

## Localisation of aid through the lens of Covid-19: a matter of choice, or a last resort?

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Vanuatu is one of the countries most exposed to natural hazards and one of the few in the world that has not recorded any case of Covid-19. Having closed its borders in the early hours of the pandemic, it then only has its own human resources to deal with the damage caused by a cyclone. An example noted by the authors to extol, once again, the virtues of the localisation of aid.

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Humanitarian aid is comprised of material and human assistance. Not only does it include funding and emergency supplies, it also encompasses the deployment of technical advisors and volunteers from international organisations to respond to the urgent needs of populations and ensure their protection in times of crisis. Since the World Humanitarian Summit (WHS) of 2016, this *modus operandi*, which is overseen by donor countries and international organisations, is at the centre of a debate being waged within the humanitarian community. For some time now, certain countries from the Global South have been calling for a form of “humanitarian sovereignty”, and tightening the rules and controls that govern foreign actors’ interventions on their territory<sup>1</sup>. It is argued that this type of aid exacerbates countries’ dependency on foreign assistance, while eroding the financial and technical capacity of local responder organisations and authorities. Furthermore, humanitarian aid is said to perpetuate power asymmetries between donor countries in the West and the Global South<sup>2</sup>.

As a response, the humanitarian system has decided, since the WHS of 2016, to promote the localisation agenda, which aims to transfer funding, control and the management of intervention strategies to local responders<sup>3</sup>. Charters, principles and roadmaps such as the Grand Bargain have been developed to guide the humanitarian system through this transition. Once achieved, the reform would, in theory, allow local non-governmental organisations (NGOs) to assume a frontline role in the management of emergency responses. Implementation of the localisation agenda would reduce inequalities between local and foreign actors, thereby addressing the multiple consequences of epistemic injustice. The resiliency and self-sufficiency of Southern communities would be enhanced through the reinforcement of local responders’ technical and financial capacity.

However, attempts to operationalise the principles of localisation have revealed capacity deficiencies among international actors, but most significantly, a lack of willingness on their part. Very few

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<sup>1</sup> See for example the case of Indonesia and Nepal, presented in Meaux *et al.*, “Lessons in localisation: the Fondation de France’s experiences in Nepal and in Indonesia”, *Humanitarian Alternatives*, issue 13, March 2020, p.72-83, <http://alternatives-humanitaires.org/en/2020/03/16/lessons-in-localisation-the-fondation-de-frances-experiences-in-nepal-and-in-indonesia>

<sup>2</sup> Loïc Gustin, *La localisation de l’aide humanitaire : Approche des enjeux et des effets potentiels pour les ONG humanitaires*, Université de Liège, 2017, <https://matheo.uliege.be/handle/2268.2/3504>. See also Open Democracy, “An open letter to International NGOs who are looking to ‘localise’ their operations”, 8 March 2020, <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/transformation/an-open-letter-to-international-ngos-who-are-looking-to-localise-their-operations>

<sup>3</sup> Véronique de Geoffroy and François Grünewald, “More than the money: localisation in practice”, Groupe URD, 2017, [https://www.grandbargain4ngos.org/upload/more-than-the-money-full-report\\_5b28deb171df6.pdf](https://www.grandbargain4ngos.org/upload/more-than-the-money-full-report_5b28deb171df6.pdf)

organisations have wholeheartedly embarked upon the first steps towards the necessary internal reforms<sup>4</sup>. Will the Covid-19 pandemic enable them to overcome their reticence and adjust their delivery model, in order to truly support the localisation agenda<sup>5</sup>? Having repatriated the majority of their foreign staff back to the North, many international NGOs were faced with no other option than to “localise” their aid in order to overcome the mobility restrictions brought about by the pandemic. Demonstrating that a local mode of delivery is indeed possible, we argue that it must be pursued beyond the health crisis. To support our argument, we draw from a concrete case that occurred in the middle of the pandemic... and of the South Pacific.

