

Valuing local humanitarian knowledge: learning from the Central African Republic

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The humanitarian community needs to better identify, collect, harness and disseminate the local humanitarian knowledge that is developed within protracted conflict settings by national NGOs.

The experiences of Caritas Centrafrique and its partner the Centre for Development and Emergency Practice (CENDEP) show that national non-governmental organisations (NGOs)¹ have much to contribute to the existing knowledge of the international humanitarian sector. The two organisations co-convoked a workshop in June 2018 on Transferring and Valuing Local Humanitarian Knowledge in order to reflect on the importance of local knowledge and how the humanitarian community can better identify, collect, harness and disseminate such knowledge for more contextualised, localised humanitarian responses.²

Caritas Centrafrique is the joint-lead agency in food distribution, along with the World Food Programme, in three critical zones of the Central African Republic (CAR). Its national staff's local knowledge has guided the organisation in its development of a specific humanitarian know-how, allowing better access to affected communities, mitigating operational risk, informing culturally sensitive interactions with local formal and informal authorities, and easing

the organisation's negotiations with rebel groups. In CAR, where more than one in five people has been displaced by protracted conflict, Caritas Centrafrique staff are able to negotiate safe access to communities and create a humanitarian space in areas in which it is difficult for international actors to operate.

Local knowledge: a key aspect of localisation

Knowledge (whether local or humanitarian) and its management are extremely underrepresented in the literature on the localisation of aid – that is, transferring leadership for aid provision to local rather than international actors. References to local knowledge are mainly limited to indigenous knowledge (usually reduced to technical know-how such as vernacular building techniques or to contextual information), knowledge about the community or basic situational data such as information on accessibility. Most examples are taken from natural disaster settings, without application to protracted conflict situations. Furthermore, such knowledge is invoked only during

preparation and planning phases, such as for needs assessments and context analyses. Local humanitarian knowledge tends to be seen as intuitive rather than evidence-based; furthermore, some national NGOs' practices may be considered to conform insufficiently to international humanitarian principles. All this undermines the potential for local knowledge to be understood by the international community.

Caritas Centrafrique and CENDEP, however, have been working together to make national staff's knowledge more visible and valued by the international humanitarian community. Their approach is to build upon existing knowledge, practices and experiences. Caritas' national staff – who see themselves as 'children of the country' (*fil du pays*) – are able to retrieve and understand differently sensitive information received directly from community members. They know how this flow of information is generated, how it is expressed and how it should be interpreted taking into account local connotations and meanings. This local knowledge provides the basis for training on data collection and management and on communication and reporting, plus follow-up activities on peer mentoring, monitoring of implementation in the field, one-to-one accompaniment and strengthening a culture of change. Based on learning from this collaboration CENDEP has organised a series of trainings and tools for 40 programme officers from different regional and national Caritas offices.

The notion of evidence and the co-production of knowledge

It was clear that Caritas Centrafrique national staff were sometimes unable or lacking confidence to voice their own knowledge using internationally recognised jargon so a 'training-by-doing' attitude was encouraged, with staff encouraged to become trainers themselves, transferring knowledge to new team members in their own words. Supporting national NGOs in responding to one, pre-defined concept of research and helping them to complete frameworks designed by the international community

are not enough. It needs to be acknowledged that they can contribute to ensuring that questions are legitimate and culturally sensitive and can be understood outside the international humanitarian sector, thereby clarifying cultural misunderstandings and mitigating communities' frustrations generated by insensitive questions.

The notion of evidence itself as something tangible, measurable, scientific and rigorous has become standardised and this must be challenged. Creative and flexible methods of knowledge collection need to be initiated based on less formal contacts with communities and more adaptable research protocols. Participants at the workshop's round table on research methods as a means of empowerment argued that traditional storytelling, song or performance – even if not yielding evidence that would adhere to international standards – can be used in reporting for describing community perceptions of situations and needs.

The co-production of knowledge can broaden cooperation but hides potential power imbalances. Often, while collaborative and participatory methods are used at a field level for data collection, decision making still occurs only at a higher, national cluster level. Furthermore, there is a tendency for some local authorities and affected communities' representatives to only share information that they believe the internationals want to receive.



A camp for internally displaced people in Bria, Central African Republic.

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Data collected by national and local staff can be more nuanced and less inflated than data collected by international organisations. This can provide a more accurate representation of a situation, allowing better monitoring and thus more successful implementation.

Increasingly it is considered good practice to create a digital or virtual forum where knowledge and technical expertise can be stored and distributed across all levels of the humanitarian system. Such repositories could contain lessons learned or simply present evidence for users to interpret. The creation of such forums can also lead to new leadership roles for national NGOs in technical or coordination forums and consortiums so that they can work together with other organisations and build on their mutual good practice.

Strengthening knowledge and expertise: a shared responsibility

International NGOs have the responsibility to facilitate processes which incite a change of behaviour and attitude in order to allow a shift of power. Without compromising principles, international standards should be looked at flexibly to embrace national organisations' unique effectiveness. International NGOs also have a role to play in the tailoring of these standards to local contexts.

National NGOs have the responsibility to create an internal culture of change and a space to think and reflect on their own practices. They should also advocate for the recognition of their experience and contribute to the strategic development of humanitarian knowledge.

Wider research is needed by national NGOs to improve understanding of local settings, social and political infrastructures and the cultural dynamics of different actors, including their strengths and assets and their resilience and adaptation strategies. Such research can also enable greater understanding of conflict evolution, heritage and local decision-making processes. This can boost joint operational capacity and vulnerability reduction through a holistic understanding of conflict settings and contextualised responses that take into consideration what works and what does not.

We need a behavioural shift from identification of lessons learned to a constant revision of practices through the integration of local knowledge and a self-reflective thinking. An action-research approach through ongoing rigorous monitoring and testing of innovations in projects will allow simultaneously to increase knowledge and to improve practices. Slower research processes and adapted research methods can empower local staff and communities through community researchers. National organisations, like Caritas Centrafrique, could take the lead in researching emerging trends in an autonomous, free and flexible manner in order to enhance critical reflection and bolster ownership within communities.

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1. The term 'national NGO' is used to encompass all local and national structured civil society organisations.
2. Workshop report at bit.ly/Brookes-CaritasCA-local-knowledge

