



Time for HR to step up:

National perspectives on transforming surge capacity

Policy-to-Practice Paper

Abstract

This policy-to-practice paper builds on the 'Time to move on: National perspectives on transforming surge capacity' report commissioned by four Charter4Change signatories CAFOD, Christian Aid, Islamic Relief and Tearfund as part of their work with the Start DEPP Transforming Surge Capacity Project, and written by Andy Featherstone -. It is intended to provide the humanitarian HR community with practical guidance relating to the implementation of the report's main recommendations.



Background and context

The loss of talented national staff to international organisations is a continued source of frustration for local and national NGOs in many crisis-affected countries, and the adverse impact on programmes and outcomes was acknowledged by a wide range of stakeholders at the 2016 World Humanitarian Summit. It is also acknowledged explicitly in the Charter for Change (Charter4Change, Commitment 4) which calls on signatories to 'stop undermining local capacity'.

The 2016 study – 'Time to move on, National perspectives on transforming surge capacity' – was commissioned by the four Charter4Change signatory organisations which are members of the Transforming surge capacity consortium (CAFOD, Christian Aid, Tearfund and Islamic Relief) and analyses national NGO experiences of recruitment for surge by international NGOs. It identifies good practices, documents impact, and develops recommendations for taking the findings forward across the humanitarian sector.

This practice paper – Time for HR to step up – should be read in conjunction with the Time to move on study and elaborates the recommendations for the human resources (HR) community. It challenges HR practitioners to 'step up', i.e. to demonstrably raise their game in terms of identifying and implementing surge recruitment practices and surge approaches that support national capacity.

Two focus areas for HR

Two important aspects relating to surge recruitment (and the loss of national staff to international organisations) emerge clearly from the report, and HR practitioners should focus on these areas:

1. the timing – i.e. influencing the timing (and rate) of staff turnover
2. the ethics – i.e. eliminating unethical recruitment

This paper outlines the opportunities and practical ways in which HR practitioners in national NGOs, INGOs and UN agencies have to influence both the timing of staff turnover and the ethics of surge recruitment.

The Charter for Change is an initiative, led by both National and International NGOs, to practically implement changes to the way the Humanitarian System operates to enable more locally-led response. It has been signed by 29 INGOs and endorsed by more than 130 national organisations and networks. It commits signatories to change the ways they work with and relate to national organisations in 8 key aspects. www.charter4change.org



Direct Funding

Commit to pass 20% of humanitarian funding to National NGOs



Partnership

Reaffirm the principles of partnership



Transparency

Publish the amount or percentage of funding that is passed to NNGOs



Recruitment

Address and prevent the negative impact of recruiting NNGO staff during emergencies



Advocacy

Emphasise the importance of national actors to humanitarian donors



Equality

Address subcontracting and ensure equality in decision-making



Support

Provide robust organisational support and capacity building



Promotion

Promote the role of local actors to media and public

FIGURE 1:The eight commitments of the Charter4Change



1. The timing: Influencing the timing (and rate) of staff turnover

The research found that local and national NGOs are most likely to lose their staff to an INGO in the period 6-12 months after an emergency response is triggered. In reality a local/national NGO is 'vulnerable' from the outset although the research evidence suggests more staff leave in the period 6-12 months after an emergency response is triggered than in the first 6 months.

Understanding the reasons for staff turnover are vital if this problem is to be addressed effectively, and it is through a deeper understanding of staff turnover that we are able to identify ways of mitigating the likelihood, prevalence and impact.

Staff turnover is a reality for any organisation, and eliminating it entirely is neither possible nor desirable! The challenge for each organisation is to mitigate its impact, i.e. to ensure staff turnover is at a manageable and affordable level and that it does not adversely impact operations or impact and outcomes. For some organisations this means being realistic about how long staff can be retained, and seeking to retain staff for as long as possible. It can mean ensuring the exit / transition process is managed effectively to ensure handovers can be given, and that job cover can be identified and put in place. For others it means being transparent about the employment relationship and strengthening employee engagement and motivation.

