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'LOCALISATION': Meanings and Trajectories

The 'humanitarian system' wants to change, and change big time. Though having provided much needed practical assistance to millions of people over the past half century, there is a sense that it is no longer entirely 'fit for purpose'. 'Localisation' has come out of the World Humanitarian Summit process as one of the important pillars of that change.

"As local as possible, as international as necessary" has become the strap line that signals the broad goal and meaning of 'localisation': The default mode for crisis response should become one that relies on national and local capacities ('nationally owned' and 'nationally led'), only supplemented by international action if and for as long as needed.

What, however, does this mean in practice? In this and subsequent blogs, I share some reflections about the implications of 'localisation', and some of the challenges that we are likely to encounter.

1. Key Dimensions of Localisation.

Going through the rapidly growing literature of reports, blogs and stated commitments that relate to 'localisation', we see four major areas of change emerging:

- **Visibility:** Greater recognition and visibility for the efforts, roles, innovations and achievements of local actors;
- **Capacities:** More effective support for stronger local and national capacities & less undermining of those capacities e.g. by hiring away the more qualified local staff;
- **Funding:** More direct and better quality funding to local actors: The commitment at the World Humanitarian Summit is to increase direct funding to local actors from less than 1 % today to 25% by 2020. Local actors also demand better quality funding: longer-term, more flexible and covering core costs;
- **Partnerships:** Better, more genuine, 'partnerships' and less sub-contracting relationships.

These different aspects of 'localisation' are related but not identical. The translation into practice of each will require different changes and can benefit from its own milestones. They may also happen at different speeds: If I am an INGO with 90% funding from institutional donors and 10% from my own fund raising, I may be able to better profile the local actors in my communications and fundraising materials, but not to provide them with better quality funding if my 'back donors' don't enable it. Another agency may be able to provide more direct and better quality funding, but may not be well qualified to offer significant support for overall organisational development.

One of the really interesting questions is whether there can be 'partnership' without money transfers? If the answer is 'no', then the transactional nature of the relationship remains the corner stone. If the

answer is 'yes', then we can think better about what other 'added value' a national actor can see in an international partner.

2. Why Localisation and Why Now?

Listening to the conversations, two justifications are often invoked: 'first responders' and 'comparative advantage'.

'First responders': The argument holds that we should invest in stronger local capacities because the 'first responders' to a crisis will invariably be 'local' (to the level of family members and neighbours), and because local/national actors will stay, whereas international responders at some point will leave. While correct, this argument is also a bit puzzling. As we have seen with the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami, the massive influx of Syrian refugees into neighbouring countries, the 2015 Nepal earthquake etc., sudden onset 'disasters' can be of such scale that they overwhelm the local and national capacities to respond. That is when international support becomes justified and sometimes absolutely necessary. Let's remember that the WHO was severely criticised for not responding quickly and robustly enough to the Ebola outbreak.

'Comparative advantage': Local actors understand much better the context, the cultural sensibilities, speak the local language(s), are better able to navigate the local environment. A valid observation, which is precisely why the international agencies that establish their own presence, quickly start hiring the most qualified 'national' staff. Not an argument then, it seems, that would compel radical change. Moreover, while local actors better understand the context, they can also be part of the context: something that becomes particularly delicate in times of conflict, when the international agencies are very concerned about 'neutrality' and 'impartiality'.

Both justifications do not seem to explain why 'localisation' is suddenly the 'next big thing'. The comparative advantages of local actors, and their being the 'first' (and longest-lasting) responders are nothing new. This has been the case for the past half century. So why 'localisation' now?

Are there not deeper reasons why the 'international humanitarian system' (that some would simply call the 'relief industry') should change? Deeper listening brings up other reasons:

- The system is overstretched: It is no longer able to finance and respond operationally to the explosion of needs around the globe. So we need many more national and local actors to step up. That would be a very legitimate and understandable reason: but it also changes the 'tone' or 'colour' of the conversation: Now the 'international system' is not saying: "hey, sorry that we didn't acknowledge this earlier, but we have now (yes we know it has taken us an eternity) come to acknowledge and appreciate your roles and capacities, and want to get better at supporting you". It is actually saying: "hey, we are overstretched and can't handle the global burden of humanitarian needs anymore, we need your additional capacity and have to ask you to share more of that burden, please." From a local actor perspective, the difference in message is important and will influence how I respond to it. After all, as a local actor I am well aware that the term 'localisation' is a bit like 'empowerment': It makes you wonder what happened in the first place, to make that someone has no power, or that the action is not 'locally-led'?

- The system is unhealthy: it is overly centralised and bureaucratic, it encourages competition rather than collaboration, its 'technification' and 'professionalisation' are taking the humanity out of it: affected populations are no more than 'big data'.
- The (underfinanced) system is wasteful: There are too many 'fundingmediaries'. More fundamentally: by not effectively strengthening local capacities, it has to mobilise time and again at great cost, in response to the next crisis. The international agencies, rather than complementing the national efforts, come in with a too heavy footprint, tend to take over, in different ways undermine local capacities, and continue doing so for too long. Hurricane Matthew's impact in Haiti, a few days ago, will be an interesting case: international capacities are needed to bring in enough food and other supplies quickly. But after many years of repeat waves of international presence, has more Haitian capacity been built?

