

LOCALISATION: WHERE ARE WE AT AND HOW DID WE GET HERE?

THE ISSUE

LOCALISATION: EXPLORING A MULTIFACETED AGENDA

EARLY LOCALISATION DEVELOPMENTS

Many faith-based INGOs and the Red Cross movement have worked with local partners for decades. In 2013, humanitarian researchers Ben Ramalingam, Bill Gray and Georgia Cerruti issued the “Missed Opportunities” report evidencing the case for greater investment in local actors. In 2015, NGOs ADESO, CAFOD, Christian Aid and DanChurchAid launched the ‘Charter for Change’, where 40 INGOs made 8 commitments toward empowering partnership practice, which were endorsed by 600 local NGOs.

In 2016, OCHA organised the World Humanitarian Summit in Istanbul. In advance of the Summit, OCHA held regional consultations with thousands of humanitarian stakeholders. The loudest issue that emerged was the need for a shift in power in the sector to channel more respect, more voice and more resources to local actors, such as local civil society and local Red Cross/Crescent branches.

THE CASE FOR LOCALISATION

The case for localisation relates partly to effectiveness and partly to ethics. On ethical grounds, some feel it right for national actors in their own country to lead the management of the assistance communities require in a crisis. If there were a flood in Italy, many affected citizens would likely feel more comfortable being supported by Italian emergency services than by an influx of American, British or Russian rescue workers.

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Christian Aid partner Jeridoo Foundation (JDF) working in IDP camps in NE Nigeria near Maiduguri in Borno State organizing football tournaments to aid the psycho-social well-being of displaced children fleeing Boko Haram terrorist violence, funded by the Dutch Relief Alliance. ©Photo: Michael Mosselmans/Christian Aid

The effectiveness case is that many local actors are closer to the communities they come from, so better positioned to understand what kind of assistance communities value, what kind of assistance best fits with the local culture, and who the most vulnerable people are. They are more able to communicate candidly with communities and hence to better respond to feedback. They are in communities before during and after crises so well-positioned to ensure a smooth transition between preparedness, relief, and recovery. Their running costs are lower than international organisations which enables value for money. Furthermore, the growing volume of crises occasioned by escalating climate change, COVID-19 and renewed conflict in several contexts significantly exceed the international system’s capacity, so it is imperative to grow national response capacities to strengthen the sector’s reach.

With thousands of local civil society organisations in dozens of different settings, it would be ludicrous to pretend that one size fits all, so the capacities, strengths and weaknesses of local actors vary enormously (as with international NGOs).

PROGRESS ON LOCALISATION

At the World Humanitarian Summit, major donors, UN agencies, the Red Cross and three major NGO networks (ICVA, InterAction and SCHR) signed the Grand Bargain, with commitments to accelerate localisation, including the target of providing 25% of funding to local actors from a baseline of 0.2%. The target is often misunderstood as it refers to funding that reaches local actors via one intermediary – wherein a donor like ECHO gives funding to an intermediary like WFP who give money to a local actor. We do not yet have effective data systems to measure this well.

The COVID-19 crisis that resulted in an unprecedented global lockdown from early 2020 created significant challenges to international actors with restrictions on movement and travel meaning local actors had to take a larger role in delivering humanitarian assistance. Furthermore, the #BlackLivesMatter movement that gained prominence following the unlawful killing of George Floyd in May 2020 resulted in significant reflection across the international NGO sector about how to respond to accusations of racism and colonialisation concerning long-standing sector practices, which accelerated efforts to think about how to better respect local humanitarian actors as a sector.

One outcome was the establishment of the “Pledge for Change” launched in October 2022 by the CEOs of ADESO, CARE, Christian Aid, OXFAM and Save the Children, and signed up to by 11 INGOs making commitments to an ambitious decolonisation agenda around equitable partnership, authentic storytelling and influencing wider change.

Meanwhile, Grand Bargain 2.0 launched in May 2022 narrowed from its original 10 themes to prioritise progress in quality funding, localisation and participation. The Grand Bargain established two high-level caucuses on localisation to secure leadership commitment to unlock barriers – one committed to more empowering practices toward local partners by intermediaries (INGOs, Red Cross and UN); a second considered how to better deliver progress toward the 25% target.



Community members part of the women-led partner Agri Services Ethiopia water supply project near Jinka, capital of South Omo (Ethiopia). ©Photo: Michael Mosselmans/Christian Aid

DONOR INITIATIVES

Important donors have begun to issue progressive new policies to drive localisation forward, including USAID, the world’s largest donor, who are making determined strides toward increased quality funding for local actors. Michael Koehler, Deputy Director General of DG ECHO, launched ECHO’s progressive new localisation policy at the European Humanitarian Forum on 20 March 2023, which requests partners to prioritise working with local actors where achievable, proposes that if possible at least 25% of each ECHO grant should be channelled to local actors, demands that local partners receive fair overhead costs, and undertakes to give those who demonstrate equitable partnership practice extra marks when choosing which proposals to fund.

FUTURE DIRECTIONS

An important development being furthered by some international and local NGOs is to move one step further by not only seeking to shift power to local organisations, but to shift power to communities in crisis. One important modality is the ‘Survivor and Community-led Response’ approach developed by the Local to Global Protection initiative, where local NGOs make small grants to community-based, grassroots and pop-up groups who design and implement their own humanitarian assistance, protection and recovery interventions, straddling the cash, localisation, nexus and participation themes of the Grand Bargain.

BUMPS IN THE ROAD

A significant challenge for the localisation agenda has been that rhetoric on localisation is far ahead of reality in crisis countries. All major international humanitarian stakeholders have signed the Grand Bargain and in the aftermath of COVID-19 and #BlackLivesMatter, it is hard to find a humanitarian actor who claims not to believe that localisation is the way forward for the sector. But many actors have been slow to walk the talk.

A further challenge is that the heavy compliance architecture of the international humanitarian system can imply that the national NGOs that donors are most comfortable to fund are big capital-based national NGOs that display the same characteristics as international actors, whereas some believe that smaller community-based grassroots organisations, who struggle to navigate the complex compliance demands of the international system, bring the most attractive advantages of locally-led response, being closest to the communities they serve.

NEXT STEPS TO ACCELERATE PROGRESS

The key ways forward being proposed by the Grand Bargain and the Charter for Change include:

- moving the centre of gravity of the debate from Geneva, Brussels, and New York to country level. It is at the country level where humanitarian action happens and where progress toward localisation is slower than everyone would wish. The Grand Bargain is establishing National Reference Groups to bring multi-stakeholder dialogue to crisis contexts; the Charter for Change is establishing country networks with the same intention; and the Start Network is decentralising power to locally-led hubs
- ensuring fair overhead costs for local actors. International actors insist on receiving 7-10% overheads to meet the costs of their organisation in programme budgets. National actors seldom receive anything. But national actors also require investment in their operating costs (e.g. security guards, cleaners, staff training, financial systems, office maintenance, conference attendance, psychological support, well-being, health insurance, pensions, transport.)
- the need to revisit compliance and due diligence requirements to ensure they are fit for purpose, proportionate and do not inhibit progress toward localisation
- Trocaire, CAFOD, Christian Aid, CRS, Kerk-in-Actie, SCIAF and Tearfund have launched a pilot under Charter for Change to investigate how to simplify and harmonise compliance and due diligence as a first stab at modelling good practice for the sector.

Michael Mosselmans, Head of Humanitarian Division
Christian Aid

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