April 2016; McWha-Herman, I., Interrogating INGO’s dual salary systems to address inequality, *Bond*, 12 January 2021

5 For more information on salary inequality, see: McWha-Hermann, I., Marai, L., MacLachlan, M., & Carr, S. C. (2021) Developing evidence-based alternatives to dual salary systems, *International Perspectives in Psychology: Research, Practice, Consultation*, 10(4), 243–246, <https://doi.org/10.1027/2157-3891/a000023>; McWha-Hermann, I., & Cook-Lundgren, E. (2021) Expatriate compensation in contemporary organisations, in Toh, S.M. and DeNisi, A. (Eds.) *Expatriates and Managing Global Mobility*. Routledge; McWha-Hermann, I., Jandric, J., Cook-Lundgren, E., & Carr, S.C. (2021) *Toward fairer global reward: Lessons from international non-governmental organizations*. *International Business Review*, 101897.

6 Interview 6

Embracing respectful recruitment

Humanitarian staff will continue to be mobile. This approach acknowledges that staff movement will continue to occur in the humanitarian sector, but seeks to ensure that this mobility is supported by recruitment that is respectful and maintains a healthy system (see Box 1).

Tackling this problem does not, and should not, impinge on the right of humanitarian staff to seek better jobs and better pay. People have the right to make choices about their careers and how to use and develop their own skills and knowledge. However, the system can and should develop structural approaches to mitigate the harms of staff movement.

Box 1: What is respectful recruitment?

Current attempts to curb poor recruitment practice have largely focused on the extreme end of the spectrum, such as active and intentional headhunting of local staff, often referred to as 'staff poaching'.⁷ Over recent years, there has been a push for organisations to adopt ethical recruitment guidelines and policies to limit this practice (see Annex A).⁸ This approach is important, but falls short of solving the wider problems associated with staff movement.

Respectful recruitment considers the consequences of all recruitment decisions and takes action to mitigate their negative impacts. It seeks to support and maintain a healthy local and national humanitarian system that will continue to be effective in the absence of international actors. Respectful recruitment is intended to reduce the harms that accompany staff movement across the spectrum of recruitment, from outright poaching to the capacity loss smaller humanitarian organisations experience even through ethical processes. Ethical recruitment guidelines serve as an important basis for discussion and are one component of a set of wider efforts towards respectful recruitment.

A note on terminology: Throughout this report, the terms *ethical* and *respectful* are used frequently to qualify recruitment practice. While they are complementary, for the purpose of this paper these terms are not interchangeable. Ethical recruitment practice refers to ensuring that recruitment processes are fair, open, and transparent. Respectful recruitment practice is fundamentally *ethical*, but *also* considers and mitigates long-term run-on effects and negative impacts on local civil society.

HOW TO USE THIS PAPER

This paper aims to promote wider and more engaged conversation about respectful recruitment, illuminated through exploration of different perspectives and contexts, and explore how a combination of collective and context-specific solutions might allow the sector to make headway. It invites readers to consider a series of research-informed hypothetical scenarios, using them to scrutinise the factors, incentives, processes and systems that shape decision-making and may contribute to or minimise recruitment impacts. This paper also includes guidance on how to use scenario-based reflection to promote respectful recruitment in your own organisation (see Annex B).

7 Staff poaching is deliberately recruiting from other organisations within the same industry. The recruiting organisation benefits from its new employees' skills and knowledge to the detriment of the source organisation.

8 The [Charter4Change](#), endorsed in 2015, includes a commitment to support ethical recruitment and encourages signatories to implement ethical recruitment guidelines and policy.

Who is this paper for?

This paper is for humanitarian actors – especially operational and program managers, human resources (HR) departments, and organisational leadership. It primarily targets the actions and behaviours of intermediary or ‘larger’ organisations, and their role in supporting the shift towards respectful recruitment practices. It offers recommendations for donors to incentivise and provide accountability for these shifts. It can also be used as an advocacy tool for local and national organisations seeking to raise awareness and motivate action.

Why use scenario-based reflection?

Exploring the drivers and impacts of staff movement across multiple scenarios allowed the research to propose options for actors to consider according to their context and circumstances. This is a complex problem and there is no one-size-fits-all solution. The impact of humanitarian staff movement is driven by a variety of contextual factors that will require nuanced solutions agreed and driven from the ground up. Scenario-based reflection and learning have been used to help staff and leaders explore and anticipate the consequences of choices in other complex areas, such as risk management.⁹

The scenarios are informed by real-world examples from and the experiences of actors interviewed for this research. First-person narrative allows the audience to relate to the scenarios and reflect on how their own organisation may cope with similar situations and the adjustments needed to meet similar challenges in their own context. This approach draws on ‘narrative theory,’ which argues that narratives are a fundamental way of acquiring knowledge and increasing engagement. Narrative communication and story-telling techniques can encourage behaviour change by facilitating greater personal involvement and offering a form of learning through experience.¹⁰

Report structure

The report is structured in 5 sections. The next section explores the big picture: why are current approaches falling short of respectful practice and why is this important. The third section explains in more detail why and how our approach is different from previous contributions. The fourth section presents the three scenarios where we explore the drivers and impacts of staff movement and how humanitarian actors often respond, based on what we learned from interviews and survey responses. The final section discusses strategies and opportunities for different types of actors in more detail.

METHODOLOGY

The research sought to describe staff movement in the context of different responses, aid structures, and labour markets. It used a mixed methods approach, including desk review, a global survey, key informant interviews (KIIs), and organisational case study analysis (Figure 1). Data collection tools were developed in consultation with national partners across four country contexts: Ukraine, Bangladesh, Indonesia and Lebanon.

Case study countries were selected in consultation with partners to reflect a diversity of contexts, including some where humanitarian staff movement is a major issue, and to test assumptions about why the prevalence of poor practices varies. Case studies involved interviews with international and local/national actors, and an organisational analysis of a local/national organisation that was badly affected by loss of staff to other organisations.

⁹ InterAction (2022) Responding Amid Uncertainty and Managing Risk in Humanitarian Settings: [Resources for NGOs](#).

¹⁰ Hinyard L. J. & Kreuter M.W. (2007) Using narrative communication as a tool for health behavior change: A conceptual, theoretical, and empirical overview, *Health Education & Behaviour* 34(5), 777–92, doi: 10.1177/1090198106291963.

The desk review served to inform country selection and enable a deeper understanding of existing efforts to reduce unethical recruitment practice and mitigate its impacts. While there is little existing documentation of the impacts of staff movement, the desk review identified poor practices with particularly severe effects and trials of mitigation strategies. The desk review also identified contextual factors that affect recruitment practice.

Key informant interviews were conducted to learn about the experiences of international, national and local humanitarian actors across 12 countries and build on the outcomes of the desk review. They enabled exploration of the influences and impacts of staff recruitment, particularly on smaller local and national organisations, and the strategies that have been trialled and how they could be improved.

To assess the scale of the problem and gather a wide range of perspectives on recruitment practice and impacts, a global survey was open from July to September 2023. The survey was used to better understand the scale of the problem and gather perspectives across a broader sample.

Figure 1: Methodology



How were scenarios developed?

The narrative scenarios reflect real experiences shared by research participants; they were adapted and combined to illustrate three broad sets of dynamics. The scenarios were informed by all data sources, but draw primarily on qualitative data collected through KIIs and organisational case studies. Data was coded according to several contextual factors that resulted in common experiences:

- Stage of response
- Amount of funding available
- Level of education and state of labour market in context
- Strength of civil society
- Existing relationships and trust between international and national actors.

Each scenario was developed to capture a range of common experiences across actors with common contextual factors. 'Setting the scene' prefaces give background to the contextual factors that influence the systems' operations and how decisions are made.

The research team recognises that the three scenarios depicted cannot encompass all the combinations of factors and unforeseen circumstances that can exist in humanitarian contexts. They reflect the data collected for this research, and present common challenges associated with staff recruitment and resourcing.

Scope and limitations

Scope: This research does not address the issue of pay scales in humanitarian organisations, which has been studied at length. The University of Edinburgh Business School's [Project Fair: Fairness in INGO Reward](#) provides useful information on this topic.¹¹

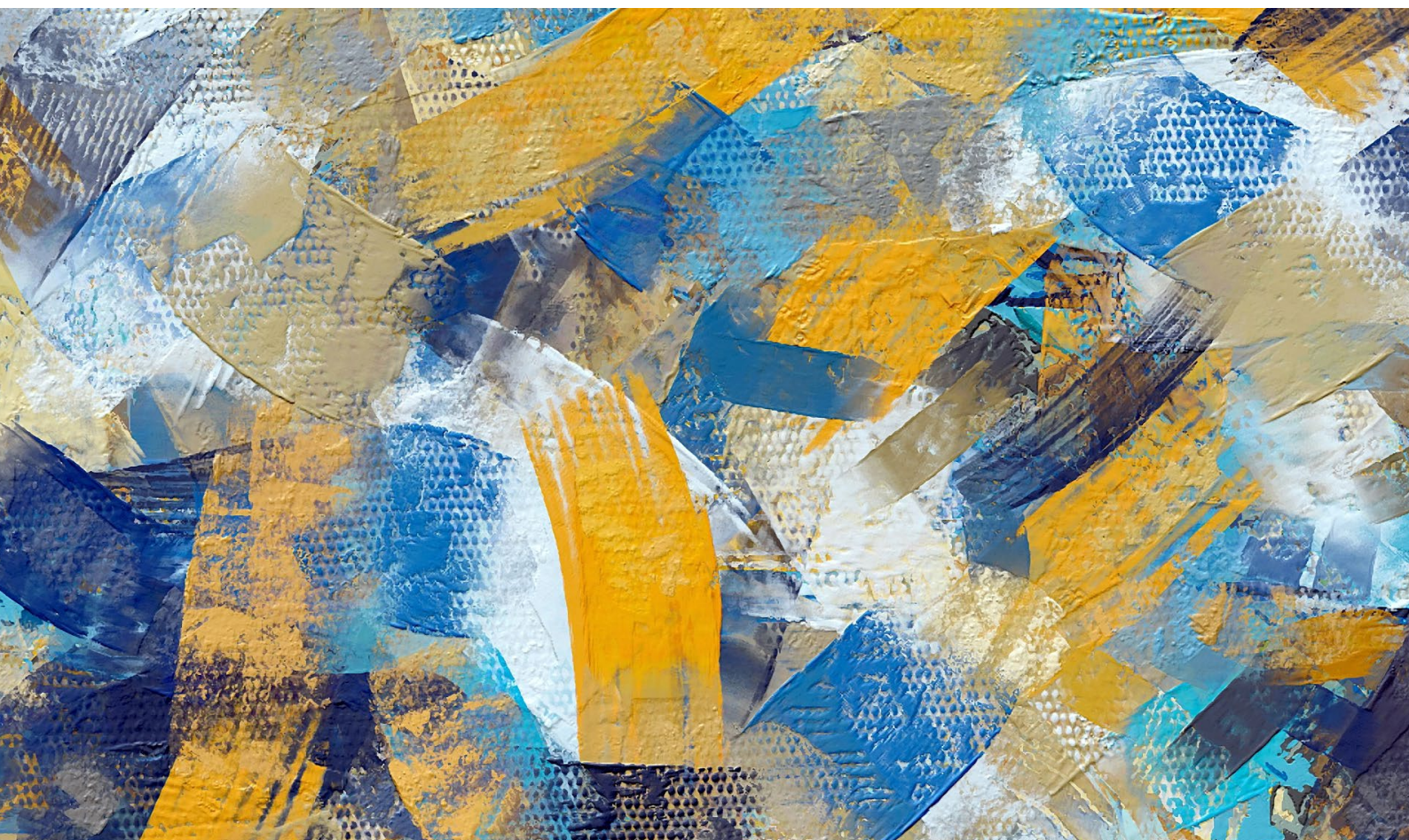
Representativeness: The small samples of research participants from each country means that the views represented here do not reflect all groups. Interviews in each case study context included participants from local/national organisations and international organisations, but few United Nations (UN) or donor personnel.

