

LOCALISATION: DIFFERENT INTERPRETATIONS DIFFERENT OUTCOMES

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I. DIFFERENT INTERPRETATIONS

Listening to conversations among international agencies, it is possible to identify different interpretations of localization, which is not always explicitly recognized.

Nationalisation



Localisation as ‘nationalisation’ means hiring and promoting more national staff within the country offices of international agencies, to the point that they are fully staffed and managed by nationals.

Decentralisation



A decentralisation interpretation focuses strongly on the problem that strategic decision-making takes place too far from where an actual crisis is happening. Localisation then means making strategic operational and financial decisions closer to the at risk or affected areas.

The Grand Bargain commitment to channel 25% of globally available financial resources for humanitarian actions ‘as directly as possible’ to ‘local’ actors, can then be understood as actors in physical proximity to the crisis area, irrespective of who they are. More direct funding of the nationally registered offices of international agencies and/or the national affiliates of international alliances, then counts as contributions to the 25% objective. This interpretation takes a more technical-operational perspective. Its main anticipated benefit is better decisions in terms of ‘better fit’ with the conditions and requirements of the situation on the ground. Greater cost-effectiveness through reducing the transaction costs of multiple intermediaries is not a primary objective. Inasmuch as it considers ‘power’, it looks mostly at the distribution of ‘power’ between ‘HQ’ and the regional/country offices.

“We believe that a more balanced international aid system, which shifts power to those closest to the front-line, will generate more effective and appropriate responses for people affected by crises.”

Start Network website (31.01.2020)

Transformation



A transformation interpretation sees localisation success in terms of structurally stronger national capacities and leadership. Now, strategic, operational and financial decisions are made by undisputedly ‘national’ actors (governmental and non-governmental) in support of which 25% of the available international resources go directly to them. Proponents of this interpretation take a broader historical and systemic view. They argue that the ‘domineering’ presence and attitudes of international agencies are one of the important obstacles to national leadership and to building strong and sustained national capacities. This will continue until they are prepared to acknowledge their power, share at least part of the global purse and give space to local/national actors. They look beyond the ‘humanitarian economy’ to its ‘political economy’. A transformative interpretation is not against international humanitarian assistance but wants it to reinforce rather than replace local and national capacities. In that perspective, international agencies are welcome, mostly so when they support rather than overwhelm and weaken local and national capacities. As there is a growing number of protracted crises and recurrent disaster areas, this is also more cost-effective in the medium-term.

Multi-nationalisation



This refers to the intentional strategy of several INGO federated structures, to create more and more national members that are nominally independent but part of the international alliance or federation. Not only do they have the advantage of being able to rapidly receive financial and other resources from other federation members in case of a crisis. They can also benefit from the experience and expertise of their international member-colleagues with public communications, fundraising, policy and advocacy work in their own country. This gives them significant advantages over local/national CSOs that do not have such international connections. This does not diversify the organisational eco-system, because there is no level playing field for those who do not have these structural international relations. Increased competition in the domestic market will further reduce the space for many local and national civil society organisations who are already under financial and sometimes also political pressures.

II. DIFFERENT OUTCOMES

Different interpretations of localisation lead to different outcomes.

Localisation as ‘decentralisation’ can become a powerful incentive for international agencies to pursue rapid registration of their national offices in different countries, or for the accelerated multi-nationalisation of INGOs, through alliances and federated structures. This has already happened to a significant degree in India, where affiliates of international NGO federations and alliances occupy much of the public policy and domestic fundraising space. To illustrate further what this would look like: Should there be an opening for international agencies (including corporates) to be involved in large scale reconstruction in war-devasted Yemen, we can imagine a scenario in which this market-opportunity is largely taken by national affiliates of international federations, rather than authentically Yemeni civil society organisations. A fast-track strategy of course can be to co-opt some of the latter. Some years ago, within the span of 4 months, an established Turkish CSO was approached by three INGO, with the request to become part of their international federation.

Localisation as transformation may lead to different outcomes e.g.

- ❖ A scenario in which national crises are managed by the government authorities, who control the relief funding. They direct where their national and local non-governmental relief providers must work, and determine the space, location and sector of work of the supporting international agencies. Ethiopia approaches that scenario.
- ❖ A scenario in which national crises are managed by a plethora of non-governmental actors, typically operating in consortia, networks or other forms of collaboration. But with some competition and lack of coordination between the different collaborative groupings. The relatively passive role of the government also means that crisis management is not seen as part of the governance relationship between citizens and authorities.
- ❖ A scenario where national and local governmental and non-governmental actors collaborate effectively in a shared infrastructure for crisis management. Here localisation has been achieved not on the basis of individual L/NA but with a systemic perspective that also reinforced the complementarities in their collective capacities.

