Our Voice at Istanbul

Outcomes of a civil society conference
Acknowledgements

We would like to thank all of the conference participants for taking the time to attend the conference, and for engaging with the conversation with such sincere, honest and constructive contributions. We would like to thank Polly Bodgener, and her team of facilitators, Joshua Wathanga, Mary Nkengia Murimi, Pamela Reynell, and master of ceremony, Davis Adieno for their guidance, without which the discussions would not have been as rich or constructive. We would also like to thank Jo Saville and her team of rapporteurs, without whom this report would have not been possible. Last but not least, we would like to offer our deepest gratitude to Martin Barber for his continued support, insight and mentorship in the delivery of the conference and the writing of this report.

‘A new humanitarian eco-system will need to shake up the boundaries of who is defined as a humanitarian.’
Finding problems in a system that has been widely deemed no-longer fit for purpose is not a challenge for most. Determining what change needs to take place in order to address the growing humanitarian needs is considerably harder and has been the focus of the UN World Humanitarian Summit’s regional consultations. The next step, which is perhaps the most difficult and decisive part, is delivering this rhetoric in practice, in line with the change being called for.

As three organisations set up to facilitate and enable change in different ways, we decided to convene a conference that would help to explore and elaborate this conversation with the purpose of building concrete, practical action ahead of the World Humanitarian Summit. We wanted to do this to ensure that the conversations already taking place kept momentum towards practical solutions, and that voices calling for change continue to be heard.

A new humanitarian eco-system will need to shake up the boundaries of who is defined as a humanitarian. It will need to recognise and mobilise a far greater diversity and polarity of players within its system. It will need to be able and willing to listen, learn and adapt in a far more agile, honest and practical way if communities are to be trusted to take up the lead role in each response, as is being called for. We heard from participants about the importance of sustained investment in people and organisations, particularly at the local and national level, in order to maintain capacity beyond a particular crisis. It was clear from the participants that there is a role for local, national, regional and international relief agencies, but their roles should be determined by need, on a crisis by crisis basis.

Most of all, we will need to continually remind ourselves that our ultimate objective is a system that is better able to support the preparation and response to crises, so that affected people are served in a more timely, effective and accountable way. To say this is not to deny that change has not already started to take hold, with transformational initiatives and technological solutions already improving humanitarian action. However, to save more lives, to assist more vulnerable people, and stay true to their voices trusted to us, we will need to remain human in a humanitarian system that sometimes discusses everything but people.

The voices that came out of the conference were powerful. Voices, many new to the wider conversation, shone through in their effort to draw attention to what really mattered, without the jargon or tainted critique which so often befalls a multi-faceted group with a task as large as this.

Collectively, an exciting message did emerge. It was strong, articulate and clear: put down the egos, share out the knowledge, and place people at the centre. This report is a record of these voices, with their diversity, difference and commonality; it endeavours to share the fruitful discussions that took place, without altering the discourse, nor the challenge or questions, which are a true and honest reflection of a conversation that is only just beginning.

"Collectively, an exciting message did emerge. It was strong, articulate and clear: put down the egos, share out the knowledge, and place people at the centre."
In February 2016, the Humanitarian Leadership Academy, Kenya Red Cross Society and Start Network co-hosted a two-day conference aimed at bringing together civil society to examine practical and creative solutions for humanitarian effectiveness, in the effort to build a roadmap of opportunity towards and beyond the World Humanitarian Summit.

Over the last two years, the humanitarian community has heard from the UN World Humanitarian Summit’s (WHS) regional consultations how national and local organisations need to be at the forefront of the responses. While there is enough evidence to demonstrate that we need to recognise and prioritise national and local organisations, there was still a need to construct how to concretely put this into action, using our collective voice.

The conference was convened to set up a roadmap of clear commitments, from the numerous stakeholders participating, in order to practically advance the collective civil society voice ahead of the summit in May 2016.

The conference brought together over 60 community-based organisations, national NGOs, international NGOs, governments, donors, civil society activists, academia and membership networks.

Participants discussed the challenges to achieve localisation, explored what would success look like in 3 to 5 years’ time, and together came up with possible actions and creative solutions to the challenges posed. The participant’s contributions, documented throughout this report, are rooted in their experiences, successes and less successful stories of working in and with the humanitarian sector.

From the conference, twelve recommendations were collated, and 72 practical actions were conceived (see chapter 3 for full list). The following list has been drawn up from these recommendations and actions to provide possible commitments civil society can support and implement as part of the World Humanitarian Summit process and beyond.
Proposed Commitments

Theme 1
National and local structures
National governments should promote local ownership/leadership of preparedness, response and recovery, through reform of policies, budgets and coordination.

• We commit to encouraging national governments to reform and/or develop legislative frameworks (policies and budgets), regulatory bodies and coordination mechanisms, for preparedness, response and recovery, so that decision making can be devolved to the most appropriate level.
• We commit to encouraging national governments to ensure the local availability of a minimum acceptable capacity for preparedness and response by investing in local communities.
• We commit to promoting the voice of civil society and facilitating their engagement with governments and other humanitarian organisations.
• We commit to encouraging INGOs to adopt a supportive approach and consider disaster affected communities as leaders and participants rather than beneficiaries.
• We commit to collaborating with governments to reinforce and/or establish local and national early warning mechanisms, including forecasting capabilities, disaster risk reduction strategies and local action plans, thereby embedding a culture of anticipation.