The good news [about staff turnover] is that it is often possible to influence when staff leave, and to mitigate the impact of them leaving when they do. In both cases an understanding of the factors behind staff turnover - typically described by HR practitioners in terms of push and pull factors - will enable organisations to choose an appropriate response and approach.

While the areas in this section below are primarily for local and national NGOs to consider and address, INGOs and UN agencies can and should offer their support to their local and national NGO partners. This support could be in the form of sharing their considerable experience, allocating staff time to answer queries and give advice, and by making templates and guidance materials freely available. In addition, networks / umbrella organisations such as the CHS Alliance, ICVA, the Start Network, the NEAR Network (and others) also have a range of freely available resources and case studies for local and national NGOs to draw on.

Photo: Food assistance is unloaded from a truck for distribution to communities affected by Typhoon Haiyan in the Philippines

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Retention strategies

- **Simple job descriptions / role profiles** - local and national NGOs could ensure that staff and volunteers have clear job descriptions or role profiles and that they understand how their work contributes to the achievement of the organisation's vision and mission. A job description or role profiles outlines the job / role purpose and details specific objectives, goals, and activities, as well describing the values and behaviours required. Simple job description templates are available from chsalliance.org
- **Effective performance management** – local and national NGOs could strengthen their culture of feedback, communication and participation and ensure staff and volunteers regularly receive feedback on their work. Guidance on performance management systems including pro formas and templates are available from chsalliance.org
- **Robust compensation / remuneration systems** – local and national NGOs could review their pay scales and terms and conditions to ensure they are appropriately structured, transparent, and 'competitive' in their respective market. This would entail reviewing broader aspects of reward systems such as the leave available and medical insurance/provision. Support is available from chsalliance.org and ngolocalpay.net as well as other NGO networks.
- **Provide training courses and sponsorship of qualifications** - as a benefit to encourage staff retention.

Strengthening national surge capacity

- **Investing in country emergency teams** – local and national NGOs should be supported (by INGOs and donors) in strengthening their own surge capacity, for example through establishing their own surge rosters, identifying standby/emergency response teams, creating an emergency response contingency fund to cover scale up of operations. At the very least, established INGO partners could initially focus on strengthening the surge capacity of their local and national partners. Strengthened national surge capacity means that an organisation is more likely to be able to cover employment gaps, and more likely to be an effective implementing partner.

Strengthening organisational capacity

- **Prioritise management and leadership development** within local and national NGOs, making full use of freely available resources from organisations and platforms such as disasterready.org and the Humanitarian Leadership Academy (Kayaconnect.org / humanitarianleadershipacademy.org) as well as through the Start Network's Talent project and the Start Network's Shifting the Power project.
- **Investment in contingency planning** within local and national NGOs, including developing plans for backfilling roles and covering absences / redeployments.
- **Strengthen the capacity of the HR function** within local and national NGOs, so that they are better able to support humanitarian surge, learning and development and staff engagement. Where there is no HR function, then work with those in administrative / finance / support functions to ensure that HR responsibility is appropriately assigned and understood, and that key HR actions are implemented.
- **Career paths and professional development** – the advent of the Humanitarian Leadership Academy and their Kaya Connect platform, and initiatives such as Disaster Ready, present an opportunity for individuals to consider their own career development. Where organisations provide some support for career development (for example when linked with performance management) then this has been proven to increase engagement and support retention.
- **Staff care** – local and national NGOs should ensure there is adequate provision for the physical and psycho-social wellbeing of their staff and volunteers. Simple policies around allowing time off, reasonable working hours and conditions together with policies that guide practical emergency support/intervention are vital and also contribute to overall wellbeing, engagement and retention.
- **Establish INGO/national NGO HR platforms:** During disaster preparedness and planning stages or at the beginning of a response create HR networks between national and international organisations to harmonise salaries and benefits across the sector so that INGOs do not out price NGOs. These could take the form of an HR Cluster at the beginning of a surge response or the establishment of shared online platforms to aid communication.

