Supporting Local and National Responders During Covid-19 and Beyond

- Covid-19 has given rise to an increased reliance on local and national non-governmental organisations (LNNGOs) in humanitarian response; in doing so, it has evidenced that locally-rooted response is more effective, efficient and sustainable
- Covid-19 has exposed systemic flaws but also gives rise to important lessons for improving support for LNNGOs
- There is momentum for systemic change, but this is contingent on Grand Bargain signatories honouring their localisation commitments by improving funding structures

SETTING THE CONTEXT

The Covid-19 pandemic has inflicted an unprecedented shock to the entire humanitarian system, challenging existing operating structures. International mobility was significantly impacted, resulting in broken supply chains. International organisations (UN agencies, INGOs) based in-country predominantly resorted to remote working. This has given rise to an increased reliance on local and national non-governmental organisations (LNNGOs), both for responding to the impacts of Covid-19 and existing humanitarian crises.

The purpose of this policy brief is to illustrate that the Covid-19 pandemic offers valuable lessons for Grand Bargain signatories to improve support and funding to LNNGOs. The lessons reflect both opportunities to leverage and gaps to address. The impacts of Covid-19 are still evolving, and the pandemic has exacerbated humanitarian crises and vulnerabilities. It is therefore urgent that Grand Bargain signatories strive to honour their localisation commitments to provide “more support and funding tools” to the frontline responders on the ground, to ensure vulnerable populations are protected.

1 https://gblocalisation.ifrc.org/grand-bargain-localisation-workstream-2/
METHODS

The findings and recommendations presented in this brief are based on primary data collected from interviews with 20 local and national non-governmental organisations (LNNGOs) based in South Sudan, Bangladesh and Uganda. Due to the mobility restrictions of the pandemic, interviews were conducted online between March and May 2021. The research aimed to obtain a comprehensive understanding of the operating context and challenges faced from the ground during Covid-19; from countries facing different humanitarian crises. Senior members of local and national humanitarian forums were purposively approached for the research. Despite the small sample of interview participants, the research is therefore likely to represent the experiences of affiliate LNNGOs from the forums too. All participants are endorsers of the Charter4Change. This is a network of NGOs composed of international signatories and local endorsers, committed to ensuring the localisation ambitions expressed at the 2016 World Humanitarian Summit are realised. This includes several Grand Bargain signatories. Finally, a survey was disseminated to the INGO signatories to ascertain an international perspective on wider systemic trends, which received 9 responses.

RESULTS

Funding allocations do not reflect the increased reliance on LNNGOs during the pandemic

The Global Humanitarian Response Plan for Covid-19 (GHRP) explicitly states that “whenever they are best placed to respond, this funding should be allocated as directly as possible to local and national actors”\(^2\). However, in practice there was a continued systematic preference towards UN agencies and INGOs. LNNGOs experienced significant challenges to access the direct funding mechanisms. For example, the South Sudan Humanitarian Fund (SSHF) was identified as an instrumental tool for LNNGOs to obtain funding during Covid-19. However, only a very small minority of LNNGOs have access to this mechanism. Several interview participants expressed frustration at approval criteria that exclude smaller organisations from gaining access, and identified competition for funds with international organisations as a barrier.

The majority of LNNGOs across all three countries rely on intermediary international organisations as their primary channel for funding. This dependency was exacerbated by the pandemic. Across all three countries, international partners have been perceived to favour larger and more established LNNGOs. Funds have also been diverted to health-partners. Consequently, this has reduced funding for many smaller organisations, despite their instrumental access to communities. As a result, many LNNGOs have been subject to closures or laying-off staff. This has significant repercussions on humanitarian response. At a time where mainly

\(^2\) UNOCHA, 2020, p.38
LNNGOs are able to remain on the ground, vital links with vulnerable communities have been severed because organisations cannot afford to keep operating. Covid-19 has therefore exposed that humanitarian funding remains concentrated in the hands of the actors who are not on the ground. This has reiterated the importance of questions pertaining to the distribution of funding based on the comparative advantage of different actors in the sector.

**Technology is both a barrier and an opportunity**

Covid-19 has shifted a lot of coordination and planning to an online environment. Several organisations in Uganda and Bangladesh highlighted this as an opportunity to become more involved in decision-making and supported in partnerships. Participants from all three countries shared positive stories of being invited to multi-stakeholder fora to share insights with international partners. Many therefore regard this as a positive development; resulting in increased recognition and visibility of local response efforts. Most importantly, this has established a better baseline to engage in complementary and equitable partnerships, and improved direct access to donors.

However, increased reliance on technology has also exposed challenges. Adapting to the online environment presented additional costs due to extra data, call-time and communication software. Many LNNGOs struggled to adapt because they did not have the resources available. This issue stems from the project-based funding trend which prevents LNNGOs from investing in infrastructure development.