Theme 2
Investing in local systems
Global organisations and NGOs should collaborate with local government to invest in demand-led, non-siloed, accessible and locally coordinated systems/networks, which ensure effective participation by local communities.

• We commit to reinforcing responsive local structures and prioritising local capacities to ensure effective and timely response.
• We applaud the emergence of objective-led networks that can accelerate learning on what is and is not working.
• We commit to supporting local structures, which incorporate local knowledge, to collect and analyse relevant data for contingency planning, preparedness and response.

Theme 3
Technology
All stakeholders should embrace the use of technology: to promote improved transparency and accountability to affected populations, to streamline the delivery of assistance, and to enhance information sharing.

• We commit to working with others to establish multi-stakeholder portals/platforms at the regional level to enable free access to relevant information, management tools and exchange of community knowledge for all humanitarian stakeholders, including in local languages.
• We commit to fostering collaboration between communities, the private sector, academia, and other stakeholders to enable communities to get access to relevant, existing and innovative technology solutions (for example, to facilitate matching supply and demand).
• We commit to using technology to promote and/or strengthen monitoring, evaluation, accountability and learning activities, to enable affected populations to rapidly assess and communicate the impact of interventions (feedback mechanisms).

Theme 4
Core standards
All stakeholders should promote the use of core standards for collective action in support of locally led, demand driven, capacity strengthening initiatives.

• We recognise the value of sustainable mentoring and peer-to-peer support in humanitarian action and commit to promoting and facilitating such programmes at all levels.
• We commit to promoting the adoption of common information management and reporting standards, in order to improve efficiency and reduce costly administrative burdens.
• We encourage national academic institutions to research, assess and recognise experience of individuals and organisations in humanitarian action.
• We commit to applying relevant core standards (such as the Core Humanitarian Standards and Sphere) and ensure they are always relevant.
• We commit to working with others to identify core humanitarian skills, including sector specific skills, and to promote related local training programmes, accreditation and certification, and databases of local surge capacity.

Theme 5
Financing
All stakeholders should collaborate to adopt funding mechanisms to support local leadership, streamline delivery and enhance anticipation and preparedness.

• We applaud efforts to establish mechanisms for flexible, timely funding to enable early interventions and promote local decision-making (for example pooled funds or local civil society forums).
• We commit to collaborating with all relevant stakeholders to review funding mechanisms to ensure that all partners contribute added value to a future, demand driven financing architecture.
• We recognise the importance of sustainable local capacity and commit to encouraging donor organisations to provide funding for local actors, including reasonable administration overheads.
• We commit to working with others to assess the potential for local risk financing mechanisms in fragile contexts.

"If you want to go fast, go alone. If you want to go far, go together."

We were reminded throughout the conference of this poignant African proverb. It highlighted the importance of coming together and the true power of collaboration. For a group as large and diverse as civil society, the value of coming together in ways, such as the sub-set at this conference, will be paramount to the success of our collective voice.

This report was written to document the process of convening such a conference. Without attributing words to any one person, it aims to show both the diversity of views present, as well as capture the development of commonality in the voices that arose throughout the conference.
The Humanitarian Leadership Academy, Kenya Red Cross Society and Start Network co-hosted a two-day conference in Nairobi, Kenya in February 2016. The conference was convened in order to bring together civil society to discuss and build a practical roadmap of opportunities ahead of the World Humanitarian Summit.

The conference convened 94 participants from 18 countries, representing 63 entities, including: community-based organisations, national NGOs, international NGOs, governments, regional bodies, donors, civil society activists, academia and membership networks (see appendix 1 for full list of organisations).

It sought to provide a safe, positive environment for civil society to discuss its position on some of the key issues relating to the World Humanitarian Summit and the wider humanitarian effectiveness agenda. Discussions were focused around two themes so as to establish areas of agreement on recommended solutions and concrete, practical actions:

- Localisation of humanitarian action in practice
- Sharing and strengthening of capabilities and skills

Lessons learnt from experience were also gathered and documented to serve as evidence of how improvements could be made.

Participants were asked to take the opportunity to ‘examine afresh the work that has been done, and what has been taken for granted on how we serve communities and stakeholders’. They were asked to think of ways that ‘civil society can really shape some of the salient asks at the World Humanitarian Summit’. We hoped for ‘honest and frank discussions’, drawn out of the ‘knowledge and experience in the room’, with the purpose of moving us forward.

Participants worked predominately in small workshop groups to provide concrete focus to the examination of opportunities for change, and to discuss practical actions and creative solutions to the current challenges. Each group convened around a number of themed questions, and were asked to prioritise and present their ideas at the plenary sessions for wider discussion.

Keen to not start from scratch on the discussion around humanitarian effectiveness, participants were asked first to start by documenting existing, relevant initiatives on a timeline to date, and beyond. A selection of existing networks and grassroots initiatives, each focused on transformational change in some way, were also asked to present information on existing enterprises within the sector. The participants, representing a diverse subsection of civil society, were each asked to listen and contribute to a discussion that needs each and every one at the table if we are to make the collective change that is being called for.

