



# Unpacking the localisation agenda: What do we mean by 'as local as possible'?

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## EVENT REPORT

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BRUXELLES

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## KEY MESSAGES

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The Grand Bargain created a momentum for the whole humanitarian community to think about the localisation agenda. It forced donors and humanitarian organisations to think about it in a structured way. Since the 2016 World Humanitarian Summit, the process of localisation has been slow but the involvement of local and national actors in humanitarian responses certainly increased.

Although the humanitarian community is willing to move forward on the localisation agenda, there remains obstacles. In that respect, many donors face legal and administrative constraints impeding them to directly fund local and national organisations. Furthermore, the increasing use of counter-terrorism measures and impact of sanction regimes tend to limit further the risk appetite for donors challenging their ability to foster the localisation agenda.

In face of these challenges, the need for strengthening trust between the different stakeholders has been highlighted as essential to move forward, as much as investing collectively in national and local leadership. The panel recognized the new dimensions and understanding of the added value of local actors and agreed that a wider interpretation of what 'capacity' is should be explored.

# Introductory remarks

Following the opening and welcoming remarks by Dominic Crowley, President of VOICE, Koen Van Acoleyen, acting Director of Humanitarian Aid and Transition at the Belgium Ministry of Foreign Affairs, presented his introductory remarks.

Koen opened the discussion by reminding his audience why localisation is such an important feature of humanitarian aid. Localisation is about acceptance and inclusion; it entails a contextual approach to a specific situation, increasing resilience and offering a better response. Throughout the years, the localisation agenda has been mainstreamed by the humanitarian community. As a signatory of the Grand Bargain, Belgium has established three targets: to allocate 60% of its budget to unearmarked funding, to focus mainly on cash-based programming and involve local actors in the humanitarian response. With these objectives in mind, Koen stressed that Country-based Pooled Funds (CBPF) represent a great opportunity to achieve localisation.

Although recent analysis has shown that 25% of CBPF are channelled through national and local actors, compared to 1% in 2006, Belgium and other donors still encounter funding obstacles; Koen mentioned legal constraints such as the impossibility for donors to finance directly local NGOs. Another challenge is related to the question of risk sharing and accountability; as local actors may undergo pressure from their government or other actors, involving them presents a risk of politicisation of humanitarian assistance or of aid diversion. Koen also underlined the struggle of measuring progress on this agenda and the need to be clearer about the definition of local actors and what is meant by 'as local as possible'. Lastly, despite progress by some donors, larger humanitarian donors face difficulties in implementing this second workstream of the Grand Bargain. Koen concluded by welcoming this event organised in the frame of the VOICE Grand Bargain project funded by the Belgium Ministry of Foreign Affairs.



# Panel presentation

Walter Füllemann introduced the panellists. Unfortunately, Nasra Ali Ismail, acting Director of Somalia NGO Consortium, could not attend the event as she had to be in Somalia for humanitarian reasons.

Walter then proceeded to underline ICRC's big advantage as the Red Cross and Crescents broad network offers a great local perspective on humanitarian issues since they are embedded in local communities. For national societies and local actors, the commitment to local communities is strong as they are not going to go away; they will be forever involved with these communities. Local and national actors are the first ones to respond in case of humanitarian crisis. With regards to protection, Walter insisted that it is ICRC's task to remind all parties to the conflict to respect International Humanitarian Law. In order to do so, it is paramount to be seen as impartial and independent. For ICRC, principled humanitarian action and its perception are absolutely essential. In settings politically, religiously and ethnically charged, it is not easy. If non state actors are fighting the state, it gets challenging for national societies to be seen as principled actors. What is more, the increasing protracted nature of conflicts nowadays is game-changing. Walter insisted on the importance of complementarity; the notion of humanitarian actors getting in and out in a short time period is no longer applicable. But what does complementarity mean? The treaty-based nature and international mandate of ICRC, on one hand, and the proximity of the Red Cross and Crescents movement to local communities, on another hand, offer a more effective humanitarian response. In terms of long term and more local-based action, the Federation presents an important added value.

