

LOCAL LEADERSHIP IN HUMANITARIAN RESPONSE INITIATIVE

Outcomes from the Regional Shelter & Settlements Fora

Credit: Hasan_Rahmani



ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

In response to the growing call for more locally led humanitarian response, InterAction's **Shelter and Settlements Working Group** conducted extensive consultations in four regional shelter and settlements fora in 2022 and 2023. These four regional reports directly capture the voices and unique perspectives of regional shelter and settlements stakeholders.

- These reports are made possible by the generous support of American people through the **United States Agency for International Development – Bureau for Humanitarian Affairs** (USAID/BHA). The contents do not necessarily reflect the view of USAID/OFDA or United States Government.
- These reports summarize the key findings of the consultations conducted by principal consultants **Fiona Kelling**, **Dr. Sneha Krishnan**, and **Dipti Hingorani**.
- This initiative was managed and guided by **Juli King**, with the support of **Mohamed Hilmi** and **Madelyn Evans** of InterAction. Additional guidance was provided by InterAction's Humanitarian Policy and Practice Team and Communications Team.
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LOCAL LEADERSHIP IN HUMANITARIAN RESPONSE INITIATIVE: OUTCOMES OF THE ASIA SHELTER & SETTLEMENTS FORUM

FEBRUARY 2022

This report sets out the main discussion points from the second of four regional shelter fora that took place between September 2022 and February 2023. It provides insights and recommendations that will support donors and INGOs to promote local leadership and local decision making in humanitarian shelter and settlements response.

KEY MESSAGES

- **ELEVATE COMMUNITIES:** Efforts are being made to devolve power to national and local organizations and to increase the voice of national and local staff. However, further transfer of decision-making power needs to occur to seek out, listen to, and elevate the role of affected people.
- **UNDERSTAND LOCAL CAPACITIES:** The role that local organizations or key individuals in the community play should align with their capacity. They should be supported through partnership where they require additional assistance or strengthening.
- **IDENTIFY KEY STAKEHOLDERS:** Increased local leadership can result in greater alignment between the assistance provided and the communities' needs. However, this depends on how and at what level local leadership is implemented. The definition of 'local' is context specific. Responders should identify who has the knowledge and capacity in any particular situation rather than making generalizations.
- **ALLOCATE RESOURCES:** The role that local actors can play in decision making is tied to their ability to access and control resources directly.
- **RECOGNIZE STANDARDS:** International principles and standards encourage equitable and quality assistance and avoid disparities or conflict. While allowing for local realities, the underlying principles still need to be upheld and pursued.
- **BUILD CAPACITY IN ALL STAKEHOLDERS:** There is consensus on the need to build capacity, but this must occur at several levels. Local organizations require stronger systems and governance. National organizations and governments must increase participation and agency of affected populations. International organizations must develop better ways to provide technical support and training and to work with communities. Donors must adapt their processes and requirements to local contexts.
- **CONSIDER OWNERSHIP:** International partners need to be willing to address their own role and responsibilities and relinquish control where appropriate. The push to localize has often come from the global north, but localization should be led by the needs and interests of local actors and what they want to see.

The Asia Shelter Forum took place in Dhaka, Bangladesh, from 28 to 30 November 2022. It contributed to the objectives of the ongoing InterAction initiative on Local Leadership in Humanitarian Response within the shelter and settlements sector. A consultation was held as a breakout session with the theme of Local Capacity and Coordination Mechanisms. The session explored current regional understandings and examples of local leadership as well as what increased local leadership could achieve. The information from the session supplements information gathered at the Africa Forum in September 2022 and Latin America and the Caribbean, and Middle East and North Africa fora in February 2023.

Details of the objectives, structure, and content of the session is in Annex 1.

‘Localization’ has been advancing in the Asia region for many years

InterAction Shelter and Settlements Working Group (SSWG) provided a short update on their work in local leadership since the last Asia Shelter Forum in 2021 in Nepal.

The SSWG mentioned that at the 2021 Asia Shelter Forum, a similar session discussed opportunities and barriers for national staff and organizations to increase leadership in humanitarian response. The importance of developing effective response leadership and coordination among local organizations, governments, and others was emphasized, with a focus on capacity strengthening and local strategies. Improved networks, communication, and resource sharing were identified as essential areas, and there was a call to develop a regional platform for capacity enhancement training and local coordination. The key takeaway message was that national stakeholders must take on leadership roles and focus on capacity strengthening in preparedness, response, and recovery.

