

LOCALISATION IN MYANMAR: SUPPORTING AND REINFORCING MYANMAR ACTORS TODAY AND TOMORROW

REVIEW



Executive Summary

Authored by the Global Mentoring Initiative and RAFT Myanmar. May 2022.

This report explores the question of whether and how to support [further] localisation in the current conditions in Myanmar, which are assumed to remain similar for the next few years. It does this primarily from the perspective of international aid actors who, through their funding, hold much power over Myanmar actors. But it also speaks to what Myanmar actors need to do or do more of.

The report invites critical reflection and changes, not only in practices of international agencies, but also in how they relate to national and local actors, and in fundamental assumptions that shape how the international aid system works. It is intended for all international and national/local actors responding to the crises in Myanmar today. This includes donors, the UN agencies, the Red Cross agencies, international NGOs (INGO) and the different Myanmar actors.

The report provides an overall picture of Myanmar as a protracted and currently deepening crisis, explores the rationale for localisation, what we mean with it, and how it can be turned into practice in the areas of collaboration, financing, capacities, and coordination. It makes a series of recommendations to international actors and Myanmar civil society organisations (CSOs) summarized below.

To all international actors

- **Agree on what localisation is:** Adopt the correct understanding of localisation as supporting and reinforcing local actors, in a spirit of inclusion, mutual respect and genuine partnership, rather than replacing or subordinating them. This requires active attention to the power dynamics in the collaborative relationships, and frank conversations about the responsible use and potential abuse of power.
- **Be transparent** about the true nature of the collaborative relationship and use the term 'partnership' for a high quality one. Intentionally invest in relationship- and trust building.
- **Talk about risks:** Enter the strategic risks of not supporting Myanmar actors, or not as much as possible, into the risk matrices. Bring back-donors, international operators and Myanmar actors together for focused discussions about particular types of risk. Complement risk anxieties with opportunity-spotting: working closely with Myanmar actors creates opportunities.
- **Recognize the capabilities:** Start from the assumption that Myanmar actors have many relevant capabilities, and that international actors must learn from them as much as they can learn from international actors. Acknowledge that international actors can and do undermine Myanmar capacities, if they weaken their self-confidence, hire away their best staff and keep them on a financial shoestring.
- **Prioritise** area-based over sectoral/thematic coordination, as the needs, capabilities and operating conditions in different sub-national contexts of Myanmar vary greatly.
- **Set joint leadership over coordination efforts as the operational medium-term aim.** That cannot happen unless there is a much more enabling environment for Myanmar actors to participate, meaningfully.

To back donors

- **Acknowledge that Myanmar continues to be a protracted crisis** and clarify, institutionally, whether supporting the diverse set of Myanmar responders as actors in their own society and not just as delivery instruments for international aid is a value and objective.
- **Ensure the organisational business continuity** of enough Myanmar actors in all parts of the country.
- **Aim for quality funding:** Ensure that the international and Myanmar intermediaries receive quality funding and monitor that they pass it on to their subgrantees. The quality of funding is as or even more important to organisational and programmatic effectiveness as the quantity. It is also critical for institutionalised capacity-development.
- **Adopt a gradualist, not a maximalist approach to direct funding** of more Myanmar agencies. This starts out with small grants combined with the support to develop the organisational policies and programmatic expertise where needed. As progress occurs, and trust develops in the relationship, the grants can become larger.
- **Make the necessary link between financial health and organisational capabilities development.** Investments in capacity-development will not bring any return if the recipient organisation cannot attract and retain capable people and have enough people to devote the time necessary for quality work.
- **Invest more in a Myanmar infrastructure of capacity-support resources.** Investing in an international infrastructure of capacity-support resources but not in a similar infrastructure in countries suffering protracted and recurrent crises, does not offer value-for-money from a longer-term perspective.
- **Be strategic with capacity-development:** Demand from international intermediaries who propose to do 'capacity-development', that they present clear objectives in terms of stronger organisational capabilities, not just individual competencies, and link this to role-change objectives.

To back donors & International intermediaries

- **Do not insist on Myanmar CSOs having an up-to-date registration** with the SAC regime. In practice, it does not offer any real guarantees and risk reductions for international aid agencies, while it is likely to significantly reduce their independence and can put them and those they support at risk.
- **Mainstream adaptive management:** Volatility and unpredictability are the 'normal' in many parts of Myanmar today. Back-donors cannot insist on overly detailed plans or expect guaranteed results and need to have administrative and decision-processes in place that allow potentially significant adaptations to an intervention to be reviewed and decided on fast and without excessive paperwork.
- **Reduce administrative requirements** and be creative in finding practical solutions to real world operational constraints and problems for operators in Myanmar today. At times this may imply accepting that lesser quality of services and goods are better than none at all because international standards cannot be met.

To back donors, International & Myanmar Operators

- **Be inclusive:** Include the meaningful participation of affected social groups/constituencies in the localisation policies and practices. This goes beyond feedback and complaints on agency-decided interventions and accepts social/group community influence on priorities and design- and implementation decisions.
- **Promote and insist on impartiality** understood as 'non-discrimination', including the right of no-longer combatants to humanitarian care. Be clear that political neutrality is and always has been a tactical and not a fundamental principle that should not be insisted upon for those who cannot realistically hope it will lead to greater access. Tactical neutrality also does not absolve the aid agency for the responsibility to defend fundamental rights and the constraints imposed by international humanitarian law.

To Myanmar actors

- **Take initiative:** Be propositional towards international actors. Myanmar CSOs need to own their standards of integrity, quality, and accountability. Articulate your own standards, in the first place towards Myanmar stakeholders, in ways that are contextually realistic.
- **Internally, be inclusive and attentive to internal status and power dynamics.** Also more established Myanmar CSOs can fail to recognise the agency and contribution of very localised actors, and risk bypassing them. Identity-based behaviours can add a further layer to this, as can social traditions that subordinate women and perhaps youth and are an obstacle to inclusive participation.
- **Work together:** Internally, promote and strengthen collaborative willingness and competencies. Competition between Myanmar actors is not in the best interest of people in Myanmar.
- **Remain a force for rights, democratisation and peace** towards other Myanmar actors. Responding to acute humanitarian needs is necessary but the only real answer lies at the level of political change. So remain advocates and role models for human rights, democratisation and non-violent handling of differences and conflicts.

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Recommendations

- To international and Myanmar operators/responders: **Jointly develop collective frameworks to advance or deepen localisation**, with a shared vision of what success will look like, and agreement on key milestones and how progress will be assessed. Develop separate frameworks for the different sub-national contexts in Myanmar.
- To back-donors and international/Myanmar intermediaries: **Do not overburden Myanmar actors with information requests** or provide them with the additional staff to respond to them. Independent and dedicated services can avoid this, if in practice they do not still rely heavily on the Myanmar actors on the spot to get the information they seek.
- To international and Myanmar capacity-development supporters: **Start from a holistic organisational development**, and collective capabilities outcomes perspective, within which any thematic learning area needs to be fitted. Enable peer learning between Myanmar actors.



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