Walter opened the discussion with a question regarding progress achieved on the localisation agenda and in the second part of the debate proceeded to ask the panellists what can still be improved and what are the challenges remaining.





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**Sema Genel Karaosmanoglu, Executive Director,  
Support to Life and chair of the NEAR Network**

Sema presented briefly the NEAR network. As a network from the global south, NEAR represents no less than 286 local and national actors. Born three years ago, during the World Humanitarian Summit (WHS), the NEAR network brings local and national actors to discuss similar issues and concerns about the way the humanitarian system is operating. The network allowed local actors to formalise some of these discussions and bring them to a global level. During the WHS, the issue of localisation came out very strongly and serious commitments were made by donors, UN actors and international NGOs. On that particular matter, NEAR offers the opportunity to discuss these issues in localities, at the national level and see how this agenda can be pushed forward. The network received a lot of support and benefited from grants to put some ideas into action. Sema also highlighted that the NEAR network created strategic alliance with some international NGO partners and coordinates with other networks.

Sema then reacted to Koen's intervention. As pool funding mechanisms increase, it is a good way to engage more and more with local actors. However, they cannot have more access to the resources available out there. Consortia between local and international NGOs also offer great mechanisms to include local partners. Sema concluded that although the process is slow, we see increasing engagement of local actors in humanitarian responses to humanitarian crises.

Sema highlighted that risk and trust are the heart of the challenge around localisation. We need to change the way we view risk. The way it is currently perceived affects the effectiveness of the humanitarian system; national, local actors and affected populations are paying the highest price. Sema urged that donors are too risk averse but that there must be ways of taking calculated risks. She also questioned the definition of capacity. From her perspective, capacity is often seen as the ability to comply with donors' requirements – thus Sema questioned if we could change this way of thinking?

Sema acknowledged a crisis around trust. Trust is about listening, appreciating, respecting and accepting. Trust is about listening, appreciating, respecting and accepting. When there is a lack of trust among humanitarian actors, the solution tends to evolve around putting in yet heavier mechanisms for risk management.



Furthermore, humanitarian financing is seen as merely transactional; we do not acknowledge reinforcing first responders and local capacities as investment for the future. At present, the humanitarian community does not utilize and invest in civil society but rather overpowers it. Sema advocated for humanitarian financing to build a vibrant civil society while meeting humanitarian needs, which could be according to her, an end in itself.



## Anita Bay Bundegaard, Head of the EU Office, *Save The Children*

Anita offered a perspective from an international NGO. Save the Children is a network of thirty national organisations. The network functions as whole to develop programmes. Anita stressed that the developments Save the Children has gone through have to be seen in conjunction with the global initiative of the Grand Bargain as the different component of the Grand Bargain are interlinked – one cannot talk about localisation without tackling the issue of multi-year funding, for example. Save the Children is now building its policies and systems to mainstream localisation in the network.

Anita carried on and noted that in a way, it is still early days for the localisation agenda, Save the Children is still trying new things. Anita shared with the audience few examples on how they work towards localisation. In Somalia, Save the Children – leading the education cluster with UNICEF – decided to translate all significant documents in Somali and conduct meeting in Somali. This initiative allowed local authorities and local actors to use those documents. The specific commitments were designed to strengthen the local capacity in Somalia. Last but not least, Anita mentioned how the localisation agenda has moved into other frameworks such as the Global Compacts for Migration and Refugees; this indicates how the localisation issue is as important in other settings.

As Walter mentioned the protracted crises, Anita stressed that many situations take place in a context that present both humanitarian and development features. These difficult situations entail complex operating circumstances for humanitarian actors; while in some instances governments cooperate with humanitarian workers, they might in other cases decide to go against them. Moreover, Anita emphasised that one has to be aware of the fact that local NGOs are sometimes working in complicated settings and suffer from all kind of pressure – which incidentally increase risk aversion for donors. These situations have consequences on the localisation agenda. One way to handle this issue is to balance trust and control and pay attention to the way the partnership in humanitarian settings is developed. Without trust, it is hard to do localisation.

