

Time to reassess capacity-building partnerships

by Brooke Lauten

Since 2001 the Watchlist on Children and Armed Conflict has worked with local civil society organisations, child protection networks and grassroots organisations to build capacity to monitor and respond to abuses of children's rights. Through our capacity-building partnerships, we work to shift the power structure that defines the roles of national and international NGOs in humanitarian programming.

'Capacity building' is often defined in a way which implies that international organisations/agencies are 'investing' and national organisations are 'developing'. In an effort to recognise the added value that national organisations can offer to their international counterparts, the capacity-building discourse has begun to shift away from the investing/developing model and towards a conversation on partnerships. By focusing on ways in which both the international and national organisations can work as 'partners', organisations on both sides hope to address what one expert referred to as the 'asymmetry of power': relationships in which "the northern organisation can do to the southern organisation what the southern organisation cannot do to the northern organisation."¹

However, despite recent efforts to partner with and expand the capacity of local organisations, humanitarian action remains, in large part, driven by international NGOs. If international organisations are serious about strengthening and expanding the role of local organisations in humanitarian response, they must critically examine the structure of current partnerships and seek ways to foster a more equitable relationship through which both the international and the national partner benefit.

Humanitarian policymakers and practitioners have increasingly come to view the development of 'partnerships' between national and international civil society

organisations as a key element of responding to humanitarian crises. The structure of these working relationships varies significantly across agencies. Most commonly, an international NGO holds the operational reins while the national organisation functions as an 'implementing partner'. This type of partnership tends to extend the reach and staffing capacity of the international organisation, allowing the international NGO to implement programmes quickly among a large population. Because local NGOs are not likely to face as many bureaucratic obstacles to bringing staff into areas of the country affected by crisis, and agency policy often allows national staff to work and travel in areas where international staff cannot, implementing partnerships have become essential for the timely delivery of aid in large-scale humanitarian crises.

However, these 'partnerships' are typically less effective in enhancing the organisational capacity of the national partner. Implementing NGOs rarely have a major role to play in determining the design or strategy behind a programme they are tasked with executing. While the national implementers are often consulted as the project evolves, formal decision-making authority rests exclusively with the international NGO. While in some cases the technical capacity of the national NGO is enhanced through the execution of a project, strengthening technical capacity is rarely the primary objective of an implementing partnership.

Government and civil society partnerships

As part of an effort to facilitate a transition to post-conflict programming, international humanitarian organisations have also begun to employ capacity-strengthening partnerships with host governments and related ministries. Although the initial humanitarian crisis is almost always accompanied by a partial or complete breakdown in the government's ability to provide services to its citizenry, the rebuilding of the capacity of the government has come to be seen as an essential step towards recovery from a continuing current crisis and prevention of future crises. However, simply strengthening the skills of the government does not necessarily create an accountable government. In partnering with government agencies, it is essential that humanitarian agencies do not ignore partnership opportunities with national organisations. A strong civil society provides an important check on government power. In cases where humanitarian agencies do not match efforts to improve government functioning with efforts to build up local civil society, they neglect the notion of government responsibility to its citizenry.

In order to fill this gap, some international NGOs have initiated operational partnerships with national NGOs. Unlike an implementing partnership or a partnership with a government agency, an operational partnership is designed to allow two independent organisations to work actively and collaboratively toward shared goals. This type of arrangement almost always emphasises transparency, equity and complementary strengths, and typically includes regular meetings and carrying out joint project activities. Ideally, both the national and international NGO engaged in the partnership benefit from the arrangement. Through

partnership, the national NGO offers the international NGO greater informational and geographic access to the affected population. Additionally, national NGO involvement often ensures significant local buy-in to programmes, making the programmes in which they are involved more sustainable. Conversely, the international NGO can extend its global reach, can often offer an increased level of security for the national NGO by ensuring that attacks on facilities and programmes will be noticed by the international community, and can provide the national NGO with technical and financial assistance.

Despite clear benefits to both parties engaged in operational partnerships, control over the relationship typically rests squarely with the international NGO. The international NGO almost always has greater access to resources than the national NGO. Due primarily to this access, the international NGOs are more often likened to donors than to true partners by the national NGOs. In fact, when used by many local organisations throughout the world, the word 'partner' is largely synonymous with 'international

NGO donor'. While the discourse around partnership continues to focus on equality, the practical barriers to achieving true parity between national and international NGOs are rarely addressed. In order for the international NGO to move away from a donor role, operational capacity-building partnerships must be approached holistically, with sensitivity to past experience, current needs and the envisioned future of the organisation for which capacity is being created.

Whose vision?

In humanitarian contexts, many local NGOs begin their work as implementing partners of large international NGOs. In such cases, the organisational 'vision' of national NGOs is driven almost exclusively by the needs of the international NGOs. By continuing to operate at the behest of the international organisations, recently established national organisations ensure a continued flow of funding. However, while responding to the operational needs of international organisations allows national organisations to

compile a patchwork of activities they are capable of implementing, it leaves less opportunity for national organisations to establish their independent mission and goals.

