

What type of aid localisation is needed for tomorrow's humanitarian work?

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The author invites us to gain a clearer understanding of the different ways in which localisation can or should be applied. In doing so, she lays the foundations for new ways of working that may well shape tomorrow's humanitarian sector.

For the past ten years or so, the localisation of aid has been at the centre of most discussions among international humanitarian actors. Although the general idea of changing aid dynamics and transferring leadership to national actors is universally accepted in New York as it is in Geneva, putting this concept into practice is problematic since it risks redefining the structural foundation that underpins the entire aid sector. Yet the numerous studies on the efficiency of humanitarian action published in the context of the Grand Bargain are categorical: by investing at local level, aid could be more timely, less costly and more grounded in the specific reality of each recipient destination. Nonetheless, localisation seems these days to be treated more as a semantic change in the language of aid advocacy than a tangible reality. In fact, national stakeholders seem irremediably relegated to the role of bit players, condemned to exist alongside the humanitarian giants in imbalanced subcontracting relationships or within the framework of formal and time-limited seminars. Thus the laudable aim of “handing over” is not as easy as it seems, and the risk of localisation washing is patently obvious in the context of the legitimacy and funding crises¹ currently affecting our sector. In light of this, it is important to take time to appreciate the multiple variations of localisation, their nuances and their limitations as well as the benefits aid localisation can hope to bring to the humanitarian work of tomorrow.

Contract localisation: could nationalising jobs and training suffice?

The contractual decisions taken by an increasing number of humanitarian organisations in the Global North represent one of the first concrete signs of aid localisation. By implementing human resource strategies to gradually replace expatriate positions with local contracts, localisation seems to be steadily taking shape in the types of job carried out by staff in the sector. Thus, for certain positions specific to humanitarian operations, once-common international roles are becoming increasingly scarce or being abolished altogether. Notable examples are the roles of logistics specialist, base manager and administrator. The nationalisation of these so-called support roles is one of the most tangible demonstrations of the concept of localisation; it is a growing trend that is likely to become

¹ Alexandra Sirgant, « Le PAM en pleine crise interne, invité à repenser son système d'aide humanitaire », *Vatican News*, entretien avec Lila Ricart, 27 mars 2024, <https://www.vaticannews.va/fr/monde/news/2024-03/pam-nations-unies-crise-aide-humanitaire-financement.html>

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more prevalent over the coming years. However, this relatively “simple” application of a complex concept is already showing the limitations of its own effectiveness.

The main problem of localisation by contract is its lack of structural impact. While the “expat vs. local” dichotomy is admittedly becoming less commonplace, it still looms large, especially given that it impacts operational roles far more greatly than it does strategic roles, notably those relating to programming and management activities. By keeping local and international personnel within a hierarchical employment relationship, the system maintains a career development structure that is internationally weighted. This issue is further exacerbated in certain organisations, in particular within the United Nations (UN) where the differences in remuneration are so large that an employee who is accepted on an expatriate contract for an operation outside their country of origin will see their salary increase fourfold or more. It is therefore the very status of expatriate that needs to be scrapped.

In a similar and often complementary approach to localisation by contract, many operations focus on the training of aid workers. Responding to the need both to transfer skills and know-how at national level and to standardise the professions in the sector, this area of activity has attracted substantial investment in recent years. This emphasis on training has enabled the sector to capitalise on significant developments in learning methods made above all in the private sector. Learning techniques adapted to humanitarian work now include seminars, webinars, training for trainers, simulations and round tables, now products in their own right and which some calls for funding offer to implement as the only required outcome. Although these tools may be rewarding in individual career paths, they are expensive – certain UN-brokered inter-agency simulations cost up to 100,000 dollars for thirty participants or so – and indirectly maintain the national-to-international career progression structure. In their comprehensive analysis of the State of Humanitarian Professions study and voicing the point of view of national teams, the Bioforce Institute made a crucial recommendation that too few aid sector players seem to put into practice: “Instead of head-office teams developing learning programmes and ‘imposing’ them on national offices, operational teams should define their own needs and request tailored support to meet them. [...] In addition, organisations should promote peer learning across countries and regions rather than relying wholly on centralised resources.”²

In a nutshell, it seems that localisation by contract or training cannot hide the structural need for in-depth localisation which, to become a reality, must reach the very roots of our system.