2. The ethics: Eliminating unethical recruitment

One of the biggest concerns of local and national NGOs is what they consider to be 'unethical recruitment'. Examples of unethical practices cited include: deliberately soliciting national staff that participate in inter-agency co-ordination meetings to work for INGOs or UN agencies; headhunting; not honouring contract notice periods; not allowing reasonable transition periods.

To the extent that ethics may or may not be universally understood, this aspect of surge recruitment is 'fixable', that is to say recruiting organisations, in this case predominantly INGOs and UN agencies, have the possibility of choosing (and agreeing between them) their recruitment ethics, and thus preventing (to a large extent) unethical recruitment.

Realistically, it is unlikely that unethical recruitment can be completely eliminated given the decentralised nature of most recruitment, however, for values driven organisations working for social good, in this case UN agencies, INGOs and other national NGOs, it could be reduced substantially!

The Charter for Change suggests 'compensation for loss' as a way of addressing the impact of unethical recruitment, and this is considered in the section below. The challenge for HR practitioners is to find a way that is more sustainable, more aligned with the values of humanitarian action and capacity strengthening approaches, and one that does not inadvertently legitimise 'poaching' of staff from local or national NGOs. (This last point is important, since payment of a fee / compensation for loss will still be economically attractive for many INGOs and UN agencies if they can recruit a qualified candidate more quickly - it is common practice to engage a recruitment or executive search firm to identify candidates and/or support recruitment in exchange for a fee - and the result could be that local and national NGOs end up as recruitment agencies that merely feed UN agencies and INGOs with competent/qualified staff at attractive market rates).

One way in which HR practitioners in INGOs and UN agencies could practically address unethical (surge) recruitment would be to develop and agree a code for ethical surge recruitment, that could be applied during the period (for example in the 12 months) after an emergency response is triggered.

Towards a code for ethical surge recruitment

- The code should include elements relating to ensuring reasonable notice periods (for example one month's notice), transparent and open recruitment processes, not deliberately enticing individuals (headhunting), exploring secondments and other ways of resourcing roles.
- Safeguarding measures should be reiterated for example background checks, medical screening and references should be undertaken by recruiting organisations as necessary, and not by-passed / circumvented in order to speed up recruitment.
- The issue of 'compensation for loss' could be considered (as the Charter for Change suggests)
- A quality mark or kitemark could be awarded to INGOs that agree to abide by the Code, setting them apart and recognising their commitment
- The code could be integrated with principles of partnership or existing policies and an organisation's commitment and practice could be recognised by the award of a quality mark or kitemark type symbol

**The concept of a voluntary code for ethical (surge) recruitment is developed below*



As soon as the handover ceremony finished, Gemma and Rey Matinon began to install the curtains they had been making for their new house. Barangay Sicaba, Cadiz.

©Integral Alliance/Tom Price

What does this mean for the Charter4Change - Commitment 4?

The Charter for Change specifically addresses the issue of recruitment for surge in commitment 4.



4. Stop undermining local capacity

We will identify and implement fair compensation for local organisations for the loss of skilled staff if and when we contract a local organisation's staff involved in humanitarian action within 6 months of the start of a humanitarian crisis or during a protracted crisis, for example along the lines of paying a recruitment fee of 10% of the first six months' salary

The research found that while there was some limited acknowledgement that a recruitment fee might help mitigate some of the impact, it is clear that a figure of 10% in no way adequately compensates for the impact of losing a key member of staff, and indeed the research findings suggest that it is the period 6-12 months after an emergency response is triggered when local and national NGOs are most likely to 'lose' staff. For it to be meaningful, the percentage would need to be higher, and also applicable in the first 9-12 months after an emergency response is triggered. The 'compensation for loss' approach would also need to be implemented in conjunction with retention strategies, the strengthening of national surge capacity and the strengthening of organisational capacity. Even better would be for INGOs to focus on eliminating what is perceived as unethical recruitment.

For unethical recruitment to be eliminated, we need to identify (as the research does) what exactly the unethical practices are. And then, steps can be taken to raise awareness, and encourage those recruiting unethically to move away from those practices.