III. THE SPIRIT AND INTENT OF THE GRAND BARGAIN

The nationalisation, decentralisation and multi-nationalisation interpretations of localisation are not in line with the spirit and intent of the Grand Bargain, which is to “reinforce rather than replace local and national capacities”.

THE SPIRIT OF A PARTICIPATION REVOLUTION AND LOCALISATION

“We need to include the people affected by humanitarian crises and their communities in our decisions to be certain that the humanitarian response is relevant, timely, effective and efficient.”

*“We need to provide accessible information, ensure that an effective process for participation and feedback is in place and that **design and management decisions are responsive to the views of affected communities and people.**”*

“The Grand Bargain recognises that, faced with the reality of our woefully under-resourced humanitarian response, the status quo is no longer an option.”

*“We commit to support local and national supporters on the frontline...(We) engage with local and national responders in a spirit of partnership and aim to **reinforce rather than replace** local and national capacities”.*

“An understanding inherent to the Grand Bargain is that benefits are for all partners, not just the big organisations.”

“The Grand Bargain is a level playing field where we all meet as equals.”

Different local and national actors, for differing reasons, adopt a different stance towards their international partners. Overall however, the aspiration is for equitable partnerships (i.e. ‘decision-making’ and not ‘implementing’ partners) and towards local/national actors being in the driving seat, no longer in the passenger seat.

IV. OTHER INTERPRETATIONS

Complementarity and subsidiarity



Complementarity is one of the ‘Principles of Partnership’, endorsed in 2007 by the Global Humanitarian Platform.

“The diversity of the humanitarian community is an asset if we build on our comparative advantages and complement each other’s contributions. Local capacity is one of the main assets to enhance and on which to build. Whenever possible, humanitarian organizations should strive to make it an integral part in emergency response. Language and cultural barriers must be overcome.”

Valuing diversity and the ensuing complementarity is at odds with the current situation where a small number of first receivers of international humanitarian aid take a huge proportion of it. Active decentralization and multi-nationalisation strategies are also likely to reduce the diversity and potential for complementarities.

“The mindset of most international actors in DRC remains one where humanitarian actions is as international as possible, and where local capacity is only considered when internationals’ limits are reached. (...) between preconceived ideas about local organisations’ capacity, risk-based understanding of capacity (the focus of international actors on fiduciary risk as opposed to the capacity to alleviate suffering) and a general lack of trust, there is little objective assessment of the capacity among local organisations in South Kivu and Kasai Central. (...) It is time for a truly large-scale investment in local humanitarian response that is sustainable in places like DRC, where humanitarian situations will likely continue through the next decade.”

Barbelet, V. et alii 2019: Local humanitarian action in the DRC. p. viii/28

The phrase ‘as local as possible, as international as necessary’ expresses a principle of ‘subsidiarity’ that in theory could result in ‘complementarity’. Under subsidiarity, the default mode is that L/NA handle the crisis with their own means; any international assistance is only a reinforcement in complement to this. Attractive as it sounds, the phrase is problematic: Who decides what is ‘possible’ and what is ‘necessary’ and on what grounds? International and national actors may differ quite significantly on the answer for any given context. L/NA actors would argue that often international actors quickly shift the balance in their favour by hiring away the best staff from L/NA.

The notion of ‘complementarity’ is also implicit in phrases that talk about the humanitarian eco-system and the ‘rightful place’ of L/NA in it. Calling it an ‘eco-system’ conjures up an image of a peaceful landscape or pond with a diversity of species that live in complementary harmony with each other. ‘Power’ and power-imbalances do not appear in this friendly image. Once ‘balanced’ eco-systems however often become disrupted by the introduction of species foreign to it, that may turn out very invasive, take over the pond and dramatically reduce its previous biodiversity? Disruptive invasion is a real risk as that is what the international humanitarian industry is geared up for to do best.

“The comprehensive model is the mainstay of the humanitarian sector and is commonly seen in responses to low-income countries. It is based on the notion of limited or no national capacity and a central role for international agencies in managing, coordination and delivering assistance. There are many issues with this model in terms of its insensitivity to context, the lack of engagement with local and national actors, and a tendency to be supply-driven rather than needs oriented.”

