Supporting Local Ownership in Humanitarian Action

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CENTER FOR TRANSATLANTIC RELATIONS

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Raising the Bar

Enhancing Transatlantic Governance of Disaster Relief and Preparedness

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About this paper

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Dr Pouligny started her academic career after 15 years of field experience with the UN and NGOs in Latin America, Caribbean and Africa. Since then, she has continued to work as a policy advisor and a practitioner for the UN, NGOs and local communities in different parts of the world, including Central and South America, The Caribbean, Africa, Asia and the Balkans. She has also regularly designed and led training programs for different audiences, including diplomats, military and humanitarian staff, local community leaders.

Both her research and her practice have been geared towards the support of local capacities and a more productive interaction between local and international initiatives. From this perspective, she has also reflected and written extensively on the methodological and ethical issues raised by such work. Another characteristic of her approach is its trans-disciplinarity.

Dr Pouligny is the winner of two consecutive Fulbright Commission awards (2002-2003 New Century Scholar and Alumni Initiative Award, 2004) and former grantee of different public and private foundations in North America and Europe, including the Ford Foundation and the United States Institute of Peace.

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I. Introduction

The conceptual assumptions, operational components and practical implications of the 'local ownership' agenda in humanitarian action remain largely unmapped. The literature rarely refers to the notion. Humanitarian agencies refer to the idea of 'ownership' more readily amongst themselves, in reference for instance to the involvement of different humanitarian actors in one of the existing networks or collective initiatives. However, **a few programs refer to a 'sense of ownership' as a key factor to their success**. A typical example is the design and use of toilets in hygiene programs: They are more likely to be kept clean if users have a sense of ownership. This is encouraged by promotional activities; for example, having toilets close to where people sleep; involving users in decisions about their design and construction; and rules on proper operation, maintenance, monitoring and use.[1] In general, humanitarian actors more commonly refer to the notions of 'local involvement,' 'participation' or 'capacity building.' In discussions with practitioners, the notion of 'local ownership' is sometimes perceived as more difficult to address in the context of humanitarian crises (caused by a violent conflict or natural disasters) than in longer-term forms of assistance. Many would even consider that there might be a trade-off between the imperative to save lives and deliver aid quickly in order to alleviate the immediate suffering and the need to respect and support local capacity and ensure local ownership. Humanitarian agencies often need to implement projects under important time constraints while meeting donor requirements, even though a large proportion of humanitarian aid actually goes to protracted crises. Experiences have shown that, however legitimate, these concerns often serve as excuses to postpone drastic transformations much needed in humanitarian practices.

This policy paper explains why and how the notion of 'local ownership' should gradually make its way in the humanitarian community, not because it is 'politically correct', but because it is **a decisive condition to actually increase the quality and accountability of humanitarian aid** (two commitments stressed by the Sphere Initiative for instance). Several reasons explain this. First, the international community is never the first to answer an emergency and never has the total capacity to face it; it must rely on, at the very least, a minimum level of local capacity. Second, greater attention to the local ownership agenda is also a way to stress the importance of the impact of outside aid on local societies. Third, this notion is consistent with the rights-based approach of humanitarian aid, which focuses on the rights and agency of the individuals and groups affected by disaster, whether natural or man-made (including armed conflict). This perspective no longer considers local beneficiaries as mere victims and passive recipients of aid. As underlined by the *Sphere Handbook*, "participation is essential for people to define a program that helps them achieve their right to life with dignity;" this notion is central to the principles and code of conduct of humanitarian action.[2]

This paper will first review definitions related to the idea of local ownership and other notions associated with it. Then, it will address the main components of the local ownership agenda, before reviewing the main challenges that can appear in its implementation and suggesting ways to address them, relying on a number of concrete field experiences. Finally, it will suggest three series of recommendations.

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1 Sphere, 2004, Handbook: Excreta disposal standard 2: design, construction and use of toilets.
2 Sphere, 2004, Handbook.

II. Definitions

A short history of the notion in international discourse

The idea of ownership in development is hardly new, but since the mid-1990s local ownership and its variants have taken on particular prominence in the publications of bilateral and multilateral development agencies. A number of well-known examples provide reference points for this ongoing debate. The Development Assistance Committee (DAC) of the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) asserts in its seminal 1996 statement *Shaping the 21st Century* that sustainable development "must be locally owned" and that development cooperation has to be shifted to a partnership model where donors' programs and activities operate within "locally-owned development strategies".[3] Donors should "respect and encourage strong local commitment, participation, capacity development and ownership".[4] The DAC linked these positions to a series of specific targets for poverty reduction that formed the basis of the Millennium Development Goals adopted by the United Nations General Assembly in 2000.

In a landmark proposal to the World Bank three years later, James Wolfensohn emphasized the idea that developing countries "must be in the driver's seat and set the course," owning and implementing their development strategies. Both the OECD and the World Bank progressively developed the two notions of "engaged society" and "effective states" to express the way in which local ownership should be understood.[5] The UN Development Programme (UNDP) has also developed a series of analyses on ownership and technical cooperation. Major bilateral donors and non-governmental organization (NGO) consortia have done the same, sometimes connecting ownership and conditionality as a main theme. However, the prominence of the phrase is not matched by a corresponding depth of analysis, explanation or scrutiny in policy statements. The different agencies have also been slow in translating these commitments into practices.

The literature directly addressing local ownership in humanitarian action is still very modest in size. A relatively more extensive literature approaches the idea indirectly by analyzing related themes such as local involvement, participation or capacity as well as the reference to the notions of accountability and empowerment. These actually refer to different elements that are part of the notion of local ownership. They may also indicate a potential graduation. Their practical limitations also help to understand the advantage that would come with the adoption of the notion of local ownership as a standard of intervention.

(Local) Involvement

The idea of an increased involvement of local actors in humanitarian aid is a common catch phrase in discourse, but it remains an extremely vague notion. Very few answers are given, for instance, on who might be the actors concerned, how they should be identified, and even more importantly, how they could be concretely included, at what point of the process and for what purpose. This explains, for instance, the criticism of local actors regarding outsiders. These would be the champions of local ownership as long as local actors – whoever they are – follow up a project entirely designed by outsiders. This particularly applies to the humanitarian agenda and the identification of people's needs. A standard example is that in evaluation missions, when evaluators ask beneficiaries if anyone has ever asked them what their needs or even opinions were, the answer is "No".[6] Similarly, communities are often reported as having little role in the management of donated aid.[7]

(Local) Participation

The participative discourse is the most commonly used in current humanitarian standards. For instance, the 2004 edition of the *Sphere Handbook* includes a chapter that details a number of process standards common to all sectors. These include the active

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3 OECD/DAC, 1996.
4 OECD/DAC, 1996: 14.
5 World Bank, 2005.
6 CDA, 2008, Telford and Cosgrave, 2006, Turner et al. 2008.
7 CDA (Collaborative Learning Project), 2008.

involvement of the affected population in the assessment, design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of the assistance programs. This is consistent with the common understanding of the notion of participation as an umbrella term including different means for a group or the public to take part in all aspects of an activity, including the decision process. However, in practice, participation is often understood in a more restricted way, as 'consultation' (where agencies validate strategies and decisions that have already been made) or 'participative management' (which actually refers to the limited participation of selected actors).

