



Local and international collaboration in urban humanitarian responses

Perspectives from the Philippines, Colombia and South Sudan

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Purpose

This paper is part of a series of research pieces produced under the 'Urban Crises Learning Fund' managed by the International Institute for Environment and Development (IIED). Funded by the Department for International Development (DFID), the Urban Crises Learning Fund aims to build an in-depth understanding of how the humanitarian sector can most effectively operate in urban contexts.

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Traditionally, the humanitarian sector has responded to emergencies in rural contexts; however an increasing number of urban crises has necessitated a re-evaluation of standard procedures. The urban setting poses unique challenges, which are best met through close collaboration with local actors who understand the context. However, policy and practice of how to bridge local and international actors lack a systematic approach. This study explores the urban-specific challenges to local and international collaboration. Recommendations to improve partnerships include giving directly to local agencies, rather than subcontracting them, and advocating a holistic approach, in line with local humanitarian or developmental agendas. These recommendations have emerged from case studies involving interviews with local stakeholders carried out in three distinct urban contexts, each with a different type of disaster experience: Tacloban, Ormoc and Palo in the Philippines, following natural disasters, in particular Typhoon Haiyan; Medellín in Colombia, following ongoing conflict and displacement; and Juba in South Sudan, following conflict, violence and civil war. A companion piece analyses each of these case studies in more detail.

Contents

| | | | |
|-----------------------------------------------------------|----------|-------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------|
| Executive summary | 4 | 3 Findings | 11 |
| 1 Introduction | 7 | 3.1 Who are the 'local actors'? | 11 |
| 1.1 Background: towards an urbanisation of disaster risk? | 7 | 3.2 What are the urban-specific challenges? | 12 |
| 1.2 Research questions | 8 | 3.3 What are the main challenges to collaboration? | 13 |
| 2 Methodology | 9 | 3.4 How could collaboration be improved? | 25 |
| 2.1 Study background | 9 | 4 Conclusions and recommendations | 28 |
| 2.2 Study design and sampling | 9 | 4.1 Conclusions from the study | 28 |
| 2.3 Definitions | 10 | 4.2 Recommendations to improve collaboration in the urban context | 30 |
| 2.4 Data collection and analysis | 10 | 4.3 Areas for further research | 31 |
| | | Acronyms | 32 |
| | | References | 33 |

Executive summary

The humanitarian sector has traditionally responded to emergencies in rural contexts; however an increasing number of urban crises is necessitating a re-evaluation of standard procedures. The urban setting poses unique challenges, which are best met through close collaboration with local actors who understand the needs and context. However, policy and practice of how to bridge local and international actors is lacking a systematic approach. This study explores the urban-specific challenges to local and international collaboration. Recommendations to improve partnerships include empowering local agencies by giving directly to them, rather than subcontracting services, and advocating a holistic approach by designing programmes in line with local humanitarian or developmental agendas.

The locus of humanitarian action is shifting to urban contexts as the world becomes more urbanised, which is necessitating a re-evaluation of standard procedures. The humanitarian needs generated in urban contexts are posing new and complex challenges, which need to be met by both traditional and emerging actors. Understanding the urban context, especially in relation to humanitarian response, is fraught with challenges. Each urban centre has a unique combination of interrelated physical, social, economic and environmental characteristics, and the most vulnerable groups are likely to be scattered across densely populated areas and difficult to access locations, such as informal settlements. The ability of humanitarian organisations to set up operation sites is hampered in built-up areas. Urban areas are a highly dynamic setting which undoubtedly necessitates the collaboration of local actors. However, policy and practice initiatives of how to bridge local and international actors are still vague, but they are an emerging active area of research.

The purpose of this study is to explore the existing collaboration between local actors and international actors working in the urban humanitarian response, in order to identify recommendations to strengthen collaboration through a systematic approach. A total of 44 Interviews were carried out across three distinct urban contexts, each with a different type of disaster experience:

- Typhoon Haiyan in Tacloban, Ormoc, and Palo, Philippines.
- Protracted displacement in Medellín, Colombia.
- Conflict and violence in Juba, South Sudan.

BOX 1: WHO ARE THE 'LOCAL ACTORS'?

There was confusion on the part of international respondents over who exactly was a local actor and what designation they should have during a response. Technically, local actors might not be 'professional' humanitarians, but their involvement in response means they are involved in humanitarian action, and in effect become humanitarians.

The term 'local actor' can be defined as an organisation or an individual, from and based in the country and within the area affected, who has influence and is working directly or indirectly on the humanitarian response.

What are the urban-specific challenges to humanitarian response?

Disasters within urban areas will invariably lead to large populations of internally displaced populations (IDPs). Neither adequate space, nor the resources required to build new accommodation are readily available. As such, these people end up living in informal settlements in the most hazardous parts of the city. This places a huge burden on urban services, especially with regards to equitable access to those in need. Those living in extreme poverty often endure the same hardships, and the line between those affected by the crisis and the poorest is often simply administrative.

BOX 2: DIVIDED LIVING

On the whole, international actors lead separate existences from local actors, living in hotels or guarded compounds, being driven around in agency vehicles, enjoying far higher salaries and socialising in 'expat-friendly' areas of the city. The stark separation between the lives of international and local actors has led to feelings of resentment from locals and limited the opportunities to interact and learn from each other.

What are the main challenges to local and international collaboration?

Humanitarian system inefficiencies and rigidity

The humanitarian system is filled with industry jargon, has a very specific architecture, and has to move quickly whilst making decisions on imperfect information regarding highly complex disaster situations. However, it encourages competition rather than collaboration, has rigid processes, permits high turnover of staff, and channels finances through costly middle management.

Capacity is sometimes limited, but often underestimated even further

International actors in acute crises reported that local capacity was low, due to lack of financial and operational resources. However local actors claim they understand the context, and are best placed to prioritise interventions, therefore their capacity is high. Local actors are often seen as a tool to help internationally-driven humanitarian programming, rather than an asset in their own right, with knowledge and expertise that can enhance the work of all actors at a strategic level.

Time constraints affect ability to understand context, and favour pre-existing networks

It was felt that there was a lack of contextualised knowledge and cultural understanding on the part of international actors, resulting from a lack of time spent in the setting. Problems can only be identified, and the correct solutions generated, if the context is well understood, which local actors are best placed to do. International actors tended to go to where access was easiest and where installed capacity already existed, because they could trust that they would get their mandate delivered on time.

Balancing ideas: international technical expertise versus locally driven programming

In any collaboration there will always be a trade-off between the skills and expertise of each party involved; however a working relationship is difficult to foster when one party is or feels excluded. International actors have control over the finances and set the agenda, but there is often a lack of agreement with local actors over the priorities, and local protocols can be bypassed. This leads to duplication of services in some areas, whilst other areas are neglected. Many local organisations end up changing their remit and working outside of their speciality in order to access funding.

Incentives to collaborate are lacking

Working with local actors is good practice, but is not yet a core requirement of international humanitarian assistance, and if international actors can go it alone, they often will choose to do so. Collaboration was believed to occur only when the international actor was obliged to work with local actors. The intrinsic benefit of working with local actors is often not valued; rather collaborations were being approached as a box ticking exercise.

Shortcomings of institutional frameworks

New administrations often fail to recognise successful work carried out previously, and will look to implement a new project rather than continue a current one. Frequent personnel changes impede the progress of programming.

Recommendations to improve collaboration in the urban context

- Change the focus to how collaboration works between locals and internationals. Place local actors at the centre of design, with international actors fitting into the local humanitarian or developmental agenda, rather than planning how local actors can fit into the international agenda.
- Partnerships need to be approached on a platform of equal decision-making, with joint prioritisation of issues and solutions. Clear, simple, and open communication will ensure that many different local actors feel comfortable engaging in the humanitarian process. In particular, humanitarian jargon needs to be well explained and translated during coordination meetings, and in the subsequent updates.
- Better representation – beyond a box ticking approach – of local actors at higher levels of decision making, strategy and programming. In practice this means greater emphasis on an equal dialogue in person and at all levels between international actors and a range of local actors.
- Donors need to be willing to take more (perceived) risk and give funding directly to local organisations, rather than funnelling money through other organisations which then subcontract the local organisations. Taking this approach would help local organisations build capacity and drive programming.
- Provide a 'menu' of funding options to help local actors to access money and build capacity themselves. Local actors should be sensitised to the range of donors and funding streams for humanitarian response and briefed on how the emergency humanitarian system works.
- Though it may have become difficult to find international humanitarians willing to commit to long periods of time, ideally contracts for international actors should not be short-term, to help reduce the high turnover and encourage the development of an in-depth understanding of the context.
- Ensure those living in extreme poverty are not left behind. Interventions should use an area-based, trans-sectoral, participatory approach.
- Avoid going to places simply because they are easy to access and so as to deliver the organisational mandate on time.
- In strategic disaster-prone areas such as cities, where there are ports or airport, pre-established partnerships between government, local actors and international actors should be prioritised. Cities can act as strategic locations to accept and distribute relief.

1

Introduction

1.1 Background: towards an urbanisation of disaster risk?

As the world's population becomes increasingly urbanised, the locus of humanitarian action is shifting to urban contexts. By the mid-2000s, more people were living in urban centres than rural areas. By 2050, it is predicted that 6.3 billion people will live in towns and cities (OCHA and DARA, 2014). Urban crises are not a new phenomenon – epidemics, eruptions, floods, and conflict have afflicted numerous settlements throughout history. However, the humanitarian sector has traditionally responded to emergencies in rural contexts, developing expertise through years of experience. Yet now, an increasing number of urban crises is necessitating a re-evaluation of standard procedures. The humanitarian needs generated in modern and future urban contexts are posing new, urgent, and complex challenges, which need to be met by traditional, as well as emerging, actors.

Understanding the urban context, especially in relation to humanitarian response, is fraught with challenges. Firstly, what constitutes 'urban' differs globally as population size, density, and administrative status vary between countries, hindering an international consensus (Dodman and Archer, 2014). Secondly, every urban centre has a unique combination of interrelated physical, social, economic and environmental characteristics which will be differentially affected by increased unpredictability and variability in the global climate system (Currion, 2015; Strachan, 2014; IFRC, 2015; UN Habitat, 2010). Understanding any one part of these systems – let alone how they all link and react

during a disaster – is a complicated endeavour. Thirdly, assumptions and generalisations of urban populations and urban opportunities mask complex realities. For instance, the majority (90 per cent) of urban populations live in small or medium-sized cities, not mega-cities (10 million+ inhabitants) (Currion, 2015); urban households might engage in both rural and urban economic activities (Dodman and Archer, 2014); perceptions that urban residents are better off than rural inhabitants does not truly reflect the range of health statistics of different urban demographics – children growing up in slum contexts have health indicators comparable to rural children despite proximity to a range of health services (Burkle *et al.*, 2014). Finally, what is considered an 'urban crisis' varies and is highly political and there is not yet consensus about who are the key actors.

