Literature review

Is aid really changing?
What the Covid-19 response tells us about localisation, decolonisation and the humanitarian system

Authored by

DA GLOBAL

Commissioned by

British Red Cross

Literature review

This literature review accompanies a report:
Is aid really changing? What the Covid-19 response tells us about localisation, decolonisation and the humanitarian system

1.

Introduction

The emergence of localisation as a buzzword following the World Humanitarian Summit (WHS) of 2016 led to momentum towards more locally led humanitarian responses. The commitments made towards the end of the last decade in the form of the Grand Bargain,[1] the Charter for Change[2] and the Agenda for Humanity[3] give wider acknowledgement to the central role that local and national actors have always played in humanitarian response, particularly as first responders. In particular, the Grand Bargain saw an agreement between some of the largest donors and international humanitarian organisations. They committed to getting more resources into the hands of people in need, and to improving the effectiveness and efficiency of humanitarian action, including more support and funding tools for local and national responders.[4] These actors – comprising governments, communities, Red Cross and Red Crescent National Societies and local civil society – are often the first to respond to crises, remaining in the communities they serve before, during and after emergencies. Grand Bargain signatories committed to making principled humanitarian action as local as possible and as international as necessary, recognising that international humanitarian actors play a vital role, particularly in situations of armed conflict.

Despite the emergence of 'localisation' as a concept at the WHS, the actual foundation for localisation is rooted in two decades of humanitarian approaches and commitments, namely the sixth principle of the 1994 Code of Conduct for the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement and NGOs in Disaster Relief,[5] the 2003 principles of good humanitarian donorship,[6] and the 2005 Paris Aid Agenda.[7] These all laid the groundwork for humanitarian actors to recognise of the importance of local actors' expertise and leadership.

Even before the 1994 Code of Conduct, National Societies were a central and integral part of the broader Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement (the Movement). The initial idea behind the creation of the International Committee of the Red Cross in 1864 was to promote the establishment of National Societies as primary medical responders alongside their authorities. This was before the idea and rationale emerged that an international operational body could be useful in conflict. Throughout the long history of the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement, there is an accompanying history of new resolutions that reflect the role of National Societies. For example, in 2015, the Movement

[1] The Grand Bargain – A Shared Commitment to Better Serve People in Need (2016)
https://www.jips.org/uploads/2019/03/Grand-Bargain-final-22May2016.pdf

[2] Charter for Change (2015) Charter4change. https://charter4change.org

[3] Agenda for Humanity (2016) Agenda for Humanity. https://agendaforhumanity.org

[4] Inter-Agency Standing Committee (2021) More support and funding tools for local and national responders.
https://interagencystandingcommittee.org/more-support-and-funding-tools-for-local-and-national-responders

[5] "Principle 6. We shall attempt to build disaster response on local capacities. All people and communities – even in disaster – possess capacities as well as vulnerabilities. Where possible, we will strengthen these capacities by employing local staff, purchasing local materials and trading with local companies. Where possible, we will work through local NGHAs as partners in planning and implementation, and cooperate with local government structures where appropriate. We will place a high priority on the proper co-ordination of our emergency responses. This is best done within the countries concerned by those most directly involved in the relief operations, and should include representatives of the relevant UN bodies." See: International Committee of the Red Cross (1994) Code of Conduct for the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement and Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) in Disaster Relief. https://www.icrc.org/en/doc/resources/documents/publication/p1067.htm

[6] See in particular principle 8 in: Good Humanitarian Donorship (2003) 24 Principles and Good Practice of Humanitarian Donorship.
https://www.ghdinitiative.org/ghd/gns/principles-good-practice-of-ghd/principles-good-practice-ghd.html

[7] See in particular 12–16 in: The Paris Declaration on Aid Effectiveness and the Accra Agenda for Action. (2005 & 2008).
https://www.oecd.org/dac/effectiveness/34428351.pdf

also made a statement on localisation to "affirm the complementarity of local, national and international action" in a message to the WHS.[8]

Discussions about localisation recognise that it requires fundamental shifts in ways of working for the current humanitarian model. As a result, healthy debate has sprung up about when, where and how to engage in these shifts – specifically, when they might be needed and when they may not be appropriate. This debate is rooted in an understanding of the humanitarian system and viewpoints of it being fundamentally neo-colonial, with the divide between local and international organisations recognised as being deep-rooted and ideological.[9]

The Covid-19 crisis has once again shown us that local actors are the best placed to respond – even when faced with a global crisis. The increase in local action during the pandemic offers a blueprint illustrating why and how localisation can be effective. It shows how we can move past resistance around how to put it into practice and towards transforming commitments into reality. As a result, the ideology underpinning previous resistance has also been under discussion.