This report presents the process by which the participants reached the recommendations and practical solutions. It does not attribute statements to any one voice, nor does it specifically refer to the numerous reports that have gone before it but nonetheless serve as a solid basis for many of the discussions. It aims to capture the voices of the conference participants, often through quotes from notes taken throughout the conference, and record this recent example of representatives from civil society coming together to collectively explore real opportunities for change.
The conference started by asking the participants to build a shared understanding of what the future could look like, and what the current obstacles to achieving that are. It was very important that the conversations built on what has gone before them and not to start at the beginning of a discussion that has been consolidated over the last three years of consultations. To build together the picture of ambition, we started by posing three questions to each group of participants:

- What does change look like in five years?
- What are the challenges with the current state in relation to change?
- What are the opportunities for change?

These questions marked the basis of all future discussions and presentations. The following chapter documents the vision, challenge and opportunities as explored by participants, under the salient themes that arose out of the workshop discussions.

Building the ambition

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Each voice, of course, cannot each be displayed in this report, but the themes that emerged, and that continued to emerge throughout the conference have been where possible. It must also be recognised that this is neither the start nor the end of the conversation: the voices of civil society are gathering and solidifying in a sincere effort to broker opportunities for change at the World Humanitarian Summit and beyond.

What does change look like in five years?

This question was the first posed. It sought to encourage answers that were ambitious but achievable within a deadline of just half a decade. Such a deadline acknowledged that change requires time, but that when it comes to saving lives, the humanitarian sector has never had time on its side. The voices of participants paint a clear vision for change:

Responses will be led locally

In the next five years, ‘national governments and the international community will together mobilise financial and human resources to invest in local capacities to respond to the needs of the populations affected by the humanitarian crisis.

‘Strong national governments will realise their responsibilities to their citizens by providing security, protection and basic needs in emergencies’. They will be seen as the ‘duty bearers of on-going sustainable change’. They will be at the forefront of ensuring that national organisations are organising themselves in response, and where international organisations are involved, they ensure that these bodies are working within the bracket of national coordination’.

‘Communities will have the mechanisms in place to hold their national governments to account’, as well as ‘influence the learning that emerges from the response’. Sincere ‘partnerships between government and civil society will exist’, and ‘national capacities will be prioritised throughout responses’.

In five years, ‘70% of financing resources will be available at the community level, distributed through coordination structures that will have more local actors than not’; local leadership will be the norm.

Future responses are distributed and decentralised. They are ‘not solely influenced from north–south, but instead south–south, south–north and north–north’.

The approach will be holistic

There will be a paradigm shift putting community, the voice of people, at the centre of each response. This could be done by developing programmes around the language, culture and standards of the community’.

Chapter 1

“Be creative, go a little crazy and be wild with your ideas, I hope that something exciting will come out of it.”

Extract from Dr Jemilah Mahmood’s introductory remarks. Under Secretary General for Partnerships, IFRC, and Chair of the Humanitarian Leadership Academy’s Board
The role of humanitarian organisations will have to change. The international role will be one of ‘accompaniment and facilitation’. Local humanitarian responders will be ‘empowered’, ‘recognised’ and ‘prioritised’. Their actions and responses will be ‘sustainable through financially stable initiatives, which are collaboratively supported together with international humanitarian responders’.

What are the challenges with the current state in relation to the change? The obstacles that the humanitarian sector faces when it comes to transformational change are numerous and multi-layered. It was important for conference participants to acknowledge and define the challenges that they face, in order to set up the conversation on the opportunities to overcome such challenges.

Resources, roles, decision making, terms and conditions
‘International NGOs benefit from partnership agreements with donor governments, providing them with greater assurance on overheads.’ Smaller NGOs do not currently receive similar financing, which ‘hampers their ability to invest in or grow their capabilities’, and ensure their ‘compliance with donor regulations’. In addition, ‘donor funding restrictions are seen as a challenge for local organisations’.

With ‘less than 0.2% of all humanitarian aid going to local and national organisations’, there is a challenge around how resources can be channelled directly. Local responding agencies receive financing via larger responding bodies, which has in turn been channelled via even larger intergovernmental bodies. One participant asked if we could indeed ‘calculate the value for how it would be if the money were to go straight to local and national organisations’.

If localisation is to be successful, ‘the role of the current international community will have to change’. Change is sometimes hard to conceive, particularly where ‘self-interest is involved’. ‘The community always has been and always will be the first responder, with or without humanitarian assistance’. Recognising this and supporting this will require a ‘real shift in the way that responses are delivered’. It would however ‘require international bodies to take step back and re-evaluate their role’.

Humanitarian organisations are ‘burdened’, ‘misplaced’ in the system or ‘under recognised’. ‘People tend to come in at the tail end of process, and are rarely represented in decision making forums’. ‘Aid workers are put in an impossible situation to make up for the failures of governments, to prevent conflicts and manage human vulnerability’. ‘National governments do not always actively recognise their role as leaders in responses’.

Civil society is sometimes not civil enough’; they become the ‘opposition rather than partners’.

Relevance, duplication and wastage
There is a challenge of ‘whether or not humanitarian organisations will even be relevant in 2021’. ‘We are trapped by an excessively complicated aid system that we created’. If you ‘don’t have strong systems to start with, you cannot scale up’. ‘We need to lessen the burden’; ‘we must reduce the paperwork’.

