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**Humanitarian Policy Group**

# Upending humanitarianism
## Questions emerging 'from the ground up'

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Over the past few years, both leading up to and building upon the World Humanitarian Summit (WHS) in May 2016, the idea of responses that are 'as local as possible, as international as necessary' has emerged as both a central and a contentious point of departure for reforming the existing humanitarian architecture. Critiques of the system as overly beholden to international actors and overpowering of national and local civil society or government actors have led to calls to allow space for a more devolved humanitarianism that recognises that first responders are almost always local. Such a response, proponents argue, is more contextually appropriate and attuned to existing needs; enhances flexibility and efficiency; and involves local aid actors and communities more meaningfully in humanitarian decision-making.

A variety of initiatives have emerged in recent years designed to reflect local perspectives on humanitarian response. CDA's Listening Program has recorded the views of people on the receiving end of international assistance, and the Local to Global Protection initiative has documented community perspectives on protection.[1] Other initiatives were launched around or build on momentum from the WHS. The Agenda for Humanity's five core responsibilities include investing in local capacity and reinforcing local systems.[2] The Grand Bargain calls for more support and funding for local and national actors, alongside a 'participation revolution' to promote decision-making by those receiving aid.[3] Initiatives such as the Charter4Change and the NEAR Network support more locally led and empowered responses to crisis.[4] More

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1  See http://cdacollaborative.org/cdaproject/the-listening-project and https://www.local2global.info.

2  See https://www.agendaforhumanity.org.

3  'The Grand Bargain – A Shared Commitment to Better Serve People in Need', Istanbul, 26 May 2017, https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/Grand_Bargain_final_22_May_FINAL-2.pdf.

4  See https://charter4change.org and http://near.ngo.

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recently, much of the conversation has revolved around financing – related to the Grand Bargain commitment to pass 25% of global humanitarian funding through national and local responders by 2020 – and actions aimed at 'building the capacity' of local organisations.[5] Financing, however, is only part of the equation, and capacity discussions date back to the early 1990s, and even before.[6]

While few oppose the logic underpinning these and similar initiatives, significant obstacles to implementation exist, including powerful vested interests in the current system and its division of resources, and little agreement on what 'localisation' and 'locally led' humanitarianism means in practice, and how best to achieve it.[7] Who and what constitutes 'local' action? From whose perspective? How do we create incentives to encourage devolution in a system that privileges a few key actors and, culturally and structurally tends toward centralisation? These and other fundamental questions have not been fully discussed, let alone answered.

Against this background, the Humanitarian Policy Group is embarking on in-depth research on four themes relevant to the concept and practice of a more local humanitarian response:

• Capacity and complementarity.
• Non-traditional sources of aid financing.
• The role of informal and cross-border actors in protecting civilians.
• Dignity in displacement.

This briefing note is based on an initial analysis of the concept of 'localisation' or 'locally led' humanitarianism from these four perspectives. It is

the first of what we expect to be a series of think pieces arising out of the research, with the aim of contributing to ongoing discussions about the meaning of a more local humanitarian response, and its attendant strategic and systemic implications.

Two central questions have emerged from the research to date.

## Have we predetermined the outcome by setting the parameters of the debate? Agenda-setting as a form of power

Critical theory focused on discourse and narratives points out that our words, conversations and practices constitute a form of power. This power in turn creates positions of relative advantage and disadvantage in social relationships.[8] Scholars have applied this analytical lens to a range of circumstances, including conflict and humanitarianism. In mediation, for instance, analyses of the stories conflict parties tell have documented how the first speaker defines the parameters of the conversation, causing the second to react to the first, dominant narrative.[9] In short, who speaks first – and the language and vocabulary they use – matters.

Applying this analytical lens to the 'localisation' debate highlights how 'traditional' international actors have, for better or worse, set the terms of the debate by 'speaking' first – or perhaps by failing to listen. This both reflects their dominant position in the international system, and simultaneously reinforces this dominance. For instance, our review of the literature reveals that much of the debate about capacity in humanitarian response revolves around institutional and organisational processes, where the capacity of local organisations is 'built' in order to fulfill donor requirements regarding legal status, organisational policies or financial systems. This occurs through training, workshops, partnership agreements or secondments from international to national organisations.[10] In this way, local actors are nudged – some might say forced – to become 'like' international actors in ways that downplay

5   For a mapping of support and tools for local actors, see Sorcha O'Callaghan and Adele Harmer, *Grand Bargain Work-stream 2: Increasing Support and Funding Tools for Local and National Responders* (New York: Humanitarian Outcomes, 2017).