Urban contexts concentrate people and power – and thus poverty and inequality – which shape the vulnerability of the given urban population. Armed conflict is also increasingly taking place in urban settings (ICRC, 2016). The most vulnerable groups, including internally displaced populations (IDPs) and those living in extreme poverty, are likely to be scattered across densely populated areas and difficult-to-access locations, such as informal settlements. The mobility and ability of humanitarian organisations to set up operation sites is hampered in built-up areas. Moreover, humanitarian actors will have to work within established codes and procedures of the influence and politics of municipal authorities, whilst attempting to coordinate with numerous actors from the private sector, academia, and civil society, who have expertise, and are already working on disaster risk reduction and responding in crises. Urban areas are highly dynamic settings which undoubtedly necessitate the collaboration of local actors that best understand the context. International

actors, therefore, play a support role to local actors and decision makers in the urban context. However, policy and practice initiatives of how to bridge local actors and international humanitarian assistance are still vague and lack a systematic approach. The challenges to collaboration between international and local actors constitute an active area of research, as is identifying how collaboration can be strengthened.

1.2 Research questions

The aim of this paper is to inform effective policy making and programming by generating much needed information on the challenges to, and opportunities for, collaboration during urban humanitarian responses. It is well recognised that local actors play a significant role in humanitarian responses; however, there continue to be many missed opportunities for collaboration. This research therefore focuses on identifying the key challenges to collaboration, highlighting examples of best practice and innovative partnerships, as well as exploring potential options for future collaboration.

As this was an explorative study being conducted in a number of different contexts, the research questions were broad:

- Who are the 'local actors'?
- What are the urban-specific challenges?
- What are the challenges to collaboration?
- How could collaboration be improved?

The reason scare quotes are used around 'local actors' is because, despite the fact that this is a commonly-deployed term in humanitarian reports, we would like to problematise it (when contrasted with 'humanitarian actors'). We propose that anyone working to save lives or alleviate suffering is a humanitarian and as such distinctions should only be made on whether they are based locally or internationally. 'Humanitarian' is not a term reserved for internationals. Thus this paper distinguishes local and international and not local and humanitarian.

2

Methodology

2.1 Study background

The purpose of this study is to explore the existing collaboration between local actors and international actors working on the urban humanitarian response. The research contributes towards systemising this response, which currently operates on a case-by-case basis. The study explores whether challenges and good practice from a number of different urban contexts can facilitate innovative cross-learning. The distinct contexts were purposely selected to capture a broad overview of how collaboration may or may not be successfully carried out, depending on the strength of the involvement of government and civil society. The different contexts were furthermore chosen because they represent different types of urban disaster experiences:

- Philippines: Natural disasters, specifically Typhoon Haiyan in Tacloban, Ormoc, and Palo, which hit in November 2013.
- Colombia: Protracted displacement in Medellín.¹
- South Sudan: Conflict and violence in Juba since December 2013.

2.2 Study design and sampling

A total of 44 semi-structured interviews were carried out across all three contexts, with four additional focus group discussions (FGDs). See Table 1 for the breakdown per location.

Additional data was collected in the form of observations and informal conversations. The semi-structured interviews explored three key themes: (i) the context of the urban crisis and local actors; (ii) challenges to collaboration; and (iii) how collaboration could be improved. Purposive sampling was used to identify key stakeholders, including disaster management and response professionals from local and international organisations, community leaders, local government leaders, and academic and research institutions. Sampling was extended through snowballing.

¹ Violence in Medellín has been ongoing since the civil war, which began in 1948. It was thus difficult to identify a starting date for the displacement crisis, and furthermore the response is ongoing. As such, the timescale was left to interviewees to expand on what they felt was relevant.

Table 1. Data collection methods per research location

| | PHILIPPINES | COLOMBIA | SOUTH SUDAN |
|-----------------------------|----------------------|----------------------|-----------------------|
| Local organisations | 5 interviews + 1 FGD | 4 interviews | 6 interviews |
| Local government | 4 interviews + 1 FGD | 6 interviews + 1 FGD | 1 interview |
| International organisations | 4 interviews | 3 interviews | 11 interviews + 1 FGD |
| TOTAL | 15 | 14 | 19 |

2.3 Definitions

In general, interviewees representing local actors were nationals of the country working for a local or national organisation, including the government. Interviewees representing international actors were anyone who worked for an international organisation. It must be noted that local actors and international actors were not a homogenous group, and many different views were expressed within and between these two groupings. Where possible the difference of opinions has been highlighted. We do not claim that references to international actors or local actors represent the views of all international or local actors working in the specific study area. All responses have been anonymised. Quotes from 'local actors' include both government and NGOs, and are indicated as such; quotes from 'international actors' include both INGOs and the UN.

2.4 Data collection and analysis

Data collection took place between March and June 2016. Translators were used where required,² and all interviews were transcribed and analysed with qualitative thematic analysis (Braun and Clark, 2006). This report focuses on the main themes which emerged from all three case study sites. These case studies provide a focused snapshot of perspectives on collaboration in the urban contexts of Tacloban, Ormoc, Palo (the Philippines), Medellín (Colombia), and Juba (South Sudan) at a particular time. For individual analyses of the three contexts, please see the Companion Piece, *A city-specific focus on local and international collaboration: Tacloban, Ormoc and Palo (the Philippines); Medellín (Colombia); Juba (South Sudan)*.

² Translators were only used in Colombia if the interviewee did not feel comfortable holding the interview in English. In both the Philippines and South Sudan, no translator was necessary.

3

Findings

3.1 Who are the ‘local actors’?

Precise definitions of the local actors varied across and within all contexts. Interviewees highlighted key local actors to include the government, community leaders, civil society organisations, and faith-based organisations. These actors are well recognised in the literature and in previous research. A definition of a local actor was even extended as far as “any beneficiary with some kind of influence” (international actor, Juba), and any group who consider themselves to be a cooperative. Government was viewed by all as the one to lead a response, but the ability to fill this role heavily depended on the strength of the government and whether the disaster overwhelmed existing capacity. This is not new information, nor is the acknowledgement that urban settings pose unique challenges. In dense living areas with high anonymity and fluctuating populations, there are many more actors and it is also more difficult to identify traditional community structures. As quoted by an international actor in Juba, “I am not particularly aware of traditional chief structures because it is an urban area.”

What emerged from the interviews was a sense of confusion from international respondents over who exactly is a local actor, and what designation they should have during a response.

The first key issue appeared to be one of professionalisation. This seems to be the case in particular when actors are not professional humanitarians, but are involved in the response. It is well recognised that local actors are part of the frontline first

response, yet confusions existed over how to view local involvement.

“When people are affected, they get organised.” Local NGO, Medellín.

“We work lots with chiefs and the government and they aren't humanitarians, but they are local actors who are very important and influential.” International actor, Juba.

Technically, local actors might not be ‘professional’ humanitarians, but their involvement in response means they are involved in humanitarian action, and in effect become humanitarians. The widespread uncertainty over who is an actor and what designation they should have seemed like an arbitrary distinction. It is therefore easier to think in terms of local actors and international actors involved in the response, rather than who is or is not a humanitarian.

The second issue was to what extent someone from the capital city is a local actor? When international actors spoke of locals, they often used the term interchangeably with nationals. However, often a source of frustration for local actors – those of the affected community – was how those from other parts of the country do not represent them. National organisations are likely to be larger and better resourced, but may not know the nuances of the local context. Part of the problem was that local actors are likely to be significantly affected during a disaster, so the next most capable local actors for international actors to seek advice from might not be from the area. Clearly there is a trade-off here between proximity and understanding of context, and capacity to respond, when collaborations are being considered.

To summarise, the definition of ‘local actors’ is by and large commonly understood, but how these actors fit with the humanitarian response lacks a universal understanding. Based on the interviews, this working paper takes the term to mean an organisation or an individual, from and based in the country and within the area affected, who has influence and is working directly or indirectly on the humanitarian response.

3.2 What are the urban-specific challenges?

Urban challenges have been extensively catalogued in literature, and were reiterated during interviews. This section explores the main challenges that emerged.

3.2.1 It is difficult to relocate a large displaced population within an urban setting

One of the main challenges seen in all three case study sites was extended displacement of populations. How the displaced populations were located in the cities differed. In Tacloban, Ormoc, and Palo, many displaced people still lived in temporary shelters, or had returned to ‘no-build zones’ informally or illegally. Some had been resettled in new builds, but problems remained with the lack of space.

“A lot of challenges that were noted in terms of support coming from the government, like for example the support coming for housing. Housing is one of the issues that is actually lagging behind. The challenges were acquiring the land, as most are private lands, the government has difficulty to convert it from agriculture to residential.” International actor, Tacloban.

In Medellín, displaced people were largely located in the steep mountainside peripheries, having built houses on arrival. Medellín has been experiencing an increase in the phenomenon of urban-urban displacement. This was the result of the historically rural conflict moving to the city, and in particular the peripheral areas where IDPs are located. Organisations working with IDPs in this context are no longer working solely on recovery, but are directly confronted with the cause of the displacement. As such, the cause of suffering for IDPs is no longer alleviated on arrival in the city.

“Victims tend to locate on the outskirts of the city. Most of them live in inadequate conditions. There is a very evident presence of armed groups there.” Local government, Medellín.

In Juba, displaced people were predominantly in the so-called ‘protection of civilian’ (POC) camps on the outskirts of the city, but also located in other centres within the city (such as schools), or with friends and

family. The number of IDPs living in the camps was much higher than official records, as the camps offered security and food, which was lacking in many other parts of the region and city. However, there was a sense of a loss of identity with regards to nationality for those having been displaced to the camps.

“Most of them are traumatised because of what happened in their life, and feel like they are in their country and are living in an IDP camp. They feel as if they are not part of this nation.”

International actor, Juba.

3.2.2 Those living in extreme poverty often endure the same hardships

In all three contexts, the line between those affected by the crisis who require humanitarian assistance, and those living in extreme poor was blurry. On first inspection, those in need of humanitarian assistance in Juba appeared to be self-contained because of the walled camps, however the situation was not confined to these camps, with IDPs also in schools and churches as mentioned above, but also because other residents in Juba were also in need of humanitarian assistance. In Medellín, only victims of the conflict who had been officially registered received recognition and support from the state, leaving many unregistered victims missing out. Those affected by the crisis moved to the poorest parts of the urban area, and thus lived side by side with urban citizens living in extreme poverty, and experiencing the same difficulties.

“The difference between the victims and non-victims is more or less administrative. In the communities, all have experienced the conditions of violence.”

Local organisation, Medellín.