Contextualisation: The complexity of different contexts meant that it was impossible to cover all the contextual factors and circumstances that influence staff recruitment and its impact. Meeting the challenges presented in this paper will require reflection and collaboration amongst humanitarian actors at all levels. Recommendations are presented to guide discussion and action, but are not prescriptive solutions.

Market analysis: This paper explores the impact of the labour market and strength of civil society on recruitment practice in different contexts, but detailed market analysis was out of scope. References to the impact of the labour market require further research for validation.

¹¹ McWha-Hermann, I., Jandric, J., Wakefield, S., Carr, S.C., Grund, C., & Moutou, M. (2017) [Project Fair: Exploring practical pathways for reward fairness in international NGOs](#). Edinburgh, UK: University of Edinburgh.

Photo: Shutterstock



The big picture: Current recruitment approaches fall short of respectful practice

One of the factors hindering action on this issue is the dilemma it presents for international actors. A choice by international actors *not* to hire national staff, especially in senior positions, could be perceived as falling short on their commitment to local leadership. Yet, when international actors *do* recruit national staff, it invariably comes at a cost to local and national organisations – again, potentially out of step with their localisation commitments. This dilemma, along with a myriad of other contributing factors, have caused challenges around staff movement to consistently be placed in the ‘too hard basket’ for humanitarians, with solutions seeming out of reach.

The harm local and national humanitarian organisations experience as a result of staff movement is widely acknowledged, but there is very little documentation or analysis of impacts. The problem is not novel, with evidence starting to emerge in the evaluation of the Indian Ocean tsunami response in 2006.¹² It has gained increased attention over the past decade, primarily in response to major sudden-onset disasters that spurred large international responses, but has not prompted meaningful changes in practice or support to smaller local and national organisations.¹³

Approaches to recruitment vary widely – from attempts to intentionally poach staff to fully ethical and transparent processes – according to several factors (discussed in the next section). For example, one international actor explained how their organisation has an ethical recruitment policy, but during emergencies steps are often missed.¹⁴ Another actor from a smaller national organisation shared an example of a staff member being recruited through a fair process, but the standard one-month notice period was too short to mitigate the impacts of their loss.¹⁵

Impacts can also vary widely. For example, one actor from a national organisation claimed that their organisation was able to fill vacancies arising from staff moving to larger organisations with little long-term impact, while another actor from a smaller local organisation reported debilitating impacts on their operations and financial sustainability.¹⁶

The scale of the problem

While the staff movement issue is widely acknowledged in the localisation discourse, there is little evidence of the scale of the problem. Of 25 local and national actors interviewed in this research, 22 identified staff movement as having substantial impacts on their organisation. They ranged from impacts that could be managed relatively easily, such as a larger organisation losing one or two staff in a year, to detrimental impacts that forced smaller organisations out of business. Of the 15 international actors interviewed,

12 Telford, J. & Cosgrave, J. (2006) Joint evaluation of the international response to the Indian Ocean tsunami: Synthesis report, Tsunami Evaluation Coalition; Featherstone, A. (2017) Time to move on: National perspectives on transforming surge capacity, CAFOD, Christian Aid, Tearfund and Islamic Relief Worldwide.

13 Featherstone, A. (2017) Time to move on; Featherstone, A. (2014) Missed again: Making space for partnership in the typhoon Haiyan response, Actionaid, CAFOD, Christian Aid, Oxfam, Tearfund; Antequisa, R., A paradox in practice: To localise aid international agencies need to address practices that undermine national capacity, C4C, 25 August 2015.

14 Interview 30

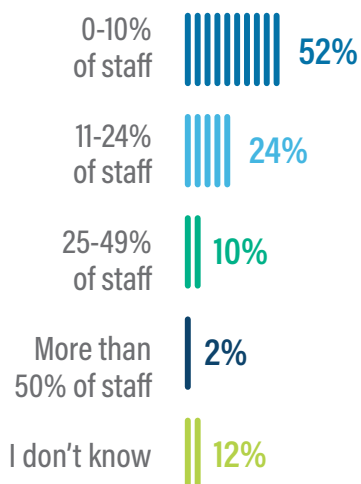
15 Interview 6

16 Interviews 7 & 17

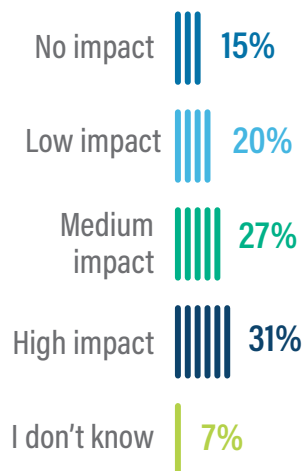
12 identified the problem, citing other international actors' unethical practices or describing their own experiences of losing staff to better-resourced organisations.

Survey results indicated that **86% of respondents had experienced staff leaving to join larger organisations, with 30% claiming that this happens often** (several times per year). The number of staff who moved and level of impact varied across respondents (see survey results below).

What percentage of your staff would you estimate left to join an international or larger humanitarian or development organisation in the last 2 years?



How much has staff leaving to work with an international or larger organisation impacted your organisation?



The severity of impacts

Despite common acknowledgement of the problem, there is little concrete evidence and documentation of **how** staff movement affects smaller organisations. This research identified the following potential areas of impact.

Program implementation

Continual loss of key programming staff delays or even terminates program implementation and delivery of essential services to communities.¹⁷

60% of survey respondents indicated that staff movement had a **high or medium impact** on their ability to deliver programs effectively in a timely manner.¹⁸

We see a lot of local organisations are struggling, they don't have many qualified staff. If a staff member leaves, they don't have any coping mechanisms, their programs and projects are immediately affected. They have to stop the program maybe two or three times, it has a huge impact on program performance. (National actor, Myanmar)

The impact is direct, particularly on program implementation. When organisations invest in building staff capacity through induction and refresher training, losing an employee disrupts the workflow. This disruption affects the quality of service delivery, program deadlines, and the internal dynamics among the remaining staff. (National actor Lebanon)

¹⁷ Interviews 1, 2, 6, 7, 11, 13, 14, 27, 31 & 32

¹⁸ 42% of respondents reported a high impact, 28% of respondents reported a medium impact.



Financial sustainability

Smaller organisations have small budgets for overheads and administration; costs associated with continual recruitment and training put budgets under considerable strain. Several respondents from local and national organisations shared experiences of investing significantly in the education of their staff, only to see them leave to join larger organisations.¹⁹

49%

of survey respondents indicated that staff movement had a **high or medium impact** on their financial sustainability.²⁰

It was a six-month process for recruiting. I [CEO] had to cover the work during this time. And when I couldn't do it, I had to pay for a consultant to come and do the work. I could not charge this cost to the projects since the consultant didn't hold the title of grant manager and donor projects only allow staff costs to specific titles. (National actor, Yemen)

The budget on salary increases up to seventy-five per cent depending how many people we are training. I tried to invest in training people to keep them from leaving, but that was not effective, as soon as you train someone other organisations become interested. (National actor, Ukraine)



Reputation

Losing staff to larger organisations often means that smaller organisations are unable to continue efficient program implementation, which has a considerable impact on their reputation. Affected organisations then receive less funding because they are unable to meet donor expectations.²¹

58%

of survey respondents indicated that staff movement had a **high or medium impact** on their reputation in the community and/or with funders.²²

Many local NGOs face reputation challenges. Staff often prefer to work for INGOs or UN agencies over local NGOs. This preference for larger, international organisations can affect local NGOs' ability to attract and retain talent. (National actor, Lebanon)

When individuals leave or transition to larger organisations after only three or four months, it creates difficulties in continuing or completing the projects. Finding qualified and skilled replacements for this limited time to complete the projects becomes a challenge. Furthermore, we are obliged to provide clarifications to the donors regarding the reasons for their departure and the resulting complications for project continuity. (National actor, Bangladesh)

19 Interviews 1, 2, 7, 24, 27, 28, 30 & 31

20 23% of respondents reported high impact, 25% reported medium impact.

21 Interviews 2, 7, 13, 14, 22 & 23

22 32% of respondents reported high impact, 26% reported medium impact.



Strength of civil society

Unethical recruitment practices can leave civil society undermined and less effective. This may be masked by the presence of large UN agencies and NGOs in the short term, but in the long term and as larger organisations scale back, civil society organisations may fold or diminish to such an extent that they cannot provide ongoing services or to be prepared for future events.²³ Survey responses highlighted the impact on civil society.

57%

of survey respondents indicated that **loss of leadership** due to staff movement had a **high or medium impact** on their organisation.