Many argue that, until now, international actors' commitments towards localisation have failed to meet expectations of a deeper transformation of humanitarian structures.[10]

As well as seeing the start of a global pandemic, 2020 was also a year in which the murder of Mr George Floyd in the United States and the Black Lives Matter protests that followed drew into focus the spectre of racism across all spaces. This has led to increasingly open questions being asked about the nature of humanitarian response and its colonial underpinnings. In this sphere, knowledge and ways of working from the Global North often have been viewed or presented as intrinsically more valuable than those of local communities and/or knowledge from the Global South.[11] This extends to international aid, and various thinkers have made links between systemic racism and the different ways in which it conspires to keep development agendas and narratives firmly rooted in the Global North. This is relevant because many of the strategies underpinning aid and development overlap, creating barriers to understanding or accepting the independent expertise and agency of humanitarian actors from the Global South.[12]

[8] Council of Delegates of the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement (2015, December 7). Resolution 3 of the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement message to the World Humanitarian Summit. https://rcrcconference.org/app/uploads/2015/03/CD15-R3-message-to-WHS_EN.pdf

Currion, P. (2020, July 13) Decolonising aid, again. The New Humanitarian. https://www.thenewhumanitarian.org/opinion/2020/07/13/decolonisation-aid-humanitarian-development-racism-black-lives-matter

[9] Wall, I. & Hedlund, K (2016) Localisation and Locally-led Crisis Response: A Literature Review. Local to Global Protection. https://www.local2global.info/wp-content/uploads/L2GP_SDC_Lit_Review_LocallyLed_June_2016_final.pdf

[10] See: Cornish, L. (2020, June 3) Is it finally time for the localization agenda to take off? Devex. https://www.devex.com/news/is-it-finally-time-for-the-localization-agenda-to-take-off-97323; Ncube, A. (2020, September 21). Localization of Humanitarian Action: From Grand Bargain to Grand Betrayal. The Global. https://theglobal.blog/2020/09/09/localization-of-humanitarian-action-from-grand-bargain-to-grand-betrayal and Pincock, K., Betts, A., & Easton-Calabria, E. (2020) The Rhetoric and Reality of Localisation: Refugee-Led Organisations in Humanitarian Governance. The Journal of Development Studies. 1-16. doi: 10.1080/00220388.2020.1802010, p.13-14. https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/00220388.2020.1802010

[11] Osofisan, W. (2020, November 20) Opinion: Why the Black Lives Matter movement should have us rethinking humanitarian aid. Devex. https://www.devex.com/news/opinion-why-the-black-lives-matter-movement-should-have-us-rethinking-humanitarian-aid-98570

[12] Olowookere, S. (2021, February 8) George Floyd's death shows us how International development needs to change. We Are Restless. https://wearerestless.org/2020/06/02/george-floyds-death

2.

Philosophies of localisation

2.1. Definitions of localisation

Signatories to the Grand Bargain – including representatives of donor countries and international aid organisations from the UN, international NGOs and the Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement[13] – committed to making humanitarian action "as local as possible and as international as necessary". This included an agreement to enable a shift in funding of 25% to local actors as directly as possible. However, many other definitions of localisation also exist, as used by different actors in the international aid industry. In contrast to this commitment, a definition by the Australian Red Cross describes localisation as a "shift of resources and decision-making to local and national responders in humanitarian action".[14]

The fact there is not one accepted definition, and that there are no clear qualifiable indicators, makes it difficult to analyse the progress of localisation, or the impact of Covid-19 on the localisation agenda. Judgements about which definitions are most valid depend on context and how they are being applied – for example, to advocate for decisions towards particular localisation outcomes over others.

At a broad level, large institutions and their Northern-based actors appear to define localisation in capacity and funding terms.

Many other definitions, particularly from academics and practitioners, discuss localisation as a handing over of power. For the purpose of this study, we present two of the most well known definitions below to help situate the research within the framework of what exists in the public domain.

- The International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC) Strategy 2030 states that one of the '7 transformations' the IFRC network will need to embrace to tackle global challenges is "Supporting and developing National Societies as strong and effective local actors".[15]

- The Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) specifically mentions local governments as well as civil society organisations, defining localisation as: "a process of recognising, respecting and strengthening the leadership by local authorities and the capacity of local civil society in humanitarian action, in order to better address the needs of affected populations and to prepare national actors for future humanitarian responses".[16] This definition could be interpreted in many ways, since it establishes local response as an effective way of improving humanitarian response and also recognises and respects the importance of local actors' leadership and capacity.

[13] Metcalfe-Hough, V., Fenton, W., Willitts-King, B., & Spencer, A. (2020) Grand Bargain annual independent report 2020. ODI Humanitarian Policy Group. https://interagencystandingcommittee.org/system/files/2020-12/Grand%20Bargain%20Annual%20Independent%20 Report%202020.pdf

[14] Australian Red Cross (2017). Going Local. https://www.redcross.org.au/getmedia/fa37f8eb-51e7-4ecd-ba2f-d1587574d6d5/ARC-localisation-report-Electronic-301017.pdf.aspx

[15] IFRC Solferino Academy. Strategy 2030. https://future-rcrc.com/why-strategy-2030/s2030-the-seven-transformations

[16] OECD (2017) Localising the Response. https://www.oecd.org/development/humanitarian-donors/docs/Localisingtheresponse.pdf

Alternative narratives about localisation argue that it is not simply about the transfer of funds, but also about equitable control of decision-making:[17]

> "Localisation requires a shift in power relations between actors, both in terms of strategic decision-making and control of resources.
>
> **de Geoffroy, Grunewald and Ní Chéilleachair, 2017**

Given the range of definitions available, we may expect localisation to be a holistic process of change, where it is not just that funds are being delivered more directly from donors to local organisations, but that those organisations take a primary role in how and what decisions are made, and the form that humanitarian response takes.

