

# OPPORTUNITY KNOCKS

Realising the potential of partnerships in  
the Nepal earthquake response

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY





Destruction and temporary shelters in the badly-affected village of Basanta, in Tistung VDC, Makwanpur district.

## Introduction

In the Oxford online dictionary, the definition of ‘opportunity knocks’ is given as ‘a chance of success occurs’<sup>1</sup> and this is true of partnership in the Nepal earthquake response: for the first time in Nepal and for one of the first times in response to a large-scale disaster, the international humanitarian community have been united in their early adoption of partnership as the dominant modality of providing relief and recovery. At the time of writing, the World Humanitarian Summit (WHS) has acknowledged the importance of using and not replacing local capacity, and it is hoped that the findings from this study will provide practical support to efforts to ‘localise’ humanitarian response.

While there have already been several strategic reviews of the earthquake response conducted by members of the international humanitarian system, **this study is different in that it seeks to capture and amplify the perceptions of national responders about partnership performance in the earthquake response and how the international humanitarian system can provide better and more predictable support for disaster response in the future.**

### The role of partnership in the earthquake surge and relief response

At an international level, there are encouraging signs that the negative experiences from the international surge triggered after Typhoon Haiyan and documented in the

## Background to the *Missed Opportunities* research series

This report is part of a series of studies originally commissioned by five UK development and humanitarian agencies (ActionAid, CAFOD, Christian Aid, Oxfam and Tearfund) that have been collaborating since early 2012 to document and research partnership experiences with local actors in humanitarian responses.

To date the group of five agencies have worked on four documents: published in September 2013, *Missed Opportunities* assessed the potential for partnerships to contribute to the effectiveness of humanitarian response. This was followed by the *Missed Again* report – a real-time review of the response to Typhoon Haiyan, which was

published in September 2014. The third instalment of the research series, *Missed Out*, was published in May 2016 and examined the role of partnership in responding to humanitarian needs as a result of the South Sudan conflict. In the run-up to the WHS, findings from the research series were summarised in a synthesis paper, *Missed Opportunities No More*, which, on the basis of the findings, advocates for the localisation of aid and greater global support for humanitarian partnerships.

As part of expanding this research series CARE, originally a research partner for this project, became a full member of the commissioning group in 2016.

## Challenges of INGO – local NGO partnerships

Partnership challenge	Description
Capacity building	The need to rapidly scale up existing and new partnerships created a need to develop skills at the same time as delivering assistance. While innovative strategies were used to achieve this, there has been a tendency to focus on project-level capacity building rather than organisational-level capacity development. While this trend is beginning to change, it will take considerable time to make the shift.
Issues of equity	There is a perception among many local NGOs that INGOs have tended to prioritise investment in their own capacity over that of their partners. While this may be defensible in other contexts where INGOs have been operational, it is more problematic in the context of Nepal where the majority of programmes are being delivered by partners, with INGOs playing an oversight role.
Shared partners	At a district level many local NGOs are now responsible for multi-million-dollar project portfolios which dwarf their pre-earthquake responsibilities. This funding is often comprised of a range of multi-sectoral INGO-funded relief projects. The associated need to accommodate project approaches and business practices of several INGOs was considered to be a significant challenge, particularly given the perceived failure of INGOs to coordinate with each other.

Missed Again report are being translated into action with calls for greater investment in national-level first responders. While in Nepal there had been some efforts taken to prepare, the investment made in localising surge capacity had been limited and after the earthquake the focus of many INGOs was to strengthen their own capacity in advance of that of their partners. If disaster response is to be localised, there is an important need to prioritise funding for preparedness and surge capacity both nationally and at a district level.