Accountability in the humanitarian sector is still a challenge. Legitimacy is often questioned, hampering responses or jeopardising community acceptance. ‘International organisations usually respond reactively after the problem has exhibited while local organisations can recognise the problem early and prevent it’.

Some see ‘humanitarian action as being too politicised’. ‘Insecurity and terrorism is only increasing, which stifles the ability for responses to always make it to the front line, or to reach affected populations in need’. ‘Humanitarian responders are increasing targeted’, and their protection is often almost impossible to guarantee.

What are the opportunities for change?
Practical and creative solutions were the focus of the conference, in the effort to build a road map of opportunity towards and beyond the World Humanitarian Summit. Chapter 3 documents the conference
generated recommendations and experience based actions, while below explores the key themes, which continued to emerge around opportunities and voices for change.

Information & technology
The ‘absence of free, democratic access to information’ was seen as an essential area for improvement in order to open up the doors to community-based and national organisations. Better systems were seen as necessary to ‘aid the flow of information and communication both from top to bottom and bottom to top’.

Technology was seen as a ‘critical tool in changing the game’ for humanitarian response. Its ability to bypass or circumvent systems and borders, and break-down the accessibility barrier offers a real opportunity for responders to change the way response is driven and managed. Technology was also seen to ‘engage youth, and other society groups whose capacities are sometimes overlooked in emergencies’. Others outside the sector, such as the private sector or academics were seen as key agents in supporting such transformations.

Coordination & frameworks
Coordination mechanisms and decision making platforms came under discussion, as they ‘frequently are closed to local and national responding bodies, and/or led by the international architecture as opposed to building out from the existing mechanisms in-country’. ‘Active support to governments’ was seen as important in order to enable the localisation of preparedness, delivery and recovery of the humanitarian response. This would include the ‘reform of coordination mechanisms and policy and budget frameworks’.

Local networks & systems
The promotion and ‘investment in local networks’ was highlighted in discussions. The development of ‘demand-led, non-siloed, accessible systems’ were seen as ‘products of locally coordinated responses’. Transformed local systems would ‘enable communities to self-rely and lead responses’ without waiting on external humanitarian organisations to come and assist. ‘Changing the tools that are used in needs assessments’ were also seen as a necessary step in ‘ensuring that communities can use them, and channel the information which is gathered effectively into local mechanisms’.

Knowledge, evidence & accountability
The limited knowledge sharing was seen as a ‘barrier to peer to peer support and learning’. Knowledge differs from place to place, and yet experience can be translated and adapted to different contexts, enhancing responses.

Learning about what works, and what has not been successful is rarely documented and shared in a proactive way. ‘Failure was seen as something that needed to be spoken about more’, and actively captured. Building a strong evidence base would provide a more informed and structured approach to responses. The need for ‘systematic feedback mechanisms’ was regularly called for, pointing to the ‘automatic increase in accountability and transparency’ for communities.

Funding & financing
The financing of response was frequently recorded as the power denominator in most discussions. ‘Without a transformation in funding structures and finance mechanisms the decision making will remain in the north’, and exclude local organisations. There was a call to encourage the ‘proactive funding and investment of local bodies’, in ‘recognition that they were often better able to identify issues or problems before they arose, and go on to contextualise the intervention or solutions as part of the response’.

The direction of funds was also seen as an opportunity, with local resources being actively channelled locally. Kenya was cited as ‘an example of where public donations have been invested in regional responses’, with the advantage that this is seen as ‘non-political financing’.

Preparedness and disaster risk reduction
There is need to focus more on development, and its relationship with humanitarianism. It was noted that ‘where response requires an increase in resources, it is usually due to a lack of development’. The anticipation of crises was seen to be ‘most visible at local and national levels’, in addition to the recognition that ‘local responders are the first to respond, remain during and after the disaster’.

“I encourage everyone to drop our titles, take off our organisational hats and remind ourselves – what was the driving force that made you join the sector?”

Closing remarks from Saba Al Mubaslat
CEO, Humanitarian Leadership Academy
Chapter 2

Learning from the process

The following chapter looks at the process of convening such a conference, the learnings absorbed, and the important topics which were reflected upon. The overarching objective of the conference was to convene a space for voices to be heard and stories to be shared. This is not always easy – some of the most important questions raised are the toughest to hear. However, the process of bringing together such a diverse group of people highlighted significant topics of importance, including collaboration, listening, the change process and building consensus. Under these topics, this chapter looks at the way in which the conversation was convened, the questions that arose, and how the dialogue moved over the two days.

Convening a safe space for collaboration

The conference aimed to provide a positive and safe environment in which a subsection of civil society could discuss its position on some of the key issues related to the World Humanitarian Summit and the wider humanitarian effectiveness agenda. Bringing together multiple stakeholders in one room enabled participants to draw on the wealth of experience of one another, learn from them and share new perspectives. Without the sincerely, honest contributions, the conference would not have been able to build, or attempt to build, a collective voice.

We don’t know what we don’t know

Setting up discussions around themed questions was an opportunity to give people a real chance to share their perspectives and experiences. Each perspective is unique, and gives others the chance to contextualise their understanding or tune into the nuance of a debate with new knowledge. ‘We don’t know what we don’t know’, was highlighted several times. It served as a reminder that we rely on others to share their knowledge, enrich our understanding, and engage in dialogue so that as a whole sector ‘we can benefit from knowing more about that which we did not know’.

