

Localisation and Locally-led Crisis Response: A Literature Review

Executive Summary

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The role of local actors in crisis response, and the nature of their relationship with international responders, has been discussed in the humanitarian discourse for many years. The importance of working with and supporting local responders is reflected in many of the key documents that frame the current humanitarian system, including the General Assembly resolution 146/82.

Evaluations of major responses and consultations with local actors themselves, however, have revealed that these institutional commitments rarely translate into effective relationships on the ground (in particular the TEC evaluation of the Tsunami response and the Synthesis Report capturing the consultation process for the World Humanitarian Summit).

As Obrecht notes in her 2014 paper on de-internationalising humanitarian action, the questions of localization are underpinned by two main themes: effectiveness and power. The question of whether local organisations can be as effective or more so than internationals has, she says, been answered “largely in the affirmative” (Obrecht 2014 p1). The question of power, however, is much more complex. In the last few years, particularly in the run-up to the World Humanitarian Summit, the discourse around local actors has become more prominent, with the establishments of groups like the Charter4Change which call for a radically overhauled approach to funding, supporting and building partnerships with local organisations. Practical factors such as the increasing security challenges for international aid workers and agencies are also driving an increased interest in working with and through local actors. Some agencies have now begun to recognise in their policy that power dynamics are at the heart of the localisation discussion: specifically, the unwillingness of international agencies to place local groups in the decision making driving seat.

Most of this work is described in the literature as ‘localisation’, yet despite the increased interest there is no agreed definition of the term in the literature. ‘Localisation’ is used across the sector to refer from everything to the practice of increasing numbers of local staff in international organisations, to the outsourcing of aid delivery to local partners, to the development of locally specific response models. The term often also encompasses work that originates with local groups or is in support of local initiatives. Some groups, including Local2Global, consider that work that originates with or is in support of local initiative is fundamentally different to other models included under the umbrella of ‘localisation’, and describe such work specifically as ‘locally-led’. This is in line with concepts such as subsidiarity, which are currently prominent in the policy discourse (see the Synthesis Report). This paper uses ‘localisation’ as it is used in the literature: an umbrella term referring to all approaches to working with local actors, and ‘locally-led’ to refer specifically to work that originates with local actors, or is designed to support locally emerging initiatives.

The literature also offers a wide range of definitions as to who local actors actually are – from regional authorities to volunteer groups – with little discussion of the different roles, dynamics and needs of different groups. Some key terms in the literature, particularly ‘partnership’, have been widely challenged especially by local actors themselves, who experience relationships between international and local responders as more akin to subcontracting than a partnership of equals.

From the perspective of local actors and affected communities themselves, their marginalisation and the alienation they feel from the current humanitarian system are clear. While the documentation of the local perspective is limited, key papers including the book *Time to Listen* and the WHS consultation process, along with response-specific studies from the Philippines provide important perspectives. Key insights include the observation that for local groups, assistance is as much about social interaction as the aid itself, and the finding of the *Time to Listen* research that aid for affected people is as much about the process of delivery as it is about the assistance itself – a process from which many feel alienated.

While there is insufficient literature to draw definitive conclusions as to best practice in supporting and working with local actors, there are some preliminary indications. Research papers have identified what are perceived as the blocks to effective support, including time constraints, administration (especially challenges in working with small grants), language, the exclusivity of the current humanitarian coordination system and an institutional unwillingness to invest in capacity development and relationship building especially prior to a crisis. Some studies have also identified a deeper unwillingness on the part of agencies to cede power and responsibility to local organisations, often citing concerns over humanitarian principles, which in the eyes of some amounts to neo-colonial attitudes towards power and leadership.

