



BRIDGING THE INTENTION TO ACTION GAP: THE FUTURE ROLE OF INTERMEDIARIES IN SUPPORTING LOCALLY LED HUMANITARIAN ACTION

Executive Summary Report

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Since the World Humanitarian Summit 2016, the discussion on locally led humanitarian action has evolved considerably. The debate has become more nuanced in many ways, and with respect to intermediaries, the discussion has become less polarised and more constructive. This research paper contributes to that constructive direction by recognising that intermediaries have a role to play but that **the future role of intermediaries needs to change substantially from the current status quo.**

This study results from a shared ambition of the members of the Grand Bargain Localisation Workstream to increase clarity and ambition as to how the role of intermediaries should be evolving. In consultation with its co-convenor, the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies, and members of the Workstream, the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation commissioned the project to explore the future role of organisations when acting as intermediaries. The study was conducted during April and May 2021 and involved over 100 stakeholders from 36 countries from across the humanitarian system.

What this paper does

- ▶ Proposes a future role for intermediaries in supporting locally led response, recognising that an important transition needs to take place.
- ▶ Employs a behavioural science approach to help understand why intermediaries are not already transitioning into this role.
- ▶ Identifies interventions for change in three essential areas: motivation, opportunity and capabilities to support change to an ideal future role for intermediaries.

Organisations acting as intermediaries

The research recognises that organisations can play multiple roles in humanitarian preparedness, response and recovery programming. These are broadly divided into two areas:

- ▶ **Direct implementation:** where an organisation receives funding from the donor and directly implements the activities in the target areas or with target communities.
- ▶ **Intermediary role:** where an organisation, network or mechanism acts as an intermediary between donors and national or local implementing organisations through provision of funding or other support.

This research focuses on the intermediary role though acknowledges the relationship between both modalities.

KEY FINDINGS

The existing role of intermediaries needs to fundamentally shift to better support locally led action.

- a. **The balance of direct implementation and intermediary roles for organisations not local to context needs to shift.** The existing balance is not considered to be appropriate or fit for purpose, and international organisations in many contexts continue to inappropriately default to direct implementation.¹

- b. **The role of the intermediary, when requested or required, needs to be more appropriate and accountable.** Even when international organisations act as intermediaries, many local and national organisations do not receive the support they request or believe they need to maximise their effective contribution to the humanitarian system.²

Barriers preventing change are currently far more powerful than the triggers that will motivate change.

Default processes, rewards for new behaviours and incentives are inconsistent and lack accountability. Even if there is intention to change as an intermediary organisation, the reality of enacting changed behaviours is often prohibitively complex, overwhelming and disincentivised.

Change is required in three key areas to achieve a more effective future role for intermediaries.

Concrete changes are required in the **motivation** for change; the **opportunity** for intermediaries to make easy choices that will effectively support change; and the deployment of **capabilities** that are adapted according to actor and context to ensure a fit-for-purpose contribution.

A VISIBLE AND VALUED ROLE FOR INTERMEDIARIES

The proposed future role is that *intermediaries empower local and national organisations to drive, define and deliver principled humanitarian responses to needs in their communities.*

The model below captures the future role of intermediaries with six core capabilities to empower national and local organisations, recognising that capabilities alone will not facilitate the fundamental shift required without the motivation and opportunity for change.

Figure 1: Proposed model for the role of intermediaries



RECOMMENDED INTERVENTIONS

There is evidence that innovative organisations and their partners across the system are paving the way towards a more effective intermediary role. In learning from these frontrunners, and insights from behavioural science, we have developed the following recommended interventions. They recognise the importance of change across all three areas of opportunity, motivation and capability.

Opportunity

Change the defaults

Donors, international, national and local actors should consistently build in a range of default processes that incentivise ideal intermediary practices across programming and partnerships in design, contracting and implementation.

- ▶ For example, preferred supplier pools could be established. Intermediaries who are effectively partnering could go into a pool of preferred suppliers or continue to receive funding for effective partnership practices.

Hold intermediaries accountable

Accountability that is driven and informed by local and national actors could create transformational change. Local and national actors should play a far more prominent role in holding intermediaries accountable.³

- ▶ For example, establish and use processes for local actors to provide direct feedback and assessments or partner evaluations of international partners to inform programming and funding decisions.