2.2. Who and what is 'local?'

All attempts at defining localisation require an understanding of what we mean by 'local'. Grand Bargain signatories defined local actors for the purposes of measuring their financing commitments. This definition includes governmental authorities at the national and local levels, while local non-state actors are organisations "headquartered and operating in their own aid recipient country and which are not affiliated to an international NGO".[18] This includes a wide range of actors: local and national NGOs or civil society organisations, National Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies and local or national private sector organisations. It may also include an organisation or agency that is auxiliary to a national government. National Societies are auxiliary to the government, but other organisations or agencies may play an auxiliary role too. The principle of independence remains very important for the Movement, notably in ensuring that National Societies are perceived as being separate from statutory and security agencies in situations of armed conflict or other situations of violence (including in their role as auxiliaries). This also underpins the whole Safer Access approach, which aims to ensure that all National Societies can work safely and be trusted throughout a country.[19]

In fact, who is 'local' in individual contexts is not so easily defined. The literature suggests that local actors consist of a wide range of groups, from regional or provincial governments to community volunteer groups, individuals and nationwide charities. For example, in the context of Bangladesh, it is native Bangladeshi actors who are considered to be local in traditional development frames, rather than the Rohingya refugee population, while in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, some stakeholders did not consider organisations based in Kinshasa to be local.[20] In any context, national stakeholders and decision-makers will probably have a key role in making or influencing these decisions to determine who is considered local. While the humanitarian

---

[17] de Geoffroy, V., Grunewald, F., & Ní Chéilleachair, R. (2017) More than the money – localisation in practice. Trocaire. https://www.trocaire.org/sites/default/files/resources/policy/more-than-the-money-localisation-in-practice.pdf

[18] See: https://interagencystandingcommittee.org/system/files/categories_for_tracking_direct_as_possible_funding_to_local_and_national_actors_003.pdf

[18] and: Inter-Agency Standing Committee (2018, 24 January). IASC Humanitarian Financing Task Team, Localisation Marker Working Group. [Definitions paper] https://interagencystandingcommittee.org/system/files/hftt_localisation_marker_definitions_paper_24_january_2018.pdf

[19] Safer Access – Saving Lives (2015) Safer Access for all National Societies. https://saferaccess.icrc.org

[20] Barbelet, V. (2019) Rethinking capacity and complementarity for a more local humanitarian action. https://cdn.odi.org/media/documents/12957.pdf

sector has tried to define localisation as a more equitable share of funding and power going to local and national organisations, not all local NGOs or National Societies might necessarily be considered local by crisis-affected communities because of differing nationalist identities, debate and contexts.

There are also distinctions between host National Societies and partner National Societies (for example, the British Red Cross, the Australian Red Cross and the American Red Cross, to name a few), with the former being based in the Global South and the latter generally being based in the Global North. The binary created in discourse between what is considered local and international risks being reductive and does not take into account the vastness of the humanitarian response community and the nuances within it. The concept of localisation relates to scale in the areas of sociology, politics and economics, not just geography.[21] It therefore defines where power lies, and breaks this down along colonial lines of North and South.

2.3. Partnership and complementarity

Much of the literature highlights the importance of understanding the ways in which partnerships between local and international actors can best function to accelerate localisation. For humanitarian organisations, partnerships can be central to operational delivery but may also lead to greater impact and effectiveness as well as increased local legitimacy and participation.[22]

Research carried out by a consortium of NGOs in the Accelerating Localisation Through Partnerships programme suggested various ways in which local and national NGOs, and international NGOs, add value to partnerships.[23] According to the findings, local organisations add value through human resources management, advocacy and identifying capacity strengthening needs, whereas international NGOs bring fundraising capabilities, and technical and capacity building expertise. All organisations add value through project design, planning and management, monitoring, evaluation, accountability and learning (MEAL), financial management and coordination. The findings of this research were further reviewed as part of the Grand Bargain Localisation Workstream, resulting in a guidance note with 24 points presenting principles of partnership.[24] Among these, one principle highlights that all humanitarian actors should identify the value they add to partnerships so that complementarity can be identified prior to a crisis.

