

# CAPACITY SHARING IN HUMANITARIAN CONTEXTS

Scoping paper developed by the IASC Localisation Task Force

## Scope and purpose of this paper

This scoping paper aims to provide some conceptual clarity on the topic of capacity sharing and encourage further development of the approach as a new way of working. The paper (a) provides a working definition of the scope and parameters of capacity sharing, (b) defines capacity sharing in relation to other forms of capacity activities, in particular strengthening and building, and (c) illustrates capacity sharing as a tool for advancing more equitable power relationships between local and international actors.

The drafting process for this paper involved a review of existing literature on capacity sharing, strengthening<sup>1</sup> and building, as well as consultations with different humanitarian actors, including local non-governmental organisations (NGOs)<sup>2</sup>. Whilst this paper focuses on capacity sharing between local and national actors (L/NAs) and international actors in humanitarian situations, the authors acknowledge the need to also explore capacity sharing in development and peacebuilding contexts, as well as capacity sharing between L/NAs, to deepen our understanding of the barriers and enabling factors of the approach. It is envisaged that relevant bodies within the IASC and beyond will continue with the work of clarifying the capacity sharing arrangements in a more comprehensive manner.

## What is capacity sharing?

As capacity sharing<sup>3</sup> is a relatively new term in the humanitarian sphere, there is currently no globally recognised definition for the term. Drawing on both the available literature and conversations with a range of stakeholders, the authors propose the following working definition for capacity sharing: *the approach of recognising, respecting, and sharing existing knowledge, skills, and resources within and between diverse actors with the central aim of improving the lives of affected populations*. Building on the concept of complementarity – described by Barbelet as “an outcome where all capacities at all levels – local, national, regional, international – are harnessed and combined in a way that supports the best humanitarian outcomes for affected populations”<sup>4</sup> - the concept is grounded in the assumption that capacity in all its forms exists everywhere, if not evenly, and that capacity sharing provides the vehicle to connect and draw on the resources, skills and expertise available across different actors that are needed to deliver positive outcomes for communities in crisis.

Unlike capacity building, and to a lesser extent, capacity strengthening, which largely focus on the one-directional transfer of technical capabilities (see following sections), capacity sharing is “multi-directional as opposed to linear in nature”<sup>5</sup> and requires international actors to look critically at their own skills, knowledge and expertise and how these relate to the skills, knowledge and expertise of L/NAs to deliver humanitarian services in a given context, with the ultimate aim of better serving the needs and priorities

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<sup>1</sup> Note that capacity strengthening is also sometimes referred to as capacity development – see for example United Nations Development Programme (2008) [Capacity Development Practice Note](#). However for the purposes of clarity, this paper uses capacity strengthening throughout.

<sup>2</sup> The definition of local actors, local NGOs, and international humanitarian actors used in this paper has been adapted from IASC definition which can be found [here](#).

<sup>3</sup> Capacity sharing may also be referred to as capacity exchange or [capacity bridging](#).

<sup>4</sup> Barbelet, V. (2018) [As local as possible, as international as necessary; understanding capacity and complementarity in humanitarian action](#). Humanitarian Policy Group

<sup>5</sup> Trócaire (2023) [Voice Out Loud: Reinforcing capacity sharing and mutual learning](#).

of affected populations. In taking a capacity sharing approach, all actors must critically assess their own capacities and identify their respective comparative advantages and weaknesses as part of a collective effort to improve how the response meets the needs of affected populations.

## Why is capacity sharing important?

### **Capacity sharing offers an opportunity to move to a more collaborative humanitarian system**

Capacity sharing is driven by the ultimate aim of providing high quality services through a framework of collaboration of all systems actors in which success is defined by how well the overall response is able to meet the needs of the population. By framing the success of a response as a collective responsibility, rather than measuring success against individual program, organisational or donor outcomes, it becomes evident that no one organisation is able to respond to all needs of the population and that complementary working is not only desirable but necessary. Taking a capacity sharing approach can therefore lead to the improvement of the skills, capacities and collaborative efforts needed between organisations to deliver better outcomes for the affected population.

### **Capacity sharing is a mechanism for more equal partnerships between local and international actors**

“Locally led humanitarian action”, also frequently used interchangeably with “local humanitarian leadership”, emphasises the importance of not only recognising, respecting, and valuing local humanitarian action<sup>6</sup>, but also acknowledging that humanitarian action must be owned and led from the ground up<sup>7</sup>. This humanitarian subsidiarity<sup>8</sup> is demonstrative of the desire for a clear shift away from a humanitarian system that is rooted in a colonial and patriarchal aid system, in which power and resources rest with entities in the Global North. This system has traditionally deemed local capacity to be inferior, or failed to acknowledge its existence at all<sup>9</sup>, as demonstrated by preference for knowledge generated from the Global North, as well as preferential funding for programming designed and implemented by international rather than local organisations<sup>10</sup>.

