



# Partnership Practice by Donors in the Humanitarian Sector

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This Briefing Note considers the role of donors as partners in multi-sector, multi-stakeholder partnerships in the humanitarian sector. It draws primarily on experience gained through working with bilateral agencies, the UN, international non-governmental organisations (INGOs) and coalitions of these and others, and considers these agencies' behaviours both as partners and as donors. In this way it goes beyond traditional notions of who is a donor by also looking at how UN agencies and INGOs operate as donors.<sup>2</sup>

The paper's primary audience is those who may not be familiar with partnership practice in humanitarian action, which has made some important contributions to advancing multi-stakeholder, multi-sector approaches in the past 15 years. Its secondary audience is partnership practitioners and donors within the humanitarian sector as it seeks to unpick and advance ideas about what constitutes good 'donor-as-partner' practice in the sector.

The insights offered are intended to facilitate discussion and learning. The intention is not to provide a comprehensive assessment of donor partnering in the sector; this would require significantly more time and resources. What the paper does do is draw attention to instructive examples, important trends and ongoing challenges within the western 'humanitarian industrial complex' of predominantly bilateral development agencies, the UN, INGOs and, to a lesser degree, the Red Cross / Red Crescent movement.

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<sup>2</sup> A more holistic assessment would also include the partnering experience of local NGOs, national governments, individuals and affected-country businesses etc. Unfortunately, the time and resources available for this first Briefing Note did not allow for this wider assessment.



## SUMMARY

The humanitarian sector is concerned with saving lives and alleviating suffering in sudden onset emergencies (such as following an earthquake or typhoon) and in conflict-ridden environments. The fundamental principle that guides emergency response is that in all circumstances, all people should be treated humanely and with respect. In practical terms, this means that all have the right to give and receive humanitarian assistance (the humanitarian imperative) in an impartial way, based on need.<sup>3</sup>

Donors are central to the humanitarian sector, including traditional bi-lateral agencies, national government agencies, international non-governmental organisations (INGOs), faith-based organisations, corporations and businesses, as well as diaspora groups and individuals. Donors resource emergency response, but also in many cases strive to improve the effectiveness of emergency response and enhance and increase emergency preparedness.

Over the past 15 years or so, investing in partnerships and partnering to improve emergency preparedness and response has become increasingly prominent, especially with respect to engaging the resources and capabilities of a variety of organisations through multi-sector and multi-stakeholder partnerships. As a result, many donors have come to see themselves as more than providers of resources, but also as partners, facilitators and enablers who seek to increase impact. A typical motivation for partnering investment is to do more with less, to do better and to do differently.

In our increasingly complex and, in the humanitarian context, resource-poor world, few would question the rationale for multi-sector and multi-stakeholder partnerships. Less common are corresponding efforts to understand what ways investing in partnering has increased the effectiveness of emergency preparedness and response, and how might investing in better partnerships lead to greater impact. In this regard, those involved in the humanitarian sector might benefit from better understanding about partnership practice and advances in multi-sector and multi-stakeholder partnerships that have been achieved in other human development endeavours, such as combating climate change, alleviating poverty, promoting economic development, assuring food security, defending human rights or conserving natural and cultural heritage.

In turn, the experience and capacities for partnering in the humanitarian sector could be resources for those seeking to invest better through partnering in their own fields or sectors of concern and interest. The insights offered here are intended to facilitate discussion and learning among partnership practitioners and donors seeking to invest better, and achieve greater effectiveness, through partnerships. They provide an introduction for those interested in gaining an appreciation and better understanding of efforts in the humanitarian sector to invest better through partnering. The intention is not to provide a comprehensive overview of partnering in the humanitarian sector, but rather to draw attention to important trends, good practice, instructive examples and important challenges.