Research commissioned by the British Red Cross with the support of the ICRC in 2018 evaluated complementarity within the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement in the context of three conflict crises. The paper defines complementarity as follows: [25]

> "…the combination of strengths that each component can bring in a complementary way that ensures the ability of each individual component, as well as the Movement as a whole, to respond to the humanitarian needs of those affected by conflict
>
> **Austin and Chessex, 2018**

[21] Barakat, S., & Milton, S. (2020) Localisation Across the Humanitarian-Development-Peace Nexus. Journal of Peacebuilding & Development, 15(2), 147–163. https://doi.org/10.1177/1542316620922805

[22] Squire C. (2012) Partnerships and Capacity Building: A Guide For Small and Diaspora NGOs. The peer learning programme for small and diaspora organisations. https://www.intrac.org/wpcms/wp-content/uploads/2016/09/Partnership-and-Capacity-Building_A-Guide-for-Small-and-Diaspora-NGOs-1.pdf

[23] Action Aid, CARE, CAFOD, Christian Aid, Oxfam, Tearfund (2019) Accelerating Localisation through Partnerships. https://resourcecentre.savethechildren.net/library/accelerating-localisation-through-partnerships-global-report

[24] Grand Bargain Localisation Workstream (2020) Guidance note on partnership practices for localisation. https://interagencystandingcommittee.org/system/files/2020-05/Guidance%20note%20on%20partnership%20practices%20May%202020.pdf

[25] Austin, L., & Chessex, S. (2018) The case for complementarity. British Red Cross supported by the International Committee of the Red Cross. https://reliefweb.int/report/world/case-complementarity-working-together-within-international-red-cross-and-red-crescent

The report came from an assessment of longstanding Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement positions,[26] which are also evident in documents from past international Movement conferences. It also set out to critically assess whether the Movement 'walked the talk' of complementarity that it took to the World Humanitarian Summit in 2016.

The paper highlights these strengths and presents a solid case for recognising the value that National Societies, as well as the rest of the Movement, can bring to humanitarian interventions. That said, a recognition of complementary strengths does not necessarily imply a shift of power from the international to the local, but rather a greater understanding of the benefits of partnership. The report also underlines the fact that these differences need to be addressed to enable greater autonomy. For example, supporting a National Society to develop its capacity for resource mobilisation would help ensure it has a diverse donor base and does not rely solely on Movement partners for future funding.

[26] In 2019, the Council of Delegates passed the Strengthening Movement Coordination and Cooperation (SMCC) 2.0 Resolution (available online: https://rcrcconference.org/app/uploads/2019/12/CD19_R9-SMCC-Adopted-resolution-FINAL-EN_clean_FINAL.pdf). Local action is one of its seven priorities (see 3f on p.4, which also talks about complementarity but centres the importance of "ensuring the coherent and sustained development of local capacities, including in resource mobilisation and in alignment with the localisation agenda") and is a priority workstream of the SMCC 2.0 process.

3.

Covid-19 and a local response

3.1. A moment for localisation

Schenkenberg van Mierop says that "many of the most significant sector-wide reform processes in recent times followed mega-crises", and suggests that humanitarian response will look different in a post-Covid world.[27] The pandemic has been viewed by many stakeholders and commentators as an opportunity to re-energise the flagging shift towards localisation. Léa Moutard writes that the pandemic has been seen by local and national aid workers as "their time to shine".[28]

A tracking tool created by the ODI Humanitarian Policy Group (HPG) shows that local actors are taking a key role in community engagement, emergency support and food provision.[29] The majority of examples it gives show changes in experience from past actions and give details of the nature of these changes. There are several reports of activities from areas where travel restrictions have led to new ways of responding. For example, in Myanmar, while Covid-19 has presented additional challenges, there have also been positive steps towards localisation. While international staff are often systematically covered through global insurance schemes, this is not always the case for local

organisations. To overcome this, the IFRC and the Myanmar Red Cross Society implemented insurance and safety nets for local staff and volunteers that had previously been reserved for international staff.[30] More broadly, and not least in conflict areas, Movement partners have contributed financial and advisory support to ensure volunteers and frontline staff have adequate insurance coverage, as well as scaling up technical training and donating PPE. [31] The ODI tracking tool features other reports of cluster groups being increasingly local and taking place in local languages, as well as local coordination allowing for more effective community feedback.

It was also reported by the IFRC that more generally, there was a commitment towards strengthening National Societies through establishing a remit for their leadership to "guide priorities and all international support" in a 12-month update review on Covid-19.[32] The literature shows a particularly strong localised response in the South Pacific during the pandemic. In Vanuatu, support staff were unable to reach affected islands following Cyclone Harold so existing capacity and resources on the islands were used, with remote support from Australia, New Zealand and other islands.[33] Analysis of this response suggests that while the movement restrictions

[27] Schenkenberg van Mierop, E. (2020) After COVID-19: Time to reset [Blog]. HERE-Geneva. https://here-geneva.org/after-covid-19-time-to-reset

[28] Moutard, L. (2020, July 2) Covid-19 and localisation: an opportunity for equitable risk-sharing [Blog]. Humanitarian Practice Network. https://odihpn.org/blog/covid-19-and-localisation-an-opportunity-for-equitable-risk-sharing

[29] Humanitarian Policy Group (2020) Covid-19: tracking local humanitarian action and complementary partnerships. ODI. https://www.odi.org/covid19-tracking-local-humanitarian-action

[30] Humanitarian Advisory Group (2020) Two steps forward, one step back: Assessing the implications of COVID-19 on locally-led humanitarian response in Myanmar. https://humanitarianadvisorygroup.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/COVID-19-implications-for-Myanmar_Final_electronic_101220.pdf

