



Humanitarian Horizons: Power, People and Local Leadership

# CROSSING THE BRIDGE: A PRACTICAL GUIDE TO SUPPORT GOOD INTERMEDIARY PRACTICE

GUIDANCE NOTE

September 2024



A GLOBAL NGO NETWORK  
FOR PRINCIPLED AND EFFECTIVE  
HUMANITARIAN ACTION



HUMANITARIAN  
ADVISORY GROUP



Partnerships are vital in promoting locally led response, laying the foundation for how local and national actors work with intermediary partners. A good intermediary bridges the gap between donors and local humanitarian actors, ensuring aid is delivered effectively and sustainably and shaping how partnerships are put into practice.

## ABOUT THIS PAPER

This paper was produced by Humanitarian Advisory Group (HAG) in partnership with GLOW Consultants and the Pacific Islands Association of Non-Governmental Organisations (PIANGO) and with input from the International Council of Volunteer Agencies (ICVA). It is a product of the Humanitarian Horizons research program, funded by the Australian Government through the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade. ICVA collaborated with HAG during a consultation process in the Asia-Pacific as part of a United States Agency for International Development Bureau of Humanitarian Assistance-funded multi-stakeholder consultation on the [Principles of Partnership](#).<sup>1</sup>

The paper builds on [Bridging the Intention to Action Gap: The Future Role of Intermediaries in Supporting Locally Led Humanitarian Action](#). It aims to provide a practical guide for intermediary organisations to strengthen their partnership approaches, and highlights the role of donors and other funding instruments to catalyse this process. It integrates lessons and insights from existing research and evidence, as well as discussions undertaken as part of the ICVA principles of partnership consultations – which included three segregated online workshops with local actors, international actors and donors, and an in-person workshop with a mixed cohort of participants from Asia Pacific region. Insights from local and national actors have played an important role in shaping this report, through consultations undertaken with ICVA as well as their role in shaping existing research.

### What do we mean by an intermediary?

An organisation, network or mechanism acting in an intermediary role between donors and local and national actors through provision of funding or other support. Intermediaries can be international or national organisations. Being an intermediary is not a fixed status, because organisations can play multiple roles in humanitarian preparedness, response and recovery programming, including being both an intermediary and a direct implementer.

## THE ROLE OF INTERMEDIARIES

In 2021, HAG and partners produced the [Bridging The Intention To Action Gap](#) report for the Grand Bargain Localisation Workstream, which proposed a partnerships model for intermediaries in supporting locally led action (see Figure 1). The model is based on behavioural science principles, using the COM-B System, which identifies three conditions – capability, opportunity and motivation – as essential for behaviours to occur.<sup>2</sup> The model also presents six core capabilities for intermediaries to focus on to empower national and local organisations, recognising that capabilities will not facilitate the fundamental shift required without the motivation and opportunity for change. This guidance note presents practical actions that intermediaries and donors can take to improve partnerships that promote localisation.

<sup>1</sup> The Principles of Partnership (Equality, Transparency, Results-Oriented Approach, Responsibility and Complementarity) were endorsed by the Global Humanitarian Platform in 2007.

<sup>2</sup> Michie S, van Stralen M, West R (2011), The behaviour change wheel: A new method for characterising and designing behaviour change interventions. <https://implementationscience.biomedcentral.com/articles/10.1186/1748-5908-6-42?report=reader>

Extract from *Bridging the Intention to Action Gap: The Future Role of Intermediaries in Supporting Locally Led Humanitarian Action*<sup>3</sup>

Figure 1: Model for the role of intermediaries



For the humanitarian system to support a more effective role for intermediaries, concrete changes are required in relation to: the motivation for intermediaries to work differently in support of locally-led humanitarian action; the opportunity for intermediaries to make choices that will enable a more appropriate role for national and local organisations; and adaptation of a core set of capabilities, according to actor and context, to ensure a fit-for-purpose contribution. The model includes hypotheses, drawn from the literature and tested in this research, about the best avenues for transformation.