6   Hugo Slim and John Mitchell, 'Towards Community-managed Relief: A Case Study from Southern Sudan', *Disasters*, 1990; Ian Smillie (ed.), *Patronage or Partnership: Local Capacity Building in Humanitarian Crises* (Bloomfield, CT: Kumarian Press, 2001).

7   See Alice Obrecht, *'De-internationalising' Humanitarian Action: Rethinking the 'Global-Local' Relationship* (Paris: IRIS, 2014); Imogen Wall with Kerren Hedlund, *Localisation and Locally-led Crisis Response: A Literature Review* (Copenhagen: Local to Global Protection, 2016); Christina Bennett, Sara Pantuliano and Matthew Foley, *Time to Let Go: Remaking Humanitarian Action for the Modern Era* (London: ODI, 2016).

8   Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge* (London: Tavistock, 1969).

9   John Winslade, 'Mediation with a Focus on Discursive Positioning', *Conflict Resolution Quarterly*, 23, 2006.

10  See Kimberly Howe, Elizabeth Stites and Danya Chudacoff, *Breaking the Hourglass: Partnerships in Remote Management Settings* (Somerville, MA: Feinstein International Center, 2016).

their relative strengths in operational terms, whether related to access, grassroots connection or contextual knowledge. In our work on local humanitarian access in Ukraine, formal partnerships changed the comparative advantage of local volunteers in managing their access in two ways: first, by institutionalising partnerships (creating contractual partnerships as opposed to informal collaboration networks) and second by formalising activities with projects, as opposed to retaining a more flexible approach to programming.[11]

Institutional capacities are central elements of ensuring accountability to funders. Yet they also reinforce the practices and relative advantage of international as opposed to national or local actors, since the latter typically lag behind in the sophistication of their administrative or financial processes. These capacities also support agendas related to evaluation, impact and evidence, all of which are part of the donor-dominated Grand Bargain vision of humanitarian reform.[12] What about building the capacity of international actors to respond to the nuances of local contexts and dynamics, or facilitating a 'surge' capacity to more quickly and effectively address sudden-onset crises?[13]

This analytical lens raises cross-cutting questions about whose capacity needs to be built and for what purposes, and serves as a reminder that capacities are multifaceted, as opposed to belonging to one group over another, and multidirectional, rather than flowing from international to national or local actors. It compels us to think about the ways that we might be compromising the agility, flexibility or situatedness of local actors by encouraging homogeneity in the profiles of the organisations and institutions that respond to crisis. Moreover, discussions about capacity too often focus on who has it, rather than whether and how these capacities contribute to more effective humanitarian action.

While particularly relevant to discussions about capacity, similar questions crop up in relation to dignity. Only in the past 10–15 years have humanitarians begun to recognise the ways that images of suffering erode and erase the dignity of those in the photographs used to raise funds in their name, even if this has not led to consistent changes in practice. Early humanitarian marketing relied upon images of extreme suffering and deprivation, since such destitution heightened the chances of receiving assistance. Even into the twenty-first century, people have to show themselves as undignified to be 'worthy' of assistance.[14] The choice of images used to portray the humanitarian subject was and remains one of power, both reinforcing the power of the giver of assistance and rendering the recipient powerless in the process.

These are old *and* new debates that deserve a fresh lens. Adopting an analytical lens that forces us to question our underlying assumptions illustrates how language and practice can be used implicitly to frame the conversation within particular boundaries that, at the same time, tend to reinforce rather than upend power and privilege. This has not gone unnoticed or unquestioned by those on the outside looking in. In Ukraine, for example, local actors strongly criticised the way their international counterparts operated, questioning their motivations, ways of working and adherence to their own principles. Likewise, volunteers active in the response to recent mass migration into Europe complain of the 'arrogance' of NGOs and bridle at criticism of the work of 'amateurs' from salaried aid professionals conspicuous by their absence in the critical early months of the response.[15] In the context of 'localisation', these examples serve as reminders that the dominant conversation may not be the only one in the room.

11 Veronique Barbelet, *Humanitarian Access and Local Organisations in Ukraine*, HPG Working Paper (London: ODI, 2017); Eva Svoboda, Veronique Barbelet and Irina Mosel, *Holding the Keys: Humanitarian Access and Local Organisations*, HPG Report (London: ODI, 2017).

12 See http://www.irinnews.org/analysis/2016/05/24/grand-bargain-big-deal and https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/Grand_Bargain_final_22_May_FINAL-2.pdf.

13 Sean Healy and Sandrine Tiller, *Where Is Everyone? Responding to Emergencies in the Most Difficult Places* (London: MSF, 2014).