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<sup>3</sup> For an explanation of humanitarian principles and the humanitarian imperative, see the International Committee of the Red Cross [www.icrc.org](http://www.icrc.org)



## Key Messages

### **PARTNERING IS NOW IN THE HUMANITARIAN MAINSTREAM**

Investing through partnerships and partnering is today at the heart of humanitarian action. The importance and role of partnering is underscored in numerous high-level policy documents, within agencies' strategies and guidelines, and in the myriad networks and consortia that operate within the sector. This expression, however, remains largely rhetorical and is not readily reflected in deed and good practice. In addition, partnerships within the sector still tend toward the transactional. That said, whether public or private, donors<sup>4</sup> are trying to contribute more than just funding to support partnership: for example, by increasingly trying to act as partners to other donors, to their grantee agencies, to those affected by disasters, to governments, and to other stakeholders. The overarching motivation is to do more with less. On occasion, this is coupled with a motivation and desire to do better and to do differently.

### **DONOR DRIVEN FRAMEWORKS AROUND**

Over the past 15 years, several initiatives have helped to embed partnership thinking (and some action) into the fabric of humanitarian practice. At the bi-lateral donor level, the **GOOD HUMANITARIAN DONORSHIP (GHD) INITIATIVE**<sup>5</sup> is a notable example, as are the individual efforts of a small number of national donors, including the UK Department for International Development (DFID), Sweden's Swedish International Development Agency (SIDA), parts of USAID, and Australia's DFAT. Numerous efforts within the UN system have found expression in a number of ways, such as through the application of the **UN PRINCIPLES OF PARTNERSHIP**,<sup>6</sup> the so-called **Cluster Approach**<sup>7</sup> and, more recently, through a **common service initiative** aimed at ensuring greater participation by those affected by crisis and disaster where local actors are seen as equal partners to the initiative. In addition, the UN and its major donors have been responsible for the establishment of a number of pooled funding mechanisms. These aim to provide a flexible, responsive and timely source of financing for emergencies. Increasingly, they seek to support collaborative action. The **SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS** promoted by the UN are also relevant here.

### **INGOs AS INNOVATORS**

The INGO sector is perhaps where some of the most innovative and interesting examples lie in the various partnerships, consortia and networks that have come to define emergency preparedness and response. INGOs such as World Vision, MercyCorps, ActionAid and others have become advocates for partnering approaches and have set new standards for partnership practice.<sup>8</sup> In addition, there are a number of newer networks within the INGO sector that are predicated on partnership principles, such as the START Network<sup>9</sup> and the CDAC Network.<sup>10</sup> The latter in particular takes a multi-sector

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<sup>4</sup> In this paper, the focus is primarily on partnering experience of working with bi-lateral development agencies, the UN, and INGOs, which needs to be expanded to include also the partnering experience local NGOs, national governments, individuals or business.

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.ghdinitiative.org/ghd/gns/best-practices.html>

<sup>6</sup> See <https://www.icvanetwork.org/system/files/versions/Principles%20of%20Partnership%20English.pdf>

<sup>7</sup> The Cluster Approach is the UN's preferred mechanism for coordination in humanitarian action in identifiable sectors, such as food, water and shelter. For more detail see Footnote 18.

<sup>8</sup> Notwithstanding, it should be noted that good practice is highly context specific and often determined by the commitment of individual practitioners.

<sup>9</sup> The START Network comprises 42 national and international aid agencies from five continents, ranging from high-profile organisations to smaller agencies. The aim is to work out more effective ways of working together to deliver aid, harness the power and knowledge of the Network to make faster and better decisions to help people affected by crisis, and to



approach as a result of its make-up of INGOs, UN agencies, the Red Cross/Red Crescent Movement, media development agencies, specialist communication organisations and others. These networks themselves take on donorship roles.

## **PARTNERING CULTURE CHARACTERISTICS**

Investing through partnering has been shaped largely by donors – both public and private – and has created a partnering culture in the humanitarian sector. This can be characterised as follows:

- A rhetoric or narrative of partnering pervades the sector.
- There is a proliferation of multi-sectoral and multi-stakeholder partnerships.
- There have been important investments aimed at advancing partnership action and building relevant capabilities, most notably the UK DFID's **Disasters and Emergencies Preparedness Programme (DEPP)**<sup>11</sup>.
- A growing number of bi-laterals have come to see their role as enabling more effective partnership between their grantees and have helped to seek synergies and cost-effectiveness through the nurture and support of INGO partnerships and networks (such as START and CDAC).
- There are increased efforts to work with affected populations as co-creators of solutions (i.e. partners!) – despite difficulties of putting this into practice.
- Most INGOs are today in some form of collaboration with one another and with NGOs from the 'global South'.
- Donors are beginning to invest in efforts to learn more about 'collaborative advantage'.
- Pooled funding mechanisms are taking increasing prominence, though have been slow to respond to criticism about lack of access to funding for both international and local civil society.<sup>12</sup>
- International corporations, philanthropic foundations, businesses, diasporas, and individuals have become more active as donors to complement bilateral and multilateral agencies, giving new impetus to partnering efforts.

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develop new approaches to aid, including funding approaches, that will reduce the scale of human suffering. See: <https://startnetwork.org>

<sup>10</sup> The CDAC Network represents a great innovation in its truly multi-sector approach. Since inception, members have, by design, come from a broad cross-section of organisations involved in emergency response including humanitarian, media development, social innovation, technology, and telecommunication organisations. With over 30 global members, its early adoption of its own partnership principles underlie how Network members are expected to work together. See: <http://www.cdacnetwork.org/>

<sup>11</sup> <https://disasterpreparedness.ngo/>

<sup>12</sup> See, for example, <https://reliefweb.int/report/world/pooled-funds-how-can-ngos-engage>



## Context

The humanitarian sector is keen on reform. Every five years or so, a new approach seems to be promoted in an attempt to address the increasing scale, frequency and complexity of emergencies. In fact it is recognised by many, both within and outside the sector, that the conventional international system for emergency response is obsolete.<sup>13</sup> This has prompted questioning about the adequacy of (bi-lateral) donor funding and the capacity of traditional humanitarian agencies, as well as the discovery that partnership capabilities and capacities are needed to work more effectively with ‘non-traditional’ humanitarian actors such as new technology companies, international corporations, philanthropic foundations, businesses, diasporas and individuals. More recently, the driver for reform has been the growing need to **‘LOCALISE AID’** in recognition of failures in top-down approaches and the genuine assertion that localisation is the right and moral thing to do.

With each new reform agenda has come a corresponding understanding of the need to deploy a much broader range of skills, knowledge and approaches. From [Humanitarian Reform](#), to the [Transformative Agenda](#), and now [The Grand Bargain](#), successive (mostly evolutionary) commitments aim for better coordination and collaboration to access appropriate skills, knowledge and approaches, implying that partnership should be at the heart of humanitarian action.

Yet despite the centrality of partnership and collaboration to the formal humanitarian narrative, integrating effective partnership action into the operations of bi-lateral agencies, the UN and INGOs has been slow. As a result, partnership remains largely rhetorical, and partnerships continue to be predominantly transactional.<sup>14</sup> Moreover, where partnership is more ‘applied’, there is lack of documented evidence about what works and why (humanitarians tend to focus on measuring the what, not the how). With this context in mind, this paper draws attention to key developments in partnerships and partnering in the humanitarian sector with an aspiration to provoke discussion, review and input by others.

In recent years the number of operational and policy frameworks to support more effective partnership working in humanitarian response has bloomed (see below for examples) and the sector has invested – both conceptually and with resources – in promoting and enabling partnership. While some partnerships are initiated to address common challenges that one organisation realises it cannot address alone or for reasons of, for example, increased policy impact, partnerships are more frequently established for reasons of expediency – for example, to gain access to funding rather than an ideological commitment to collaboration and partnering per se. More often, however, it is bilateral donors who require a collaborative approach from their ‘partners’, usually in pursuit of a reduction in their transaction costs. Those involved in initiating and attempting to implement these frameworks and partnerships seem to have been unsure as to whether partnership approaches are fundamental to humanitarian response, or simply a more efficient way to leverage and disburse resources. While practice in general has been disappointing, there have been some notable efforts:

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<sup>13</sup> ‘Traditional’ approaches have been uni-directional (I have come to help you; accept what you are given); dominated by a small number of recognised actors (ie, UN, Red Cross, INGOs and bi-lateral and multi-lateral agencies); focused on search and rescue; and not linked to longer term development efforts.

