

Localising humanitarian responses

Unpacking perceptions on Localisation

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SUMMARY REPORT



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“Localising Humanitarian Responses” was the first event in a series of four that seek to better understand localisation and its many manifestations, aiming to challenge assumptions and explore the wealth of experience and knowledge on localizing humanitarian assistance.

Convened by Save the Children Denmark, ActionAid Denmark and Oxfam IBIS and funded by Globalt Fokus the project entitled “Localisation in Practice” aims to identify and explore key challenges and opportunities in operationalizing the Localisation commitment within international organizational frameworks such as those to which the three co-conveners belong.

The events are designed to support humanitarian policy makers, practitioners and researchers to gain from a broad knowledge base and understanding, when working with different approaches to localised humanitarian response.

On this background the event “Localising Humanitarian Responses” held in collaboration with the Danish Institute for International Studies and the Danish Ministry of Foreign Affairs, engaged in unpacking the concept of “localisation” by critically engaging different perceptions of what localisation is and how it can be operationalised. It brought together six experienced practitioners and researchers, who engage with the localisation agenda in various ways and with different points of departure.

Following the event, the convening organisations held a reflection-workshop in which the identified topics and challenges were reflected upon in relation to the organisations themselves and the sector as a whole.

The themes and challenges identified are summarised below and will form the basis of further learning during the coming events.

Keynote speakers:

- Coree Steadman, IFRC, Senior officer, Localisation, Coordinator of the Grand Bargain Localization workstream on behalf of IFRC as co-convenor
- Georges Ghali, ALEF (Act for Human Rights), Lebanon, Executive Director
- Grace G. Ileri, East Africa Humanitarian Programme Co-ordinator, ActionAid / former programme manager of the Shifting the Power project in Kenya
- Anthony Nolan, Save the Children Global Education Cluster Coordinator/ Former UNICEF Global Technical Lead, Localisation, Child Protection Area of Responsibility
- Veronique Barbelet, Senior Research Fellow and John Bryant, Research Officer, Humanitarian Policy Group/ Overseas Development Institute

Key themes identified:

Lack of a common understanding on key concepts

A key challenge which was quickly identified following the conception of the second workstream under the Grand Bargain entitled “More support and funding tools to local and national responders” was the lack of a common understanding of what was meant by local and national responders. Different actors continue to have different definitions of when an actor is to be considered local, making evaluation of the achievements towards better supporting these actors complicated. Furthermore, as posed by several of the speakers present, the fourth commitment under this workstream¹ has received an excessive amount of attention compared to the others, despite capturing only one the funding aspect of localisation efforts. This has diverted attention away from other important commitments under this workstream such as capacity strengthening of local responders and improving complementarity in contexts where international and local actors are cooperating in a response.

Complementarity was particularly highlighted as an area which would benefit from further unpacking as most Grand Bargain supporters and signatories recognise the relevance of international actors to a certain degree in contexts of internal tension and conflict. Known as the commitment to respond as “locally as possible and as international as necessary” and reinforcing rather than replacing, most actors are still struggling to ascertain what this means in practice and how equal collaboration and participation is to be realised. There may be several reasons for this, including issues of lack of capacity – or rather lack of confidence in present capacity both of which will be further examined in this summary.

A significant point of contention in the discussion of localisation is that of local capacities and how to best harness, strengthen and enable these. Several speakers highlighted that there is a pervasive understanding of capacity as being something that international actors have and local actors lack – leading to an understanding of capacities defined by the needs and priorities of international organisations, rather than the needs of the local actors with whom they work.

These very narrow definitions of capacity present several challenges including missing out on beneficial partnerships with local organisations whose structures and capabilities cannot be recognised within the organisational framework of an international organisation. This includes locally led and civil-society

¹ Achieve by 2020 a global, aggregated target of at least 25 per cent of humanitarian funding to local and national responders as directly as possible to improve outcomes for affected people and reduce transactional costs.

based organisations who often have significant capabilities and immense contextual understanding but lack a traditional organisational structure.

These limitations also extend to capacity strengthening modalities as unfortunately more holistic and long-term commitments such as secondment of local staff, mixed INGO and local trainings and training of local capacity strengthening experts are rarely explored.

Several speakers touched upon the involvement of local organisations in discussions of capacity and securing ownership and leaderships of capacity strengthening as a key issue in ensuring better collaboration and stronger local humanitarian capacities.

Power-dynamics in the international humanitarian systems and ways of working

An uncomfortable fact touched on by almost all speakers was the fact that power-dynamics between local/national and international actors contributes significantly to the challenges of realising localisation. Collaboration between international and local actors continue to suffer from assumptions of local actors being a financial risk and less impartial and the burden of proof still lies heavily with those in favour having to prove the advantages of localised response. While these worries may in some cases be warranted, flipping the narrative from questioning localisation to questioning the reasons for not working locally could prove a significant step in the right direction. Especially since there is no concrete evidence to back up assumptions that risks such as fraud are more prevalent within local organisations than in their international counterparts.

More importantly, there is a significant need for INGO's to look inward at their role in changing these power-dynamics and acknowledging that the current ways of working are skewed in favour of international action in regard to donor requirements and funding systems. If the ambitions of the localisation commitment are to be realised, the role of INGO's must change, letting local organisations access funding mechanisms, ensuring their participation in relevant coordination forums and increasing their visibility in communications even if this ultimately happens to the detriment of international actors. An important part of this will be moving away from looking at partnerships primarily as a vehicle of service delivery and toward focusing on more sustainable objectives such a capacity strengthening, providing technical and operational guidance and providing seed funding for partners to start projects of their own to strengthen their credibility and capacities.

