HPG

Humanitarian Policy Group

Researching local humanitarian action through partnerships with local actors

Larissa Fast

'Localising' humanitarian action is a hot topic, with implications for organisations and the way they work. This 'local turn' for humanitarian action mirrors similar calls related to peacebuilding and other interventions in situations of violence and conflict (Mac Ginty and Richmond, 2013; Paffenholz, 2015; UN, 2015). The work of the Humanitarian Policy Group (HPG) is no different. HPG's 2017–2019 research agenda seeks to understand the complexities and dynamics of humanitarian action 'from the ground up'. As part of this process, HPG committed to reflecting on and learning from its partnerships with local actors – local researchers and humanitarians – in keeping with the spirit of the project.

As well as using local researchers as enumerators or data collectors, we also wanted to involve local scholars, universities, think tanks, policy specialists,

practitioners and affected people in the design, implementation, analysis and testing of the research. In other words, involving local actors as research partners and not only as research sub-contractors. Was it possible for this research agenda to be locally led, or at least co-created? What have we learned from this process and how have our research partners experienced it?

This briefing note draws on insights from working with local actors for the HPG 'from the ground up' research project, with fieldwork for case studies of Bangladesh, the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), northern Iraq, Lebanon, Libya, Nepal and Uganda. It includes reflections from HPG researchers as well as the local researchers with whom HPG partnered, who were invited to share their perspectives about the advantages and challenges of working with each other.[1]

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1   None of the research partners are identified in this piece, either by individual or organisational name or by country. The names of research partners are included in the case study publications published by HPG. While I am author of this note, I did not participate in any of field-based case research and contacted local partners separately to provide written feedback in response to a series of questions. Although this division of responsibility does not completely eliminate the inherent bias of asking about the process of collaboration with the institution with which I am affiliated, it did provide a degree of separation from the process and results of the research.

This paper is the second in a series that synthesises findings from HPG's local humanitarianism research (Fast, 2017).[2] The note first describes HPG's approach to researching local humanitarian action, followed by a discussion of developing research partnerships and conducting research. It concludes with a series of reflections about partnering with local institutions.

The starting point

HPG partnered with local actors with a range of experience in working with foreign research or academic institutions. For some, this was their first time working with HPG or conducting qualitative (interview or focus group) research; others had extensive experience of conducting research with and for other ODI teams, think tanks or universities.

HPG employed different **types of partnerships** for the research. In some places, partners provided technical advice and expertise; in others, access to networks or knowledge of the local language was more important. Local actors functioned as research sub-contractors in a few contexts, while in other countries the engagement process aimed to co-create a research product. Arrangements varied from loosely defined partnerships to specific contractual agreements. Most of these were short term, designed to meet specific needs (for instance, data collection and analysis in a particular country about an aspect of local humanitarian action) or to test the possibility of an extended partnership. With at least one partner, HPG negotiated a Memorandum of Understanding to govern a longer-term research collaboration.

HPG partnered with local or national research organisations in most countries, and in some contexts at least one national humanitarian or development non-governmental organisation (NGO). Partners participated in or led activities, including shaping interview questions, translating key research concepts, conducting interviews and focus groups, interpreting data, sharing findings and crafting dissemination plans. The shape and combination of activities depended on the research goals and the availability and strengths of partner organisations. Some organisations jointly conducted research with HPG, whereas others undertook components of the data collection and contributed to the analysis. For instance, in one country the collaboration with a national humanitarian actor allowed the research team to identify and interview local actors that would have otherwise been inaccessible. The diversity of research respondents and participants thereby shaped the findings and ensured the research captured the perspectives of those who are not often included in research about humanitarian action.