<sup>14</sup> This does not take account of the fact that, at the local level, humanitarian responses operate through ‘invisible’ arrangements and relationships that utilise community and local social capital. Partnering capabilities have always been in place at this level, but not always recognised or nurtured by the big agencies. This topic deserves more attention as it has been largely neglected to date.



## Bi-lateral Donors

Probably the most significant initiative of bi-lateral donor collaboration within humanitarian space is the [Good Humanitarian Donorship \(GHD\) initiative](#). Established in 2003, the GHD was set up to address a growing sentiment that improved coordination and mutual learning among donors would lead to more effective humanitarian response. It was predicated on the idea that ‘good donorship starts with good partnership’ and a core concept constituted accountability to ‘beneficiaries and other stakeholders’ (tho’ aspects of accountability in this context seem to be conflated with partnership as a result of accountability’s focus on consultation).

While this initiative can be commended in its efforts, for example, to make aid more needs based, to simplify reporting, and to improve coordination, as well as the fact that it established a useful narrative framework around collaboration within humanitarian response, progress with implementation has been patchy at best. A [10-year review](#) from 2013 sets out why. Thus the 23 GHD Principles of Good Humanitarian Donorship appear to demonstrate the (albeit well-meaning) intention largely to improve ‘business as usual’. Partnership in the GHD context thus, to date, remains conflated with more effective and efficient delivery of emergency assistance. That said, the GHD has recently been given a new lease of life under the joint Chair of the US and Canada. Time will tell what this new focus will yield.

There have been some notable single-donor efforts where donors have either tried to work as more genuine partners and / or have sought to facilitate and enable the partnership practices of those they fund:

- [DFID’s Aid Connect](#): AidConnect<sup>15</sup> replaces DFID’s previous system of PPAs (Programme Partnership Arrangements). While the PPAs were popular with those who received them (those that didn’t perceived PPAs as an elitist mechanism for ‘top’ UK INGOs) in that they provided individual agencies with flexible core funding arrangements – the holy grail of all donor funding – the new UK Aid Connect mechanism, currently restricted and programmatic, requires **multi-sector applications** for funding. INGOs, for instance, are required to partner with academia and / or the private sector and / or southern organisations.

To make the most of this new mechanism from a partnership perspective, the consortia making the applications will need to work out the *hows* of their collaboration by designing approaches that create space for learning about this. But this is a paradigm shift for DFID away from single agency funding. It is also notable that some of the big NGOs in the UK have made significant investments in boosting their partnership capacity in recent years – for example, World Vision – and one can only hope that this will influence how these agencies approach their work thro’ the Aid Connect mechanism.

- [EuropeAid’s NGO Framework Partnership Agreement](#) and [Joint Programming framework](#): The European Commission runs EuropeAid, the Directorate-General for International Cooperation and Development. EuropeAid’s NGO Framework Partnership Agreement for humanitarian aid genuinely appears to espouse the **value of partnership** (rather than partnership as simply a tool and method of delivery) in that agencies can’t access funding without a national partner as a co-applicant. While this is hard to deliver in less stable contexts, and while the collaborative work itself is not specifically monitored, sitting behind this framework is recognition of the value of

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<sup>15</sup> <https://www.gov.uk/international-development-funding/uk-aid-connect>



strengthening the position and capacity of local / national actors – such that they become partners to a project, rather than merely recipients.

The **Joint Programming framework** is also worth mentioning (despite being development-oriented, it does address resilience programming which increasingly impacts on the efficacy of humanitarian action). Within this framework the EU uses its pan-state status to convene EU member states at country level, alongside governments, to develop common strategies and plans around a shared agenda where everyone has a role to play. Partnership thus appears to act as a motivator in efforts to create synergies, add value, and increase coherence (notwithstanding a corresponding instrumentalist set of drivers).<sup>16</sup>

- **Australia’s Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade – DFAT (formerly functioning as AusAid)** has made, and continues to make, significant investment in building a capability for partnering internally as well as the capability of its partners, especially in the business sector through using a specially developed Business Partnerships Platform.<sup>17</sup>

In terms of a donor acting as a more genuine partner, **DFID’s landmark DEPP, or the Disasters and Emergencies Preparedness Programme**, also deserves mention.