Directions of accountability

Another significant aspect of these power-dynamics to which donor organisations are a significant contributor is that of accountability. The research of ODI highlighted a strong tendency towards international organisations feeling primarily accountable to donors whereas local organisations were significantly more focused on their accountability towards the communities in which they work. This is quite evident in the fact that while international actors and donors came together in the Grand Bargain to work towards more efficient delivery of humanitarian assistance, many local organisations place very little significance on these commitments in terms of actual realised change. Conversely there have been several examples of local organisations and governments using the Grand Bargain to hold internationals accountable to their commitments to work locally and change their ways of working to better accommodate collaboration with local organisations. This was and is still evident in Bangladesh where the government has taken a clear stance against organisations who are unwilling to work with local organisations in the Rohingya Refugee Response.

Strengthening the accountability of international organisations is of significant importance and is not just a question of furthering equal collaboration but rather of seeing partner staff as equals. There are several examples of overwhelming discrepancies in the emphasis placed on the safety of partner staff in comparison with international staff, a fact to which most international organisations are currently oblivious. Safety should always be at the forefront of any collaboration especially in volatile humanitarian contexts and having an open dialogue for raising such questions and for local organisations to raise these issues with their international partners is paramount to ensuring safe and equal partnerships.

Structural and cultural challenges for local participation in funding and coordination mechanisms

The prevalent power-dynamics in the sector described above have naturally influenced the structures and culture within the sector, making it difficult to transform the words of the localisation commitment into action.

One of the bigger challenges facing any organisation working in the humanitarian field is that of funding. As mentioned above, this was directly addressed by the widely discussed 25% -commitment, but the actual directness and amount of funding is not necessarily of the greatest importance.

Described as “a red herring”, the actual directness of the funding is not of primary importance to local organisations, what matters is the flexibility with which they are able to distribute the funding they receive, and most importantly – that funding includes the covering of indirect costs. The 7% overhead included in all funding received by international organisations, is not mirrored in the funding they relay to their local partners. This makes it almost impossible for local organisations to build up the organisational capacities to be able to accommodate donor requirements and being unable to retain talented and capable staff between responses. The fact that funding is still largely provided in short term cycles only serves to further these challenges, as local staff will often go searching for more stable positions in international organisations or leave the sector all-together.

While it may seem a simple fix to simply include overheads in all agreements made with local organisations – and rightly so, there is a serious discussion to be had about restructuring funding mechanisms to better accommodate local organisations as they appear.

Building organisational capacity often becomes a process of shaping local organisations to look like mini-INGO’s rather than respecting the advantages of their different structures and cultures and trying to accommodate these. Frameworks such as SHAPE² has taken this on, looking at how local organisations can access funding and create donor interest without losing their local anchoring and connection with the communities from which they originated.

Changes such as reducing minimum asks for pooled funds, covering overhead costs and changing reporting requirements to better fit more operationally focused organisations will require flexibility on the part of donors and international organisations but is a prerequisite for achieving what was set out in the Grand Bargain commitments.

Another important commitment held within the localisation workstream is the inclusion of local organisations in coordination mechanisms³. Significant strides have been made in the direction of including local partners in existing international and local coordination mechanisms but there are still areas where change could and should be made in order to become more inclusive.

The UN cluster system has done a great job of including national and local NGO’s, but the fact that only very few clusters are ever led by local actors is a significant flaw, since these are the organisations

² <https://start-network.app.box.com/s/7qm2hz9sz4wjwian07cuc49xuayazf50>

³ Commitment 3: Support and complement national coordination mechanisms where they exist and include local and national responders in the international coordination mechanisms as appropriate and in keeping with humanitarian principles

which the clusters ultimately represent. Leadership in these forums also carries a massive symbolic significance in acknowledging the voice of local actors. A significant obstacle to this is the fact that despite most cluster meetings being held in a language other than English, almost all the materials provided are in English, combined with the use of technical jargon and a fondness for abbreviations this is not exactly a recipe for inclusivity.

Moving forward and putting words into action

The significance of the Localisation commitment under Grand Bargain as an international ambition should not be underestimated, but putting those words into action has proven more difficult than initially expected. Committing to improving the collaboration with local actors requires significant change in the structures and ways of thinking and working that have long dominated the humanitarian sector. Moving away from considering localisation and partnerships as primarily funding-focused would be an important first step toward creating longer-term, holistic collaboration between international and local organisations while simultaneously addressing some of the worries and assumptions which currently constrain collaboration.

But while sustainable engagement and changing of structures is a great step in the right direction, putting localisation into action requires international organisations to accept the fact that their role in humanitarian assistance needs to change from first-line to a role of facilitation and assistance when needed, letting local organisations take charge and providing them with the resources to do so. The complicated nature of the contexts in which humanitarian responses take place along with a perceived lack of “humanitarian” organisations present is too often used to excuse not collaborating locally. This despite capacity strengthening and collaboration with traditionally development-focused local partners would not only contribute to efforts of localisation but also to realising better collaboration across the Humanitarian/Development nexus.

This process will also require significant flexibility on the part of donors, since putting more decision-making power and responsibility into the hands of local organisations will require some flexibility in terms of expectations and requirements for dedicated staff for reporting and compliance. It will also require donors to move towards smaller grants for more actors rather than the other way around if actual localisation of assistance is to be achieved.