

What can be done to implement a stronger, locally led humanitarian workforce?

Lucy Hall • Data and Evidence Specialist
at the Humanitarian Leadership Academy

Will a blend of different capacity-sharing approaches, based on professional development and activism principles, translate into a stronger, locally led humanitarian workforce? This is at least the solution the author champions in this article.

Localisation and decolonisation

Localisation and decolonisation are interconnected concepts in the humanitarian sector, that aim to bring about change as to the future of humanitarian work: localisation is a strategic approach to humanitarian action which was brought into further focus through the Grand Bargain in 2016,¹ which aims to shift power and resources away from the Global North towards those that are affected by crises. Increasing evidence since 2016 has highlighted concerns that efforts to localise humanitarian action need to be more effective, which led to the development of the Pledge for Change 2030 agenda.² Pledge for Change has three main commitments, and a humanitarian learning agenda forms a key part of the third commitment: “Influencing Wider Change”.³ Decolonisation focuses on dismantling historical power imbalances and prioritising voices of affected communities.⁴ There is consensus in humanitarian debate that both localisation and decolonisation agendas are needed to support and enable a more locally led workforce.⁵

Organisations in the humanitarian learning sphere

The Humanitarian Leadership Academy (HLA) is one of the organisations promoting a learning agenda to further evolve locally-led policies and practices.⁶ Working in partnership with local organisations,

¹—. InterAgency Standing Committee, *The Grand Bargain – A Shared Commitment to Better serve People in Need*, 23 May 2016, https://interagencystandingcommittee.org/sites/default/files/migrated/2017-02/grand_bargain_final_22_may_final-2_0.pdf

² Active Learning Network for Accountability and Performance in humanitarian action (ALNAP), “State of the Humanitarian System”, 2022, <https://sohs.alnap.org/2022-the-state-of-the-humanitarian-system-sohs-%E2%80%93-full-report>; Pledge for Change, *Our Story*, October 2022, <https://pledgeforchange2030.org/our-story>

³ Pledge for Change, *The Pledges. Pledge 1 – Equitable Partnerships*, 2023, <https://pledgeforchange2030.org/pledges/equitable-partnerships>

⁴ Mary Anderson, *Decolonizing Aid: Local Solutions, International Assistance, and the Future of Development*, Kumarian Press, 2019.

⁵ UNOCHA, *Global Humanitarian Overview 2024*, 23 December 2024, <https://www.unocha.org/publications/report/world/global-humanitarian-overview-2024-enarfrsp>

⁶ Humanitarian Leadership Academy, *Locally-led learning, transforming lives*, 2024, <https://www.humanitarianleadershipacademy.org>

the HLA works across 6 regions to make learning accessible to humanitarians in diverse settings. The HLA also acts as a convener to bring the sector together, and to amplify the knowledge and voices of local organisations.

This article highlights the work being delivered by the NEAR Network, the Nirengi Association in Türkiye, and the Institute of Studies on Conflicts and Humanitarian Action in Colombia (IECAH), and draws on experiences from multiple organisations in Aden and Mukalla in Yemen, the South Sudan NGO Forum, Save the Children Mali, Niger and Tanzania.

Different models of learning and why terminology is so important

In the field of humanitarian learning, terms like capacity building, capacity strengthening, and capacity sharing abound, each carrying nuanced meanings. While seemingly synonymous, these terms diverge significantly in practice. The United Nations defines capacity building as the holistic process of nurturing skills, instincts, and resources crucial for survival, growth, and adaptability within organisations and communities.⁷

On the other hand, capacity strengthening focuses on enhancing existing capacities within individuals, organisations, or systems,⁸ while capacity sharing fosters a reciprocal exchange of knowledge, valuing experiences and fostering a conducive learning environment, as outlined in ALNAP’s State of the Humanitarian System.

Capacity strengthening has been in sporadic use since the late 1990s, sometimes seen as a damaging term at odds with localisation, assuming “local actors’ capacity is poor and needing strengthening purely to meet criteria set by the Global North”.⁹ Capacity sharing is emerging as the preferred term and approach to learning in the humanitarian system. Assuming the principles translate into equitable outcomes for humanitarians by creating inclusive spaces for mutual learning and growth for individuals and local organisations.