The DEPP was a three-year, £40 million initiative designed to improve the quality and speed of humanitarian response and the way in which countries cope with disasters and conflict. There are a number of important factors from a donor-as-partner point of view, of which the following are a selection:

1. The DEPP is primarily delivered through two UK-initiated, tho increasingly global, networks – the START Network and the [CDAC Network](#). At the management level, DFID works in genuine partnership with these two networks, both of which were involved in co-creating the programme’s design and delivery mechanisms – albeit it that they had to be risk-assessed by DFID – and are involved in the funds ongoing management.
2. Funding has been made available to ensure meaningful learning is generated from the DEPP, including an assessment of the ‘collaborative advantage’ of working in partnership – at the global, regional and national levels.
3. £10 million of the £40m has been ear-marked as a so-called Innovation Fund. DFID has sub-contracted the running of this Fund to START and CDAC, and subsequent applications have required multi-sector, multi-stakeholder proposals – some of which emphasise learning about how the projects are run in addition to their impact.
4. A small proportion of the programme fund (approx. 5% of £30m) supports a project called [Financial Enablers](#). This is being used to invest in locally-defined priorities in a few select countries; learning includes assessing how these projects are working from a collaborative perspective. This is perhaps the only example in the humanitarian sector of a donor attempting to take greater risk and move money downstream by focusing on local priorities.
5. Both START and CDAC have heavily invested in training their core staff in partnership working, thro’ PBA, in an attempt to make the most of the collaboration. DEPP funds have covered some of this training.

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<sup>16</sup> The EU is one of a handful of donors which are increasing their budget support at the country level as they see countries as partners in upholding the Paris and Busan principles. Most donors do very little budget support these days, as risk aversion seems to be trumping partnership with state actors.

<sup>17</sup> See <http://dfat.gov.au/about-us/publications/Documents/dfat-humanitarian-strategy.pdf> and also: <http://dfat.gov.au/aid/who-we-work-with/private-sectorpartnerships/bpp/Pages/business-partnerships-platform.aspx>



Another interesting area of action within the bi-lateral sphere is the appetite, particularly within DFID and the EU, to **promote and use learning**. Both donors are actively engaged with their beneficiaries and stakeholders in these efforts. In this way they have shown that they are open to using experience to gain insight into their future priorities and ways of operating as donors. For example, current funding of the European migrant crisis through DFID has been influenced by feedback from DFID's NGO 'partners' through the [START Network](#) based on learning from consortium-based approaches in the first two years of the fund. The result is that the fund has now changed to incorporate a contingency drawdown facility.

An additional example comes from USAID's [Learning Lab](#), an interactive community where members can access and contribute to a [growing repository](#) of tools and resources on integrating collaboration, learning and adaptation throughout the programme cycle. Feedback is thus being used to course-correct part-way through programme implementation. In theory, this requires more effective partnership working with local organisations and affected communities on the grantees' part. In these few ways the oft-repeated mantra of evidence-based policy and programming does appear to have some teeth and is gaining momentum with some bi-lateral humanitarian donors.

## UN-led Initiatives

The **Principles of Partnership** (or PoP; equality; transparency; responsibility; complementarity; and a results-oriented approach) flowed from the [Global Humanitarian Platform](#) – a three-year initiative within the UN system that represented a radical change for the UN and '...an affirmation of the reality that (I)NGOs and the Red Cross/Red Crescent movement mobilised more resources for humanitarian assistance than the UN, had more field staff, and a greater capacity for humanitarian advocacy.' The underlying belief was that no single humanitarian agency could cover all humanitarian needs, and that collaboration between these agencies was not an option but a necessity.

The abiding critique of the PoPs is that, while the five principles became a useful point of reference for the UN system and its 'partners', implementing them has been a challenge as no guidelines or resources were made available to support their operationalisation. Moreover, the meaning of partnership was never defined and thus the transformative potential of working in partnership was downplayed as the Principles were applied to any form of collaboration, including donor project funding.

