

## Localisation in Humanitarian Practice

Developed by the Humanitarian Policy Group (HPG) of the Overseas Development Institute (ODI) and the International Council of Voluntary Agencies (ICVA), this paper highlights the necessity for the increased localisation of aid. Articulating some of the benefits (as well as some of the perceived concerns), it seeks to unpack the concept of localisation, acknowledging that 'local' is not a homogenous entity, but represents a diverse set of actors, working from varying and often distinct ideologies and at different levels.

The paper posits that, whilst the localisation of aid must occur, all humanitarian action cannot be placed solely on the shoulders of local actors. The international humanitarian system continues to save lives and alleviate suffering. However, *how* 'the international' engages must change. As highlighted in the UN Secretary-General's report for the World Humanitarian Summit (WHS), the humanitarian sector must 'reinforce, not replace' local systems, using the comparative advantages of an increasing range of diverse humanitarian actors.

To conclude, the paper discusses key factors blocking concrete steps towards the localisation of aid, notably the resistance of the established humanitarian system to cede power, control and resources.

### Localisation: a long overdue shift

The presence of 'local', 'national' and 'regional' actors, both state and civil society, at the heart of humanitarian response is not new. The idea that states are entrusted with the core responsibility for their populations in crises is articulated in General Assembly Resolution 46/182 (1991) and numerous international frameworks and initiatives,<sup>1</sup> all of which underscore the centrality of national and local action in humanitarian contexts.

The need to support and maximise the role of local, national and regional actors in humanitarian action was emphasised throughout the WHS consultation process and clearly captured in the Secretary-General's report: to 'commit to as local as possible and as international as necessary' and to 'put people at the center' were two recommendations

---

<sup>1</sup> See for instance the Good Humanitarian Donorship principles (2003), the Code of Conduct for the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement and NGOs in Disaster Relief (1994), the Sphere Project (1996, 1998, 2004, 2011) and the new Core Humanitarian Standard (2015), the Paris Principles (1993) and Accra Agenda for Action (2008), the Busan Partnership for Aid Effectiveness (2011), the New Deal for Engagement in Fragile States (2012) and the SDGs/2030 Agenda (2015).

outlined in the report, reaffirming local ownership.<sup>2</sup> The report calls on the international community to respect and strengthen local leadership in crises, rather than creating parallel structures which often undermine national processes. International partners are tasked to 'make greater effort to support and enable national and local actors, to provide expertise, good practice, and add capacity and capability rather than "take over" and run the response'.<sup>3</sup> OCHA's *Leaving No One Behind* report (2015)<sup>4</sup> reiterates these recommendations, alongside the imperative to leverage comparative advantages and strengthen collaboration between national and international actors. The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) have provided a framework for such a collaboration: 'The 2030 Agenda calls on humanitarians locally, nationally, and internationally to work differently with one another and with counterparts in development, peace operations, climate change, and gender equality to move people out of crisis: reducing vulnerability, doubling down on risk management, and tackling root causes of crises and conflict'.<sup>5</sup>

### **The benefits of localisation**

The *World Disasters Report* (2015) identifies localisation as key to humanitarian effectiveness.<sup>6</sup> As reaffirmed by Elhadj As Sy, the Secretary-General of the IFRC: 'Local actors are always the first to respond. In 2015, we saw local people and organizations at the center of operations rescuing thousands trapped in the rubble after the earthquake in Nepal, setting up evacuation centers in the wake of Cyclone Pam in Vanuatu, and on the frontline of the protracted conflict in Syria'. A locally-led response has the advantage of better access and deeper networks with affected people, a better understanding of the history and cultural and geopolitical specificities of the area and – as local actors are often themselves affected – a personal understanding of what needs to be done.

Regional actors, national governments and local communities are becoming more central players in humanitarian action, with an increasing number of countries expanding their capacity to respond without international assistance.<sup>7</sup> Crisis-affected countries are increasingly resisting (and in some cases, Sudan being a notable example, blocking) international humanitarian response in favour of more locally-led engagement, which they deem to be more trustworthy and legitimate.<sup>8</sup> India, for example, initially rejected international assistance following the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami, and Mozambique successfully handled floods in 2007.<sup>9</sup> A further example is the Kachin IDP crisis in Myanmar in 2011. While the UN and international NGOs struggled to access affected populations,

---

<sup>2</sup> UN General Assembly, *One Humanity: Shared Responsibility. Report of the Secretary-General for the World Humanitarian Summit*, January 2016.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>4</sup> OCHA, *Leaving No One Behind*, OCHA Policy and Studies Series, 2015.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>6</sup> IFRC, *World Disasters Report 2015*.