In terms of the effectiveness of the earthquake response, the findings of the research supported by secondary evidence suggest that partnerships made an essential contribution to the breadth and depth of humanitarian action, although the need to broker new partnerships to reach the scale required may have slowed the response. UN figures suggest that in the initial relief phase many of the priority needs were met, which goes some way to answering one of the most vexing partnership challenges – that of whether partnership can deliver humanitarian

Community volunteers help prepare materials during an Oxfam distribution of hygiene kits in Sankhu. The kits contain a bucket for clean water, a bar of soap, oral rehydration salts, and towels, helping people meet their basic sanitation needs. Oxfam has also provided the community with emergency latrines to help prevent the outbreak of infectious disease.



Audrey Wade / Oxfam

assistance at scale. With a few caveats, the earthquake response suggests that it can.

### NGO partnership approaches and an assessment of performance

The earthquake response offered some examples of good practice: for pre-existing partnerships, INGOs brought knowledge, training, trust and ambition which supported local NGOs to quickly scale up and to work more effectively with their international partners. In contrast, newer partnerships were frequently more project-based, with local NGOs often confined to subcontracting roles as INGOs replaced rather than reinforced local capacity. A number of partnership challenges were encountered by local NGOs (see table on page 3) but it was the lack of equity in partnerships that was the most significant concern, and it has taken time for INGOs to start to address this.

The relationship between INGOs and local NGOs and some of the successes and challenges of partnerships during the earthquake response are exemplified in the two case studies in this executive summary.

In order to assess partnership performance, the first three *Missed Opportunities* studies used humanitarian evaluation criteria to compare the effectiveness of INGO and local NGO humanitarian partnerships,<sup>2</sup> but with the endorsement of the Charter for Change at the WHS,<sup>3</sup> there is now a more relevant lens with which to assess performance. In the table below, key commitments are listed alongside a performance assessment and rating based on the findings of the research (strong, good, moderate, poor or weak).

### Conclusions and recommendations – from ‘missed opportunities’ to ‘opportunity knocks’

The *Missed Opportunities* study series has documented changes in INGO partnership practices over the last three years during which time there has been significant progress made in recognising the value of national response capacity. With the inclusion in the Grand Bargain of a donor commitment to provide direct funding to local NGOs and the launch of the NEAR network (Network for Empowered Aid Response), a global

## Assessment of Nepal partnerships against key commitments in the Charter for Change

#	Description of commitment	Assessment of performance based on the research findings	Performance rating
1	Increase direct funding to southern-based NGOs for humanitarian action	An unprecedented proportion of funding was passed through INGOs to local NGOs. However, very little funding was passed to NGOs either directly or through pooled funding modalities.	MODERATE
4	Stop undermining local capacity	The findings of the research suggest that far fewer local NGO staff were recruited into INGO staff than often occurs in crises of similar magnitude, although the government requirement for the prioritisation of partnerships also meant that many INGOs did not scale up to the same extent as they would usually do.	GOOD
6	Address subcontracting	The scale of the response delivered through partnerships and the lack of humanitarian experience of many partners meant that a subcontracting approach was adopted by many organisations. Partner-led INGOs with smaller budgets tended to establish stronger partnerships.	MODERATE/ POOR
7	Provide robust organisational support and capacity strengthening	With only a few exceptions, organisational support over the first 12 months has tended to focus at the project level with an increase in strategic capacity building in a few cases in recent months.	MODERATE
8	Communication to the media and the public about partners	Performance was mixed with an equal number of INGO communications acknowledging and failing to acknowledge that assistance was delivered by partners. For relief distributions, there were frequent concerns that it was the INGO name that was printed on items that were being distributed by their partners.	MODERATE

2 An assessment was made of the extent to which partnerships had strengthened the relevance, efficiency, effectiveness, coverage and connectedness of the response.

3 The Charter for Change is an initiative led by both national and international NGOs to practically implement changes to the way the humanitarian system operates to enable a more locally-led response. It comprises eight commitments which international NGO signatories commit to implement in full by May 2018. It has been signed by 29 INGOs and has been endorsed by 134 organisations in total (see [www.charter4change.org](http://www.charter4change.org)).