The danger of dilution

Within workshop groups, conference participants were frequently split out into smaller groups for discussions and debates. Following these discussions, the small groups would report back to their full group and discuss the prioritisation of ideas, before reporting back to the conference in plenary. Those reporting would share the recommendations, and the details behind these recommendations. Some participants expressed concern that through this process of prioritisation, some ideas would fall through; had a different group, made up of a different mix of people, been faced with the same recommendations, perhaps different priorities would have surfaced. There was also acknowledgement that there would be limitations to what could be discussed in adequate depth over the relatively short period of time of the conference, with just a subset of civil society.

Look, Listen

It was acknowledged that there was overall a positive focus on localisation during the conference, and that local and national consultations throughout the various previous consultations had been voicing the same or similar concerns. Some people voiced their ‘surprise at the level by which people were looking at localisation’, struck by the feeling of depth really starting to grow in the conversation. Others remarked at how the articulate voices, which were plentiful, gave way to those new to sharing. Some shared how much they had felt that their voice could be picked directly in terms of what has worked well or not worked well. Contexts could be compared. Direct collaboration is incredibly important when it comes organisations understanding the local context together.

Listening to the voices

The questions and concerns raised at the conference were often poignant and salient. Voices of experience, be it at the local, national, regional or international level, were steeped with genuine concern about the future of the humanitarian sector, its need to change, and the sometimes seemingly insurmountable gaps between the questions that arose out of oil sessions, presentations and workshops, alike. They provoked thought, and challenged perceptions.

• Is the problem that people can’t access the system?
• Can we challenge the system with accountability and transparency?
• Who are the consumers of our endless reports?
• Can anyone change a system?

Local to localisation

The word localisation was an interesting point of discussion, even before the conference began. Its meaning, its relationship, even its relevance was questioned. It is a hard word to get right, when it is so often used as a catch all for a shift or transfer of power. While debated, the word was ultimately recognised for being ‘just a word’. It was considered more important for everyone to ‘share a similar understanding of what localisation really means’.

Participants were each asked to write one word which described to them what localisation really meant to them (see figure 1). However, many fuller depictions of the term were also shared: ‘localisation in the 21st century means being local but massive’; ‘localisation needs to be defined locally and contextualised’; ‘localisation is when local actors know what needs to be done and then can do it. It is practical’. The ‘gap between the local community and the donor’ was referenced as too great, and allowed for ‘local concerns to be lost as they moved north and returned south’. There was a call for ‘local and international donors to speak and work together more, exploring and expanding the partnership versus donor relationship’. This would, it was said, ‘promote an ecosystem of diversity that moved away from the limiting definitions of local versus international’.

Figure 1: Word cloud which represents what localisation meant to participants in one word.
Projecting the voices

‘Getting a seat at the table’, whichever table, that governs decision making and power was another point raised. So often decisions are made without a reflection of the diversity of who will implement and receive these decisions. There were voices, not necessarily in opposition, also calling to ‘decentralise decision making power’. Some people talked of ‘change already taking place’, others questioned whether anything had changed at all. ‘Conversations and talks of change do not equate to change’. References were each made to power and funding, and how ‘they remain north based’.

Local voices were seen as becoming ‘more vocal’, and ‘more able to act’. There were questions around if ‘money from the south should not be better channelled to assist the south’. There were also calls for ‘increasing local to local networking’, to build connectivity and allow lessons to be shared.

Too often ‘communication is confused with information that has been extracted from communities’. Listening is a skill that front line responders come to learn, but the ‘systems aren’t in place to take what is heard back into organisations’ – too often it starts and stops there.

Replicating the old

In discussing the future, it was frequently noted that by default, the systems would use similar terminology. For example, in a discussion about reforming coordination mechanisms, the concept of ‘clusters’ was used. Objections were made to this terminology because ‘it represented a system repeating itself’. There was a wider reflection that ‘national NGOs are producing the same or similar patterns as those that have gone before them’.

Shout about failure

It was thought that we could really help to ‘accelerate learning if we could incentiuse members to admit what wasn’t working’. We need to admit ‘openly and publicly what doesn’t work’, ‘we shouldn’t be penalised for it’. A theme of ‘micro-revolutions’ started to emerge: this is very ‘localised change that requires the system to change above it’. More practically it could be done through ‘locally driven evidence gathering, or the documentation of success stories on a local level. It is an attitude change’, ‘change is a gradual process that will work in increments’.

Who are we?

This question rose up in many forms and guises, but centred around two frequently referenced personas: civil society and local.

There were those who asked: ‘who was civil society?’ – or expressed their weariness at ‘representing such a diverse and varied group’. For some ‘we represent the aid sector’, ‘we are part of the system’, and ‘not true civil society in its broader sense’. Others felt that ‘if we are not civil society, then who were we?’.

We were left with a poignant reminder that regardless ‘we should be civil enough to hold ourselves responsible – to carry the voices of those who had trusted us with them’. Who was local? – was also asked. If was felt by some that the term local was misused to describe simply those that don’t look like they are engaged in the local – was also asked. If was felt by some that the term local was misused to describe simply those that don’t look like they are engaged in the local. Others felt local was often equated with ‘people based in the Global South’. ‘We need to move away from definitions of local versus international, local is local no matter where it is’.

