



Time to Move On:

National perspectives on transforming surge capacity

Executive Summary¹

Overview

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. This paper summarises a study carried out towards the end of 2016 which documents and analyses national NGO experiences of recruitment for surge by international NGOs and identifies good practices as well as documents impact and develops recommendations for taking the findings forward across the humanitarian sector.

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Introduction and purpose of the research

It is widely believed that the practice of INGOs recruiting national staff directly from national NGOs during humanitarian response can undermine national NGO capacity. But there has been very limited analysis about the ways in which it affects local NGOs' ability to respond to crises themselves or the impact that it has on their ability to retain high quality staff. This phenomenon is not new or novel and has periodically gained prominence (most notably in the evaluation of the Indian Ocean Tsunami response in 2006) but it has never received sufficient attention to galvanise policy or practice changes on the part of the international organisations that perpetuate it. More recently during the Typhoon Haiyan (2013) response in the Philippines and the Nepal earthquake (2015) response research on humanitarian partnerships once again highlighted the challenges faced by the flight of front-line surge staff from national to international organisations.

In the consultations leading to the World Humanitarian Summit (WHS), significant attention was placed on the important role that national actors play in crisis response linked to a concern that members of the international humanitarian system could do far more to stop hindering and to help national humanitarian action. Potential actions that could be taken to re-balance the system more in favour of national actors have been grouped under the banner of 'localisation' which seeks to promote a re-calibrated system which works to the relevant strengths of its constituent parts and enhances partnership approaches to humanitarian actors.

Objective of the study

This study aims to research national NGO experiences of recruitment for surge by international NGOs and identifies good practices as well as documenting impact. It also develops recommendations and an action plan for taking the findings forward within the Transforming Surge Capacity Project (TSCP)¹ and more widely in the humanitarian sector.

What is the scale of the problem?

Although documentation about the movement of staff from local NGOs to international organisations during surge responses is scant, it is a familiar issue for many people who have engaged in humanitarian action. In the Philippines during the Typhoon Haiyan response and more recently in the Nepal earthquake response, there were frequent reports of surge staff moving from national NGOs

Staff movements from NGOs to INGOs and UN in the Nepal earthquake

to INGOs with the most shocking example of one national organisation losing nine senior staff in the space of two humanitarian interventions (Typhoon Washi and Typhoon Yolanda). As illustrated in Figure 1 the research shows that this is part of a wider problem that serves to undermine locally-led response in both rapid onset and protracted crises across the world.

Like me, a few of the local staff from my former organisation moved to UN and INGOs

Regional INGO officer, Sindhupalchok

Four staff of ours left us to join INGOs - they can learn more than we can offer.

*Senior national NGO staff member
Sindhupalchok district*

We have lost about 7-8 staff to UN agencies and others, but not to our donors. Nowadays, INGOs and UN agencies are hiring more & more local people... There is already a dearth of young people to work for us. Though we cannot raise the salary, we have lowered down the experience of applicants

*Senior national NGO staff member
Sindhupalchok district*

We keep losing one staff in every month. They go to INGOs.

*Senior national NGOs staff member,
Kathmandu*

¹ The full report can be found at www.charter4change.org or <https://startnetwork.org/start-engage/transforming-surge-capacity>

² Led by ActionAid, the Transforming Surge Capacity project brings together eleven Start Network agencies to look at how surge capacity in the sector can be delivered in more efficient and effective ways. It is specifically focused on piloting and building evidence on approaches which are more collaborative, locally focused, and which engage