61%

of survey respondents indicated that **diminished institutional capacity** due to staff movement had a **high or medium impact** on their organisation.²⁴

We lose people to high-paying country offices and UN. Since we don't have enough money, we get people from universities whose salary expectations are not that high. We invest a lot of time and energy, when they are trained they leave. It causes serious institutional weakening. (National actor, India)

This undermines civil society by taking senior members from national NGOs. They have been in the leadership circle of their organisations, then they get some sort of administrative position. A humanitarian coordinator in the government ends up in a data processing job within the UN system. You put him in the organisation with no decision-making power. (National actor, Ukraine)

I know several smaller organisations that just disappeared because of the lack of personnel. (National actor, Ukraine)

23 Interviews 1, 14, 20, 24, 25, 27, 30 & 31

24 19% of respondents reported high impact, 42% reported medium impact.

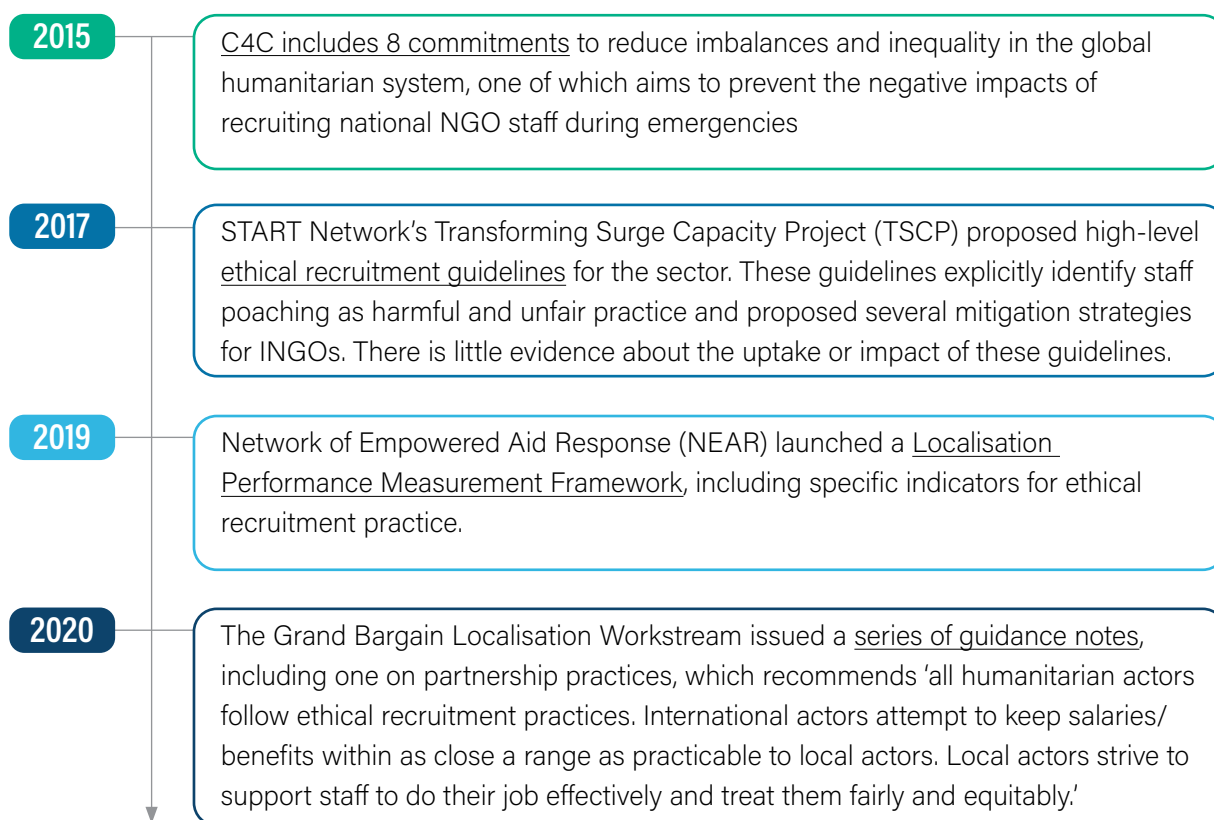
Photo: Shutterstock



The need for a fresh approach

Global humanitarian initiatives and commitments have helped to put the staff movement problem on the agenda. This has been largely driven by efforts to develop and implement ethical recruitment guidelines (see Annex A), championed by Charter 4 Change (C4C), inclusion of ethical recruitment practice in localisation frameworks, and work undertaken by the Grand Bargain Localisation Workstream (see Figure 2).

Figure 2: Examples of global commitments for strengthening ethical recruitment



Despite good intentions, there is little evidence that these high-level initiatives have shifted practice. Global commitments have led to many international NGO HQs adopting ethical recruitment guidelines or policies, with C4C's 2022 annual report claiming that 76% of signatories maintain ethical recruitment guidelines.²⁵ However, there is scant evidence of the impact or influence of these policies or how they are monitored or enforced. Several INGO actors claimed that their organisations had 'unwritten but understood' policies around ethical recruitment,²⁶ which may be true but prevents monitoring and accountability. Survey results further highlighted this challenge, with only **31% of respondents indicating that they were aware of such guidelines** being in place in larger organisations, and **20% claiming that these and similar efforts to manage staff movement have made no difference.**

“ The discussion is good but there is a complete disconnect between HQ and country offices [...] They sign on to all the changes but can't enforce commitments. (National actor, India)²⁷ ”

25 Charter 4 Change (2022) From commitments to action: Progress report 2021-2022.

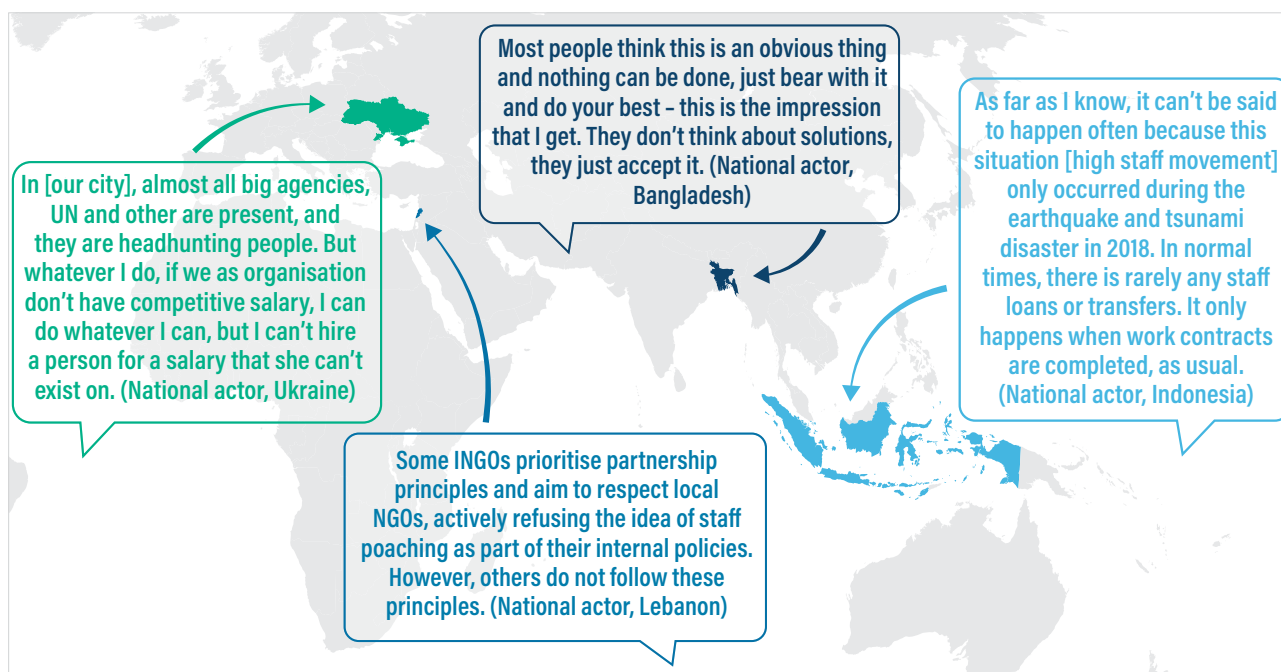
26 Interviews 8, 15, 20 & 35

27 Interview 31

Positive steps are evident in some contexts. For example, in Ukraine, national level ethical recruitment guidelines were proposed by the NGO Resource Centre and adopted by the Humanitarian Country Team (HCT) in July 2023. These guidelines were created in response to rampant humanitarian staff movement after the February 2022 invasion.²⁸ The adoption of national guidelines is an important step towards contextualising global solutions. While it is too soon to assess the impact of these guidelines, actors in Ukraine interviewed for this research had poor knowledge of the guidelines or how they were being implemented, again suggesting limits to the effectiveness of ethical frameworks.²⁹

One of the key challenges facing global or blanket initiatives on humanitarian recruitment is that responses must be context specific. This research identified that across 12 contexts, views varied widely within and between actor groups and country contexts with respect to the impact of the problem and the proposed solutions (see Figure 3). For example, in Indonesia, where civil society is strong and government regulations restrict access for international actors, staff movement was generally not perceived to be a problem, except during major emergencies.³⁰ In Ukraine, a country facing a second year of invasion, the issue is regarded as more serious.³¹ In countries where humanitarian actors have been engaged over the longer term, such as Lebanon, some progress has occurred due to more opportunity for engagement between actors, while in others, such as Bangladesh, actors report a growing sense of powerlessness, with little hope for meaningful change.³²

Figure 3: Different contexts produce different perspectives



Alongside global initiatives, some action has been taken at the national and local levels to create solutions. This study uncovered some examples of locally driven, collective actions leading to more respectful recruitment practices. In Lebanon, humanitarian coordination forums collaborated to discuss these issues and agree on their own solutions (see Box 2).