**Local solutions are essential for effectiveness and sustainability**

Covid-19 has illustrated the strength and value of local forums and networks. In order to make humanitarian response more accountable to the needs of vulnerable populations, these networks need to be recognised for their strategic advantages. Local NGO forums were frequently branded as an efficient response mechanism rooted in the local contexts. They have been essential for LNNGOs to adapt to the strained funding environment previously described. In Bangladesh and Uganda, LNNGOs came together to pool resources and join consortiums to manoeuvre these obstacles. This shows how local actors were able to adapt in spite of the wider systemic funding weaknesses. Furthermore, the forums offered an opportunity to collaborative, share lessons and mobilise collectively to strengthen response. In contrast, South Sudanese LNNGOs generally regarded international actors as gatekeepers facilitating access to engage in response. This does not dispel the significance of local networks in South Sudan. Instead, it highlights that contexts that had strong collaboration platforms between LNNGOs pre-Covid were able to leverage these as an instrumental tool for Covid-19 response. The pre-existing ‘localisation’ pathways were another key factor impacting the response, which is significantly different between the three contexts.

Informal networks have also been integral during Covid-19. LNNGOs adapted to Covid-19 restrictions by disseminating sensitisation campaigns and risk communication strategies via community leaders, religious leaders and other local structures. This is a testament to the strategic advantage of LNNGOs due to their proximity to vulnerable communities.
and understanding of their contexts. The pandemic also amplified the desire to foster more sustainable solutions going forward. This includes prioritising local leadership and alternative resource mobilisation to improve resilience. Despite representing three very different humanitarian contexts, all three countries echoed this trend.

**Covid-19 can be leveraged as a catalyst for change**

INGOs who responded to the survey echoed a clear message; Covid-19 has evidenced the urgent need for systemic transformation. The crucial priority needs to be improving the effectiveness of response by better supporting local responders. For example, seven of nine INGOs stated that Covid-19 will be a catalyst for speeding up localisation progress.

One INGO stated that Covid-19 has “provided critical proof of why localised aid is more effective, efficient and sustainable”. However, several respondents cautioned the need to ensure the positive shifts promoting local response are not temporary. They caveated that continued progress requires institutional support from international mechanisms; most urgently, addressing structural funding barriers. Reflecting on the systemic weaknesses exposed by Covid-19, one respondent stated that “the humanitarian system is built in reverse”. The message was clear; if the Grand Bargain Localisation reform agenda is to materialise, its signatories need to leverage the momentum from Covid-19 to translate commitments into practice.

*“The humanitarian system is built in reverse”*

**LESSONS FOR GRAND BARGAIN SIGNATORIES**

**Inclusive dialogue is needed to identify solutions to systemic funding issues.** Covid-19 has evidenced that LNNGOs do not have equitable access to direct funding. For the Grand Bargain localisation agenda to be realised, it is pivotal that signatories translate commitments into practice. Funding instruments intended for LNNGOs, such as pooled funding, need to become more accessible. This will require inclusive multi-stakeholder dialogue between LNNGOs, donors, UN agencies, and INGOs. ‘Localisation’ of traditional humanitarian aid cannot be achieved if the actors along the entire aid-chain are not involved in designing its solutions.

Similarly, the quality of funding channelled through intermediaries needs to be improved. The current project-based trends generate an unsustainable dependency dynamic. There needs to be open and inclusive discussions on how to counter this.

**It is time to shift the institutional discourse away from capacity-building to mutual capacity-strengthening.** Covid-19 has evidenced the inherent flaws to the institutional mindset that frames local actors as needing ‘capacity-building’. The Covid-19 operating context has evidenced that LNNGOs have capacity to lead efficient response. At an unparalleled scale, it had evidenced their comparative advantage when it comes to trust of the
communities they are based in, and understand how to adapt interventions to cater to local needs. As actors at the top of the aid-chain, Grand Bargain signatories have a responsibility to reflect this in policies and practice. Capacity should not merely be framed in terms of financial and administrative terms as frequently stipulated in due diligence requirements. Instead, there needs to be recognition of comparative advantages on both sides to leverage complementary and equitable partnerships. Simultaneously, Grand Bargain signatories need to adhere to their commitments to strengthen risk-management and technical systems of local partners where required.

**Keep up direct dialogue between donors and local responders!** The remote working forced novel adaptations that should be leveraged going forward. The complementarity of partnerships becomes strengthened through multi-stakeholder dialogues between donors, international partners, and local responders. It fosters more equitable partnerships. LNNGO inclusion in decision-making improves the programme quality by more accurately reflecting local operating context and needs.

**Grand Bargain signatories must actively support the drive towards more sustainable and resilient humanitarian response.** Respect for local institutions needs to inform future policy planning. Grand Bargain signatories have an important role to play here by promoting complementary partnerships. This will help facilitate a shift away from the current dependency culture by ensuring LNNGOs have more agency over response.

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Please note, this brief stems from a Master’s thesis research project.