In practice, there can be divergence between 'popular' participation, which refers to the engagement of all populations (or aid beneficiaries) – in particular the 'disadvantaged' or 'vulnerable' (a terminology that is itself contested, in particular by those directly concerned) – and stakeholder participation, which highlights that other actors are involved beyond beneficiary groups. In some cases, the participation of beneficiaries may also be more symbolic than real. The whole rhetoric is often misleading and a vast literature in development anthropology has criticized the discourse about, and practice of, participation, showing that it considerably underestimates a number of fundamental questions, particularly in terms of the structure of power. This may lead to ambiguous if not contrary results, for instance when minority groups or those in positions of power capture processes at the expense of marginalized groups or the most vulnerable.[8]

The reflections gathered by the CDA Listening Project among experienced and thoughtful people who occupy a range of positions within thirteen recipient societies are also very revealing. Among the findings is the fact that 'participation' was not a term the people interviewed chose unless they were part of the 'aid delivery chain' and accustomed to aid jargon. "In contrast, those outside this chain often used a range of other expressions to describe what is often labeled 'participation,' including "to be involved;" "to have a part in the process;" "to have a say;" "to be consulted;" "to have input and influence;" "to have a role to play;"

"to join;" "to discuss together," "to decide together," "to work together" and so on."[9] In other words, people asked for active roles in literally the entire project cycle and aid process. As suggested by the title of the CDA report and the very words of some of the interviewees, people want to "Discuss Together, Decide Together, Work Together".[10] Seen this way, participation is "about building a two-way relationship, a sharing of know-how and experiences."[11] It is about building a genuine dialogical exchange.[12]

(Local) Capacity

In the past few years, the notion of '**capacity building**' has become the new credo of the donor community and has penetrated the field of humanitarian action. The UN Terminology Database defines capacity building as a "process by which individuals, groups, organizations, institutions and countries develop, enhance and organize their systems, resources and knowledge, all reflected in their abilities, individually and collectively, to perform functions, solve problems and achieve objectives."[13] This coincides with the definition of 'local capacity' in contexts of disaster as "a combination of all the strengths and resources available within a community, society or organization that can reduce the level of risk or the effects of a disaster".[14] In international discourse, capacity building is specifically presented as a key to ensuring a smooth transition from relief to development and, ultimately, the withdrawal of international presence. Many practitioners also consider capacity building as the most effective way to prepare local actors for future crises.[15] Some also consider that it is a crucial factor for minimizing perverse effects of assistance.[16]

The term 'capacity building' can be a misnomer in that it may imply a value judgment about the non-existence of capacities where they actually do exist, even in a rudimentary form, and would simply need to be unfolded, developed or enhanced. In most situations, some sort of capacity, however nascent or in part destroyed, is indeed present prior to any international presence or any capacity building work. Efforts should therefore be geared towards identifying

9 CDA, 2008.
10 Ibid.
11 Ibid.
12 Culbertson, Pouligny, 2007.
13 http://unterm.un.org/, last accessed 7 May 2009.
14 UNISDR, 2004.
15 Sphere, 2004 Handbook: Health Services: 255.
16 UN, 2005 ; UNICEF, 2006.

existing capacities, building on them and supporting them. The term has therefore acquired some less than positive connotations. In the development community, the term has gradually been replaced by '**capacity development**' as "a means for strengthening and maintaining individuals', organizations' and societies' capabilities to set and achieve their own development objectives."[17]

Support to local capacity generally involves the following components: (1) material, infrastructural and technical support measures for key organizations and institutions; (2) transfer of skills and knowledge to a variety of governmental, non-governmental and civil society actors; (3) training; (4) facilitation of planning processes with local actors, including through need assessments, design of prevention and adequate response mechanisms and formulation of strategies and budgets; (5) community-based approaches and community development activities.

(Local) Accountability and empowerment

The notion of capacity building is also often linked to the idea of 'good governance,' highlighting the need for local governments' openness and **accountability** towards their own citizens in the management of aid. Most donors insist on the involvement of civil society organizations and local communities in the process as a requirement for establishing national ownership. At issue are the depth of organizational resources and autonomy in citizens' organizations and their own responsiveness as they seek to represent their members or communities, provide much-needed services and challenge their governments to be transparent and accountable. This internal accountability may also compete with external accountability to donors (both public and private), which may not share the same priorities as local populations and are in such a dominant position that they may prevail over the local citizenry. Local political and social actors from beneficiary countries regularly denounce this contradiction. This focus on local governments' accountability may also overshadow outsiders' own accountability towards local governments and societies, including the direct beneficiaries of humanitarian aid. The humanitarian community has focused on this aspect only relatively recently; so far, concrete reforms in that direction have been limited.

Local ownership may also be conceived as a form of **local empowerment**. It is most often phrased as 'community empowerment' to make the distinction with the first use of the concept in relation to gender issues. Fully embedded, the notion of empowerment supposes that beneficiaries are given some power, which means a certain leverage capacity in the local socio-political arena, as well as representative mechanisms at the community level to influence and even have some control over aid flows. This aspect is the least developed in the humanitarian field, in part because some actors have traditionally considered that they had neither the time nor the means to develop such approaches and that ultimately it might even be detrimental to the efficiency of aid delivery. Others have also stressed the intrinsic obstacles to any form of local empowerment in a system in which local people have so little actual power.[18] However, increasing evidence from the field shows that this path is not purely utopian.

This paper argues that aiming at a true support to local accountability and empowerment is, ultimately, the path to ensure greater preparedness as well as quality of humanitarian responses to disasters and other emergencies.

(Local) Ownership

In the international aid discourse, 'ownership' as part of the notion of 'local ownership' does not have its conventional meaning, i.e., rights of exclusive possession. Nor is it used in the organizational sense, referring to the owners of a business firm, or to the members of a non-profit association. 'Ownership' refers instead to relations among stakeholders in development or humanitarian action, particularly their respective capacity, power or influence to set and take responsibility for an agenda and to muster and sustain support for that. This means that part of the implementing bodies need to be firmly rooted in the recipient country and represent the interests of ordinary citizens. In this respect, appropriate mechanisms of representation are needed. Among other conditions traditionally underlined are the need for transparency and accountability among the various stakeholders, insiders and outsiders included.

An important point to note is that, in the development discourse – in which the notion is much more developed – it does not only refer to the 'act of owning.' 'Local ownership' also refers to the actual capacities of political, social and community actors in a particular country to set and take responsibility

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17 UNDP, 2008.
18 de Waal, 1994; Davis, 2007: 12-13.

for the aid agenda. This concern acknowledges the existence of a strong asymmetry between international and local actors and the necessity to remedy it. Therefore, local actors need to develop their capacity to influence substantially not only the management of humanitarian aid, but more broadly the conception, design, implementation and review of humanitarian responses to crises. On their side, international actors are responsible for supporting the progressive development of these capacities in a constructive dialogical exchange with local actors.[19]

In other words, the notion of local ownership encompasses the different components of local involvement, participation, capacity, accountability and empowerment. It might well be the ultimate condition to raise the quality of humanitarian responses to disasters.

19 Culbertson, Pouligny, 2007.

III. Components

The actual development of a local ownership agenda relies on two basic components: identifying relevant and skilled local partners as well as identifying and supporting local resources. A number of conditions are required to ensure that humanitarian actors actually move in that direction; this policy paper will analyze those in the next section.

The identification of relevant and skilled local partners

Defining who the local partners are, how to identify them, how their stake (in terms of ownership) is negotiated and who takes the lead in the whole process, is essential. For a long time, there was scant reflection on these issues. The choice of local partners generally reflects the principles, interests and priorities of the outside party. This entails a decision, often taken abroad, as to who will be the main interlocutors of a specific humanitarian mission or organization and who should be the beneficiaries of the aid. This may create a certain power shift in the local arena, in particular in conflict settings.[20] Most international organizations distinguish three categories of actors: governments, civil society actors (which may or may not include the private sector) and communities. These receive unequal attention from the different international actors engaging in humanitarian action. In practice, however, all three levels need to be addressed to ensure genuine ownership.