14 Barbara Harrell-Bond, 'Humanitarianism in a Straitjacket', *African Affairs*, 84(334), 1985; Heide Fehrenbach and Davide Rodogno (eds), *Humanitarian Photography: A History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015); Sonya de Laat and Valerie Gorin, 'Iconographies of Humanitarian Aid in Africa', in Christina Bennett, Matthew Foley and Hanna B. Krebs (eds), *Learning from the Past to Shape the Future: Lessons from the History of Humanitarian Action in Africa*, HPG Working Paper (London: ODI, 2016). While some humanitarian agencies have instituted policies related to the images used in their publications (e.g. MSF: see https://www.msf.org.uk/sites/uk/files/ethics_photographers_200809231432.pdf; see also http://www.dochas.ie/images-and-messages) this is not necessarily widespread across the sector.

15 John Borton and Sarah Collinson, Responses to Mixed Migration in Europe: Implications for the Humanitarian Sector, Network Paper 81, December 2017.

## Have we misdiagnosed the problem? Looking beyond the false dichotomy between 'local' and 'international'

While 'as local as possible, as international as necessary' set up a vision for complementarity, current debates about 'localisation' often still frame the problem in a dualistic, zero-sum way – as a competition that privileges either international or local actors, with support to one at the expense of the other. This is especially true of the financing discussion. While perhaps a logical conclusion in an era of insufficient resources to address the needs of larger natural and human-caused emergencies, it also begs the question whether the 'localisation' debate has been reduced to a false dichotomy. 'Localisation' and 'locally led' is not an either/or proposition: it is *both* a process of change *and* an outcome of that change; it is a means for achieving a more effective response *and* an end state; it is already occurring and not yet widespread. As examples, we have only to look to the national Red Cross/Red Crescent Societies and their central role in natural disaster and conflict response, or to the actions of West African communities which tipped the scales in stopping the spread of Ebola.[16] In the same way that gender is not uni-dimensional or only about women, 'localisation' cannot be primarily about a trade-off between local or international.

The search for pathways to a more devolved humanitarianism requires us to look beyond the false dichotomy of the local versus the international to examine other dimensions of the meaning of a humanitarianism 'from the ground up'. A more local, contextualised humanitarianism comes in various forms, including the role of spontaneous responders,[17] social networks or faith communities in the response to crises, as well as the role of trust in these interactions. A review of the literature related to the sources of financing for people in crisis reveals the importance of social and religious networks. In Uganda, kin relationships provide a range of financial and other resources, including access to land, information and social support.[18] In Gaza and elsewhere, Islamic charitable practice provides important sources of revenue.[19] These networks and relationships enable households to cope in times of crisis.[20]

Likewise, people's spiritual resources, faith communities and rituals such as prayer perform a protective function that formal approaches to physical or psychosocial protection cannot capture or replicate. This is both in a healing sense[21] and in an explanatory sense – as a way of ascribing meaning to a personal or communal crisis such as displacement.[22] Thus, faith is both a source of protection and integral to resilience and everyday life. In contrast, humanitarian protection standards are secular, focused on the individual, and primarily rights-based, articulated in international law and reflecting the dominant role of states.[23] Research has shown that affected communities' understanding of protection is generally broader than that of conventional protection actors, often closely linking protection and livelihoods.[24] It is

16 On the RCRC, see International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement message to the World Humanitarian Summit, 7 December 2015, http://rcrcconference.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/03/CD15-R3-message-to-WHS_EN.pdf; on Ebola, see Paul Richards, *How a People's Science Helped End an Epidemic* (London: Zed Books, 2016); and Pauline Oosterhoff and Annie Wilkinson, *Local Engagement in Ebola Outbreaks and Beyond in Sierra Leone* (Brighton: Institute for Development Studies, 2015).

17 John Twigg and Irina Mosel, *'Emergent Groups and Spontaneous Volunteers in Urban Disaster Response', Environment and Urbanization*, 29(2), 2017.

18 Bernard B. Obaa and Robert E. Mazur, 'Social Network Characteristics and Resource Access among Formerly Displaced Households in Lira, Uganda', *Disasters*, 41(3), 2016.

19 Bassam Abu Hamad and Sara Pavanello, *Transforming Cash Transfers: Beneficiary and Community Perspectives on the Palestinian National Cash Transfer Programme* (London: ODI, 2012).

20 Veronique Barbelet and Caitlin Wake, *Livelihoods in Displacement: From Refugee Perspectives to Aid Agency Response*, HPG Working Paper (London: ODI, 2017).

21 Aditi Gorur, *Community Self-protection Strategies: How Peacekeepers Can Help or Harm* (Washington DC: Stimson Center, 2013).

