

Interview with Jan Egeland

Eminent Person of The Grand Bargain and Secretary General of the Norwegian Refugee Council

VIEWS ON THE EU



- > 1. In 2021, VOICE members adopted a Policy Resolution “Grand Bargain 2.0: let’s make it a turning point in the global humanitarian aid system” calling on the EU and its Member States to make tangible progress in the next few years on the following Grand Bargain (GB) priorities and themes: localisation, harmonisation, and simplification and quality funding. Where are we at in 2023 with the Grand Bargain progress?**

Over the past two years, the Grand Bargain has achieved some important steps in the right direction. Many donors and big implementers in the system have recognised the importance of quality, predictable funding, and have made commitments to increase the share of multiyear funding that they disburse or cascade to frontline organisations. We have created a new model for cash coordination, an issue that remained unresolved for almost a decade. Through the caucuses on the role of intermediaries and on funding for localisation, many organisations have made clear commitments to strengthen the quality of their partnerships, and to develop roadmaps on how and when to achieve the 25% target for funding channelled to and through local actors.

Although the Grand Bargain may not yet have transformed the system in the ways we had hoped, it would be wrong to say it hasn’t achieved results. There are many incremental changes in individual organisations - including in some of the big players in the system- that would not have happened without the Grand Bargain.

- > 2. The topic of this VOICE out loud is localisation. Have you seen any progress on this over the past years? To what extent the GB caucuses on the role of intermediaries and funding for localisation are expected to be game changers in the discussion?**

When Signatories agreed on the structure and focus of the GB 2.0, localisation was elevated to become one of the two enabling priorities of the Grand Bargain. Achieving localisation is key for a more efficient, effective, and relevant humanitarian system. Localisation has been a key priority for the Grand Bargain since its start, with a key focus on achieving 25% of humanitarian funding going to and through local and national NGOs. The system as a whole is far from reaching this target (according to current figures, direct funding to local and national actors is below 3%), and so one might think that we have totally failed localisation. But, I think that the system is moving in the right direction. Every major donor and major organisation that also acts as an intermediary now has policies, targets, and guidelines on localisation. We all want, and need, to do better. Both caucuses, the one on the role of intermediaries and the one on funding for localisation which I co-chaired with NEAR, provide a very useful framework for implementing these commitments. Signatories who adopted the caucuses’ outcomes demonstrate that there is a willingness to change, and this paved the way for others to follow. UN agencies now say that a large portion of their funding is going to and through local groups.

- > 3. According to Grand Bargain 2.0's priorities, localisation is critical for more effective aid. Even though there seems to be common agreement on this, many barriers remain. According to your experience as Eminent Person, what are those main blockages, at the leadership level, to move forward with the agenda?**

When we talk about the 25% target, there are indeed many barriers. Some donors mention that their bureaucracy, legal frameworks, or processes prevent them from funding directly local and national actors. Others have very limited presence in the field and few staff in capitals, and thus prefer to directly fund UN agencies or big INGOs in order to manage fewer grants. Other donors have very heavy compliance regimes, requiring NGOs to use large number of staff to manage all aspects of that partnership – some local and national actors simply don't have the capacity to manage these partnerships. From my perspective as EP, these are some of the barriers to moving forward on the funding aspect of localisation. To move forward, we should go back to some of the other original commitments in the Grand Bargain and agree to simplify and harmonise processes like due diligence and compliance. But mostly, there needs to be a big push from the top to enable these changes. Leaders from donor agencies, UN and INGOs to walk the talk. The NGO that I lead, the Norwegian Refugee Council, has hundreds of partnerships with local actors but the quality is not always great – for example, until very recently we would not share our overheads with them. This has now changed and NRC has developed a policy requiring that overhead funding is provided for local implementing partners in all NRC agreements. This marks an important change; one that will require donors to play ball. We will ask the donors to give local actors the same that they give to us, which is 7 per cent: that is, 7 per cent for us, 7 per cent for them. If donors are not willing to provide the additional 7 per cent to local groups, and NRC has to share the 7 per cent in overhead funding with a partner, then 4 per cent will go to the local group.

- > 4. The European Humanitarian Forum in Brussels on 20-21 March brought together humanitarian actors and EU stakeholders to discuss several issues affecting the delivery of humanitarian aid. Do you consider that the GB was featured enough in the forum discussions?**

Absolutely - I was pleased to see the Grand Bargain featuring high on the agenda of the European Humanitarian Forum again this year. We cannot really talk about the delivery of humanitarian aid without touching upon the Grand Bargain. In a context where needs continue to grow, we really need to live up our commitments and focus on efficiency and effectiveness.

At this year's EHF, DG ECHO also presented their localisation guidance – this is a major achievement for DG ECHO, and a step in the right direction.

- > 5. This year's Annual Meeting on 19 and 20 June 2023 will mark the end of the Grand Bargain 2.0. What do you think will be the future of the Grand Bargain?**

Indeed, the current phase of the Grand Bargain is about to end. Together with the Facilitation Group, which is in many ways the steering committee of the Grand Bargain, discussions are ongoing on what the next phase will look like. Many consultations have taken place with all Signatories, and what has emerged is a desire by all to keep this platform. It is clear that, despite the many achievements, we still have a long way to go to fully realise our commitments. Quality funding, localisation, and participation remain more relevant than ever. But we might also need to look back at the recommendations of the High Level Panel on Financing and re-consider the Grand Bargain with respect to the other pillars.

The Grand Bargain remains the only platform where all actors, donors, UN agencies, the Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement, INGOs, and local and national actors have an equal seat around the table. I will hand over my role to a successor.