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First to respond, last in line

Excluding Nigerian responders from key decisions doesn't just ignore local knowledge — it entrenches a model of aid built far from the crisis

Last October, in Borno State in north-east Nigeria, local aid workers braved a deadly cholera outbreak, delivering emergency supplies to communities that international staff could not reach. They knew the terrain, spoke the local dialects and earned the trust of the people. But when the donor funds arrived, these same responders were pushed aside. The major strategies were drafted in Abuja or Geneva, and local expertise became an afterthought.

This contradiction sits at the core of Nigeria's humanitarian response: those closest to the crisis lead the effort on the ground, yet international organisations hold the purse strings and set the priorities. And while local groups and national NGOs are the first to respond, they are often the last to receive funding.

Aid at arm's length

The north-east remains the epicentre of Nigeria's humanitarian crisis. Over two million people have been displaced by Boko Haram's violence and the armed conflict that followed. In response, more than 350 registered local NGOs are delivering food assistance, health services and psychosocial support across Borno, Adamawa and Yobe. These organisations are deeply embedded in communities. They are not passive recipients of international goodwill; they are the backbone of the aid system. And yet they receive only a fraction of the support.

Globally, less than two per cent of humanitarian funding goes directly to local NGOs. In Nigeria, most donor money passes through large international NGOs or UN agencies, who then subcontract portions of the work to local partners. However, these sub-grants rarely include funding for core costs, such as salaries and rent, leaving local organisations without reserve funding or the flexibility to strengthen their systems. Meanwhile, international partners are granted 10–15 per

cent for the same purpose. This imbalance starves local organisations of the resources they need to grow, recruit staff or invest in long-term impact.

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This is not a matter of competence. Nigerian NGOs are led by skilled professionals, many of whom have years of field experience. But short-term project funding with no institutional investment has created a cycle of dependency. One local NGO leader describes this as 'being stuck on a treadmill', always having to deliver on someone else's terms.

International organisations often refer to local NGOs as 'partners'. But the reality on the ground feels very different. Research on Nigeria's aid sector shows that these relationships often follow a 'subcontracting logic', whereby foreign actors design the programmes, and local NGOs are contracted to deliver predefined outcomes.

During my fieldwork in Maiduguri, I encountered this dynamic time and again. One programme manager described how her team (all experts in conducting needs assessments in remote areas) was invited to a training session on conducting such assessments. The training was led by an international non-governmental organisation (INGO), whose staff had never worked in the region. 'We had to sit and be taught what we already knew', she told me.

These patterns reflect more than just poor coordination. They point to a deeper issue: a neo-colonial mindset embedded in today's aid architecture. Solutions, knowledge and authority are still assumed to come from the outside.

A seat at the table

The power imbalance isn't just financial — it's institutional. For years, Nigeria's Humanitarian Country Team (HCT), the top-level coordination body, was composed almost entirely of international staff. One token Nigerian NGO representative was expected to represent the entire local sector.

This exclusion has not been without consequences. Research by the Overseas Development Institute on the north-east Nigeria crisis found that decision-making dominated by international actors often led to assistance that was poorly adapted to local contexts, leaving some of the most vulnerable groups underserved. Women, people with disabilities

and minority ethnic groups were frequently overlooked in humanitarian planning, and aid delivery sometimes failed to address the cultural, linguistic or security realities of hard-to-reach communities. In effect, the absence of strong local representation in strategic forums has meant that the humanitarian system can unintentionally reinforce exclusion, thereby undermining both equity and impact.

Although four Nigerian NGO leaders were elected to the HCT in December 2023, this was more of a symbolic step, as inclusion without power is insufficient. True localisation means Nigerian voices shaping decisions about strategy, funding and programme design. Even within cluster meetings, local NGOs are often marginalised. Sessions are conducted in English, heavy with jargon and usually held in Abuja — far from the field. Many grassroots organisations cannot afford to travel or keep up with technical lingo. 'We're invited as participants, not as leaders', one NGO head told me. John Ede, a Nigerian humanitarian leader, sums it up best: 'We implement the projects on the ground, so we should have a say in how those projects are designed and funded.'

Towards structural change

What's happening in Nigeria mirrors a global problem. At the 2016 World Humanitarian Summit, donors pledged to send 25 per cent of aid 'as directly as possible' to local actors. The Grand Bargain was meant to shift power. By 2020, however, this target had been badly missed. In fact, as mentioned above, only two per cent of humanitarian funding ended up going directly to local organisations.

To move beyond rhetoric, localisation in Nigeria must become structural. This means more direct donor funding to local NGOs, including flexible, multi-year grants that support core operations. It also requires equitable partnerships, where Nigerian organisations co-design programmes and share strategic power. Finally, it demands guaranteed representation of local actors in coordination platforms, with real influence over policy and funding flows.

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Encouragingly, we are seeing movement. In its latest round, Nigeria's Humanitarian Fund allocated 58 per cent of funds directly to local NGOs, including women-led and disability-focused groups. This is one of the highest proportions of local funding globally — and proof that donors *can* work directly with national actors at scale.

But isolated reforms are not enough. What's needed is a structural overhaul. A 'whole new ecosystem of smart humanitarianism', as one aid consortium leader put it. This new model must be decentralised, flexible and genuinely collaborative — not dominated by compliance-heavy gatekeeping. It also means shifting the mindset of international agencies, from controlling and auditing local partners to mentoring and empowering them.

As humanitarian crises deepen across Nigeria, local and national responders must be recognised as default leaders, not last resorts. Across conflict-affected regions, communities have demonstrated resilience, knowledge and ingenuity in the face of systemic neglect. It is time for the humanitarian system to trust and invest in this strength. If we are serious about building an aid architecture that is effective, just and dignified, then the balance of power must shift. Resources, decision-making and leadership must be transferred to those closest to the crisis. Anything less is merely dressing up an outdated, colonial-era paradigm in new terminology.



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