Even though the approach of involving local organisations in the research generated mutual benefits, the process was not without frustration and challenge, on both sides. Some partnerships worked smoothly and others less so. Multiple partners identified the relationship with an internationally recognised think tank as a benefit; they appreciated the visibility that might come from it and how it might lead to new partnerships with other organisations. As one partner put it, 'This encounter could make other potential partners aware of [our organisation] and could facilitate a ricochet effect at an opportune moment for the research and evaluation sector'. Another stated that the partnership 'enables us to look at issues from a wider perspective and provides an opportunity to connect ourselves with a range of stakeholders. It enriches us with new concepts and ideas and widens the scope to work in new areas'. In this sense, local researchers valued exposure to broader perspectives on current debates and outreach beyond a single country or region. Others, however, expressed frustration with what they perceived to be the researchers' lack of 'in-depth knowledge of [a] country, its history, culture and people', linking this to the meaning of localisation: 'Localisation does not only mean that "I understand the local and you understand the global" but really is about making meaningful conversation on the nature of localisation and globalisation across the divide'.

For HPG, relationships with local organisations were instrumental in carrying out the project, but the type and degree of value varied. As outlined further below, challenges to working with local actors ranged from differing understandings of research methodology and ethics to capacity strains for organisations that accepted more work than they could deliver. An additional challenge was that interpreters sometimes translated interviewees' testimonies to provide a more 'sanitised' version, which was not as critical of their political situation. However, HPG researchers identified benefits from the partnerships, which at a minimum facilitated access to interviewees and assisted with logistics. In the most successful instances, local organisations contributed

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2   There is a small but growing number of similar reflections about research partnerships in the humanitarian or development sectors. See for example Jacobsen and Landa (2003), HAG (2017) and Toomey (2018).

substantively to the findings, and these partnerships allowed HPG to contextualise and adapt the research methodology and tools to the specific context.

Insights into developing research partnerships

Researchers from HPG and local partners identified several issues related to the development of research partnerships. First, the **timeframes** of conducting policy research and developing partnerships conflicted, both in the design and implementation of the research. HPG defined the research topics in terms of their thematic importance before deciding on locations and identifying potential partners. In most cases, this meant it was not feasible to produce locally defined or locally led research on humanitarian action, even with a process of co-creation. Similar constraints have plagued other efforts to 'localise' the research process. As the Humanitarian Advisory Group (HAG), a similar policy group and HPG partner based in Melbourne, Australia, reported, despite local researchers leading the research, 'due to time constraints regarding submission, the national researchers did not have substantive input into the development of the EOI [expression of interest]' (HAG, 2017: 2).

While some flexibility existed to discuss, adapt and jointly develop the research focus, interview questions and lists of potential interviewees, HPG set the overall terms for the research. As one HPG researcher observed, 'while we have tried to make the partnership as equitable as possible, the reality is it is **not an equal partnership** as HPG controls the resources, and it developed and ultimately makes decisions about the partnership and research progress'. Another observed that, despite repeated efforts to involve local organisations in the substance of the research, some did not take this opportunity. This may have been due to a lack of time or expertise. However, it might also have been a consequence of the underlying power imbalance of the partnerships, since HPG initiated the research and controlled the budgets.

Agreeing upon the terms of reference, budgets, due dates, research methods, **logistics** and analysis took significant time on all sides. Limited internet and mobile connectivity characterised many of the research locations, which, combined with time zone differences, made it difficult to ensure timely responses or to have more extensive discussions about the research process. This was compounded by difficulties related to clear **communication,** which both local researchers and HPG staff identified as challenging.

One justification that often surfaces with regard to local partnerships is that they are cheaper. While **cost savings** may accrue, this is not necessarily a given. Nor does shifting the responsibility for conducting research to local partners automatically save time and effort. Less familiarity with the interview materials makes it more challenging to interpret and find nuance in analysing data, as does working through translators. Moreover, even when interviews were recorded by a local actor, the HPG researcher needed to listen to these recordings, essentially doubling the time spent on the interview. Local actors exhibited differing levels of interest in the research, but passion about the topic of local humanitarian action and partnerships helped to create buy-in and improved the quality of contributions and the process.

