RESEARCH BRIEFING

TURNING THE TABLES

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Save the Children

RESEARCH BRIEFING:
Turning the tables: Insights from locally-led humanitarian partnerships in conflict-affected situations

This briefing paper shares research findings about how international organisations and local or national organisations can work in partnership to respond to crises. The research was commissioned by Save the Children and carried out by Saferworld.

The research focused on partnerships in conflict-affected contexts. It identified successful examples of locally-led partnerships as well as the factors that explained their success. A roundtable discussion in November 2018 between international and national organisations in London, United Kingdom shaped the field research methodology, which involved interviews of local actors in Myanmar, Uganda and by phone with Syria.

The report was written by the research leads Monica Stephen and Ariana Martini. It was funded by Sida and the IKEA Foundation. The contents of the publications are the sole responsibility of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of Sida and the IKEA Foundation.

Rethinking localisation: From rhetorical commitments to transformative change

There is growing commitment among donors and international non-governmental organisations (INGOs) to shift resources and power to national partner organisations in crisis and conflict situations. This research looks at ways partnerships can support people and organisations from conflict affected contexts to be able to better shape and direct what, where and how aid is spent.

What does localisation mean?

Fundamentally, localisation is a process that increases the leadership and authority of vulnerable crisis-affected people in determining how crisis response resources are used within their communities to address their priorities. Yet as the localisation spectrum below shows, localisation is interpreted and practiced in different ways, which has diluted the meaning of 'localisation' and obscured the radical implications it could have for the aid system.

As a result, much literature and debate over localisation has focused on technical, piecemeal changes in INGO partnership practice over the fundamental change required for meaningful local leadership over the aid system and responses to individual crises. This study focused on partnerships that demonstrated partial localisation, advanced localisation or were fully locally-led.

Little has changed in practice, especially in conflict situations

There is growing need and rhetorical commitment to localise the aid system as it struggles to deal with the increasing scale and complexity of humanitarian crises. However, most INGO partnerships with national and local organisations are top-down and transactional in character, particularly in conflict situations. These partnerships often position CSOs as 'implementing partners' or service providers with little influence over the direction of interventions. As a result, national and local organisations are left feeling dissatisfied and disempowered by their partnerships with INGOs and less able to meet the needs of communities or strengthen the civil society they are part of.
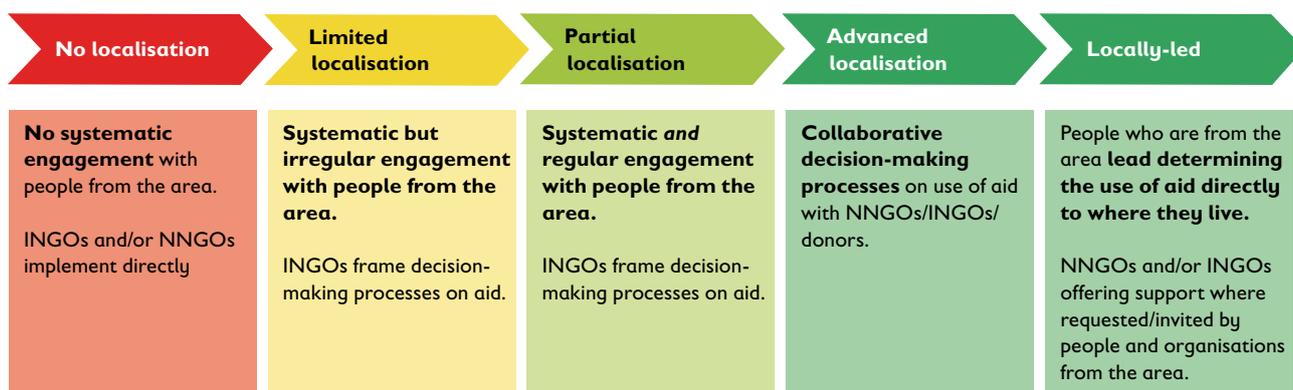
Efforts to push for greater localisation have led to limited progress in light of several stubborn barriers:

- Patronising assumption that CSOs lack 'capacity'
- Underlying prejudices and discrimination based on race and gender
- A focus on compliance and value for money
- Worries over local organisations' impartiality and neutrality
- Fear of reinforcing harmful practices and inequalities
- Restricted civil society space
- Ways of working that reinforce top-down partnership models

Strengthening local leadership over aid in conflict will:

- allow aid to be based on better awareness of the context
- build on what's there
- prioritise the views of those most affected by crises and aid responses

THE LOCALISATION SPECTRUM

No localisation	Limited localisation	Partial localisation	Advanced localisation	Locally-led
No systematic engagement with people from the area. INGOs and/or NNGOs implement directly	**Systematic but irregular engagement with people from the area.** INGOs frame decision-making processes on aid.	**Systematic *and* regular engagement with people from the area.** INGOs frame decision-making processes on aid.	**Collaborative decision-making processes** on use of aid with NNGOs/INGOs/donors.	People who are from the area **lead determining the use of aid directly to where they live.** NNGOs and/or INGOs offering support where requested/invited by people and organisations from the area.

Learning from partnership models that support locally-led crisis response in conflict situations

The research identified several potentially replicable models of principled, locally-led crisis response being practiced in conflict situations. The research highlights many of the benefits and opportunities of these models, which have emerged and thrived despite the obstacles mentioned above. Below are some examples of locally-led partnership models across the localisation spectrum.

Progressive project-based partnership models (partial localisation)

Save the Children's RISE project (Syria): Syrian CSOs deliver roughly 75% of all aid inside Syria but receive less than one percent of all direct international aid funding in the country. To help address this, Save the Children's RISE project worked remotely to support the development of a sustainable, independent and active Syrian civil society. Unlike generally short-term humanitarian projects, the RISE project was designed to last three years to focus explicitly on the long-term organisational development of CSOs. Additionally, this support was based on CSOs own stated priorities rather than those decided by INGOs and advocated for removal of barriers.

A three-layered partnership model (advanced localisation)

The Border Consortium's (TBC) organisation-wide approach (Myanmar): The Border Consortium functions as an intermediary between a large coalition of CSOs and a wider group of INGOs who support them. As part of a hybrid model, The Border Consortium is thereby able to advocate for the priorities and activities of CSOs among the INGOs that formed it and partly alleviate the power imbalances between them. Amongst other successes, it has been able to standardise INGO reporting requirements for CSOs while extracting and distributing flexible funds.

A CSO-led consortium-based partnership model (advanced localisation)

Oxfam, The Joint Strategy Team (JST) and the Durable Peace Partnership (Myanmar): The Joint Strategy Team is a consortium comprising of nine Kachin CSOs in response to the conflict-driven humanitarian crisis in northern Myanmar. It emerged organically out of long-running partnerships between the CSOs and Oxfam. Once established, the JST was able to unite the CSOs around a common strategy for crisis response, which reflected the shared experience of its members in dealing with the international community and helped influence the broader aid system in the country. The CSO JST members set the strategic direction and moral leadership, with Oxfam fulfilling administrative and donor compliance responsibilities.

Survivor and community-led crisis responses (locally-led)

Start Network and Christian Aid pilots in north east and north west Myanmar: The Local to Global Protection (L2GP) Initiative model consists of four elements: CSO/INGO joint mapping of existing crisis response mechanisms; INGOs providing block grants to national-level CSOs to distribute rapid, inclusive micro-granting at scale while covering all management and operational costs; capacity strengthening to a range of local-level community-based organisations and self-help groups based on their stated needs; and INGOs to help identify entry points for CSOs to influence international coordination systems.

> "Oxfam has the contractual responsibility, legally, whilst moral leadership is with JST members."
>
> Consortium Manager at Oxfam

Learning from strategies and tactics used to address common obstacles to locally-led crisis response

As well as the partnership models highlighted above, the research interviews highlighted some strategies and tactics used to good effect by INGO-CSO partnerships to overcome the common obstacles to locally-led crisis response in conflict situations.