<sup>7</sup> ALNAP, *The State of the Humanitarian System: Assessing Performance and Progress*, ALNAP Pilot Study, 2010.

<sup>8</sup> HPG, 'Creating a Paradigm Shift: Statement for the World Humanitarian Summit Global Consultation', 2015.

<sup>9</sup> John Twigg, *Disaster Risk Reduction*, HPN Good Practice Review 9, 2015.

local NGOs were able to reach Kachin IDPs – ‘local agencies have effectively navigated a complex political and military environment to ensure consistent delivery of assistance to, and protection of, IDPs’.<sup>10</sup> The private sector is also engaging more strategically in humanitarian operations. The Kenyans for Kenya initiative, involving a bank, a mobile network operator and the Kenya Red Cross Society, raised \$7.5 million to support the response to the 2011–12 drought and famine.<sup>11</sup> In Yemen, the private sector is key in distributing humanitarian aid at a point when political polarisation and conflict is threatening starvation.<sup>12</sup>

### **Localisation ‘unpacked’**

The increased engagement of local actors brings a diversity of skills, experience and approaches. However, whilst repeated recommendations reflect the need for a shift in humanitarian response, it is unclear what localisation actually means. This limited conceptualisation makes it difficult to understand how localisation works, who the key actors are and how they engage with international actors. It also makes it difficult to assess its long-term implications.

What is described as ‘local’ is often approached as a single unit of analysis. There are, however, different layers: regional, national and local. Moreover, the ‘national’, ‘regional’ and ‘local’ are often conflated with one another when, in fact, they operate according to different rules and with different actors, including the state and non-state actors, such as civil society, diaspora groups and the private sector, as well as regional players. On the ground, those actors may have very different modes of engagement, access mechanisms and degrees of legitimacy in the eyes of people in need. Take, for example, the diverse range of operational NGOs. A growing number of NGOs are now operational at national, regional and international levels, which in turn draw on human and financial resources from national, regional and international levels. Is an NGO therefore categorised as local or international based on its country of origin, by its governance structure or according to where it previously or currently sources its financial and human resources? Acknowledging these complexities, and with primary reference to NGOs, ‘localisation’ in this paper is defined as the *process* of having a humanitarian response owned in part or whole by a national and/or local constituency well-versed in the needs and socio-cultural context of the area in crisis.

### **Linking complementarity and localisation**

Calls to ‘localise’ aid represent a vital – and long overdue – shift. Yet, whilst increased localisation of aid must be realised, this should not be considered the only solution to the multitude of operational challenges faced by the humanitarian sector. Particularly in conflict-

---

<sup>10</sup> Carine Jaquet and Conor O’Loughlin, ‘Redefining Humanitarian Space: The Kachin IDP Crisis in Myanmar’, *Humanitarian Exchange*, no. 55, September 2012.

<sup>11</sup> Jim Drummond and Nicholas Crawford, *Humanitarian Crises, Emergency Preparedness and Response: The Role of Business and the Private Sector: Kenya Case Study*, HPG Working Paper, January 2014.

<sup>12</sup> This is based on research conducted by HPG on the role of the private sector in humanitarian action in Yemen in 2015. Results from the study are due to be published in mid-2016.

driven contexts – which accounted for 80% of humanitarian aid in 2015<sup>13</sup> – the need for international response capacity will remain. While UN agencies have struggled to fulfill their mandate as ‘provider of last resort’ as cluster leads, international actors, starting with the UN and INGOs, must strengthen their operational capacity and expertise, for example through further specialisation, better security management and the ability to manage risk. As highlighted in a growing body of literature,<sup>14</sup> limited collective operational response capacity, especially in the first few months of a conflict or sudden-onset disaster or throughout a protracted crisis, represents a key challenge. Recent experiences from Iraq, Syria, South Sudan and Yemen illustrate the difficulty of securing access and providing assistance in volatile situations. This limited operational capacity is the result of numerous factors, including difficulties in negotiating and maintaining access, recruiting and retaining key staff and managing security in sensitive and high-risk environments. Meanwhile, the centralised and process-driven nature of the humanitarian system hinders contextualised, flexible response, and often limits the sector’s ability to meaningfully engage with diverse actors.