28 Interviews 1, 24, 27, 30 & 40
 29 Interviews 1, 24, 27, 28, 29, 30 & 40
 30 Interviews 35–38
 31 Interviews 24, 27, 28, 29
 32 Interviews 6, 13, 14–19, 21–23 & 25

Box 2: Positive practice – local solutions in Lebanon

Prior to the Beirut Blast in August of 2020, the Lebanon Humanitarian and Development NGOs Forum (LHDF) formed a human resource working group to discuss issues around staff movement and recruitment.³³ The LHDF includes more than 85 local and national NGOs active in Lebanon and enables coordination and ongoing dialogue between actors.³⁴ The forum additionally coordinated with the Lebanon Humanitarian INGO Forum, a coordinating body comprised of 65 INGOs active in Lebanon, to discuss solutions to these challenges.³⁵ As a result of these discussions, local/national NGOs and INGOs were encouraged to enter into informal agreements that require INGOs to inform local/national NGOs when recruiting their staff, and to mandate longer notice periods before staff departures, among other commitments.³⁶ National actors in Lebanon claimed that these agreements helped to mitigate the impacts of staff movement; however, after the blast, INGOs received more funding and initiated more projects, which led to a resurgence of poor recruitment practice; no accountability mechanism was in place to uphold the agreements.³⁷

The Lebanon example demonstrates the importance of ongoing dialogue between local, national, and international actors to develop solutions to staff movement issues. Existing relationships, trust and forums allowed actors to come together to assess challenges and implement strategies with enough buy-in to gain traction. However, it also demonstrates the importance of holding larger organisations to account, especially when they are acting in intermediary roles.

WHY CONTEXT MATTERS

This research identified several contextual considerations that affect the prevalence of poor recruitment practices and their level of impact, described below.



Stage and type of response: The type of emergency (e.g. sudden-onset, slow-onset, protracted crisis) and stage of response (e.g. immediate response to an emergency, several years into a long-term response, recovery phase) strongly influences how systems and process for recruitment are developed, and therefore how recruitment is experienced. This research found that respectful recruitment practices are least likely in the early stages of a rapid onset response, when operations need to be scaled up urgently.³⁸



Initially there was a lot of growth happening, now we have stabilised. In the last two years, we have recruited maybe four or five positions, whereas if we came in new, we would look for ten to thirty in one go. There is not a huge recruitment process going on now. Eight to ten years ago, this probably would have been very different. (International actor, South Sudan)³⁹



Amount of funding available: Evidence suggests that when funding is plentiful, poor practices are more frequent and their cumulative impacts are severe. When larger organisations and intermediaries have more funding for projects, they often recruit local staff to help with their increased workload. When this practice is widespread, the impact on civil society can be significant because many organisations lose multiple staff in a short time period. When funding wanes, poor practices are less widespread but tend to have an intensely focused impact because smaller organisations lack the budget to recruit and train new staff.⁴⁰

33 Interview 19, 21 & 22

34 [Lebanon Humanitarian and Development Forum](#)

35 Interview 22, [Lebanon Humanitarian INGO Forum](#)

36 Interview 22

37 Interview 22

38 Interviews 1, 2, 6–12, 20–25, 27, 36 & 38

39 Interview 20

40 Interviews 2, 7–9, 14, 23–25, 27 & 31

“ We lost three or four key staff who went to international organisations. The main cause [was] that they got a better job offer and job security. It’s quite common because of challenges we are facing now with the shortage of funds. UN and donors have become more restricted with no flexibility. (National actor, Yemen)⁴¹”



Level of education and labour market in context: Evidence suggests that a strong education system and a strong labour market reduce the extent and impact of poor practices. In theory, a highly skilled and well developed labour market reduces the need to poach talent developed in smaller organisations, and there will be enough highly skilled national staff to fill vacancies as they arise.⁴² However, staff mobility throughout a response, including relocation overseas for international opportunities, can change these dynamics and drain national capacity.⁴³

“ Attracting skilled and qualified individuals has become a significant challenge for the organisation [...], leading many talented people to leave the country. While there is a large pool of job seekers, finding individuals with the required competencies has become increasingly difficult. (International actor, Lebanon)⁴⁴”



Strength of civil society: If the national humanitarian system is supported by a well-established and strong civil society, local organisations will be more capable of withstanding poor recruitment practices without impacts becoming overwhelming. The prevalence is often reduced because well-established local organisations are able to implement staff retention strategies and claim that staff remain more loyal to their organisation.⁴⁵ Joint advocacy by civil society organisations may increase the chance of holding larger organisations to account for their recruitment practices.

“ In my experience, staff movement rarely happens due to loyalty in our organisation. Some colleagues have moved for higher salaries, but this doesn’t happen a lot. Some staff even continue to volunteer after their employment contract has ended. (National actor, Indonesia)⁴⁶”



Existing relationships and trust between international and national actors: In contexts where coordination forums exist and genuine partnership and collaboration is common, actors can engage in open dialogue about these issues and maintain transparency in recruitment processes. This can minimise both the prevalence and impact of poor practice. In contrast, poor communication and differing agendas and priorities can make respectful recruitment processes less likely.⁴⁷

“ Informal agreements [not to poach staff] only work when organisations are engaged in long-term partnerships or consortiums. In such cases, all parties involved have a shared interest in maintaining the success and sustainability of the collaborative efforts, making it more likely for the agreement to be respected and upheld. (National actor, Lebanon)⁴⁸”

41 Interview 7

42 Harris, J. (2023) Occupational preferences of skilled workers in the presence of a large development sector, *The Journal of Development Studies* 59(3), 342–359, doi: [10.1080/00220388.2022.2139605](https://doi.org/10.1080/00220388.2022.2139605); Harris, J. (2020) Understanding the effects of a large development sector on the labour market of a small low-income country: Evidence from Sierra Leone [PhD thesis], University of Oxford.

43 Interviews 8, 11, 12, 15, 19, 20, 23 & 31

44 Interview 15

45 Interviews 21–23, 29, 31, 35–37 & 40

46 Interview 36

47 Interviews 14, 17, 21–23, 35–37

48 Interview 17

Exploring opportunities for contextualised solutions: The scenarios






This section presents three scenarios (see Figure 4), each of which is informed by real experiences and based on a mix of the contextual factors outlined in the previous section. They offer opportunities to reflect on these dynamics, how they interact, and potential responses. Each scenario includes a rationale, a brief hypothetical context, and narratives from two perspectives. an analysis of the scenario's elements, and avenues for the actors to promote respectful recruitment. This is accompanied by an analysis that unpacks the different elements of the scenario and a series of opportunities that the actors could have considered to promote respectful recruitment.

In the scenarios and solutions, organisations are referred to as '**larger**' and '**smaller**.' This is intended to capture a range of experiences such as staff movement from a local to international organisation, from a smaller local/national organisation to a bigger national organisation, or from INGOs to UN agencies.






Guidance on using these scenarios for discussion or training is provided in Annex B.

Figure 4: The scenarios






Scenario 1: Lines get crossed in emergency response

-  Response phase: Immediate aftermath of sudden-onset disaster
-  High levels of funding
-  Limited existing relationships or trust between actors
-  Limited specialist experience in the labour market
-  Moderately strong civil society

Scenario 2: Prolonged response leads to constant cycle of recruitment

-  Response phase: Ongoing response in a protracted crisis
-  Stable levels of funding
-  Established relationships between actors
-  Weak labour market
-  Weak civil society

Scenario 3: Lack of respectful exit strategies as funding declines

-  Response phase: Long-term response and recovery
-  Low levels of funding
-  Established relationships between actors
-  Weak labour market
-  Weak civil society

SCENARIO 1: LINES GET CROSSED IN EMERGENCY RESPONSE

This scenario is informed by experiences shared across multiple contexts in the immediate aftermath of a disaster (0–6 months), when funding levels are high and there are limited existing relationships and opportunities for dialogue between actors. It reflects a context with an active civil society, but limited skills in humanitarian response.⁴⁹



Setting the scene: Disaster strikes context with limited existing humanitarian presence

A major earthquake and resulting tsunami strikes a small island nation, devastating multiple cities and regions and directly affecting hundreds of thousands of people. Sub-national government and local civil society mobilise as first responders; the government requests international assistance when it becomes apparent its national capacity will soon be overwhelmed. The existing humanitarian architecture consists of the national government, a few UN agency and INGO personnel, and diverse networks of local organisations undertaking development work. Civil society is diverse and active, and the labour market is relatively well developed, containing highly skilled individuals but few with experience in disaster response. The earthquake triggers a large influx of international funding; in the first two weeks, more than 20 new international organisations enter the country.



Experience of a larger organisation

I work for an INGO (one of few in the region) that has been active in this country for four years. We deliver programming through several local partners. After the earthquake, new INGOs and UN agencies arrived and attempted to recruit new staff, who understand the context, to implement their programming. Many of our national staff were approached because they have skills and knowledge that are rare in the local community.

⁴⁹ This scenario is predominantly informed by examples shared by stakeholders relating to the immediate aftermath of the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022, Beirut blast in Lebanon in 2020, Sulawesi earthquake and tsunami in Indonesia in 2018, and the onset of the Rohingya crisis in Bangladesh in 2017. While contextual factors and influences differ, examples were chosen to reflect shared characteristics of humanitarian response according to identified contributing factors and adapted to fit this narrative. The material was based largely on interviews 1, 6–14, 17, 20–25, 27, 28, 30, 36, 38 & 40.

In the first four weeks of the response, we lost four key technical staff to UN agencies. They were offered significantly higher salary and benefits packages, but had to leave us and join their new employer within one week. These national staff held critical contextual understanding and relationships with the communities that we relied on to deliver assistance effectively. With the short notice these staff gave and the ongoing emergency unfolding, we had no time to go through the proper recruitment process to replace them. Our organisation has a policy not to recruit staff from our local partners, but it is not monitored or enforced. My options were limited because it was an emergency, and we did not have anyone to fill the roles. I spoke privately to several staff of our local partners who I knew were very competent and offered them jobs on the spot; they accepted. I told them they would have significantly higher salaries, but I needed them to start in a week, otherwise I would have to offer the positions to others. I felt bad for pulling them away from their organisation, but what else could I do?



Experience of a smaller organisation

I am the director of a small local organisation. We have been operating in the region for eight years. My staff is only 15 people, all from the communities we serve; we also have 20 volunteers that help us deliver programming. We receive the majority of our funding through short term projects and have worked with INGOs in the past. After the earthquake and tsunami, one of our previous INGO partners approached us, and we agreed to work with them again. The project would provide just enough funding for me to pay my staff for the six-month contract.