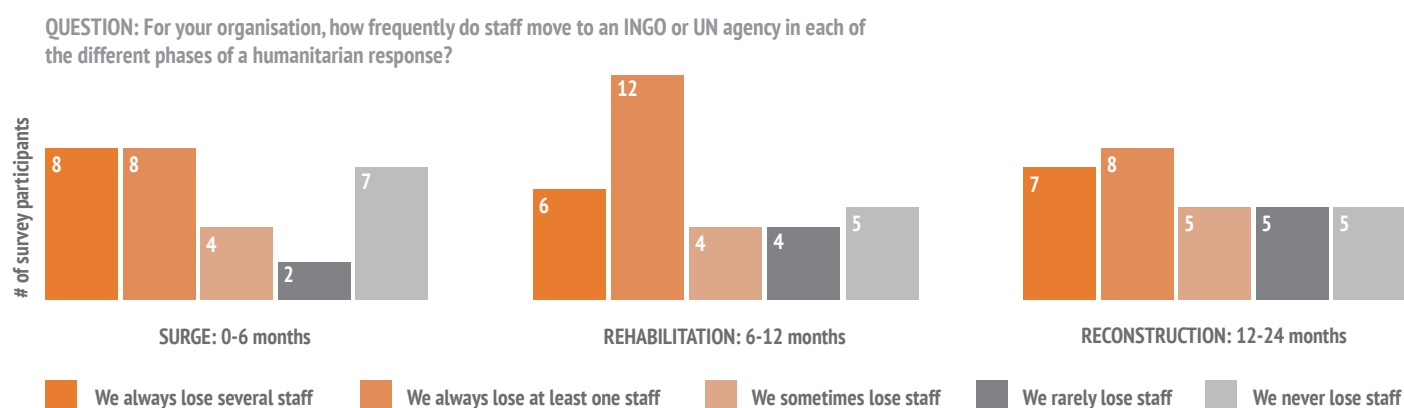


FIGURE 1: Assessing the scale of the problem - results from the online survey

What is the impact of staff movements from national NGOs to INGOs and UN agencies?

Very little information exists of the impact of the flight of surge staff but the research goes some way to describing the challenges it presents to national NGOs. Managerial and technical field staff were considered to be the category of staff that were most frequently recruited into international NGOs and UN agencies, both because of the transferability of the skills that they have but also because they are often among the most visible to international organisations. The impact and severity of staff movements on the ability of national NGOs to scale up for humanitarian response was considered to be significant in the initial relief phase as national NGOs were seeking to scale-up their operations (0-6 months), however it was in the rehabilitation phase (6-12 months) where the staff losses were considered to be greatest at a time when INGOs and UN agencies were scaling up their operations most aggressively.

Beyond the loss of staff there was considerable concern expressed by national NGOs about unethical recruitment practices which on many occasions were undertaken within established partnerships and frequently without reference checks being undertaken or recruited staff being able to serve out their notice period. In countries where technical skills were in short supply, national NGOs were sometimes reticent to send talented staff to cluster meetings as they were treated as 'talent pools' where national staff with good language skills and technical knowledge were at risk of being cherry-picked by international organisations.

Why do people move from national NGOs to INGOs and UN agencies

Push and pull factors

There are many factors that influence the movement of staff from national NGOs which include pull factors such as opportunities to receive higher salaries and better benefits from better-funded INGOs and UN agencies and push factors that included the longer hours that national NGO staff often work and the difficult working conditions that they sometimes have to endure (see the bar chart below). Project-based contracts were raised as a concern, but the same challenge frequently applied to INGOs and UN agencies. For many staff, movement from a local NGO to a national or regional NGO to an INGO or UN agency was considered to represent a natural career progression and offered the additional enticement of being able to compete for overseas posts.

While staff that had moved from national NGOs to INGOs or UN agencies were often placed on short contracts, many had been successful in moving between international organisations and those that were interviewed as part of the research had managed to stay within the international sector. There was only one example given of a staff member seeking return to a national NGO which was ultimately unsuccessful; under current conditions, the gap in pay and benefits between national and international employment is too large to easily permit an ebb and flow.

Structural factors that perpetuate the problem

While on the surface there are a discrete number of push and pull factors that contribute to the loss of surge staff, there are some important underlying causes that serve to perpetuate the status quo.

QUESTION: What do you consider to be the motivation for staff movement from national NGOs to INGOs and UN agencies?