[31] IFRC (2020) Options for ensuring coverage for uninsured Red Cross and Red Crescent volunteers impacted by COVID-19. Guidance for National Societies. https://volunteeringredcross.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/IFRC-Guidance-Duty-of-Care-for-Volunteers-18-May.pdf

[32] IFRC (2021) Covid-19 Outbreak: 12 Month Update. https://reliefweb.int/report/world/covid-19-outbreak-12-month-update-reporting-timeframe-31-january-2020-31-january-2021

[33] Relief Web (2020, April 29) Pacific National Societies respond to Cyclone Harold in the time of COVID-19 - Vanuatu [Press release]. https://reliefweb.int/report/vanuatu/pacific-national-societies-respond-cyclone-harold-time-covid-19

and economic consequences resulting from Covid-19 impacted delivery, the locally led response was quick and efficient.[34] National Societies took a prominent leadership role while benefiting from strong partnerships with others in the Movement.

The HPG report suggests that the strong local response has its foundations in a decentralised approach already in existence in the Pacific, where National Societies have experience in autonomous humanitarian action in their own contexts. An earlier Australian Red Cross report focused on the local rather than international interpretation of localisation and identified that for Pacific stakeholders it was the ability of local responders to lead in decision-making on issues affecting their community that was of prime importance.[35] The research presents the development of capacity and partnerships as the most important thematic areas of localisation in the Pacific. There are also a number of other materials detailing how local approaches have been facilitated across the Movement.[36]

3.2. Localisation through necessity

In a pattern similar to the Ebola crisis of 2014-16,[37] the Covid-19 pandemic has laid bare the fact that although locally led responses are effective and beneficial, it is circumstances rather than choice that have stopped international responders taking the lead. The

Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC) interim guidance for localisation and the Covid-19 response states specifically that:[38]

> " International travel and movement restrictions are impeding the international community to surge international staff and supplies at the usual scale and speed to provide expertise, capacity and support to staff and partners that are already working on the ground.
> **Inter-Agency Standing Committee, 2020** "

Similarly, the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs' (OCHA) Covid-19 Global Humanitarian Response Plan emphasises the importance of involving and supporting local organisations because of their centrality to a crisis characterised by "limited mobility and access for international actors".[39] In statements like these, the traditional humanitarian structures suggest that additional support for local organisations is necessary not because of a moral imperative to decolonise, or confidence that local responders can operate effectively or independently, but because it's impossible to mobilise the usual international surge capacity.

In certain contexts, more than 50% of international staff were pulled out during the pandemic,[40] and in others they were not able to travel to crisis-affected areas.[41] It is often citizenship or affiliation and the axis

[34] Australian Red Cross (2020) Local response in a global pandemic: a case study of the Red Cross response to Tropical Cyclone Harold during COVID-19 in Vanuatu and Fiji. https://www.redcross.org.au/getmedia/979a2299-2a98-4cc3-b15b-2abd2c061109/ARC-TC-Harold-Full-report-Electronic-171220.pdf

[35] Australian Red Cross (2017) Going Local. https://www.redcross.org.au/getmedia/fa37f8eb-51e7-4ecd-ba2f-d1587574d6d5/ARC-Localisation-report-Electronic-301017.pdf.aspx

[36] International Federation of the Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies. National Society Development. https://media.ifrc.org/ifrc/national-society-development

[37] DuBois, M., Wake, C., Sturridge, S., & Bennett, C. (2015) The Ebola response in West Africa: exposing the politics and culture of international aid. ODI. https://www.odi.org/publications/9956-ebola-response-west-africa-exposing-politics-culture-international-aid

Hitchen, J. (2016, December 15) Learning from local responses to Ebola in West Africa. Global Health, Epidemiology and Genomics. http://gheg-journal.co.uk/2016/12/learning-local-responses-ebola-west-africa

[38] Inter-Agency Standing Committee. (2020) IASC Interim Guidance on Localisation and the COVID-19 Response. https://interagencystandingcommittee.org/inter-agency-standing-committee/iasc-interim-guidance-localisation-and-covid-19-response

[39] OCHA - Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (2020) Global Humanitarian Response Plan: Covid-19. https://www.unocha.org/sites/unocha/files/Global-Humanitarian-Response-Plan-COVID-19.pdf

[40] Parker, B. (2020, May 20) UN pulls half its foreign aid staff out of Yemeni capital as COVID-19 spreads. The New Humanitarian. https://www.thenewhumanitarian.org/news/2020/05/20/un-yemen-pullout-staff-safety-covid-19

[41] Australian Red Cross (2020) Local response in a global pandemic: a case study of the Red Cross response to Tropical Cyclone Harold during COVID-19 in Vanuatu and Fiji. https://www.redcross.org.au/getmedia/979a2299-2a98-4cc3-b15b-2abd2c061109/ARC-TC-Harold-Full-report-Electronic-171220.pdf

of North or South which defines who is able to 'manage' the crisis from a distance and who has no choice but to 'operate' or 'administer' the response while remaining at risk on the frontline. However, it is also important to note that ICRC operations have shifted to different ways of working, including, where possible, remote or home working in line with WHO guidelines and national measures to prevent and mitigate the spread of Covid-19. It is also highlighted that most ICRC staff remain in their places of assignment and international travel has been suspended other than in exceptional circumstances.