Two weeks after we started the project, two of my senior staff told me that they were leaving to join our INGO partner. They had been offered more than double their current salary, but had to leave in a week or they would lose the job offer. I did not want to prevent them advancing their career and earning a fair wage, so I let them go – what else could I do? I immediately advertised the positions and started asking around, but the salaries I could offer were not competitive with those advertised by the new INGOs in town. My remaining staff did the best they could to take on the extra workload, but no one had the skills required to take over the senior positions completely. We were forced to delay the project while we recruited. This damaged the reputation with the community that we had spent years building and breached our agreement with our INGO partner.

It took me a month to fill the positions, but I had to hire candidates with no experience in humanitarian programming; they will need at least three months of training. A new INGO asked to partner with us to deliver programming, but I lacked the lead technical staff to take on the project, so I was unable to secure the funding.

Contextual assessment: What factors are at play?



Response phase: Immediate aftermath of sudden-onset disaster

This scenario illustrates a common example of unethical recruitment in the immediate aftermath of an emergency. Even with good intentions and policies in place, lines often get crossed and strategies to support local partners can easily be deprioritised. Larger and international organisations face this type of ethical dilemma when pressure from a donor or an unfolding emergency compels them to hire the best available people as quickly as possible.



High levels of funding

The scenario demonstrates a domino effect set in motion by a large influx of international funding and international actors who are under pressure to deliver numerous programs rapidly in a new context. High levels of funding generally means more and/or larger projects that require more staff and therefore more recruitment. This creates competition between organisations to secure funding and staff in a new context.



Limited existing relationships or trust between actors

The small pre-disaster humanitarian presence meant a lack of established relationships and trust between existing and newly arrived actors and little communication about recruitment. The partnership between the INGO and local organisation was on a short-term contract basis; there were no existing channels for communication or discussions about perceived repercussions.



Limited specialist experience in the labour market

Little humanitarian experience in the labour market and the pressing emergency meant that new actors entering the country were far more likely to recruit developed talent from existing organisations than to develop skills in entry-level employees.



Moderately strong civil society

Due to a relatively well-established local civil society and candidate pool, the local NGO was able to fill vacancies relatively quickly. However, the less developed skills and experience of the new staff necessitated lengthy and expensive training.

Context-specific strategies: How can we shift practice?

As is the case for most aspects of humanitarian response, the foundations of respectful recruitment are laid in advance of an emergency. It is the responsibility of established humanitarian actors to entrench ethical and respectful recruitment policies within HR teams and organisational culture, so that when disaster strikes they are the default. Actors must socialise and enforce these policies and eliminate opportunities to disregard them. Ensuring accountability is critical to success. In locations without a well-established and active humanitarian presence, building relationships and developing workforce capacity must also be considered.



OPPORTUNITIES

1. Larger organisations can invest in systems and processes to make respectful recruitment default practice.

International organisations should include respectful recruitment as part of their localisation strategies or action plans; this will mean balancing their needs with those of the broader humanitarian ecosystem and civil society. Leaders and managers can identify a point person in the HR team to work on respectful recruitment. HR processes to support ethical practice could include minimum notice of one month (only alterable through approval), and requiring the recruiting staff member to explain (in writing) how they are implementing ethical recruitment guidelines.

2. Organisations working in partnership can codify terms to reduce unethical or damaging recruitment.

Existing partnerships, frameworks and forums can be leveraged to encourage respectful recruitment. This includes aligning with national or sub-national government guidelines related to humanitarian recruitment and deployment. Create spaces for local and national organisations to discuss and define respectful recruitment practices appropriate to context that they can use to advocate to international organisations. Partnership agreements can include specific clauses to support respectful recruitment.

3. Donors can hold intermediaries accountable for respectful recruitment practice.

Donors have the ability to hold intermediaries accountable for respectful recruitment and incentivise positive practice. The best ways for donors to promote respectful recruitment may vary across programs, but they should develop a policy position on humanitarian recruitment and adapt it to the dynamics in their priority contexts. Techniques to realise their commitment can then be developed, such as including respectful recruitment in discussions with partners, allocating dedicated funds to offset the harm of staff movement, and requiring respectful recruitment approaches as annexes to contracts.

“ Donors have a huge responsibility [for respectful recruitment]. I don't know why they don't make changes. One line in a contract and everything would stop. (National actor, Ukraine)⁵⁰

4. Larger organisations can prioritise investment in long-term institutional partnerships to build trust and share capacity over time.

High levels of funding can allow increased funding to flow to local partners. Larger organisations can invest in long-term institutional partnerships that align with the Principles of Partnership to allow for two-way capacity exchange and support outside of direct project implementation.⁵¹ Increased focus on partnership and institutional strengthening can reduce staff movement. Larger organisations can support and work through local partners to deliver programming without needing to recruit additional staff for direct implementation.

“ We need to focus more and more on localisation and partnership to reduce staff movement – supporting staff in their local organisation, not stealing them to join internationals. (International actor, South Sudan)⁵²

5. Larger organisations and donors can support and strengthen national surge capacity.

Larger organisations can invest in building capacity in local and national organisations in advance of crises to reduce the need for a large international expansion of presence. The COVID-19 pandemic shifted the way that surge support is deployed and engaged, encouraging much greater reliance on local and national capacities.⁵³ These practices can be built on and expanded, including increasing peer-to-peer support to encourage knowledge sharing, disseminating requests for surge staff locally and regionally before internationally, and revising contracts and remuneration policies to facilitate deployments of nationals.⁵⁴

“ Alternatively, INGOs could step back from bidding on projects and prioritise supporting local organisations. Currently, consortium-based projects are being awarded more frequently, allowing local organisations to enhance their capacity in the process. (International actor, Bangladesh)⁵⁵

50 Interview 1

51 [Principles of Partnership](#), Endorsed by the Global Humanitarian Platform, 12 July 2007.

52 Interview 20

53 HAG (2022) Default to design: Shifting surge post pandemic.

54 Ibid.; ARC (2020) Local response in a global pandemic; HAG (2020), No turning back: Local leadership in Vanuatu response to Tropical Cyclone Harold; ARC & HAG (2020) Distance deployments: Australian Red Cross' experience with remote rapid response.

55 Interview 12

SCENARIO 2: PROLONGED RESPONSE LEADS TO CONSTANT CYCLE OF RECRUITMENT

This scenario was informed by experiences across several contexts in active conflicts and in ongoing crises lasting more than two years.⁵⁶ It reflects a weak labour market as large portions of the workforce evacuate the country, and civil society weakened by the prolonged and constant movement of staff. The humanitarian system is well established in this context, allowing opportunities for communication and partnerships but external factors continue to hinder these efforts.



Setting the scene: Protracted crisis creates shortage in the labour market

This country has suffered from ongoing conflict for more than three years. Intense fighting has displaced many people from their homes. Fighting between political factions has resulted in a collapse of government and an economic crisis. The country is also suffering from the impacts of climate change, including severe food and water insecurity.

Humanitarian actors have been active in the country for over a decade. When the conflict began, many new actors moved into the country and many new local organisations formed to aid the response. However, due to the economic crisis, many local organisations cannot afford to sustain their staff salaries and local staff are constantly looking to move to international organisations that can pay them in foreign currency. The remaining labour market is weak, because poor conditions in the country have caused many highly skilled and educated people to pursue better opportunities overseas. International organisations continue to seek out local partners to deliver programs to overcome access constraints, but local organisations struggle to take on new projects due to staff shortages and the constant need to recruit and train entry-level staff.



Experience of a larger organisation

I am the HR manager of an INGO that has been operating here for eight years. We work through several local partners and are committed to localisation. We just received new funding for a project in a region where there is ongoing fighting. We are looking to recruit a technical specialist with local knowledge and access to communities in this region to lead the project. As it is too dangerous to send our international staff to the region, this person will work directly with our local partner to implement programming. They may visit the field but primarily will be based in our office, which is outside the conflict zone.

⁵⁶ This scenario is informed by examples from Ukraine, Yemen, Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), South Sudan, Bangladesh and Myanmar. It draws mainly on examples of periods of conflict or political upheaval in a prolonged crisis. While contextual factors and influences are not the same across these contexts, examples were chosen to reflect shared characteristics in response according to identified contributing factors and adapted to fit this narrative. The material was based largely on interviews 1, 2, 6–14, 20, 24, 25, 27, 28, 30–32, 34 & 40.

We have an ethical recruitment policy and try to follow it as much as time and resources permit. We posted the job advertisement openly online, and received nearly 200 applications, but we could only consider those with at least five years of experience in humanitarian work and the specific technical training required for the new project, this allowed us to easily narrow down the candidate pool. We interviewed the five top applicants; our candidate had the most experience, acquired through working for a national NGO. I called his current employer for a reference check; she was surprised to learn this person was looking for other work and noted that her organisation would suffer significantly from losing him, but still gave him an excellent reference. I offered to do some technical capacity support for her organisation; she seemed interested, but I have not had time to follow up – things are so busy right now with this new project. We offered our new colleague the job on a six-month contract, paid in US dollars. He accepted, and we offered him the standard one-month notice period.



Experience of a smaller organisation

I am the director of a small national NGO. We have been operating here for 10 years. I have 25 staff. I have always tried to give my staff lots of training and education opportunities, but since the conflict started I have been recruiting new staff constantly – we are always operating with a 15% vacancy rate. There is less time and fewer resources to invest in staff. It seems as soon as they are trained they leave for a better position, and there is nothing I can do.

One of my senior staff had been with us for six years, and was critical to our programming in contested regions. One day I received a call from an INGO staff member asking for a reference for him; I had no idea he had applied for work elsewhere. When I asked him why he was leaving, he said he wanted an office role with less risk than the front line where he currently worked and with a higher salary that could provide for his family better; I would never stand in the way of that. The caller from the INGO had offered to provide technical capacity support, but this is not something we really need. I suggested another form of support, and he said he would get back to me, but I have not heard from him again.

We knew recruitment and training would take more than the one month notice period. I advertised the position and received over 200 applications, but few with much experience of humanitarian work, as is often the case. Our recruitment process includes long-listing, shortlisting, a written test, and interviews to narrow down the candidates. I made an offer to the best candidate, who met only 50% of the job requirements, but he turned it down because we could only pay the salary in the local currency. I had to re-interview; in the meantime, we began spreading the work over other staff, even though they had full roles already and different skills. I eventually selected the next best candidate, who only met 20% of the job requirements, but was the best I could find for the salary I could offer. It took me two months to fill the position; by this time my old staff member was long gone, and I had to train the new employee myself. I called the INGO about support in training my new employee, but no-one got back to me. It took more than six months of training before the new employee could meaningfully fill the role.