Both HPG researchers and local organisations identified the **problematic nature of short-term partnerships,** albeit for different reasons. One local partner stated that 'long-term partnerships with local research organisations would be more fruitful than short-term ones, as it would enable both parties to know and learn about each other's strength and weaknesses beforehand', with corresponding benefits for the research project. Another wrote that the absence of a formal, longer-term agreement detracted from the benefit of allowing them to profit from new opportunities and advancing their expertise.

HPG researchers were aware that multiple partners had many projects and competing demands on their time, in some cases due to an ongoing humanitarian crisis. Several local partners engaged in a plethora of activities, including operational projects as well as research. The reality of this political economy of local–international relationships meant that some local organisations were 'overwhelmed with an influx of new contracts' and in some instances needed to prioritise other projects over HPG's research. For example, in the context of an ongoing crisis, the scale and urgency of operational contracts with large international donors meant neither organisations or individuals had the capacity to fully engage with the substance of the research. These challenges may also have resulted from the less tangible nature of an HPG request to co-create a research project in comparison to more concrete requests, such as conducting interviews according to a guide. In the context of competing demands, it is more straightforward to conduct a set number of pre-defined surveys or interviews rather than contribute more broadly to research design and analysis.

Finally, in embarking upon partnerships it is important to consider the **positionality** of individuals and organisations, referring to how social, political and other identities influence our interactions as well as our understanding of the world around us and confer or limit power and privilege (Muhammed et al., 2015). The more common approach is to question the positioning of local partners, yet one local partner observed that HPG is still of the '"north" and not in the "south". The north has its own methods and "comfort zones" like soft landing spots with international NGOs (INGOs), and the south similarly with local and national power structures and hierarchies'. Thus, while local perceptions will affect research findings, so too will those of international organisations such as HPG.

Conversely, HPG researchers recognised that local partners have historical and current relationships with individuals or organisational interviewees. In some cases, these are beneficial, as the status, networks and connections of local organisations ensured interviewees' participation. Additionally, with governments becoming increasingly assertive about approving research protocols by foreign researchers, partnerships with local actors can ease national government approval processes, where required.[3]

However, these same relationships could sometimes prove problematic. For example, a local organisation's work on behalf of one group in a conflict setting could make it difficult to conduct interviews across conflict divides. In some contexts, the attitudes and assumptions of enumerators towards refugees and internally displaced people raised concerns around objectivity. Conversely, in one instance, the degree of closeness between local NGOs and government actors raised ethical questions related to sharing data. Some teams had to navigate between counteracting and challenging local customs or prejudices and maintaining a fruitful collaboration.

In other instances, HPG worked with multiple local partners, both national and local, highlighting the varying meanings of 'localness'. Local organisations may not necessarily match the identity, culture or languages of the displaced or refugee populations with whom they work. As one HPG researcher observed, 'there was, at times, as much of a gulf in practises and understanding between [the local and the national

partner] as there were between us and the national partner … The local partner was unfamiliar with many of the processes and work culture of the national partner and vice versa'.

Also, while national organisations are more 'local' than HPG, national organisations in Dhaka or Kampala are less local than an organisation based in Cox's Bazar or Gulu. This effectively created a middle layer of (national) partner that, although able to speak with authority on issues of national-level policy and interactions with the international system, was less familiar with the particularities of the sub-national context. This additional national layer helped with quality control of data and reduced the need for HPG oversight, but also added to the 'hierarchy' of contracting and reduced opportunities for local organisations to contribute substantially to the research design. Additional engagement and conversations at the sub-national level helped to create a space where these partners were comfortable contributing, and eventually added to the nuance and depth of knowledge, to the overall benefit of the research. Thus, while a range of local and national actors are often conflated under the 'local' label, having research partners at both national and local levels enabled HPG to research and experience views, capacities, access and opportunities across 'local' humanitarian action.

Insights into the research process

A series of challenges likewise characterised the process of conducting research, from data collection to analysis and knowledge creation.