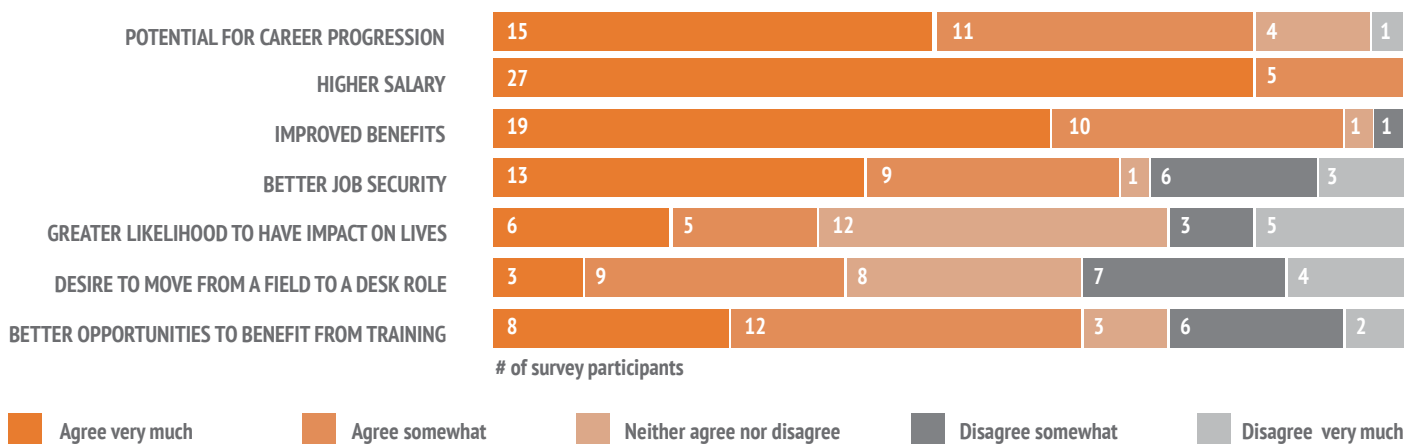


FIGURE 2: National NGO staff perceptions of the reasons for staff movement to international organisations

The failure of long-term institutional development, imbalances in resource allocation and the lack of progress that has been made by INGOs and UN agencies to shift power and by local and national NGOs to claim power has served to entrench a system that continues to prioritise the international humanitarian system above the national.

The research also found that the impact of staff losses on national NGOs are frequently exacerbated by poor HR practices on the part of the INGOs and UN staff that recruit them. Concerns raised during interviews included a failure to follow recruitment practices, poaching of national NGO staff and the refusal to permit newly-recruited staff to serve notice periods.

Many national NGO staff expressed the difficulties they had experienced in trying to raise these issues; on the rare occasions when they were able to discuss them, it was common for senior staff to be blamed, or HR departments at headquarters. As a consequence, it has been difficult for organisations to be able to discuss the challenges presented by staff movements even when it occurs within established partnerships.

Many national NGO staff spoke of feeling powerless to raise concerns when recruitment practices failed to match up to professional standards. One NGO leader based in Africa laughed at the suggestion that he should raise concerns with the donor agency that had recruited a key field staff member saying that the funding relationship meant that the power was in the hands of the international organisation and he did not want to risk upsetting his donor.

Only one of the national NGOs that participated in the research spoke of efforts that they had taken to address problematic staff movements and poor practices which included making verbal agreements with their funding partners not to approach their staff, efforts that they had made to negotiate higher salaries to ensure that they were benchmarked towards the top of their peers, and the inclusion of the Principles of Partnership (PoP)³ in their contracts with INGOs and UN agencies where possible, in an effort to incorporate equitable and ethical partnership practices. The organisation had found the transparency principle in the PoP particularly helpful in offering an entry-point for discussions about recruitment practices that were considered unprofessional.



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

³ www.icvanetwork.org/resources/icva-submission-whs-principles-partnership

Models of surge that strengthen national capacity and mitigate the negative impact of staff movements

That is not to say that progress has not been made, and there are a growing number of initiatives that have been embarked on to strengthen national surge capacity and to support national response. In some cases, these have begun to address some of the imbalances highlighted by the research.