The literature looking at effective locally-led work focuses overwhelmingly on the relationship between local and international actors (rather than, for example, the experiences of local actors). Case studies that rebut the assumptions made about the difficulties of supporting local responses include projects from Cyclone Nargis response in Myanmar, Gaza, Afghanistan, Sudan, Zimbabwe and the response to Ebola. All demonstrate that innovative, supportive work to support local responses, including relationship building and financing, is possible even in large-scale sudden onset crises. The Paung Ku project in response to cyclone Nargis, for example, created a mechanism for processing and disbursing funding applications in under two hours. While the research base is insufficient for definitive conclusions, key factors in supporting locally-led responses have been identified as a central role for local actors in designing and implementing support, resource transfers that allow for flexibility and decentralised decision-making (even at household level), investment in relationship building with local actors and technical support (a mentoring rather than a training approach is indicated as preferable in some case studies), and inclusion of local authorities where appropriate.

Some specific aspects of locally-led work have been more examined than others. Some headway has been made in terms of developing small grant mechanisms, for example, although strict transparency rules and other technical requirements are still challenges. The field of cash grants – regarded as inherently empowering of local responders especially those affected themselves – has provided important insights, especially their effectiveness in highly complex and political environments such as Gaza and Somalia. The particular challenges and opportunities of working with local volunteer groups – a rapidly growing area of interest given the growing role of local and international volunteer responders – have been explored by the Red Cross and also in developed countries such as the US, with evidence coming through that engaging with and training volunteers increases their capacity to handle a response. The work of Digital Humanitarian Network, an innovative project to create an interface between agencies on the ground (local and international) and a network of technical volunteers worldwide has proven successful. There is also much work going on now to understand and engage with locally-led

work – including diaspora responses – in conflict work in particular. Case studies of interest here include DRC’s successful provision of grants to isolated communities in Somalia, and other local and international actors’ support to local protection responses in Sudan and the Congo among those captured and researched.

Finally, anyone seeking to support locally-led work needs to explore and understand the profound changes that are going on within the operational environment. As Syria and the Ebola responses in particular, the role of diaspora groups is becoming ever more important and sophisticated as communications technology and online fundraising facilitates the development of international ad-hoc responses that currently operate mostly outside of the formal humanitarian sector. In places like Syria such initiatives are contributing a significant amount of the assistance on the ground. Humanitarian funding in the form of remittances is already thought to have outstripped official assistance in many emergencies, and is increasing – and has been associated in some research papers with increased empowerment and decreased vulnerability. The complexities of diaspora dynamics are, however, under researched and their levels of interest in working with/alongside formal humanitarian actors may be overestimated by some.

The role of social media in increasing the capacity to organize and coordinate has facilitated a notable growth in ad-hoc volunteer groups emerging within hours of a crisis: a phenomenon seen in New Zealand, and in the current European refugee crisis. The explosion in online fundraising platforms – now a multimillion-dollar industry – is emerging as a key driver of next-generation locally-led responses, as agencies become increasingly able to fundraise online rather than depending on engaging with the established system of humanitarian funding. Online fundraising is, for example, widely used by the refugee response by volunteer groups across Europe. There is also growing evidence that technology is facilitating very different kinds of organizational structures: groups of individuals connected through a network rather than a traditional NGO, for example. Technology also facilitates very different kinds of projects: ones that provide information and connect local responders to those in need as well as allowing for self-organization of those in need using social media. Supporting such work presents considerable challenges to international responders, as these actors tend not to form the kind of institutions with whom aid agencies are used to establishing a formal relationship. Important alternative models for supporting these kind of locally-led responses are coming from the private sector (such as the incubation of the iHub movement across Africa) and academia (such as the Petajakarta project in Indonesia) as well as from affected communities themselves. Major agencies now beginning to engage with this approach include UNICEF, with their Innovation Lab approach to fostering local talent. Also emerging, however, is research indicating that lack of access to technology is becoming a new form of vulnerability in its own right, for individuals and for groups, and that in many places old power dynamics – such as male disempowerment of women – are also emerging in patterns of use and access of digital tools.

By Imogen Wall with Kerren Hedlund, with financial support from Swiss Development Cooperation (SDC). The full report can be found at <http://local2global.info>

L2GP is an initiative, which works to promote effective, efficient and sustainable responses and solutions to humanitarian and protection crises with an explicit focus on enabling locally-led responses. Contact us at <mailto:info@local2global.info> and read more at <http://www.local2global.info>

