

Valuing and Transferring Local Humanitarian Knowledge



READY to go
Mobile Guide

Learn how to value and transfer local humanitarian knowledge to develop a localized response.



Valuing Local Knowledge

The Importance of Local Humanitarian Knowledge

Local actors from national organizations, local communities, and civil society organizations possess humanitarian and contextualized knowledge, information, and experiences that are valuable and essential for the wider humanitarian community.

Sharing and transferring local knowledge benefits both national and international organizations by:

- Promoting mutual understanding
- Identifying and exchanging contextual humanitarian knowledge and experiences
- Building trust and partnerships with communities
- Strengthening the capacity of organizations and communities
- Enabling all actors to contribute their knowledge and expertise to improve humanitarian response at the local level



Challenges and Misconceptions

When international and national actors work together in the local context, certain challenges, barriers, and misconceptions can arise that may hinder their collaboration and communication as well as impact the overall effectiveness of the response.



Standards and processes are not adapted for the local context

National organizations are expected to use standardized processes and approaches based on international organizations' structures, language, needs, and expectations which may not be applicable to the local context.



Local knowledge is underrepresented and undervalued

International organizations may consider local knowledge to be limited to community practices or indigenous technical know-how. They may focus programming on a 'top-down' approach and underestimate the valuable knowledge and experience national actors possess that is critical for developing a contextualized response.



Local knowledge is incorporated mainly at the planning stage

International organizations consult with national organizations mainly during the planning phases of the project cycle to conduct needs assessments and context analysis. However, they should consider local humanitarian knowledge and perspective, especially during all stages of a project including implementation and evaluation.



Lack of trust and consistency

International staff and projects often have short-term rotations which can disrupt the quality and consistency of local projects and cause a lack of trust and loss of relationships with national partners.



Lack of communication and collaboration

International organizations tend to share knowledge, good practice, and collaborate closely with other organizations that share the same type of institutional culture. This makes it challenging for national and community organizations to collaborate, communicate, and share knowledge with international organizations.



Linguistic barriers

Staff from international organizations are not always aware that humanitarian terminology is not easy to understand. They may not take the time to explain terms to national staff who may lack confidence in using it in their work.

Local Knowledge is Essential for a Contextualized Response

National organizations work closely with communities over time which enables them to understand the local context and build trust with local actors. This local experience allows them to develop functional and operational humanitarian expertise that is essential to developing and delivering a contextualized response.

Understanding the Local Context

National organizations and local actors have a solid humanitarian knowledge of the local context, cultural practices, and the community's needs which enables them to:

- Design and implement programs that are culturally sensitive, context-appropriate, and address the needs of the community.
- Adapt actions appropriately to the local context, culture, and environment.
- Identify and mediate ways projects can enhance resilience and sustainability for the future.
- Build and maintain social networks with communities and external actors.



Understanding the Local Context

Trusted by Local Actors

National organizations and local actors possess cultural sensitivity and respect for local formal and informal authorities which enables them to:

- Gain access to information and context-specific knowledge through different social networks.
- Build trust, develop relationships, and negotiate with local stakeholders, including armed groups.
- Identify different safety and security risks in the local operating environment.



Trusted by Local Actors

Better Access to Communities

National organizations and local actors are closely linked to local communities, and may engage with local armed groups, and formal/informal leadership structures. This enables them to:

- Negotiate safe access to communities.
- Gain acceptance from communities.
- Create a humanitarian space in areas where it is difficult for international actors to operate.
- Collect data and first-hand information from local communities that provide a more accurate representation of the 'realities on the ground' and field monitoring mechanisms.



Better Access to Communities

Insight into Insecure Settings

National organizations and local actors work with communities in volatile and insecure settings on a long-term basis which enables them to:

- Provide logistical insight on issues related to security and access in protracted crisis situations.
- Have a comprehensive understanding of coping, adaptation, and resilience strategies in conflict settings.



Insight into Insecure Settings

Invested Interest for the Future

National organizations and local actors have an invested interest in achieving more than just program objectives which enables them to:

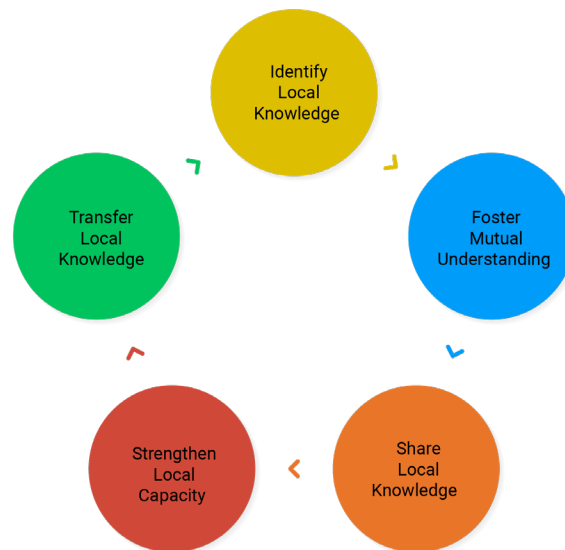
- Establish a long-term vision for the future, going beyond relief efforts towards sustainability.
- Provide another approach to humanitarian response that focuses more on social interactions than delivery.



Invested Interest for the Future

How to Value and Transfer Local Knowledge

Consider these key steps to value and transfer local humanitarian knowledge.



Identify Local Knowledge

Identify and document the knowledge, skills, and expertise that local actors possess.

Foster Mutual Understanding

Promote mutual understanding between local and international actors.

Share Local Knowledge

Share and exchange local knowledge, experiences, and expertise with international actors.

Strengthen Local Capacity

Develop the capacity of national organizations and communities through professional development and learning.

Transfer Local Knowledge

Integrate local knowledge and experience to develop a contextualized response.



