

TURNING THE HUMANITARIAN SYSTEM ON ITS HEAD

Saving lives and livelihoods by strengthening local capacity and shifting leadership to local actors

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The global humanitarian system is overstretched, investing inadequately in risk reduction and prevention, and providing assistance that is often insufficient, inappropriate, and late. Humanitarian action led by governments in crisis-affected countries, assisted and held accountable by civil society, is usually faster and more appropriate, saving more lives and alleviating the suffering of many more men, women, and children. Yet, during 2007–2013, less than 2 percent of annual humanitarian assistance went directly to local actors. This system must change, with locally led humanitarian action whenever possible; adequate funding to state and non-state actors in affected countries; and stronger partnerships between international and local actors, focusing on strengthening local capacity.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

WHAT'S WRONG?

The current humanitarian system—led by the United Nations, funded largely by a handful of rich countries, and managed almost always by those actors, large international non-governmental organizations (including Oxfam), and the Red Cross/Red Crescent movement—has saved countless lives over the past 50 years. Moreover, it has done so with relatively little funding: less than what the world's major donors spend on subsidies to their farmers. Yet despite the best of intentions and efforts to reform, our global humanitarian system is overstretched. While many of the reasons are not due to the humanitarian system itself, too little is invested in disaster risk reduction and prevention, by both humanitarian and development actors, and assistance is often insufficient, inappropriate, and late. Simply put, we are not saving as many lives as we could. Further, the need for humanitarian assistance will only increase, given the trend toward more frequent and destructive disasters from natural hazards. The risks are higher for low-income people and communities in all countries.

In many cases, especially in smaller crises, humanitarian response that is conducted and led by local people and organizations—governments in countries affected by crises, assisted and held accountable by local civil societies—is faster and often more appropriate, and thus saves more lives. Local and national actors are almost always the first responders to sudden-onset crises (e.g., earthquakes and flash floods) and often the only responders in the critical hours immediately following a disaster. In situations of armed conflict, as in Sudan and Syria, only locals may be allowed access to those needing assistance. Local actors most likely understand the context on the ground better than even the best-prepared international organizations. For this reason, local actors usually are best placed to identify and address the particular needs of men and women, especially if there is meaningful representation of and leadership by women. Because local actors are assisting their families, friends, and fellow citizens, and because they remain in the community when the international humanitarian response ends, they tend to be more accountable to affected populations. Also, shifting the center of preparedness and response to the national and local level puts responsibility, decision making, and power where it should be: in the hands of the people affected most by crisis.

States have a duty to respect, protect, facilitate, and fulfill the rights of their citizens, and thus should have the primary role in both humanitarian preparedness and response. This is particularly the case with small- and medium-size, localized crises, which account for the vast majority of people affected by crises. Pushing for greater leadership by the actors in affected countries puts even greater pressure on them to fulfill their responsibilities by shifting the default leadership from the international system to national governments and by ensuring that civil society in those countries has the capacity and space to hold their governments to account.

Local humanitarian leadership is certainly not a panacea and is not always prudent or possible. There are, and will continue to be, governments that are unwilling to lead humanitarian efforts, or to do so in a responsible, equitable manner, and governments that are party to conflicts and cannot be trusted to protect all of their citizens; while beyond the focus of this report, holding governments accountable on protection and assistance issues is a critical task that is primarily the role of political actors and the UN Security Council, rather than humanitarian actors. There will also continue to be mega-crises to which no one country can respond alone and crises that render the local government and people unable to lead response efforts, particularly immediately after a crisis. But even in those instances, the international community should change its

modus operandi so that it looks first to see the existing capacity on the ground, in state entities (including subnational entities) and civil society, before taking the lead in humanitarian action or steamrolling over existing local capacity. If leadership by international actors is necessary, they should devote resources to supporting and developing local capacity in parallel to delivering the response.