3.2.3 Urban context understanding is not necessarily transferable

Even for those who have experience of working in an urban context, difficulties can arise when moving to work in a different setting. This is because even though some challenges may arise in the multiple settings, each setting is unique. A prominent INGO transferred a senior figure to Medellín, who at first struggled to see where the humanitarian crisis was, since the setting they were used to was more severe, and similar to the traditional camp-based humanitarian situation.

“Because they are from Sudan, they think of humanitarian action as people in tents. When they arrived and saw the situation, they said, ‘Well, you don’t need humanitarian action’ because it’s so different, it’s not so intense, or so deprived. The technical staff helped them understand the context. The people really need humanitarian action, but here the action is more political than survival.” Local government, Medellín.

3.2.4 An international presence in the post-disaster setting results in more expensive amenities

An international presence, particularly in Juba and Tacloban post-disaster, can skew the economy. The flow of money into the local economy by international actors resulted in inflation which priced urban citizens out of the market for food and basic supplies. This is difficult to avoid, but it is crucial that this is recognised. Sometimes the arrival of international actors and the money they bring can exacerbate conditions for those who do not receive assistance.

3.2.5 Divisions exist between international actors and local actors in urban response

Locals and international actors face different challenges, but separation of the two harms the response. International and local actors lead largely separate existences with widely different security protocols. International actors live in hotels or (guarded) compounds and are driven around in agency vehicles, avoiding public transportation and socialising in 'expat-friendly' areas of the city. Without advocating either way, if international actors can be evacuated at the first sign of danger, can they ever truly understand the crisis? The stark separation between the lives of international and local actors and the discrepancy in wages and access to expenses, led to feelings of resentment from locals, who see international actors enjoying a relative luxury and partaking in 'peace tourism'³ or 'disaster capitalism',⁴ whilst local actors endure hardship. The divisions between international and local actors, because of security situations or the independent forums both are working in, limits opportunities to learn from one another, and may contribute to increasing the tension and undermining the trust between local and international actors. To be seen to be on the ground daily – as local actors are – was felt to be the best foundation to build trust and successful programming.

"When it comes to protecting staff, what you are actually doing is putting them in straight-jackets ... and they are living in different worlds."
Local government, Juba.

In summary, the continued division of the daily lives of international and local actors and the 'expat' community created overseas, especially in humanitarian responses, is often resented by locals. Resentment is not a foundation on which to build collaborative projects.

3.2.6 An integrated approach in a city means reframing how we understand the city

Although at first a crisis may only be felt in isolation in one area of a city, it was seen to all be connected. It was expressed that a city should be framed more like an organism or a body, and that situations in one area will eventually affect the whole. Part of the problem, particularly with response in an urban context, was a sense that the individual is more important than the group. For example, the targeted assistance to certain families who had experienced loss of displacement and not to neighbours, created resentment within communities and tensions which may not have existed before. It was felt that in a city it must also be understood that what happens to others, will eventually be felt by everyone.

"A city is like a body, whatever happens, that pain is reflected in the entire body. Sometimes we don't feel it, but in the end, it will affect the entire body. We have not yet seen the city in a more integrated way, and that is socially. We are not districts, we are not administrative institutions and territories, we are people, all driven by a common goal and challenges."
Local government, Medellín.

3.3 What are the main challenges to collaboration?

This section explores the main themes that emerged on challenges to collaboration.

3.3.1 Humanitarian system inefficiencies and rigidity

The humanitarian system is filled with industry jargon and has a very specific architecture, composition and hierarchy; it necessarily has to move quickly whilst making decisions on imperfect information, and has strict checks in place to ensure funds – often large sums – are being released and used as intended. It is understandable then that this complicated system takes time to comprehend and to be able to engage with effectively. Many local actors may never have worked with the cluster system, applied for humanitarian funding, or partnered with an international humanitarian organisation before the event of a disaster. As the urban context is still so poorly understood, even experienced international actors find this context challenging. These challenges are further compounded, it was found, by a number of inefficiencies and rigidities in the

³ Local government, Medellín.

⁴ Local organisation, Tacloban.

humanitarian system which are hindering collaboration with local actors.

Competition for resources (physical, human, and monetary) between local and international actors is negatively affecting the potential for collaboration. At its very simplest, competition for local partners occurred when the international presence overwhelmed and outnumbered the number of available (traditional) local actors, eg government or established NGOs. This occurred especially in the Philippines in the aftermath of Typhoon Haiyan. Not all INGOs are thus able to find local partners, especially when resources were concentrated to cities. Potential collaborations were thus lost to intra-international competition. This extended to competition for skillsets, eg carpenters to rebuild, or a resource, eg tarpaulins, which resulted in bottlenecks during the response and led to competition between organisations attempting to gather the necessary resources to deliver their mandates.

Competition for competent national staff was also raised as a challenge to effective collaboration in Juba and Tacloban, Ormoc, and Palo. International organisations were seen to ‘poach’ good national staff, or national staff themselves were competing to transition into an international organisation for better wages (often in USD), job and personal security. To what extent competition for funding was ‘healthy’ or disadvantaging local smaller NGOs was uncertain. Larger national NGOs state that ‘we have healthy competition’⁵ when it comes to the funding environment. However it is usually only the larger national NGOs who win grants, and are thus prone to regard a system which benefits them as ‘healthy’. Overall it felt that those who may have had less experience with the humanitarian system, including the smaller local actors, were not able to compete fairly, and instead were obliged to seek the less desirable sources of funding which have ‘high amounts of outputs for small amounts of money, [which international NGOs would not] waste their time with’.⁶ An environment fuelled by competition rather than collaboration takes on a different nature and common goals are not sought.

“They [local actors] feel disenfranchised; they feel like their voice is not heard enough, especially considering this is their country. So there is always this sense of imbalance and an unjust system...I mean USD1.3 billion was given last year and it is not entirely clear how much of that went to national actors.”
International actor, Juba.

Bureaucracy and inflexible processes were perceived to negatively affect collaboration and slow down the response. International actors preferred to work with government agencies (where possible), and with appropriately registered local civil society groups or NGOs. It was explained that international actors cannot work with organisations that do not have a ‘legal identity in the eyes of the government’.⁷ During a disaster – and especially in a city – many more individuals or groups become (or have the potential to become) local actors involved and influential in the humanitarian response. These include private companies, grassroots organisations, faith-based organisations, and informal community-based groups. International actors either have to expend resources helping these informal groups become formalised; and these may not even want to become a legal entity, particularly at a time when most actors want to be focusing on direct lifesaving/restoring activities, or they have to omit working with these local actors. The exclusion of informal groups due to bureaucracy and protocol limits the scope of local actors with whom international organisations can partner. Local expertise was thus not being tapped, and either ran in parallel to the international response, or was lost. Whilst it is important to comprehensively vet new partners, greater flexibility towards forming new partnerships with local actors and increasing the accessibility of funds and resources were highlighted as means to improve collaboration in the future.

High turnover on all sides affects the ability to form relationships between actors. In general turnover in organisations is high during a disaster. International workers move between different responses and jobs, national actors move between different national and international organisations, local actors are displaced or move, and government administrative transitions can be high. Especially if there is conflict in a country, as was the case for Juba (see Section 3.3.8). The key problems of high turnover that were raised were that relationships were not fostered, it was unclear who was the focal person to approve and move plans forward, training was negatively affected, communication deteriorated, working groups had a short life-span, local procedures became inconsistent, and tensions could build if a local custom was by-passed, intentionally or inadvertently. High turnover, however, has become a feature of the humanitarian industry with international staff able to sign contracts of as little as three months in a new location. High turnover is far from being impeded by the humanitarian system and it was felt to negatively affect collaboration.

⁵ Local NGO, Juba.

⁶ International actor, Juba.

⁷ International actor, Ormoc.

“Colombia is very problematic because many institutions have short-term contracts, and sometimes the contracts are say from March–November, and you just have a gap for four months, without a new person, just because ‘this person doesn’t get a new contract’. People say ‘you used to work well with that person’ and there was a lot of trust building and then there is nobody there to refer to. Maybe with luck, the same person steps in again. Or if there is a new person, with no handover, you start again with the same processes.” International actor, Medellín.

Local actors may not feel comfortable expressing views and opinions on collaborations, when the international partners are also their donors. Local actors expressed general feelings of failed expectations and that there was a lot of talk but very little action. Their ability, however, to criticise this was raised as an issue. When local actors rely on funds from international actors, it becomes very difficult to criticise, as this may jeopardise future funding. In particular, the fact that UN agencies could simultaneously be a donor, an implementing partner, and a cluster coordinator, meant that local actors may not be able to raise issues as they never know which hat the UN agency will decide to wear. When contracted by another agency, there is a risk in telling whomever the money is coming from about the shortcomings of their programming.

Funding goes to international intermediaries and middle managers rather than directly to local actors. Both international and local actors spoke of how a large number of intermediators are involved in a response. This layer of middle management that is meant to help with accountability or monitoring and evaluation of how funds are used, is itself expensive. Money gets caught up in the overheads of middle management organisations and very little trickles down to local actors. It was felt that whatever gets implemented is diluted to the point that very little impact is seen. Moreover, organisations that work as middle management end up becoming stronger rather than the local actors that they are there to support. Collaborations are missed as there is less money going to local actors to help them expand. The challenge is twofold. First, in balancing how to directly fund local actors and communities without middle management, whilst retaining strong accountability and financial tracing mechanisms. Second, in funding productive projects and being able to evaluate them to see they have tackled the issues affecting the population.

“We here, the middle point (between donors and recipients) are becoming stronger. And we haven’t been able to strengthen the real institutions which are families and communities. Because we are here as an intermediary. And a very expensive intermediary!” Local government, Medellín.

“20–30% of the money of what they probably get, actually gets downloaded to the ground, everything else just goes back to their expenses.” Local organisation, Tacloban

It is a challenge to bring many actors together and limited possibilities to interact negatively affect collaboration. For example, in the Philippines, two seats are mandated by law to be filled by civil society organisation (CSO) representatives on the Regional Disaster Risk Management Councils. However, the seats for Tacloban had not been appointed before Typhoon Haiyan and were still vacant more than two years after. Even though the reasons for why this was were not given directly, it was stressed that this was something that needed to be worked on, to ensure that official representatives were found for CSOs. Across all the contexts it was raised that it is difficult to bring actors together, as time is precious, people may not be able to attend meetings for logistical reasons, or may have other priorities. This causes the fragmentation of dialogue and strategy between actors.

In summary, a system tasked with dealing with highly complex disaster situations involving multiple stakeholders which encourages competition rather than collaboration, has rigid processes, permits high turnover of staff, continues to hold power of money and resources, and channels finances through costly middle management, does not favour collaboration.