3.3. Funding

One of the issues that the drivers towards localisation have sought to address is an overly centralised and remote international relief system, where funding is given to a far-too-limited number of first receivers. This has been referred to as an 'oligopoly' of actors.[42] Indeed, the now 63 signatories of the Grand Bargain committed to an aggregated target of transferring 25% of humanitarian aid funding to local and national responders.[43] As of 2020, only 10 signatories have achieved this commitment.[44] In fact, since 2016, only small increases in funding to local organisations have been seen.[45]

Data showing where funding for the Covid-19 response has ended up in terms of delivery actors is incomplete. We do know, however, that from the beginning of the crisis until October 2020, 66% of humanitarian funding was channelled through multilateral organisations.[46] Significantly smaller amounts were given directly to NGOs, civil society organisations (CSOs), National Societies and the public sector. According to analysis by Development Initiatives,[47] from the start of the pandemic until June 2020, a greater proportion of funding had been channelled through multilateral organisations than has been the case in recent years, with a substantially lower than average proportion of funding going to NGOs and CSOs. This is not necessarily at odds with the commitments of the Grand Bargain, however. According to the definition laid down by the Localisation Marker Working Group,[48] the definition of funding that is "as direct as possible" includes pooled funding accessed by local actors as well as funding through an international aid organisation as a single intermediary, so multilateral organisations are able to sub-contract.

[42] PHAPassociation (2017, January 30). Ben Parker: What does 'localization' of humanitarian aid mean in practice? [Video]. YouTube. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kLlkcexkrQk

[43] Inter-Agency Standing Committee (2021, January 20) More support and funding tools for local and national responders. https://interagencystandingcommittee.org/more-support-and-funding-tools-for-local-and-national-responders

[44] Metcalfe-Hough, V., Fenton, W., Willitts-King, B., & Spencer, A. (2020). Grand Bargain annual independent report 2020. ODI, Humanitarian Policy Group. https://interagencystandingcommittee.org/system/files/2020-12/Grand%20Bargain%20Annual%20Independent%20Report%202020.pdf

[45] Development Initiatives (2020) Global Humanitarian Assistance Report 2020: Chapter 4, Crisis financing to the Covid-19 pandemic response. https://devinit.org/resources/global-humanitarian-assistance-report-2020/crisis-financing-covid-19-pandemic-response/#downloads

[46] Development Initiatives (2020) Financing humanitarian needs amid the Covid-19 pandemic [Factsheet]. https://devinit.org/resources/financing-humanitarian-needs-amid-the-covid-19-pandemic/?nav=more-about

[47] Development Initiatives. (2020). Global Humanitarian Assistance Report 2020: Chapter 4, Crisis financing to the Covid-19 pandemic response. https://devinit.org/resources/global-humanitarian-assistance-report-2020/crisis-financing-covid-19-pandemic-response/#downloads

[48] Inter-Agency Standing Committee (2018) IASC Humanitarian Financing Task Team, Localisation Marker Working Group [Definitions Paper]. https://interagencystandingcommittee.org/system/files/hftt_localisation_marker_definitions_paper_24_january_2018.pdf

2020 Funding for Covid-19 response by recepient type

UN agency	**$1,005,896,193**
National government	**$326, 502, 702**
Red Cross/Red Crescent International Society	**$153, 294, 729**
International NGO	**$50, 952, 765**
Inter-governmental	**$50, 400, 000**
Red Cross/Red Crescent National Society	**$23,177,784**
Unspecified	**$15,016,929**
Uncategorised private organisation/foundation	**$3,727,272**
National NGO	**$1,732,887**
International organisation/foundation/individual	**$1,339,500**
Local/National organisation/foundation/individual	**$560,00**
Affiliated	**$400,000**
Uncategorised NGO	**$264,900**

Source: UNOCHA Financial Tracking Service

According to the latest data for 2020, the overwhelming majority of funding has gone to international organisations, predominantly UN agencies, international actors within the Movement, international NGOs and inter-governmental organisations, with a far smaller amount of funding directly going to national NGOs or local organisations. While this does not mean necessarily that funding is not reaching local actors, it does suggest that power and decision-making ability remain firmly in the hands of international organisations. This trend aligns with the discussion around 'local' actors feeling subordinate. So, although localisation has happened in terms of local organisations taking direct charge of activities, international partners remain in control of project funding and strategic management. This leads local partners to feel as if they are simply service providers.

In the case of Cyclone Harold in Vanuatu, money came via the IFRC Disaster Relief Emergency Fund (DREF) and over 60% of funding went to National Societies, far beyond the 25% target in the Grand Bargain. But it is still evident that in terms of the global Covid-19 response, there is a vast divide between funding for the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement and National Societies.

4.

