

CONSORTIA OF LOCAL AND NATIONAL HUMANITARIAN RESPONDERS IN UGANDA

LEARNING FROM THREE YEARS OF HUMANITARIAN RESPONSES
DELIVERED BY LOCAL CONSORTIA UNDER THE ELNHA PROJECT

August 2020



INTRODUCTION

Over the past few years, in line with their commitment to the principle of supporting localization of humanitarian aid, many international donors and INGOs have promoted the formation of partnerships and consortia with and between local and national humanitarian actors (LNHA). Such partnerships are encouraged for both humanitarian responses and coordination mechanisms, and can involve only LNHA or LNHA and international actors.

Since the end of 2016, the Empowering Local and National Humanitarian Actors (ELNHA) project has granted funding to a number of consortia of local and national actors in Bangladesh and Uganda for their self-designed and self-implemented

humanitarian responses. Findings and lessons from this project can be of interest for donors and INGOs that support similar consortia.

This document presents some **successes** of and **challenges** faced by LNHA in Uganda when operating in consortia with peer organizations to design and implement their own humanitarian responses; some **factors identified as enabling locally-led consortia to function well**; and **ways to further support these consortia**. It also discusses the **appetite of LNHA** in general for building such consortia.

THE ELNHA PROJECT AND HRGF-FUNDED RESPONSES IN UGANDA

ELNHA is a five-year initiative (January 2016 to March 2021) implemented by Oxfam in Bangladesh and Uganda, with a strong influencing component at global level. It aims to promote more equal sharing of power and resources between international humanitarian actors and local and national ones. ELNHA assumes that empowering LNHA to lead emergency preparedness and responses in their own context will enable vulnerable people living in disaster-prone areas to benefit from well-coordinated humanitarian responses.

One mechanism used by ELNHA is the Humanitarian Response Grant Facility (HRGF), a fund managed by Oxfam to which LNHA in Bangladesh and Uganda can submit proposals and receive grants for their self-designed humanitarian responses. Between December 2016 and March 2020, four rounds of HRGF-funded responses have taken place in Northern Uganda, funding 17 locally-led responses including 11 implemented in consortia, as shown in the table below. Annex 1 provides more details.

HRGF Round	Locally-led responses	In consortia
Round 1: December 2016 – February 2017	5	2
Round 2: May – July 2017	7	1
Round 3: June – November 2018	5	3
Round 4: November 2019 – March 2020	5	5

Oxfam did not initially request that LNHA apply in consortia, but some did from the first round, with the aim of combining their expertise, experiences, and roles in the local humanitarian system. One example, at the end of 2016, came from Kaabong district, with three LNHA joining forces:

- KAPDA (lead organization), focusing on WASH and protection activities;
- DOCAHWA, focusing on emergency food security and vulnerable livelihoods (EFSVL), specifically cattle health;
- The District Disaster Management Committee (DDMC) as a strategic partner – that is, not receiving funding – to ensure coordination with other actors in the district, linkages with the District Disaster Preparedness Plan, and access to the district handpump mechanics for repair of water points.

Based on this experience, and recommendations from evaluators, over time LNHA have been more and more stimulated to form consortia to apply to the HRGF. The rationale includes:

- LNHA can combine different expertise to design and implement more holistic responses;
- It allows LNHA to operate at scale;
- LNHA can create a clear fingerprint in their areas, in the eyes of local government and local communities;
- It strengthens networking and collective capacity building;
- LNHA learn to work together for a common humanitarian goal – a hands-on experience of joint planning, coordination and

accountability;

- It can create opportunities for smaller local actors, who could never apply alone, to demonstrate their expertise and the value they can add, while strengthening their experience and capacity under the protection of a local consortium lead.

The final evaluation of the first phase of ELNHA (January 2019) even recommended to award future HRGF grants exclusively to consortia, alongside a suggestion to develop the capacity of LNHA in forming consortia through training on topics such as negotiation skills and drafting a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) outlining division of responsibilities. LNHA are free to form the consortia they wish to, based on discussions and negotiations with each other, but the consortia have to be formed before or during the proposal preparation stage.

The analysis presented in this learning brief is based on various sources of information:

- Findings from the final evaluation of the first phase of ELNHA (January 2019);
- Findings from real-time reviews of selected HRGF-funded responses, conducted in July 2018 and January 2020;
- Sharing of experiences by selected LNHA during a learning review facilitated by ELNHA in January 2020, together with side interviews conducted with some participants;
- Observations by the ELNHA Uganda team.