3.3.2 Capacity is sometimes limited, but often underestimated even further

Capacity is the ‘combination of all the strengths, attributes and resources available within a community, society or organisation that can be used to achieve agreed goals’ (UNISDR, 2009). This section explores the perceptions of capacity which emerged from the interviews. Overall, the sentiment from international actors in acute crises (conflict and natural disaster) was that local capacity was low. This was either due to inexperience of responding to the crisis, or because of a lack of financial and human resources. The sentiment from the local actors’ point of view was that their capacity was high, but that they faced challenges in strengthening their intrinsic attributes and qualities.

A major issue affecting the potential for collaboration is the reduced operational capacity of local organisations during a crisis. Often local actors will be affected during and in the aftermath of a disaster. Staff are affected by conflict or natural disasters, networks are interrupted or broken down, and assets may be affected or destroyed. For example, after Typhoon Haiyan, many local actors lost the ability to work as their ‘offices were flattened out’⁸ and almost all

⁸Local NGO, Tacloban.

gas stations were not working, so communication and transportation were severely affected.

“The roof – it was de-roofed. So we had to work on the first floor, every time there was rain all our offices and all our equipment got damaged.”

Local actor, Ormoc.

“Whenever they [international actors] asked me to get groups together, I was like when, they would say tomorrow at 9 am, and I would think: One, I don't have a car to go around; Two, I don't have communication; and Three, I don't know where the other local actors are now – and you want it tomorrow or this afternoon! Sometimes they demand something that it is just too hard to deliver because of the circumstances.”

Local actor, Tacloban.

The result is that local organisations/actors may have fewer resources (human and physical) during a response. If a large number of international actors descend on an affected area – as was the case after Typhoon Haiyan – local actors may very easily become overwhelmed by their presence. With few local actors to partner with, international actors may then choose to deliver services without looking for collaboration with local organisations. The perception that capacity is low extends beyond capacity being affected during a crisis. In general ‘low capacity’ was used as a reason to not collaborate with local actors, without proper explanation of what this actually meant.

Local capacity was often viewed by international actors as a means by which internationals can execute their pre-determined mandate.

International and national actors felt that the majority of local actors had limited capacity. When asked what local actors brought to a collaboration, most often it was their value as translators, as well as providing contextualisation of information and acting as bridges with the communities. They were viewed as a useful tool to implement the ideas and programmes of outside interventions. Local actors, however, felt that they were able to bring much more: they could see gaps that international actors could not see, had more holistic approaches to programming, and thought of long-term development. It was suggested that the western belief in technical fixes to complex problems engendered unintentional paternalistic approaches to collaboration from internationals.

“I mean I don't think it is intentional, simply we come in in a very set period of time and don't have time to learn or adapt, we have to respond you know, we have twelve- or six-month grants, and we ourselves are here for a very short period of time. Which means we revert to what we know, to the fact that we have

multiple masters degrees and are very technically sound and are going to impose a technical solution on what is ultimately a complex geo-ethnic problem. And I think that is where the paternalism comes in, ‘listen guys get your act together, adapt to this technical solution and everything will be OK, you know we know what we are doing, we studied this for a long time’.”

International actor, Juba.

International actors did not perceive that collaborations could be equal because technical capacity was not equal. Local actors were thus placed in roles that fitted the international idea of what local actors could offer.

“They [international actors] have their own agendas. They already have a programme and they are like, okay this is what we need to do, so they don't really need the local actors. Or if they need them, they need them for their own programmes.” Local actor, Tacloban.

“They [local actors] can come up with a project but most of the time we have money based on projects. So if what they are coming with is part of something we are planning to do then we can sit down and discuss how to do it.” International actor, Juba.

The perception that capacity is low is perpetuated because local actors are not given recognition for their work.

This was most evident in that large donors are likely to omit the names of their implementing partners in reports, instead claiming the work as their own. An example given from Juba focused on how UNICEF works there largely through implementing partners, yet reports will appear with statements such as “UNICEF provided assistance to 20,000 children”⁹ which masks the fact that the assistance was actually provided through local partners. Without proper recognition from their donors and partners, local actors do not receive the respect and acknowledgement they deserve. The idea that their capacity is low is thus perpetuated by these omissions.

“International actors impose collaboration through isolated projects focusing on outcomes without strengthening local capacities, and even undermining/weakening them through lack of recognition.”

International actor, Medellín.

Lack of recognition in this instance leads to weakening of local structures. Capacity and involvement in responses is further underestimated because the humanitarian financial tracking system tracks money to the UN organisations or INGOs and not to the local partners. In hindsight and evaluation reports, the involvement of, and collaboration with, local actors is still not being captured.

⁹International actor, Juba.

“From the donor's perspective they can claim the work because they funded the work, but in terms of implementation the donors have not done the work without the help on the ground from the NNGOs or INGOs.” International actor, Juba.

“They [international actors] tend not to know the context and the dynamics. They start working on isolated projects, very existentially, and aiming to have this recognition and be seen as outcomes. This has several consequences. In terms of the communities, they are left without being strengthened in their own capacities, and this aid is isolated. And they are not recognising capacities of government and communities, and because of that they're not only not strengthening, but also weakening because of that lack of recognition of what they're empowered to do.” International actor, Medellín.

There are challenges accessing funding for local actors, resulting in collaborations largely based on subcontracting. The needs that arise from a humanitarian crisis may surpass the standard fundraising ability of local actors. Most local organisations (NNGOs and CSOs) – unlike INGOs – cannot rely on emergency organisational funds from headquarters to help mobilise funds quickly to purchase resources. They must seek funding from humanitarian donors to continue and scale-up activities; however, it was felt that local actors could not access funding easily. In an effort to prevent fraud and misuse of money, donor compliance requirements are high. It was felt that to access institutional funding, an office and dedicated staff would be needed to deal with the associated paperwork, which is beyond the staffing capacity of most local actors. Funding was thus more likely to go via international organisations which were able to comply, because of higher capacity. There is a view that donors prefer INGOs as if the money is mismanaged, donors feel they are more likely to be able to recover the funding. When a new collaboration was under consideration, the biggest deciding factor was how strong the internal financial control mechanisms of the local actor appeared to be. Most partnerships were largely based on local organisations being subcontracted on projects designed by international organisations. Views were mixed on whether subcontracting was a healthy form of collaboration and a positive means for local organisations to learn from international organisations, or whether this was negatively affecting the growth and autonomy of national/local organisations. Younger NNGOs felt that contract-driven partnerships kept the power in the international hands.

“I sensed that they wanted us to work for them. But we were thinking if we work for the INGO then our plans won't push through, because we will be working for their objectives.” Local Organisation, Tacloban.

It is always favourable to have local or national actor representation across all levels, especially at higher decision-making levels. The three contexts represented different strengths of government involvement in the response, which in turn affected whether national voices were well-represented. In Colombia and the Philippines, for instance, Colombians and Filipinos were well represented in decision-making fora. After Typhoon Haiyan, the appropriate government agency or department helped co-lead the cluster coordination system. In Juba, however, South Sudanese representation in the cluster system, especially at the higher levels of decision-making was poor. The issues of representation were most acutely felt in South Sudan. Local actors felt that the majority of senior positions were held by international actors, who had all the authority to approve or block a suggestion. Even if the South Sudanese were in powerful positions, they were ‘puppets’ for internationals, and national NGOs were seen as people to whom to give orders.

“You cannot sit and talk about my home when I am not there.” Local organisation, Juba.

“The whole thing is about the internationals who are in senior management. As they have the prime authority that approves everything that you suggest. Sometimes it is approved and sometimes it is not approved.” International organisation, Juba.

Local capacity of those affected is often underestimated and is in fact very strong.

Local actors expressed a view that they and affected communities are more able to deal with challenges than they are perceived to be. Local and international actors recognised that “even the most difficult-to-access village has strong and resilient communities.”¹⁰ Local actors who worked outside of the cities of Tacloban and Ormoc stated how communities who had not expected any assistance to reach them had begun rebuilding much sooner and more proactively than locations easily accessible to assistance, such as cities. As international community help is impermanent, it is unsustainable to work in isolation without recognising local capacity.

“When people are affected by the conflict, they get organised. This capacity is often underestimated.” Local organisation, Medellín.

“At the end of the day, you say ‘no they can't do it themselves’, but have you given them an opportunity?” Local government, Juba.

¹⁰ Local government, Medellín.

In summary, local actors are seen as a tool on how to help internationally-driven humanitarian programming, rather than an asset in their own right, with knowledge and expertise that can enhance the work of all actors at a strategic level.

3.3.3 Time constraints affect ability to understand context (and build trust/relationships)

Time is one of the scarcest resources during a response. To save and restore lives and livelihoods decisions must be made quickly, based on imperfect information. The nature, scale, and severity of the disaster influence the time with which people have to understand what has happened and what is needed. For example, in a rapid onset disaster such as Typhoon Haiyan, the first three days were crucial and when most live-saving activities would have been needed. International humanitarian organisations, however, often take longer than three days to arrive and become operational. It was during these first few days and first week that panic transformed into the looting of shops and homes for medicine and food in Tacloban, and the humanitarian crisis was evolving rapidly. For new arrivals, there are many things that need to be understood quickly: the immediate context, how the situation is evolving, what led to the event, and – crucially – the background and culture of the disaster-affected area and how these will influence decisions and programmes.

Overall it was felt that there was a lack of contextualised knowledge, cultural understanding, and limited attention to local involvement in the responses occurring in Leyte, Medellín and Juba. For example, it was felt that collaboration had a tendency to favour national readily available partners, located in the capital, over local actors from the area of concern. Local actors from Medellín felt that internationals were more likely to arrive and partner with people from Bogota. This team would make an assessment of Medellín, excluding local expertise. Frustrations at interventions which were designed without an understanding of the situation were expressed.

“There is lack of knowledge of the context for both international actors and national actors. To intervene in an area you need to know it, the context must be very clear. Even at the local level some secretaries [government officials] do not know where certain territories are located, which is really bad because they decide what’s happening in the city.” Local government, Medellín.

It appears that in the rush of a response, one partners with whomever is most readily available. This was echoed in interviews in Tacloban, Ormoc, and Palo in the Philippines, where actors from Manila (the capital) were brought in. Actors from the affected area did not feel welcomed to coordination meetings or comfortable speaking up, in part because they were not formally invited nor directly asked for their input. As part of the working environment, formal invitations to events and meetings are important aspects of Filipino culture. Attention to the culture and norms of holding meetings would go a long way to ensuring local actors feel valuable and sought after.

“I felt that they weren’t looking for us, the local actors, they were waiting for us to go to them.” Local organisation, Tacloban.

Moreover, when the situation was deemed to be desperate and organisations felt under pressure to deliver services and relief items, local input was once again overlooked.

