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Exclusion of local actors from coordination leadership in child protection

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Despite multiple commitments to and much guidance on the desirability of local actors leading coordination at the national level, the reality is that they continue to be excluded.

At present, there are 33 national humanitarian child protection coordination groups (formerly known as child protection sub-clusters) in the Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC) cluster system.¹ These groups set the overall strategic direction for child protection humanitarian responses and can have great influence over the allocation of funding and training opportunities to organisations providing child protection. A recent survey showed that these groups include on average 22 national-level child protection organisations per group and that over 60% of these are local actors.² However, it is surprising that while national actors account for the majority of members, none of the 33 groups is currently co-led by a national civil society organisation (CSO).

The Global Protection Cluster's own guidance documents explicitly encourage the co-leadership of local NGOs because it brings unique perspectives to decision making and can lead to more sustainable, inclusive and effective coordination mechanisms. For example, a strong local coordinator can tap into local networks to amplify advocacy messages and produce more accurate analyses – and may be more effective in monitoring accountability to the children and their families. In most contexts, employing a strong coordinator from a local NGO will also be less costly than someone from an international organisation.

Child Protection Minimum Standards require the cluster lead agency to build on existing local coordination structures and encourage CSOs to co-lead whenever possible,³ while the IASC has stated that Resident Coordinators or Humanitarian Coordinators and Humanitarian Country Teams should ensure that funding is not an obstacle for agencies that wish

to share cluster leadership and that “those in shared leadership roles should help to build national capacity”.⁴

Why, then, are there not more local NGOs in coordination leadership or co-leadership roles? Many explanations are offered but the two we hear most often are that local partners lack sufficient capacity to lead the coordination group at national level and that international actors are needed for their neutrality, impartiality and/or independence.

A question of capacity?

Like the international community, local NGOs have a diverse range of experience and competence. Many UN agencies and international NGOs (INGOs) in lead or co-lead roles already employ national colleagues for these leadership and co-leadership positions. In many contexts, local or national NGOs coordinate local NGO networks and child protection thematic working groups, or oversee integrated, multi-sectoral child protection programmes. They also often lead or co-lead coordination groups at the sub-national level. It is unclear why the same capacities are not considered relevant or sufficient for national coordination roles.

Many existing humanitarian child protection coordination groups have been in place for over 10 years (for example, in Somalia, the Democratic Republic of the Congo and the Central African Republic), and many local child protection organisations and personnel have been working in the sector throughout this period. Nevertheless, when a child protection coordinator position was advertised for one of these contexts in early 2018, the selection criteria specified an international person with five years of professional experience. Is it really possible that no local actor had

sufficient experience and competence to be considered for such a role?

International coordinators continue to rotate rapidly through child protection leadership positions, despite often having substantially less professional experience and poorer understanding of the local context than local candidates. Strong national NGOs once had national co-leadership roles but were eventually replaced by INGOs (for example, in Somalia). A recent review of diversity in humanitarian leadership noted that the crowding out of local partners is common.⁵

Rather than lacking sufficient capacity, it may be more accurate to say that local and national NGOs lack flexible institutional funding or the robust human resources, finance or management systems that many large INGOs enjoy. This makes it difficult to recruit and retain coordination experts or draw on support from a regional or global headquarters. Nevertheless, these are surmountable constraints. Imagine what could have been achieved if the international humanitarian community had spent the last 10 years seconding coordination specialists to work within local partner organisations, or offering coaching, mentoring and shadowing opportunities, or funding a local partner to hire and manage their own national or international coordination specialist.

A question of neutrality, impartiality and independence?

It is certainly true that neutrality, impartiality and independence are critical in protection responses and that sometimes governments need support with these. If the services of an international agency are needed, UNICEF has a formal IASC mandate to be the agency of last resort for child protection within the cluster system, and should be able to address many of the concerns about neutrality, impartiality and independence. If additional levels of independence are needed, tripartite arrangements have been established in some contexts (government, UN and INGO). As such, there is sufficient flexibility available to groups to structure their leadership arrangements to fit a given context.

It is a false assumption, however, that it is only international actors who can ensure impartiality. Local and national CSOs are already in leadership roles at the sub-national level and are navigating complex local operating contexts, dynamics and relationships (we see this in our work in both Nigeria and South Sudan). Local actors are seemingly trusted to effectively manage coordination (with all its complexities) at the sub-national level – but not at the national level. Why are international organisations willing to invest human resources in national coordination roles but not in sub-national coordination roles? Many local colleagues have suggested to us that international actors prefer to lead coordination groups at the national level because these roles carry the greatest visibility and influence. Others have suggested that INGOs believe that they can do a better job than local organisations. Some have even suggested that INGOs seek national leadership roles as a way to secure access to financial resources for their own programmes.

Humanitarian Response Plans (which outline the humanitarian community's approach and priorities) do not outline how leadership decisions are made, or whether transition plans are in place, despite commitments from the IASC and the Global Protection Cluster to develop transition plans within three months of the onset of a crisis and annually thereafter. The full reasons for the lack of local actors leading coordination at the national level remain unclear but surely the humanitarian child protection community can do better.

Three challenges

As child protection coordination groups and HCTs prepare their Humanitarian Response Plans for 2019, we would like to issue three challenges to our international coordination colleagues, to all child protection coordination group members and to the cluster system more generally.

Child protection coordination groups: allocate 2–3 sentences in your next year's plan to explicitly outline leadership arrangements.

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Given that coordination leadership is fundamental to the humanitarian response, leadership arrangements should be explained in the humanitarian strategy. If local actors are not in a leadership role, the strategy should note what transitions are underway or what preconditions are needed to enable a transition.

INGOs (especially co-leads): commit to a time-bound, resourced strategy to transition to local co-leadership, including through providing coaching, mentoring and/or shadowing support where relevant. This transition should happen as quickly as possible but should of course be a responsible transition with a timeframe that reflects this. INGOs should factor this transition into their fundraising and internal resource allocations.

Donors: if the first two challenges are not met by Coordination Groups and INGOs, stop funding INGO co-leadership

positions, and instead prioritise directly supporting local co-leadership.

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1. bit.ly/GPC-child-protection
2. CP AoR Annual Survey 2017 bit.ly/CPAoR-AnnualSurvey2017
3. CP AoR (2010) Minimum Standards for Child Protection in Humanitarian Action, p38–39 bit.ly/CP-Minimum-Standards
4. See IASC (2011, revised 2015) *Reference Module for Cluster Coordination at Country Level* bit.ly/IASC-2015-cluster-coordination
5. Humanitarian Advisory Group (2018) *Drawing on our diversity: Humanitarian leadership*, p10 bit.ly/HAG-diversity-leadership-2018