Peace Direct’s *Time to Decolonise Aid* report calls for discontinuing language and terminologies that are no longer considered appropriate, including the phrase *capacity building*, which “suggests that local communities and organisations lack skills”<sup>11</sup>. The report also examines the colonial linear relationships around capacity towards “modernity”, which involves “previously colonised aid recipients in the Global South [being] transformed into ‘objects of development’, perceived as lacking agency and in need of capacity building from the Global North”<sup>12</sup>. In response to these criticisms of capacity building, humanitarian actors have increasingly moved towards longer term capacity strengthening activities<sup>13</sup> which are driven by the self-identified needs of L/NAs within the parameters of internationally defined

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<sup>6</sup> See for example, De Geoffroy, V., Grunewald, F. and Ni Cheilleachair, R. (2017). [More than the money – localization in practice](#), 1–8 | Featherstone, A. and Antequisa, C. (2014) [Missed again: making space for humanitarian partnership in the Typhoon Haiyan response](#). ActionAid, CAFOD, Christian Aid, Oxfam, Tearfund | Barbelet, V. (2018) As local as possible, as international as necessary; understanding capacity and complementarity in humanitarian action. Humanitarian Policy Group.

<sup>7</sup> Gingerich, T.R., Moore, D.L. and Beriont, C. (2017) [Local Humanitarian Leadership and Religious Literacy: Engaging with Religion, Faith, and Faith Actors](#)

<sup>8</sup> The [European Union](#) defines subsidiarity as aiming “to ensure that decisions are taken at the closest possible level to the citizen and that constant checks are made to verify that action at the European Union (EU) level is justified in light of the possibilities available at the national, regional or local level.”

<sup>9</sup> Grand Bargain (2022). Towards Co-Ownership: The Role of Intermediaries in Supporting Locally Led Humanitarian Action.

<sup>10</sup> Humanitarian Horizons (2022) Power, People and Local Leadership. [Achieving a More Equitable and Impactful Humanitarian Sector: Platform Paper](#).

<sup>11</sup> Peace Direct (2021). [Time to decolonize aid: Insights and lessons from global consultations](#).

<sup>12</sup> *ibid*

<sup>13</sup> See for example, USAID (n.d.) [Local Capacity Strengthening Policy](#).

global standards. Capacity strengthening is regarded as critical to promoting the long-term sustainability of local actors and tends to have a broader focus on institutional development, alongside specific technical or project-based skills<sup>14</sup>.

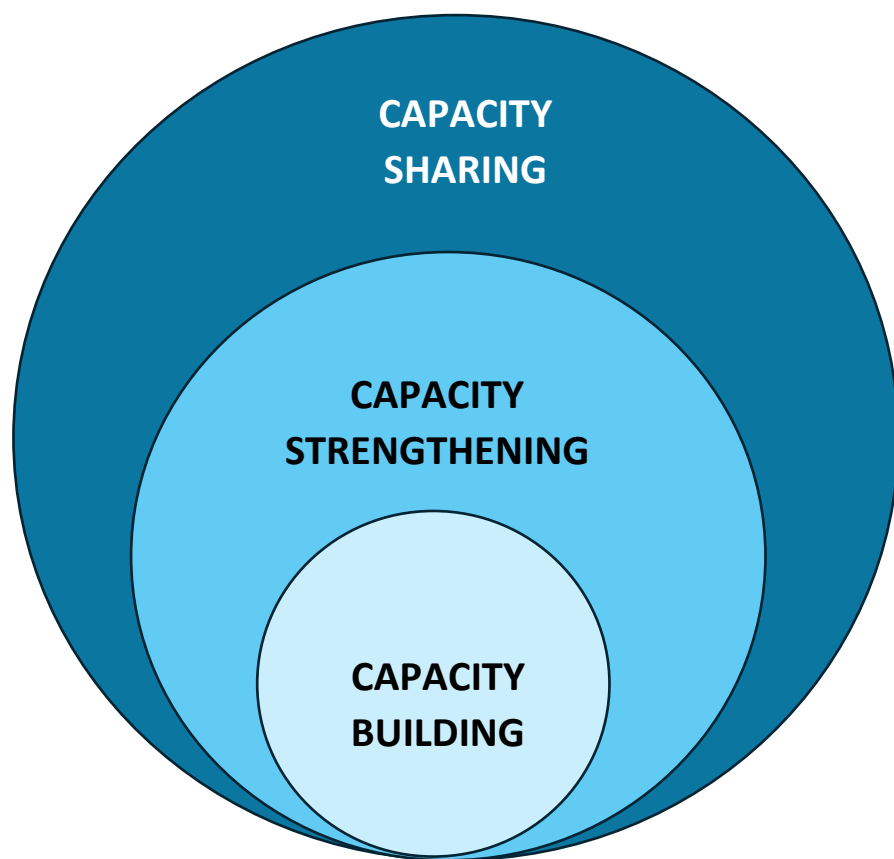
Whilst both capacity building and strengthening activities are valuable tools for building a more equitable and effective response<sup>15</sup>, they ultimately continue to replicate unequal power dynamics in which international actors are framed as having capacity and L/NAs are framed as lacking capacity. In contrast, capacity sharing reframes the concept of capacity in much broader terms, and recognises the unique skills, knowledge and experience that L/NAs possess. In doing so, it offers an opportunity for humanitarian programming and decision-making to be co-produced through equal partnership with local partners, thereby tackling entrenched power imbalances.