### Vanuatu, a Covid-19 island haven

The Melanesian country of Vanuatu, an archipelago that is home to just under 300,000 inhabitants, whose eighty islands are located northeast of Australia, is one of the last countries in the world to have not recorded any Covid-19 case<sup>6</sup>. To date, the country’s population has been protected by the proactive closure of its marine and aerial ports of entry, effective from 26 March 2020. However, this has simultaneously revealed other risks which threaten the small insular State: Vanuatu is the world’s most vulnerable country in terms of its exposure to natural hazards<sup>7</sup>. Located in the Pacific Ring of Fire, the country is subject to frequent earthquakes, volcanic activity, tsunamis, cyclones which are increasing in incidence and impact, and an array of other hazards associated with global warming.

In April 2020, the devastating passage of Category 5 Tropical Cyclone (TC) Harold served as a stark reminder of this vulnerability by inflicting extraordinary damage throughout Melanesia and in Tonga. In Vanuatu’s Northern province of Sanma, an estimated 20,000 families, representing 80 to 90% of the population, lost their homes or suffered extensive destruction<sup>8</sup> – at a time when the effects of cyclone Pam, which descended upon the country in 2015, had yet to fade from the Southern regions of the archipelago. For Vanuatu, the road to recovery is mired in a series of difficult challenges. Forty-eight percent of its GDP is generated by the tourism and hospitality industry<sup>9</sup>, which has virtually collapsed because of Covid-19. The pandemic has also profoundly impacted the post-Harold emergency response. Beyond the predictable decrease in humanitarian funding, which can be attributed to the global health crisis, the emergency response was further complicated by the closure of national borders.

For a small country, Vanuatu benefits from a high volume of international aid which, for the past few years, has amounted to an annual average of 128 million USD<sup>10</sup>. Its immediate neighbours, Australia and

<sup>4</sup> Monica Kathina Juma and Astri Suhrke (eds.), *Eroding local capacity: International Humanitarian Action in Africa*, Nordiska Afrikainstitutet, 2002 and Ian Smillie, *Patronage or partnership: Local capacity building in humanitarian crises*, Kumarian Press, 2001.

<sup>5</sup> For a discussion on this topic, refer to Martin Vielajus and Jean-Martial Bonis-Charancle, “Aid localisation: current state of the debate and potential impacts of the Covid-19 crisis”, *Humanitarian Alternatives*, issue 14, July 2020, p.150-161, <http://alternatives-humanitaires.org/en/2020/07/23/aid-localisation-current-state-of-the-debate-and-potential-impacts-of-the-Covid-19-crisis>

<sup>6</sup> Nine countries of the South Pacific, including Vanuatu, had yet to confirm a single case of Covid-19 in October 2020, according to data published by the World Health Organization: [https://covid19.who.int/?gclid=Cj0KCQjwuwD7BRDBARIsAK\\_5YhUKL-CiyktmTXztw5cwQhhYelAwBRQ3\\_kSHy9KWUAQ3\\_JZ1pdA7-EMaAIPREALw\\_wcB](https://covid19.who.int/?gclid=Cj0KCQjwuwD7BRDBARIsAK_5YhUKL-CiyktmTXztw5cwQhhYelAwBRQ3_kSHy9KWUAQ3_JZ1pdA7-EMaAIPREALw_wcB)

<sup>7</sup> According to the World Risk Report (Bündnis Entwicklung Hilft, 2019), which establishes the risk index of countries on the basis of several variables, such as their vulnerability, susceptibility and capacity to adapt, <https://weltrisikobericht.de/english>

<sup>8</sup> UN Country Team in the Philippines, “Tropical cyclone Harold situation report no.7”, 14 April 2020, <https://reliefweb.int/report/vanuatu/tropical-cyclone-harold-situation-report-7-14-april-2020>

<sup>9</sup> Knoema World Data Atlas, “Vanuatu – Contribution of travel and tourism to GDP as share of GDP”, 2020, <https://knoema.com/atlas/Vanuatu/topics/Tourism/Travel-and-Tourism-Total-Contribution-to-GDP/Contribution-of-travel-and-tourism-to-GDP-percent-of-GDP>