22 Elizabeth Storer, 'Keeping the Faith: On the Spiritual Dimensions of South Sudanese Exile in Arua, North-west Uganda', LSE Politics of Return series, 2017, http://blogs.lse.ac.uk/africaatlse/2017/09/22/keeping-the-faith-on-the-spiritual-dimensions-of-south-sudanese-exile-in-arua-north-west-uganda-lsereturn.

23 The IASC defines protection as 'all activities aimed at obtaining full respect for the rights of the individual in accordance with the letter and spirit of the relevant bodies of law (i.e. International Human Rights Law (IHRL), International Humanitarian Law, International Refugee Law (IRL)'. IASC Policy on Protection in Humanitarian Action, 14 October 2016, https://interagencystandingcommittee.org/protection-priority-global-protection-cluster/documents/inter-agency-standing-committee-policy.

24 Aditi Gorur and Nils Carstensen, 'Community Self-protection', in Haidi Willmot et al. (eds), *Protection of Civilians* (Oxford: OUP, 2016).

also intimately shaped by the particular environment in which affected communities live, which often defies international borders. Conflict, violence and disease often cross borders, suggesting a need to look at the social networks – trade, diaspora ties or kinship – that comprise a regionally constituted 'local' environment.

In humanitarian circles, the concept of dignity is often framed as the dignity of the individual, rooted in our identity as human beings and enshrined in human rights or other legal frameworks. Historical and philosophical conceptions of dignity recognise our social nature as well, and in practice how dignity is expressed is often social and inherently culturally contingent.[25] Yet operational manifestations of dignity still focus on the individual, such as dignity kits that provide sanitary supplies to individual women, or the provision of headscarves to Muslim women.[26] Cash-based programming is often claimed to be more 'dignified' because it allows individuals and households to make choices about their own priorities and needs, and how best to meet them. Unsurprisingly, evaluations consistently show a preference for cash over goods, yet the extent to which giving someone the freedom to choose between soap and food or between this shop and that genuinely contributes to an individual's sense of dignity receives less attention.

In rethinking the meaning of and approaches to local humanitarianism, looking beyond the dichotomies encourages us to consider the individual *and* social dimensions of coping with and responding to crisis, and how a more encompassing conception of the 'localisation' debate might open up space for alternative practices of humanitarianism.

### Shifting the narrative

The questions and issues above are enduring, and they defy trite, easy answers. The process of change is arduous, particularly given the immediacy of the needs that confront us. How can we think, speak and do humanitarianism differently?

Ignoring or obscuring the less visible, implicit dimensions of power does not help us identify how a local humanitarianism might see the problem from a radically different perspective, nor does it help move us closer to a vision and practice of complementarity. Put another way, is the language and framing of 'localisation' making us lose sight of the bigger goals – of reform, empowerment or complementarity? Recognising that power differentials exist in the conceptualisation of the problem, not to mention the practice of humanitarianism, or how our language and framing might mask these differences is a first step.

In our effort to 'localise' we are using different terminologies: 'local' or 'locally led' humanitarian action, 'localisation', 'from the ground up' and local humanitarian leadership. We often use these as synonyms, without defining our terms, and as shorthand about the best way forward. In this, the devil is indeed in the detail. Clarity about our definitions and the implications of these definitions for the process and proposed outcomes of a devolved humanitarianism is crucial.

If the humanitarian sector is serious about valuing humanitarianism from the ground up, we have to be willing to upend our existing assumptions about the meanings and practices of humanitarianism. This does not require wholesale rejection of existing modes of operation or legal frameworks, nor should it inspire the idolisation or idealisation of 'the local' as superior. Instead, these questions remind us how easy it is to lose sight of the proverbial wood for the trees. How we frame the conversation and diagnose the problem are essential in creating the space for alternative visions and ways of working.

At HPG, we will be exploring these and other questions in our ongoing research. While we do not expect to definitively answer any of the questions raised above, we look forward to engaging in the conversations we hope they will prompt.

25 Herbert C. Kelman, 'The Conditions, Criteria, and Dialectics of Human Dignity: A Transnational Perspective', *International Studies Quarterly*, 21(3), 1977; Catherine Dupré 'Unlocking Human Dignity: Towards a Theory for the 21st Century', *European Human Rights Law Review*, 2, 2009.

26 GBV Sub-Cluster Turkey (Syria), *Dignity Kits Guidance Note* (Istanbul: UNFPA, 2015).

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The Humanitarian Policy Group is one of the world's leading teams of independent researchers and information professionals working on humanitarian issues. It is dedicated to improving humanitarian policy and practice through a combination of high-quality analysis, dialogue and debate.

Cover photo: Medicine is dispensed to Syrian refugees by a doctor and nurse from a local NGO in the Bekaa Valley.
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