Contextual assessment: What factors are at play?



Response phase: Ongoing response in a protracted crisis

This scenario highlights the significant challenges that arise when political and economic crises and security concerns diminish smaller organisations' ability to retain staff. It demonstrates the stark gap between salary and benefit packages offered in national and international organisations, and shines a spotlight on the deep inequalities in the humanitarian system. It shows that even when international organisations implement and follow ethical recruitment guidelines, this is rarely enough to prevent harms.



Stable levels of funding

When funding is more stable, respondents indicated that attempts to intentionally 'poach' staff and mass exodus of personnel is less common than in the early stage of a response, when funding levels are high. Nonetheless, the gradual churn of humanitarian staff being trained by local and national organisations and moving on to bigger organisations as soon they develop valuable skills is constant and a source of great frustration.



Established relationships between actors

A well-established humanitarian sector and existing relationships in this scenario allowed for reasonable communication and even an offer of capacity support, but evidence suggests these promises often fall short of needed capacity exchange.



Weak labour market

Difficult conditions throughout the country led much of the skilled workforce to search for better jobs elsewhere or with international organisations that will eventually post them elsewhere. In this scenario, both the larger and smaller organisation posted the job advertisement openly and received similar numbers of applications. Many people seek jobs within the humanitarian sector because it has become one of the biggest employers in the country. However, the INGO had the luxury of narrowing down the pool to the few candidates with experience, while the smaller organisation was forced to go through a lengthy process and ultimately employ a less experienced person.



Weak civil society

Local organisations train staff, who then seek new opportunities with larger organisations. This weakens the fabric of local civil society. It also affects morale, creating additional incentives for people to move on. Many local and national respondents in these contexts reported a sense of apathy, feeling that this is the way things are and nothing can be done to improve the situation.

Context-specific strategies: How can we shift practice?

This scenario highlights the need to overcome longstanding perceptions that challenges associated with humanitarian staff recruitment in these contexts will never be resolved. When the labour market can offer few people with relevant skills or specialisations and local civil society has become weak, local actors' critical role in training and supporting new humanitarian staff must be recognised and resourced. Staff movement will continue to occur in these situations, but as the urgency of the onset of a crisis subsides, there is more time to collectively assess the problem and devise and trial new solutions.

OPPORTUNITIES

1. Organisations can come together to discuss what the key issues are and how they can collectively address them.

Create spaces for ongoing dialogue and collaboration between local, national and international actors, and donors on ways to improve recruitment practices. This may involve coordination forums or specific working groups to discuss HR and recruitment issues in a particular context. Opening channels of communication between local actors and donors will also help to elevate these issues. Actors must agree on shared goals and priorities for respectful recruitment to be able to build motivation and buy-in. Donors should engage in these discussions and support the rollout of agreed strategies.

“ We need to really open up the space and demand direct communication with donors, for the most part they are not aware [of these issues]. More direct communication and dialogue between local actors and donors could help come up with a solution. (International actor, Global HQ)⁵⁷

2. Meaningful long-term capacity development programs can be jointly designed and implemented.

Larger and smaller organisations can collaborate to design capacity development programs that benefit everyone. Larger organisations can support smaller organisations in organisational development, policy and strategy; smaller organisations can support larger organisations by sharing local knowledge and training them on local systems (not one-off training, but ongoing collaboration and support). Consider seconding staff between larger and smaller organisations as a way to transfer capacity without staff moving permanently.

“ They can work with us, if their experts can work with us then we can develop ourself; it's not training, it's a joint working approach. (National actor, Bangladesh)⁵⁸

3. Larger organisations can be more intentional in developing staff skills from the entry level.

Design and resource training programs for entry-level staff. Invest in training junior local staff to fulfil commitments to build national capacity. Training programs should enable new staff to fill vacated positions as they arise without needing to recruit top talent from elsewhere. Identify the critical skills needed across the team and implement specific and targeted programs to develop them as part of the recruitment process. Develop a pipeline of staff ready to fill positions as needed.

4. Donors can support a dedicated mechanism within country-based pooled funds (CBPF) that can be accessed by local and national organisations specifically to support recruitment, retention, and replacement of staff.

Donors must prioritise and resource strategies to support respectful recruitment. Utilising existing CBPFs to dedicate specific funds to support respectful recruitment strategies will allow organisations to progress these opportunities. These funds can be used to support the roll out of agreed strategies (as outlined above) and also to support smaller organisations to strengthen institutional capacity and cover additional costs associated with recruitment and training of new staff.

57 Interview 5

58 Interview 25

“ If donors allocate separate funds in the budget for organisational capacity development, then local organisations can utilise these funds to establish HR pools and enhance operational skills, among other things. (National actor, Bangladesh)⁵⁹

5. Smaller organisations can prioritise and invest in strengthening HR management systems.

If possible, smaller local and national organisations should invest in strengthening HR management systems. These processes can be supported by the CBPF and other forms of institutional support. This may include allocating increased resources to HR functions and the development and strengthening of existing institutional policy.⁶⁰

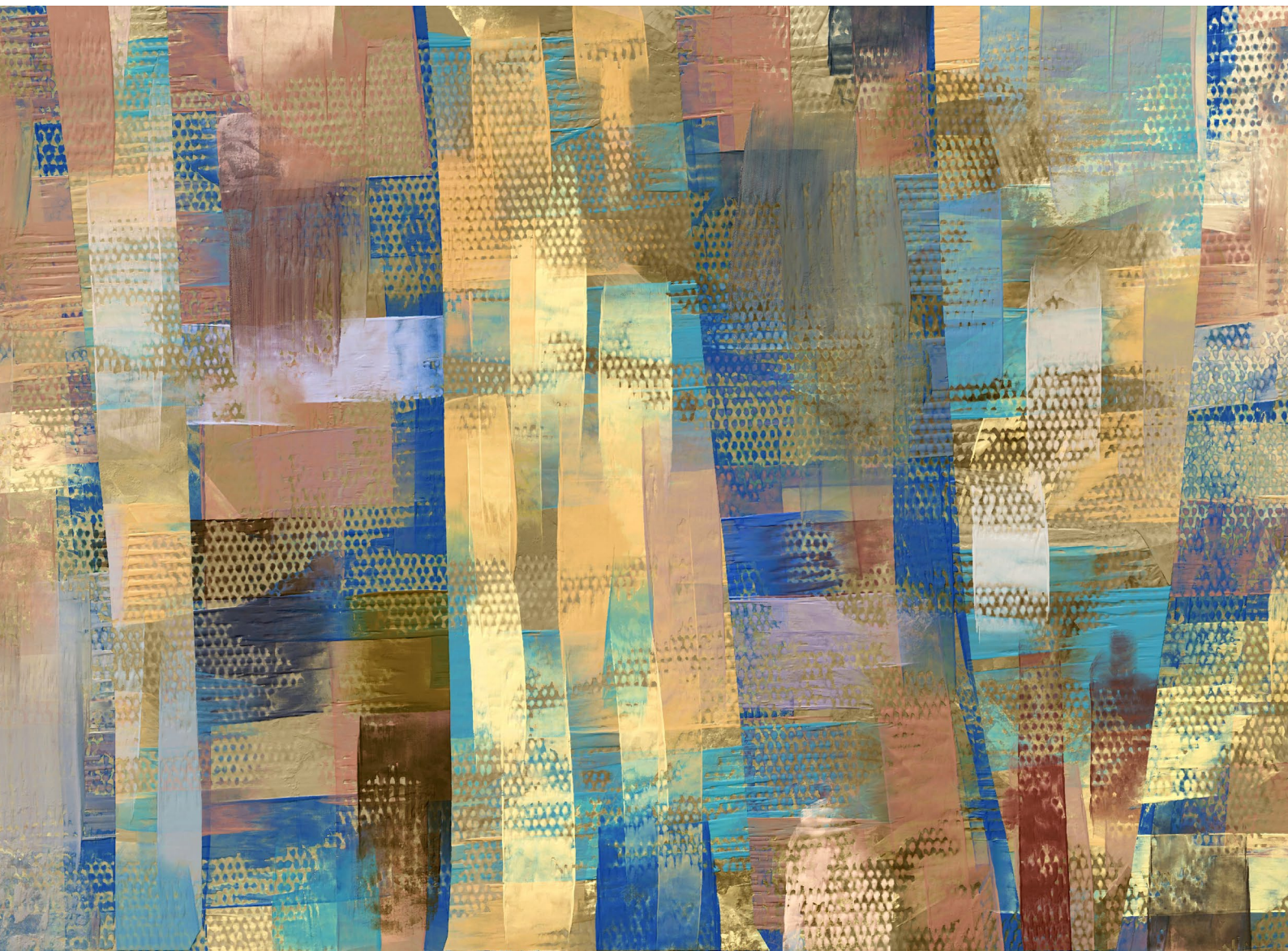
“ It’s not only about money, addressing the root causes of staff poaching is crucial. Focusing on creating an environment where staff members are content, valued, and have opportunities for professional growth can significantly reduce the appeal of leaving for other organisations. (National actor, Lebanon)⁶¹

59 Interview 11

60 For guidance on strengthening HR management systems, please see: CHS Alliance and Cornerstone Foundation (2022) [Human Resource Toolkit for Small and Medium Nonprofit Actors](#).

61 Interview 22

Photo: Shutterstock



SCENARIO 3: LACK OF RESPECTFUL EXIT STRATEGIES AS FUNDING DECLINES

In this scenario, funding has decreased significantly. It depicts a long-term recovery from a major disaster; however, this mix of contextual factors can also relate to other contexts in which funding is decreasing, including protracted crises. The impacts of long-term responses on civil society and the labour market can be similar, but impacts on smaller organisations can be more severe in contexts with limited funding. This scenario is informed by experiences across several contexts in crises lasting more than two years and their ongoing recovery phases.⁶²



Setting the scene: Decreased funding during recovery stages weakens civil society

Two years ago, several large urban areas and the surrounding countryside suffered widespread and severe flooding. The floods damaged houses, roads, bridges, infrastructure, and contaminated drinking water, including beyond the flood zone. The disaster triggered a huge international response and influx of donor funding. Two years later, thousands of people are still displaced from their homes and living in temporary shelters. Many infrastructure projects have stalled, and many people still lack access to clean drinking water.