Examples of capacity sharing

Through discussions and interviews with the contributors of this article and a desk review of grey and academic literature focusing on humanitarian learning alongside localisation and decolonisation theories, we investigate the question of how, and if, capacity sharing translates into a locally led workforce. Discussions focused on the elements that most enable locally-led work: how the approaches speak for humanitarian work to be professional and uphold agreed standards, but also, to the values that the sector has been built on, namely human interconnectedness and activist principles.

⁷ United Nations, “Capacity Building”, *Academic Impact*, 2024, <https://www.un.org/en/academic-impact/capacity-building>

⁸ Mary B. Anderson, *Do no harm: how aid can support peace – or war*, Lynne Rienner Publishers, 1999.

⁹ Farah Mihar, “Coloniality and the inadequacy of localisation”, *The Humanitarian Leader*, vol. 6, no. 1, 2024, <https://ojs.deakin.edu.au/index.php/thl/article/view/1971/1659>

Convened Spaces

The way humanitarian organisations approach learning is slowly shifting to reflect the principles of how the system can work towards decolonisation and localisation. In the learning space this has seen greater moves towards two-way, mutual learning.

One of the driving factors behind the shift towards mutual learning is the accessibility of emerging technologies, expedited by the enforced digitisation of learning in the Covid-19 pandemic. There are several examples of digital convened spaces that were created for the specific purpose of localising learning.¹⁰ NEAR Network’s Localisation Labs provide a platform for people to share their experiences, seek advice, and discuss challenges and successes. Platforms like this strengthen the skills of local organisations, including for individuals who have had little or no experience in humanitarian work. This platform functions on the hypothesis of a ripple effect, “local spaces where people add each other to these spaces [and where] people support each other with ideas and solutions.” The ripple effect is crucial to capacity sharing via trust among organisations having discussions and problem solving. The consensus amongst NEAR Network, the Nirengi Association and IECAH is that by creating spaces to share challenges, whether these are on how to access strategic spaces or a technical implementation problem, others contribute to a solution.

Organisational development through convened spaces

Discussions about what capacity sharing means highlighted that for some organisations, capacity sharing can also mean sharing financial risks and resources. This perspective of capacity sharing amongst organisations focused on the dimensions of localisation beyond learning and how to use convened spaces to co-create innovations in humanitarian financing.

When framing this approach within the context of learning, there are synergies with the concept of organisational development. Organisational development promotes sustainability and resilience within humanitarian organisations. By building robust systems and structures, organisations are better equipped to withstand challenges and adapt to changing contexts, ultimately ensuring the continuity of services and programmes over the long term.¹¹

Examples of the success can be found through NEAR Network’s Change Fund in Afghanistan, Lebanon, Somalia and Syria, where international and local organisations identify that local humanitarian actors can engage more meaningfully in humanitarian work with a more robust infrastructure supporting them.

Similar examples in Yemen and South Sudan have shown how bringing local organisations together can lead to organisations finding improvements in organisational infrastructure.¹² This includes

¹⁰ UNOCHA *Global Humanitarian Overview 2022*, 2022, <https://www.unocha.org/publications/report/world/global-humanitarian-overview-2022> ; Greig E. Krull, “Learning with low tech: challenges of moving to remote learning in a time of disruption”, in Elizabeth Walton and Ruksana Osman (eds.), *Pedagogical Responsiveness in Complex Contexts*, Springer, 2022, pp. 55–73, https://link.springer.com/chapter/10.1007/978-3-031-12718-2_4

¹¹ Start Network, *DEPP Innovation Labs*, 2021, <https://startnetwork.org/focus-areas/past-programmes/depp-innovation-labs>

¹² Salem Abraha, Mahnoor Ali, Maaria Azhar et al., *Organisational Learning for Localisation: Evaluating the impact of the Supporting Effective Humanitarian Partnerships Programme*, Save the Children Resource Centre–Humanitarian Leadership

expanding human resources and finance departments and taking on more significant risks through collaborative efforts and taking on more responsibilities and programming work in their contexts.

