

Executive Summary:

In the early hours of 14 June 2017, a devastating fire broke out in the Grenfell Tower apartment block in North Kensington, west London. The consequences of this event made it one of the worst disasters since the Second World War. It resulted in the deaths of seventy two people, rendered hundreds homeless and has had lasting effects on thousands of traumatised residents from the Tower, throughout the Lancaster West Estate and into the wider community of North Kensington.

The consequences of the disaster were compounded by the weak leadership of the response initially led by the local council, which was slow to provide direction, coordination and information and to address multiple pressing needs. Particularly in the first few weeks, this void was filled mainly by the community itself, supported by an array of local organisations and businesses, as well as individual volunteers and representatives from external organisations. Assistance was concentrated around nearby churches, mosques and clubs, which provided shelter, received and distributed the huge amounts of food, water and clothing donated by the public and offered comfort to large numbers of distressed people suddenly rendered homeless.

In the first few chaotic days and weeks, there were examples of timely, effective action, much of it from local organisations with no experience or training in emergency response, complemented at times by key expertise from outside. This included mass food distributions, including Halal meals; mechanisms to coordinate and distribute cash grants to survivors; rapidly channelled donor funding to local organisations; cultural and faith-sensitive support including around bereavement, clothing and language. Voluntary agencies, both faith-based and secular, were also pivotal in facilitating meetings in trusted spaces between community members and those tasked with leading efforts to cater to their needs.

One year on from the fire, many housing needs are still unmet, the collective trauma is undiminished for many and local businesses and people's working lives are continuing to be negatively affected. This has been an unusually major and complex emergency in an



Memorial wall with messages from the community

ethnically diverse area with a long history of deprivation and neglect. Organisations leading the response, including voluntary agencies with strong expertise in this field, were poorly equipped to deal with the complexity of the emergency, while organisations better attuned to the needs of the affected community, both local and external, were poorly embedded in the leadership of the response.

It would be easy to dismiss Grenfell as a one-off, compounded by the failings of a particularly flawed local authority but there are aspects that could play out again at a time when the frequency of disasters in the UK is likely to increase due to climate change, vulnerability to terror attacks and the inherent risks of life in crowded, unequal cities. This report, commissioned by Muslim Aid with the Al Manaar Centre and supported by local organisations, explores the role of the voluntary sector in the response, including faith-based organisations, with a view to informing the work of the sector and those who act with it, and feeding into wider thinking on the future of the voluntary sector's emergency preparedness and response, in London and beyond. Key issues include:



Volunteers off-load donations outside Notting Hill Methodist Church

Drawing on local capacities. In a major, complex disaster, local secular and faith organisations may well not have experience in emergency response, but they can draw on their local rootedness to act quickly and sensitively in line with the needs of communities they understand. In the Grenfell response, local organisations were key to tackling short-term needs and are playing a vital role in the longer term. This must be more completely and systematically embraced, both across the sector and by government.

Context matters. Emergency responses in highly heterogeneous inner-city areas like North Kensington need to take local contexts into account. Disaster response systems, behaviours and interventions all need to be tailored to specific local socio-economic and cultural dynamics in the short and longer term.

Building partnerships. Established emergency organisations have extensive experience and expertise, but they lack capacities that other entities, both local and national, may be able to offer. Partnerships between national and local actors bring reciprocal benefits both in short- and longer-term responses. Local actors cannot do without technical, strategic and financial support, while national players benefit from local understanding, links and trust from communities.

The added value of faith-based organisations. A variety of Muslim and Christian organisations have played critical leadership roles in the Grenfell response, offering trusted, expert assistance to local communities. The extensive physical presence of faith organisations at the heart of the UK's diverse communities needs to be properly recognised and harnessed as a vital element of contemporary emergency capacity.

Strengthening coordination. There were good examples of coordination in the Grenfell response, for example between Muslim charities, between funders and those who collaborated around cash grant distribution. Overall links across the sector and between the sector and government were weak, reflecting the lack of effective mechanisms to facilitate the involvement of the full range of actors engaged in emergencies at local level and beyond.

Investing long-term. Grenfell has generated complex or 'chronic' challenges, including around housing, mental health and livelihoods. To address these, interventions identified in association with residents must be supported as part of long-term recovery plans. Only so much though can be achieved through service provision and the sector must also be prepared to speak out more when confronted by injustice.

Developing effective funding mechanisms. The London Funders group and others that came together under the umbrella of the Charity Commission provided rapid, flexible, coordinated and transparent grants to affected communities and voluntary sector-run projects. There were challenges around targeting and the longer-term availability of resources. Lessons need to be learnt to ensure that funding for future emergencies is rapid, strategic and transparent.

Enhancing preparedness. Developing emergency preparedness capacities is a considerable challenge in the UK, as few secular or faith organisations have nationwide networks, and fewer still have the capacity to support preparedness work. New approaches and a different mix of organisations need to be brought into play if the sector is to become better equipped to respond when future disasters strike.