Since the 2021 Asia Shelter Forum, InterAction’s SSWG began conducting its local leadership in humanitarian response initiative, holding group discussions at regional shelter fora in 2022 and 2023 and conducting individual bilateral conversations with national staff.

An interactive survey captured participants’ key concerns and solutions

The survey recorded participants’ understanding of who is ‘local’ and what is needed for increased local leadership. Around 25 participants answered each question. The participants represented a mix of UN, RCRC, INGO, national, and local organizations (international 58%, national/local 42%). Almost all participants represented countries in the Asia-Pacific region, with three participants from Europe. The majority of participants identified as male (65%; 23% female, 12% non-binary or prefer not to say). The survey revealed that the participants brought a considerable amount of experience (majority 6-10 years) in humanitarian response as well as in the shelter and settlements sector, where two thirds had more than 5 years’ experience.

Who is ‘local’ varies between and within contexts

In **defining ‘local’ actors**, participants listed local government or elected representatives and the community or inhabitants themselves. This included ‘affected population,’ ‘beneficiaries,’ and ‘host community.’ Participants also highlighted civil society organizations, including community based organizations, citizen collectives, youth and women’s groups, volunteer groups, and nationally registered NGOs. Other actors mentioned included small businesses, the private sector more generally, and community leaders such as religious leaders and teachers. Some participants also indicated that international organizations that operate locally or employ people from the area they are working in could also be considered local actors. Therefore, the perspective on who is local varies between contexts and stakeholders.

Participants agreed there are gaps in capacity that vary between stakeholders

Participants agreed on the need for **capacity building**, particularly in terms of technical skills. This was mentioned generally, as well as in relation to specific topics such as spatial planning, community engagement, risk identification, gender awareness, and integrated programming. Other areas requiring increased capacity are fundraising, advocacy, and understanding of coordination mechanisms, standards, and principles. Governance and administrative skills, such as leadership and financial and project management/reporting, were also mentioned. Gaps in local knowledge, trust, being community-led, or capacity building itself hint at the need for improved efforts or increased capacity across a variety of actors, including donors and international NGOs/UN agencies.



Credit: Alvaro Villela

Lack of positive leadership is a barrier to increasing locally led response

Participants mentioned that the **primary barrier** for a locally led response was the lack of effective leadership, due to cultural norms, unwillingness, or lack of strategy. Other barriers discussed were political barriers and a lack of funding or financial dependency impeding local leadership opportunities. The latter may reflect a lack of trust from donors. Skills and capacity were also mentioned as barriers, both in technical knowledge and adherence to humanitarian principles, and suggest potential challenges with capacity-building efforts themselves and the need for sustained technical support, mentoring and refresher training. Participants also perceived local leadership as being hampered by discrimination, lack of access to information, and the desire by others to hold on to power and decision-making.

Building local capacity is important

Efforts should focus on putting local actors at the center of response. This requires sustained efforts to build both technical and leadership capacities. To achieve this, participants suggested:

- simulations on contexts and case studies
- training on leadership and management
- mentoring throughout program cycles
- providing technical assistance
- enabling inclusive participation
- encouraging INGOs/UN agencies and donors to let go of control
- adapting to local standards or techniques
- ensuring adequate resourcing.

Participants also mentioned a need to aim efforts at an agency level as well as work with local governments.

They highlighted the need for international actors to set clear goals and commit to local leadership. They queried the extent to which localization should be imposed versus generated from the bottom up, and they discussed the need to engage other demographic groups, such as youth.

The full survey results are available in Annex 2.

Discussions further explored the aims and outcomes of local leadership

During break-out groups, participants further explored some of the key understandings, outcomes and tensions of locally led response, and proposed actions to enable local leadership. Each group consisted of eight-ten people. One group had stronger representation from CBOs while another had stronger representation from staff working internationally. Each group discussed the same questions while notes were taken by group facilitators.

TOPIC 1: UNDERSTANDING OF LOCAL LEADERSHIP

What do you understand by the term 'local leadership'? Share an example.

As expected, there were multiple interpretations of local leadership. In addition, group participants differed in their views about the power, agency and decision-making capacities held by different actors and organizations. One group understood local leadership to require increasing national staff in leadership positions and empowering them to make decisions while international staff provide technical assistance. Another group highlighted the role of government, including differing levels of knowledge versus decision-making power, at the national and sub-regional levels in Bangladesh.