Government structures and political actors

Humanitarian workers rarely work only with a **central government**—which sometimes does not even exist or whose capacity to manage the humanitarian crisis may be impaired. The issue of '**leadership capacity**' has attracted increasing policy attention, in particular in transitional societies (generally understood as societies under a political transition or in transition between war and peace) which constitute a fair percentage of the contexts in which humanitarian action takes place. The capacity of a central government outside of the capital city, in particular in rural areas, is also of concern. The existence and

capacity of a national coordinator is a key factor for success, including in helping with coordination of the international humanitarian response. A good national coordinator contributes to the quality of the international response. The case of Mozambique in response to the Zambezi river floods and Cyclone Favio in February 2007 is often presented as a good example of such strong local capacity at the central level. Another central factor is the relationship a central government has with the international community at large and with humanitarian agencies in particular. The attention (positive or negative) of the international community is generally a good asset that local political leaders can use, in different ways, for symbolic as well as material benefits. The cases of Myanmar and Sudan provide ample illustration of this.

Civil (also known as public) servants who are **government employees** also play an important role as they are humanitarian actors' main interlocutors in their day-to-day activities. They are also part of some of the channels through which humanitarian aid may be delivered in case the state retains some presence or is not totally circumvented.

In war and post-war contexts, agents of the state may also hold specific positions and interests in the conflict. In those situations, the role of the different political, military and para-military actors (including those commonly referred to in international discourse as 'warlords'), inside and outside of any official structure, deserves specific attention. Interests and alliances often move constantly and call for a dynamic understanding of the local political arena.[22]

The identification of **local authorities** outside the capital city may be difficult and needs careful pre-assessment and continuous monitoring mechanisms. Yet, humanitarian actors do not always have appropriate analytical tools. Local authorities may be elected or appointed officials (with consequences

20 Reich, 2006: 13 ; Pouligny, 2006: 44–67.
21 DARA/IASC, 2007: 52.
22 Pouligny, 2006: 44–67.

in terms of durability of their positions) and may include figures such as Mayors, Councils, Committees and Ombudsmen. The mechanisms enacted at local levels and the administrators that comprise these systems constitute the channel through which functions and services of the state are allocated and humanitarian aid can be delivered. In comparison to those different patronage networks, the state's capacity to fulfill its role, deliver aid in times of crisis and perform minimal functions may be limited. Corruption and rent-seeking activities are generally as prevalent at that level as they are at the national level. Where administrative legitimacy is low or inexistent, bolstering those networks can actually exacerbate societal tensions and undermine the very efficiency of aid delivery. Even more important, the diagnosis may vary considerably from one region of the country to the next, making the adoption of a unified strategy for those organizations which intervene in more than one region at a time more difficult.

Civil society organizations

Even when there are strong and capable government structures, **local civil society** remains a crucial partner. While definitions of civil society as a concept often diverge in the literature, overall agreement exists that this notion encompasses "the arena of voluntary, uncoerced collective action around shared interests, purposes and values."[23] Civil society organizations relevant for humanitarian action may be of different types: coordination bodies and platforms, non-governmental organizations, citizen organizations and associations, neighborhood committees, minority groups, women and youth organizations, disabled people organizations, etc.

Engagement with civil society can enhance humanitarian assistance on three levels.[24] First, civil society organizations serve as implementing agencies. They may also be perceived as an alternative to a deficient government and even a counterweight to the power-brokers, economic exploiters and 'warlords' who tend to predominate in conflict-ridden, weak, or so-called 'failed' states. Second, civil society organizations may constitute a bridge to other forms of social institutionalization, in particular at the community level. Third, in cases where outsiders have concerns about the way local populations perceive them, engagement with local civil society may be a way to increase the ultimate acceptance of an intervention. A major handicap often stressed by practitioners is the lack of funding on the part of local NGOs. The lack of clear guidelines and support to allow local NGOs access to international funds (including in the preparation of their proposals) is often seen as a key factor preempting their involvement as well as the development of their capacity. A drastic improvement of the situation would require the preparation of adequate procedures well in advance.[25]

Private sector

The **private sector** may or may not be considered as part of this group, depending on the way one defines the notion of 'civil society.' Indeed, most of the literature considers civil society as a sector on its own vis-à-vis the three other main societal sectors— state, market and family. Although there is some degree of consensus on this basic distinction, some would continue to see business and markets as part of civil society.

Humanitarian actors collaborate with the private sector for different reasons. Business firms deliver local services – such as clean water, transportation management, electricity or food. In some cases, business firms can deliver services as efficiently as and more cheaply than local authorities. In case of natural disasters, local private companies may also offer in-kind and cash donations or put their resources (including their employees) at the immediate service of local communities. They may also play an important role in repairing and rebuilding critical infrastructure. Whereas the role of big multinationals has been more readily studied in that capacity, notably in the context of the UN Global Compact, local actors may be the first in line playing this role. The local private sector is also a potential beneficiary of international aid. Indeed, local companies are engines for growth in the reconstruction phase and constitute a crucial link to long-term self-help.[26] Local companies need support – through training and awareness raising, as well as through micro-insurance schemes – to stay in business in the aftermath of disasters.[27] Local business is also an important part of building

23 Pouligny, 2005.
24 Pouligny, 2005: 496.
25 DARA/IASC, 2007: 39-40.
26 Business for Social Responsibility, 2004; Warhurst, 2006.
27 Warhurst, 2006: 16.

local resilience.[28] Moreover, private sector actors are increasingly engaged in partnerships to reduce the risk of disaster as well as in prevention activities.[29] This includes working with businesses to better protect their own operations and make sure that those operations do not add to the vulnerability of other members of the community.[30]

Community organizations

The definition and content of the notion of '**community'** differs and evolves according to the local context and history. From one situation to another, the notion contains highly variable forms of organization and mediation. In a country's recent history, the modalities of organization and projection in the public space may have undergone a profound transformation stemming from several factors:

- First, contacts with national and international NGOs intervening in the area of humanitarian aid or development, according to a project-oriented approach that implies the existence of a certain type of 'organized' partner on the ground;

- Second, the effects of repression and war, or of the immediate natural disaster, leading in particular to major displacements of people to refugee and displaced person camps, or to cities, which hastens the breakdown of former community ties according to the imperatives of survival;

- Third, in war contexts, the effects of violence within the group, especially when this violence has been used and heightened by political entrepreneurs;

- Finally, transformation of identities and frameworks of reference as a result of violence and war.[31]

All of these factors need to be taken into consideration when identifying who the community actors are and accurately assessing their potential, beyond the appearances of disorganization and chaos that may characterize an emergency situation. This is underlined by the fact that evaluations of humanitarian aid programs often show that community level involvement is insufficient and that the identification of interlocutors at that level is not sufficiently elaborated to support a true ownership process.

Who those selected as 'representatives' of the local beneficiaries are is also a key issue as those approached by outsiders are often middlemen and parts of local patronage networks.[32] Local patrons may also exclude nominal beneficiaries such as women, people with disabilities, remote rural communities, members of minority groups, etc. The issue of ensuring a **balanced representation** of women and men of all ages within the assistance programs, including vulnerable and marginalized groups, is of special concern for humanitarian agencies and is now stressed in all guidelines.[33]

Terminology: Local, national actors or insiders?

In most analyses and discourses, the adjective 'local' is used, more occasionally 'national,' to distinguish the sphere of the country in which the intervention occurs from the outside world. However, these adjectives may be problematic in particular settings. A national actor coming from the capital city or another social group may well be considered as an 'outsider' when he enters a specific community; therefore, some authors would distinguish between a 'national' and a 'local' level, but the criteria for distinction between the two are often unclear. The notions of 'insiders' / 'outsiders' have been suggested as being of greater heuristic value. Some authors have defined insiders as "those vulnerable to the conflict [or the disaster], because they are from the area and living there, or people who in some other way must experience the conflict and live with its consequences personally. [… Outsiders are those] who choose to become involved in the conflict [and who] have personally little to lose."[34] For other analysts, the dichotomy may be more flexible as it is subjectively constructed by the actors concerned and mainly reflects the power relationships in a particular setting.[35] In all cases, particular attention should be paid to how the 'local' is defined, by whom, and what the implications are.