### **Complementarity within humanitarian action**

The imperative for increased local, national and regional leadership of aid, and the necessity for strengthened international response capacity, are not mutually exclusive. In line with the principle of complementarity, all actors must build on comparative advantages to supplement each other’s contributions.<sup>15</sup> Contemporary humanitarian action, and its corresponding coordination, cooperation and funding structures, all require significant change if they are to better address the complexities of humanitarian engagement in rapidly shifting contexts.<sup>16</sup> Organisational mandates and missions, public perceptions, donor interests and internal targets often drive institutional structures and operational decision-making. As such, the incentives for innovation and inclusion and the promotion of more effective and efficient humanitarian response are limited. All too often, this emphasis on institutional and organisational priorities occurs at the expense of local actors and affected populations. When considering how a broader, more decentralised humanitarian sector might be possible, key questions must be posed. How can actors engage with one another across their comparative advantages (local, national, regional and international) and complement one another around mandates, technical expertise and/or funds? How can other actors – such as the private sector and community-led initiatives – be brought in to enable more effective humanitarian action, and (whilst preserving humanitarian space) how can they be encouraged to operate without necessarily subscribing to the structures and processes of the established humanitarian ‘system’?

---

<sup>13</sup> ALNAP, *The State of the Humanitarian System 2015*, 2015.

<sup>14</sup> MSF, *Where Is Everyone? Responding to Emergencies in the Most Difficult Places*, July 2014; ALNAP, *The State of the Humanitarian System 2015*; OCHA, *Leaving No One Behind*.

<sup>15</sup> Complementarity is one of the five Principles of Partnership (PoP) adopted by the Global Humanitarian Platform (GHP) in 2007. The other four are equality, transparency, results-oriented approach and responsibility.

<sup>16</sup> Wilton Park, ‘Conference Report: Advancing Humanitarian Action: Engaging with Rising Global Actors To Develop New Strategic Partnerships’, 21–22 October 2013.

## **Barriers to localisation: power, control and money**

Local, national and regional actors engage actively in humanitarian response, and have been doing so for decades. However, as highlighted by HPG (2016): ‘the formal humanitarian system has failed to connect meaningfully with national and local institutions. As currently structured, the incentives for such engagement do not exist: the sector’s power dynamics, culture, financing and incentive structures create compelling reasons to remain closed and centralised’. These barriers not only discourage increased engagement by local and national actors, but they also stifle innovation and ‘stand in the way of more constructive and fruitful engagement between those within and outside the current formal system’.<sup>17</sup> Within a centralised humanitarian structure, localisation is unlikely to result in the empowerment of local actors. Furthermore, the increasing presence and impact of ‘emerging’ actors can be perceived as posing a threat to the status quo of this current architecture – specifically in relation to power, control and money.

## **Localisation and ceding power**

The humanitarian world would benefit from understanding the successes and failures of similar ‘localisation’ processes in other sectors. Outside the humanitarian sphere, localisation has been popular within the context of state formation and peace-building. The New Deal for Engagement in Fragile States, endorsed by 41 governments and intergovernmental organisations in late 2011, is one example. The New Deal emphasised ‘inclusive country-led and country-owned transitions out of fragility’<sup>18</sup> that would include key national stakeholders and non-state actors. However, in retrospect the New Deal suffered from ‘unmet conditions, unrealistic expectations about timeframes, and a lack of sustained dialogue about the causes of conflict and fragility’.<sup>19</sup>

Oliver Richmond succinctly articulates the tension between the desire to support local and national leadership and the reluctance to cede the necessary power for this leadership to be realised. Richmond and Franks highlight that internationals often seek to ‘relinquish direct control and ownership of the peace-building process’ so as to avoid the stigma of colonialism.<sup>20</sup> Nevertheless, they still continue to use various means to ensure that ‘their liberal agenda is complied with’ by these same local actors. Local actors engaging with international actors in a humanitarian response could find themselves disempowered, even as the discourse of localisation attempts to empower them.

Statements by David Cameron on Libya and Syria<sup>21</sup> illustrate the inherent desire to retain power and control over the peacebuilding ‘localisation’ process. Where Cameron describes

---

<sup>17</sup> Christina Bennett, Matthew Foley and Sara Pantuliano, *Time To Let Go: Remaking Humanitarian Action for the Modern Era*, HPG Report, 2016, p. 5.

<sup>18</sup> Rosan Smits and Deborah Wright, *Engagement with Non-State Actors in Fragile States: Narrowing Definitions, Broadening Scope*, Netherlands Institute of International Relations, 2012.

<sup>19</sup> Jacob Huges et al., *Implementing the New Deal for Fragile States*, The Brookings Institution, 2014.

<sup>20</sup> Oliver P. Richmond and Jason Franks, ‘Between Partition and Pluralism: The Bosnian Jigsaw and an “Ambivalent Peace”’, *Southeast European and Black Sea Studies*, vol. 9, no. 1, 2009.

