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## LOCALISATION & GLOBALISATION: The conversation gets serious

Localisation or locally-led response was a strong crosscutting theme at the recent annual ICVA conference in Geneva. Unlike the Humanitarian Networks and Partnerships week, which took place a few weeks earlier in the same venue, there were many more local/national organisations from aid-recipient countries, including diaspora, ‘Southern INGOs’ and Chinese NGOs. The conversations, and some recent publications, signal a change in atmosphere and in framing of the localisation debate.

**Greater awareness but little progress:** There is audibly greater awareness among local and national actors in the ICVA network, of the Grand Bargain promise by international agencies to reinforce rather than replace them. But while there has been much talk, there is little progress in practice. On the contrary, in the almost three years since the World Humanitarian Summit, localisation so far has provided new income for international organisations via working groups and conferences, at times repetitive research, and further ‘capacity-building’ of local/national organisations.

Structurally, the new Interagency Standing Committee<sup>i</sup> does not have a reserved seat for local/ national civil society organisations. All NGO participation is through ICVA, InterAction and the Steering Committee for Humanitarian Response, who can each invite one or two others, “*as per established practice in place since 2008*”. Yet local organisations signal consistently they want a greater presence and influence in coordination but also in policy making and standard-setting fora. Would it be suitable to add seats for them, rather than through consortia where INGOs retain significant influence?

Operationally, many international organisations that committed to the Grand Bargain, and others that also committed to the Charter4Change, have not provided their country representatives with clear instructions on what this means in terms of different practices. In Iraq, for some, attention to localisation was triggered only by the imminent arrival of an assessment mission (November 2018) of the Grand Bargain Workstream on Localisation. The mission observed that “*Stumbling blocks remain, such as risk aversion that leads to lack of trust; attitudes and ways of working that are perceived by local actors as a “superiority complex”; and methods of capacity strengthening that remain one way and project-delivery focused*”<sup>ii</sup>. In some cases, country representatives are in the know, but disagree with their organisational commitment – and are left free to do so. Can individual likes or dislikes override organisational commitments?

**Tension and demands:** From several countries, growing tension and distrust between local/national and international organisations is being reported. More local and national actors are now explicitly demanding a change in mindsets, practices and roles. The campaign for “*Equitable Partnership for Sovereign and Accountable Civil Society Growth*”<sup>iii</sup> that a number of Bangladeshi CSOs started already in 2017, may have been the first to articulate a series of demands. Bangladesh has a very strong civil society experienced in crisis response. Even if not historically so familiar with refugee rights, it provides many enabling conditions for rapid localisation. Yet, although localisation was mentioned somewhat in the 2018 Rohingya refugee Joint Response Plan, and a three-year roadmap to localisation advised by the Grand Bargain Workstream mission there (September 2018), there is little structured effort to advance on this. In Jordan, the Jordan National Forum (JONAF) recently issued a call to support the localisation agenda. In the Pacific, the regional fora of PIANGO and VANGO conducted a baseline study that confirms the lack of meaningful progress.<sup>iv</sup> That study provides these Pacific networks the evidence to now become more assertive. Can national and local networks be more assertive and proactive on shaping the localisation debate?

**Capacity-building or capacity-enabling?** In practice, localisation is being interpreted in international agency circles as an opportunity for yet another round of ‘*capacity-building*’ of local agencies. Critical reactions against this are growing. First there are unwarranted generalised assertions that local actors have little or no capacity, and that international ones know how to build organisational capacities of others. If the latter were the case, then why do international actors still tell their donors they need to strengthen the capacities of local organisation they have been partnering with for years? Secondly, it can become profoundly disrespectful: Can you really tell e.g. a South Sudanese CSO, that has been working for 20 years through ebbs and flows of violence, sometimes with much international support, sometimes with very little, that it has ‘no capacity’? Thirdly, increasingly these efforts are focusing on the ‘capacity’ of local/national actors to deal with “*compliance overwhelm*”<sup>v</sup>: the ever expanding and evolving compliance requirements of international actors. Yet at the same time, we are rarely prepared to provide the local/national organisations with the flexible core funding that allows them to match every 100 hours of relief or development work with a growing number of hours supervising, reporting and accounting on it. Fourthly, no attention is being paid to the ‘*capacity-to-retain*’ experienced and qualified staff, all the more difficult when international agencies actively recruit the best staff of local ones, to strengthen their own capacity. Framed and practiced like this, ‘capacity-development’ will remain a bucket-with-a-hole for local/national organisations. How about reframing the conversation in terms of ‘*capacity-enabling*’?