Some participants understood local leadership to refer more to the role that affected populations themselves play in shelter programs. For example, in Malaysia a shelter organization worked with marginalized communities, acknowledging and strengthening indigenous building techniques. Community members took the lead while the local organization worked in a capacity-building role, which included strengthening financial and leadership skills in the community as well as monitoring construction. The community members retained or improved traditional construction techniques, and went on to train communities in other villages and develop local tourism initiatives. Owner-led reconstruction, with support from NGOs, after the 2001 Kutch earthquake in Gujarat, India was presented as another example of communities' leadership role in shelter response programming.

Local leadership was also understood to include civil society actors. For example, in Mizoram, northeastern India, youth volunteers organized themselves to provide relief to almost 15,000 Rohingya refugees who had been displaced from Myanmar for more than two years.

Participants also discussed the importance of coordination between different actors. They noted that inclusion in or access to coordination bodies can increase involvement in decision making and promote greater recognition of self-mobilization efforts.

TOPIC 2: OUTCOMES OF LOCALLY LED RESPONSE

What do you think increased local leadership or locally led response would achieve?

Participants discussed how outcomes of a locally led response depend on the capacities and maturity (in terms of experience) of the local actors involved. They felt that the effectiveness of local leadership differs according to different management processes, risks, and levels of understanding and community engagement each actor has. Each of these areas may also be assisted to a greater or lesser extent with oversight or support from external actors, which can also influence the outcomes achieved. In addition, inconsistent terminology can make it difficult to assess outcomes in a standard way. For example, 'sustainable,' 'efficient' and 'empowerment' all mean different things to different people.

Some participants highlighted the risk of holding high expectations of local individuals or organizations. For instance, one participant shared an example following the Sulawesi earthquake in Indonesia, where a local priest was an effective advocate for his community and became a key focal point in mobilizing movement to evacuation centers. However, over time, he became exasperated and overwhelmed by the burden of expected knowledge of standards and guidelines and pressure from humanitarian organizations.

Broadly, participants felt that locally led responses build on a clear understanding of the impact of disasters and the dynamic needs of the different social groups affected by them. Locally led responses can use knowledge about existing skills or capacities of local actors as a starting point for planned interventions. Local actors can track and monitor how shelter assistance has helped the affected communities and any gaps that remain. Local leaders can promote localized solutions, such as supporting the preservation or continuation and improvement of traditional building techniques as well as strengthening important community infrastructure.

Locally led responses could increase accountability to affected populations through local stakeholders' greater involvement in the response. However, localized responses must also follow humanitarian principles of objectivity, neutrality, and impartiality and remain accountable to donors.

One group discussed how an effective locally led response can increase sustainability by including anticipatory actions that could reduce harm from future disasters. A locally led approach could also move decision making closer to affected groups or provide them with more direct access to cash, as in examples of collective microfinance groups in Bangladesh.

TOPIC 3: TENSIONS AND CHALLENGES

To what extent do you agree with each of these statements?

The participants were given the opportunity to voice an opinion on the following statements:

- Local actors have technical knowledge on shelter construction.
- International actors have knowledge on the context and culture.
- Local governments have capacity to lead shelter response.
- Affected communities have a voice in their own shelter recovery.
- Local actors have the opportunity to influence decision making about the shelter response.

They were invited to share their agreement or disagreement and other reflections on these statements.

Participants agreed that at every level of program implementation, both contextual and technical knowledge were important. However, the extent to which people or organizations held either depended on the context, as did whether they were considered to be local. For example, sometimes governments, particularly national ministries, can be less informed or aware of specific local characteristics, needs, or appropriate responses than international organizations that have been present for a long time. Participants broadly agreed that shelter capacity could be provided through technical support and oversight, including sharing of standards and guidelines. However, organizational capacity, in terms of governance and processes, must be robust enough to provide a solid foundation.

Participants debated how much power and influence local actors actually held. For example, local government bodies in Bangladesh implemented public housing projects, including allocation of funding, using a bottom-up approach to housing and reconstruction in the aftermath of cyclones or flooding. However, participants suggested that local government bodies were unable to influence issues related to design, location or siting of houses, duration of the program, and involvement of international and national NGOs because these were determined by the central government. In this example and others, funding and access to resources was highlighted as a challenge to local leadership in shelter and settlements response.