Barriers to further progress

4.1. Where power lies

Reports suggest that in general, and despite the achievements of local actors during the Covid-19 pandemic, the momentum achieved by the international commitments to localise has faltered.[49] This is not just about funding. To a great extent, while crisis-affected communities should be firmly centre-stage with regards to humanitarian decision-making, power remains in international and multinational hands.[50] For example, within the UN cluster system, which seeks to enhance partnerships between the UN, the Movement and NGOs, power – and in particular decision-making – remains dominated by international actors. In 2019, although 43% of cluster members were local or national NGOs, they held just 8% of co-chair positions of national clusters and 8% of leadership positions of subnational clusters, while no local NGOs held a lead position of a national cluster.[51] In this context, we are seeing actors from or working for organisations based in the Global North retaining power – which can feel very much like a colonial legacy.

Partnerships between international and local NGOs may also display these skewed power dynamics. A study into partnerships between French NGOs and local actors in Burkina Faso and Bangladesh illustrates this relationship. It reported that while there was significant localisation in terms of activities, some local partners were identified as feeling subordinate to international partners, particularly in terms of funding and strategic management.[52] Indeed, as mentioned above, it was in terms of their ability to lead on strategic management that local responders in the Pacific also felt most keen to see a shift towards localisation.[53]

In the examples from Burkina Faso and Bangladesh, 'local' research respondents also expressed a desire to genuinely take the lead in making decisions, rather than this just being a technicality. In addition, they wanted there to be a recognition of the unequal dynamic in local-international partnerships from the outset, and a fundamental shared goal of achieving a more appropriate balance.

4.2. Issues of negative assumptions

Howe et al. suggests there are four assumptions about local actors which dominate the localisation discourse:[54]

1. Local actors are less principled in their response.
2. Local actors have less operational and organisational capacity.
3. Local actors provide a lower-quality response.
4. Local actors have a lower cost than responses implemented by international organisations.

[49] Cornish, L. (2020, June 3) Is it finally time for the localization agenda to take off? Devex. https://www.devex.com/news/is-it-finally-time-for-the-localization-agenda-to-take-off-97323

Fast, L., & Bennett, C. (2020, May) From the ground up - It's about time for local humanitarian action. ODI. https://cdn.odi.org/media/documents/From_the_ground_up_its_about_time_for_local_humanitarian_action.pdf

[50] Jayawickrama, J., & Rehman, B. (2018, April 17) Before Defining What is Local, Let's Build the Capacities of Humanitarian Agencies. Refugee Hosts. https://refugeehosts.org/2018/04/10/before-defining-what-is-local-lets-build-the-capacities-of-humanitarian-agencies

[51] Local to Global Protection (2019) Localisation in numbers, funding flows and local leadership in Somalia. https://www.local2global.info/research/the-humanitarian-economy/localisation-in-numbers

[52] Coordination SUD (2019) Localisation of Aid: Lessons from partnerships between French NGOs and local actors. https://www.forus-international.org/en/extra/hub/resources-publications

[53] Australian Red Cross (2017) Going Local. https://www.redcross.org.au/getmedia/fa37f8eb-51e7-4ecd-ba2f-d1587574d6d5/ARC-Localisation-report-Electronic-301017.pdf.aspx

[54] Howe, K., Munive, J., & Rosenstock, K. (2019) Views from the Ground: Perspectives on Localization in the Horn of Africa. Tufts University. https://fic.tufts.edu/publication-item/perspectives-on-localization-in-the-horn-of-africa

These assumptions may reflect why the traditional methodology of humanitarian response seems unable or unwilling to shift power to the local or national level. According to one survey, local NGOs feel that international funders do not trust their ability to manage funds effectively and with accountability.[55] In a recent study of the role of refugee-led organisations as alternatives to the donor government, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and the international NGO model of refugee assistance, the authors describe Covid-19 as an opportunity through which new, participatory forms of humanitarian governance might be recognised.[56] However, they suggest that there is hesitancy on the part of donors due to issues of risk and accountability.

4.3. Colonial legacies

Hugo Slim also suggests that the reluctance of the international humanitarian community to let go of control and move the localisation agenda forward has its basis in racism and white supremacy.[57] This creates a divide between Northern and Southern actors in which, Slim suggests, Northern humanitarians are unwilling to let go of control because "We can't quite bear to share the system with 'them'. We don't really trust 'them' to get it right." Other literature more clearly links this white supremacy entrenched in the system with a colonial slant. For example, in an anonymous article in the Guardian, an international aid worker describes how

the prevalence of white senior leadership in the aid sector brings "echoes of the white civiliser", where the superior skills of the predominantly white-led international organisations are seen as "natural and inevitable".[58] As part of The Future of Humanitarian Action conversation series, Kennedy Odede responds to the lack of trust that donors and international organisations have in local actors and links this to a colonial way of thinking, rather than evidence that local organisations cannot effectively manage responses.[59] It is for this reason that Paul Currion calls for a transformation of humanitarian aid that puts anti-racism at its core, rather than focusing on technocratic fixes. He suggests that resistance to localisation can seem "suspiciously like language used to avoid talking about the lingering effects of racism", given that ensuring the capacity for local response to be as close as possible to crisis-affected populations seems to be so difficult to achieve. He argues that racism in the humanitarian system is "the elephant in the room" that the debate on localisation has continued to grapple with (or failed to address).[60]

4.4. Power and Critical Race Theory

Since research on localisation relates fundamentally to power, another relevant aspect is Critical Race Theory. This theory seeks to challenge mainstream liberal approaches to racial justice, which often see disparity between groups of different