**Risk aversion and partnership:** A recent study looked at the impact of increasing risk aversion of international agencies on the local-international partnership dynamics. Not surprisingly, the main focus is on fiduciary risk management (theft, fraud, corruption). Institutional donors seem to have an ever-rising expectation of zero losses. Some donors impose hefty penalties if any such loss occurs, even in conflict situations. As was pointed out at the ICVA conference: no sector in the world, not even the public sector, operates with such zero-occurrence expectation.<sup>vi</sup> By contrast, little attention is paid to the security risks that local/national ‘partners’ may run. On the contrary, as they get no core funding or compete with each other by lowering their costs, local/national CSOs can be forced or incentivised to run greater security risks. Disturbingly, in several international organisations ‘*partnership management*’ sits within the finance and compliance department!<sup>vii</sup> Genuine partnership implies that all risks are jointly assessed, and problems dealt with together. Instead, local/national organisations are seen as ‘the risk’. How about balancing risk with opportunity-through-complementarity, and investing not only in risk management but also trust-building?

**Local agencies only a means to an end?** The argument circulates that the objective is saving lives, not helping local agencies survive and thrive, and that crisis-affected people don’t care whether they get aid from an international or a local/national agency. Is that short-sighted? Is it wise practice to instrumentalise or even undermine local agency? Who is going to continue providing some relief, when the international funding has dried up and the international agencies have gone? How do we square that argument with the objective of restoring the ‘*resilience*’ of crisis-affected populations?

**Minds set to distrust?** GMI has invited reflection on the question whether ‘*distrust*’ of local/national organisation is a prevailing mindset among international relief agencies?<sup>viii</sup> While there are by now many local/national CSOs with multi-million-dollar annual budgets, a solid track record and direct funding from international donors for development work, too many international relief workers seem fixed in the belief that local/national CSOs are per definition poor performers with dubious integrity. Revealingly, local/national organisations headed by individuals who used to be national, and even international, staff of international agencies, and sometimes were set up with the help of INGOs, don’t escape the negative labelling. While previously these people were taken serious at face value, because of their belonging to an international organisation, now they must work three times as hard to prove their capabilities and integrity. How can these prejudices and perceptions be shifted?

**Localisation as driver of globalisation:** As mentioned already in 2017 GMI work, ‘localisation’ is subject to two possible interpretations: *decentralisation* or *transformation*.<sup>ix</sup> A number of international agencies are pursuing the decentralisation version, registering their in-country offices as national ones. Some are intentionally accelerating a strategy of globalisation: expanding the number of national affiliates of their global alliance or federation. Policies, such as those of the Nepali and Indonesian governments, to restrict a large influx and direct implementation by international organisations, will

add a further incentive for *globalisation as localisation*. This gives a different meaning to ‘*as local as possible, as international as necessary*’.

From different countries, locally-grown agencies signal that they do not recognise nationally registered offices of international agencies, or the national affiliates of international alliances and federations, as truly ‘local’.

This globalisation trend is perceived as a serious threat by indigenously grown local and national organisations: there are already multiple examples of how these internationally embedded entities are hard competitors for international funding available to a country. Risk averse donors with not enough personnel to get to know a diversity of local actors, may incline towards these agencies, because they offer the reassurance of brand recognition.