“I think the biggest challenge of a response is that it is so desperate here and there is so much need that it moves like a machine, and people don’t take the time to sort out how to do it. They have a mandate and they are like ‘I’ve got to deliver food, I’ve got to deliver water. I don’t have time to ask the community if they like this or that kind of food’, and so their first priority is to get the work done.” International actor, Juba.

Most humanitarian situations are highly dynamic, but not enough time is spent in the setting by international actors to understand the changing landscape. Contextualised understanding of a situation comes from prolonged time living or working in an area. This is the basis for why local actors are such key players in humanitarian responses – they of all actors have the best understanding of the history and context of their home. Nevertheless, it was raised that “what happens moves faster than the understanding of what is happening”,¹¹ even for those living in affected areas. Evidently then, the challenges to understand the context of a crisis will be much more difficult for an outsider.

Thoughts on how the rapidly changing situations affected programming and collaboration were given for all three contexts: after Typhoon Haiyan in the Philippines, local actors were reluctant to write proposals for funding, feeling that the situation would have changed too significantly by the time the resources were mobilised; in Medellín, Colombia, the rapidly changing urban conflict that was occurring needed constant monitoring to understand the shifting powers and territorial control between gangs; in Juba, South Sudan, the volatility of the economy and soaring inflation

¹¹ Local government, Medellín.

rates affected budgeting and the precarious nature of the peace-agreement left a very uncertain environment, which changed access and mobility from day to day.

“The situation changes a lot. So it is quite difficult to stay current. The internationals can understand the context today, but three weeks later it changes a bit, and they do not understand those changes.”
Local government, Medellín.

In summary, response and established community processes are harmed if international actors focus on what they believe to be the problem and not what the real problem is. Problems can only really be viewed, and the correct solutions identified, if the context is well understood. Local actors are best placed to understand the context and what will or will not work. If there is a lack of cultural sensitivity or their input is overlooked, then a programme is unlikely to succeed. Spending time fully immersed in the setting is the best way to begin understanding it.

3.3.4 Trust favours pre-existing networks and structures

Building from the previous section, the foundation on which successful collaborations are built is trust. Trust was a major issue highlighted in all contexts, permeating all decisions. Simply, distrust would limit the extent of partnerships. This section explores how trust, or lack thereof, influences collaborations and choices of location to begin an intervention.

Trust and distrust amongst all actors influences the likelihood of collaboration. For example, in Juba, international actors expressed dismay at having been “burnt on experiences”¹² of working with local partners, who themselves explained how “briefcase organisations”¹³ – organisations which exist only in name and seek funding without delivering any services to affected communities – have undermined trust in local organisations, limiting the number of collaborations which occur. Trust between communities and NGOs, NGOs and the government, and donors and NGOs, was a key issue. For instance, some local actors in the Philippines were hesitant to be seen partnering with local government as they did not wish to become politicised in the eyes of the community. In Medellín, government officials wore jackets to identify themselves as employees of the relevant department dealing with the response to displaced populations. This jacket was an emblem of trust, which had been built up over the years. With a change in city administration, the design of the jacket was changed. However, employees continued to wear the old-style jacket, despite not

strictly being allowed to, as this was a trusted sign to the communities. Trust and reputation take years to build and can easily be undermined if changes are not considered carefully. Communities in South Sudan were said to be more likely to initially distrust and scrutinise national NGOs, fearing that they may not be impartial. The communities’ perceptions of, and trust in, the local organisation often determined the decision by international actors of whether or not to collaborate. Positive views towards a local organisation would result in a collaboration, a negative or no view would not result in a collaboration. There was almost a self-perpetuating cycle, whereby local organisations who have previously worked with internationals were trusted, and grew, allowing them to win more grants and continue to expand, whilst newer/smaller national or locals NGOs found themselves in a catch-22 situation.

“The relationships between the different actors (academia, government, victims) is one of mistrust. So this limits the extent of participation.”
Local organisation, Medellín.

“Success starts with the community. Because we have trust with the community, then we have trust with the donors. So whatever we do, we go to see the intended beneficiary.” Local organisation, Juba.

International actors tended to go to where access was easiest and installed capacity already existed, because they could trust that they would get their mandate delivered on time. Often multiple international actors visited or revisited the same location. Security access limits where international actors can be present, but a focus on, for instance, the ‘highway barangays’ (the communities along the main roads) in the Philippines, unfortunately suggested more a prioritisation of ease of service delivery than of need.

“Ormoc has 110 barangays, some of them in the mountainside. They were really our concern because some of the NGOs did not go there because it was very far and their security was not assured. So what they focused on was the highway barangays, those easily reached.” Local government, Ormoc.

It was further raised that the focus on Tacloban City was to the detriment of other harder to reach municipalities.

“There were so many response agencies focusing on Tacloban City, but other local government units also needed help. So the challenge was to bring other organisations to other municipalities which were also affected by the typhoon.” Local government, Tacloban.

¹² International actor, Juba.

¹³ International actor and local organisation, Juba.

In Medellín and Juba, there were feelings that agencies had been called to areas where other agencies had worked, but once they got there, they either found that the situation was stable, that there were other actors already implementing programmes, or that other areas were likely to be faring worse. The draw to where a pre-existing network existed appeared to be the ease of implementation. International actors would base themselves and work in Medellín, when local actors wanted them to strengthen the response capacity of other localities, and encourage displaced people to choose a different urban context. It is important to focus on, and spend time in a context to understand it and ensure that capacity is being strengthened in areas where it is most needed. However, this is often where limited networks exist.

In summary, international actors must at all times harness pre-existing partnerships, signs and symbols of trust, and use them carefully under direction from local actors. Avoid prioritising ease of service delivery over need.

3.3.5 Balancing ideas: international technical expertise versus locally-driven programming

In any collaboration, there will always be a trade-off between the skills and expertise of each party involved. Where there are differences in size, reach, financing, technical abilities, and knowledge, the subtleties of how to balance each of the attributes will ultimately determine the degree of success a partnership enjoys. In the ideal collaboration, objectives are harmonised, and activities are allocated based on capacity. There is wide acceptance that international actors have greater technical and financial capacity, as well as the ability to pressurise governments on an international platform. International actors are also well placed to discern patterns from a larger context. They can see similar lessons from other parts of the world and draw parallels. Local actors, on the other hand, may have more operational and logistical capacity, and know the terrain, language, local networks, attitudes of the people, and culture. They are often able to understand the root of the problem, and how best to address it.

It is difficult to build working relationships when one party feels excluded. Amongst local actors, there was a sense of frustration that they were best placed to appreciate what is needed in the response, but international actors had mandates written from before, without consultation. Whilst it was understood that international actors come with legitimate ideas and interest, there was a strong sentiment that the agreement and input of local actors had not been sought.

“Local NGOs were waiting to be involved in the planning and implementation straight after Typhoon Haiyan. But many of those INGOs did their own thing in the planning, project design, and coordination meetings. They did not involve local NGOs.”
Local organisation, Tacloban.

Lack of collaboration at this stage has ramifications further down the line. Local actors will be the ones left in the long run after international actors leave, but managing a project they did not design. Hence the longevity of a project is not simply reliant on a successful transition from an international implementer to local manager, but on a collaborative design in the first instance. In Medellín, there was even an example of an international government's aid department liaising with the Colombian Ministry of the Interior, only to arrive in Medellín and be told by local actors that their research questions and planned intervention were not appropriate for the context.

“So when they [the international actors] came here, they were asking questions about Medellín as if Medellín was like a small administrative department. They didn't understand the full capacity that Medellín had and the differences from the contexts they were expecting. So local directors had to re-align them or re-lead them to what was relevant.”
Local government, Medellín.

Funding and programming is largely internationally-driven, precluding locally-driven ideas. Local actors expressed sentiments of exclusion from funding strategies and programme designs, with international actors mostly developing projects by themselves. A view held by a minority of local actors was that donors should direct matters, as ultimately it was the donor's money and they trusted that they had conducted the appropriate assessments. However the vast majority of local actors viewed this as a negative approach.

“International institutions sit down and design big projects with very sharp consultants who use good language and end up designing the entire programme without the input from local communities.”
Local organisation, South Sudan.

It was perceived by local actors that projects would only get funded when they aligned with international objectives. Local actors thus had to shift to the internationally-driven agenda. INGOs, on the other hand, tended to have their own money to continue to run their own projects.

“Most aid agencies come to do what they believe is the problem, and not what the real problem is, and this damages the processes taking place in those communities.” International actor, Medellín.

Understanding of the response, and resulting priorities, differed between local and international actors. Local actors felt that activities were donor-orientated, rather than focusing on what was best for the affected communities. Too much money was viewed to be spent on monitoring and evaluation, at the expense of direct interventions. Likewise, there was much frustration at the amount of expenditure on knowledge gathering rather than practical application. Local actors wanted “productive projects, based on previous findings,”¹⁴ however they claimed the theoretical side was prioritised.

“International organisations should work on real things that make people feel that they are solving their issues. They should support productive projects, based on previous workshops conducted, rather than providing new workshops. Allow them space to bring all this knowledge into practical application.”
Local government, Medellín

A concept that emerged from local actors in the Philippines was that of gaps within the gaps. During coordination of the response, INGOs were instructing local actors to “try fill in the gaps”, to which they responded, “who takes care of the micro-gaps?”¹⁵ The example was given of local actors satisfied that Save the Children were taking care of children in general, but what about children with special needs? They viewed the INGOs as better placed to address the larger gaps, with the local NGOs picking up what was missed.

“You, the big NGOS, are the regular army, with all the funding and equipment. And we, the smaller ones, are the special forces. We focus on the smaller stuff, so we actually both complement each other.”
Local organisation, Tacloban.

To interact with the humanitarian system, local organisations have lost their meaning. Smaller local organisations reported having to change their specialisation to win funding. This results in local actors working outside of their area of expertise, in order to stay active. Some described this as adapting to survive, but losing their identity.

“You find the South Sudanese flavour of how it is meant to be dies.” Local organisation, Juba.

“Today you have an NGO that is working on education and the next day you find it is working on sanitation, changing depending on where the finance is coming from.” Local government, Juba.

This was also deemed to be a “coping mechanism”¹⁶. Through the process, local knowledge of where attention should be focused was lost, as well as the existence of those organisations who decided to continue working in underfunded areas being jeopardised.

“The sunflower effect, is this effect that has the national NGOs looking for where the donation is. Some small local NGOs have to increase their mission, vision and values to feed the existing or the available funding mechanism, so you find that you can get tempted by the health fund to give you USD 3 million and say ‘Listen, do health’. And this three million is for three years, so you get tempted, unless you are strong. I have negotiated with health core funds in this office for years, but I say ‘listen this is not where we belong’.”
Local organisation, Juba.