28 World Economic Forum, 2008.
29 UNISDR, 2008; Warhurst, 2006.
30 Warhurst, 2006.
31 Pouligny, 2005: 507; 2006: 67–68.
32 Pouligny, 2006; CDA Learning Project, 2008.
33 See for instance the 2004 Sphere Handbook.
34 Anderson and Olson, 2003: 36.
35 Culbertson, Pouligny, 2007.

Identifying and supporting local resources

Insufficient attention has been paid to the idea of giving proper credit to the value of local resources. One of the first resources is **information and knowledge**. "Affected populations can be seen just as tragic victims and the passive recipients of external assistance. However, they are also the best source of first-hand information and knowledge needed by the humanitarian community."[36] It is only recently that the importance of integrating local knowledge and practices into projects has started to receive real recognition and the approach is still far from being mainstreamed. Some recent initiatives aim at increasing awareness and understanding, particularly among implementing organizations, of local knowledge, practices and contexts related to disaster preparedness, so that they can be used in disaster management activities.[37]

Humanitarian actors may feel that bringing their own solutions and action frameworks may save time and be more efficient in the short-term. Yet, they tend to forget that, even in the worst disaster, on the ground, local **coping strategies** have emerged and different forms of aid have got organized long before they arrive. According to the Tsunami Evaluation Coalition, local actors broadly met initial needs of communities hit by the tsunami. The issue was more how outside agencies were able to support those initial responses and meet ongoing needs.[38] Another study based on recipient perceptions stated that in the recollections of the Tsunami-affected people, the aid provided during the first 48 hours was overwhelmingly from private individuals or the local community (up to 91% in Indonesia for instance), although this varied by country and by service.[39] In some cases, this help came from young people, teenagers and students, for example, a group of students from a Jakarta University mountaineering club in Indonesia who went to Banda Aceh in Indonesia on their own initiative and at their own expense to take part in relief efforts.[40] Even if limited, these local resources must be, at the very least, minimally identified, known and understood by outsiders: They are already on the ground, are the first to respond and are there for a longer term, a dimension that is even more important in all cases where humanitarian aid goes to protracted crises. Supporting and/or complementing existing services and local institutions in terms of structure and design are key for the sustainability of the programs.[41] Yet, in the case of the Tsunami, the Tsunami Evaluation Coalition found that international actors reduced local and national ownership of response as agencies sometimes brushed local capacities aside and set up parallel mechanisms.[42] Guidelines developed so far emphasize the importance of designing programs in such a way that they **build upon local capacity, maximize the use of local skills** and avoid undermining people's own coping strategies.[43] This means that an assessment has to be made of the availability and reliability of local capacity before sourcing from outside the area. This applies to different types of humanitarian aid: food, shelter construction, health, etc. Outsiders need to use locally sourced materials such as skills and labor, without adversely affecting the local economy or environment. Specific guidelines have been developed to that respect.[44] In too many cases, ignoring indigenous coping strategies increases civilian jeopardy and puts segments of the population at even higher risk.[45]

Seeking resources within each specific context also demonstrates respect for **the value and integrity of local cultures and populations**. Most practitioners emphasize the importance of designing programs and interventions that are culturally appropriate and sensitive, taking into consideration communities' frames of reference and strategies. Concepts and values informing beneficiary selection, intervention criteria as well as fundamental notions of aid and solidarity may vary. If not properly taken into account, those variations may create serious problems in the implementation of aid programs. The respect for local resources and belief systems also requires better understanding and acknowledging their diversity

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36 *UN Global Symposium, 2007: 12.*
37 *See for instance the 2007 project and subsequent publication 'Living with risk – sharing knowledge on disaster preparedness' funded by the European Commission through their Humanitarian Aid department (DG ECHO) as part of the Disaster Preparedness ECHO program in South Asia and by ICIMOD.*
38 *Telford and Cosgrave, 2006.*
39 *Fritz Institute, 2005.*
40 *UNICEF, 2005.*
41 *Sphere Handbook: Common Standards. Common standard 1: Participation, 2004.*
42 *Telford and Cosgrave, 2006.*
43 *Sphere Handbook: Common Standards. Common standard 1: Participation, 2004.*
44 *Sphere Handbook: Food Aid. Food aid management standard 2: supply chain management, 2004; Sphere Handbook: Shelter & Settlement. Shelter and settlement standard 5: construction, 2004.*
45 *Boyden, 1994: 25.*

and dynamics. In some cases, new technology may be introduced to add value to the traditional systems and make them more resilient in the face of new threats such as those posed by climate change. The experience of local communities and the NGO SEEDS in Barmer, Rajasthan, India, provides a great example of how indigenous knowledge and modern science can work together to provide environmentally friendly shelter solutions in a flood-affected desert region. The indigenous technology for constructing shelters was transferred from generation to generation but was insufficient to face unprecedented floods in 2006. Research was carried out on appropriate technologies for supporting the traditional construction system, which led to the Stabilized Compressed Interlocking Earth Block technology. Local mud is stabilized with five percent cement and compressed into blocks that have high structural strength and can resist water. This technology capitalizes on existing traditional wisdom on construction materials and technologies best suited to the local environment and culture.[46]

One key issue across programs has to do with **who decides what the local 'cultural resources' and norms are and presents them to outsiders**. This relates not only to an understanding of power dynamics within these societies, but also to its inherent strengths and liabilities. Disagreements about the ownership of cultural resources may be as strong as those on water or land, for instance. Moreover, local norms and customs may be, but are not necessarily, supportive of international humanitarian standards. It is useful for external actors to be particularly aware of this potential source of tension and put in place informed identification processes and mechanisms that allow for discussion at the community level.[47]

46 UNISDR, 2008b.
47 Culbertson, Pouligny, 2007.

IV. Implementation challenges

Most observers and analysts agree that, so far, donors do not seem to be much guided by their own rhetoric. 'Local ownership' is a catch phrase, but it is hardly implemented. The handbooks developed by some UN agencies very clearly show the limits of its practicality.[48] Some analysts would even argue that an actual implementation of literal 'local ownership' is impossible, if not counterproductive, given the current asymmetrical structures of international cooperation.[49] This may seem even more unrealistic in the humanitarian field in view of the specific constraints of this sector, in particular in terms of quick and efficient delivery. However, the analysis of actual practices helps understand both the main operational challenges and the potential of actual implementation of the local ownership agenda in humanitarian aid. The main principle to remember is that there is no blueprint for infusing local ownership. Approaches should be context-specific, determined by and tailored to the diversity of political, social and economic factors.[50]

Managing outsider intrusions

Outsiders themselves constitute an important obstacle to local ownership. When a 'crisis' is discovered by the 'international community' and comes to the forefront through different channels, the country may then experience a real 'invasion.' Hundreds if not thousands of representatives of international organizations — intergovernmental and non-governmental — will arrive in the capital city, occupying a space no longer available to local actors. Humanitarian actors often also come with an impressive amount of material and resources that is all the more invasive. They may also have a detrimental effect on local economies — for example, large increases in salaries, prices in the stores, and house rents — which impedes local organizations from functioning properly. Because they intervene in an unknown and at times highly insecure environment, outsiders also tend to collaborate with other outsiders, in a largely closed circle, partially isolated from the 'real world.'[51]

Humanitarian workers may also very easily feel that they are 'in charge,' while they are not the only actors in the process and not the most important ones. If they want to support local ownership, they need to be modest, flexible, patient and unobtrusive, which is almost the opposite of what typifies most current practices. It may also contradict what organizations need in order to ensure their visibility, self-promotion, legitimacy towards donors or what any staff member may seek to get good performance reports.