EXPERIENCE OF LOCAL CONSORTIA IMPLEMENTING HRGF-FUNDED RESPONSES IN UGANDA

ADVANTAGES AND SUCCESSES OF LOCALLY-LED CONSORTIA

Generally, LNHAs that have formed consortia with peer local or national actors to design and implement HRGF-funded responses have been very positive about the experience. The aspects appreciated include:

- **Consortium partners strengthen each other and learn from each other**

This is a benefit that mentioned by all consortia.

Reflecting on his experience in a local consortium in 2017, a Programme Coordinator highlighted that the three organizations that had joined forces were able to complement each other's efforts. At the time, his local NGO was not yet fully established in Uganda, and it learned a lot from other consortium partners, in particular on finances and report writing.

Based on a capacity assessment of partners, the lead of one recent consortium trained other members in areas such as procurement, child safeguarding, gender mainstreaming, risk management and managing an asset register. Capacity building within consortia is not necessarily unidirectional, from the lead to other partners; in some instances, smaller organizations have built the capacity of the lead, for example on accounting.

Members of another recent consortium mentioned that they have been able to challenge each other constructively to resolve problems, such as when an organization was not following the implementation plan, reporting on time, or providing sufficient support to its field staff. Such issues were openly discussed, and partners concluded that this type of peer support and mutual accountability was very beneficial.

- **Being part of a consortium helps LNHAs to enhance their institutional capacity**

Horizontal capacity building usually happens after the lead organization's capacity has been assessed by Oxfam, and it in turn reviews the capacity of its partners. Gaps identified often concern institutional capacity: for instance, a weak governing board, inadequate systems, or limited networking abilities. Such assessments enable LNHAs to become aware of potential areas for improvement, some of which can be addressed by joining the consortium. Some organizations have, for instance, learned to segregate the functions and roles of their board members and managers for the response they were implementing, practice rules of engagement, or develop and follow MoUs. This capacity-building curve has allowed some local NGOs to grow from consortium partner in initial responses to lead of a local consortium later on.

- **Consortium organizations put resources in common**

Not all organizations, in particular smaller ones, have dedicated staff in – for instance – monitoring, evaluation, accountability and learning. Teaming up with an organization that has more capacity increases the chance of funding. More generally, forming a consortium can help organizations to quickly mobilize the staff required for a humanitarian response, by sharing the

burden of recruitment. In some instances, physical resources have also been shared – for example, the lead organization providing a desk in its office to staff of its consortium partner.

- **Consortium organizations hold each other accountable**

Members of one consortium explained that whenever one partner wanted to procure something, the two other organizations would check the procurement as a matter of transparency. One staff member mentioned that operating in a consortium made each partner accountable to the others, and as a result they were all meeting deadlines. The regular (usually monthly) coordination meetings held by all locally-led consortia have been an opportunity for partners to discuss any issue they may have and to find ways of improving.

- **When part of a consortium, LNHAs have more exposure and a stronger voice**

Being part of a consortium often offers more opportunities for coordinating and collaborating with other stakeholders in the area, such as local government. Consortium members can more easily network with other actors, which increases their visibility and enhances their chance to get in touch with potential donors.

Being the lead of a consortium is a great opportunity to demonstrate an organization's management and coordination skills, and use the enhanced exposure for advocacy. For example, one consortium in 2018 called the attention of UNHCR and local government to the need to improve the conditions of South Sudanese refugees entering the country – especially children, who had to wait a long time without food or water, and exposed to risks of human trafficking.

- **Consortium experience paves the way for other funding opportunities**

Some LNHAs have highlighted in proposals to other donors their experience of working in consortium with peer organizations. For instance, one local NGO described in a proposal for an emergency programme in South Sudan (which was again submitted as part of a consortium) its experience within two HRGF-funded consortia, including one as lead organization.

The various benefits of being part of a local consortium that receives HRGF funding – increased capacity, experience, visibility and networking opportunities – has certainly strengthened the confidence of LNHAs to approach other donors. In some instances, at the request of local organizations, Oxfam has provided recommendation letters to potential donors, highlighting the experience and capacity they have gained through participation in local consortia.

For example, CREAM – lead of a consortium during the HRGF's third round – had been a long-term partner with CARE, but never considered for funding. Following the HRGF-funded response, CREAM was re-assessed by CARE and given a grant worth €147,000 for a refugee response project in Imvepi refugee settlement, Arua District.

