

Recognizing, Organizing and Deepening Local Humanitarian Action: What are Local Organizations Doing about the Humanitarian Crisis? Is What's Being Done Getting Lost?

“When one talks about humanitarian action, eyes turn to international actors. However, before you get to the World Food Program there is Community Food Program, but because these actions are not always visible, it is easy to overlook them.” **Mr. Richard Ssewakiryanga - Executive Director, Uganda National NGO Forum.**

Wednesday, 7th March 2018 marked the beginning of a new chapter in humanitarian response and action in Uganda as both national and international, state and non-state actors launched the first ever humanitarian platform in the country. The platform which brings together both local and national humanitarian organizations, avers to build strong local and national organizations, that are well coordinated, informed and have the ability to influence the humanitarian agenda.

It is highly imperative to note that, in the recent past, the world witnessed one of the largest immigration strains, broadly caused by increased conflict, persecution, famine and the search for better economic prospects. Presently, Uganda is home to over 1.3 million refugees – the highest in the whole world. This position, which among other things is due to Uganda's open-door policy and the hospitality of the Ugandan people has arguably imposed a strain on domestic resources. The government and the people of Uganda have nonetheless taken this responsibility in their stride while at the same time

dealing with development challenges of their own. This transformative stance is certainly unique especially now, at a time when the asylum space is shrinking in many parts of the world¹.



Hon. Hillary Onek - Minister of Disaster, Relief and Refugees signing the charter for the platform shortly after the launch.

It is indubitable that the international community has been at the center of supporting these humanitarian efforts. Moreover, when Uganda was dealing with a fresh influx of asylum seekers from the Democratic Republic of Congo, who were fleeing inter-communal violence in the country's volatile Ituri region, feeling the increased burden, The President of Uganda, Yoweri Kaguta Museveni and the UN Secretary General Antonio Guterres convened the Refugee Solidarity Summit in Kampala to persuade the international

¹ Mr. Ali Abdi's Speech at the Launch of the Uganda National and Local NGOs Humanitarian Platform, Kampala - Uganda

community to raise \$2 billion but only managed \$516 million.

Now, while it is easy to qualify and quantify the international organization's response and contribution to humanitarian crises in the country, what remains more



Mr. Ali Abdi - Chief of Mission IOM delivering opening remarks at the launch

nuanced and less recognized is the contribution and support of the host communities and local humanitarian organizations who are oftentimes the first responders in the event of any crisis. This makes the humanitarian system look exclusive – excluding the type of organizational life that is in communities and is not fully recognized and documented. This observation is augmented by Mr. Ali Adbi, the Chief of Mission – International Organization for Migration; he contends that, for a longtime, the humanitarian system has been dominated by the international actors but notes that the context has been changing and calls for changes in how action is taken.

Additionally, despite the increased amount of international aid, it has not kept with the rising need in terms of numbers. Whatever

amount of money and human resource, the stress is big. The key therefore is to bring to the fold other people and actors. Sadly though, the local and national actors who have been doing this are not yet being recognized and thence not fully utilized.

As such, in June 2017, local and national organizations under the auspices of the Uganda National NGO Forum and OXFAM – Uganda held conversations about the growing influx of refugees and humanitarian crises in the country and the fact that response ‘seemed [sic] to only come from the international actors’ yet a significant burden was being borne by local actors. Key recommendations from these discussions were among other things, the call to engage in a structured dialogue and the resolution to establish a humanitarian platform - one that would act as a mechanism to strengthen coordination of local and national organizations and profile and make visible local, organic, humanitarian and human actions.



Ms. Rose Atim - OXFAM's Acting Country Director delivering welcome remarks

The platform has since been established and an interim steering committee

constituted. It is expected that the Platform members will be the primary source of support before the humanitarian international agencies and government. The launch of the platform attracted both international and national actors, government representatives and media. The highly powered event was also characterized by the much-needed debate about the significance, judiciousness and future effectiveness of the platform.



A section of panelists at the launch of the platform

All speakers welcomed the platform as an important step towards a more structured domestic response to the humanitarian crisis. It was also emphasized that the modalities of support to and by the platform should adopt ways of working where, whenever possible actions are undertaken in a way that achieves the Sustainable Development Goals which calls for unified effort of both humanitarian and development actors.

More so, the fact that the local actors are often times the first responders, gives them comparative advantage in how much information is available to them and the local terrain. This is what makes the

platform an imperative - providing an opportunity to improve diagnosis (when something goes wrong) and provide coordination in intervention in order to avoid duplication of actions.

The ongoing grand bargain also seeks a stronger role of local actors. In the same bargain, there's an increased emphasis on the aspect of accountability – accountability to both the beneficiaries of the humanitarian aid, and towards the financial chain. Mr. Jens Hesemann, the Senior Field Coordinator of United Nations High Commission for Refugees – Uganda, thus believes that the accountability demand, largely driven by donors and international accounting standards have become more stringent and sometimes borders on becoming a bottle neck to delivering humanitarian assistance. It is no wonder that the commitments of the platform underscore the importance of accountability and calls upon organizations to build strong accounting systems.



Ms. Kemlin Furley - UNHCR Deputy Representative speaking at the launch

Conversely, while, on the surface, this call is justified, the sophistication of the systems demanded by donors do not oftentimes correlate with the resource envelope and or capacity of the local organizations. To this end, Mr. Richard Ssewakiryanga argues that it would be fallacious to assume that being national or local, means that one is less accountable. He believes that the accountability systems in place are often times fit for purpose. This means that the stakes should be as high as the size of the projects and that accountability demands ought to correspond to the size of the organizations.



Mr. Richard Ssewakiryanga - Executive Director, Uganda National NGO Forum making his presentation about the humanitarian platform

National and local non-government actors have oftentimes had to navigate the hurdles of a regressive NGO operating environment. Organizations such as ActionAid – Uganda, have faced the crowds of the regressive state in form of raids on their offices and closures of their bank accounts. This context and history is at the heart of the call made by the participants - calls for facilitative legislations and policies from government. Government representatives at the launch recognized the significance of these concerns and

underscored the need for a more structured partnership between the humanitarian platform and the government, specifically the Office of the Prime Minister and the Parliament of Uganda.

“The platform should work with parliament – parliament needs to be part of the platform and devise means on how it can protect the members from state interference.” **Hon. Komakech Lyandro**

In the final analysis, there were numerous statements of support from all actors including donors and government. There were flash lights of hope, hope for a more meaningful engagement on the increasing need for humanitarian assistance in Uganda.



Hon. Hillary Onek - Minister of Disaster, Relief and Refugees delivering his speech shortly before launching the platform

The quintessence of this support is rooted in the statement given by the Minister of Relief, Disaster Preparedness and Refugees - Hon. Hillary Onek who pleaded his support to the platform and applauded the efforts to make local humanitarian response more credible and legitimate. He also emphasized the need for effectiveness and efficiency in the delivery of humanitarian assistance and encouraged

actors to keep the resolve in the pursuit of this moral duty - work for the people deserving of support.

Summary of Key Recommendations from the Launch

The Platform should:

- Engage and work with its membership to design and adopt modalities of support that whenever possible meet the development needs of the communities.
- Intensify advocacy efforts to ensure that government efforts also link short term humanitarian assistance to long term development goals.
- Establish structured and formal partnership between the humanitarian platform and the government, specifically the Office of the Prime Minister and the Parliament of Uganda
- Appoint representatives to the Humanitarian response coordination team
- FastTrack the establishment of the database to act as a depository where international actors locate the right actor to engage with locally.

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