



Strengthening horizontal partnership among local NGOs for strengthening local humanitarian leadership

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Aim of my Remote Partnering Plan

Objective:

We are now at the scoping and building phase of partnership among the district local actors working in humanitarian response during 2018. The local actors have worked in 2017 together with the Oxfam's Supporting Partner (local organization having direct agreement with Oxfam) for strengthening organizational humanitarian response capacity supporting local humanitarian leadership.

My objective with this remote partnering plan is to facilitate equitable partnership discussions among the local and national actors in Bangladesh in different districts. Based on these discussions the local organizations will be developing horizontal partnership among the local actors during 2018.

The key outcomes or benchmarks of my remote partnering plan are:

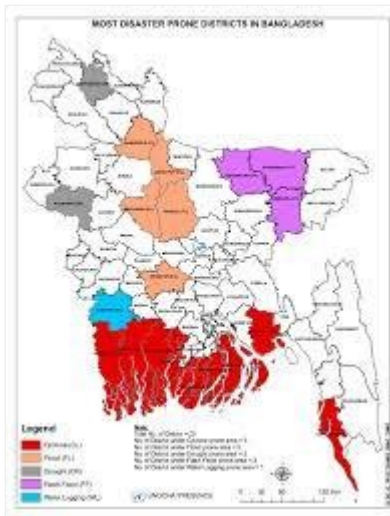
- * Local organisations have discussions among themselves about working together
- * Initiation of collaboration/ working together through Memorandum of Understanding (This will cover the financial benefits, ways of working and mutual respect and accountability etc.)

Equitable partnership means, where partners are sharing the benefits, risks, have better power relations and more understanding among themselves. This will strengthen the horizontal partnership practice among the local actors in the district for effective and coordinated humanitarian response. Eventually, this partnership approach will help them to make various partnerships with multi type and multispectral stakeholders to work together.

Scene Setting (Context)

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I am working in Bangladesh, at Oxfam Bangladesh's office based in Dhaka, the capital. Most of our partners for the humanitarian program are located at the most disaster-prone districts spread all over the country! Currently, we are working in 9 districts, with different disaster pattern like flood in the North, Cyclone in the South through the partners with whom Oxfam have agreement. These support partners are the direct partners of the project Local Humanitarian Leadership by Oxfam.

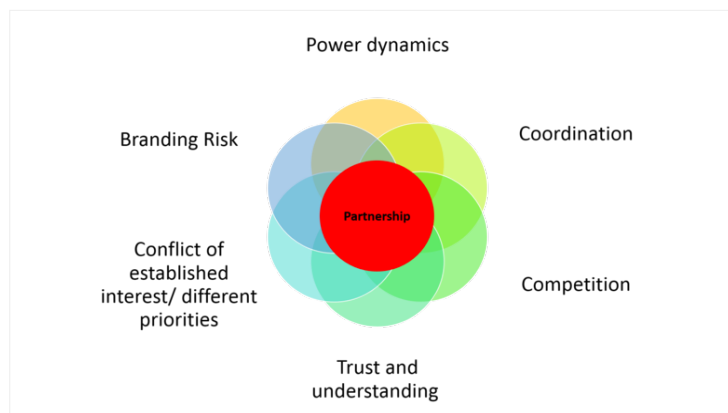


Hazard map of Bangladesh

The project aims to nurture the leadership of the local organisations in humanitarian response. The project demands an inclusive approach where the Supporting Partners need to develop Memorandum of Understanding with similar like-minded local organizations engaged in humanitarian response for capacity strengthening, influencing, advocacy and local humanitarian leadership. These local actors (known as lead actors (LA)) are those that have MOUs with the supporting partners. So, Oxfam in Bangladesh has a multi-layered partnership at 9 districts, located remotely to strengthen the humanitarian response system in the districts.