The diversity of partner types meant that their **experience and capacity** to conduct qualitative research varied, as did HPG's consequent approach to partnering. To ensure a common understanding of the research goals and a basic capacity in research in terms of skills and resources, HPG researchers conducted training in multiple contexts to familiarise partners with the overall research topic and methods. In one instance, HPG researchers conducted morning sessions on research methodology and ethics and left local researchers to discuss translation issues in the afternoon. This allowed the local researchers to tailor the questions to the context without forcing them to converse with one another in English. In another

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3   This assertiveness is both welcome and concerning – welcome, in that such oversight can offer a way to mitigate the occurrence of extractive research that does not benefit the communities contributing to research endeavours, and concerning, in that it may represent attempts to control research that does not conform to government-supported narratives around controversial issues, such as the treatment of minorities, conflict histories or human rights.

context, face-to-face workshops included planning sessions focused on how HPG and local organisations wanted to work together, the sharing of good research practice and the opportunity to discuss and adapt questions to better reflect the context. In another country, the local operational actor had less research experience and needed more direction and clarification on interview questions. HPG also relied on the technical expertise of local research organisations on methodology and design in some contexts. Therefore, as other researchers have found (HAG, 2017: 4), early investment in building partnerships with local actors paid off in terms of contextually appropriate research (who is involved), better understanding of research purposes and questions, as well as cost-effective and local ownership of the research.

Although, as one HPG researcher observed, involving more people can make it more difficult to collect data and ensure data quality and consistency, HPG also found that a diversity of types of partners strengthened the research process and findings. In one instance, a local organisation with less research experience had extensive **networks and knowledge** about the humanitarian sector, which provided expert perspectives and nuance to the eventual research findings. Conversely, another local organisation had extensive research capacity but less experience and understanding around current debates about local humanitarian action. Therefore, the various partners, whether operational or research-focused, complemented different networks and areas of expertise, and strengthened the analytical value of the research process and findings.

Cultural differences played out in a variety of ways, from differing interpretations of terminology in the terms of reference to the culture and politics of the research context itself. One local staff member suggested that the interview approach did not necessarily reflect the cultural context: 'The methodology of having structured questionnaires/ checklists (as per Chatham House interview method) was not in general culturally accepted by local interviewees as they tended to stray away from main questions and tell stories instead'. This mirrors insights related to modes of cultural communication, discussed in terms of the continuum between 'high-context' and 'low-context' cultures (Augsberger, 1992). High-context cultures value non-verbal communication and implicit meanings and, by extension, the context of the communication is crucial. In contrast, low-context cultures tend to rely on direct communication, the spoken word and explicit meaning.

Equally, cultural differences may influence understandings of **research ethics**, as differing standards and practices can elicit misunderstanding and confusion on both sides. For example, HPG and local partners variously interpreted a clause in the terms of reference about 'not paying' for interviews or focus group participation. Payments for interviews contradict ODI research ethics protocols. While non-payment is standard practice in northern research protocols (as it may affect motivations or willingness to participate in interviews, and therefore the characteristics of the research sample), southern researchers saw this not as payment for participation but instead as a reimbursement for interviewees' time or the expenses they may have incurred.

Moreover, the concerted emphasis on safeguarding – the protection of vulnerable populations – that has arisen in the aftermath of the sexual exploitation and abuse scandals that have rocked the humanitarian sector have made informed consent an unambiguous pre-condition of field research. Safeguarding also introduces more precautions and effort to ensure compliance with ethical guidelines. In one country, a local researcher with a thorough understanding of informed consent explained, in the team's native language, what it is and why it is important. This, together with a checkbox at the top of the interview questionnaire reminding each individual researcher to complete the process, helped to promote compliance with informed consent protocols and ethical guidelines. Contextualising this process, by choosing the right language to ensure clarity and creating the written or, more likely, oral consent form ended up being a highly collaborative process between HPG and local actors in multiple countries, and one that provided useful insights.