Sierra Leone, Kambia District. CAFOD partner Caritas Makeni operated a safe and dignified burial programme during the Ebola response
©CAFOD/Louise Norton



A code for ethical (surge) recruitment

As above, INGOs and UN agencies should consider a voluntary code for ethical (surge) recruitment, which might include elements relating to the following:

- minimum notice periods, and honouring notice periods
- transitional support arrangements
- exploring other contractual arrangements such as short term secondments in either direction
- working more closely in partnership
- avoiding direct approaches such as soliciting during coordination meetings and headhunting / enticing individuals with bespoke packages
- making job advertisements public / openly available
- ensuring safeguarding policies are adhered to, for example background checks, medical screening and reference checking
- offering unsuccessful job applicants the opportunity to be put forward for roles in local and national NGOs with suitable vacancies

Organisations that commit to such a code (whether a stand alone code or where the principles are integrated with existing practice) could be recognised by the award of a quality mark or kitemark type symbol given by a reputable institution or accreditation body.

Financial compensation?

In terms of the Charter for Change, it was recognised that some financial compensation in the event of a local or national staff member being recruited might go some way towards enabling an organisation being able to recruit a replacement or enact temporary cover. However, for this to be meaningful, the figure could be more commensurate with that of a recruitment agency fee (typically 15-25% of the first year's salary being offered). In line with the research findings, this fee would be levied should a local or national NGO staff member be hired by an INGO or UN agency within the period up to 6 months after an emergency be extended to 9 or 12 months after an emergency response is triggered. Financial compensation relies on there being appropriate provision within budgets and for this to happen staffing budgets may require revision and donors approval may be needed. However, staffing budgets typically already allow for minimum recruitment costs, with any additional costs (e.g. recruitment fees) being covered by unused staffing budget, for example where posts have been funded but vacant for a period of time.

Aftermath of Typhoon Haiyan, Philippines
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Next steps

This paper contains a number of practical recommendations for HR practitioners in local and national NGOs, INGOs and UN agencies to consider.

In terms of next steps for INGOs and UN agencies that have not signed up to the Charter for Change, careful consideration should be given to how they can:

- support local and national partners in developing retention strategies,
- support the strengthening of national surge capacity and organisational capacity,
- eliminate unethical surge recruitment

In terms of the next steps for Charter for Change and its signatories, there is scope to:

- strengthen the support given to local and national partners in terms of developing retention strategies,
- support the development of national surge capacity and organisational capacity,
- clarify commitment 4 (in terms of the 'compensation for loss' percentage) and supplement it by pursuing the concept of a separate, voluntary code for ethical recruitment.

Action planning

In the short term, that is in early 2017, key HR stakeholders from INGOs as well as local and national NGOs are encouraged to meet and review the recommendations in this paper and those in the Time to move on study, and to develop an action plan which should include:

- A stakeholder map identifying key stakeholders and their role in implementing agreed recommendations, for example donors, UN agencies, the Charter for Change and relevant networks such as the CHS Alliance. Stakeholders will be at the global, regional and national level
- A communications plan for various stakeholders with key advocacy messages and a timeline for implementation that includes key sector events that are upcoming

With its past work on surge capacity and humanitarian HR issues, the CHS Alliance is well placed to assume a leading role with regard to next steps and action planning. It could convene the meeting of key stakeholders, and facilitate discussions, particularly with regard to the development of a code for ethical surge recruitment and any associated accreditation or recognition overseeing the implementation of agreed actions.

The implementation of agreed HR actions should begin as soon as possible, with a realistic start date being mid-2017.

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This policy-to-practice paper was designed by **Anthony Neal**

Cover photo: In the aftermath of the floods in Uttarakhand state, northern India, in 2013, Christian Aid's local partner CASA helped distribute food to children in the Government Inter College camp in Uttarkashi. Several NGOs provided meals and medicines to the camp's residents. CASA supported local organisations to provide immediate relief, such as food, water, blankets and facilitating essential medical care

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