ANATOMY OF POWER:
INTERNATIONAL AID AGENCIES & NATIONAL CRISIS RESPONDERS
AN INVITATION FOR REFLECTION ON THE RESPONSIBLE USE AND ABUSE OF POWER

Collaborative Action for Collective Impact Series   **Paper No - 4**

2024

International aid agencies, particularly those involved in crisis-response who handle larger budgets, have power over national crisis responders. The primary source of that power is money. It is not just the money that is currently available for a particular crisis response, but many years of good resourcing that has allowed international organisations to attract and retain expertise and invest in organisational systems and practices. Power is useful in its form of 'power to': the ability to do something and put the necessary resources behind it. With that power also comes the responsibility to demonstrate good stewardship of the resources with which we have been entrusted. But power can become attractive for its potential to influence and use others to do what you want them to do: 'power over'.

This paper is written mostly for international aid agencies, although the question of responsible use and/or abuse of power also applies to and between national and local agencies. It offers a set of questions for honest reflection – and action to correct identified abuses of power.

Exercise 1: Reflect on Your Own and Your Organisation's Beliefs and Practices

You can do this individually but better as a team. In the latter case, let each team member answer the questions first individually, then bring your answers together and compare. Your answer may be more nuanced than 'yes/no' or 'always/never'. But take seriously the situations where you acknowledge an excessive use of power. And take mitigating or corrective action.

Action Area 1: Assessing and Selecting a Local Agency to Collaborate With

- Our organisation (subsequently 'we') looks for local agencies that can fit within our country strategy and/or thematic priority areas.

- We look for local agencies to collaborate with because they can complement what we want to do but cannot or will not do ourselves.

- We see the collaboration with local agencies more as a risk than an opportunity.

- We are very conscious of the risks for local agencies, when they collaborate too much and too closely with international agencies.

- When assessing local agencies as potential collaborators:

    - We review their ability to meet international standards and requirements as a primary consideration and criterion.

    - We check whether they have all the internal policies on paper, that are now a standard expectation or requirement in the international relief sector.

    - We tend to focus on what they do not have, more than on what the organisation already has and its as yet unfulfilled potential.

- We do provide detailed feedback on our assessment to the agency that has been assessed.

- We provide information about our agency to the local agency we are assessing.

- We invite the local agency to assess us in a serious manner.

Action Area 2: Entering Into a Formal Agreement

- We never add clauses and conditionalities to a formal collaboration agreement with a local agency, beyond what the back-donor requires.

- The formal agreements we offer contain multiple clauses to protect our own agency, and less to protect the local one.

- In our formal agreements, a court of arbitration will always be in our home country.

- Our formal agreements include several clauses related to how we commit to manage not only the tasks but also the quality of our collaborative relationship.

Action Area 3: Implementing a Project or Programme

- The problem analysis and subsequent conceptualization, design and detailed planning with objectives, time frames and budgets, is largely done by us.

- The amount and details of the budget provided to our local collaborator for their part in the project/programme implementation, is largely decided by us:

- We set salary ceilings for their staff.
- We determine what type and amounts of operational equipment they will get.
- We do not habitually cover core costs, on top of direct project implementation costs.
- If we cover some core costs, this is in the form of earmarked budget lines and not as a flexible fee, comparable to our own management fee/Internal Cost Recovery.
- We regularly exclude costs incurred by the local agency, that were not anticipated when the budget was created, even if they were legitimate for the purpose of the project, and supported by the required documentation.

- Any assets provided in the context of a project- or programme agreement rarely remain with the local agency when the task is completed.

- We ask the local agency to use our formats for narrative and financial documentation and reporting, even if they must use different formats in their interaction with other international agencies. They cannot present key documents in a local language if it is not a major Western one.

- We expect the local agency to be able to use, correctly, frameworks and concepts commonly used in the international aid sector, particularly related to planning and monitoring.