Three key principles underpin the future role:

- A focus on empowering and enabling national and local organisations rather than subcontracting relationships, based on the commonly shared understanding that they are currently under-resourced and their comparative advantages are underutilised due to top-down approaches
- Recognition that intermediary organisations may also act as direct implementers of humanitarian action if appropriate and required, based on the principle of complementarity
- Acknowledgement that enabling an effective role for local and national organisations is not an end in itself, but is intended to meet the needs of those affected by humanitarian crisis more effectively and in line with humanitarian principles.

3 HAG, GLOW Consultants, CoLAB, inSights, Z. Antonios (2021), [Bridging the Intention to Action Gap: The Future Role of Intermediaries in Supporting Locally Led Humanitarian Action](#). Melbourne: HAG, pp.13-14.

# 1. Motivation



**What is it?** Motivation is the “why” – people want to change behaviours because they believe it is important.

The motivation condition of the COM-B model focuses on creating incentives for intermediaries to support locally led humanitarian action. Intermediaries can foster motivation by recognising and rewarding the achievements of their local partners, aligning organisational goals with local empowerment, and promoting a culture of continuous learning (see Table 1). By doing so, intermediaries encourage active engagement and commitment from local actors, enhancing the effectiveness and sustainability of humanitarian efforts.

**Table 1: Motivation – Key actions for intermediaries and donors**

Key actions	For intermediaries	For donors/funding instruments or platforms
<b>Set realistic yet ambitious targets</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Invest time and resources in co-designing ambitious yet realistic transition goals and stretch targets with local partners</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Encourage stretch targets from intermediaries and invest resources for joint planning and capacity strengthening with local actors</li> </ul>
<b>Recognise and reward good practices</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Develop systems to acknowledge and incentivise local partners to progress on capacity/process strengthening and organisational maturity</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Establish criteria (with linked incentives) to gauge progress in intermediary support to partners and transition to locally led models</li> <li>Expand reporting templates to require detailed progress on partnership commitments and achievements with local/national actors</li> </ul>
<b>Align goals and incentives to promote localisation and elevate local voices and expertise</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Align organisational goals with promoting local leadership and good intermediary roles</li> <li>Commit to elevating local expertise in all country-level work and integrate local voices in decision-making</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Provide funding incentives that prioritise local engagement and empowerment</li> <li>Mandate the use of local experts and prioritise local researchers in evaluations and studies</li> </ul>
<b>Promote a culture of learning and mutual accountability</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Commit to transparency and open dialogue, ensuring that partners are equally informed and involved in decision-making</li> <li>Encourage continuous learning and improvement among staff and partners by creating a safe space for testing out new approaches and models of working together</li> <li>Conduct regular partnership health checks</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Support learning and development initiatives; encourage intermediaries to test new ways of working and partnering</li> <li>Facilitate open communication channels and build mutual accountability into partnership agreements</li> <li>Support initiatives that foster collective learning and shared capacity-building across appeals or responses</li> </ul>

<p><b>Plan for and measure effectiveness of partnerships and locally led response</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Measure the effectiveness of partnership approaches through real-time and end-of-appeal evaluations</li> <li>■ Set indicators to track impact of localised practices</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Establish monitoring/reporting mechanisms to ensure that partnerships progress towards mutually agreed goals and that local leadership is being prioritised</li> <li>■ Establish partner accountability mechanisms involving local/national partners to reflect and report on the progress of partnerships</li> </ul>
---	--	--

## 2. Opportunity



**What is it?** Opportunity refers to the “what” – in this instance, the everyday physical triggers and social contexts that encourage intermediaries to build and strengthen partnerships to support greater equity and local leadership.

The opportunity condition of the COM-B model focuses on creating an enabling environment for effective collaboration. Intermediaries are crucial in facilitating access to networks and resources, developing flexible funding mechanisms, and encouraging collaborative partnerships (see Table 2). By providing local and national actors with the necessary tools, resources, and support, intermediaries can give local actors opportunities to participate fully and innovate within the humanitarian landscape.