International funding is beginning to dry up as donors move on to new emergencies. Many INGO and UN agencies are exiting the country, even though there is still much work to be done. They are taking with them many local staff recruited in earlier phases of the response, thereby draining national capacity. Many smaller local organisations are being forced to close permanently in the absence of funding.



Experience of a larger organisation

I work for an INGO that came to this country immediately after the floods two years ago. At the height of the response, we had 60 staff in country, including 20 international staff and 40 national staff recruited within the first six months of the emergency. Now we are down to only five staff in our country office; most of our organisation has moved on to other posts in other countries. We used to have at least five sources of donor funding; now we only have one. Those of us that remain are still implementing programming; there is still years of recovery work to do, and we are doing the best we can with the funding we have.

⁶² This scenario is informed by examples from Bangladesh, Lebanon, Yemen, DRC, South Sudan, and Myanmar. It draws mainly on examples which reference long-term recovery phases and scale downs of international support. While contextual factors and influences are not the same across these contexts, examples were chosen to reflect shared characteristics in long-term response and recovery phases according to identified contributing factors and adapted to fit this narrative. The material is based largely on interviews 2, 6–10, 13, 17, 19, 20–23, 25, 29, 31, 32 & 34.

We used to work through local partners as much as possible – most donors have localisation strategies that require it, and were providing enough funding that we had specific budget lines for support to local partners. Over the last year our funding has decreased significantly. Even our remaining donor provides less funding for the same amount of work. Often the first budget line to be cut is non-project-based support for local partners. Because of this, we have significantly scaled back our work with local partners; when we do work through them, we are only able to fund direct project staff – no overheads (etc.). We have had to revert to more direct implementation.

We are beginning a new project soon that requires local expertise that we no longer have internally. Many of the local partners we worked with previously have closed or are not available, and we don't have the time or resources to identify and perform due diligence on a new local partner. Instead, we advertised for a new local staff member. We won't be able to pay them much, but we can offer a salary in foreign currency, which should be very attractive. We received many applications, but not many qualified applicants. We ended up selecting someone who works for a nearby local NGO. We offered the standard one-month notice period, but he said he does not need it because his current employer is temporarily closed due to lack of funding.



Experience of a smaller organisation

I am the director of a small national NGO. We have been operating here since long before the floods. I have a staff of 20. I lost six key staff after the floods who moved on to roles with INGOs or UN agencies. I had to replace them with entry level staff, but I invested in them over time with increased funding from the disaster. After the chaos of the emergency began to settle in the first year, I made a significant effort to try to retain my remaining staff. I know that salaries and benefits are better in international organisations, but I offered flexible working hours, opportunities for remote work, family support, and education. I think these strategies were very helpful in retaining my staff.

Unfortunately, over the past year our funding has decreased significantly, and I can no longer afford to maintain these retention strategies. There are fewer opportunities to secure new funding and projects, because many INGOs are now implementing directly. I struggle even to pay my staff; many of them have moved on to better opportunities. We had to close for three months between projects because I could not afford to pay salaries. When I was finally able to find a small amount of new funding, I called my senior staff back to take on the project, but one had taken a new job with a nearby INGO. I could not be upset – I understood why it was necessary, but I no longer had staff who could replace him. I started the recruitment process but received very few qualified applicants. I identified one candidate that could potentially fulfil the role, but I did not have the funding to pay her sufficiently, so she declined my offer. To secure the funding and be able to pay my remaining staff, I had to fill the gap in programming myself. I took no salary as director during this time, because the funding only covered program costs. When the project finished, I was forced to close again until we could secure new funding.

Contextual assessment: What factors are at play?



Response phase: Long-term response and recovery

This scenario depicts the unfortunate reality that many humanitarian contexts face as international attention wanes and funding begins to dry up in long-term responses and recovery phases. Local humanitarian actors inevitably suffer when funding begins to dwindle, but strategies can be put in place to mitigate the harms.



Low levels of funding

In this example, decreased funding resulted in decreased support to local actors and some INGOs reverting to direct implementation. This can lead to increased recruiting of local staff rather than working in partnership. Smaller organisations are unable to cover overhead or administration costs and bid on new projects.



Established relationships between actors

Long-term response generally creates an interconnected and resilient humanitarian system. However, decreases in funding can damage trust between organisations and weaken or end existing partnerships, limiting opportunities for open dialogue and collaboration on recruitment issues.



Weak labour market

In this scenario, the decrease in funding led to a significant drain on national capacity as skilled national humanitarian staff left the country with international organisations or to pursue other opportunities. This, of course, is not always the case; many national staff are let go when their contracts end. However, there is scant evidence of national staff who have worked for international agencies returning to national organisations.



Weak civil society

This scenario highlights an example of local civil society being strong enough to withstand impacts immediately after an emergency but less so over time due to lack of funds, which forces many small organisations to close permanently.

Context specific strategies: How can we shift practice?

Strategies and default systems must be implemented to prevent the breakdown of partnerships and the erosion of local civil society as humanitarian funding decreases. Donors must hold intermediaries accountable for funds transferred to local partners. Humanitarian exit strategies must be considered from the onset of a crisis to reduce the significant drain on national capacity that often occurs as international humanitarian organisations leave the country.

OPPORTUNITIES

1. Larger organisations can collaborate with national and local organisations to develop exit strategies that considering downsizing and staff strategies.

Exit strategies should be considered from the onset of a crisis to ensure the system remains intact after international actors leave the context. Implement strategies that encourage national staff to return to national organisations to continue the work that they are doing. Consider seconding staff to smaller organisations in the months before exiting to share capacity and enable smaller organisations to take over ongoing programming.

“ We need to take a moment to pause and think about the system we want to build. It’s never done. Let’s talk about what sort of system do we need to leave behind when we leave in five years’ time. (International actor, Global HQ)⁶³

2. Donors can hold intermediaries accountable to their commitment to transfer 25% of funding to local partners.

Donors must reinvigorate momentum behind the push for 25% of funding delivered as directly as possible to local and national actors, as per the Grand Bargain.⁶⁴ Intermediaries must be held accountable to these commitments regardless of funding levels. In the lead-up to downsizing and exit strategies, the percentage of funding transferred to local and national partners should (ideally) increase to enable them to reabsorb staff and sustain recovery.

3. Dedicated funds from CBPFs can be used to support national systems to develop humanitarian capacity.

In contexts where there is a shortage in the labour market and high demand for humanitarian staff, CBPF funds dedicated to respectful recruitment can be used to develop humanitarian training programs for job seekers. After training is completed, candidates can be listed on a humanitarian HR database.

“ It should be dealt with by the market, if there is demand for humanitarians, local HR organisations should be activated and make a database or pool for that [...] it’s not one organisation’s responsibility, it’s systemic work. (National actor, Bangladesh)⁶⁵

4. Document and share best practice.

The importance of sharing good practice spans all scenarios and stages of response, but there may be more time for reflection as a response scales down. Before and after the emergency response phase, embed respectful recruitment goals within your organisations’ monitoring, evaluation, accountability and learning practices. Measure and document the impact of your recruitment practices as well as what you have tried to do differently. Share your insights internally and externally so that learning can be applied across contexts or among organisations within contexts. This documentation should include the perspectives of national and local organisations that your recruitment practices may have affected.

63 Interview 3

64 IASC (2023) [Grand Bargain beyond 2023](#).

65 Interview 25

Working together towards respectful recruitment

The fresh approach that is needed is contingent on actors being able to come together to undertake a collaborative assessment of the contextual factors that are influencing recruitment practice and the realistic opportunities to meet these challenges. Global conversations and initiatives are important in driving attention to the issue but are not enough, on their own, to produce meaningful change on the ground. Global actors and donors have the ability to create spaces for these conversations and to incentivise commitments, but the process must be driven from actors operating in the context.

The best way to understand the dynamics shaping recruitment may take different forms according to context and circumstance. However, what is needed across the board is the motivation and incentive to tackle these issues. Donors and operational actors, particularly those in intermediary roles, must come together to understand **why** this is important – to unite behind the shared goal to leave a healthy system behind when international actors exit. Organisations must think beyond the short-term needs of their individual organisation to see the bigger picture beyond their exit strategy.

Existing commitments to ethical recruitment guidelines and practice can become a cornerstone of achieving respectful recruitment processes. In turn, respectful recruitment can be part of a larger conversation about how the humanitarian sector can better support local actors and systems. Respectful recruitment must be embedded into organisational policy and culture. Commitments to localisation and building local and national capacity must consider respectful recruitment as a priority in delivering effective support. If these issues can be elevated, there will be greater opportunity and motivation to come together to develop context specific solutions.

Encouraging context specific strategies does not invite piecemeal and ad hoc solutions with no accountability. Rather it requires decision-makers and donors to incentivise these processes and create a shared vision for why this is important. They must create an enabling environment for operational actors to champion this cause and drive change on the ground.

Recommendations to support respectful recruitment

The opportunities presented under each scenario reflect the mix of contextual factors presented in each narrative. They are presented this way to highlight how certain contextual factors may prioritise some strategies over others, but it does not mean that they **only** apply to that particular mix of factors. For example, commitment to ethical recruitment practice is not **only** applicable in sudden-onset situations when funding is high; however, evidence suggests that this is when it is the most urgent.

Recommendations draw on the opportunities from all scenarios presented in the previous section, and are adapted to specific actor groups. Most recommendations outline action larger intermediary organisations can take to shift recruitment practice. These are further disaggregated by team function to clarify roles and responsibilities, and to reiterate the importance of respectful recruitment being prioritised across the whole organisation.

Recommendations for donors focus on holding intermediaries accountable for and incentivising improved recruitment practice. These are followed by recommendations for smaller local and national organisations that focus primarily on collective advocacy. They do not seek to limit the agency of smaller organisations, but place the onus of responsibility on larger organisations to help mitigate negative impacts. It is outside the scope of this research to provide targeted interventions or advice for developing or strengthening HR policy and management strategies; guidance on these topics can be found [here](#).

Below is a summary of actions that different actors can take to contribute to respectful recruitment, with the understanding that solutions may need to be adapted according to contextual factors.