The infographic on the following page summarises each type of capacity transfer, the key differences between them, and how capacity sharing can build on both capacity strengthening and building activities. Whilst the concepts explained here have been simplified for clarity's sake, in reality the different forms of capacity transfer can be overlapping and blurred. Additionally, the concept of capacity sharing is not intended to replace other types of capacity support, but instead offers a model for a more collective and inclusive approach to delivering humanitarian assistance – in which capacity building and strengthening will still play a role. Finally, it is worth noting that although this paper aims to provide some conceptual clarity, there are no universally agreed definitions for either capacity building, strengthening or sharing, and each humanitarian organisation may have their own interpretation and application of these processes.





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<sup>14</sup> IASC (2021) [Guidance Strengthening Participation, Representation and Leadership of Local and National Actors in IASC Humanitarian Coordination Mechanisms](#). ISAC Results Group 1 on Operational Response.





<sup>15</sup> See for example Poole, L. (2014) [Funding at the sharp end: investing in national NGO response capacity](#). London. CAFOD.  
| Ramalingam, B., Gray, B. and Cerruti, G. (2013) [Missed opportunities: the case for strengthening national and local partnership-based humanitarian responses](#). Christian Aid.







## CAPACITY SHARING

 Two-way	 Ongoing process	 Way of working	 Driven by specific contextual needs
<p><b>What is it:</b> An approach characterised by reciprocal learning and exchange between international and L/NAs based on their respective skills, knowledge, strengths, and expertise. Capacity sharing is an ongoing process which aims to fundamentally rebalance power dynamics by recognising the different but complementary roles that international and L/NA can play in delivering positive humanitarian outcomes for affected communities. It involves the mutual identification of institutional capacities of both L/NAs and international actors, recognising what already exists and offering the knowledge, skills and experience that can complement these. Joint governance, co-production and complementarity are central components of capacity sharing, which can also involve investing in the long-term institutional sustainability of L/NAs, and, where applicable, international actors.</p> <p><b>When to use it:</b> Capacity sharing is a way of working that is mainstreamed throughout the humanitarian programme cycle as well as in other forums such as advocacy, research and activism.</p>			

## CAPACITY STRENGTHENING

 One-way	 Ongoing process	 Technical + institutional skills transfer	 Driven by international definition
<p><b>What is it:</b> The long-term investment in the skills, knowledge, attitudes and systems of individuals, institutions, or networks. Capacity strengthening, sometimes referred to as capacity development, focuses on both the transfer of technical and institutional development skills from international to L/NAs. Whilst it aims to respond to capacity gaps identified by L/NAs, these gaps are based on internationally developed capacity assessments and not necessarily the self-identified needs of L/NAs. Additionally, although capacity strengthening is more contextually relevant and locally led than capacity building, it ultimately still focuses on supporting L/NAs to better integrate into the existing humanitarian system, rather than seeking ways to reimagine the roles of intermediary agencies and to re-structure the system so that it better reflects and engages with local capacities and realities.</p> <p><b>When to use it:</b> In response to capacity gaps identified by L/NAs.</p>			