**Table 2: Opportunity – Key actions for intermediaries and donors**

Key actions	For intermediaries	For donors/funding instruments or platforms
<p><b>Facilitate access to networks and resources</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Facilitate local partners’ connections with networks and actors to explore new partnerships and access resources</li> <li>■ Involve local partners in engagements with donors</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Support platforms and forums that connect local and international actors</li> <li>■ Engage directly with local and national partners of international actors, for both policy and implementation discussions</li> </ul>
<p><b>Create flexible funding mechanisms</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Utilise flexible and innovative funding models that can adapt to partner and contextual needs</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Offer flexible funding that accommodates changing needs and contexts</li> </ul>

<p><b>Encourage collaborative projects</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Promote joint projects that involve local partners from the planning stage</li> <li>■ Collaborate with local partners to develop transition plans that will expand their roles gradually. These must be based on mutual capacity assessments, ensuring contributions of all parties</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Fund collaborative initiatives and partnerships</li> <li>■ Support/incentivise the creation of transition plans with clear milestones linked to capacity reassessments, providing opportunities for gradual progress</li> </ul>
<p><b>Develop mutually agreed growth/transition plans</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Involve local partners in all discussions about changes in current or upcoming partnerships and give them a voice in decision-making</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Encourage open and collaborative discussions when managing changes that affect partnerships, offering all partners the opportunity to contribute to decision-making</li> </ul>

## 3. Capability



**What is it?** Capability refers to the “how” – the physical and psychological factors that make the desired behaviour possible. Here, this means the knowledge, skills, tools and training that intermediaries must apply to strengthen equitable partnership practices. Six areas are proposed under the capability condition within the intermediary model: organisational strengthening; risk management or risk sharing; due diligence, compliance, accountability and quality assurance; brokering, advocacy and facilitation; technical capacity exchange; and funding. By focusing on these six capability areas and taking specific actions, intermediaries, donors and local partners can enhance their effectiveness and support locally led humanitarian efforts more robustly.



### 3.1. ORGANISATIONAL STRENGTHENING

Intermediaries play a crucial role in enhancing the capability of local partners by building their organisational capabilities through training, strategic planning, and governance support (see Table 3). This strengthens local actors, enabling them to operate more effectively and sustainably within the humanitarian sector.

**Table 3: Opportunity – Key actions for intermediaries and donors in relation to organisational strengthening**

Key actions	For intermediaries	For donors/funding instruments or platforms
<p><b>Assess capacity</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Regularly assess the strengths and needs of local partners through simplified processes</li> <li>■ Plan for long-term operational/organisational capacity strengthening of national partners</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Fund mutual capacity assessments and support tailored capacity-building programs</li> </ul>

<b>Support long-term capacity strengthening</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Assist local organisations to create strategic plans</li> <li>Work with local partners to co-design transition timelines and capacity support frameworks</li> <li>Develop exit plans for projects that promote sustainable elevation of local/national partners to leadership roles</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Provide financial and technical support for strategic planning</li> <li>Invest in continuous operational capacity strengthening of national partners</li> <li>Provide equal and adequate administration costs for all partners to support long-term capacity strengthening</li> </ul>
<b>Focus on strategic organisational strengthening</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Offer ongoing training and mentoring on strengthening governance</li> <li>Minimise staff poaching and use respectful recruitment practices</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Fund training initiatives aimed at improving governance</li> <li>Disincentivise staff poaching and promote respectful recruitment</li> </ul>
<b>Use local expertise</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Use local experts to provide capacity support and contextualise international standards to fit local contexts</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Encourage the use of local/national experts for capacity support, with international experts as the exception</li> </ul>

### 3.2. RISK MANAGEMENT OR RISK SHARING

By implementing robust risk management systems and promoting risk-sharing mechanisms, intermediaries can equip local partners with the tools and knowledge to navigate uncertainties (see Table 4). This ensures that risks are mitigated collaboratively, enhancing overall resilience.