- We ask the local agency to adhere to our management schedules. We speak with them critically when they fail to do so. We expect them to tolerate unplanned delays on our side, even if it has consequences for them.

Action Area 4: Capacities and Learning

- We speak and think in terms of us building/developing the capacities of national/local agencies. Our mind-sets and approach are not (also) strongly oriented to what we can learn from the local agencies we collaborate with.

- We can quickly identify six important learnings that our organisation has gotten from local agencies we collaborate with.

- The capacity support we provide is mostly focused on knowledge and skill, and organisational policies and practices. Helping local organisations become more financially sustainable is not a major part of our capacity-support.

- The capacity support we offer focuses on issues that are (also) a priority for us (and/or our back-donors). We will not readily mobilise capacity support for an issue that may be a priority for the local organisation but is not one from our perspective.

- In our project proposals, and our practices, we always set clear outcomes for our capacity-support, which we evaluate like any other project/programme outcome, and against which we hold ourselves accountable.

- Our capacity-support is part of an explicit strategy towards role changes, with the local actor taking on roles and responsibilities that currently are held by us.

- We have a defined picture of a 'capable enough' organisation. If a local actor, with or without our support, is 'capable enough', we will reflect that in all our communications and we will actively encourage other international actors to directly fund them. If we continue working with them, it will be only in response to their request for further support from us.

Action Area 5: Relationship Management

- We talk about 'our partners', with an implicit connation that they belong with and to us. We do not talk about us being partners to them.

- When dealing with the director of a local organisation, our senior representative will always be the one engaging or will at least be present.

- When we want to meet with the local agency, we regularly go to their office and adjust to their schedule and availabilities. If a meeting with them has been set, other than for very exceptional circumstances, it will take priority over other demands on our time that come up.

- In our collaboration, if the local agency operates in another language than our own, both can be used equally. If need be, we will mobilise and pay for a professional interpreter.

- In our collaborative practice, we hold ourselves accountable to the local agency for all aspects of our roles, responsibilities and behaviours in the collaboration, in the same way they are accountable to us.

- We will always share the full budget with a local agency, that includes our costs and benefits.

- We are very conscious of the power inequality in our collaboration, and the fear and self-censorship this may create in the local agency we collaborate with. We make this an explicit conversation point and are attentive to it affecting the quality of our relationship.

Action Area 6: Interactions with Donors

- We speak up to challenge a generalising negative narrative about local actors, that portrays them all as 'risk'. We do so in our interactions with our back-donors, but also in inter-agency conversations and even among ourselves, within our organisation.

- Our proposals to donors that involve collaborations with local agencies, will always maintain a justification why us playing a leading and oversight role is necessary for the reliable implementation of the proposed action.

- We regularly present proposals to donors in which the local agency has the lead, and we appear in a supporting role.

- We share the view that, in conflict situations, local agencies generally are unwilling or unable to operate in adherence to the core humanitarian principles of humanity, impartiality, neutrality and independence.

- We share the view that, in conflict situations, international relief agencies generally are willing and able to operate in full adherence to these core humanitarian principles.

- When in a post-violence context, our programming shifts from providing protection and life-saving services to projects that seek to contribute to social and political change, we reflect internally how this matches with our previous assertions to different local actors, that we were a 'humanitarian' agency, operating according to fundamental humanitarian principles.

- We want our back-donors to have direct interactions with the local agencies we collaborate with, even without our presence, and actively encourage it.

- In our reports to donors (and to the wider public), we always truthfully communicate the contributions and achievements of the local agency and give them full credit for any innovative ideas and approaches they may have introduced. We name them and provide a link to their website if they have one.

Action Area 7: Interagency Operational Coordination and Decision-Making Spaces

- If we have a presence on the ground, it will be our agency staff rather than that of our local agency collaborator, who attends the interagency coordination meetings. If one of our local agency collaborators joins in, we do more of the talking than them.