- **Working together in a consortium stimulates LNHAs to jointly submit other proposals**

The experience of jointly designing and implementing a humanitarian response gives LNHAs the opportunity to really get to know each other. When the collaboration is felt as successful and mutually beneficial, they may decide to keep developing and submitting joint proposals. For example, SORUDA and FOKAPAWA – who formed a consortium for the HRGF’s fourth round – jointly prepared and submitted a proposal to USAID Uganda Sanitation for Health Activity, which was accepted: FOKAPAWA will implement WASH activities in Pader and Kitgum districts, and SORUDA in Lamwo district, for 15 months. Two other consortia that received HRGF funding at the end of 2019 stated that they were planning to pursue joint mobilization of resources.

CHALLENGES FACED BY LOCALLY-LED CONSORTIA

Operating within a locally-led consortium of humanitarian responders also brings some challenges:

- **Challenges during consortium formation: negotiations on the lead position and having a diversity of organizations**

In some instances, the organization that first identified a funding opportunity and approached fellow LNHAs wanted to be the lead, but did not have the required capacity. Being the lead is often seen as advantageous because it brings access to additional technical support from ELNHA and funds for administrative costs, and it gives a local actor valuable experience of practising compliance, auditing and reporting.

In other cases, LNHAs can be risk-averse: teaming up with organizations that have lower levels of capacity may be seen as limiting chances to access funding, or requiring significant investments in capacity development. Some women’s rights organizations have nonetheless been included in local consortia, but it took until 2020 for a local consortium including a refugee-led organization to receive HRGF funding – a consortium formed by three refugee-led organizations, for activities in response to COVID-19. This should hopefully lead to refugee-led organizations being more trusted by other LNHAs to form partnerships in future.

- **Challenges with building up the consortium and bearing collective responsibility**

Being part of a consortium allows partners to combine their strengths, but – as members of one recent consortium highlighted – it also means that the weaknesses of one organization can affect its partners. Collective responsibility means that a mistake by one partner could put the whole partnership at risk. Mutual trust and support are hence key for a consortium to function, and learning to work together requires some initial transaction costs. Building up a strong consortium requires time and resources, which can sometimes be underestimated.

In order to enhance trust, effective coordination and quality implementation, most local consortia opted for holding regular (at least monthly) partners’ meetings, as well as joint monitoring of activities. These allowed the early identification of gaps in implementation and governance, and led to joint decisions on how to collectively address these challenges. For some responses, ELNHA facilitated real-time external reviews by peer organizations who were members of other HRGF-funded consortia. Such reviews, and exchange of experiences with other LNHAs implementing responses in consortium, have helped local actors to strengthen their own consortia.

- **Challenges with developing strong MoUs and operating within the agreed rules**

It is now standard practice for all locally-led consortia that receive HRGF funding to draw up an MoU spelling out governance structures, the roles and responsibilities of each partner, and ways of working. There have, nonetheless, been cases of partners not abiding by the MoU – for example, delayed reporting to the lead organization, which can delay the lead’s reporting to ELNHA.

Such issues have often been traced back to a lack of capacity (e.g. of finance or/and field staff), and some consortia leads resolved this through building capacity of their partners. In other cases, agreed ways of working were not always followed; for instance, some consortia agreed on monthly meetings, but in practice only one meeting was held per quarter. Partners must be made aware of potential consequences of not respecting the MoU, such as the suspension of transfer of funds.

For one consortium, the issue was that the MoU was not clear and other partners saw it as too favourable to the lead partner. Following difficult discussions, the consortium opted to review its MoU. It is interesting to see that partners’ confidence grew over time, to challenge each other and come to a settlement more in line with good partnership principles.

- **Challenges with following good partnership principles**

Locally-led consortia often bring together organizations of different sizes with different capacities. How to operate in line with the humanitarian Principles of Partnership – in particular, the principles of equality and transparency – can be learned only by working in a consortium, and LNHAs’ own past partnership experiences with INGOs were not always necessarily in agreement with these principles. This has led to some occurrences of consortia in which the lead, often the biggest organisation, takes the most prominent role in decision making, leading to frustration and mistrust among the smaller partners

The lead organization is ultimately responsible towards the donor, and bears the risks of a partner not fulfilling its obligations. When a partner does not have strong internal controls or proper systems in place, the lead sometimes adopts procedures to limit risk – for example, paying the partner on an activity basis instead of transferring funds for a given implementation period. This can be an acceptable way to limit risks, while giving the smaller organization the opportunity to grow. However, such modalities should be mutually agreed and spelled out in the MoU, which has not always been the case. They are also not conducive to empowering the partner, so they should be – as much as possible – temporary.