Managing timing constraints

At a practical implementation level, achieving true local ownership may be messy and time-consuming and may not conform nicely to donors' needs for visible, easily verifiable and quick results. The pressure can be particularly high in the aftermath of natural disasters.[52] The importance of promoting self-reliance is also sometimes overshadowed by the importance of urgent delivery, an important and valuable objective as such. Practitioners may consider that there is a trade-off between the immediacy of the required results and the process of delivering these results. Here, some distinction needs to be made between interventions in sudden large-scale natural disasters and those in lasting protracted crises like those in Darfur, Somalia, Eastern Congo or Afghanistan. In the latter cases, humanitarian actors may be present on the ground for more than a decade, a reality that reinforces the importance of supporting local capacity building, self-sufficiency and sustainability. However, in all cases, local ownership is a key factor to ensure that aid is actually matching local needs in a sustainable way. Lessons learned from positive and negative experiences in the response to the 2005 Pakistan earthquake have shown that, for instance, the delivery of inappropriate shelter did not help recipients to survive harsh winter months, or lighting stoves in tents without guidelines on using them safely did not protect beneficiaries. "The challenge lies in marrying the imperative for a rapid response with the need to ensure that the response is both adequate

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48 UNHCR, 2005.
49 Reich, 2006: 3–4.
50 Boyce, Koros & Hodgson, 2002; Leonhardt, 2000.
51 Pouligny, 2005: 501.
52 CDA, 2008.

and professional. Here, "timing does matter!" and so did the processes put in place by some organizations to make sure that the relief activities responded to people's actual situation and supported their capacities.[53] This corresponds to a major concern of international agencies who want to make sure that outside aid is efficient and can be withdrawn as soon as possible after the immediate emergency phase.[54]

Maintaining humanitarian principles

One of the dilemmas humanitarian actors may consider when engaging more with local actors is the extent to which this may contradict the requirements of '**impartiality**' (if not '**neutrality**') of humanitarian aid. Indeed, humanitarian principles have been traditionally based on the core principles of humanity, neutrality, impartiality and independence.[55] Originally, these principles were established to facilitate the delivery of assistance, its security and access. However, the reality is that in many crises, humanitarian aid is not perceived as 'neutral' as such. The choice of the modalities of aid, where and how it will be delivered, who it will be discussed (or negotiated) with, etc. means that humanitarian workers are *de facto* interfering in a sociological, political and economic reality and have an impact on it.[56] In the eyes of every single local actor, a number of different, highly subjective parameters will enter into play to assess that involvement and its so-called impartiality.[57] Refusing to work with some local actors based on strict neutrality and independence may also limit the ability to provide relief to some of those in need and thus may lead to non-neutrality in practice, regardless of intent.[58] Some analysts have even been more critical, stressing the fact that 'neutral policies' may actually exacerbate inequities. Some have argued that this extends further, as neutrality on the part of aid agencies in militarized camps makes them culpable for violence against women by security agents.[59] In other words, the notions of 'impartiality' and 'neutrality' have many facets: The public position adopted by organizations regarding political disputes; the actual effect of their interventions; and the *perception* by others, in particular beneficiaries.[60] This explains why several humanitarian organizations have moved towards a more field-centric, rights-based approach to humanitarian principles, paying more attention to local views for how principles meet practice.[61] Indeed, in practice, field staffs often implicitly modify rules in reaction to circumstances.

The same is true of the **legitimacy** of humanitarian assistance. Field reality reminds us that the legitimacy of any outsider's action, however generous its motives are, is never guaranteed. Local actors judge humanitarian actors by results: On what they say that they intend to do, on what they actually do and on how they behave and face up to their responsibilities.[62]

Developing a dynamic micro-analysis of local socio-political contexts

An important step towards increased local ownership is to open up to the local society and, at the very least, understand how it functions. Too often, outsiders act blindly, without adequate knowledge of the context of their intervention and 'end up committing the dual sin of ignorance and arrogance,' to use the words of a senior UN official. Capacity assessment needs to be part of needs assessment. The development of such analytic capacity requires outsiders to look beyond the impression of disorganization – or even chaos — often given by societies at war, just emerging from conflict or recently hit by a disaster. It also calls for socio-political analysis that helps understand who the local interlocutors and potential partners are. Indeed, humanitarian workers commonly intervene in contexts where their interlocutors may change hats as individuals and not fit nicely into fixed categories such as those that, in war contexts, try to distinguish between civilians and combatants. Those cleavages are often considerably blurred, putting in jeopardy important bases of humanitarian principles and action.[63] Many critics of prevalent approaches of

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53 Lauffer, 2006.
54 UNHCR, 2005.
55 Leader, 2000.
56 Keen and Wilson, 1994.
57 Pouligny, 2006.
58 Stott, 2007: 11.
59 Callamard, 1999; ATHA, 2008.
60 HPN, 2003.
61 ATHA, 2008: 4.
62 Pouligny, 2006.
63 Chesterman, 2001.

international aid also denounce the emphasis on individual 'victims,' 'beneficiaries' or 'vulnerable' people as opposed to identification of individuals as 'survivors,' historical 'actors' in a struggle, genuine actors with an agenda, resources and strategies, members of families and communities, part of sometimes extensive and complex networks.[64] This implies that vulnerability, for instance, is a relative state – a multi-faceted continuum between resilience and absolute helplessness, based on contextual circumstances. A thorough needs assessment therefore needs to take into consideration specific circumstances (sometimes at a very micro-level) that shape that degree of vulnerability and hence the type of action necessary. Humanitarian actors have increasingly integrated that phase of the work, but it is not always sophisticated enough and does not sufficiently inform their daily practices.

The literature now largely emphasizes the necessity to take on a 'Do No Harm' approach, i.e. to be cognizant of the unintended consequences some aid programs may have, especially with respect to the situation of vulnerable and underrepresented groups. For instance, by claiming to be gender blind in camps where discrimination exists and by providing aid on that basis, some agencies were criticized for perpetuating and intensifying gender inequality.[65] The failure to acknowledge socio-cultural context can have disastrous consequences. The 'Do No Harm' approach helps identify the ways in which international humanitarian assistance may be provided so that, rather than exacerbating and worsening the crisis, it helps local people to develop systems for resolving problems at hand. It has also proven that a better understanding of the underlying social and cultural values of a local community could be blended into projects designed to enhance ownership, participation and sustainability (CDA; Anderson, 1999). Such an approach is not reserved to those who have the luxury of working with a long-term perspective. So far, one of the main reasons why practices do not change and improve fast enough is that modes of operation tend to be too superficial and 'toolkit' oriented. One avenue to bypass these limitations is to articulate research-action at each stage of humanitarian programs as different structures in Europe and the U.S. have started to develop in the last two decades. But this approach remains too marginal and it needs to

become mainstreamed. Moreover, if more knowledge has been developed, it is not always available to practitioners in forms useful to them and, even less, actually translated into improved practices.

Monitoring interventions

The pre-assessment, internal monitoring and evaluation of aid programs is a key factor in introducing a shift towards actual ownership in the development field. Even if the specificities of humanitarian aid may at times complicate the conditions in which these exercises are undertaken (in particular in terms of timing and delivery and in cases of natural disasters), more efforts are necessary to make them more systematic. Too many programs have no comprehensive monitoring and verification system of the socio-political and economic dynamics they engender (or hinder), particularly at the micro-level. Outsiders need to micro-monitor and manage the impact of their actions in quality as much as in quantity terms. They need to assess the effect of aid on the local social, economic, political and cultural context, including on specific dimensions such as the capture of resources by the elites.[66] Yet, this is often missing. For instance, the inter-agency real-time evaluation of the response to the February 2007 floods and cyclone in Mozambique noted that "monitoring was at a basic level. Monitoring reports dealt with the quantity of inputs rather than with the quality of assistance provided or its impact. Cluster leads and member staff were more focused on delivering services to a very dispersed population than on monitoring the quality of the services being delivered overall. The initial monitoring focus was simply on coverage rather than of the quality of service, and cluster reporting reflected this. This improved to a limited extent later on and there was some qualitative monitoring by staff in the field, but this was ad hoc rather than systematic."[67]

There may also be serious drawbacks and risks appearing in a 'community-based' approach to humanitarian delivery. For instance, consultations can inadvertently reinforce hierarchical structures and further marginalize vulnerable groups or can be manipulated by some groups, leading to distrust. Likewise, when engaging with some groups such as displaced populations, particularly in conflict or post-conflict

64 Pouligny et al, 2007.
65 Callamard, 1999; ATHA, 2008.
66 Berry, 2004: 23.
67 DARA/IASC, 2007: 28-29.

areas, it is important to take into consideration how the host community is included in the local ownership agenda, otherwise risks may actually increase.[68] International actors should anticipate these risks so that they do not place disproportionate demands on local communities.

