



Partnerships for humanitarian action: challenges for large INGOs without a traditional partnership approach

Notes for the Record

Background

On 14 January 2020, the *Accelerating Localisation through Partnerships* programme (led by Christian Aid¹) and the Humanitarian Policy Group of ODI hosted a closed-door roundtable under Chatham House Rule to discuss the challenges for large INGOs without a traditional partnership approach to move towards partnerships in humanitarian contexts. This discussion took place within the framework of on-going efforts by the humanitarian system to support more local and locally-led humanitarian action. The roundtable was attended in person and remotely by 11 individuals from six humanitarian organisations as well as a research organisation and an independent consultant.

Since the World Humanitarian Summit, a number of initiatives, including the Grand Bargain Localisation Workstream², aim to support a more locally-led humanitarian action. While many discussions on localisation have focused on the commitment for more direct funding to local actors, the other commitments related to more equitable and genuine partnerships between local actors and international actors, and reinforcing not replacing local capacity, remain crucial. Humanitarian action that is as local as possible, as international as necessary calls for – in the medium term at least – genuine and complementary partnerships between local and international actors. However, there are many international organisations who continue to respond to humanitarian crises with a direct implementation modality or do not have a (long) history or tradition of partnership working. For these INGOs, there is limited support or guidance on the process of establishing or accelerating a partnership approach.

This closed-door workshop aimed to:

- Present recent studies and internal reviews related to transitioning to a partnership approach.
- Identify and discuss the challenges, barriers and blockages that stifle progress towards a partnership approach for large INGOs.
- Share learning and discuss practical steps for removing these barriers, and enabling an institutional environment for genuine partnerships with local organisations.
- Identify how the Grand Bargain Localisation Workstream could support organisations going through this transition to a partnership approach.

Key discussion points

Following short presentations from two recent studies on partnerships and experiences from two humanitarian organisations, the discussion examined the challenges, barriers and blockages for partnership approaches in the organisations present as well as the practical steps that could be used to remove these barriers. The following is a summary of the key points discussed.

¹ An ECHO-funded consortium project with Christian Aid, CARE, Tearfund, ActionAid, CAFOD and Oxfam.

² Workstream 2: More support and funding tools for local and national responders. Read more [here](#).

Challenges, barriers and blockages:

- Lack of, or vague (not concrete), strategic commitment in organisations to working in partnership which leads to a lack of global leadership where there is no clear tone from the top. No position on localisation. With a lack of strategic commitment, individuals found it difficult to drive the institutional changes needed to support partnership approaches.
- Conscious and unconscious individual biases to working in partnership with local actors undermines overall change process.
- Easier to adopt partnership approaches out of necessity (e.g. lack of access) but hard to fund actions which work through partners in preparedness.
- The word 'localisation' alienated some managers in international organisations and using the term is itself a barrier to progress. It is interpreted by some as a politically correct push to assuage white / post-colonial guilt. Others mentioned that the word localisation is not always understood by all in international organisations. Using the term 'local partnerships' has worked more effectively for other organisations.
- The challenge is even when policies, systems, guidance, toolkits are in place, change has not taken place because organisational culture is not in line. For organisations without a long or traditional approach of working with local partners, cultural and institutional shifts are needed. Another reason change has not happened is where new strategies or policies are not resourced.
- In organisations where there is no policy or approach in place, progress across different countries has been different, and approaches look quite different depending on country leadership or senior managers.
- Difficulty to get consensus on an organisational policy or position paper on localisation, but this was recognised by many as a critical step towards change.
- Other developments create a barrier to localisation such as international organisations pushing to convert country offices into national NGOs. There has been widespread frustration on this trend in some countries such as Nigeria where they call it the 'nationalisation of INGOs'. Often these quasi-national NGOs then compete for the same funds as genuine national NGOs. There are also challenges where country office staff are nationals and therefore see their office as 'local'.
- Incentives for partnership approaches are not always there from funding agencies. Even traditionally partnership-based organisations are being asked to do more direct implementation by certain UN agencies and donors in certain countries. These organisations have less leverage to push back as shifts from relying on unrestricted funds to institutional donor funding affect the whole sector.
- The issue of who is hired and the culture in human resources was raised. Partnership-based organisations tend to attract candidates who want to work in that way and vice versa. However, even for some traditionally partnership-based organisations there have been some shifts away from this where short-term humanitarian staff are recruited for direct implementation programmes and have not been fully inducted nor experienced the partnership culture in their work. Individual staff can have a huge impact on the culture of the organisation.
- Another challenge was how to convince fundraisers in organisations as the narrative of working through local partners is a little more complex. This is particularly a challenge in the UK where the media has been contributing to a slow degradation of trust in international charities and NGOs.