Despite the range of strategies that are now being used to support national surge and to militate staff movements from national NGOs to INGOs/UN agencies as the table suggests, there are still very few practical examples and the overwhelming perception of national NGOs is that the focus of attention continues to be on strengthening international over national surge practices. There were also mixed opinions expressed by national NGO leaders and staff about the extent to which these different strategies would address the flight of surge capacity (see figure 3 below).

Conclusions

The greater emphasis that has recently been placed on locally-led humanitarian response has galvanized action in some parts of the sector to address some of the practices and inequities that serve to undermine national NGO humanitarian capacity. Despite this, there are still a range of push and pull factors that serve to prompt staff to move from local and national organisations to international ones when they are needed the most; in the early stages of a humanitarian response. During this time, INGOs and UN agencies are often aggressively expanding their programmes, and national talent is often 'on show' which can exacerbate staff mobility.

During the WHS, localisation was championed as an overlooked and under-valued component of humanitarian action and agreements were made by members of the international humanitarian system and donor community to strengthen collaboration and start to address some of the inequities present in the system.



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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Time to move on: National perspectives on transforming surge capacity

| STRATEGY | DESCRIPTION | EXAMPLES |
|--|--|--|
| <p>Capacity building of national NGOs to lead humanitarian response</p> | <p>Replacing international with national surge was considered to have the greatest potential for reducing staff movements in the online survey and has been on the international humanitarian agenda for many years in theory, but good practice has been slow to emerge. The Philippines offered several examples of national NGO humanitarian consortia. Interviews during the research also highlighted the potential for a change in INGO response modalities from operational models of humanitarian response to a partnership model. This shift has the potential to place greater emphasis on supporting partner surge rather than relying on INGO/UN surge which undermines national capacity</p> | <p>Humanitarian Response Consortium Philippines, Christian Aid Rapid Response Team, Philippines</p> |
| <p>Working collaboratively to develop surge capacity</p> | <p>The second area where progress has been made is in strengthening inter-agency surge capacity where progress has been led by the Start Network's Transforming Surge Capacity Programme (TSCP) which is testing new collaborative models and localised approaches to surge in the Philippines and Pakistan. The main goal of TSCP is more effective and accountable delivery of humanitarian assistance to disaster affected people and one of the outcomes is to have more effective civil society surge capacity capable of delivering more efficient collaborative and localised emergency response. Of particular relevance to this study is the progress that has been made towards the development of a surge roster in the Philippines which will serve both national NGOs and INGOs.</p> | <p>Start Network Transforming Surge Capacity Project Surge capacity roster, Philippines</p> |
| <p>Having prior agreements in place to reduce national NGO losses</p> | <p>The development of harmonised salary scales or prior agreements which aim to reduce staff movements was considered by many online survey participants to have significant potential to reduce staff movements during surge. The only example that was found was brokering of informal agreements by a national NGO in Lebanon with its international partners to prohibit the recruitment of its humanitarian staff. The same organisation also explicitly refers to the five Principles of Partnership in its partnership contracts in order to provide a basis for transparent discussions about recruitment practices.</p> | <p>Informal agreements with partners, Lebanon</p> |
| <p>Seconding INGO staff into national NGOs to strengthen response</p> | <p>There were a few examples found of INGOs seconding staff into national NGOs as a means of addressing capacity gaps and building capacity although it is noteworthy that feedback was mixed during the Nepal earthquake response. A more positive example was the response to Typhoon Winston in Fiji where INGO staff worked within a national NGO's structure to deliver a joint response.</p> | <p>Response to the Nepal earthquake Response to Typhoon Winston, Fiji</p> |
| <p>Financial compensation</p> | <p>The research found no examples of financial compensation and feedback on the potential effectiveness of such an approach was mixed; some expressed concern that there was a risk that it would legitimise the practice of head-hunting talented national NGO staff, particularly for INGOs or UN agencies that had greatest resources or were the most operational which would actively undermine the principles upon which the C4C is based. For others, there was concern that the risk and expense that national NGOs took in recruiting staff with little or no experience and nurturing and training them went far beyond the compensation that was being proposed. However there were some that considered the approach could have value as a disincentive for poaching as part of a broader strategy that sought to re-balance the humanitarian system towards local response.</p> | <p>None</p> |

QUESTION: How effective do you think each of the strategies could be in reducing the impact of staff movements on national NGOs during humanitarian response?