"I do think that if we do want people to shift there would have to be some sort of carrot or stick. That has to be coupled with assertive willingness on the part of the donors looking at the ways in which they are contributing to this." (INGO representative)

Motivation

Make the goal and associated benefits visible and powerful

Clear and consistent direction and messaging that articulates the importance of and expectations of the intermediary role would motivate behaviour change. A consolidated approach from donors would clarify priorities and approaches and therefore increase motivation. Donors and intermediaries should continue to generate and document evidence about the benefits of locally led humanitarian action. Frequently communicating the growth in evidence and the progress in the sector towards the collectively articulated goal will also provide a sense of momentum and progress.

- ▶ For example, agreeing on collective donor messaging on the ultimate goal, the importance of intermediary roles and the associated benefits of shifting the status quo.



Create and communicate a sense of momentum

Evidence that more and more intermediaries are shifting their behaviour creates a sense that the sector is transforming and those not on board will get left behind. This can be a powerful motivator.

- For example, by communicating changes and profiling best practice, such as: “Over 40% of intermediaries are allocating overhead budget lines to local actors because it supports a more effective role for local and national actors in their own communities.” “Other donors expect reporting on how much funding is reaching local partners because they know that it reflects improved partnership practices and strengthens the impact of their aid dollars.”

“If intermediary organisations were not only competent enough, but committed enough, localisation will happen. Intermediary organisations need to fix their orientation.” (National actor)

Capability

Determine the fit-for-purpose role

International organisations in many contexts continue to default to direct implementation without considering whether an intermediary role is more important and appropriate. Even where an intermediary role may be appropriate, organisations often default to a predetermined way of working with partners based on their own capabilities. This research highlights that there is a need to break these defaults through an intentional and considered process to determine fit-for-purpose roles that adapt to context and can be interrogated by partners and donors alike.

- For example, employ or resource partnership brokers or managers who can analyse and articulate the complementary role the organisation can play, and the combination of capabilities that are requested and fit for the purpose of enabling local and national actors.

Invest in pooled funding mechanisms that empower local and national actors

Pooled funds are well placed to deliver fit-for-purpose capabilities in complex contexts. They are particularly effective as intermediaries if local and national organisations have meaningful engagement in fund management and decision-making.

- For example, advocate for, and fund, pooled mechanisms that articulate an intention to empower the role of national and local organisations and have established processes to promote capacity exchange.

“There should be that debate on evaluating their [intermediary] fit for purpose role, what value add they [intermediaries] are bringing on board ... Donors should ask intermediaries, how are you shifting?” (National actor)

ENDNOTES

- 1 Interviews 1, 2, 7, 9, 10, 11, 12, 15, 19, 20, 21, 23, 29, 30, 32, 34, 35, 36, 37, 38-40, 43, 44, 46, 48, 53, 55, 56, 59
- 2 Interviews 1, 2, 7, 9, 10, 11, 12, 15, 19, 20, 21, 22, 23, 24, 29, 30, 32, 34, 35, 36, 37, 38-40, 43, 44, 46, 48, 52, 53, 54, 57, 59, 64

The Grand Bargain's Independent Annual Report has consistently noted progress in some areas of the localisation agenda, but other studies and reports have noted major gap areas, recommending for example more support for local actors to maximise their role and the provision of more quality funding and support to equitable partnerships. For example:

Charter for Change, Progress Report 2019-20. (https://charter4change.files.wordpress.com/2020/09/c4c_progressreport_2020.pdf); Humanitarian Advisory Group and NIRAPAD, Elevating evidence: Localisation in the 2019 Bangladesh flood response, 2019. (https://humanitarianadvisorygroup.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/Elevating-Evidence-Localisation-in-the-2019-Bangladesh-flood-response_Final_electronic.pdf); CHS Alliance, Humanitarian Accountability Report, 2020. (<https://www.chsalliance.org/get-support/resource/har-2020/>); C. Els, Funding to local actors still far from Grand Bargain Commitments, 2019. (<https://www.local2global.info/research/the-humanitarian-economy/gb19>).

- 3 Interviews 1, 2, 3, 4, 11, 43 Workshops 1, 2 and 3

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