This multilayered partnership approach is influenced by:

- * Power dynamics among the bigger, medium and smaller NGOs: Bigger LNGOs have greater power, more human resource more recognition, medium LNGOs are less in power but the smaller LNGOs have less power. Thus, often the voices of the bigger LNGOs are heard, their priorities dominate the partnership choice and collaboration. The senior management of the larger NGOs are less engaged in coordination, where the medium to larger NGOs are always present and very much engaged with each other. To create equity Oxfam is working with Women Rights Organizations, Organizations which are doing great contribution in community engagement etc. These power dynamics also become dysfunctional because the project works with both larger, medium and smaller sized organizations, engages the organize to define their capacity needs, co-creation space for innovation etc.
- * Coordination: The government plays a central role of coordination among the government and the LNGOs. The coordination among the local organisations working together is poor and they rarely coordinate and share information.
- * Competition: Access to funding is a challenge for the LNGOs. All the bigger, medium and smaller LNGOs see themselves as competitors for funding. When these organisations come together to work they are still actively competing among each other.



* Trust and understanding: Trust and understanding among the supporting partners and the lead actors are very much lacking. Often the information shared by the supporting partners is not very openly taken by the lead actors. Similarly, having a direct partnership with Oxfam, the supporting partner often feels they have the right to rule over the lead actors.

* Conflict of established interests / different priorities: Different local organizations have different priorities and interests. Although, the partnerships are built on common interest, the logic of having the partnership for each partner varies. This often gets in the way of the work.

* Branding Risk: larger NGOs find threatened by working with smaller NGOs, whereas smaller NGOs find it a privilege to work with larger NGO. This is a very interesting aspect of power dynamic - around economics and scale.

It is challenging to work with these external factors. The remoteness of this type of partnership means: less engagement from Oxfam to the district; funding reaching to the local actors is delayed; locations of the local actors operating in remote areas are hard to reach. The partnership approach relies on verbal communication and email. Building strong horizontal relationships among the local organizations takes more time since they operate in different contexts and have various tensions and competition between themselves as local organizations. From Oxfam, we are breaking the protocol of only communicating with supporting partners rather extending the networking and communication with the district local actors.

Remote Partnering Considerations (Context)

Remote Partnering Considerations:

Oxfam is working to strengthen the local humanitarian leadership to bring in systemic change in the district humanitarian response ecosystem in 9 districts at scale. Each district is unique in terms of natural disaster type, geomorphology (Hoar basin, Coastal, Flood Plain etc.), but speak the same language. To create ownership, collaboration and facilitate a demand-led process, Oxfam is partnering with local organizations to create a network and culture of working together to identify, prioritize the changes in district and putting in motion the actions for this change. Oxfam staff have experienced that this approach of a network of organisations working together impacts the humanitarian response in the districts at scale. The approach is making the local organisations come together, get to know each other better, exchange and share their experiences and their expertise too! This implies that the local organisations reflect upon the continued need for the partnership / working together and think about next steps with regard to how to continue to work collaboratively. To facilitate the process of network partnership, supporting partners play a key role to coordinate and communicate with the local organizations. For this they rely on email, verbal communication through mobile phone and online calls. Whereas Oxfam is mostly in contact with the supporting partners and only rarely with the local actors (only when field visits are made, Oxfam people and local actors exchange their views).

This multi-layered partnership with too many gate keepers in the way, impacts the decision-making, spirit of collaboration, trust and complementarity at the districts. This is further challenged by the remote location of the local actors for which the local actors and the supporting partners rarely meet. The information transfer, funding, meetings, all get delayed while passing through these many 'gates'! This also makes the group lose information, reduce efficiency and often miss out on a new way of working which might be useful for the local organisations.

The mixed groups of local organisations themselves have power dynamics. Often the bigger organisations try to influence the decisions, discussions and activities. If the supporting partners are bigger in the districts, then the dynamics are less felt and local organisations are more collaborative, but if the supporting partner in the Districts are smaller, then very few local organisations work together for the partnership. The risk is the local organisations do not have any meaningful partnership discussions amongst themselves about, why they are partnering, what is their common interest apart from having access to funding and doing the work. This blocks the way to partnership – being more equitable would be something good to achieve, but local organisations do not have any partnership principles in place.