<sup>10</sup> According to data published by the OECD available at the following address: <http://www.oecd.org/dac/financing-sustainable-development/development-finance-data/aid-at-a-glance.htm> and compared to other countries whose development index is relatively similar to that of Vanuatu, such as Laos, Ghana, Zambia and the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). Without factoring the variations in cost of living, the foreign assistance received by Vanuatu represents an amount of 409 USD per capita, while in Laos, it corresponds to 90 USD. In Ghana, 84 USD per capita, 68 USD per capita in Zambia, and 10 USD per capita in DRC.

## HUMANITARIAN ALTERNATIVES

New Zealand, are the country's most generous donors, followed by Japan, the United States, the Asian Development Bank and France, one of its former colonial administrators<sup>11</sup>. The support provided can be divided into two categories of expenditure: human resources and material resources. The former category essentially corresponds to the deployment of several thousand technical experts, relief workers, volunteers and heads of mission who attend on-site to manage, supervise and implement emergency response initiatives and development programmes.

In April 2020, TC Harold descended upon the country shortly after the vast majority of foreign nationals employed by international NGOs had been repatriated and a few days following Vanuatu's announcement that all ports of entry would be indeterminately closed for health reasons. According to Ralph Regenvanu, Member of Parliament and Chief of the Opposition, "The response was all the more difficult, because we couldn't bring anyone in... Our development partners responded with funding, but the distribution of emergency supplies was complicated by the pandemic<sup>12</sup>". For weeks following the cyclone, quarantine requirements combined with limited transportation capacities at a national level delayed families' access to emergency supplies.

### **An archipelago calling upon its own human resources**

Today, more than six months into the post-Harold recovery, with a new cyclone season on the horizon, the situation remains challenging for Vanuatu due to its closed borders and the scarcity of flights. However, the country has held fast by applying novel procedures and mobilising local human resources.

New protocols and a variety of adjustments were established to facilitate customs and immigration processes, as well as diplomatic approvals for commercial freight and transport. Application of these protocols assuredly reduced the risk of infection among the insular populations of the nine South Pacific nations which have yet to confirm any cases of the virus. However, Vanuatu only received its first lot of screening kits on 15 May 2020, which suggests that the country did not even have the necessary capacity to locally identify cases before then. According to Regenvanu, the closure of national borders was initiated as a preventative measure, in light of the country's weak health system, which would not have been capable of facing a pandemic<sup>13</sup>.

To facilitate the provision of aid from one country to the next, the Pacific Islands Forum invoked the Biketawa Declaration for Regional Cooperation and established an emergency assistance mechanism called the "Pacific Humanitarian Pathway" (PHP)<sup>14</sup>. The PHP's objective is to institute the political environment required for an accelerated response to the pandemic, including the deployment of regional medical and humanitarian assistance.

In the aftermath of TC Harold, emergency relief was therefore provided without the presence of foreign nationals. Financial and material resources were provided by multilateral and bilateral development partners, but emergency support – distribution of food, water and hygiene supplies, the construction of temporary shelters and repairs to damaged roads and houses – was carried out, and continues to be carried out, by local organisations, youth and women's groups, community members, churches and national organisations. As explained by Dame Meg Taylor, Secretary General of the Pacific Islands Forum, the weakness of State-funded social security programmes in many insular countries means that in times of economic or humanitarian crisis, "we rely on our people and on our communities. We have always supported each other, and those of us who have jobs take care of those who do not<sup>15</sup>".

<sup>11</sup> Vanuatu was simultaneously colonised by France and England, from which it achieved its independence in 1980.