Direct transfer of funds: where the money goes

Achieving genuine localisation requires adjusting the aid funding mechanism in order to redirect funds to stakeholders physically located in contexts in need. This localisation by money is the second concrete application of the concept. It also achieves an efficiency that supersedes all its other applications. Through direct funding, aid red tape is sidestepped, the decision-making power that is theirs by rights is handed back to the actors in the given context, and access to a change of scale is effectively opened up. All the same, the intrinsic problem in this approach to localisation lies not in its form but in its implementation. By way of example, in its report “Moving Toward a Model of Locally Led Development”, the American donor USAID, the world’s largest humanitarian funder, set itself the strategic target of

² Bioforce, *Recommandations pour aller plus loin, 19 recommandations pratiques, SOHP 2020*, novembre 2020, <https://www.bioforce.org/en/share/the-state-of-humanitarian-professions/sohp-2020-recommandations-pour-aller-plus-loin>

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transferring 25% of its annual aid budget directly to local actors by 2025.³ In 2022, the agency was forced to recognise that it had struggled to reach 10% and that it had “a long way to go”⁴ to reach its goal. This state of affairs is shared by the other international donors who, collectively, have failed to localise more than 5% of their funding. The conclusion is bitterly disappointing: despite its ambition, the humanitarian machine neither knows how nor is able to transfer its funds seamlessly directly to national actors who by definition are far, very far in fact, from reaching the regulatory standards that the system has itself put in place. To transfer “directly” to a local actor, donors such as USAID or ECHO therefore often have to turn to a traditional aid actor such as a UN agency. This is because it will be well-versed in the donor’s budgeting and funding request practices and also familiar with US counter-terrorism legislation and the many screening policies in force. This same UN agency, which has often become much too large to handle all the operations it wants to set up, outsources some of these activities to an operational partner, more often than not an international non-governmental organisation (NGO). This international NGO, sometimes directly funded by the donor, will have access to a more or less well-developed network of national organisations such as NGOs, associations or even community-based groups. It is these national actors who, at the end of the chain, will ultimately receive a relative share of the funds all the agencies had intended to give them in the first place. In what feels like an attempt to square the circle, the problem stems from the gap between the international stakeholders armed with excellent institutional knowledge of the system and the national actors left to feel like outsiders in matters that concern them first and foremost. It is therefore common in humanitarian coordination settings running major operations to see the citizens of a country come knocking on meeting room doors to find out what is happening in these circles in which the non-colonial national language is rarely spoken. With polite embarrassment, they are told that these are complex subjects, and that the agencies are there to help them but they must “register with OCHA”,⁵ “set up a structure with a mandate”, “participate in a sectoral coordination mechanism” and “prove their group of beneficiaries exceeds 200 people”. These administrative and institutional hammer blows alienate the majority and force the bravest to blend into the background, chameleon-like, in order to survive.

A more extreme approach to the direct transfer of funds consists of setting up new structures with the administrative flexibility to transfer aid to recipients with no checks or oversight of any kind. This is what organisations such as GiveDirectly seek to do, transferring funds direct to the world’s disadvantaged populations by mobile payment with no eligibility requirements. This model, which feels more like a modern iteration of a charitable organisation, seems to represent the only viable alternative to the direct transfer of funds. Nevertheless, if this model were to become standard practice, it would render obsolete the aid giants which are ultimately only there to identify, set up and oversee programmes that are the most capable of meeting the requirements of populations in need. The potential extinction of these aid middlemen raises questions, since if they go so too does years of accumulated knowledge on the effectiveness of aid and, above all, its proper management in contexts in which transparency, neutrality, impartiality and the fight against corruption are often the most difficult principles to uphold.