**Table 4: Opportunity – Key actions for intermediaries and donors in relation to risk management or risk sharing**

Key actions	For intermediaries	For donors/funding instruments or platforms
<b>Undertake mutual risk management</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Conduct joint risk assessments with local partners</li> <li>Develop risk-sharing mechanisms in collaboration with local partners</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Encourage and fund risk-sharing agreements</li> <li>Support joint risk assessment initiatives between intermediaries and their partners</li> </ul>
<b>Plan for transition</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Develop transition plans incorporating risk management/sharing capability milestones with local partners</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Assess intermediary progress in developing risk management/sharing capability of local partners</li> </ul>
<b>Develop risk management capabilities</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Offer contextualised and relevant training on risk identification and mitigation (consider how risks apply to partners and the way they operate)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Fund risk management training programs that include contextualisation</li> </ul>

### 3.3. DUE DILIGENCE, COMPLIANCE, ACCOUNTABILITY AND QUALITY ASSURANCE

Intermediaries can reinforce the capability of local organisations by establishing compliance frameworks, conducting joint audits, and supporting quality assurance processes (see Table 5). These measures ensure that local partners can meet international standards, enabling them to access more resources and maintain accountability.

**Table 5: Opportunity – Key actions for intermediaries and donors in relation to due diligence, compliance, accountability and quality assurance**

Key actions	For intermediaries	For donors/funding instruments or platforms
<b>Simplify due diligence processes</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Simplify organisational due diligence processes</li> <li>■ Work with other intermediaries on due diligence passporting</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Support simplified and standardised due diligence processes from intermediaries</li> <li>■ Encourage due diligence passporting, and resource pilot initiatives</li> </ul>
<b>Focus on mutual accountability</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Improve open reporting and information sharing with partners</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Include compliance clauses or indicators on partner collaborations to increase mutual accountability</li> </ul>
<b>Simplify reporting processes</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Simplify reporting mechanisms for partners to reduce time and resource burdens. Explore alternative methods of reporting</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Simplify and reduce reporting requirements for intermediaries, and incentivise partners to do likewise</li> </ul>

### 3.4. BROKERING, ADVOCACY AND FACILITATION

Through brokering relationships, advocating for priorities of local actors, and facilitating access to resources, intermediaries can expand the operational and strategic capabilities of local actors (see Table 6). This empowers them to engage more effectively in the humanitarian system and to amplify their impact.

**Table 6: Opportunity – Key actions for intermediaries and donors in relation to brokering, advocacy and facilitation**

Key actions	For intermediaries	For donors/funding instruments or platforms
<b>Broker relationships and access to resources</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Support local partners to establish and strengthen relationships with donors and other stakeholders/actors</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Encourage and support relationship-building activities –meet with local partners regularly</li> </ul>



<b>Advocate for local needs and elevate local actors</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Support local actors to represent local interests at various platforms</li> <li>■ Advocate for local actor decision-making and engagement in all forums</li> <li>■ Elevate local leadership in public communications</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Support local advocacy initiatives</li> <li>■ Require local actor engagement and presence in relevant meetings</li> </ul>
<b>Facilitate access to resources</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Help local organisations access funding and other resources</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Facilitate open discussions on resource allocation and collaboration in partnerships</li> </ul>

### 3.5. TECHNICAL CAPACITY EXCHANGE

Intermediaries can build technical capability by providing training, developing toolkits, and facilitating peer learning (see Table 7). This exchange of knowledge and skills enables local partners to enhance their operational effectiveness and adapt to complex humanitarian challenges.