All of this is not cost-effective: If there are major disasters in e.g. North America, Europe, China or Japan, there simply is not a 'second tsunami' of international agencies: overall the national capacities are enough to deal with the situation. Why don't we simply say that 'localisation' is the investment, globally, in national capacities to manage crisis situations effectively. Just as all societies need to have the capacities to meet their own water or energy needs. Isn't that a more strategically convincing argument than the reference to 'first responders'? Unless of course we mostly want to see more 'burden sharing' i.e. the dominant players in the 'international system' are really looking for more 'no-entry' and 'quicker exit'-strategies because they no longer have the will and ability to stay on?

3. Which Local Actors & Who is 'Local'?

While the 'Grand Bargain' document from the World Humanitarian Summit does not specify the nature of the 'local actors', conversations in INGO circles tend to focus on local 'civil society' ones. So what is the place in this for local and national authorities? After all, when we have a major disaster in aid-providing countries, flooding in Germany, a hurricane hitting the eastern board of the US, an earthquake in Italy, a refugee influx in Belgium, it is governmental institutions that lead the response. Major support roles tend to be played by the Civil Defence and national Red Cross or Red Crescent society, further complemented by NGOs and other voluntary associations.

In a conflict situation humanitarian actors may be more cautious about strengthening governmental capacities, as its neutrality and impartiality may be compromised. But much disaster risk reduction actively involves governmental institutions. And with increasing urbanisation, city authorities often play a major role.

There is also the thorny issue of who is 'local'? Two of the tension-points here are diaspora-led organisations and national franchises of international NGO alliances. Diasporas are important not only for their remittances. Several diaspora members have set up their own operational organisations. Their familiarity with the mind-sets and ways of working of the 'internationals' may give them a competitive advantage over 'national' actors. While they sometimes claim to speak for their own society, non-diaspora local actors do not necessarily agree and see them as just another intermediary. The situation is also muddled by international civil society alliances and confederations creating more and more national franchises, sometimes approaching a national CSO to change its identity and become part of the international brand. Does enhanced work with them count as 'localisation'? For the moment, other national and local organisations don't agree: they see them as internationals-in-disguise, competing with them for limited funding.

4. Different Trajectories.

Progress on 'localisation' is not going to be similar, and comparable, across the board. We can see different scenarios which will lead to different trajectories and speeds. Some key factors influencing the translation into practice are likely to be:

- The type of international organisation: Developing meaningful partnerships with local actors will come more naturally to international agencies that have a strong foundation in 'solidarity', and whose default mode is working with partners. The current signatories to Charter4Change are not a representative sample of the international relief actors. International agencies whose reflex is to be 'operational', and whose business model is largely dependent on this, will find that real partnerships go 'against their grain'. UN agencies talk easily about partnership, but have sometimes a mandate and sometimes an unnecessary tendency to be and remain centre stage.
- Governmental and non-governmental partners: Working with national and local public authorities is different from working with national civil society actors – or national/local private sector actors. Governmental entities can more easily assert an 'authority', but strengthening their institutional capacity may be harder than that of non-governmental actors.
- Prior History in the Context: You would expect the 'localisation' of relief to be easier and more advanced in places with repeat (or chronic) crises such as the Philippines, Bangladesh or the eastern DRC. Localising a major relief effort may be more demanding in response to a rapid onset (as different from a slow onset) disaster. Or where the prior collaboration was largely around development and/or conflict transformation; take Nepal prior to the 2015 earthquake or West Africa prior to the Ebola outbreak as examples. It will be more difficult where there was hardly any history of prior collaboration, such as in Syria.
- The various strands of 'localisation': As mentioned, progress in the different areas: visibility for the local actors; better capacity-support; more equal partnerships; and more direct and better quality funding, will require different actions and may happen at different speeds. For each of these we can ask: What needs to be stopped? What can continue but needs to be changed? What do we need to do more of? What do we need to do that we haven't done before?

These different trajectories will make it difficult to assess whether, across the 'system', there is meaningful progress in the next five years. It may also provide many opportunities to drag the feet and find reasons why change is happening only at a snail pace. We will have to develop refined ways of reviewing progress, and assessing whether constraints invoked are legitimate or overstated?

5. Who Determines the Balance?

"As local as possible, as international as necessary" is both a powerful and a deceptive catch phrase. Because who determines whether the right balance was achieved, and whether that balance evolved appropriately, as the situation evolved? My observation, over 25+ years of work, is that the international agencies' strong footprint may be warranted at particular moments in time, but often continuous for far too long. Sometimes national governments make the point when they start restricting the number of work-permits for expatriates, telling the international agencies that by now they should have trained enough nationals to be in charge. How do we assess this more pro-actively, with enough nuance and without excessive subjectivity?

6. Beyond the 'Humanitarian' Sector?

Finally, there is no reason why 'localisation' should be limited to the humanitarian sector or the relief world. Support for national capacities and encouragement of national 'ownership' are also part of development cooperation, conflict reduction and peace work, trade negotiations, research etc. Already twenty years ago, an ODI colleague was embedded as an adviser in the delegation from an African country to rounds of technically complex and tricky international trade negotiations. I would be surprised if they don't fully handle these now on their own. All of my involvement with conflict reduction and peace work has been with 'local capacities', for the simple reason that it is inevitable: outsiders can help create some enabling conditions but only the people of societies in conflict can make durable peace with each other. We now have African and Asian-Pacific Evaluation Associations, and need to work more with and, if needed, further support national and regional capacities to conduct policy- and practice-relevant research.

For some 50 years international development cooperation has been shaped by Western actors because they were the main providers of 'aid money'. Perhaps 'localisation' signals, and will accelerate, a more international 'international' system? That is partially frightening, because a whole industry has been built on this in Western countries. But it may be inevitable - and will also open up powerful new perspectives and alignments.

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