Despite this approach to capacity sharing not being purely about learning, it speaks to other dimensions of localisation,¹³ demonstrating how capacity sharing is interconnected with transforming locally led action.

Technical Expertise

There remains a place in the humanitarian system for more locally led capacity sharing activities such as through the development of technical, sector-specific expertise.

In Colombia, the IECAH has demonstrated success in curating spaces for technical learning on multiple subjects with experiential learning. This fosters use of asynchronous and synchronous learning methodologies, providing time for reflection on theory and application simultaneously. The Nirengi Association uses similar methodologies for its capacity sharing work and has been able to demonstrate success in Türkiye through openly accessible content, facilitated discussions, and then taking the agreements with other organisations into policy spaces to influence change.

Multiple learning packages exist for standards-based learning,¹⁴ which primarily use capacity strengthening principles, but, increasingly, local organisations, like those that work with the Humanitarian Leadership Academy, are being invited to create curriculums, choose existing content that is relevant to their work and adapt it to make it more accessible and relevant.

Coaching, mentoring and leadership development

A final example of capacity sharing that is becoming more commonly used and receiving increasing attention as being potentially transformative is coaching and mentoring.

Traditionally, these approaches have primarily focused on individual career development, wellbeing and skill enhancement, but there is new evidence on the effectiveness of coaching and insight that coaching and mentoring can support in navigating complexity in humanitarian contexts.¹⁵

Academy, March 2022, <https://resourcecentre.savethechildren.net/pdf/Organisational-Learning-for-Localisation-Evaluating-the-impact-of-SEHP-2.pdf>

¹³ Start Network, *Start Network launches new framework for localisation*, 2017, <https://startnetwork.org/learn-change/news-and-blogs/start-network-launches-new-framework-localisation> ; Network for Empowered Aid Response (NEAR), *Localisation performance measurement Framework*, March 2019, https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5fc4fd249698b02c7f3acfe9/t/6011621dba655709b8342a4c/16111751983166/LMPF+Final_2019.pdf

¹⁴ Sphère, *Resources*, 2024, <https://www.spherestandards.org/resources/?category=training-parent> ; Humanitarian Leadership Academy, *Our Learning Programmes*, 2024, <https://www.humanitarianleadershipacademy.org/learning-programmes> ; CHS Alliance, *Training*, 2024, <https://www.chsalliance.org/training>

¹⁵ Erik de Haan and Viktor O. Nilsson, "What can we know about the effectiveness of coaching? A meta-analysis based only on randomized controlled trials", *Academy of Management Learning and Education*, February 2023, http://www.erikdehaan.com/wp-content/uploads/2023/04/AMLE20220107_RP.pdf; NGO Coaching and Mentoring, "About Coaching and Mentoring", Save the Children, 2021, <https://ngocoachingmentoring.org/about>

The HLA's established coaching programme takes a peer-led approach, through a network of experienced humanitarian coaches. This network aims to tap into the collective wisdom and experience of humanitarians for holistic leadership development and learning.

“Coaching is defined as partnering with individuals in a thought-provoking and creative process that inspires them to maximise their personal and professional potential”.

“Professional coaching focuses on setting goals, creating outcomes and managing personal change.”¹⁶

The coaching relationship is an example of a capacity sharing approach, as a two-way relationship where learning, knowledge and experience are exchanged. There is increasing evidence from Tanzania, Niger, Norway and the United Kingdom to suggest that these are mutual relationships which create mutual learning.¹⁷ The HLA's coaching pool facilitates coaching relationships that are contextually specific and meet individual needs. Programmes include the Across Organisational Mentoring Programme (AOMP) – a crisis coaching initiative for leaders in the occupied Palestinian territories (oPt), Sudan, Afghanistan and Libya, core coaching skills programmes for leaders in the Middle East region, and a women in leadership network offering a peer mentoring programme for women humanitarian leaders.¹⁸

The enabling factors for capacity sharing approaches

When discussing and reviewing capacity sharing approaches, the commonalities in their enablers are striking; there are common factors in their design:

- Open spaces for discussion and collaboration
- Mutual trust and strong relationships amongst convenors and facilitators, and the organisations and individuals engaged in the spaces and individuals themselves
- Outcomes being multiplied through a ripple effect, driven by networks of local organisations, and the creation of networked networks
- Motivation to share, listen, reflect, adopt and adapt practices

Equally, some of the barriers to capacity sharing discussed with contributors and identified in the literature include:

- An over-reliance on technology, and de-valuing the connectivity of in-person conversations and spaces, particularly in fragile contexts where the internet and technology are restricted by government authorities
- Logistical arrangements of convened spaces – as the global humanitarian workforce becomes more inter-connected, space timings dictate who can engage and participate meaningfully
- The balance between shared learning and experiences and ensuring that standards are upheld
- Large international organisations still leading and shaping capacity initiatives

¹⁶ International Coaching Federation, *Empowering the World through Coaching*, <https://coachingfederation.org>

¹⁷ Shruti Sonthalia, “Evaluating the impact of embodying the coaching mindset on leaders’ paradigm of power”, in *Coaching: An International Journal of Theory, Research and Practice*, vol. 17, no. 1, February 2024.

¹⁸ Humanitarian Leadership Academy, *Women in Leadership Network for the Humanitarian and Development Sectors*, Kaya, 2024, <https://kayaconnect.org/course/info.php?id=4895>

Discussion

The purpose of capacity sharing is broad – exchanging knowledge, experiences, lessons learnt, and the application of technical standards all towards enabling effective locally led action and shaping an equitable humanitarian ecosystem.

The ripple effect of capacity sharing is perhaps one of the most powerful features of shared learning as there is a recognition that learning never stops, and that the adaptation and contextualisation of skills and knowledge will continue organically without direct inputs needed. This is observed in the NEAR Network Localisation Labs in Afghanistan, Bangladesh Myanmar and Uganda, and convened spaces in Colombia and Türkiye. For this to happen at scale would evidence that capacity sharing can contribute to a more locally led humanitarian ecosystem, with experiences being listened to, adopted, piloted, tested and shared, creating a snowball effect of local expertise driving a re-invigorated system. This is yet to be fully demonstrated, with Shahida Arif from NEAR Network surmising: “There is a shift happening within the humanitarian workforce, but there is still a significant gap between humanitarian policy and humanitarian practice.”

The focus on ensuring the capacity sharing mentality is embedded in learning principles for individual learning is the primary focus of the Nirengi Association and the networked approach in its work. Networks hold strong relationships across the humanitarian system with international organisations, think tanks and policy groups, donors, academics and the local organisations. Relationships between individuals as well as networks are as important for capacity sharing; without mutual trust, it would be: “just talking to one another and not bringing people along on the journey” (NEAR Network).

Conclusion

The evolution of learning terminology outlined at the start of this article represents not just the greater focus on more appropriate language, but also a shift in intention towards learning.

There is a greater emphasis on sharing experiences and knowledge amongst individuals to further the humanitarian learning agenda that reflects the value being given to local knowledge. There are increasing calls for capacity sharing principles to be adopted for more systemic and scalable localisation and decolonisation of the humanitarian workforce.

The enabling factors that have been highlighted can, and arguably should, be used to bring this wider change about, as there are signs of progress towards a locally led workforce through blended capacity sharing approaches.

Special thanks go to Shahida Arif, Gloria Miranda and Zeynep Sanduvas for their contributions to honing this article.

Biography

Lucy Hall • Lucy Hall is a Data and Evidence Specialist at the Humanitarian Leadership Academy, an organisation focused on enabling people to prepare and respond to crises in their own countries, through quality learning opportunities.

Lucy's work focuses on exploring enabling factors for decolonial, inclusive and accessible learning design; discussing how learning can create a more equitable and socially just humanitarian system; and how data and evidence contribute to learning cultures.

Reproduction prohibited without the agreement of the review Humanitarian Alternatives. To quote this article:
Lucy Hall, "What can be done to implement a stronger, locally led humanitarian workforce?", *Humanitarian Alternatives*,
no. 26, July 2024, pp. 39–50,

<https://www.alternatives-humanitaires.org/en/2024/07/10/what-can-be-done-to-implement-a-stronger-locally-led-humanitarian-workforce/>