TOPIC 4: ENABLING LOCAL LEADERSHIP

What steps or actions are required that would enable a locally led response?

Participants shared suggestions on how to tackle the barriers faced by local leaders in shelter and settlements response.

Many of these suggestions were aimed at organizations or governments and focused on enhancing local actors' capacity and coordination. Efforts are needed to enhance structures and processes within local organizations through capacity development, skill development training, and awareness raising. Some participants felt that raising awareness with local governments—while considering local politics—would enable a locally led response and improve coordination and collaboration with government. The need to ensure enough resources are available for the shelter relief and reconstruction was also mentioned.

There was agreement that locally led responses would also give disaster-affected communities or displaced families themselves ownership of the reconstruction of their own homes and settlements. This included communities being able to choose their own leaders, identifying the most vulnerable households, raising issues, and engaging with other actors and stakeholders. Affected people would be able to build shelters and have access to resources and be able to decide on the best use of those resources. Approaches mentioned that would enable this included owner-driven approaches, settlements or area-based approaches, vocational training, and adoption of local technologies and designs aligned with local practice and customs.

Empowering and strengthening local communities is a key driver of change in the current system. 'External' humanitarian responders must ensure sufficient systems to build or transfer capacity, robust participatory processes, and action-oriented plans to enable this process, coupled with a willingness to let go and let others take the lead.

See Annex 3 for details of the exercises.



Credit: Aadhyatm Verma

The Asia forum provided lessons for successful consultations at upcoming fora

- There was high representation of national and local voices at the Asia Shelter Forum. However, this highlighted the need to consider language and access to technology. For example, some participants struggled to load the Menti survey and to respond rapidly. This was made more difficult as the survey questions were in English. Future consultations should facilitate questions and responses in additional languages (recognizing this would have been difficult in the Asia context but is more possible in Latin America and MENA).
- In group discussions, participants preferred to talk with each other rather than enter more information on a Menti form. Assigning note takers in the discussion groups improved the details of conversation captured and allowed the facilitator to focus on encouraging and directing the conversations.
- Participants tended to speak in generalizations, despite efforts to base opinions in context-based examples. At future fora, facilitators should encourage participants to ground their contributions in a specific contextual example.
- The forum identified potential key informants, both individuals and organizations, to follow up as part of the continuing research.

Annex 1: Session Plan

Annex 2: Menti Survey Questionnaire Results

Annex 3: Powerpoint presentation

ANNEX 1: SESSION PLAN

Asia Shelter Forum 28-30th November 2022

This consultation will explore the current regional trends to strengthen local leadership and decision making in humanitarian response within the shelter and settlements sector. It invites participants in the Asia SF to reflect on their experiences and identify tensions, challenges and opportunities to strengthen local leadership in the region. The session will contribute to the ongoing research on localization in the shelter and settlements sector under InterAction's Local Leadership in Humanitarian Response Initiative.

Consultation Objectives:

- Explore understandings of local leadership in the shelter sector by different shelter stakeholders
- Identify examples of where localization is happening or specific efforts being made by organizations
- Gather contributions and reflections from the participants on how current practices or efforts to support locally led response are being experienced
- Identify people to participate in FGD or further interviews

Methods:

- Introduce research project to the participants and invite them to contribute further
- Use mentimeter to understand who is contributing and capture high-level inputs
- Small group/plenary discussions (supported by menti) to further explore understandings, outcomes, tensions and opportunities identified by participants and identify potential key informants

SESSION 1

OUTLINE

5 mins	Introduction to the people and overall project/topic and overview of session
5 mins	Introduction to local leadership initiatives
20 mins	Menti poll
45 mins	Small group discussions using menti poll interspersed with conversation / online breakout rooms
10 mins	Feedback to plenary on common themes/key points
5 mins	Conclusion

Introduction - 5 mins

Verbal presentation (title slide in background with contact details) to introduce ourselves and how the session will run. Provide a very brief summary of the InterAction Local Leadership in Humanitarian Response initiative and how information gathered (in session, through individual conversations and survey) from the Asia SF will contribute ongoing research, and invite to participate further by visiting market stall.