Nevertheless, some attempt was initially made to use them to review how well so-called humanitarian '[clusters](#)' function<sup>18</sup> – the preferred method of coordination in large-scale emergencies. One of the findings from these efforts has been that funding relationships have remained challenging, and that the reliance of local organisations on UN and INGO funding has skewed equality among 'partners' in the clusters. More recently, the PoP have become less influential.

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<sup>18</sup> The cluster approach is a mechanism that helps to address identified gaps in emergency response and enhance the quality of humanitarian action in identifiable sectors, such as food, water and shelter. Clusters are intended to improve the effectiveness of humanitarian response by ensuring greater predictability and accountability, while at the same time strengthening partnerships between NGOs, international organisations, the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement, UN agencies and local and national governments. They have been severely criticised for many things yet the sector remains attached to their use and is attempting reform: see, eg, [here](#), [here](#) and [here](#).



Some interesting learning about the PoPs can be found in [Partnerships in Principle, Partnerships in Practice](#). Another useful review of the PoPs comes from PBA's journal on partnership, *Between and Between*: <http://partnershipbrokers.org/w/journal/hard-earned-lessons-for-putting-the-principles-of-partnership-into-practice/>.<sup>19</sup>

Another interesting UN-led initiative – principally by OCHA and UNICEF, under the umbrella of the CDAC Network – is the so-called [Communication and Community Engagement Initiative](#). This aims to organise a collective, common service to address the need for a more systematic and coordinated approach to communication and community engagement with affected people in emergency response. It is characterised by donor-to-donor collaboration, as well as donor-and-other-stakeholder collaboration, in an attempt to ensure that coherent and coordinated information is provided to affected communities, and that the design of any humanitarian response is more robustly informed by the views and feedback of affected people. It is predicated on a collective approach between all partners and seeks to build on local capacity first and foremost. This approach was really tested for the first in the 2015 Nepal earthquake response. Learning from that and other subsequent experiences has been used to formulate the current approach.

## International Non-governmental Organisations (INGOs)

Based on the above, partnership working within INGOs could appear to be predominantly donor driven. Indeed this is often the case, as the predominantly transactional approach to partnership that the bi-lateral funding agencies take with their so-called 'INGO partners' cascades down thro' the vertical funding relationships INGOs as donors subsequently have with their local 'partners'. In this model, accountability goes the wrong way: upwards, rather than horizontally out to the communities whom the INGOs are attempting to support.

INGOs are notorious, and have long been criticised, for espousing a vociferous partnership rhetoric while in reality behaving in a transactional fashion. It is also common for the term 'partnership' within INGOs to be equated with 'donor management' and for partnership units to be focused on fundraising. [World Vision International](#) has been a long-standing exception. Its partnership unit is focused on improving the work of World Vision as a genuine partner globally. More recently, Oxfam created 1.5 posts specifically to support more effective partnership working between the organisation and its partners (tho' plans to increase this capacity were cut in a recent restructure).

There are, however, some noteworthy examples where groups of INGOs, often but not always in collaboration with other stakeholders, have adopted a partnership approach as the most appropriate way to address a particular challenge, and where partnership has been valued and understood as an asset in and of itself. These partnerships often stem from a particular thematic challenge – such as the CDAC Network and the innovative CaLP ([Cash Learning Partnership](#)). The Active Learning Network for Accountability and Performance ([ALNAP](#)) in humanitarian action includes a range of global donors who participate in the network as partners; the principle of equity persists at Steering Committee level where big bi-laterals have the same say as other, smaller stakeholders. Another innovative INGO grouping in recent years in terms of partnership has been the Emergency Capacity Building

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<sup>19</sup> There are many lessons for partnering practice, including the role of brokers, within these articles, which there is not the time to get into in this first, short overview of partnering practice in the humanitarian sector. Readers can, for now, access these documents for themselves and draw their own conclusions.



Project, or [ECB](#) (sadly defunct), while an interesting cross-sector grouping is represented by [ELRHA](#) (which stands for Enhanced Learning and Research for Humanitarian Action).