- Many agreed that international organisations need to be more honest about the role of colonialism, power, and what drives our organisations. We need to recognise that many of our local 'partners' are in fact our dependents. We also need to think about what we are willing to sacrifice (funds, staff numbers, credit, branding).

Practical steps to address and remove barriers:

- More evidence is needed to demonstrate that better outcomes are reached when INGOs partner with local NGOs. This would challenge the position of some that localisation is about assuaging guilt rather than ensuring effective humanitarian response. A lot of the existing evidence comes from contexts where partnerships were a necessity rather than a choice, but these can still inform decisions in situations when organisations are in a position to choose to adopt a partnership approach.
- Flip partnership analysis to ask what international organisations can do to support the local humanitarian response system based on an analysis the capacity of the existing local system. Such a shift requires changing systems to support this process in terms of attitudes and culture needed to support partnership approaches.
- Discussion on which is more effective: that the change process towards working in partnership is driven from the bottom up or from the top down. The discussion pointed that probably a combination of top down and bottom up was needed. Bottom up change processes can break the cycle of change management coming from headquarters and thus be better received by field operators, but often lead to slower change at the institutional level. Top down can result in policies which enforce a partnership approach, but also senior leadership which embody the approach. It was discussed that if senior leaders are not onboard, or do not sufficiently understand, any approach will fail.
- The participants recognised the importance of focusing on the cultural change in the organisation, not just policy and guidance. Therefore, the involvement of HR as part of the institutional change process is crucial.
- Organisations that are shifting to a more partnership-based approach may need to ensure job descriptions, interviews and the whole recruitment process reflects this to ensure they are recruiting new staff committed to partnerships with local organisations.
- Due diligence processes will need to be adapted if a partnership approach is to be effective, genuine and balance power differentials.
- Integrating the partnership approach change process as part of a wider change process can be effective, for instance as part of an internal process aiming to strengthen capacity for disaster preparedness.
- The localisation commitment under the Grand Bargain was seen as having changed the conversation on partnership within international organisations.
- A number of organisations mentioned that the localisation commitment as part of the Grand Bargain had required their organisation to come to a position on localisation; that it had been effective in forcing them to define that position or policy. This process sometimes involved conducting an internal review and an analysis of the current state of play in the organisation which often highlighted the ad hoc nature of partnership practices.
- In other organisations, some individuals felt they were lone localisation champions, fighting against the tide. For them, more evidence might help, but realistically often change happens with shifts in leadership culture rather than increased evidence.

A few recommendations were identified during the discussion:

- Ensuring external pressure is maintained including through the Grand Bargain Localisation Workstream.
- Keep connecting to share learning, resources, experience and challenges. There has been positive progress by some organisations, and others are keen to learn from them.
- Ensure local partners and local organisations are leading or at least participating in these conversations on change.
- Encourage more discussions on how we incentivise donors to support or insist on localisation.
- Highlight the evidence that exists that partnerships are both cost-effective and lead to effective response for crisis-affected people.
- The Grand Bargain Localisation Workstream (and others) could support by facilitating discussions with those struggling to affect change in their organisations towards more systematic and better quality partnerships with local and national actors. They could also support by working with others to answer common questions related to localisation, including:
 - Where is the evidence that crisis-affected people receive better assistance when local organisations are leading the response?
 - Why work with local partners we can reach people more effectively?
 - Our staff are nationals, so why do we need to work with local organisations?
 - What are the added value of local organisations (see question above)?

Reports / resources discussed³:

- Accelerating Localisation through Partnerships [Accelerating Localisation through Partnerships: Recommendations for operational practices that strengthen the leadership of national and local actors in partnership-based humanitarian action globally](#); [Pathways to Localisation: a framework towards locally led humanitarian response in partnership-based action](#).
- ODI HPG's research report [Rethinking capacity and complementarity for a more local humanitarian action](#).
- Islamic Relief and ODI's report [Localising emergency preparedness and response through partnerships](#).

³ This is not a direct indication of the organisations present.