Identifying Local Knowledge

Identifying Local Humanitarian Knowledge

Some international organizations may think that national organizations have limited capacities simply because the specific knowledge is not identified. Consider these actions to identify and document the knowledge and expertise of national organizations, actors, and communities.



Think outside the box. Acknowledge that national actors possess functional and operational knowledge that is critical to informing the response strategy. Their expertise goes beyond providing contextual and situational information.



Document and systematically map the expertise of national actors. Build awareness and visibility of local knowledge to the wider humanitarian community. This can be done through ongoing monitoring and action-research, particularly regarding local responses, preparedness, and resilience.



Determine ways to identify, document, transfer, and update local humanitarian knowledge. This can be done by integrating knowledge management into project management, and sharing knowledge and best practices between projects.



Develop a common lexicon of terms and concepts. Take time to explain humanitarian terminology to national organizations to allow them to formulate their specific knowledge and capture concepts relevant to the local context.



Encourage national actors to participate in humanitarian forums. Give them the opportunity to demonstrate their strengths and expertise in front of other organizations which will also help them to build confidence and realize their potential. Sometimes an external support or catalyst may be needed to advocate their participation.



Fostering Mutual Understanding

Fostering Mutual Understanding through Local Knowledge

Consider these actions to foster mutual understanding between international and national organizations, local authorities, stakeholders, and communities.

Redefine Roles

Redefine roles to help develop mutual understanding of practices and perceptions among international and national organizations:

- Challenge the dominant way of thinking
- Shift power imbalances by redefining roles to be complementary roles (instead of hierarchical/subordinate roles)
- Promote mutual learning through co-developed training
- Create a space for open dialogue starting with recognizing each other's strengths, opportunities, and needs
- Take time to clarify cultural issues without unconscious bias or value judgements
- Engage in joint decision-making on key issues and long-term solutions for the future



Redefine Roles

Conduct Action Research

Conduct action research to help develop a contextualized response that:

- Considers the perspectives of national organizations and communities
- Enables greater operational capacity
- Reduces the vulnerability of the community and specific groups
- Identifies specific actions that should be taken and avoided in the response considering conflict settings, local social/political structures, different cultural dynamics, and resilience strategies



Conduct Action Research

Engage the Community

Identify community members and/or national staff who can mediate and encourage open dialogue between international and national organizations, and communities in order to:

- Align national and international objectives to better benefit communities
- Understand and 'translate' the needs and demands of communities and international organizations
- Identify and manage communities' expectations
- Explain and adapt technical humanitarian language to the local culture and context



Engage the Community



Sharing Local Knowledge

Sharing Local Knowledge

Consider these actions to encourage knowledge sharing and collaboration among international and national actors, and the community.

Promote Knowledge Sharing

- Support the development of local networks where both international and national actors can exchange and share knowledge, experiences, and best practices.
- Encourage international organizations to collaborate with national actors from a broad range of backgrounds and cultures to gain different perspectives and insight.
- Support local actors to take on co-leadership, coordination, and technical roles in international humanitarian forums and consortiums.
- Set up open access repositories containing 'lessons identified' from local responses.
- Record and share local knowledge across all areas of the humanitarian system (not only between similar organizations).



Encourage Participation in Projects and Forums

Encourage national actors to actively participate and share knowledge in forums and projects with other organizations.

- Encourage national actors to mediate discussions between communities and national/international stakeholders and build mutual understanding of different knowledge, cultures, and perceptions.
- Lead discussions by presenting local strengths and opportunities.
- Give people time and opportunities to express themselves at any point in the discussion.
- Remain transparent in the decision-making process and clarify the positions of national actors.
- Agree on common positions in debates and in advocacy.
- Identify long-term solutions building on local knowledge and initiatives beyond the project life cycle.





Strengthening Local Capacity



Strengthening Local Capacity

Consider these actions to encourage continuous learning and strengthen the capacity of national staff and local actors.

Identify and develop roles for both national and international staff that are based on their specific expertise and characteristics.

Provide national staff with opportunities for peer mentoring, field monitoring, contextualized proximity mentorships (CPM), and one-on-one coaching at work.

Coach and mentor national staff to take on leadership roles and to participate in technical working groups.

Adapt the training to the local context; avoid general training that is not relevant for the situation.

Co-develop training and tools that build on existing knowledge, practices, and experiences from national and international actors.

Provide Training of Trainers (ToT) programs to enable national staff to teach and transfer their expertise to other colleagues in their own words, manner, and culture.

Create opportunities for organizations to reflect on their own practices, strengths, challenges, and expectations to drive organizational culture change.



Transferring Local Knowledge



Transferring Local Knowledge into the Response

Consider these actions to integrate local knowledge and expertise into humanitarian practices, programming, and localized responses.

Give local actors the floor. Provide local actors with enough time and opportunity during forums and events to share their local knowledge and expertise.

Incorporate local knowledge into the context analysis. Consider the knowledge and expertise of national organizations when conducting context and conflict analysis to develop localized projects.

Adapt international standards and benchmarks to local contexts. Work actively with local actors to tailor standards based on their humanitarian knowledge to be more applicable to realities on the ground. Find a balance between using technical terminology and local modes of expression so all actors can communicate clearly.

Incorporate creative ways to collect information. Go beyond traditional processes and use alternative methods for collecting information and knowledge (traditional storytelling, song, performance).

Design meaningful questions. Involve national organizations in designing data collection methods to ensure that the questions are legitimate, culturally sensitive, and are understood outside of the international humanitarian sector.

Advocate for a systematic recognition of local humanitarian expertise. Build awareness around the value of local knowledge, how it contributes to the strategic development of global humanitarian knowledge, and how it should be integrated into project cycle management, forums, and publications.