Short presentations - 5 mins

Meshba Uddin and Bai Mahdouz will say a few words on their efforts and initiatives on local leadership

Menti overview – 20 mins

Mentimeter poll to understand who is in the room and key priorities. Code: **5949 4242**

Questions:

1. What country are you working in?
2. What type of organisation do you work for?
3. What is your nationality/ies?
4. What is your gender?
5. How many years have you worked in humanitarian response?
6. How many years have you worked in the S&S sector?
7. Who do you consider to be a 'local actor'?
8. Do you think there is a capacity gap that is preventing local leadership?
9. In what area/topic does capacity need to be increased?
10. What are the main barriers to increased local leadership in humanitarian response?
11. Where should efforts be focused to enhance and improve locally-led response?
12. What else should be considered? Or any other comments, clarifications or questions

Small group or plenary discussion – 40 mins

Use second menti poll to guide discussion in small groups. Ask a question, get the answers, use to probe the small group further – provide examples, discuss aspects further. Code: **5473 9618**

Questions:

1. What do you understand by the term 'local leadership'? Share an example...
2. What do you think increased local leadership or locally-led response would achieve?
3. To what extent do you agree with each of these statements?
 - a. Local actors have technical knowledge on shelter construction
 - b. International actors have knowledge on the context and culture
 - c. Local government have capacity to lead shelter response
 - d. Affected communities have a voice in their own shelter recovery
 - e. Local actors have the opportunity to influence decision-making about the shelter response
4. What steps or actions would support or enable locally-led response?

Feedback to Plenary - 15 mins

If timing allows, each group provides a quick two-minute summary of key points discussed and any casestudy examples of where aspects of their discussion was displayed.

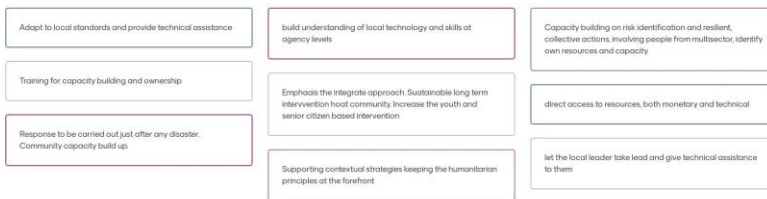
Summary/close – 5 mins

Otherwise, summarize any keys points, thank participants for their contributions and reiterate call for further contributions to the research especially if they are/have links with local organisations.

Where should efforts be focused to enhance and improve locally-led response?



Where should efforts be focused to enhance and improve locally-led response?






Where should efforts be focused to enhance and improve locally-led response?



What else should be considered? Plus any other additional comments, clarifications or questions...





ANNEX 2: POWERPOINT PRESENTATION



Local Leadership in Humanitarian Response

Meshba Uddin (Independent), Bai Mahdouz (CRS Philippines)


Facilitated by Fiona Kelling and Sneha Krishnan on behalf of InterAction



Session plan

- Introductory remarks
 - Sneha Krishnan, InterAction
 - Meshba Uddin, Independent
 - Bai Maroudz Ibrahim, CRS
- Mentimeter poll
- Small group discussion
- Feedback to plenary
- Wrap up

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Meshba Uddin

Reflections on localization in Nepal

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Bai Maroudz Ibrahim

Influence and Coordination Officer, CRS Philippines

Mentimeter poll

Pursuing local leadership in the Philippines

Mentimeter poll

Go to www.mentimeter.com

Type in code **5949 4242**

Or click on this link:

<https://www.menti.com/aldx9ewun6es>

or scan this QR code:



Small group discussion

Break into groups of 8-10 people

Small group discussion

Go to www.mentimeter.com

Ask your facilitator for the code for your group



Small group discussions

Questions

1. What do you understand by the term 'localization'? How is it the same/different to 'local leadership'?
2. Can you give an example of a successful locally-led response? What made it successful?
3. What tensions are faced when trying to increase or implement locally-led response?
4. What do you think increased local leadership or locally-led response would achieve?

Feedback to plenary

2 minute summary from each group of key points from discussion

ASIA SHELTER FORUM 2022

THANK YOU

Mohammed Hilmi
mhilmi@interaction.org

Meshba Uddin
meshbauddin2022@gmail.com

Bai Maroudz Ibrahim
baimaroudz.ibrahim@crs.org

Sneha Krishnan
sneha.etch@gmail.com

Fiona Kelling
fionakelling@gmail.com

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