Collaborations do not always result in balanced partnerships. Mixed views were expressed on whether collaborations had been balanced, and whether locals had benefited, or given more than they received. During the response, local actors felt INGOs had benefited from their local workforce, but had not been given anything in return, leading in turn to a sense of resentment. This was particularly the case in Juba and the Philippines, where collaborations were deemed to use locals mainly for logistics, language, and access. This was compounded by the fact that differences in resourcing often meant it was harder for local actors to meet what was asked of them by international organisations. That being said, some local actors expressed increased confidence in forming future partnerships with international actors and expanding their own operations by having gained new technical knowledge. Overall, there was a recognition by local actors that the international way was good for the emergency setting, but felt that there was a lack of respect during collaboration.

Local coordination mechanisms and protocols were sometimes by-passed, hindering effective collaboration. The lack of coordination between locals and internationals of INGOs ultimately reduces the effectiveness of the response. There were numerous examples of international actors who proceeded to the communities without coordination with the local administrative units, without having attended cluster meetings, and began to distribute items. This led to many cases of duplication of services in one community, whilst others sites were being missed.

¹⁴ Local government, Medellín.

¹⁵ Local organisation, Tacloban.

¹⁶ Local organisation, Juba.

“There were families who got five fishing boats because there were lots of NGOs giving out fishing boats. But they do not have fishing materials.”

Local government, Palo.

The reasons cited for coordination mechanisms being by-passed included being in a rush to deliver goods and services, and also viewing interactions with local government as an annoying bureaucratic procedure. Depending on how effective the local structures were perceived, different aspects of local coordination mechanisms were by-passed. For instance in Juba, international actors felt it best to coordinate directly with local government structures as these remain the most consistent, but this was recognised to have created tension with the national government.

“There were some INGOs who did not follow the local protocols...they would go directly down to the barangay without communicating with the chief executive of the municipality and that prevents collaboration.” Local organisation, Tacloban.

In the immediate relief and response phase, collaborations were limited. As the response phase moved towards recovery, collaborations became more apparent as time pressures lessened. In the beginning of the response phase after Typhoon Haiyan, most programmes were directly implemented by international actors, with some local NGOs feeling aggrieved at the way they were excluded. This, coupled with the fact that the disaster directly affected the ability of many NGOs to work, resulted in very limited collaboration, especially in the early response phase.

“When they [international community] came in they were like, ‘Okay, get out of our way’ and took charge. So there was a bit of animosity.”

Local organisation, Tacloban.

In summary, a working relationship is difficult to foster when one party is or feels excluded. International actors are the ones who have control over the finances, set the agenda and drive the project; however there is often a lack of agreement with local actors over the priorities, and local protocols can be bypassed, especially in an acute setting. This leads to duplication of services in some areas, whilst other areas are neglected. Many local organisations adapt and change their remit, working outside of their speciality, in order to access funding.

3.3.6 Lack of real long-term thinking and a holistic approach

Sustainability is a core component of a successful intervention. For this to occur, strategies towards longevity must be factored in at the design stage of a programme. Often the projects that endured and had the most impact and widest approval were those which took a cross-cutting approach. This section explores sustainable and holistic approaches applied in the different contexts.

Sometimes interventions can “create a mentality of dependency”¹⁷ which may disempower the ongoing programmes of local actors. Local actors in the Philippines reported that occasionally the support that beneficiaries received could easily slip into dependency, whereby an acceptance that assistance would come disempowered people from responding themselves. Both local and international actors echoed the same sentiment in Juba, ie international actors taking control of everything leads to a state of dependency.¹⁸ In Medellín, this was referred to as a “lack of economic autonomy”,¹⁹ and the resulting assistance equating to “bread for today, hunger for tomorrow”. Occasions where this dependency was created but expected outcomes were not delivered, led to a sense of broken promises and resentment from local actors.

“If you take control of everything ... you are just going to create a dependency syndrome.” Local actor, Juba.

The purpose of international collaboration must be transparent. In the Philippines and Juba, the majority of the work carried out by international actors was physical, and as such visible to local communities. Here the purpose was not questioned – although concerns remained over the strategy employed. A large source of frustration for local organisations in Medellín was when internationals come without a clear reason or mandate for their visits. When the work was knowledge-based rather than action-based, it became especially important to communicate how that intervention would benefit the community.

“International actors come, write a resolution by themselves and then leave. The result is information and papers and it doesn’t lead to anything.”

Local government, Medellín.

¹⁷ Local organisation, Tacloban.

¹⁸ Local government, Juba.

¹⁹ Local government, Medellín.

“Some international organisations come here to learn about the processes that take place but it’s not clear what the reason for those visits are. So there should be clarity on the objectives of the visits. There was a recent visit, they came and met with victims and different organisations, but after that the victims said ‘what happened with them?’”
Local government, Medellín.

Without guidance or a framework, the transition from humanitarian to development affects all actors and thus collaboration. This is not a new issue, but it was brought up as a major hurdle and warrants further exploration. In Juba, international actors spoke of “humanitarian aid simply being a band-aid filling the gap without a holistic approach”,²⁰ and “without guidance or a framework, money fills in the need wherever it can”.²¹ A highly volatile situation such as South Sudan means the country can suddenly change from a development perspective to a humanitarian one. Agencies whose mandate is developmental suddenly find themselves having to work outside of their remit, or INGOs have to leave the country since their humanitarian mandate is no longer applicable. Locals are left disillusioned since from their perspective, no change has occurred. This reiterates the need for a long-term strategy of development and humanitarian actors, local and international.

“Don’t send in firefighters to prevent a fire.”
International actor, Juba

“When there is a phenomenon involving populations of such a large magnitude, the chance of being reintegrated into society cannot be achieved through focused attention; it must include a local and regional development perspective.”
Local organisation, Medellín.

Typically there is an absence of a long-term plan, so those new to a role don’t have anything to work from immediately. Repetition of work and data collection when international actors arrive, rather than using findings from previous work, was cited as a major cause of frustration for local actors. It was perceived that when international actors arrive they seek to establish a new baseline rather than building on what was done before. Whilst this is extremely important in a dynamic situation, constant reassessments by international actors was considered by local actors to be detrimental, as previous work would be overlooked. Ultimately, it was viewed as internationals wasting resources. This problem could be linked to the lack of a regular forum for urban working groups who would have a long-term plan and serve as a conduit for previous and future work.

“Others have a system whereby every six months they change their staff so there is no continuity and the institutional memory is lost. When this person gets the chance to learn how to operate in that context they are again on the move. And then you have to bring in a new person who has to start learning again. This I believe creates mistrust and people begin to look down on some of these organisations.”
Local government, Juba.

In summary, projects involving international partners must ensure there is excellent transparency, to avoid confusion and resentment from local actors as to their purpose of being there. Interventions must be carefully balanced to provide assistance, but avoid creating dependency. Lastly an integrated, long-term plan which seeks to view the city as a whole, rather than in districts, administrations and sectors will lead to sustainability, and avoid issues with the transition from humanitarian to developmental work.

3.3.7 Incentives often don’t go further than a box ticking approach to collaboration

Working with local actors is good practice, but is not yet a core requirement of international humanitarian assistance, despite the majority of humanitarian organisations worldwide being national organisations. This section draws out the challenges related to a lack of incentivisation in the humanitarian system to take seriously the importance of collaboration with local actors.

If international actors can go it alone, they often will choose to do so. With short funding cycles and high pressure to quickly respond to needs, seeking collaborations and building partnerships are not being incentivised nor prioritised. Practically it might be easier to not collaborate with local actors to avoid ‘contractual headaches’ of partnership agreements. If international organisations already have the necessary technical capacity then they also save time on training.

“I simply already have the capacity to do the work that I need the local NGO to do.” International actor, Juba.

“Because we don’t want anything eating into our time, if we haven’t seen their [local actors] work, it probably means it isn’t that good, and we see no need to work with them.” International actor, Juba.

Alternatively, where local actors are needed, they can be subcontracted into international programmes, rather than collaborated with equally. In all three contexts, internationals were not obliged to work with local

²⁰ International actor, Juba.

²¹ International actor, Juba.

counterparts in the same way as they were in situations such as Syria, where access is not possible and work by international humanitarian organisations is predominantly remotely managed through Syrian actors to deliver lifesaving activities.

Collaboration was believed to occur only under certain conditions where the international actor was obliged to work with local actors.

The following were conditions suggested by local actors: The first condition is when the donor specifies the need to have a local partner to access the funding. The second condition relates to the deterioration of security: an international organisation has an ongoing project, but a problem means that they must operate remotely. Being the only ones that are left (not having anywhere to relocate to), local organisations are then brought in to deliver the project. The third condition is if money is left over and the international actor must use it quickly; to share the risk of losing the money, collaborating with a local organisation is a strategy.

“We always try to foster local NGOs because it helps us with areas that are harder to reach.”

International actor, Juba.

In summary, it appeared that the intrinsic benefit of working with local actors is not what is being valued, rather collaborations were being approached as a box ticking exercise.

3.3.8 Working within existing institutional frameworks and problems of centralisation

A trade-off exists between an institution, typically that with the most capacity, leading and making decisions on behalf of others, and peripheral organisations providing feedback of their requirements. Problems arise when those who are meant to be assisted feel their needs have not been met. Often this is because government or large institutions are acting in a ‘cookie-cutter’ fashion, which is not specific enough for the local contexts, and is too rigid in its approach.

If government was unable to manage during the response, then a major partner was lost. In an acute disaster setting, such as Typhoon Haiyan in the Philippines, the capacity the government has to respond can be placed under immense strain. Local actors spoke of the “chaos and anarchy”²² in the immediate aftermath, including looting and an absence of police presence. INGOs working on the response described how the government’s lack of capacity in responding

meant that “the UN and other INGOs were the ones who did the response and most of the recovery”.²³ If the local government is severely overwhelmed by a disaster, it makes it difficult for international actors to find ways to work within the institutional framework.

“A friend of mine, he’s a policeman, when I met him one night, he told me, ‘man, to each his own, because there’s no police’ – and he’s a police-man!”
Local organisation, Tacloban.

On an individual level, local actors spoke of the lack of preparation on the part of communities to face such an event. Strategic and holistic plans were in place, but the fundamentals of how to enact this at the local level were missing.

“It’s like a basketball team with a game plan of how to win the championship, but none of the players can dribble!” Local organisation, Tacloban.

Frequent administrative changes impede the progress of programming. New governments and changes to city administrations undermine the processes in place, for both local and international actors. This was exacerbated in the absence of a long-term plan. Organisations from all contexts spoke of the frustration of having to establish new relationships, build trust, go over work previously conducted, and having to shift agenda to what the new administration wanted to focus on. Some international actors described a sense of new work being driven by “people with egos”,²⁴ who simply wanted to change what had previously been done, even if it was working well. Often what was lacking was a handover from one person to another when they finished their role. This lack of continuity meant the new person did not know what projects were currently ongoing. Sometimes the political transition was dramatic, as was the case with the outbreak of a civil war in Juba, where half the government staff were no longer able to work the following day.