In order to be able to conduct and lead disaster risk reduction, preparedness, and response efforts in their countries, local actors—governmental and non-governmental—need funds and sufficient capacity, including technical capacity (e.g., water and sanitation, shelter, humanitarian principles and standards), capacity on cross-cutting issues such as ensuring gender awareness and equity and monitoring and evaluation, and organizational capacity (e.g., financial and human resources systems). Nonetheless, Oxfam research has found that remarkably little humanitarian assistance goes directly to national and local actors in crisis-affected countries. Between 2007 and 2013, the resources provided directly to these actors averaged less than 2 percent of total annual humanitarian assistance. While that figure appears to have increased somewhat in 2014 to 3.2 percent, the percentage of direct funding to local NGOs appears to have actually decreased. Moreover, when international actors do provide direct funding to local actors, they frequently treat them not as true partners but as sub-contractors who are carrying out plans designed by the international actors with little ownership themselves.

WHO'S WRONG?

Despite increasing rhetoric about supporting local actors, the principal donors, the United Nations, the biggest international nongovernmental organizations (including Oxfam), and the Red Cross/Red Crescent movement provide too few resources directly to local state and civil society actors. The quality of their assistance is also often lacking, delivered through unequal partnerships and with inadequate focus on capacity strengthening. The principal donors are stuck in the status quo, lacking incentives to change and unable to conceive of a new business model if they cede responsibility and leadership to local actors.

National governments bear the primary responsibility for disaster risk reduction, preparedness, and response in their countries, and should be leading the response, supported and held accountable by local and national civil society. Yet they often invest insufficiently because they lack the necessary resources, do not prioritize humanitarian action, or are a party to the conflict that is causing the crisis in the first place. If civil society in affected countries cannot hold their governments accountable, international actors can play this role, while committing to strengthen the technical and organizational capacity of civil society partners according to best practices.

WHAT WRONG TO RIGHT?

Creating a global system in which the default is locally led humanitarian action requires turning the current system on its head. Many changes are required, including increased humanitarian assistance funding overall; increased direct funding of local actors; more balanced partnerships between international and local actors (prioritizing local actors that have a strong focus on the ways in which humanitarian crises affect men and women differently and actors that have strong female representation and leadership); more emphasis by international actors on quality capacity-strengthening of local partners; and increased commitment and accountability by national governments to sufficiently fund, and responsibly and equitably provide, disaster risk reduction, preparedness, and response in their own countries.

The primary constraint to needed change is donors' limited willingness to provide adequate, timely, and appropriate financial resources. This affects not only the creation of sustainable local capacity but also efforts to engage in meaningful international reforms. Both the inadequacies and imbalances in humanitarian financing stem from its voluntary nature. UN member states do not make mandatory payments to any humanitarian fund or agency, in sharp contrast to UN peacekeeping missions, which receive their funding from mandatory assessments charged to member states. Even the International Commission for the Conservation of Atlantic Tunas imposes mandatory dues. A voluntary system permits donors to focus only on the emergencies, sectors, and funding modalities that interest them. It heightens the power of domestic groups in donor countries to distort assistance priorities.

RIGHTING THE WRONG

There are several ways to enable the current system to shift toward more local leadership—with governments in crisis-affected countries at the helm, supported and held accountable by civil society—that will save more lives. The primary pathways include (1) locally led humanitarian action whenever possible, with a clear role for international actors; (2) adequate funding to state and non-state actors in affected countries; and (3) stronger partnerships between international and local actors, as well as greater emphasis on strengthening local capacity. National governments must also improve the quantity and quality of humanitarian action, but this report focuses on how international actors can and should increase and improve their support for local humanitarian leadership. Specifically, Oxfam recommends a mandatory assessment for humanitarian assistance funding and a commitment by international actors to increase their direct funding of local actors and to be transparent in such funding.

In our role as one of the largest humanitarian international non-governmental organizations, Oxfam is committed to being part of the solution, making it an organizational priority to increase our direct funding of local actors, to improve the quality of our partnerships and capacity-strengthening of state and non-state partners, and to advocate to all relevant actors for changes to the international system.

If we were to create a global humanitarian system today, we believe it would focus on national government leadership, supported and held accountable by civil society, and it would have resilient communities at its core, with international actors standing by to assist whenever necessary. This is not the system we have. We must “right the wrong.” We must turn our current system on its head and strive toward such a system, which is more effective, efficient, and equitable.

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