**Table 7: Opportunity - Key actions for intermediaries and donors in relation to technical capacity exchange**

Key actions	For intermediaries	For donors/funding instruments or platforms
<b>Contextualise technical capability exchange</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Plan and invest in co-designing capacity support frameworks with local partners</li> <li>■ Work with local experts to contextualise international standards and facilitate technical exchanges</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Encourage capacity support activities and frameworks that are co-designed with local partners</li> <li>■ Fund technical exchanges that prioritise local expertise</li> </ul>
<b>Prioritise technical and peer learning</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Provide training on specific technical areas</li> <li>■ Facilitate peer learning and exchanges</li> <li>■ Elevate local expertise at the country level, prioritising it for technical support, research and evaluations</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Resource local partners' desired technical training and peer learning programs</li> </ul>



### 3.6. FUNDING

Intermediaries support the financial capability of local organisations by securing and disbursing funds, simplifying grant processes, and providing financial management training (see Table 8). This ensures that local actors have the financial resources and skills needed to implement sustainable and impactful programs.

**Table 8: Opportunity – Key actions for intermediaries and donors in relation to funding**

Key actions	For intermediaries	For donors/funding instruments or platforms
<b>Include overheads and indirect costs</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Cover local partners’ overheads and indirect costs</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Require intermediaries to fund both overhead and indirect costs of partners; mandate standard minimum amounts</li> <li>■ Consider ringfencing a percentage of funding to incentivise direct support for partnerships with local/national actors</li> </ul>
<b>Consider multi-year resourcing</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Offer multi-year funding commitments where possible</li> <li>■ Allocate funding for long-term operational capacity strengthening, considering sustainability beyond immediate project needs</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Support long-term funding initiatives</li> <li>■ Provide flexible funding to support the long-term operational capacity of local partners</li> </ul>
<b>Simplify grant processes</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Streamline application/contracting and reporting processes</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Encourage and support simplified grant procedures</li> </ul>

# Acknowledgments

**Research team:** Eranda Wijewickrama, Pamela Combinido, Josie Flint (Humanitarian Advisory Group), Zaki Ullah (GLOW Consultants), Akmal Ali (PIANGO), Keya Saha-Chaudhury, Asma Saleem (ICVA)

**Copy Editor:** Campbell Aitken

**Design:** Jenny Moody, A&J Moody Design

**Suggested citation:** HAG, GLOW Consultants, PIANGO & ICVA. *Crossing the bridge: A practical guide to support good intermediary practice*. Humanitarian Horizons. Melbourne: HAG.

This publication was funded by the Australian Government through the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade. The views expressed in this publication are the authors' alone and do not necessarily reflect those of the Australian Government.

## Humanitarian Horizons 2021-24

This report is part of the [Power, People and Local Leadership](#) stream of the [Humanitarian Horizons 2021-24](#) research program. Humanitarian Horizons is a three-year research initiative that adds unique value to humanitarian action in the Indo-Pacific by generating evidence and creating conversations for change. It is supported by the Australian Government through the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade.

## About the partners

**GLOW Consultants**, based in Pakistan, is a leading national entity providing practice solutions and field implementation support to donors, their implementing partners and research institutions. GLOW has successfully completed more than 100 third-party monitoring and evaluation assignments.

The **Pacific Islands Association of Non-Governmental Organisations (PIANGO)** functions as a regional secretariat to a network of umbrella organisations or platforms that are registered in 24 countries, territories and states across the Pacific region. PIANGO's primary role is as a catalyst for collective action, to facilitate and support coalitions and alliances on issues of common concern, and to strengthen the influence and impact of non-governmental organisations' efforts in the region.

**Humanitarian Advisory Group (HAG)** was founded in 2012 to elevate the profile of humanitarian action in Asia and the Pacific. Set up as a social enterprise, HAG provides a unique space for thinking, research, technical advice and training that contributes to excellence in humanitarian practice.

**International Council of Volunteer Agencies (ICVA)** is a global network of non-governmental organizations whose mission is to make humanitarian action more principled and effective by working collectively and independently to influence policy and practice.



*Humanitarian Advisory Group is BCorp certified. This little logo means we work hard to ensure that our business is a force for good. We have chosen to hold ourselves accountable to the highest social, environmental and ethical standards, setting ourselves apart from business as usual.*