“We would like to work with government more, but obviously it is quite difficult. It is not only a question of politics, but government capacity. Because after the December event imagine a situation where you have a ministry, ministry staff: Dinka, Nuer, Equatorians,²⁵ all working together, then from one day to the other there is a civil war starting and all the Nuer staff have to disappear. Automatically you have a loss of capacity which is immediate. You have this throughout the ministries, departments and directorate generals. You have nobody to talk to in the ministries. You go there and they have all left.” International actor, Juba.

²² Local organisation, Tacloban.

²³ International actor, Tacloban.

²⁴ International Actor, Medellín

²⁵ These are some of the different ethnic groupings within South Sudan. The civil war displaced mostly Nuer in Juba.

“I’ve also spoken to other staff from other organisations and we are all overwhelmed by the impact that the change of local government has, and the impact that it has had on processes. Usually there is a lack of handover of information, there is sometimes a huge resistance to recognise what was done before and carry it on, or to recognise what was not done so positively but could be improved. This is getting better but it takes months – I mean we are now in April and since the beginning of the year, many things just stopped. There were no financial resources, nobody to talk to, because they had not yet decided who was responsible for what. So it’s a huge challenge, and I think there is a lot of political pride in the sense that, ‘We will do everything better and different’.” International actor, Medellín.

Centralised decision making often suffers from a lack of contextualised understanding. When decisions are made in a centralised manner, be it government or large organisation, the nuances are lost. Often it is these subtle aspects and contextualised knowledge that will determine uptake of the project, and its overall success. In Medellín, local actors described the lack of contextual understanding that decision makers from Bogota had about the city. Some even suggested that a lot of organisations from Medellín itself do not fully understand the context, as they do not have people based in the areas affected, so how can institutions based solely in the capital, let alone international actors, fully understand what’s happening? Another frustration was internationals coming to the country, but collaborating with NGOs based in Bogota, and claiming to have worked with locals.

“The most complicated aspect is to solve this centralism of the local government, because they are still taking decisions from their desks back in Bogota. So that’s the most complicated. The central government does not know the territories properly, and they are seeking to solve most of the difficult situations from there, not knowing the territories.” International actor, Medellín.

“Bogota said ‘I want to do this’, but the local authorities were doing it anyway! It was already done. The projects that are being undertaken by the government are the result of a really limited comprehension of what’s happening in the territories, and it’s full of stereotypes.” Local government, Medellín.

A similar issue existed in the aftermath of Typhoon Haiyan. There is a lack of communication from national strategies to local practice, however the local is still expected to implement everything from the national authorities. An international actor may arrive and, by law, expect something is happening in a locality, only to find the scenario to be very different: people not

employed in roles they should be in, and mandatory structures missing.

In summary, frequent administrative changes undermine long-term processes that have been built on trust. This affects all stakeholders involved. When decisions are made in a centralised manner, nuances are often missed. Where possible, harness local knowledge to devise contextualised interventions.

3.4 How could collaboration be improved?

This section pulls key recommendations provided by interviewees during the research, and also offers ideas from the analysis of the challenges. For city-specific suggestions on improvements to collaboration please see the Companion Piece. Five key themes emerged and as much as possible, actionable recommendations have been suggested.

3.4.1 Partnerships and relationships

Time, despite pressures, needs to be invested into rationalising the conversation between all actors to build trust. The emphasis here was on having a more equal dialogue between actors founded on a firm understanding of what the other means, and how each actor can fit into the bigger picture. Collaboration encountered difficulties when there was distrust, often associated with the occurrence of real or perceived false promises. To tackle this problem, from the beginning a joint rationalisation of the conversation, terms, language and theory used to understand a problem should be built. This is especially the case where priorities are shifting in a dynamic crisis. It was understood that time and the pressure to deliver services was an issue, but that the time given to engaging in dialogue would ensure a better response and sense of partnership. Therefore, taking the time to clearly discuss issues and explanations behind decisions will help build mutual trust in the others’ motives, and ensure the most tailored approach.

Collaboration should be focused on promoting strategic growth, not financial transactions.

Collaborations should be built upon a meeting where the priorities are made together.

“The strategic partnership is a partnership where organisations with common values and common objectives actually have a discussion that does not necessarily involve the finances.” Local actor, Juba.

The interest in moving away from discussing finances was rooted to a feeling that conversations would be abruptly cut off with potential international partners if local organisations could not currently meet the

requirements or qualifications to access the funding. Instead, jointly constructing strategy and growth with “sincerity, honesty and openness” was felt to foster stronger collaborations.

Better representation, beyond a box ticking approach, of local actors at higher levels of decision making, strategy and programming.

International and local actors stressed that representation should not be about filling a quota. There is a real need to have input at the decision-making level from those who have been affected and live with the consequences. Committees should be balanced or favoured towards local actors. That is, if there are five people needed to make a decision, at least three should be of the locality.

Cultural sensitivity at all times ensures that both partners feel empowered to give input during decision making.

Particular attention should be given to where and how coordination meetings are convened. Rules and norms of invitations to such meetings are important cultural aspects to consider. As mentioned, in the Philippines it was important to be formally invited to meetings, so that local actors felt welcomed and valued. Multiple ways of encouraging feedback during meetings need to be explored to ensure that attendees – local and international – feel willing and comfortable to give thoughts and criticism. A few key informants should be contacted immediately after a disaster to help inform communication and engagement strategies of the incoming international actors.

Projects big and small should focus on having partnerships or consortia of different organisations working together.

National and local organisations cited joining consortia of organisations as a means to access large institutional funding. Whilst in theory either international or local organisations could lead the consortium, in practice no examples of a local organisation taking the lead could be given. A lack of internal capacity, related to managing funds, was cited as the main reason. However if partnerships were to become more strategic and less centred around finances, then there could be the potential for co-leading between local and international organisations in consortia. This would demonstrate an interest in supporting and strengthening the capacity of the local organisation and help ready local actors ‘to absorb the shock’ when international organisations eventually exit.

3.4.2 Building from previous work

Invest in institutions not individuals. Where turnover is high and cannot be stopped, it was felt that there needed to be more investment in local institutions. Workshops were not viewed as an effective use of money as they invest in individuals and not in institutions. With the resultant brain drain from local organisation as national staff are ‘poached’ to international organisations, it was felt that more should be done around capacitating the local organisation to support the growth of its staff.

Seek to strengthen the whole, not isolated institutions or projects. The whole system needs to work together in a well-articulated manner, which begins from the grassroots up. Programmes rooted in community-based learning have rapidly become the norm in development. Actors involved in a disaster response should be mindful of not imposing collaboration through isolated projects which could weaken other structures.

Gather data locally to ensure that new projects support and build from initiatives that have worked previously. Local actors suggested that the best way to avoid repetition of work was to speak with as wide a range of informants as possible to understand what had been done previously. As much data as possible should be gathered directly from local contexts, and not national databases.

3.4.3 Adaptability and flexibility

Streamline the process of establishing partnerships and giving access to resources. It was strongly felt that there needed to be greater flexibility in partnering processes with non-registered, non-traditional local actors, such as private groups. Suggestions emerged of waiving protocols during the response phase. Funding could be made simpler by creating one-page templates for proposals of small grants which local actors can complete rapidly at the end of a coordination meeting. The time it takes to approve bidding proposals is a barrier to collaboration. Reducing the waiting time to have something approved would result in more local actors willing to work through international donors.

When partnering isn't possible, flexible ways to share resources, such as transport with local actors, should be established as part of international agencies' response protocols. When local actors have more access to resources (potentially those destroyed after a crisis), they will be able to do more, which in turn may reveal future avenues for collaboration, or at the very least improve the response. The variety of mobile apps for pooling resources would be an interesting area of research and application in the humanitarian context.

Flexible, tailored working groups and task forces help deliver a nuanced response appropriate to the context. A number of working groups or task forces which brought together actors with different backgrounds were employed to focus on urban and disaster-specific issues. These task forces were considered to help deliver a more tailored response. Task forces could also avoid the issues of competitions for skillsets which were raised. Local actors would be integral in identifying the micro-gaps, around which to build collaborative working groups and task forces.

3.4.4 International involvement pre-, during, and post-response

Greater pre-disaster focus with pre-established partnerships between government, local civil society, communities, and international actors is required. In strategic disaster-prone areas such as cities, where there are ports or airports able to accept and distribute relief items, a focus should be given on prepositioning emergency relief goods. In a similar vein, pre-established partnerships between international and local actors with a focus on contingency plans, should the local actors be heavily affected by the crisis, would help ensure that locals and internationals have defined roles and responsibilities that would help to speed up response activities. Outside of the immediate relief and response, it was felt that international actors should continue to play a key role in overseeing implementation of what is agreed in peace processes and recovery plans, and hold the government accountable for non-fulfilment of policy measures.

The daily lives of international actors should not be kept separate from the communities they live in. Security of personnel is a real concern, and we are not advocating that international actors take risks. Nevertheless, the separation in the daily lives of international and local actors builds resentment, reduces chances for discussion and dialogue, limits contextual understanding, and ultimately, harms the response. This is a significant area for future research, and is only just beginning to be touched on.

To reduce high turnover and loss of relationships, short-term contracts should be phased out.

The ability to sign a three-month contract means that individuals rarely build momentum in understanding a context. Though it may have become difficult to find international humanitarians willing to commit to long periods of time, ideally contracts for intentional actors should not be short term, to help reduce the high turnover and encourage the development of an in-depth understanding of the context. This will also build trust that internationals intend to stay with affected communities.

3.4.5 Better access to information

Better and more accessible information on sources of humanitarian funding for local or national organisations. Local organisations that had no previous experience working in a humanitarian response cited that they learnt about the way the cluster system functions via informed friends. International development organisations interested in training could thus prioritise sessions on Humanitarian 101. Humanitarian jargon needs to be well-explained and translated during coordination meetings, and in the succeeding updates. Understanding the humanitarian architecture and terminology will help local organisations work out how they fit in, and where best to seek sources of funding. Providing a 'menu' of funding options would help local actors to access money and build capacity.

4

Conclusions and recommendations

4.1 Conclusions from the study

4.1.1 Who are the 'local actors'?

Throughout the literature on disaster response, there is increasing recognition that local actors are the earliest and main responders. Who exactly these actors are depends on the scale, nature, and location of the disaster. There is no universal definition of a local actor. Examples given from this research varied from government to community members, and included all in between who have influence. As such, the term was extremely broad and subjective in nature. This fact must be considered when partnerships are sought.