Misrepresentation

The perception of who is doing what was said by some to be misconstrued. ‘Agencies tend to have a high opinion of themselves, and communities don’t. Smaller organisations tend to have better relationships with communities; governments tend to do more than people think, and communities do more than they respond’. Ultimately ‘we fail to engage at the beginning’, which is an integral piece to getting the rest of the project cycle right.

The best responses, it was discussed, originate from the humanitarian community and build up towards the national level’. Enhancing what is on the ground enables the aid to go deeper.

Defining the change and who owns it

Can anyone change a system?

This question was just one of many posed that sought to unravel what change could look like. ‘Perhaps we have to go to the future and work out what kind of aid system we will need, and then come back and work out what we have to do now’. Others went further to suggest that ‘a system can’t change itself’, but that ‘change would have to happen from the ground up’. Reflectively suggested that ‘we were moving from a place where a centralised system had made sense to one where a localised system made sense’.

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Who is doing the capacity building?

Overlooking the terminology itself, capacity building, what it means and how it comes about came under critique. It triggered a debate around who is deciding what capacity is, and what capacity is needed; questions were asked about the ‘absence of communities in the defining of capacity’, and statements made about how ‘capacity is available everywhere’. The discussion around the meaning of the term was said to be ‘as if we almost had to expand peoples understanding of different contexts’.

Building consensus

Ultimately, the conference was focused at producing creative solutions to the questions and challenges that were posed in abundance. Chapter 3 lays out the outcomes of these discussions, the recommendations and the practical actions rooted in the experience of the participants working in or with the humanitarian aid sector.

The conference had set itself an objective to establish areas of agreement amongst attendees for potential concrete action and/or recommended solutions for inclusion at the World Humanitarian Summit and wider humanitarian effectiveness debate. Consensus from such a large and diverse group is a difficult outcome to achieve, but an important one when it comes to collective voice.

Through the process of prioritisation, participants in their groups were asked to vote for practical actions that were seen to be of greatest importance. They returned to these recommendations on the second day, to ensure that there was ‘no room for misinterpretation’. The final lists were of course refined versions of these practical actions, with the hope that they were more robust and better understood by the groups endorsing them and the groups reviewing them. While they were supported by many, not each recommendation was taken forward or reflected – thus bringing some to question if full consensus was being achieved.

However, a clear distinction was raised by the end of the conference – ‘are we here to sustain our brands or sustain our impact?’. It became clear that consensus would be hard to reach as long as we were trying to unite the mandate of organisations and the feelings of people under the same umbrella. The importance of building consensus was placed less at finding one voice for civil society at the conference, but instead to find the harmony in the collective voice. It was clear that each participant was in attendance because they wanted in some way to positively contribute to current discussions. Through collaboration, genuine listening, and owning the change that is being called for, consensus can be achieved.
Building collective ‘micro-revolutions’

The main output from the conference was to draw up a collection of concrete recommendations, and experienced based actions, conceived by the large variety of stakeholders present at the conference. Below are 12 of these recommendations, and a menu of 72 actions, which were documented throughout the conference. The executive summary lays out a summarised version of this list, with actions translated into commitments relevant to the UN Secretary General’s Agenda for Humanity and Grand Bargain that civil society are invited to engage with pre, during and post the World Humanitarian Summit.

It was acknowledged that these actions alone do not address all the issues in relation to humanitarian action, nor do they intend to. They are instead to be seen as a menu of opportunities from which, with collective action, we can build an improved humanitarian response for humanity.

Recommendation 1: Use technology to address the barriers to localisation and increase accountability and transparency to affected populations.

Action: Through multi stakeholder platforms enable access to information and management tools for all humanitarian stakeholders, including affected communities.

Action: Democratise access to learning and promote exchange of community knowledge.

Action: Use technology to match up supply and demand, and promote the effective delivery of humanitarian aid by local actors.

Action: Create technology based learning spaces to facilitate community engagement.

Action: Foster innovation at the local community level to enable its direct application.

Action: Develop open source/last mile solutions that are cognisant of local context and knowledge.

Action: Build partnerships of local actors with private sector, academia and information and communication technology hubs, in order to borrow and build appropriate technological solutions from what already exists.

Chapter 3

Recommendation 2: Support governments to enable localisation of preparedness, delivery and recovery of the humanitarian response in an effective and timely manner, through reform of coordination and development of policy and budget frameworks.

Action: Invest in local actors to reform and/or develop legislative frameworks (policies and budgets) and regulatory bodies.

Action: Document and share best practice on legislative frameworks and regulatory bodies, in order to influence their reform and development.

Action: Ensure community access to information by utilising existing local communication systems, and safeguard data privacy and security of affected population.

Action: Two-way dissemination of free, available and local relevant information in a format that is easy to understand and can inform decision making.

Action: Ensure that there is civil society voice representation in every country and regional forum to engage with government and other humanitarian actors.

Action: Develop structures and processes to ensure that local capacities are available and accessible.
Recommendation 3: Promote and invest in local networks that enable the development of demand-led, non-siloed, accessible and locally coordinated systems

Action: Reinforce responsive local structures and prioritise local capacities to ensure effective and timely response

Action: Reconsider the place of disaster-affected communities as participants as opposed to beneficiaries.

Action: Place deliberate effort to ensure that the aid system is demand driven.