Some lessons can be taken from the development field where monitoring and evaluation of capacity building experiences, for instance, has been gradually improved.[69] This kind of tool is a key condition to see the different dimensions of the ownership agenda implemented and to promote a decisive shift in organizational cultures and practices.

Managing asymmetric relationships

Even more than in the development field, the pursuit of some degree of local ownership in humanitarian action is hampered by significant asymmetries of resources, access and influence at different stages of the planning process and during the delivery of humanitarian aid. Relationships between outsiders and insiders have, almost by definition, the nature of patronage.[70] Who defines aid strategies is a critical question. In particular, when the extent of the disaster is large and the local government capacity limited, local decision-makers' choices and room to maneuver seem limited vis-à-vis international actors. This power asymmetry also goes with cultural domination, with most of the models of humanitarian aid being decided and imposed from outside. Some analysts have criticized the 'top-down' nature of humanitarian principles for that reason: "The official humanitarian enterprise remains a select club in which the rules are set by a rather peculiar set of players who are generally far-removed from the realities of the people they purport to help."[71] Hence, external actors are often those establishing rules, principles, as well as scope of humanitarian engagement even though they are significantly distanced from, and thus least able to, interpret operational environments.[72] In its implementation, humanitarian assistance has also been qualified by analysts as being an essentially 'top down' process: "Humanitarian agencies are often poor at consulting or involving members of the

affected population and beneficiaries."[73] In emergency relief operations, there is a huge power imbalance between relief workers and beneficiaries. This is also true of the relationships between international and local NGOs. Moreover, there is a strong temptation to create or instigate the creation of 'home-grown' NGOs, who may be more malleable and easier to work with. Among other consequences, "there can be considerable discrepancy between the agency's perception of its performance and the perceptions of the affected population and beneficiaries."

Asymmetric relationships also characterize local contexts. Humanitarian aid may increase them and exacerbate tensions in local patronage networks, as well as power struggles. Distribution of aid and, more broadly, the re-allocation of resources to which humanitarian aid contributes, can intensify divergences and conflict among different groups or parties. This can be particularly true when one group dominates an apparatus, and efforts are made to reach out to those in minority; or when the modes of aid distribution induce new modalities of rent distribution. Existing patronage networks may also be prone to corruption. The infusion of new resources through humanitarian aid tends to exacerbate them.

In this context, it is particularly important to consider the role of all actors who play the role of broker, performing intermediary functions between outsiders and insiders. Local employees of international structures play an important role in this respect and, depending on the way in which they are selected, managed, given recognition and controlled, they may either contribute to developing a sense of local ownership, or not.[76]

In order to be more successful, humanitarian aid would ideally involve all groups of stakeholders, including those who are generally referred to as 'beneficiaries.' In view of the difference in interests, this means that working relationships would include a mix of cooperation, competition and conflict management, the objective being **to create win-win situations for all stakeholders and the maximum**

68 The Brookings Institution, 2008.
69 James, 2001.
70 Smillie, 2001.
71 Donini, 2007.
72 ATHA, 2008.
73 Hallam, 1998.
74 Pouligny, 2005: 501.
75 Hallam, 1998.
76 Pouligny, 2006: 87–95.

efficiency and quality of humanitarian aid for local beneficiaries. The consequence is that humanitarian staff needs to have adequate skills to manage these types of relationships. Conflict settings present specific challenges in this respect. Indeed, in such contexts, who is armed or not often constitutes a decisive criterion as to the place occupied by any actor and its capacity to attain its objective. The capacity to appear as a potential spoiler often gives a decisive (and disproportionate) advantage to define one's relevance, notwithstanding one's actual skills and capacity to contribute positively to the success of a humanitarian action. This does not mean that marginalized actors, at the community level, do not have the capacity to develop strategies — the fact is that they do, particularly because they have immediate needs to meet for them and their family. However, the less powerful they are, the more they tend to consider that they have very little to gain from the international aid. This attitude, very common at the community level, is often wrongly perceived as a signal of 'indifference,' 'apathy,' or even 'ingratitude' but it clearly limits the chance for any sense of ownership on the part of ordinary people.[77] On the positive side, outsiders may affect local power configurations in a positive way, ensuring for instance a greater inclusion of marginalized groups such as women and ethnic minorities. "In Ethiopia, community members saw women who were trained or hired by NGOs play growing roles in communal meetings and their relationships within households have also changed."[78]

Re-enforcing local legitimacy & accountability

A specific difficulty posed by the asymmetry and patronage patterns of humanitarian aid is that local structures, governmental and non-governmental, created or instigated by outsiders are generally oriented first towards the outside world and not their own society. Outside interventions even tend to reverse the legitimization process. Legitimacy does not arise from any social basis, but is granted by outsiders through the provision of crucial symbolic as well as material resources. International and local legitimating mechanisms may actually contradict one another. Local leaders do not answer to their people, but to international authorities and norms. The great advantage of this situation for local leaders is that they can easily manipulate it if they are smart enough to appear to conform to the expectations of the international community. In addition, international

actors, though best equipped to provide service delivery, may undermine the state's responsibility to its citizenry and may encourage populations to look to agencies for assistance, rather than to seek accountability within government structures.

The outsiders' actual accountability towards local people and partners also needs to be drastically improved and prioritized. For the moment, it remains largely insufficient and generates all kinds of frustrations. NGOs have power because they control access to essential services and goods and they can be in danger of behaving as if they were accountable only to their donors, rather than to the people whom they serve. It is often in the early stages of an emergency response that basic principles of accountability are dispensed with. Some organizations have fundamentally reoriented their work from that point of view, seeking to empower beneficiaries through such mechanisms as information sharing, transparency and inviting feedback from beneficiaries, including by establishing complaints mechanisms. This is, for example, what Tearfund did in Kashmir and North Kenya, Medair in it post-tsunami water and sanitation program in Aceh province (Indonesia) or CARE in Peru's earthquake response in 2007. These mechanisms are also crucial for preventing and detecting corruption, a subject that remains taboo in too many cases.[79] The Humanitarian Accountability Partnership, established in 2003, has designed a whole set of definitions, procedures and standards that specify how an agency should ensure accountability to its stakeholders. Its members are progressively putting them into practice. Other guidelines include the Emergency Capacity Building Project: Impact Measurement and Accountability in Emergencies: The Good Enough Guide (2007), People in Aid: Code of Good Practice for human resource management in emergencies (2003; revision of 1997 code) as well as the International Council of Voluntary Agencies: "Building Safer Organizations" handbook and guidelines for investigating charges of abuse and exploitation by humanitarian workers (2007). The establishment of such standards is an important step, but more efforts are needed to increase their implementation. Some analysts remain skeptical in view of the intrinsic obstacles to such implementation: lack of power and influence of those most in need, limits of the aid system itself, power and patronage distortion both at the international and national level.[80] According to them, accountability would be a virtuous aim, but an

77 Pouligny, 2006
78 CDA Learning Project, 2008.
79 Bailey, 2008; Ewins et al., 2006 ; Maxwell et al., 2008.
80 de Waal, 1994; Davis, 2007: 12-13.