An important issue to highlight is whether national actors, usually from the capital, are considered local. Local actors tended not to consider someone from the capital as a local, as they felt they did not understand the context or represent them. International actors however often conflated local with national. A project can therefore involve a partner whom international actors would consider to be local, but local actors do not recognise as such. This can not only be a source of confusion, but resentment.

With the term 'humanitarian', there existed confusion as to how humanitarian work differed to the work being carried out by locals involved in the disaster response. This was reinforced during interviews,

where the distinction was viewed to be redundant. There was preference for the use of either local actors and international actors, or local humanitarians and international humanitarians. To contrast local and humanitarians is unfair since international actors do not themselves have a monopoly on being humanitarians.

Civilian attitudes can have a huge effect on the success of projects, even when they are not stakeholders. The remit of this research did not extend to data collection with civilians, however, in all contexts, interviewees spoke about having the trust of the community as a fundamental basis from which to work, and how this trust was often lacking. Although civilians or 'beneficiaries' may not always be considered an actor, their views will ultimately influence the effectiveness and longevity of a project.

4.1.2 What are the urban-specific challenges to collaboration?

The urban context is an emerging locus for disasters. With its concentration of people, power and resources, it is a much more complicated and dynamic area to work in compared to the rural context. In each context, huge populations of people who had been displaced had arrived to the urban area. This resulted in services being extremely stretched and difficulties finding urban space available for relocation. Usually, these people ended up living in the most hazardous and insecure parts of the urban area. This created two main problems, firstly their hardship continued due to the lack of services and

the informal manner in which they found themselves living. Secondly, those who live beside them in extreme poverty endure the same hardships, but often were not eligible to receive the same assistance. This can lead to resentment within the community if only certain people are helped. There is thus a growing interest in area-based approaches to humanitarian assistance (McGranahan and Satterthwaite, 2015).

A large divide continues to exist between international and local actors in all aspects. International actors have far superior security protocols, live in hotels or guarded accommodation, are driven in agency vehicles and socialise predominantly with other internationals. Meanwhile, local actors often have to endure hardship. The arrival of international organisations, particularly when responding to an acute situation in a fragile region with an unstable economy, pushes up the cost of general amenities. This can price locals out of the market. Feelings of resentment from local actors towards international actors do not foster a good working relationship. International actors, being removed from the reality of the context, may also fail to understand the nuances of where they are working, which can lead to poorly designed interventions.

At first, the crisis may only affect one part of the urban area. However a city is not made up of isolated districts, administrations and institutes, rather they are all connected. What happens in one part will eventually be reflected throughout. The findings from this study echo those from ICRC's recommendations for Habitat III, that those who live in an urban area rely on an intricate network of urban services (ICRC, 2016), and as such, urban-based challenges need to be addressed in a holistic manner, with a whole-of-society approach.

As the urban context is emerging as the new locus of humanitarian assistance, it appeared that it had not yet fully been compartmentalised as a unique context by those working in it. Despite urban-specific questions being asked, urban-specific answers were not always given, and key informants often slipped into discussing experiences of the rural context or general impressions alongside their experience of urban contexts. Urban contexts were acknowledged as not yet being a unique programmatic focus, despite being the hub of planning and programming activity. What an urban crisis constituted in each of the three contexts varied, and knowledge picked up by professionals in one context did not necessarily translate to other contexts.

4.1.3 What are the main challenges to collaboration?

Challenges affecting collaboration were derived from the humanitarian industry itself, which promotes competition amongst actors for funding, inefficiently funnels money through costly middle management, permits a high turnover of staff, and has rigid bureaucracy.

Although local capacity is sometimes limited, it is frequently underestimated even further. Local actors, however, often feel that their capacity is good. There was misunderstanding surrounding the term, as for international actors, capacity related to financial and operational abilities. For local actors, capacity related to understanding the context, and prioritising the response. The perception that capacity is low is perpetuated because local actors are often not given recognition for their work. Local actors are frequently seen as a tool to help internationally-driven humanitarian programming. This is instead of international organisations using local knowledge and expertise to enhance the work, predetermined by local organisations. A power imbalance exists whereby the financing, and therefore decision-making abilities and agenda, lie with the international actors. Local actors are also not viewed to be accountable enough according to international standards. The incentives to collaborate are often missing and it appeared that the intrinsic benefit of working with local actors is not what is being valued. Collaborations, when initiated, were done in a box ticking manner.

Sustainability is a core component of a successful intervention. For this to occur, strategies towards longevity must be factored in at the design stage of a programme. Often time constraints affect the ability of international actors to understand the context and build trust. Limited contextual understanding means international actors focus on what they believe is the problem and not what the real problem is. Local actors are the best placed to understand the challenges present, the nuances of what will or will not work, and assist with prioritisation. If there is a lack of cultural sensitivity or their input is overlooked then a programme is unlikely to succeed. For international actors, spending more time fully immersed in the setting and working with a wide range of local partners is the only known way to begin understanding it. Local procedures must be followed to avoid duplication of work in one area,

and missing other areas. Harnessing pre-existing partnerships, signs and symbols of trust, and using them carefully under direction from local actors helps build trust. Often among the projects that endured, had the most impact and widest approval were those which took a cross-cutting approach, integrating many different challenges and seeking holistic solutions.

4.1.4 What are the differences in conflict-response and natural disaster-response?

Broadly, collaboration between actors in two major types of crisis were being compared in this research: conflict and natural disasters (with associated urban displacement). In Juba (a conflict setting) and Tacloban, Ormoc and Palo (a natural disaster setting), international organisations tended to take over, whereas in Medellin (a conflict setting), this was not the case. There are multiple reasons to explain this phenomenon. First of all, the Colombian conflict is chronic, spanning over six decades, whereas South Sudan is a much more overt and acute situation, more similar in nature to the post-disaster setting in the Philippines. It appeared then to be less of a case of differences between natural disaster and conflict, but of acute versus protracted situations. The volatility of the situation in South Sudan approximated the acute needs of populations after a catastrophic natural disaster, to which international humanitarian assistance is well-adapted. Colombia, on the other hand, has evolved into what appears as a more chronic developmental situation in which the humanitarian community may not feel comfortable expending resources.

Perhaps most importantly are the differences in income status between the countries; South Sudan is a lower income country, the Philippines is a lower middle income country, and Colombia is a higher middle income country (World Bank, 2016). In South Sudan, the international response is very dominant, and persists because there are so few effective government services. In the Philippines, where the government had greater capacity to manage the response, the majority of the international actors left after the first six months. In the more wealthy setting of Colombia, the protracted nature of the displacement, combined with a much more capable and resilient government, means international organisations are rarely based there. The differences between the settings were thus more likely associated with the resources and experience of the government related to the crisis.

4.2 Recommendations to improve collaboration in the urban context

This research concludes with the following recommendations for improving collaboration:

- Change the focus to how collaboration works between locals and internationals. Place local actors in the centre of design, with international actors fitting into the local humanitarian or developmental agenda, not deciding how local actors can fit into the international agenda.
- Partnerships need to be approached on a platform of equal decision making, with joint prioritisation of issues and solutions. Clear, simple, and open communication will ensure that many different local actors feel comfortable engaging in the humanitarian process. In particular, humanitarian jargon needs to be explained well and translated during coordination meetings, and in the updates that follow.
- Better representation – beyond a box ticking approach – of local actors at higher levels of decision making, strategy and programming. This in practice means greater emphasis on an equal dialogue in person and at all levels between international actors and a range of local actors.
- Donors need to be willing to take more (perceived) risks and give funding directly to local organisations, rather than funnelling money through other organisations which then subcontract the local organisations. Taking this approach would help local organisations build capacity and drive programming.
- Provide a ‘menu’ of funding options to help local actors to access money and build capacity themselves. Local actors should be sensitised to the range of donors and funding streams for humanitarian response and briefed on how the emergency humanitarian system works.
- Though it may have become difficult to find international humanitarians willing to commit to long periods of time, ideally contracts for intentional actors should not be short-term, to help reduce the high turnover and encourage the development of an in-depth understanding of the context.
- Ensure those living in extreme poverty are not left behind. Interventions should use an area-based, trans-sectoral, participatory approach.

- Avoid going to places simply because they are easy to access and to subsequently deliver the organisational mandate on time.
- In strategic disaster-prone areas such as cities, where there are ports or airport, pre-established partnerships between government, local actors, and international actors should be prioritised. Cities can act as strategic locations to accept and distribute relief.

4.3 Areas for further research

Based on findings from this research and gaps in the literature, the authors recommend the following areas for further research.

How do local and international actors collaborate in response to other urban crises?

Perhaps most notably is during epidemics such as ebola in West Africa. Here we have an emerging type of disaster that may warrant a unique way of responding.

Is the humanitarian structure disempowering to local initiatives? This research suggested that both funding acquisition and strategic decisions are dominated by INGOs, and to some extent the larger NNGOs. This can prevent local grassroots initiatives from developing in the first instance, and once INGOs are in-country, they tend to avoid collaborating with unregistered local organisations. Added to this is the brain drain that occurs when local actors move from smaller organisations to larger international ones. More research is needed to explore whether the humanitarian system contributes to or perpetuates a state of disempowerment amongst local initiatives.

What does capacity mean to local organisations?

A large discrepancy exists between what local and international actors understand to be good capacity. This stems from the fact that no universal definition exists, and the working definitions can be interpreted differently by different actors. Such a significant amount of money goes to capacity building, and yet many local organisations claim to have good capacity. More research is needed to refine how the term is understood by all parties, in particular by local actors.

Acronyms

| | |
|--------|------------------------------------------------------------------|
| CSO | Civil society organisation |
| FGD | Focus group discussion |
| IDP | Internally displaced person |
| IFRC | International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies |
| IIED | International Institute for Environment and Development |
| INGO | International non-governmental organisation |
| NGO | Non-governmental organisation |
| NNGO | National non-governmental organisation |
| OCHA | Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs |
| UNICEF | United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund |
| UNISDR | United Nations Office for Disaster Risk Reduction |
| USD | United States dollar |

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Traditionally, the humanitarian sector has responded to emergencies in rural contexts; however an increasing number of urban crises has necessitated a re-evaluation of standard procedures. The urban setting poses unique challenges, which are best met through close collaboration with local actors who understand the context. However, policy and practice of how to bridge local and international actors lack a systematic approach. This study explores the urban-specific challenges to local and international collaboration. Recommendations to improve partnerships include giving directly to local agencies, rather than subcontracting them, and advocating a holistic approach, in line with local humanitarian or developmental agendas. These recommendations have emerged from case studies involving interviews with local stakeholders carried out in three distinct urban contexts, each with a different type of disaster experience: Tacloban, Ormoc and Palo in the Philippines, following natural disasters, in particular Typhoon Haiyan; Medellín in Colombia, following ongoing conflict and displacement; and Juba in South Sudan, following conflict, violence and civil war. A companion piece analyses each of these case studies in more detail.

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