55 Poole, L. (2013) Funding at the Sharp End: Investing in National NGO Response Capacity. CAFOD. https://www.alnap.org/help-library/funding-at-the-sharp-end-investing-in-national-ngo-response-capacity

56 Pincock, K., Betts, A., & Easton-Calabria, E. (2020) The Rhetoric and Reality of Localisation: Refugee-Led Organisations in Humanitarian Governance. The Journal of Development Studies. 1-16. doi: 10.1080/00220388.2020.1802010, p.13-14. https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/00220388.2020.1802010

57 Slim, H (2020) Is racism part of our reluctance to localise humanitarian action? [Blog]. Humanitarian Practice Network. https://odihpn.org/blog/is-racism-part-of-our-reluctance-to-localise-humanitarian-action

58 Anonymous (2020, October 15). The aid sector must do more to tackle its white supremacy problem. The Guardian. https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2020/jun/15/the-aid-sector-must-do-more-to-tackle-its-white-supremacy-problem

59 Devex (2020, September 17) Decolonizing Humanitarian Aid [Video]. YouTube. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XAf3tHuZdSA

60 Currion, P. (2020, July 13) Decolonising aid, again. The New Humanitarian. https://www.thenewhumanitarian.org/opinion/2020/07/13/decolonisation-aid-humanitarian-development-racism-black-lives-matter

racial origin as related to individual effort and outcomes, or the culture of people from a marginalised background, rather than being due to a structural disadvantage that is hardwired in the capitalist framework.[61]

Critical Race Theory helps us to understand the processes that shape and sustain race inequality in society. The literature on it is vast and helps us to understand individual actions through the structures that define everyday realities in education, the health service, the criminal justice system and politics for people from oppressed and marginalised racial groups. This is so important for humanitarian approaches, particularly localisation, because aid, development and humanitarian ways of working are all seen as having colonial origins. In fact, equity in development is most often used to describe something the Global North does to or in the Global South, rather than as a concept that applies between the North and South.[62] Neither does it take into consideration the issue of creating systems that foster equity between the North and the South, within the context of historical inequalities and power dynamics.

It has been argued that despite good intentions, localisation presents a biased understanding of the local and its agency in transforming humanitarianism.[63] This line of thought contends that not only does localisation represent a failed attempt to reconfigure the international humanitarian

system's power relations (which are dominated by actors from the Global North), but it glosses over the crucial role of the South in shaping norms for humanitarian action. It has also been argued that the current conversation is dominated by a problematic idea of the local being in binary opposition to the international, and this leads to a failure to see the full picture when analysing the sector's exclusionary practices.[64] As such, literature suggests that the localisation agenda risks perpetuating the very issues it aims to redress.

The bold commitments made in the second half of the last decade via the Grand Bargain have meant that localisation has become a part of established discourse in the international humanitarian sector. Yet much of the literature suggests that the shift to localisation has failed to live up to expectations that many had for a fundamental transformation of how humanitarian responses work.

That said, the physical absence of many international actors during the Covid-19 pandemic has shown us what many have long said: that local responders can operate efficiently and effectively without an international presence. While there are contextual examples of local organisations taking leadership and decision-making roles in response during the pandemic, it has also revealed, however, that greater shifts towards direct funding and more equitable decision-making remain elusive.

[61] Leech, G. (2012) Capitalism: A Structural Genocide. London: Zed Books.

[62] Martins, A. (2020) Reimagining equity: redressing power imbalances between the global North and the global South. Gender and Development. 10 March 2020. https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/13552074.2020.1717172

[63] Gómez, O. A. (2019) Localisation or deglobalisation? East Asia and the dismantling of liberal humanitarianism. Third World Quarterly. 42(6), 1347-1364. https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/01436597.2021.1890994

[64] Roepstorff K (2020) A call for critical reflection on the Localisation agenda in humanitarian action. Third World Quarterly. 41(2). https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/01436597.2019.1644160

As some point out:[65]

> It appears that, rather than triggering adaptations to the humanitarian business model, or accelerating localization reforms agreed through the Grand Bargain, the Covid-19 crisis is instead prompting a regression toward traditional donor and UN funding dynamics.
>
> **Konyndyk, Saez and Worden, 2020**

The literature does not suggest that the shift towards localisation has led to systemic change in the architecture of humanitarian response; in large part, traditional power dynamics remain unchanged. These dynamics remain largely along colonial or neo-colonial North-South lines and suggest a passive assumption of an inherent efficiency in Western ways of managing operations or addressing problems. If this is not tackled, there is a risk that localisation may become aspirational rhetoric without the active commitment needed to bring about changes in entrenched power dynamics. However, new models of funding are also important, and these may well spearhead progress to locally led action in the future.

---

[65] Konyndyk, J., Saez, P., & Worden, R. (2020) Humanitarian Financing Is Failing the COVID-19 Frontlines. Center For Global Development. 18 June. https://www.cgdev.org/blog/humanitarian-financing-failing-covid-19-frontlines

Accessible
versions
available

Email: localisation@redcross.org.uk