Action: Support objective-led networks that can also accelerate learning on what is not working.

Action: Promote policy change on how UN bodies interacts with local non-governmental organisations.

Action: Implement peer-to-peer support (sister organisations) between international, national and local NGOs, and/or organisations in similar situations or with similar capacity, and ensure they are sustainable.

Recommendation 4: Build a momentum around collective accountability, feedback and complaints, which in turn impacts on actions

Action: Create systematic collective feedback mechanisms, which continuously inform decision making.

Action: Strengthen feedback mechanisms to support community preparedness.

Recommendation 5: Gather, document and disperse local and national level information to build knowledge on what already exists locally

Action: Collect and share evidence in local languages (including traditional observations as indicators of crises).

Action: Mandate national bodies to collect evidence through the documentation and dissemination of success stories in their own local languages.

Action: Build and support local and national level platforms (e.g. social media, media, radio, EWS, SMS) for quick/dispersed information sharing and collection.

Action: Closely link evidence based to disaster risk reduction and contingency planning.

Action: Recognise the difference in national contexts and the available mechanisms in existence.

Action: Actively recognise southern based institutions in order to increase the evidence base in national contexts themselves.

Recommendation 6: Anticipate crises at local and national level in recognition that local responders are the first to respond and the actors which will stay after it has passed

Action: Train and reinforce local and national early warning predictors (“crisis anticipators”).

Action: Using available platforms, gather and share information, in local languages for communities to readily access.

Action: Strengthen or create feedback mechanisms to support community preparedness.

Action: Create forecaster networks at the local and national level to share experience and mentor others on traditional and meteorological indicators.

Action: Create a “no regrets” financing/decision making environment to ensure responses and build the evidence base to continually improve.

Action: Create locally layered risk financing systems to ensure that decisions and financing on preparedness is locally driven.

Recommendation 7: Transcend the humanitarian-development divide

Action: Prioritise and invest in disaster risk reduction plans.

Action: Support governments to develop a thorough disaster risk reduction strategy.

Action: Support the translation of the strategic action plans at local levels.

Action: Provide access to flexible immediate funds (up to $500K) to promote early responses.

Action: Provide access to resources for capacity building.

Action: Recognise and invest in existing capacity and build on capacity of local responses to ensure that minimum capacity is in place (admin, org., technical).

Action: Advocate for joined up reporting standards and requirements.

Action: Establish and/or strengthen existing monitoring, evaluation, accountability and learning (MEAL) within local systems.

Recommendation 8: Core standards for collective action in support of locally led, demand driven, capacity strengthening initiatives

Action: Increase organisations ownership of core standards to build responsibility for action.

Action: Organisations commit to and utilise agreed standards (such as CHS and Sphere) and ensure they are always contextualised.

Action: Define the information and management tools which should be accessible to all actors (funding, feedback mechanisms, etc.) to ensure equal access to information on standard requirements.

Recommendation 9: Strengthen and/or develop national and international bodies in order to assess and recognise experience of individuals and organisations

Action: Define and foster access to a minimum package of skills in the humanitarian response, which is shared with the humanitarian sector.

Action: Promote accreditation and/or certification of certain skills (i.e. Humanitarian Passport Initiative), as well as improve links between individuals or organisations with academia.

Action: Work with academia and universities to join up theory and practice, and ensure demand driven professionalisation.

Action: Recognise existing capacity and skills, and recognise that certain sectors need a certain level of skills/experiences base, but that all training must be contextualised.

Action: Build a database of available capacities in relation with the humanitarian sector.

Action: Recognise that surge capacity exists locally and that they can be complemented by regional and international capacities, when needed.

Action: Foster accompaniment and secondment opportunities, not just training.

Action: Invest in local organisations for a sustained period in a deliberate effort to maintain skills.

Recommendation 10: Ensure effective participation by local communities in identifying local capacities and existing gaps in local, formal and informal structures of governance

Action: Build a body of local knowledge and understanding of what are the needs and what is the response provided.

Action: Acknowledge and build on existing local grass-root structures and knowledge to collect and analyse data to feed into appropriate humanitarian responses.

Action: Promote the definition of contingency plans to be defined by local communities themselves.

Action: Recognise that there are different types of disasters and that, depending on the contexts, the responses to the crisis (knowledge and skills), from the local communities, will be different.
“When you walk with a community there is a sense of unity, of humanity. It doesn’t matter what you look like. It doesn’t matter where you come from. When you have a problem, it is also my problem and we are united in that.”

Civil Society Conference participant
Concluding remarks

The conference for civil society convened by the Humanitarian Leadership Academy, Kenya Red Cross Society and Start Network, aimed to provide a platform for voices from civil society to discuss localisation of humanitarian action in practice.

The voices explored the vision, challenge and opportunity in the humanitarian sector in order to set up a solution focused conversation.

The conversation outcome, to conceive and share actions that would concretely support and affect the change being called for, have been clearly outlined in Chapter 3, and directly feed into possible practical commitments as shared in the executive summary. Chapter 2 focused on the process of bringing together such a diverse group of people, highlighting the importance of collaboration, listening, the change process and building consensus.

The World Humanitarian Summit has called for the international community to join together, and jointly commit to make genuine change to a system that is currently unable to meet the scale of need.