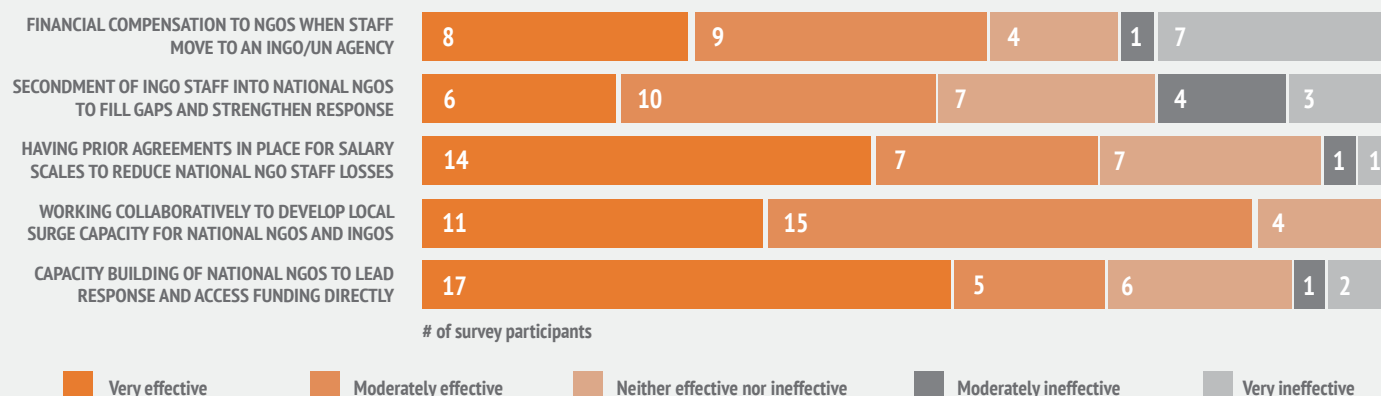


FIGURE 3: NNGO staff perceptions of the effectiveness of INGO/UN strategies to support NNGO surge capacity

These efforts have complemented existing initiatives to strengthen partnership by the 29 INGO signatories of the Charter4Change (C4C)⁴ which seeks to practically implement changes to the way the humanitarian system operates to enable more locally-led response. One of the Charter's 8 commitments obliges signatories to 'Stop undermining local capacity (and) to 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'. Despite these initiatives, there is much still to be done to rebalance the system in a way that will strengthen rather than undermine national surge capacity.



So, what can be done? As the title of this report suggests, it's time for the sector to move on; the research highlighted a number of changes that are required, internal to local NGOs, internal to INGOs and UN agencies, and across the humanitarian system more generally that have the potential to influence change. **These include the following:**

- The need for INGOs and UN agencies to commit to ethical and accountable recruitment procedures which should include proscribing the practice of using partners and cluster meetings as talent pools and a commitment to maintaining professional recruitment standards including taking up references and respecting notice periods;
- The need for national NGOs to seek to address the push factors by strengthening Human Resource Management (HRM) systems and to mitigate the negative impacts of staff movements by adopting succession planning – to the extent that resources will permit;
- An urgency for the humanitarian system including national NGOs, INGOs, UN agencies and donors to redress the imbalance that exists which serves to undermine local response capacity through a range of measures to strengthen resources and assistance in support of localised humanitarian response as outlined in the eight commitments of the C4C.

Even with the enthusiasm and momentum that was garnered in support of localisation during the WHS, change will take time and will require strenuous efforts on the part of humanitarian organisations and donor agencies alike to address the imbalances that exist – more difficult still will be the change of thinking that will need to occur if locally-led response is going to be more than just a series of empty WHS promises.