On the other hand, the issue of risk taking is one of the biggest challenge for donors. However, Anita explained that one interesting feature of the Grand Bargain and the localisation agenda is that this initiative precisely includes all actors – donors and partners.



But the transfer of risk remains a great challenge for the humanitarian community as actors do not always see what the localisation agenda entails on this particular matter. Anita noted that there is no common position on the question. Even different priorities within the Grand Bargain are working against each other. Although it was clearly not the intention, localisation is sometimes undermined by other agendas such as the request for more accountability and transparency when it comes to local partners. In light of the politically charged contexts in which humanitarian actors operate, Anita regretted that as of today it still seems difficult for actors to trust each other. This issue seems to be one of the most important challenge of the localisation agenda.





**Kim Eling, Head of Unit, International and Interinstitutional Relations, Legal Framework, DG ECHO**

Kim explained that ECHO is supporting specific projects on localisation. Localisation is not a new concept; much of the first response has always been done by local actors. What is new is that the Grand Bargain has forced both donors and humanitarian organisations to think about it in a structured way. Having the localisation agenda as a Grand Bargain commitment is challenging for the humanitarian community and it is positive. Kim carried on by explaining that due to legal constraints, ECHO cannot directly fund national and local actors as such and given the upcoming institutional changes, it is not likely to change anytime soon. However, the EU is funding local actors extensively through the partners it works with. In some instances, it might be purely incidental while in other cases, it is absolutely central to the design of the programme the EU is supporting. For example, through the ESSN programme, the EU is able to indirectly finance prominently local partners. From the very beginning, there has been a strong local-national voice in the programme. ECHO also finances the DREF which is a way to support Red Cross Red Crescent national societies and would like to see how to encourage its partners to engage more systematically with local NGOs. Kim noted that the quantification of assistance to local NGOs through ECHO's partners is not possible yet. Although it is too early to give clear conclusions on projects dedicated to localisation, Kim picked out a few points on the results so far:

- As humanitarian actors work on specific contexts, to ensure protection and fulfil the needs, impartiality is fundamental for partners;
- Localisation is not only about donors and partners but also about the relationship between local/international NGOs, UN agencies and implementing partners. It is about how the partnership is defined;
- The donors' community must take into account that, in addition to inherent risks linked to humanitarian activities, local actors might be confronted with additional and more specific risks;
- It is not only about funding but also about empowering the actors on the ground and integrate them in the humanitarian structure – which has presented great progress since the WHS;
- The CBPF are not yet funded by ECHO. However, Kim acknowledged that this represents a huge game changer, and that this is potentially a way forward for ECHO to support local NGOs.



In terms of next steps, Kim underlined that there is no single track on this. Given that CBPF offer potential for building local capacity and fostering the localisation agenda, ECHO is now exploring piloting contributions to two of them.

Kim mentioned the South Sudanese humanitarian fund and the Ukrainian one.

As expressed in its first intervention, lessons learned of the two flagship initiatives funded by the ERC on localisation (to support the NEAR network and the Red Cross movement) will also provide ECHO with further elements to continue strengthening its engagement.



# Exchange with the audience

The question and answer session gave the participants the opportunity to develop a diversity of interesting points of view.

A first set of questions dealt with the definition of localisation. It was proposed not to only focus on local NGOs but look at localisation broader, and to consider the risk-appetite of donors as well as the diversity and capacities of local NGOs.

The representative of DRC explained that the organization is questioning the focus on funding transfer and the percentage approach behind localisation since they want to concentrate on the ultimate purpose of localisation that is building self-reliance.

The NEAR network has developed a framework with 6 components – partnership, funding, capacity, coordination/complementarity, policy/influence/visibility, and participation – to be used for measuring progress towards localisation. It is a tool that assesses a baseline based on these 6 components, and provides a guide to develop action points in areas where localisation is lagging behind. Because civil society is both local and global, INGOs have their role to play – it is more about connecting the local to the global as opposed to doing the job on the ground. INGOs have to be open about this and listen to the responders that are already there in a crisis. INGOs put forth the argument of impartiality, however we must remember that (according to ALNAP research) 93% of all aid workers are national staff. It is only by investing in local systems of accountability that we can break prejudices around corruption.