## CAPACITY BUILDING

 One-way	 Project based	 Technical skills transfer	 Driven by international definition
<p><b>What is it:</b> The one-way transfer of knowledge, skills and expertise, most commonly from international actors to L/NAs. Capacity building tends to focus on improving the technical capabilities of individuals and teams, rather than wider organisational development, and is generally delivered through time-bound, short-term workshops and training courses. Capacity gaps are generally identified by international actors, who then offer training to L/NAs.</p> <p><b>When to use it:</b> In specific circumstances in which local/national actors are required to possess certain capabilities for the delivery of a project.</p>			

## Principles for capacity sharing

- **Capacity exists everywhere and can come in many forms:** Whether visible or invisible, capacity exists within individuals, communities, CSOs, the public and private sector at the local, national, and international level, in many different forms everywhere. It can also include capacity in all forms, including technical, financial, institutional, human, systemic, or external environmental factors.
- **Capacity sharing must place affected populations at the center:** Humanitarian responders must be guided by the needs of affected populations, asking “what are the specific skills, knowledge and experience needed to meet the needs of people in crisis?” and using this to determine which capacities are required.
- **Capacity sharing should acknowledge, value, complement, and build upon the existing capacity in a given context:** This requires a thorough understanding of the existing capacities of both international actors and L/NAs in relation to their collective ability to deliver the best possible outcomes for affected populations. Based on this, international and L/NAs can jointly identify the limitations and relationships between their existing capacities, and the opportunities for sharing and growth.
- **Capacity sharing enables subsidiarity:** In creating space for locally led action, capacity sharing should serve the resource needs of affected populations as the most proximate to, and impacted by, crises.
- **Capacity sharing requires an enabling environment:** Capacity sharing occurs most effectively and has most impact when it is neither forced or imposed, and there are no undue restrictions on the agency and autonomy of those actors engaging with the approach. Additionally, capacity sharing also requires a culture of mutual respect, self-reflection, and humility, both at an institutional and a system-wide level.
- **Capacity sharing is inclusive:** Capacity sharing is not an instrument of power. It should not serve to hold influence, exclude or marginalise but rather promote safe inclusion and participation in line with the principle of “Do No Harm”.
- **Capacity sharing is non-transactional:** The sharing of capacity is not a process driven by gain or reward by those who hold it. It represents an unhindered and unconditional flow of diverse resources in response to the specific needs of the affected population.
- **Capacity sharing is non-hierarchical:** Capacity sharing must promote equal power relationships and should therefore be based on joint governance and co-production. Capacity sharing is continuous and multi-directional, and its value is determined by how it collectively best contributes to improving the lives of populations in crisis.

## What does capacity sharing look like in practice?

Given that capacity sharing represents a new way of working, its adoption has not yet been widespread across the humanitarian system<sup>16</sup>. The following case studies illustrate how capacity sharing can be put into practice.

### CASE STUDY: A hybrid partnership model in West Africa

**What is it:** A network of local medical NGOs in West Africa led by Senegal-based INGO ALIMA

**How was capacity shared:** ALIMA partners with local NGOs in each country they operate in. Their local partners have the freedom to design and adapt programming to fit the local context, using grant money channeled

<sup>16</sup> Intrac (2022) [The Power of Connection](#): A PAX joint learning pilot with partners. Praxis Series Paper No. 14.

through ALIMA. In parallel, ALIMA staff are seconded with the local partner to provide sustained support and training in project management and organisational development. For example, in Burkina Faso ALIMA is providing support to local partner Keoogo to realise their 5-year strategic plan. This support was specifically requested by Keoogo based on a capacity need that they had identified internally. Additionally, ALIMA has a reserved number of seats for local partners on their board of directors.

Local NGOs provide expertise to strengthen on-the-ground programming, and input into ALIMA's governance via board of directors



International partner provides access to funding and ongoing capacity support to strengthen local organisational sustainability

**More information:** [ALIMA "Stronger Together" web series](#)

### **CASE STUDY: Co-design of a locally led Early Warning System in Guatemala**

**What is it:** A partnership between INGO Trócaire and several local partners to co-design and implement a flooding early warning system (EWS). Within this Trócaire took the role of a convenor, using their position as an international actor to bring together local partners who then took the lead on developing the project.

**How was capacity shared:** Following the identification of the need for an EWS by local community coordinators, Trócaire worked with the Guatemalan Galileo University and local NGO Pastoral Social de San Marcos on an extensive co-design process based on sharing capacity and learning involving communities, municipalities, academics and local authorities. The resulting EWS is locally owned and implemented, and the accompanying reference manual has been adopted by the National Coordinator for Disaster Risk Reduction.