**CASE STUDY****INGO experiences from the Nepal earthquake response**

The International NGO has a humanitarian programme in excess of £30 million for the earthquake response and has had a presence in Nepal for many years.

As part of its response, it scaled up its programme in one of the worst-affected districts where it had previously partnered with an advocacy NGO. Because of these historical links, a partnership agreement was able to be established swiftly and responsibility for programme delivery in seven Village Development Committees (VDCs) was handed from the INGO to the partner, albeit with the INGO retaining responsibility for procurement and logistics. The partner was responsible for local mobilisation.

At the same time, the INGO scaled up its programme in a further nine VDCs for which relief assistance was being provided operationally while partners were identified. Implementation was a challenge due to the remote location and the distance from its base in the district capital.

While there were a number of local NGOs that expressed an interest in taking on the project, capacity assessments undertaken in the first two months after the earthquake revealed that very few of them had sufficient capacity to implement and several of them already had significant commitments to other INGO partners and so were unlikely to be able to absorb the additional responsibilities. A number of other NGOs had no previous experience in the technical sectors that the INGO was working in.

After several months of partner assessments, a decision was taken to work with two local NGOs, splitting the VDCs between them. In order to maintain momentum at the same time as building capacity for implementation, an initial three-month partnership plan was devised which provided close support including joint implementation. This was followed by a phased approach to handing over operations and budgetary handling which went from an initial 80%:20% ratio to 70%:30% to the current situation where the INGO has responsibility for 60% of the operations and budget and the partner holds 40% of the responsibility.

At the height of the response when the INGO was involved in operational delivery in the district, it had 63 staff based in the district including staff embedded in the partner organisation. As responsibilities have been handed over, this has decreased to 33 staff with the partner taking over roles previously occupied by the INGO, which has now adopted a monitoring and support role.

Accompanying this process of gradual handover has been a strategy of operational capacity building, which has sought to target areas that either carry most risk (finance, logistics) or that are linked to technical operations (WASH, cash distributions). One of the key lessons from the first 12 months of the response is that partner staff turnover is extremely high, which has led to a change of strategy to focus more on strategic capacity building that focuses at the organisational level in an effort to strengthen its sustainability rather than maintaining a focus at project level.

Local women constituting the women's committee sign to receive the aid from ActionAid, which they will distribute.





Earthquake recovery Nepal, one year on – Jiri VDC in Patitar village (ward 6). Laxman B.K. and wife Deepmaya received a cash grant from Christian Aid partner HURADEC, which they used to buy livestock for rearing.

movement of southern NGOs committed to reshaping the humanitarian and development system to one that is locally driven and owned,<sup>4</sup> the policy and practice landscape is rapidly changing.

In placing far greater responsibility in the hands of local actors to lead and deliver humanitarian assistance, it could be argued that the earthquake response was a reaction to these shifts, but this is not true as the pre-eminence of partnership was as much a consequence of government policy as it was INGO preference. However, the Nepal earthquake has offered the international humanitarian community an opportunity to experience humanitarian response as it is likely to be delivered more frequently in the future – led by government and delivered by local organisations, with the international humanitarian system playing a support role. Given the infrequency with which this happens, it should come as no surprise that the response had its challenges. Despite these, there is much to commend in what has been achieved by the different partnerships established during the response, which also offers significant lessons about what needs to change to strengthen collaboration in the future.

#### So what needs to change?

Fundamentally, there is a need to close the gap between rhetoric and reality with INGOs more consistently reinforcing rather than replacing local NGO capacity.

While this shift is happening in the Nepal earthquake response, it has taken too long. There needs to be a far greater emphasis by the international humanitarian system and INGOs on identifying partners and investing in capacity development for surge and response in advance of crises. This will require a broader and deeper level of engagement with local NGOs outside of disaster response with a view to reducing the need for support when crises are occurring. The same emphasis on organisational capacity strengthening that has accompanied the growth of international NGOs now needs to be focused at a national level, with a view to fostering a vibrant national humanitarian response capacity that can implement both in partnership and in an independent capacity.