Ramalingam, B. & J. Mitchell 2014: Responding to Changing Needs? p. 27

Acknowledging that comprehensive response by international actors can sometimes be justified, we would then expect a collective localisation strategy to bolster the systemic capacities of L/NA so that they can lead and manage the continuing crisis more by themselves. In practice, that doesn’t seem to happen, not even in situation of protracted or recurrent crises as in South Sudan or Haiti.

‘Complementarity’, ‘as local as possible, as international as necessary’, ‘subsidiarity’ and ‘humanitarian eco-system’, are lofty principles but hide the structural power imbalances that in practice maintain the dominance of international relief agencies.

‘Locally-led’



Another way of speaking about localisation is ‘locally-led’ crisis response. This may make practical sense in a number of countries around the world where national governments have both a reasonable capacity to manage disasters and crises and the political will to maintain authority. India would be one example.

Not surprisingly perhaps, having been confronted with the ‘second tsunami’ of a ‘comprehensive response’ in 2005, the Indonesian authorities signalled their clear authority when an earthquake caused a smaller tsunami and landslides in Sulawesi in 2018. In other contexts, where there is little or no ‘local’ leadership, the question should be why not? Is this not the natural state of affairs? Do Western countries not maintain national/local leadership when confronted with a major disaster? On a more practical level, local leadership requires certain competencies: L/NA at times find it hard to meaningfully participate in local coordination spaces, because they don’t understand the structures of the international relief system, which are referred to with a multitude of obscure acronyms. L/NA can be appointed in leadership positions, e.g. as co-lead of a cluster or sector etc. But such position without formal authority requires particular facilitation, persuasion and servant leadership competencies, that also many international coordinators do not have.

In short, ‘locally-led’ would be the outcome of either political assertiveness or of effective subsidiarity and ‘localisation’. In practice however, it does not acknowledge the political economy and power dynamics of the global humanitarian crisis management.

Direct Extensive Engagement with Affected Populations



Some international relief actors take the assertion that humanitarian action is about crisis-affected people, not about local organisations, and that ‘localisation’ therefore is achieved when they engage directly and actively with these populations. Reducing the vulnerabilities and strengthening the ‘resilience’ of affected households is the objective, not strengthening the organisational capacities and/or supporting the leadership of national and local actors.

This argument is challenged on several grounds. It goes contrary to the assertion that national governments are the primary duty-bearers to protect the basic rights and wellbeing of the people in their territory. It ignores the reality that ‘resilience’ is stronger when more people or households are organised, informally or formally. Associations and organisations are the framework to collaborative and collective efforts, whose cumulative resilience is greater than that of individual households. Finally, it reflects a self-centred vision of international agencies who do not have a significant presence in many crisis-situations around the world, and who may come and go depending on funding or where the next big crisis takes place.

Led and managed by affected populations and their organisations



A last interpretation puts crisis-affected people in the driving seat, whether it be in regard to international or local/national assistance actors. This interpretation gives primacy to the Grand Bargain commitment to a ‘participation revolution’. It goes beyond ‘accountability to affected populations’ or ‘communicating with communities’, but fully respects (or restores) agency to crisis-affected people. Such perspective is promoted but also illustrated with examples under Local2Global and Voices-to-Choices. It also resonates with approaches to disaster risk reduction and climate change adaptation that envisage active roles for local communities.

Whereas top-down approaches put community-based organisations at the bottom of the decision-making ladder, here they are at the top.

« Localisation entails a process that progressively increases the leadership and authority of vulnerable crisis-affected people in determining how local, national and international (financial and technical) crisis response resources are used within their communities to address their priorities.»

Save the Children Sweden & Saferworld ‘Turning the Tables’: 2020:15)

V. LOCALISATION FOLLOWS INTERNATIONALISATION

Overlooked in all the conversations about ‘localisation’ is that it is the normal state of affairs. Historically and globally, local actors lead and manage their preparedness and responses to crises largely on their own. Before the relief industry bloomed, a few decades ago, there was no large-scale international mobilization. When there are floods in Germany or the UK, an earthquake in China, a hurricane hitting the US, there is no large-scale influx of international relief agencies. And ‘localised’ leadership and action is the reality, perhaps by default, in the many smaller and medium crises that do not attract global media and donor attention. From that perspective, localisation is a process to reverse a prior ‘internationalisation’. Which invites us to inquire why and how that happened in the first place.

Localisation and internationalisation are dynamic processes over time. In several crisis prone countries, we can see periods of strong or increasing localisation, followed by periods of internationalisation, then some localisation again as internationals withdraw or scale down, and another round of stronger internationalisation if a new attention grabbing crisis hits a country.