### **The Emergency Capacity Building Project**

Established in 2005, ECB was initially implemented by seven global INGOs: Oxfam GB, Save the Children US, World Vision International, Catholic Relief Services, the International Rescue Committee, CARE International and Mercy Corps (in ECB Phase II, which began in 2008, the IRC withdrew from this group). Funded by the Gates Foundation and Microsoft Corporation – who are to be lauded for their flexible, experimental approach to this funding – and, in its latter stages, by an ECHO project grant, the ECB’s overall aim was to improve the speed, quality and effectiveness of humanitarian response by addressing four capacity gaps identified by the agencies involved: staff capacity; accountability and impact measurement; risk reduction; and information and technology requirements.

In the process much was learned about how to achieve effective collaboration – both between the primary implementing agencies as well as between those agencies and their country-level partners, where they worked through consortia in five countries / regions in pursuit of shared programme goals (Bangladesh, Bolivia, Indonesia, Niger, and the Horn of Africa). The spirit of ‘ours not mine’ pervaded the project. Useful learning about ECB is captured in the article [Collaboration and Learning in Humanitarian Action](#), and also in a longer paper titled [Humanitarian capacity-building and collaboration: lessons from ECB](#).

### **Enhanced Learning and Research for Humanitarian Action**

ELRHA was established in 2011 with the aim of improving humanitarian outcomes, principally by providing opportunities and expertise to support the humanitarian community in developing and sustaining effective partnerships in research and innovation. Since its inception, ELRHA has supported over 100 collaborative research and innovation initiatives globally through its funding programmes and has a reputation as a thoughtful and supportive donor that works in partnership with its grantees. ELRHA has always seen partnership at the heart of its work, from its early days has had a partnerships manager in its core team, and has gone so far as to produce a [guide](#) that sets out how humanitarian organisations and academia can more effectively partner. Perhaps unsurprisingly its first donor was DFID.

## **Looking to the Future: What Should Donors-as-Partners be Doing?**

This paper draws attention to some interesting examples of the role of donors (whether bi-lateral, UN, INGO or coalitions of these and other actors) in multi-sector and stakeholder partnerships in the humanitarian sector – or at least as enablers of efforts to partner more effectively, and in ways that move partnership from rhetoric to reality. There is no doubt, however, that humanitarian partnerships remain largely transactional.

A key challenge for the future of partnership within the humanitarian sector will be to identify strategic levers and entry points for change. While the **Grand Bargain**<sup>20</sup> is certainly one of the

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<sup>20</sup> The Grand Bargain is an agreement between more than 30 of the biggest donors and aid providers, which aims to get “more means into the hands of people in need”. The Grand Bargain includes a series of changes in the working practices of donors and aid organisations that would deliver an extra billion dollars over five years for people in need of humanitarian aid. The Grand Bargain commits donors and aid organisations to providing 25 per cent of global humanitarian funding to



primary levers *it is not a panacea*, not least because, to date, it only involves large bi-lateral donors and global aid organisations. What is probably more useful is to consider its main themes. These do capture the zeitgeist, and a cursory review of them suggests where efforts might best be placed.

Probably most significant is the emphasis that the Grand Bargain places on the '[participation revolution](#)'. Alongside this sit efforts by all toward greater transparency, more flexible funding tools for local and national responders, collaborative multi-year funding, and various statements about the importance of joint working and taking a systems approach – all of which could foster better partnership working. Most important of all is the stated, sector-wide commitment to **localisation**, which sits behind the Grand Bargain's 10 commitments. These thematic areas represent rich pickings for multi-sector partnership enthusiasts – not least because none of this will be possible without more, and more effective, partnership working, and a greater understanding by donors of the importance of this.

In view of the above, the following six recommendations could represent good first steps:

- 1. INCREASE INVESTMENT IN LEARNING AND RESEARCH TO UNDERSTAND THE HOW OF PARTNERSHIP AND COLLABORATION:** First and foremost, all donors involved in emergency preparedness and response need to better understand what it takes to be an effective partner.

There is an increasing appreciation of how hard collaboration can be, alongside an understanding that collaboration and partnership are essential to taking work to scale and to being more responsive to local need. More must be invested into understanding 'collaborative advantage' and especially how donors can better partner with local people and organisations. One way of doing this might be to organise technical exchanges between donors, as well as between donors and their local partners, to enable partnership expertise to be shared between organisations.