For Save the Children, who is working with marginalized children, localisation is different according to specific contexts. The organization addresses the gaps left based on what locals already do. It is not necessarily local NGOs but rather local communities responding to those in needs.

In absence of direct funding, ECHO encourages its partners to work with local partners through the requirement of some criteria in proposals such as the assessment of local capacities and possibly through multi-year funding. The Nexus approach should also support sustainability.

Attention was also drawn to the fact that risks seriously increase as the level of transfer becomes more important. The absence of means for local in

between short term project contracts was also flagged. Building local capacities requires longer-term options. Often the good job made by locals is not sustainable without external support.

It was suggested that the localisation agenda was shaped by Southern actors and not forced by strategies built in the North. Localisation is a work stream of the Grand Bargain and there are more debates on localisation in the North; it might be INGOs needing capacity building to better balance the power. The Grand Bargain includes things working against each other behind the prevalence of effectiveness.



Kim said that donors are supporting funding to local NGOs and multiannual funding is not only an intention but is becoming a fact with strategic and programmatic partnerships. Also the new instruments have a huge potential to support resilience. Let's learn from development, he said, that is much more advanced on working with local actors.

Coming back to risk transfer, Koen said that if risk would be expressed as financial and security costs, locals would be far more expensive related to the actual risk they bear; cost effectiveness would then be looked at differently. Donors should better value the diverse dimensions of what locals bring – such as partnership, representativeness or participatory processes – and adopt a broader concept of capacity.

Sema underlined that although localisation faces many challenges, local actors have to be involved if we want to reduce risk. If we want to empower the local civil society, we have to mobilise local networks.



We should also ask local partners what seems to empower them, and consider empowering communities, not only local NGOs.

The representative of HI said that, while working with number of local partners, it is clear that counter-terrorism measures jeopardize humanitarian aid and raise numerous ethical problems – making it more difficult to combine all this with localisation. Bringing a donor's point of view, the Belgian representative confirmed that counter-terrorism is an issue, leading donors to impose much more sanctions and constraints. There are complex discussions among EU Member States on this particular issue. It explains why donors are requiring evidence on local responders, local suppliers, etc. Although the European Parliament was supportive of the humanitarian principles, there might be a chance that this trend will be overturned with the upcoming European elections, making the bureaucracy more nervous, with a risk of going backward on security and risk sharing.

Sema added that there is a need for new ways of thinking and new tools, such as a process-based framework (versus the result-based framework currently used), re-understanding capacities (versus the current understanding that solely equates

capacity with meeting donor requirements), investing in local actors and communities for built-in resilience (versus bringing resilience from the outside to “beneficiaries”), and indigenous approaches to risk management. Donors are key to support the increase of local leadership and to make strong local partnership a conditionality. To make the choice of mainstreaming localisation means integrating it everywhere in everything, and investing in the collective, at national level and with local leadership, as well as in the organizational.



## Conclusion

As Walter rounded off the debate, he asked the panellists what would be next on their agenda as organisation or donor and what does this mean for the localisation agenda.

Anita said that the localisation is a priority reflected in Save the Children's policies and practices. Regarding discussion with donors, humanitarian actors and donors need to help each other and bring this issue on the agenda of the next European Parliament. The issue of localisation needs to remain a high priority.

Sema noted that local actors finally feel that they can talk about issues of risk transfer and the imbalance of power within the humanitarian system. This represents a clear positive step of the Grand Bargain. She welcomed how the Grand Bargain has started mobilising local leadership to become more vocal on what changes need to take place within the system. However, she stressed how important it is to capitalise all those efforts and developments. Donors and the big humanitarian players need to look at how they can

transform their achievements into something sustainable.

Finally, Kim looked back at all the work the humanitarian community has come to and acknowledged that without the Grand Bargain, none of this would have been possible.





VOICE (Voluntary Organisations in Cooperation in Emergencies) is a network representing 85 European NGOs active in humanitarian aid worldwide. VOICE is the main interlocutor with the EU on emergency aid and disaster risk reduction



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