utopist one. The answer may be that a one-size-fits-all, de-contextualized and de-politicized form of accountability does not and cannot enhance humanitarian action.[81] The approach suggested in this policy paper is locally driven and embedded. To be credible, these measures also need to go hand in hand with effective performance assessments and sanctioning systems for humanitarian organization staff, as well as specific training, including in inter-cultural communication and facilitation skills.[82]

An important dimension for humanitarian agencies is that **focusing more decisively on their local legitimacy and accountability should help deal with some of the tensions they currently experience between the humanitarian principles and codes of conduct and the reality on the ground**. Organizations that have started implementing some aspects of it, notably through local accountability mechanisms, such as Tearfund in Pakistan or Medair in Indonesia, have reported an improved sense of security of the staff because of the increased interaction with the community and an increase in mutual trust. This has a concrete impact, as for instance organizations had much fewer problems in storing items of value.[83] World Vision International considers that "accountability works as a community-based warning system that can help to significantly reduce organizational risk and flag issues early."[84] The organization also found that "having a department with a mandate to represent community perspectives help[ed] staff to reconnect with their original reasons for working for WV and to strengthen commitment to organizational values around valuing people."[85] This does not mean that the process will always be an easy one. However, guiding humanitarian staff to engage more with local populations is probably the best way to deal with some of the contradictions humanitarian agencies face in their operations.

Supporting knowledge and skills transfer to promote self-help skills

Acknowledging and fully considering the extent of knowledge and experience that local people have about their own situation is clearly difficult. Lessons learned in the development field show that the involvement of a greater proportion of national consultants and experts and, where appropriate, the development of South-South cooperation are among the major modalities inducing a shift towards local ownership. Opportunities to encounter and learn about different possibilities for humanitarian aid governance are also important contributions to local ownership at the leadership level. One interesting experience is the ProVention Consortium, a global partnership of governments, international organizations, academic organizations, the private sector and civil society whose goal is to support developing countries to reduce the risk and social, economic and environmental impacts of natural hazards on vulnerable populations. The consortium organizes regular international forums that allow for South-South exchanges of experiences.[86] Experiences of learning exchanges between community leaders in Central America or Asia have also shown the possibility and value of such encounters, helping community leaders to share lessons, build partnerships and learn new ways to reduce the impact of potential disaster in their communities.[87]

Such a spirit is even more important to promote when working with social and community actors. As in the Canadian model of community-based rehabilitation programs, it is important to involve, utilize and build on existing resources in affected people, their families and communities, but also to transfer some skills so that resources become available to all and rehabilitation is 'democratized.'[88] The experience of Sreema Mahila Samiti, an NGO in the Nadia district, West Bengal, provides a good illustration of that. "In its disaster preparedness programs, it has trained women self help groups in the skills of survival and rescuing. Women and girl children now swim fearlessly. Women can now put together temporary shelters, raise tube-wells, assemble emergency boats and can row them to save themselves and others from the floods. These newly learned skills and the encouragement to use them have made women less dependent on male community members for their rescue. The program also concentrates on training children in survival skills. In some cases, women have been

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81 Davis, 2007.
82 Pouligny, 2005: 499–500; People in Aid, 2003, 2007.
83 Bainbridge, Tuck and Bowen, 2008.
84 World Vision, 2007.
85 Ibid.
86 Provention, 2008.
87 Disaster Watch, 2008; NADRR, 2007.
88 Boyce, Koros & Hodgson, 2002; Boyce & Lysack, 1997; Helander et al, 1989

inducted into the rescue teams and men in the task force for childcare and first aid, generally considered to be a woman's work."[89]

However, such a transfer needs to be based on a consistent analysis of skills and knowledge already available in the community. It also supposes some support to communities decision-making capacity and sometimes basic education.[90] This again may require time, but both the humanitarian and the development communities have accumulated enough experience to draw the most important lessons and, on that basis, design guidelines and tools to help support that capacity, even when time is short. Local training institutions, as well as organized networking, need to be involved in the process to facilitate the local exchange of knowledge and best practices.

89 Pincha, 2008.
90 CDA, 2008.

V. Conclusion & recommendations

During the past decade, the humanitarian community has initiated a number of interagency initiatives to improve accountability, quality and performance in humanitarian action. Four of the most widely known initiatives are the Active Learning Network for Accountability and Performance in Humanitarian Action (ALNAP), the Humanitarian Accountability Partnership (HAP), People In Aid and the Sphere Project. Representatives of these initiatives began meeting on a regular basis in 2003 in order to share common issues and harmonize activities where possible. Since 2006, these four have been joined by Coordination SUD (Solidarité, Urgence, Développement), Groupe URD (Urgence Réhabilitation Développement) and the Emergency Capacity Building Project (ECB). This collaborative work has been decisive in putting in place new guidelines and tools to increase the quality of humanitarian aid. The process standards developed by the Sphere project on participation constitute an important step towards the promotion and implementation of the local ownership agenda. Other initiatives mentioned in this report have also allowed dialogue and thinking on quality issues to move forward. However, much effort is still needed for this progress to be reflected in practices, processes and procedures.[91] The following recommendations suggest concrete avenues to pursue those efforts.

Recommendation 1: Transforming outsiders' operational culture

Outsiders need to transform radically their operational culture. This process needs to be supported in four ways:

More action research is needed in order to assess concrete experiences in which new modes of operation have been tested and to identify the methods and models that better support local ownership.

The leverage effect that outside humanitarian aid should fundamentally have for local actors needs to be better conceptualized and understood, including in its various interactions with local political, social and economic processes, so that it accurately informs humanitarian practices (aid programs, job descriptions, monitoring mechanisms, etc.). This also requires a true ethical reflection about what it is to be an outsider in an emergency.[92]

It is time now for organizations and consortia to put more emphasis and effort on the consistent implementation of accountability and quality standards and tools.

Progress has been made in recent years in codifying these tools but implementation remains scarce. All staff training and job descriptions need to be revised in order to reflect adequately this new orientation. "Practicing accountability requires an organizational culture – and support from the leadership – that is supportive of learning, of corrective action and of continuous improvement. Otherwise, accountability can be seen by staff as a distraction or as 'something that complicates things' as opposed to a way to meet our objectives and improve our performance."[93] The impact on practices needs to be more precisely assessed and documented so that humanitarian staff can believe it can make a difference and those lessons can start being taken on board more generally by the humanitarian community.[94]

A shift in donors' policy is needed to support implementation.

All organizations that have started implementing the process attest to the importance of institutional commitment translated into more means, as well as staff trained and dedicated to the task. However, contrary to the rhetoric, "funds are more willingly affected to quantifiable results than to substantial

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91 Davis, 2007; Callamard, Braband, 2002.
92 Pouligny, 2002.
93 Smith and Jauregui, 2008.
94 Humanitarian Accountability Report, 2007; People in Aid, 2007; Annual Disaster Report, 2007.
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expenditures."[95] It is donors' responsibility to support humanitarian agencies to become responsive organizations. There is also a need for some budgetary flexibility to be able to respond fully to some of the suggestions raised by beneficiaries. Some organizations consider that, for instance, "there is anecdotal evidence that donors are more open to incorporating accountability into project design than we give them credit for."[96] Humanitarian agencies need to develop a concrete dialogue with donors to articulate and better explain the local ownership agenda and develop mechanisms to incorporate the costs into budgets (using for instance part of the communications and monitoring and evaluation budget lines), to fully resource the strengthening of local ownership agenda in an emergency response.

Last but not least, the local ownership agenda needs to be more openly discussed and advanced in partnership with organizations in the Global South.

While coordination and dialogue among international actors have improved drastically over the last two decades, in particular across the Atlantic, global platforms and international actors often fail to engage and link with local levels.

Recommendation 2: Adjusting intervention procedures

Adequate — tailor-made — procedures need to be agreed on and implemented to ensure that key local stakeholders in humanitarian aid in any given situation will have both the means and the capacity to be actively involved at all stages. This **adjustment of intervention procedures** demands that:[97]

The focus should be on processes as much as on results of humanitarian aid.