- **Challenges with ensuring effective communication within the consortium**

The ELNHA team usually communicates directly with the consortium lead, who in turn would share information with its partners. However, this did not always happen, and some organizations missed meetings organized by ELNHA.

Internal communication issues have been observed in many locally-led consortia. For example, in some cases one partner would provide some support to beneficiaries, followed by additional services from another partner. It has happened that the first partner changed the selection of beneficiaries, without informing the second partner in a timely way.

- **Challenges with senior management not being as engaged as required**

Senior managers of one local consortium lead were never readily available: both the executive director and the project coordinator seemed to be very engaged in other duties and unable to dedicate the required time to implementation and governance, leaving the bulk of the work to the project assistant and accountant. Not surprisingly, this consortium faced many of the challenges mentioned above. This is an extreme case, but shows that engagement of senior management is key for successful implementation, especially when operating as a consortium. As outlined in the next section, one characteristic shared by the most successful and efficient locally-led consortia is strong (but fair) leadership by the lead organization.

IDENTIFIED FACTORS ENABLING GOOD FUNCTIONING OF LOCALLY-LED CONSORTIA

Key factors identified as conducive to successful and efficient locally-led consortia include:

- Consortium partners are genuinely willing to work together and have a shared interest, which leads them to accept jointly taking risks.
- Consortium partners agree on and sign a clear MoU before applying for funding; several consortia used an existing MoU between the lead organization and Oxfam as a guiding document.
- Consortium partners all follow the signed MoU.
- Consortium partners jointly develop the budget and plan.
- Consortium partners share administrative costs.
- Modalities for transferring funds from the lead organization to other consortium partners are jointly agreed on, based on the strength of partners' internal financial management controls.
- Consortium partners have strong mechanisms for communication with each other. This includes conducting regular (at least monthly) coordination meetings during which progress is discussed and plans are updated, sharing monthly reports, and the lead organization trickling down communication and feedback from the donor.
- The lead organization shows leadership, taking action when one of the consortium partners does not fulfil its responsibilities – for instance, when a partner does not submit a report on time or is late with activities, the lead may put on hold the financial transfers to this partner. Funds are transferred to partners with full accountability, accompanied by a narrative report.
- The lead organization refrains from micro-managing other consortium members, applying a 'trust but verify' approach.
- A sense of ownership and active participation by all consortium partners is stimulated. Several consortia did this by having members chair their coordination meetings on a rotational basis.
- Key decisions are taken jointly by all consortium partners, in a transparent manner.
- The executive directors and boards of directors of the individual organizations are actively engaged. For example, one consortium explained that the heads of all three partners formed a steering committee, responsible for oversight and quality assurance. The committee sat weekly to evaluate implementation progress, take key decisions on activities and allocation of resources, ensure quality of narrative and financial reports to Oxfam, link consortium partners with other stakeholders, support with identifying other donors and writing joint proposals, support with identifying capacity gaps, resolve conflicts, advise on legal matters, and report to the boards of all partner organizations. Another grantee mentioned that its board was involved throughout, from orientation and inception meetings to monitoring of activities.
- The lead organization, which undergoes a capacity assessment and due diligence by Oxfam, performs a similar review of its partners. This allows consortium members to be aware of areas of improvement and agree on a plan to address them.
- Based on the identified capacity gaps and risks, the lead organization and/or donor offers technical support and capacity development to the partners.
- Peer learning is stimulated through exchange visits, staff exchanges or learning events.

WHAT IS LOCAL AND NATIONAL ACTORS' APPETITE FOR FORMING LOCALLY-LED CONSORTIA?

In Uganda, calls for proposals from LNHA often include the formation of local consortia as a pre-requisite for funding. Donors see this as way to mitigate risks, improve efficiency by combining the expertise of various actors, reduce administrative costs, and simplify contract management by having the lead organization as single point of contact. This raises the question: is building locally-led consortia a donor-driven phenomenon, or is there also appetite among LNHA?