More disturbingly, such national members of international alliances are now actively engaging in local fundraising, from new middle classes, corporates and potential philanthropists. Rather than helping long-time local/national agencies take this opportunity to finally reduce their dependency on international funding, they are now competing for the exploitation of this new resource. The old adagio takes on a new twist: “*First you gave us fish to eat, but each time we became hungry again. Then you taught us to fish and we could feed ourselves. But now, you are sending your fishing trawlers to our shores to catch our fish.*” How will Western INGOs feel if many more ‘southern NGOs’ increased their fundraising from governments and the general public alike, in their home countries?

This globalisation of INGOs is another factor contributing to ‘*shrinking space*’ for local civil societies, which are already under growing pressure worldwide. How do we reconcile this with our concern to protect bio-diversity in the natural world, and for justice in the human realm? At least one director of a pure relief agency that mostly implements directly, acknowledged that ‘*localisation is a matter of justice*’. What shapes our organisation’s strategic choices: *solidarity* or *growth*?

**Shifting the conversation:** For the past three years localisation has been debated and researched as a technical issue: We first needed a clear definition of who is ‘local’, then indicators to establish a baseline and track changes; and we are refining our accounting systems so we can track precisely what percentage of funding goes as directly as possible to local/national organisations etc.

Are these the heart of the matter, or just surface concerns: What about *mindsets* and *money interests* in the localisation debate? In 2018, GMI signalled that addressing localisation primarily through the money (20% or 25%) angle is unhelpful. First comes the quality of relationship. This resonates with southern’ agencies’ demand to be treated with equity and respect. If the relationship is poor and full of distrust and control, the money will always be a zero-sum game: what goes to the local agency is lost for the international one. If there is genuine partnership for a common purpose, the money that goes to the local agency serves the shared purpose. How do we have a conversation about solidarity and shifting roles?

**Strategic outcomes:** The localisation question is currently hardly discussed in terms of strategic outcomes. Because the Grand Bargain derived heavily from the *Humanitarian Financing Gap* report, it remains framed in terms of increased cost-efficiency, in the short term. This doesn’t make sense: For the past 20 years, massive amounts of money have been spent in Haiti. Yet when Haiti will be hit by the next disaster, international agencies will pour in again in large numbers, because Haiti still doesn’t have the capacity to largely manage its own crises. Is that only a failure of the Haitians? Do the Pacific islanders see a future where the most important and financially most sustainable organisations will be – as purely illustrative example- Save Tonga, World Vision Fiji, CARE Vanuatu, and Oxfam Solomon Islands? What legacy, in terms of strengthened local and national capacities, is currently being planned for cyclone Idai-hit Mozambique?

**Geo-political changes:** Nor is localisation discussed in terms of geo-political changes in a new world, where power will be less concentrated in the ‘North’ or ‘West’. There is growing frustration among local/national agencies, about what comes across as a persistent attitude of superiority in international ones. Several reports have invited INGOs to do some serious strategic thinking on possible future scenarios<sup>x</sup>, that take these changes into account. A time will come when many more local/national governmental and non-governmental actors will assert that such attitudes are no longer welcome.

**Global civil society for global challenges:** We are facing urgent global challenges: climate change, plastic oceans, another great ‘extinction’ in the natural world, a booming arms trade, surveillance capitalism etc. Faced with this, local/national organisations see the need for strategic collaboration between the civil societies of the ‘North’ and the ‘South’. But worried voices can now be heard about a possible confrontation between the civil societies of ‘North’ and ‘South’, if the first keeps treating the latter as inferior. What could more equitable, respectful and strategic collaboration look like?

**Where next?** Speakers from the international agency world were clear: The international system will not reform itself comprehensively and only from within. They advised to look for where opportunities to do things differently arise, grasp them and demonstrate that alternatives are possible and work. Local/national agencies must no longer let the localisation debate be shaped, paced and controlled by international ones, but take their own initiatives.