Finally, in several places, the fact that partners were local influenced **access** to research subjects in both positive and negative ways, as HPG and partner researchers pointed out. According to an HPG researcher, 'the local research partner tried to arrange an interview for us with one of their own INGO partners, and received a terse response'. The local partner likewise emphasised that 'sometimes, it was very difficult to get access to the INGOs. INGOs in [country] are not very respectful in appreciating the demands of the local NGOs. Thus, the attitudes of INGOs sometimes acted as barrier in getting access to them.'

These differences in access became especially apparent when HPG researchers sought interviews with

international organisations, which usually resulted in faster, more positive responses, and interviews with more senior staff. Some local organisations also expressed discomfort with the idea of interviewing staff from INGOs or UN agencies, although they interviewed other local organisations with whom they had previously worked.

This was true across contexts. In one country, HPG researchers observed that some international organisations did not trust local researchers or did not wish to be interviewed by them about a sensitive topic. These organisations did, however, consider HPG a 'good research organisation', although in some cases only after vetting or introductions from headquarters-based staff. These instances vividly illustrate unequal power dynamics, which affect access, characterise the humanitarian system and serve as barriers to local actors.

Reflecting on the lessons

Reflecting on the process and insights from both local partners and HPG researchers, a series of lessons are evident.

Successful research partnerships require trust, time and effort

This is both a truism and an acutely important reality. Investments over time to communicate clearly and regularly, clarify expectations and respond to queries are needed on all sides to establish and maintain trust and successful partnerships. Time and flexibility also need to be integrated in the planning stage so that feedback from local researchers can be included.

Face-to-face interactions make partnerships easier, although researchers on both sides found communication via WhatsApp helpful in maintaining connections during the research process. One HPG researcher noted that logistical complications, such as a delay in transferring funds, can undermine trust. However, small efforts can increase visibility and strengthen collaboration. For example, in one country the research team created project business cards with logos from each of the organisations, which presented the project as a joint effort. In another context, utility jackets were provided for enumerators to identify them with the name of the local research organisation. Due to the timebound nature of the partnership, the HPG logo was not included.

Valuing different types of expertise demands deliberate and concerted effort

Expertise comes in many forms. HPG is a research organisation based in London, which means that its insight into on-the-ground realities of humanitarian action come from the research process. Its institutional expertise is thematic and focused on the humanitarian system, even if individual researchers have experience in specific contexts. Even so, one local partner felt that HPG researchers lacked enough knowledge about the country, which in the local partner's view made it difficult for HPG researchers to understand or contextualise the information from initial interviews and drafts. In researching local humanitarian action, therefore, the close involvement of local partners was crucial. The expertise of local actors provided detailed understanding of the individual case contexts, at multiple levels, while HPG was able to consider this knowledge in light of broader debates and multiple contexts. In this way, the types of expertise proved complementary.

Ensuring that local partners are able to contribute their knowledge and expertise to the discussion is key in valuing contextual expertise (Barbelet et al., 2019). HPG researchers used joint analysis workshops, whether in London or in country, to 'interview' research partners about their expertise and contribute to the interpretation of data. As one HPG researcher stated, this process 'enabled them to say this is what I think, this is what I heard' in ways that valued their expertise and allowed them to explicitly contribute their perspectives to the research.

Research partnerships can take many forms but an awareness of power dynamics and effective communication are imperative

In some cases, the goal is an equal partnership involving both parties bringing money and expertise to the partnership, joint creation of the research design and shared ownership, responsibility, staff and costs. Such partnerships are possible when power is equal and shared. These, however, are rare. In other cases, the optimal arrangement may be for the local partner to take on a straightforward sub-contracting role for specific research products or translation assistance, particularly if they do not want the responsibility of co-creation and shared ownership, if the international partner cannot commit to co-ownership, or capacities and timeframes do not allow the development of an equal partnership. In the latter cases, however, international researchers must be attentive to the ways in which they exercise power and how this affects the partnership and research results.