<sup>21</sup> See Brian Wheeler, ‘David Cameron Defends Libya Decisions’, BBC News, 15 January 2016; Peter Osborne, ‘Barack Obama Is Right: Cameron Let Libya Fall into the Abyss’, *The Spectator*, 11 March 2016.

local ownership, he explicitly entrusts international actors with defining its parameters: government would be 'local', according to Cameron, even as it is externally engineered and designed. In the case of Libya, a unity government was announced following a meeting of rival factions in January 2016. Part of a United Nations-brokered peace process, the government is intended to bring together the two rival administrations in the country. It has however yet to find public legitimacy, and the crisis in Libya continues as Western governments consider a military intervention.

Despite calls to increase the localisation, nationalisation and regionalisation of aid, the humanitarian sector faces similar challenges when it comes to traditional, established actors ceding space and power to others. Recent reforms to the humanitarian architecture, such as the Humanitarian Reform process of 2005 and the Transformational Agenda beginning in 2011, aimed to create more coordinated and effective humanitarian response (including through Humanitarian Coordinators, Humanitarian Country Teams and the clusters), yet these structures exclude a range of actors – often precisely those actors 'localisation' is meant to promote.

### **Localisation and funding**

Directly related to power and decision-making control are resources – that is, the necessary financing to undertake humanitarian action based on strategies and decisions made at the local, national and regional level. Discussions of power and control cannot take place without clear reference to money. Findings from research on South Sudan at the Geneva Centre for Education and Research in Humanitarian Action concludes that localisation as a process remains at the level of rhetoric in part because humanitarian funding is largely inaccessible to local actors.<sup>22</sup> NGO representatives at a recent ICVA-facilitated National and Southern International NGO symposium<sup>23</sup> highlighted the limited information available on potential funding and the burdensome requirements organisations must meet to access institutional funding – often including the need to provide years of audited financial statements and comprehensive documentation on everything from governance to human resources, staff security plans and past project documentation.<sup>24</sup> Whilst due diligence processes are necessary, the extent of these processes limits the ability of many local and national NGOs to engage, in turn allowing larger institutions to continue to access direct funding. The *Global Humanitarian Assessment Report 2015*<sup>25</sup> highlighted that, in 2014, only 0.2% of total humanitarian assistance went directly to local and national NGOs. Local and national actors do receive other funding, but often in subcontracting relationships with the UN or INGOs that fail to leverage their comparative advantages and skills.

---

<sup>22</sup> Henri Nzeyimana, 'Localizing the Humanitarian Response: Can the Rhetoric Translate into Concrete Action? South Sudan Case Study', MA Thesis, Geneva Center for Education and Research on Humanitarian Action, 2015.

<sup>23</sup> ICVA National and Southern NGO symposium, Geneva, 8 April 2016.

<sup>24</sup> This is further corroborated by findings from the Less Paper More Aid initiative led by ICVA ([lesspapermoreaid.org](http://lesspapermoreaid.org)), underlining the lack of proportionality in donor conditions.

<sup>25</sup> Development Initiatives, *Global Humanitarian Assistance Report 2015*.

Acknowledging these problems, Charter4Change,<sup>26</sup> signed by 23 international NGOs and endorsed by over 100 local and national NGOs,<sup>27</sup> outlines eight commitment areas to support the localisation of aid by May 2018. Signatories have committed to passing 20% of humanitarian funding to NGOs, and making these figures public. This initiative may prove to be an important shift in moving from rhetoric to action.

### **Where to from here?**

In reiterating the importance of, and unpacking the concept of, localisation, this paper has also highlighted the need for strengthened complementarity within the humanitarian sector, and has discussed the key barriers in realising local and national humanitarian leadership, namely decision-making and control over and access to resources.

While there is a body of analysis on the role of localisation in peacebuilding and post-conflict reconstruction, there is yet to emerge an in-depth analysis of the successes and challenges of localisation within the humanitarian sector. An evidence-based approach to localisation that takes into account existing capacities as well as the history and culture of the local actors concerned is strongly recommended. In the case of the Ebola outbreak in West Africa, for instance, knowledge of faith and traditions played a key role in empowering people to protect themselves.<sup>28</sup>

Congruent with HPG's recent *Time To Let Go* report, successfully addressing these barriers requires an intentional shift from a centralised, process-driven humanitarian structure towards a model which 'genuinely recognises and embraces the contributions of new donors and enables the comparative advantages and contributions of local, national, regional and international implementing organisations in service delivery'.<sup>29</sup>

---

<sup>26</sup> See <https://charter4change.org>.

<sup>27</sup> As of May 2016.

<sup>28</sup> This is in addition to benefiting from the experiences of other sectors, such as the private sector, in localisation.

<sup>29</sup> Bennett, Foley and Pantuliano, *Time To Let Go*, p. 8.