- If we are both present in such coordination meetings, we will do our own informal networking in the margins, without necessarily introducing our local agency colleague, or giving them most space to engage in conversation with other participants.

- We actively encourage our local agency collaborator to attend these coordination meetings, and if needed will enable their meaningful participation by providing them with detailed briefings on how the UN-led coordination systems works and the most common acronyms etc. If needed, we will accompany them in a support and mentoring role if they so request, until they feel confident enough to meaningfully participate on their own.

Action Area 8: Dealing With Too Assertive Non-governmental National/Local Actors

- A too assertive and critical local agency director does cause irritation for us and raises eyebrows, whether the criticism is justified or not.

- We will generally refrain from collaborating with a local agency, whose senior staff asserts too much their independence and equality. If we are in a collaboration, we will seriously consider not renewing it when the current one comes to an end, even if the local agency has fair grounds for its attitude.

- When we hear other international agencies criticise a local organisation and/or its director as being too assertive or critical towards international ones, we do take note. It does influence our attitude towards that agency or person.

- When we hear other international agencies criticise a local organisation and/or its director as being too assertive or critical towards international ones, we try to engage other international agencies towards a more reflective stance. Perhaps the local actor has some valid reasons for the criticism, that we should try to listen to more openly, even if the person does not express it in the best possible way.

Action Area 9: Harvesting Local Funding Opportunities

- A central part of the capacity support we offer to, or mobilise for, local agencies we collaborate with, is to strengthen and support their organisational capabilities to raise more income from domestic sources, or other international ones, to strengthen their financial sustainability and independence.

- We register our country offices as national organisations, to be able to also tap into international humanitarian aid that is supposed to be available to local actors.

- We actively invest in fundraising from government, the general public and the private sector in aid-recipient funding, as another income opportunity for our national and global operations and organisational infrastructures.

Action Area 10: The Global and National Policy Spaces

- We participate in some global spaces and fora where policies, standards and good practice guidance are being developed collaboratively, for global use. We do not involve our local agency collaborators in this, directly or indirectly.

- We do not see a problem if, within a particular country, a working group or task force focusing on the collaboration of national/local and international actors is only led by international agencies.

- If we see that, in a particular country, a working group or task force focusing on the collaboration of national/local and international actors is only led by international agencies, we will raise this as an issue that must be addressed. As key stakeholders, who will be directly affected by what is discussed and decided, they must co-lead this and be able to effectively participate.

- The problem of 'representation' in the face of large numbers of local agencies, is also invoked within or by our organisation as an obstacle for their participation.

- We believe that national and local organisations have the potential to solve the issue of 'representation', and if needed, will support a process led by them, to find satisfactory solutions for this.

- If you add all your answers together, what picture emerges about your power and how you use it?

Exercise 2: Image Yourself a National/Local Agency

Now imagine yourself as a national actor. You can physically move to another spot, to mark the shift from being an international actor to a national actor. Go through the various action areas as described in the first exercise and experience how that feels for a national/local actor. Pay attention not just to your thoughts but to your emotions in that role. Note them down. What picture emerges about the power of you as national/local actor in the interaction with your international organisation?

Exercise 3: What Needs to Change?

Return to your identity as international agency staff. Look back at your practices as reviewed in Exercise 1, now with the experience of having looked at them through the eyes of a national/local actor in Exercise 2. What must change? What must you stop doing? What must you do less of? What must you do more of? What must you start doing that you have not done so far?

How will you put these changes into practice? Draw up a provisional plan that sets priorities and a sequencing to make these changes within your own organisation and/or in the collaborative interaction with local agencies and/or in the wider aid community (in country, or in the global interagency spaces you participate in). Then act on it.

GMI is a value-based and purpose-oriented consulting and advisory group, set up by experienced practitioners and working out of Switzerland. One of its core areas of expertise are collaborative relationships and partnerships, within teams, between teams or units within organisa-.tions, between organisations or between organisations and social groups

Find out more at www.gmentor.org