Sometimes, successful research partnerships must involve an assessment of the benefits and various partnership approaches. Realistic assessments of the

time and effort required for successful partnerships are necessary to realise the true cost of the partnership. Thus, the value of the partnership is less about cost or time savings, and more about the added value of different perspectives. Holding discussions early in the research process will help clarify roles and responsibilities about everything from expenses and research ethics to ownership of the research outputs and the dissemination of findings. A realistic assessment of the opportunities and constraints of short-term and longer-term partnerships can and should be part of this process.

All types of partnerships can conceivably suggest a degree of 'localising' the research process. Localisation may not always mean locally-led. Instead, it acknowledges the added value of partnerships with local actors as well as the significant challenges, some of which are rooted in varying understandings of localisation and partnership themselves. Complementarity is about creating shared value through a process that recognises power differentials and respects the contributions of all partners.

Developing a partnership statement offers an opportunity and process to clarify expectations, values and contributions
A partnership statement, as a framework that sets out the expectations and attributes of partners, as well as the values and approach of an organisation, represents one avenue for transparent engagement. Such a statement can help to clarify expectations, contributions and assets, as well as the values and mission of an organisation. In one instance, HPG co-developed a principles of partnership statement with a local organisation that also laid out a longer-term collaboration. An organisation may develop its own statement proactively, as a way of outlining expectations for partnering, or such statements may be negotiated, serving as a joint reference document between organisations.

The idea of a partnership statement or articulation of an approach to partnering with others is not new (for example Fast et al., 2002). In 2007, in recognition of the shortcomings of humanitarian reform processes that did not adequately account for or value local actors and capacities, the Global Humanitarian Platform, including UN agencies, NGOs, and the Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement, set out a 'principles of partnership' (PoP) statement affirming the values of equality, transparency, results, responsibility and complementarity (ICVA, n.d.). More recently, local NGOs in Bangladesh have outlined a 'Charter of

Expectations' with regard to partnerships with INGOs, UN agencies and donors (The Daily Star, 2018). The process of developing such a statement offers an opportunity to reflect on and articulate organisational approaches to partnerships as well as ethical commitments. If developed with the relevant staff from a local organisation, a joint statement could offer a clear, commonly understood foundation for working together. Yet there is also a risk that a statement may solidify the dichotomy between the financial and procedural 'capacities' of the international partner and the supposed 'softer' capacities of relationships, access and contextual expertise of the local partner. Regardless, the eventual value of the process and statements lie in their implementation and not in the statements themselves, and they can help to keep all partners accountable to a shared commitment.

'Localising' research carries similar challenges and benefits to that of 'localising' humanitarian action
In practice, 'localising' the research process is not easy and can sometimes lay bare uncomfortable truths. We discovered that many of the dynamics and complications of devolving humanitarianism to national and local actors likewise characterise the process of conducting research with national and local organisations. The challenges identified above, such as those around timeframes, positionality and access, mirror those related to developing partnerships in the humanitarian sector more broadly: where internationals wield power in the system, and status as 'international' or 'local' confers automatic benefits to some and disadvantages others (Obrecht, 2014); where internationals are seen as more impartial (Schenkenberg, 2016) or, in the case of research, as more 'objective'; where value is attached to technical over contextual expertise (Dubois et al., 2015; Barbelet et al., 2019); or where the immediacy of need becomes a justification for not involving local actors in all stages of the project cycle, from design to evaluation, and not simply during project implementation.

Equally, just as local communities may tire of repeated needs assessments, they may likewise experience 'research fatigue' when researchers come to ask questions and extract answers and insight without returning to report findings (for example Clark, 2008). Yet overall, we found that local research partnerships offered significant advantages, among them enhancing and nuancing research findings, highlighting potential biases and blindspots and, when partnering with non-humanitarian organisations, breaking out of the humanitarian 'echo chamber' of ideas and perspectives. It is precisely these benefits that make the process worthwhile.

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