⁴ www.charter4change.org

Recommendations

To strengthen locally-led response and to avoid undermining the capacity and effectiveness of local and national humanitarian response, the following actions should be taken by INGOs and UN agencies:

- Recent humanitarian responses have shown that very little progress has been made by INGOs and UN agencies in curtailing practices that undermine local surge capacity. They should now make specific agreements to limit 'poaching' of staff within established funding, implementing or strategic partnerships to ensure that local capacity is not undermined⁵. These should be written into partnership contracts.
- INGOs and UN agencies should shift from investing in their own surge capacity to supporting that of their partners' in advance of crises. This will require a broader and deeper level of engagement with local NGOs outside of disaster response. This will only be possible by committing to sustained investments in local NGO organisational capacity.

To strengthen locally-led response and to address unnecessary staff movements from national to international humanitarian organisations, the following actions should be taken by national NGOs:

- National NGOs should use the tools available to them to hold INGOs and UN agencies in contractual relationships with them to account for supporting surge practices. The PoP offers a set of important principles which have been endorsed by INGOs, UN agencies, clusters and donors alike. Where an international partner has endorsed the C4C, national NGOs should ensure that it is reflected in contracts and relevant partnership documentation.
- Competent and well-managed staff are at the heart of effective organisations. To the extent that resources permit, national NGOs should continue to strengthen Human Resource Management (HRM) systems. Surge planning should be at the heart of this so that organisations will be better-positioned to keep their humanitarian staff and ward off poaching attempts by INGOs/UN agencies.
- Staff development and capacity building with a focus on humanitarian competencies should also be the responsibility of national NGOs especially outside of humanitarian responses. In addition to strengthening capacity, this may also serve to strengthen staff retention.

For locally-led humanitarian response to be more than a set of empty WHS promises, all members of the humanitarian system urgently need to take the following actions:

- For far too long, investment in surge capacity by the humanitarian system has focused on its international members. The progress made by the TSCP in developing a surge roster that has the potential to strengthen national response represents an important breakthrough. As it is operationalised, it will be important to document lessons with a view to encouraging similar practice in other countries frequently affected by disasters.
- Despite important progress having been made, addressing the imbalances in the humanitarian system will only happen if there is a shift in resources to national humanitarian organisations. It is essential that all members of the humanitarian system deliver on the promises that were made during the WHS to increase investment in national capacity. The provision of funding before disaster strikes will allow time to establish surge capacity outside of the pressures of response.

⁵ It is noteworthy that this same proposal was included in the overarching recommendations of the TEC evaluation in 2006

Time to Move On was commissioned by the 4 NGO members of the START Network's Transforming Surge Capacity project (see <https://startnetwork.org/start-engage/transforming-surge-capacity>), which have signed the Charter4 Change: CAFOD, Christian Aid, Tearfund and Islamic Relief and was funded by the TSCP.

The research methodology included, a web-based document search and literature review on issues of localisation, surge capacity and human resource practices in the humanitarian sector; data gathering and document review of initiatives to support surge capacity in the Philippines; a two week trip to the Philippines during which key informant interviews and focus group discussions were conducted with local and national NGOs (14 interviews) and International NGOs; consultations with a global group of senior national NGO leaders representing 5 disaster-affected countries; an online survey to obtain feedback on current practices, to analyse challenges and to identify solutions (33 national NGO participants); and consultation, feedback and validation workshops in Manila and London after the preparation of the draft research report.

The report was written by **Andy Featherstone** and the executive summary designed by Anthony Neal. The research was overseen by Anne Street, CAFOD's Head of Humanitarian Policy, supported by staff from the commissioning NGOs: Michael Mosselmanns and Jane Backhurst of Christian Aid, Oenone Chadburn and Tim Ingram of Tearfund and Helen Stawski and Imran Madden of Islamic Relief. We are grateful to Ben Emmens for his advice, also to Catherine Kenyon and Julius Kaberere of the TSCP secretariat, and Sophie Allin, Yael Eshel and Tim Cohen of CAFOD. Jing Pura and Gladys Serano of Christian Aid in the Philippines kindly supported the visit to the country and organised the validation workshop. The enthusiastic participation in the study by local and national NGOs in the Philippines and more globally provided an excellent foundation for the findings and thanks are due to so many people across Asia and Africa who either agreed to participate in interviews or who gave their time to complete the survey.