While any organisation – national or international – will inevitably follow funding sources, building expertise within civil society requires operational focus. National NGOs must actively use available resources to develop their operational strategy. They can network with other national NGOs to learn from their experiences and they must investigate means to earn money locally.² In cases where capacity-building initiatives allow implementing agencies to begin independent activities through operational partnerships, both the international and national partner must make a concerted effort to ensure that programmatic goals are independently initiated and shared. In other words, programmatic vision must come as much from the national organisation as the international organisation.

Once mutual objectives are established between organisations, it is essential that capacity-building



As part of UNHCR's community empowerment projects, workers build a school and pass on their construction skills to younger returnees in Gbarlatuah, Bong county, Liberia.

efforts respond to capacity needs. Operational partnerships often focus on building programmatic capacity. The international organisation provides technical and financial support to a national NGO in order to build local expertise in a particular thematic function (such as child protection, health or women's issues). While improvement in programmatic capacity is essential, programmatic capacity building must be mirrored with an equivalent build-up in administrative capacity. Without the strengthening of administrative systems, any organisation will eventually become overwhelmed by increased programmatic demands. Thus operational partners should strive to link increased programmatic capacity with capacity-building support in programme management, project cycle management, the establishment of financial systems and other administrative functions.

Funding barriers

While operational partnerships are often limited by the focus of the capacity-building activities, the funding structure for these activities also poses significant barriers to the effective development of the national organisation. In most organisational partnerships, the national organisation is supported through a small grant from the international partner. These grants range in size but rarely exceed \$50,000 and are typically \$5-30,000. In a newly formed partnership with a recently established national organisation, a \$5,000 grant often constitutes a significant portion of the national NGO's operating budget. Furthermore, \$5,000 is typically a negligible sum for the international partner. Thus, as 'seed funding' for a partnership, small grants can be ideal. On the one hand, they provide national organisations with limited funding history reasonable flexibility to build either programmatic or administrative capacity. On the other, a \$5,000 grant poses limited financial risks for international organisations in the event the partnership does not progress as originally envisioned.

Unfortunately, even when national organisations are able to prove their effectiveness in using small grants,

many have difficulty attracting donors who are willing to provide more than \$30,000 per grant to support the national NGO's activities. This unwillingness is due in part to the fact that small grants are typically focused on supporting the functioning of a national organisation rather than its growth. As noted above, the focus on programmatic capacity building often limits the degree to which national organisations can strengthen administrative systems, particularly their financial management systems. Donors will simply not provide larger funds to organisations which do not have such systems in place. Because national NGOs often do not meet the 'standards' to be eligible for greater funding, even the most successful among them are limited to receiving a plethora of small grants in order to grow. The most successful national organisations are often able to sustain their operations with these small grants. However, because their attention is divided among so many international 'partners', it is extremely difficult for them to grow to a point where they will be eligible to compete for the same funding that is granted to the large international NGOs.

The unwillingness of international NGOs to expect success from their partners also cripples the development of the national NGO. Too often, the small grant scheme assumes that failure will be the likely outcome of a partnership project. By keeping the grants short-term and small-scale, any fallout from a capacity-building project can be absorbed by the international organisation. However, by exclusively focusing on its own ability to tolerate loss, the international organisation often ignores opportunities to increase the absorptive capacity of the national organisation. If an operational partnership is to be effective, both partners must consider the ways that funding structure impacts the future of the respective organisations. As the national NGO partner experiences increased success, it can and should be held to progressive standards of project evaluation. Likewise, the international NGO partner should respond to increased national NGO performance by facilitating funding opportunities which extend beyond small grants.

Conclusion

Most international humanitarian NGOs focus on crisis response in countries where national governments are unwilling or unable to provide adequate support to their citizenry. In any country where they operate, the ultimate goal of international humanitarian organisations is to transition responsibility for their beneficiaries back to national governments and civil society. As such, operational partnerships between international and national NGOs are created to facilitate the replacement of the stop-gap efforts by the international organisation with equally effective, long-term, sustainable efforts of the national organisation. With appropriate attention given to shared priorities, increased programmatic and administrative capacity and the progressive accountability of both the national and the international NGO, an operational partnership can function as an effective vehicle for promoting local civil society in a crisis-affected country. Ultimately, these efforts will allow nationally-based organisations to respond to future crises in their country and to define and achieve their country's development objectives.

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For more information on Watchlist's work with local organisations, see www.watchlist.org/advocacy/policystatements/the_power_of_partnership.pdf

1. Charles Elliot as quoted in Postma, William (1994) 'NGO Partnership and Institutional Development: Making it Real, Making it Intentional', *Canadian Journal of African Studies*, Vol. 28, No 3. p 450
2. Postma, William (1994) 'NGO Partnership and Institutional Development: Making it Real, Making it Intentional', *Canadian Journal of African Studies*, Vol. 28, No 3. p 453