The lessons from the earthquake response must be used to transform the humanitarian system both in Nepal and globally by taking urgent action to:

- **strengthen** partnerships between international and national responders for preparedness planning
- **reinforce** collaboration to build local capacity for humanitarian surge and response
- **continue to improve** partnership practice to make the shift from international to national response.

<sup>4</sup> NEAR is a movement of local organisations formed to reshape the humanitarian and development system to one that is locally driven and owned, and is built around equitable, dignified and accountable partnerships. See [www.near.ngo](http://www.near.ngo)

## The need to strengthen partnership between international and national responders for preparedness planning

Who	What	Where
Donors	There is an urgent need for continued global investment in preparedness planning and capacity in Nepal but in a way that is situated in the local context and that builds on existing structures. At a central level, donors should continue to support the Nepal Risk Reduction Consortium (NRRRC) to strengthen preparedness and response.	Nepal
INGOs and UN agencies	There is a need to strengthen governmental and non-governmental preparedness at the district level across the country. The District Lead Support Agency role offers an excellent opportunity to achieve this.	Nepal

## The need to strengthen collaboration and build local capacity for humanitarian surge and response

Who	What	Where
Donors	Given the evidence of the earthquake response in which local NGOs played a leadership role and in the spirit of the Grand Bargain, donors must find a means of directly funding local NGOs whether through the establishment of a pooled funding facility or through bilateral agreements. The development of this fund before disaster strikes will allow time to establish it outside of the pressures of response.	Nepal
Government, INGOs and UN agencies	Government policies on targeting of assistance failed to include some of those who were most vulnerable. It is urgent that a coordinated and principled approach for joint assessment and targeting can be agreed for adoption in future disasters.	Nepal
INGOs and UN agencies	International organisations should shift from investing in their own surge capacity to supporting that of their partners in advance of crises. This will require a broader and deeper level of engagement with local NGOs outside of disaster response.	Nepal and Global
INGOs and UN agencies	It will be necessary for international organisations to change the mindsets and skill sets of international surge staff to ensure they have the right attitude and relevant skills to work collaboratively with partners in the earliest stages of a response.	Global
Local NGOs	Based on the experience of the earthquake response, local NGOs should review their own standby arrangements to ensure that they are organisationally prepared to respond in the future. This should include negotiations with their INGO partners on support for preparedness planning and equitable partnership arrangements for disaster response.	Nepal

## The importance of continuing to improve partnership practice in order to make the shift from international to national response

Who	What	Where
INGOs and UN agencies	There is a need to revise existing humanitarian partnership models based on the earthquake response in order to accommodate the delivery of assistance through partnership at scale and to inculcate these into organisational practice.	Nepal and Global
INGOs and UN agencies	Models of humanitarian delivery through local partners must be accompanied by sustained investments in local NGO organisational capacity to a standard and quality that permits a shift to partner-led response.	Nepal and Global
INGOs and UN agencies	The Grand Bargain negotiated during the World Humanitarian Summit has provided a context for increasing the efficiencies and effectiveness of the humanitarian system, and these changes must be role-modelled in how INGOs work with shared partners where standardised approaches to reporting and a shared commitment to providing support would reduce administrative effort and strengthen the potential for capacity development.	Nepal and Global
Charter for Change signatories	While the commitments outlined in the Charter for Change offer essential guidance for partnership situations such as the earthquake response, there is a need to develop a simple set of measurable indicators for each of the commitments to permit a level of oversight that could assist in determining progress made against this important set of obligations.	Global
Local NGOs	Membership of the NEAR network offers an important opportunity for local NGOs to influence the wider policies and practices of the humanitarian system that affect their capacities and operations and the well-being of communities.	Nepal and Global

**CASE STUDY**

**Local NGO partnership experiences from the Nepal earthquake response**

The district NGO was established in 2009 with a mandate to address social issues through empowerment. This approach was expanded in 2013 to include community development. In 2014 the NGO had a programme portfolio of approximately Nepalese Rupees (NPR) 1 million (£7,000) and had a staff of approximately 20 people.