Larger organisations and intermediaries

Country Directors and leadership teams

- Prioritise ongoing dialogue and collaboration with all actors to understand the contextual factors that influence recruitment practice and develop strategies for respectful recruitment in context.
- Ensure that respectful recruitment is embedded in organisational policy, human resources (HR) procedures, localisation strategies and M&E frameworks.
- Make a senior manager responsible for raising awareness and monitoring respectful recruitment strategies and approaches.
- Prioritise investment in long-term institutional partnerships with local actors to build trust and share capacity over time.
- Increase the percentage of funds allocated to local partners when transitioning out of context to enable them to attract and retain high-level staff.

Program teams

- Prioritise respectful recruitment in program design and staffing.
- Jointly develop and implement long-term capacity development programs with partners and local actors.
- Invest in supporting national surge capacity through peer-to-peer capacity exchange or secondments and supporting local and national surge mechanisms.
- Collaborate with local actors to develop respectful exit strategies to maintain a healthy local humanitarian system.

HR teams

- Update and socialise recruitment policy and procedure that includes respectful recruitment.
- Align recruitment processes with national policy, regulations and mechanisms.
- Work with local partners to codify terms to reduce unethical or damaging recruitment practice.
- Support local partners to develop HR and institutional capacity by providing resources and training.
- Develop and resource training programs for entry-level local staff.
- Document and share best practice in respectful recruitment.



Donors

- Incentivise and engage in proactive conversations at the country level about contextual factors shaping staff movement, and develop strategies for respectful recruitment.
- Incorporate respectful recruitment in donor localisation strategies and policies. Hold intermediaries to their commitments and to follow-up and implementation.
- Include respectful recruitment in conversations with partners to raise its profile.
- Hold intermediaries accountable to the Grand Bargain commitment to transfer 25% of funding to local partners.
- Incentivise increased funding to local partners when international organisations are exiting.
- Support pooled fund initiatives to promote respectful recruitment.



Smaller local and national organisations

- Establish forums for collective advocacy (e.g. through consortia or single-issue coalitions).
- Collaborate with all actors to identify the contextual factors that influence recruitment practice and develop strategies for respectful recruitment.
- Include clauses in partnership contracts to reduce unethical or damaging recruitment.
- Support and participate in mechanisms to strengthen national surge capacity.
- Collaborate with international and intermediary organisations to organise capacity exchange.
- Collaborate with large humanitarian organisations to develop exit strategies that include a respectful transition.
- Invest in strengthening HR systems.
- Collectively advocate that national governments and actors create a mechanism to develop the humanitarian capacity of job seekers.
- Document and share best practice in respectful recruitment.

CONCLUSION

This report uses scenarios to demonstrate that there is no one-size-fits-all solution to recruitment challenges in the humanitarian sector. However, common lessons and findings can be drawn across all contexts. Ethical dilemmas associated with recruitment practice are entrenched in the humanitarian sector. Respect in recruitment decisions (i.e. considering negative impacts on local actors) can be overpowered by urgent programming needs, donor commitments, and competition to hire the best people to secure funding. The nuance and complexity of these dilemmas present significant barriers to implementation of respectful recruitment practice and underscores why recruitment issues have prevailed in the sector for so long.

Human resource management and policy can easily be deprioritised in humanitarian contexts. HR teams in humanitarian organisations often lack power and influence to mandate and monitor respectful recruitment, and hiring decisions are often program driven. As such, change cannot be led by HR teams alone, but must be prioritised by leadership in strategy and decision-making and incorporated across the work of programmatic and operational teams.

Effective solutions will require collaboration and collective action across all levels. Achieving respectful recruitment will require the sector to unite behind the long-term goal of maintaining and strengthening the humanitarian system, not only for the next few years, but for the foreseeable future. If the sector is genuine in its commitments to shift power to local actors and support the localisation of humanitarian response, it must find better ways to more holistically support local and national organisations to take the lead.

The impacts of staff movement for local and national organisations are increasingly apparent, but top-down approaches are not creating meaningful change. Global initiatives, donors and INGO HQs have the ability to increase momentum, elevate the issues, and incentivise change, but meaningful solutions must be developed from the ground up. Actors must come together to prioritise and support contextualised and localised approaches to respectful recruitment, considering the full range of influences, impacts and mitigating actions.

Annex A. Ethical recruitment guidelines

Ethical recruitment guidelines typically focus on ensuring that all candidates for roles are treated in a fair, equal, respectful and confidential manner. Guidelines have been developed and adapted by various international organisations, and include many of the recommendations presented below (adapted from the START Network's TSCP, which proposed sector-wide ethical guidelines in 2017).

1. **Widen the pool of candidates** both internally and externally. While traditional 'advertising' may not always be possible, avoid relying on word of mouth.
2. **Be transparent about recruitment decisions.** Processes and decisions should be documented and shared with relevant parties.
3. **Employ multiple selection methods.** Interviews should cover the approaches, behaviours and attitudes of candidates as well as their technical skills and ability to deliver. Additional methodologies might include written tests, practice exercises, etc.
4. **Check references thoroughly.** Standard practice requires two references; at minimum, one reference check must be conducted. Other checks may be necessary (e.g. police, child protection, anti-terrorism).
5. **Be mindful of legal requirements and obligations of NGOs in context.** Any legal requirements in country, including registration as an employer, should be adhered to with regard to recruitment practices, but the relevant ministry may also specify obligations for INGOs (e.g. a government representative on every interview panel).
6. **Respect notice periods of other organisations.** Do not pressure new staff to start as soon as possible and disregard their notice periods.
7. **Avoid 'poaching from other organisations and support national organisations to fill gaps.** National staff should not be headhunted. When a staff member from a national organisation is offered a position, recruiters should consider opportunities for secondment or to provide additional support to the organisation losing staff.
8. **Develop an ethical recruitment policy.** Organisations should have a publicly available statement that confirms their stance on ethical recruitment. This should guide humanitarian response recruiters and ensure candidates are aware of the recruitment practices the organisation will follow.⁶⁶

66 Adapted from START Network's TSCP sector wide standards for ethical recruitment guidelines, published in 2017.

Ethical recruitment principles endorsed in Ukraine

National guidelines proposed in Ukraine exemplify how these broad commitments can be contextualised according to current practices and prevalent challenges. Guidelines endorsed by the HCT in Ukraine include commitments to:

- Post job vacancies openly and receive applications through official channels.
- Give preference to regular contracts.
- Coordinate transparently with relevant parties throughout the recruitment process and respect existing notice periods.
- Include specific provisions in partnership agreements that limit partner staff movement to the sub-contracting organisations.
- Ensure HR teams are aware of this issue and the ethical recruitment principles.
- Facilitate recruitment in a way that does not undermine the capacity of other organisations.

Ukrainian guidelines also include commitments to **AVOID**:

- Use of aggressive headhunting practices
- Depletion of senior management and technical staff of another organisation during a recruitment process.
- Dissemination of recruitment advertisements via private emails or mailing lists of coordination forums, clusters, or technical working groups.
- Imposition of caps on the salary scales of partner organisations.

Annex B. Using the scenarios: Activity guide

Organisations or groups looking to explore opportunities for respectful recruitment may wish to use the scenarios in this paper as a training tool or prompt for discussion. This section offers some guidance for doing so.

Step 1: Tell participants why it matters

Awareness of this issue varies across organisations and roles within them. You may wish to provide some brief materials to frame your discussion. What is most helpful will vary, but here are some ideas:

- Gather some experiences from your own organisation that illustrate the challenges and their importance
- Select some statistics or examples from the 'big picture' section (pages 6-9) to illustrate the issue
- Share the definition of 'respectful recruitment' (Box 1, page 2).

Your existing organisational practice might be relevant here too. Are commitments related to respectful recruitment already part of your organisation's strategy? Is there a policy you would like people to be familiar with before the discussion? Priming people so that they have the organisational context in mind can help them to see the connections with their work and motivate participation.

Step 2: Share the scenarios you wish to discuss

Participants should have the information in the boxes that sets the scene for each scenario, as well as the narratives from different perspectives. For the purposes of the discussion, it may be more effective not to share the contextual assessment or strategies that accompany them until after you have explored participants' own reactions to each scenario.

Step 3: Discuss

Below are some questions that can be used to guide discussions about the scenarios. You may wish to adapt them for your purposes.

Questions to help you explore the scenario:

- What external factors are influencing the actions in this scenario (i.e. what contextual factors outside of each organisations' control are influencing the circumstances)?
- What internal factors are influencing decision-making in this scenario (i.e. how is organisational policy, culture, etc. affecting the decisions of the person in this scenario)?
- What triggered or led to poor recruitment practices? How could this have been handled differently?
- What are the short- and long-term implications of poor practices for both the larger and smaller organisation? How might this affect support to affected communities?
- How is this scenario similar or different to your own experience?

Questions to help you reflect on your own organisational practice and develop strategies for respectful recruitment:

- What external factors influence recruitment practice in our context? How can we improve management of the implications of contextual factors?
- What internal factors influence decision-making in our organisation? What systems or processes need to be developed or strengthened to support respectful recruitment? What steps and resources are needed to achieve this?
- If faced with a situation similar to this scenario, how could we respond in a way that prioritised respectful practice? What support or resources would we need to take this approach?
- How can we hold ourselves accountable for respectful recruitment?
- How can we encourage others in the sector and in our context to prioritise respectful recruitment?
- What steps can we take to better support local partners, considering the impacts of staff movement?

Step 4: Compare

Give participants the contextual analysis and strategies that accompany the scenario you are discussing. Comparison between these and the ideas or issues raised by participants can underpin the next phase of discussion. For example:

- How does the contextual analysis of the scenario relate to the contextual factors in our context? How are they similar? How are they different?
- How do our proposed solutions compare to those identified in the scenario? How are they similar? How are they different? Why?
- How can we adapt the solutions presented with the scenario to our context?
- Considering the solutions presented with the scenario and those proposed in your earlier discussion, what are three priority areas on which our organisation should focus?

Step 5: Identify action points

Your group may wish to identify action points to take these issues forward. This will include identifying priority areas and developing action plans to shift practice, and processes for monitoring and evaluating the outcomes.

Please feel free to share your experiences and feedback with us. We are always pleased to receive feedback and hear how our research has been used.

For more information about this research or support in embedding respectful recruitment practice in your organisation, please contact the research team at:

Jesse McCommon at jmcccommon@hag.org.au

Eranda Wijewickrama at eranda@hag.org.au