- 2. UPGRADE INVESTMENT IN PARTNERSHIP CAPABILITY:** Once donors better understand the how of partnership and the added value of collaboration, they will need to make relevant investments in their partnering capability.

While it is true that deep and transformational partnership is not always the most appropriate approach, the kind of step-change envisaged for the future of humanitarian aid will require a corresponding step-change in partnership capabilities and capacities. Donors-as-partners are encouraged to invest significant resources in making their organisations 'partnership-ready'. This could include, for example, ensuring partnership is properly represented and resourced in organisational strategies, identifying partnership champions and moving them around the organisation, and ensuring that such champions and indeed anybody with partnership within their job function, are properly trained. Any organisational change effort requires this kind of strategic approach.

- 3. IN ASSOCIATION WITH THE GRAND BARGAIN, ESTABLISH A MECHANISM TO INCREASE SYSTEM-WIDE PARTNERSHIP CAPACITY:** To accompany the above, leading donors within the humanitarian sector should signal their understanding that the

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local and national responders by 2020, along with more un-earmarked money, and increased multi-year funding to ensure greater predictability and continuity in humanitarian response, among other commitments. See: <https://interagencystandingcommittee.org/grand-bargain-hosted-iasc>



‘participation revolution’ and ‘localisation of aid’ will *only be possible* through a step-change in the way the sector works between itself and with local partners. This deserves system-level leadership and system-wide investment in sustainable frameworks and approaches for partnership.

There is no doubt the humanitarian sector has created a number of important partnership initiatives in recent years. Yet learning from these initiatives is dispersed and, as demonstrated in this paper, initiatives have come and gone. This means there has not been consistent emphasis on, and capability for, partnership within humanitarian action. This has led to problems with core values such as transparency, accountability, equity and trust between humanitarian agencies and those they seek to serve and support. With new energy and impetus toward ‘participation’ and ‘localisation’, and with the desire – rightly – of local and national actors to play recognised and leading roles in their own national contexts – key global and national structures within the humanitarian system would do well to understand that working effectively in partnership with national and local actors is the only way to achieve these goals. This will require leadership at the highest level. A start might be to review, update and revive the PoPs as well as the principles of good donorship – and make these mandatory for all.

4. **CHANGE FUNDING REQUIREMENTS:** On the funding side, if up to 25% of the humanitarian aid budget is to go directly to local partners – an issue hotly contested by some INGOs, who argue that having a quota will mitigate effectiveness<sup>21</sup> – donors will need to change their funding requirements. The current trend toward increased due diligence and payment by results fly in the face of the 25% ambition. If these tendencies give big agencies a headache, they are likely to be even more problematic for local organisations. This approach certainly doesn’t represent good donor-as-partner practice. Moreover, the way donors manage their grants, primarily through log-frames, is not conducive to capturing unintended consequences – including the way that partnership works.
5. **TAKE MORE RISK:** At the moment, donors of all stripes do not tend to invest in the priorities of affected populations. There needs to be a culture change within all donors to enable them to do this, in support of which they need to be willing to take more risks, and to help their grantees take more risks, by moving funding downstream. They also need to be prepared, for example, to write off, say, 5% of their funding portfolios as a way of supporting greater risk-taking toward greater localisation of aid. As one colleague said: ‘Current [bi-lateral] donor approaches murder flexibility and responsiveness’. They also murder effective local and community partnership working.
6. **INVEST IN NETWORK / ECOSYSTEM ANALYSIS:** Social network analysis helps to visualise networks, consortia and partnerships – increasingly the preferred delivery model for emergency preparedness and response – and show how these ‘ecosystems’ operate. This helps to connect people into systems by identifying, for example, who isn’t connected and should be. It can also help to pinpoint where resource flows are needed and yet are not flowing, and thus to prioritise and target investments. This kind of support represents good donor-as-partner behaviour!

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<sup>21</sup> One could easily ask, ‘whose effectiveness’. Additionally, INGOs have been criticised for decentralising and applying for funding as ‘local organisations’.