After the earthquake, the budget quickly grew to NPR 10 million (£70,000) at the end of 2015 to 250 million in mid-2016 (£1.75 million). It is projected to increase to NPR 350 million (£2.45 million) by the third quarter of 2016. In the same period, the staff size has increased to 250 people.

In order to ensure a level of management oversight a board member took over operational management in the district.

The budget is being funded by five INGO donors and each has different approaches to providing support and use different systems – some more paternalistic than others. The district NGO had pre-existing policies in place to guide financial management, procurement, recruitment and reporting. These have been endorsed by one of the larger INGO donors, which has handed over responsibility for procurement and financial management.

The district NGO has an advisory committee which includes technical support but it also receives technical advice from its INGO partners. It has received training on various aspects

of implementation including on quality standards but capacity building has largely been focused on strengthening compliance.

Most of the INGOs it works with have already undertaken needs assessments and planned their activities and there has been limited scope for it to influence project design. Logical frameworks and budgets are usually already in place by the time they are shared with the NGO and so its job is usually to implement the planned activities. One INGO has recently permitted it to determine programme activities as long as they fit within the broad objectives that have been set.

There is a concern that the INGOs have a lot of staff and suffer from high turnover. This means that they are not always familiar with the district administration, which can be problematic.

Donor budgets include very limited overhead costs which is a challenge given the complexities of the response. No support is provided to sustain the broader organisation or to contribute to core costs as the budget is focused at a project level. There have been instances when projects have been postponed but there was no budget made available to compensate the NGO for local-level costs that it incurred. There are also issues of per diem payments for government monitoring staff which the NGO must pay but which are not reimbursed by the INGO as it is against their policy.

The *Opportunity Knocks* report was commissioned by a consortium of UK-based international non-governmental organisations, which included ActionAid, CAFOD, CARE, Christian Aid, Oxfam GB and Tearfund.

The research project was overseen by Tearfund’s Humanitarian Policy Officer, Tim Ingram, and supported by a steering committee which included: Jane Backhurst (Senior Adviser Humanitarian Policy and Advocacy, Christian Aid), Francisco Yermo (Humanitarian Policy and Advocacy Adviser, ActionAid), Anne Street (Head of Humanitarian Policy, CAFOD), Debbie Hillier (Senior Humanitarian Policy Adviser, Oxfam) and Frédérique Lehoux (Humanitarian Partnership Coordinator, CARE).

The report was written by Andy Featherstone, with assistance from Subindra Bogati who supported the research and contributed to the report. The six commissioning NGOs have provided invaluable support both in Nepal and the UK, and particular thanks are owed to Tim Ingram in the UK, and Douwe Dijkstra, Tearfund’s Country Director in Nepal, for their support in guiding the process. The research would not have been possible without the kind assistance of CARE Nepal and Oxfam in facilitating the trips to Gorkha and Sindhupalchok respectively.

The participation in the study of both national and international members of the humanitarian community is testament to the commitment that exists to realising the potential of partnership in Nepal. We are grateful to all those who invested their valuable time in the research process.

**Opportunity Knocks: Realising the potential of partnerships in the Nepal earthquake response**  
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Cover photo by Tom Price / Tearfund: Progress continues on the construction of Thuli Maya’s new earthquake-resilient house in Tistung VDC, Makwanpur district. Steel-reinforced bracing and regular concrete layers are some of the elements that will make this house, and the 600 other houses Tearfund plans to build in Makwanpur, safer in the event of another earthquake.