Community identifies the need for EWS. Then a wide range of local actors input into the design of a contextually relevant system



International partner facilitates knowledge exchange, creates and convenes space for linkages and learning to be captured across multiple levels

**More information:** [Voice Out Loud: Reinforcing capacity sharing and mutual learning](#)

### **CASE STUDY: Co-creation of multi-year, regional initiatives to advance local humanitarian leadership**

**What is it:** A partnership between INGO Catholic Relief Services and over 85 local institutions in Asia, Latin America, the Caribbean, West Africa and Central Africa to co-design and implement regional initiatives to advance the leadership of local institutions in emergency response.

**How was capacity shared:** CRS was approached by local partners for support in advancing their emergency response capabilities, which led to the co-design of the EMPOWER Project Initiative. The initiative focused on enhancing local actors' ability to access direct humanitarian funding, improve overall management of humanitarian responses, and increase their participation in humanitarian coordination mechanisms. The approach is guided by priorities identified within the local institutions and through capacity sharing between these institutions and CRS. CRS provides tailored technical assistance based on local institutions' assistance requests through short-term assignments, embedding staff with local institutions, and long-term accompaniment to promote sustainable impacts. The initiative has also created formal and informal networks between participating local institutions which are providing technical support and accompaniment to each other as well as to CRS during emergency preparedness and response operations as well as for institutional strengthening efforts.

Local humanitarian institutions identify the areas of need for advancing emergency response capabilities. Then local and international institutions co-design and implement a regional initiative to enhance these capabilities.



International partner provides access to funding, ongoing technical support to support local institutions' sustainability, and facilitates knowledge and capacity sharing across participating local institutions, creating space for long-term linkages and learning

**More information:** [EMPOWER Project Initiatives](#)

## How do we advance the capacity sharing agenda?

Recognising the need for more examples of capacity sharing in practice, the following offers opportunities for how international humanitarian actors can promote capacity sharing in line with the above-mentioned principles. It should be noted that this list is meant to inspire discussion about best practices that can be established and that capacity sharing approaches should always be adapted to the specific context.

1. Push for a broader, globally recognised definition of 'capacity' that acknowledges the contextual and operational strengths of L/NAs.
2. With #1 in mind, humanitarian actors should take a people-centered approach to programme design to identify what capacities are needed to deliver positive outcomes for affected communities and use this as the basis for developing partnerships. Learning can be drawn from current 'area based approach' efforts which tend to work with communities to define a response need that can include all actors working in a particular geographically-bounded area<sup>17</sup>.
3. Develop more comprehensive tools for (a) mapping both capacity needs and capacity availability in a given context – both for self-assessment and collective assessments of capacity, and (b) integrating self-reflection into capacity self-assessments conducted by all actors to encourage the identification of their own limitations and gaps and how these relate to the capacity requirements in a given context. Within this there is an opportunity to interrogate the role of intermediaries, exploring the possibility for a transition to convenor and facilitation roles, rather than direct implementers<sup>18</sup>.
4. Advocate for donors to incentivise capacity sharing as a new form of collective working, for example by earmarking funding for partnerships which are grounded in the principles of capacity sharing, introducing predictable and flexible multi-year investments for co-produced programming, and rewarding risk sharing practices between multiple stakeholders<sup>19</sup>.
5. Similarly, all actors should mitigate the issue of brain drain and high staff turnover from L/NAs to international organisations. Without such measures, L/NAs will continue to be subject to capacity strengthening efforts despite the best intentions of a capacity sharing approach.
6. Alongside programming and partnership, humanitarian actors should explore opportunities to apply the principles of capacity sharing in IASC coordination settings to strengthen joint decision-making and promoting local leadership.
7. Humanitarian actors, particularly international but in some contexts national, should significantly invest in local language skills and translation costs to reduce language barriers with

<sup>17</sup> See for example Catholic Relief Services. 2020. [Area-based approach in humanitarian response and recovery](#). ALNAP

<sup>18</sup> See for example: The Grand Bargain Intermediary Caucus (N.d.) [Towards Co-Ownership: The Role of Intermediaries in Supporting Locally-Led Humanitarian Action](#). | Peace Direct (2023) [The nine roles that intermediaries can play in international cooperation](#).

<sup>19</sup> See for example: IASC (2021) [Risk Sharing Framework: enhancing the impact of humanitarian action through improved risk sharing](#).

L/NAs and create an enabling environment for mutual exchange of knowledge, skills and experience.

8. Document learning from capacity sharing efforts to deepen understanding of both the enabling factors and the barriers to the approach. Findings and recommendations should be widely disseminated to raise awareness of what capacity sharing is and how it can be delivered.