³ USAID, *Moving Towards a Model of Locally Led Development: FY 2022 Localization Progress Report*, https://www.usaid.gov/sites/default/files/2023-06/FY%202022%20Localization%20Progress%20Report-June-12-23_vFINAL_1.pdf

⁴ David Ainsworth, “What’s stopping USAID from localizing?”, *Devex*, 21 February 2024, <https://www.devex.com/news/what-s-stopping-usaid-from-localizing-106272>

⁵ OCHA, *oPt HF Eligibility Guidance Note, Annex 7*, June 2023, https://www.ochaopt.org/sites/default/files/files/Annex_7_Eligibility_Guidance_Note.pdf

The direct transfer of funds as a solution for simple and effective localisation therefore seems to be more a can of worms than a panacea. If localisation is neither a matter of money nor of contracts, perhaps, in fact, it is much, much more than that.

Towards a localisation of ideas

To the great dismay of many humanitarian workers, it seems that localisation cannot be operationalised, essentialised or even reduced to a practical change if it is to be achieved holistically. It is only by beginning to consider the concept as a network of ideas with the power to redefine our current paradigms that we can even begin to get a sense of its full potential. Through this approach, localising would mean tearing down the administrative edifices which distance the humanitarian machine from its beneficiaries.⁶ In this sense, maybe “unseating” would be more appropriate a term than localising. This would also entail localisation through the adaptation of individuals arriving in a context outside their home country, which could call for respect for the local language: speaking Swahili when working in the Democratic Republic of the Congo or Creole in Haiti. It would mean above all the end of a humanitarian strategy in which heavyweight directives are forced on a given country or area and the advent of a practice by which international stakeholders represent a sort of catalogue from which civil protection services, national Red Cross and Red Crescent societies and civil society actors can draw to find specific technical support. National initiatives built on this new balance of power are already up and running, with a long, deeply embedded and engaged history, and it is these stakeholders who must speak up to explain to the sector how to localise.

Localisation is a radical change of mindset which implies calling into question the extreme professionalisation of the sector and restores straightforward activism as the basis for our action. The aid sector needs to shed its cumbersome bureaucratic skin and extract the essence of what made it effective, making this available to any organisation who wants to use it in their own right. Indeed, fundamentally it is not for us, Western stakeholders and observers, to suggest what localisation should or should not look like: referring to the concept twenty-four times in this paper does not localise us any further, quite the opposite in fact. Our role here should rather be to listen actively to the criticism of the rigidity of the administrative systems we impose while believing we are doing the right thing, and to recognise the absolute primacy of the needs of the men or women who stand before us, to promote an approach that is driven by communities, for communities.

Translated from the French by Fay Guerry

⁶ Lila Ricart, « Quel avenir pour le Programme Alimentaire Mondial ? *Policy paper* : comprendre la plus grande agence de l’humanitaire onusien ». *Journal du multilatéralisme*, 26 septembre 2023, <https://observatoire-multilateralisme.fr/publications/quel-avenir-pour-le-programme-alimentaire-mondial>

Biography

Lila Ricart • Lila Ricart worked for six years in emergency humanitarian response including with the United Nations World Food Programme and Handicap International in armed conflict situations (Central African Republic, Democratic Republic of the Congo, South Sudan) and in the aftermath of disasters (Mozambique, Madagascar, Honduras, Haiti, Turkey). For the last three years she has specialised in preparing for emergencies by seeking to question how the humanitarian system operates. She is part of the Emergency Supply Prepositioning Strategy team and lectures at the Paris Institute of Political Sciences (Sciences Po) as well as at Bioforce where she offers spaces for reflection on the role of the aid workers of tomorrow.

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