- The big localisation debates are still happening in Western capitals. They need to take place in aid-recipient countries, be locally-driven, and focus on strategic outcomes in a changing world.
- Aid-recipient local organisations can easily pull together an evidence-base: For the past X years, how many due diligence and capacity-assessments have they undergone; whose financing covered their core costs and whose only direct project costs; what is their concrete experience with international partners aligning their requests and formats for reporting; what capacity-support addressed their organisational priorities; how much staff time is spent on compliance requirements; how many qualified staff have they lost to international organisations; which international ‘partners’ practice mutual accountability etc.
- Local/national organisations can pro-actively articulate their own proposals for equitable partnerships and concrete role changes. They need to address their internal competition to do collective bargaining. Competition does not always bring out the greatest ‘value-for-money’. Internal division is a big drain on local and national capacities to prevent and respond.
- Local/national organisations can lead on the strategic assessment of in-country collective capacities to manage crises, of state- and non-state actors combined, identify the priority gaps and develop a roadmap for strengthening their collective force.
- Sustainable finance for local/national crisis prevention and -response capacities, is a top strategic priority. Other sources of funding than short-term, mostly Western, relief funding, must be tapped into. And local/national actors can organise themselves to create effective and credible national institutions, that can act as the reliable intermediaries to manage large grant portfolios from institutional donors – as is already the case in the development sector;
- Local/national organisations can also articulate their commitments to multiple-stakeholder accountability. The Bangladeshi CSOs behind the campaign for equitable partnership, will soon be presenting their ‘*accountability charter*’, to complement their demands.

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<sup>i</sup> [https://interagencystandingcommittee.org/sites/default/files/iasc\\_structure-and-working-method\\_2019-2020\\_web.pdf](https://interagencystandingcommittee.org/sites/default/files/iasc_structure-and-working-method_2019-2020_web.pdf)

<sup>ii</sup> Grand Bargain Localization Workstream Field Mission to Iraq 18-22 November 2018, p4,

<sup>iii</sup> [http://coastbd.net/wp-content/uploads/2017/10/CSO\\_Common-Space\\_Campaign-Paper.pdf](http://coastbd.net/wp-content/uploads/2017/10/CSO_Common-Space_Campaign-Paper.pdf)

<sup>iv</sup> VANGO, PIANGO, HAG 2019: *Localisation in Vanuatu: Demonstrating Change*. [https://humanitarianadvisorygroup.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/02/Vanuatu-Baseline-Report\\_February-2019\\_FINAL.pdf](https://humanitarianadvisorygroup.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/02/Vanuatu-Baseline-Report_February-2019_FINAL.pdf)

<sup>v</sup> InterAction & Humanitarian Outcomes 2019: *NGOs and Risk: Managing uncertainty in local-international partnerships*. *Global report*. pp. 30

<sup>vi</sup> Local/national organisations on the other hand see international agencies as very wasteful, also of public money, and don’t understand why that wastage is not questioned.

<sup>vii</sup> InterAction & Humanitarian Outcomes 2019: pp. 5/30-31

<sup>viii</sup> GMI 2019: *Prepared-for-Partnership? Trust and Distrust in International Cooperation*. GMI <https://www.gmentor.org/new-blog>

<sup>ix</sup> GMI 2017: *Understanding the Localisation Debate*. [www.gmentor.org](http://www.gmentor.org)

<sup>x</sup> E.g. King’s College London & Start Network 2013: *The Future of Non-Governmental Organisations in the Humanitarian Sector*. *Global transformations and their consequences*; BOND 2015: *Fast Forward. The changing role of UK-based NGOs*. London; IARAN 2017: *The Future of Aid INGOs in 2030*. [http://futureofaid.iran.org/The\\_Future\\_Of\\_Aid\\_INGOs\\_In\\_2030.pdf](http://futureofaid.iran.org/The_Future_Of_Aid_INGOs_In_2030.pdf)