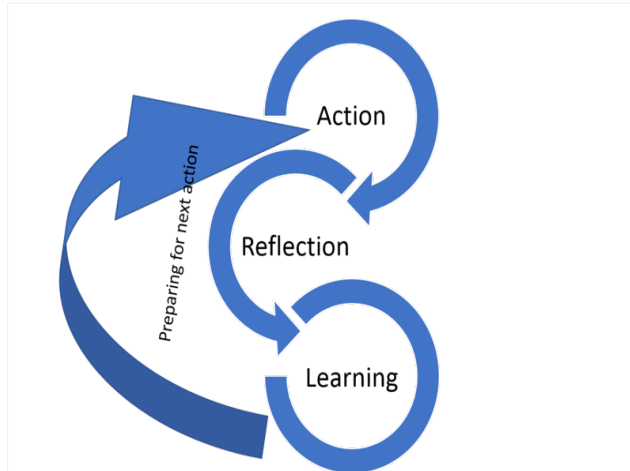
My partnering challenge is to initiate the discussion among the local organizations about having a better partnership/ working together more closely and then moving forward to develop partnership principles to work together with INGO/ UN/ LNGO etc. This can be done through developing an MOU at the very beginning but then letting it take shape over time. As a part of the capacity building itself, the project will support the local organisations to have such discussions and facilitate the MOU development process at the beginning.

Building my Remote Partnering Approach (development)

The Local organisations are working to achieve a common goal, carrying out timely humanitarian response. Mostly they share the common goal but often the "how" to reach the common goal varies. To create a shared vision, I would hold Skype meetings with the local actors and the support partners meeting at district level. Also, with the technology, I will share small video messages to the local organizations about the benefits of

working together and having discussion on partnership. I would also encourage them to have the same video message sent to me and Oxfam with their reflections and ideas.

Power, comes with access to funding, information and communication with the Oxfam or INGOs/ UN. I will send the information email to all the local actors and the support partners so that they get the information directly from us! I will also ask them to create a learning and sharing opportunity on a regular basis, with organisations visiting each other and developing ways to learn through exchange. I will also hold discussions between the Oxfam and its partner organisations on partnering principles, tensions and what gets in the way of operating effectively.



Internet is, however, a real challenge in the remote areas. Whenever we find that internet is good, several people will join meetings. I will do live webinars where people can join as much as possible. I would also with the support from our IT team would create a survey poll to understand which initiatives have been most useful. The mutual feedback and building more responsible behavior is very crucial for local organisations as well as for Oxfam. We will try to have a plan which is both pragmatic and achievable.

The Remote Partnering Implementation Plan

To implement my remote partnering plan, I will initiate conversation at the districts with the supporting partners and lead actors. The conversations will focus on developing common vision for all the local organizations and what needs to be done to achieve the common vision.

I will organize a partnership broker organisation to facilitate partnership discussion in the districts with the support partners and the local actors. As a follow up from the discussions, the possible partnership would be made directly between the local organizations and supporting partners.

I will use video clips from my end to the local actors with the information on the project and its progress. I will also hold skype meetings with the supporting partners and ask them to capture their discussions on video. We will do a webinar every 3 months to see how the partnership discussions are taking place, how the challenges in partnership are addressed and what new learning is emerging.

As a part of the demand-driven approach for capacity building, the supporting partners need to have MOUs among themselves and the Local actors. The development of these partnerships would be supported by Oxfam and nurtured as necessary so that they remain strong and productive.

More frequent meetings and workshops will be held by Supporting partners, giving kore space for the Local organizations to speak up!

Expected Impact (Evaluation)

This remote partnering challenge will impact "*How partnership is done by the local Organizations and why is it important for capacity building*". INGOs/ UN organizations develop partnership with Local organizations for having a remote impact. Through my partnership challenge, the local organisations will have partnership with other local organisations. Like the INGO/ UN bodies, the local organisations will have their own partnership principles and guidance for creating a partnership between themselves. The more remote local organisations will then be together to make a difference for any shared vision/ aim. These local organizations will feel the benefit of remote partnering, when the partnership conversations start taking place, critical friendship, reflective practice and so on – voice of people would then be properly heard.

To understand the status of the partnership I would carry out a baseline for stakeholder analysis. This will give an idea which are the organisations working in each district. From the baseline, we will capture the changes. Every 6 months, the data would be collected. Progress would be measured, when partnership agreements will be done, the organisations will be proactive to work together and come together, having partnership principles and guidance at the organisational level. The partnership principles would be piloted at the supporting partners level, and the process would be well documented. The partnership agreements will also provide useful evidence of change.

The practice of giving, and having access to, more information, best practice, online video tutorials etc. would be useful for all the organisations involved. They will be more connected, better coordinated and, hopefully, more willing to collaborate. An additional outcome would be if a consortium of these NGOs come together when there is need for an emergency response.