We know that change takes time, and we acknowledge that the future will be more complicated, complex and multi-polar, than it is now. It will require a new type of response, that extends beyond the current boundaries. The conference was an opportunity for a subset of civil society to help shape what a future humanitarian eco-system could look like. It was just part of a complex conversation, filled with honest, sincere voices that aim to keep the lens on practical solutions, and explore what it would look like to put people back into the centre of each response.

“If you want to go fast, go alone. If you want to go far, go together.”
Appendix 1

Full list of organisations in attendance

ActionAid
Adeso
Amel
Anglican Development Services Mt. Kenya (ADS MKE)
Arid Land Development Focus (ALDEF)
BRAC
CAFOD
Christian Aid
Christian Aid Kenya
CHS Alliance
Civiscus
Danish Refugee Council
Development Initiatives
Development and Humanitarian Committee
Development Research and Training
Direct Aid
Disaster Management Training Centre – Mulungushi University Zambia
East African Legislative Assembly
Emergency Pastoralist Assistance Group – Kenya (EPAG-K)
Forum Bangun Aceh (FBA)
Global Southern NGO Network
Goal
GlaxoSmithKline
HelpAge International
Humanitarian Development Consortium
Humanitarian Leadership Academy
Interagency Working Group
InterAid Uganda
Intergovernmental Authority on Development International Committee of the Red Cross
International Council of Voluntary Agencies (ICVA)
International Institute for Rural Reconstruction (IIRR)
International Rescue Committee (IRC)
IPPF - Sprint Initiative
Jordan Hashemite Charity Organisation (JHCO)
Kenya Red Cross Society
Kids Educational Engagement Project (KEEP)
Living with Peace Kenya
Local 2 Global Protection
Mavi Kalem Social Assistance and Charity Association
MCF Panairabi
Mother
National Disasters Operations Centre
National Drought Management Authority
NGOs Co-ordination Board – Kenya
Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC)
Organisation for Islamic Cooperation
OXFAM
Pamoja Trust
Pastorallist Community Initiative Development and Assistance (PACIDA)
P-FIM
Refugee Consortium of Kenya
Road International
Save the Children International
SOMIRENEC
Start Network
The Humanitarian Forum
Translators Without Borders
UK Department for International Development (DFID)
University of Nairobi
World Vision International

Appendix 2

Case studies shared and captured at the conference

Housing for Tsunami Survivors

After the 2004 tsunami, the relocation programme provided new concrete houses for tsunami survivors up in the hills, often a few km away from the sea. One problem was that many of those who were relocated to these houses were fishermen who needed to live near the sea – it was too difficult for them to live so far away so they left their houses and went back to where they used to live. Another problem was that the concrete houses were too hot to live in without aircon. So people chose to abandon them and live in wooden houses instead. In a build to meet their deadline, the relocation programme rushed to provide new houses for the survivors without involving them in the decisions about where they would like to live and how the houses should be constructed.

Influence of cultural identity on resilience building among urban refugees

Refugees are passionate about their culture. Their mother tongue, songs, dance, traditional food, mode of dressing and artefacts make wherever they are feel like home. In an urban environment refugees feel very separate from both the local community and refugees from other countries. In December 2015 an event entitled ‘My Culture My Identity’ was organised in Ruiru Town in Kenya involving refugees, UNHCR and partners which aimed to promote peaceful coexistence between refugees and their Kenyan hosts and providing a platform for refugees and Kenyans to showcase their unique ways of living. After the event many refugees felt that through sharing their different cultures they are able to appreciate and respect one another. The attendance of government and UNHCR made the refugees feel loved and hopeful and the inclusion of Kenyans assured them of their acceptance and recognition. This is an example of Education in Emergencies putting theory into practice and achieving positive results.

Acknowledgement and support of the value of local communities’ response to crises as initial indicators of potential difficulties

Affected by drought and conflicts, Pastoralists in Northern Kenya have developed deeply rooted community responses to impending crises: time tested early warning systems based on listening and watching nature’s signs trigger local response. These responses link business people to credit mechanisms, they initiate innovative ways to access far away pasture areas, and use negotiation and relations building with neighbours in order to maximise the supportive diaspora. Responding agencies arrive at the far end of these local life-saving responses, when they situation has deteriorated. Large funding levels are required where smaller injection at the right time would have saved livelihoods.

Conflict superimposed on drought has even more far reaching ramifications. Based on these observations, agencies need to get involved earlier to support the strengthening of the existing systems so that the humanitarian response is in line with local response, not lagging behind.
Humanitarian Leadership Academy
We are a global learning initiative set up to facilitate partnerships and collaborative opportunities to enable people to prepare for and respond to crises in their own countries.
humanitarianleadershipacademy.org

Kenya Red Cross
Our mission is to work with vigor and compassion through our networks and with communities to prevent and alleviate human suffering and save lives of the most vulnerable. The International Center for Humanitarian Affairs was established by the Kenya Red Cross society to create an autonomous platform for knowledge management, capacity building and to influence policy on humanitarian issues in Kenya and within the African continent.
kenyaredcross.org

Start Network
We are an international network of NGOs that enables a broad range of humanitarian actors and partners to provide the best possible solutions for people affected by crises. We provide platforms to enable collaborative approaches to decision-making and provision, which enable us to achieve more together than any single organisation acting alone could accomplish.
startnetwork.org