Over four rounds of HRGF calls, ELNHA has observed a number of changes in the way local consortia are formed and how partners shape their interventions. Over time, LNHAs have built up their consortia in a more independent way, with less advice from ELNHA on which organizations to partner with. Local actors now identify potential partners and negotiate among themselves, based on the interventions they feel are required. While the first HRGF-funded projects implemented by local consortia often resulted from combining individual interventions, now there tends to be a stronger overarching, holistic approach. The submitted proposals are obviously more the result of true consolidation, with more evident synergies among the work of the individual partners.

An interesting example comes from the Karamoja region (Kaabong and Kotido districts), which since 2019 has no longer been covered by the HRGF. While awaiting new funding opportunities, LNHAs have proactively formed five consortia to strengthen and learn from each other and enhance their chances of mobilizing resources. They stated that they appreciated the past experience of local partnerships for bringing powerful opportunities for learning and support. In some consortia, members have been packaging their joint ideas on resilience building or gender-based violence prevention; some stronger organisations have supported smaller ones by conducting organizational capacity assessments; and some peer learning has also taken place.

When the potential for funding is small, the appetite for forming locally-led consortia is weaker. Some bigger LNHAs also prefer to partner with INGOs than peer organizations, as they feel they can learn more from international actors and gain more visibility and access to funding.

WHAT CAN BE DONE TO FURTHER SUPPORT AND STRENGTHEN LOCALLY-LED CONSORTIA

- Based on feedback from LNHAs and observations, the ELNHA team identified measures to further support and strengthen locally-led consortia:
- Stimulate local actors to form consortia in advance, so that once a relevant call for proposals is published they can focus on writing the proposal during the available time, which is usually short. Organizations can identify potential partners through LNHA platforms and networks.
- Promote increased diversity of partners within locally-led consortia, encouraging the involvement of women-led and refugee-led organizations so they can also enhance their capacity through hands-on experience and help ensure that responses are really appropriate for the most vulnerable and marginalized people. Other possible engagements include internships, mentorship and training of some staff within other local responders.
- Support LNHAs to limit governance issues in their consortia by providing training on consortium building, focusing on topics such as conflict management, collaborative approaches, and development and management of equal partnerships, and
- by providing feedback on draft MoUs to ensure clarity and reduce chances of future conflicts.
- Encourage LNHAs to continue engaging in joint advocacy initiatives, in particular through local platforms and networks, to further develop collaborations and exposure. Initiatives could include the joint development of a position paper, collaboration on planning and use of contingency funds, or coordinated dialogue in humanitarian spaces to ensure representation and recognition.
- Stimulate local consortia to document and share their work, experiences and learning, with the aim of using this documentation for fundraising and enhanced visibility.

**ANNEX 1:
OVERVIEW OF THE 11 HRGF-FUNDED RESPONSES IN UGANDA THAT WERE IMPLEMENTED BY CONSORTIA
(BY MARCH 2020).**

HRGF Round	LNHAs consortia Awarded funding	DISTRICT	TYPE OF INTERVENTION	FUNDING AWARDED (€) AS PER PROPOSAL BUDGET
Round 1: Dec. 2016 - Feb. 2017	KAPDA (lead) DOCAHWA Kaabong DDMC	Kaabong	WASH EFSVL (cattle health) Protection	23,871
	VEDCO (lead) AWYAD Lamwo DDMC	Lamwo	WASH EFSVL (food) Protection	24,794
Round 2: May - Jul. 2017	KAPDA (lead) DOCAHWA MADA	Kaabong	WASH EFSVL (cattle health) Protection	28,316
Round 3: Jun - Nov. 2018	FOKAPAWA (lead) WOSO FRO AVCT PCCO	Agago	WASH	34,500
	MADA(lead) DOCAHWA JICAHWA	Kotido Kaabong	EFSVL (cattle health, agricultural inputs) Shelter	41,000
	CREAM (lead) CERID Radio Pacis	Arua	EFSVL (economic empowerment) WASH (sanitation and hygiene) Information	100,000
Round 4: Nov. 2019 - Mar. 2020	AHEDI (lead) MACCO ADINGON	Arua	Protection	23,947
	PALM (lead) ViFoH PEP	Arua	EFSVL (income generation) Protection	29,452
	CEEU (lead) IRE Trinol	Yumbe	EFSVL (cash and agricultural inputs)	24,889
	SORUDA (lead) FOKAPAWA	Lamwo	WASH EFSVL (cash and agricultural inputs) Protection	25,000
	NUWOSO (lead) ODOWOL	Lamwo	WASH	20,000

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Published by Oxfam Novib in October 2020.

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