<sup>12</sup> Asia Society Policy Institute, "Covid-19 and the Pacific: weathering two crises", 14 May 2020, Webcast featuring Ralph Regenvanu (MP and Chief of Opposition, Vanuatu), Kevin Rudd (former Australian Prime Minister) and Dame Meg Taylor (Secretary General of Pacific Islands Forum), <https://asiasociety.org/policy-institute/events/webcast-Covid-19-and-pacific-islands-weathering-two-crises>

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>14</sup> The Permanent Mission of Tuvalu to the United Nations, "Pacific Island Forum foreign ministers agree to establish a Pacific Humanitarian Pathway on Covid-19", 10 April, 2020, <https://www.un.int/tuvalu/fr/activities/pacific-islands-forum-foreign-ministers-agree-establish-pacific-humanitarian-pathway>

<sup>15</sup> Asia Society Policy Institute, *op. cit.*

### Localisation in action

Though seemingly logical, approaches that favour such local networks are far from being generalised in the humanitarian sector. Certain significant actors, however, such as the Red Cross Movement, are more engaged in implementing the localisation agenda and may serve as models in humanitarian relations for organisations that display more Western-centric delivery models.

Nonetheless, and despite the call to action launched in 2016 in support of localisation, we must concede that emergency interventions remain largely the business of foreign international agencies, whose role includes both response design and implementation. Championing the role of local responders destabilises the dominant *modus operandi* and delivery approach of humanitarian actors.

The Grand Bargain, for instance, invites its signatories to increase their ratio of *direct* funding to local actors, without channelling it through intermediary international NGOs. This brings about a loss of revenue for these organisations, who continue to reap the lion's share of bilateral and multilateral funds. As such, the implementation of the localisation agenda is hindered by conflicting rationalities which simultaneously aim to preserve international NGOs' long-term viability<sup>16</sup>. Within a competitive funding environment, NGOs' preoccupation with their institutional survival testifies to self-interested action which is irreconcilable with the localisation agenda. It is hardly surprising, then, that in spite of the Grand Bargain's objective of 20% of funding being provided directly to local or national responders, actors from the Global South received only 0.4% of total available funds in 2017<sup>17</sup>.

### What lessons for the humanitarian community?

As revealed by the case of TC Harold, Vanuatu possesses an abundant, competent and local labour force which, in addition to being perfectly willing to participate in recovery efforts, is struggling with an unemployment crisis due to the collapse of the tourism sector. The response to such a calamity, therefore, does not depend on the presence of foreigners, but on expedited access to financial support from the international community. Pandemic-related risks may dissipate over time, but climate-change-induced disasters will continue to pose a grave threat to the Pacific region. In Vanuatu, Covid-19 revealed the country's structural vulnerabilities, well beyond the fragility of its health system. According to Regenvanu, any emergency response in Vanuatu must rest on the development of both a national economy and lifestyles capable of withstanding the closure of national borders. "To provide support in times of disasters, we need to look at agriculture and domestic trade. Let's see what other parts of the country can provide, instead of importing food from the outside<sup>18</sup>." The same logic may be applied to local expertise, which must be valued and enhanced in order to increase the country's resilience and autonomy of action.

The post-Harold response is far from unique in its absence of foreign nationals. In certain countries, where armed conflict poses a security risk to expatriate staff, remote management has become the norm. Within this delivery model, international agencies subcontract their interventions to local responders. This approach, however, tends to be perceived as a managerial compromise, rather than as a choice. Thus, it becomes obvious that in spite of the Grand Bargain commitments, which promote local organisations' autonomy, knowledge and financial capacity, the localisation agenda is struggling in its implementation as a humanitarian vision. It only occurs when expatriates are no longer able to travel to the field. Thus, for a significant paradigm change to instil itself in the humanitarian sector, Northern actors must choose to localise their programmes at all times. Localisation should not be a last resort, but rather the leading option.

*Translated from the French by Marie-Claude Savard*

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<sup>16</sup> François Audet, *Comprendre les organisations humanitaires*, Presses de l'Université du Québec, 2016.

<sup>17</sup> ALNAP, "The State of the Humanitarian System 2018 - Full Report", 2019, <https://www.alnap.org/help-library/the-state-of-the-humanitarian-system-2018-full-report>

<sup>18</sup> Asia Society Policy Institute, *op. cit.*

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### Biographies

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