This shift coincides with the call by the Tsunami Evaluation Coalition for a "fundamental reorientation from supplying aid to supporting and facilitating communities' own relief and recovery priorities."[98] Different organizations have already echoed this call and developed best practices and detailed guidelines in this respect. An increasing number of field evaluations also look at the methodologies involved and use qualitative indicators as much as quantitative ones. However, this fundamental reorientation needs to be mainstreamed by donors, as well as agencies, and find concrete implications at all levels of intervention.

The humanitarian aid community and each organization need to put more efforts in improving knowledge management.

Focusing on local ownership means that every intervention needs to be context-specific and determined by the diversity of social, demographic and economic factors. This is because regions and communities vary enormously with respect to their administrative structures and capacities, economies, social and cultural conditions, population distribution, financial and workforce resources, local skills and materials, etc. **This supposes a certain knowledge that needs to be better developed (notably through thorough qualitative micro-level needs assessment as well as micro-monitoring systems) and managed so that it actually informs daily decisions and practices**. Quality 'pre-assessments' are essential in order to identify the capacities and gaps among the different actors. Humanitarian actors often claim that they do not have enough time for such evaluations, including because they are under donor pressure. True or not, this perception needs to be changed. In each program, field staff should have at their disposal concrete guidelines to help them identify their interlocutors in contexts where actors may no longer play the same role as before the disaster, and where hierarchies and values may have changed and new ones may have emerged. They also should have key indicators for monitoring and reporting on their work and their impact on local people's lives.[99]

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95 CDA, 2008.
96 Smith and Jauregui, 2008.
97 Culbertson & Pouligny, 2007; Boyce, Koros & Hodgson, 2002.
98 Telford and Cosgrave, 2006.
99 Pouligny, 2005, 2006.

This means that a learning culture needs to be created in which front-line staff want to learn from the local actors and share knowledge because they think it is useful.[100]

Too often, the main moment when beneficiaries are asked to give their opinion is during field assessments. This is too limited and too late and tends to keep them in a passive role.[101]

Enough project staff needs to speak local languages and understand local cultural, social and political dynamics.

Those who do not have that knowledge should receive, at the very least, pre-deployment briefings and adequate tools and support to understand their environment.

A supporting partnership of diverse groups in a designated community needs to be built.

The IFRC *2007 Annual Disaster Report*, which focused on the issue of discrimination against vulnerable groups during disasters, suggests the formation of "Community Response Committees" to help ensure that local communities lead their own recovery, and that a diverse group of community members is involved. Community surveys and focus groups can also provide important inputs, but the report notes that humanitarians are often under pressure not to share the results beyond organizational leaders. This needs to change.

Adequate resources need to be assigned to develop local skills, including in the immediate management of a crisis.

Participative and accountable mechanisms need to receive the same kind of concrete support. This requires a clear commitment on the part of donors.

Implementation arrangements need to be realistic, practical, incremental, transparent, participatory and non-discriminatory.

This means that more emphasis needs to be put on transparent information and a wider communication and outreach strategy.[102] This should include two aspects. One is the need for people affected by a disaster to have access to the right information.

When Cyclone Nargis hit Myanmar in May 2008, it was weeks before local humanitarian relief efforts were reinforced by an international response. However, in that time, information outlets provided a life-saving service according to the UN OCHA. Dedicated radio broadcasts helped many to survive in those first critical weeks, telling them how to purify water, treat minor ailments, identify serious medical problems and build basic shelters. Information is also crucial when rumors are the rule in violent contexts.

The other dimension is to provide people with adequate information about what they can expect from aid agencies. In too many cases, evaluations show that people did not know what they would receive and sometimes had unrealistic expectations.[103] The experience of Tearfund in Spin Boldak, at the border between Afghanistan and Pakistan, contrasts this classic scenario. Tearfund supported the extension and renovation of a local school in a community where many internally displaced people were to be integrated after IDP camps were closed. At a time when the work had to stop for funding limitations, the team shared budget information with local communities, showing not only a will to be transparent, but giving a better sense of the actual limitations of the project. This also allowed to identify, with the local authorities, limited but real occurrence of fraud and to remedy them.[104] Different NGOs, like Oxfam, utilize information boards to inform communities. In Aceh (Indonesia), the organization Austcare has used the board to post criteria required for participation in a project to reconstruct brick factories prior to requesting proposals from the community. Then they posted the list of successful participants with a brief explanation of why they were selected and why those who were unsuccessful were not. The organization found that it was very effective in ensuring that community jealousy and conflict were kept to a minimum and messages previously "lost in translation" were made clear and accessed by all.[105] Others like the Humanitarian Accountability Partnership and the 2004 *Sphere Handbook* have produced guidelines for the establishment of complaint mechanisms. People can comment on the programs by different means, including public meetings, through a special office or via community-based organizations, for instance. Some organizations have started to implement those measures. Such processes require additional means and skills, but prove extremely beneficial for

100 Loquercio, 2006: 20-21.
101 Sphere standards on Participation, 2004.
102 Pouligny, 2006: 147–54.
103 DARA/IASC, 2007: 50; HAP, 2007b.
104 Bainbridge, Tuck and Bowen, 2008.
105 Clinton Initiative, 2006; Oxfam, 2008.

the projects. They need to be generalized. These elements need to be part of a broader effort to make effective two-way communication with affected population common practice during crises.

Recommendation 3: Advancing preparedness at the community level

Different agencies and initiatives have now centered their strategies towards developing preparedness at the community level.[107] **This emphasis on advancing preparedness needs to be confirmed and strengthened.** Indeed, many evaluations have found that first rescue and early relief efforts were almost always local, meaning that they were largely from individuals from the community or close to the community. Thus, it is critical that, particularly in disaster-prone areas, local communities are provided with the basics of preparedness and are included in preparedness plans.[109] Some organizations have also learned from past experience the importance of planning in advance so that partner staff in countries vulnerable to emergencies are trained in appropriate guidelines and procedures such as Sphere as part of preparedness measures (see for instance the experience of Christian Aid in Sri Lanka after the Tsunami, in 2004: Paratharayil 2007). Similar efforts should apply to protracted crises in which humanitarian aid stays for several years, sometimes over a decade. As pointed out by a study on emergency preparedness in the United States, it seems obvious that, almost by definition, all emergencies occur in some local community. "But this is not as obvious in the national and international discourse on emergency management. For example, in the United States, emergency management is concentrated in federal agencies and to a limited extent in state governments. Attention and support for local community development and coordination is minuscule."[109] What is true in a country like the U.S. is even truer in many other contexts. Donors and humanitarian agencies need to increase their efforts in this respect.

The TEC evaluation report on the response to the Asian Tsunami recognizes that promoting local ownership in humanitarian emergencies can be difficult and time-consuming to achieve. "Nevertheless the potential advantages offered by ownership by the affected population, including more effective, appropriate and sustainable aid, should be deemed to outweigh the difficulties. Some see humanitarian action as relieving the distress of the affected population without addressing the underlying causes. However, Article Nine of the Red Cross/NGO Code of Conduct states that 'relief aid must strive to reduce future vulnerabilities to disaster as well as meeting basic needs.'"[110] Moreover, all the accounts of recent and current experiences in which one or several aspects of the local ownership agenda were pursued show that, in the end, it has increased the adequacy and efficiency of humanitarian aid and at times allowed both a quicker and more focused implementation of the project. It is time for the humanitarian community to move one step further in its commitment for both greater quality and support to the rights and dignity of local populations.

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106 HAP, 2007a; Sphere, 2004.
107 See for instance WHO, 2007.
108 Fritz Institute, 2005.
109 Schafer et al., 2008.
110 IFRC, 1997; Telford and Cosgrave, 2006.

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