Strengthening civil society at large, not just large, formalised CSOs

Efforts to support civil society as a whole, rather than individual or small numbers of organisations, can promote a more representative and effective civil society and bring groups and organisations together from across conflict boundaries and kickstart collaboration and peacebuilding efforts.

> *Example from Myanmar*
> The JST in Myanmar have endeavoured to distribute the flexible support they have access to benefit other local initiatives, however formal or informal, with the provision of humanitarian 'public goods', including a humanitarian study centre and advocacy at the high level.

Enabling flexible and adaptive programming

Significant context changes, though common in-conflict situations, can be a real test for INGO-CSO collaboration. Flexibility, when justified on the basis of changes to the context and to humanitarian needs, should be encouraged and built in to INGO strategy to help CSOs provide the most relevant and effective programming.

> *Example from Uganda*
> In northern Uganda's BidiBidi refugee settlement, the ability to alter the entire remit of some programmes was ultimately crucial to keeping aid relevant. In this case, Caritas Arua and Caritas Uganda initially supported refugees with tools and vegetable seeds but quickly realised that conflicts over natural resources necessitate more peacebuilding work, such as setting up conflict resolution committees to encourage peaceful co-existence among refugees and host communities. The ability to adapt in this way stemmed from their access to public donations received through church communities.

Trust = speed + scale: supporting CSO security management strategies and tactics

Most of the locally-led CSO-INGO partnership models explored as part of this research evolved out of long-term, strategic relationships and collaboration underpinned by mutual trust. In such cases, CSOs enjoyed a good deal of influence over the work conducted even where contracts between CSOs and INGOs involved sub-contracting-style arrangements focused around service delivery.

Transfer of risk and responsible partnering

CSO partners commented that they take on disproportionate risk in partnerships and receive little support to manage it in most partnerships. In response, some INGOs have added security management questions into their partner assessments

"Consortiums are a better arrangement compared to sub-contracting. Nevertheless, sub-contracting is better, for example, where we have stayed with [the INGO] for a longer period of time... because we know one another a little better. Because they listen, they know that we are the ones who are actually scoring the goal on the ground."

Project coordinator from a leading NNGO in Uganda

but these are rarely revisited. Other INGOs with a deep understanding of the context, operational risks and CSO partners, felt able to draw on flexible funding sources from trusts and foundations to cover security-related costs.

> *Example from Syria*
> In Syria, the RISE project adopted a devolved and multi-layered governance structure. This helped to enable responsiveness to frontline CSO needs including security needs. It also helped to insulate and protect information concerning frontline CSOs' activities. The devolved, multi-layered design consisted of management by three separate Save the Children hubs each focused on a different region, and under these further layers of management between the INGO and frontline CSOs.

Photo: Aung Naing Soe

Recommendations for INGOs and donors

By highlighting instances of locally-led partnerships, the research shows that INGOs can play an important intermediary role in enabling locally-led crisis response by identifying and advocating for, and applying more flexible means of funding and partnering with CSOs.

While CSOs and people affected by crises and conflict will ultimately play the primary role in 'turning the tables' towards a more locally-led aid system, this paper offers recommendations for INGOs and donors whose practices still present major obstacles to genuine and transformative aid partnerships:

1. Actively advance a progressive vision of localisation
- Reflect on how INGOs and donors are marginalising locally-led crisis response.
- Challenge underlying prejudices such as race and gender discrimination by opening space for honest dialogue about their roots and the ways they affect partnerships.
- Reflect commitments to localisation in organisational strategies and accountability mechanisms.
- Support alternative models and structures of locally-driven partnerships.
- Encourage spaces for diverse civil society leaders to shape partnerships with INGOs.

2. Understand and realise the potential that locally-led crisis response and progressive partnership models have for transforming conflict sensitivity in practice
- Explore ways of conducting rapid, participatory analyses of conflict and civil society.
- Create incentives to improve the representation of diverse women, youth and other groups that might be marginalised and affected by crisis.
- Fund CSOs that represent and serve women, youth or other marginalised groups.
- Support research into the specific challenges in INGO-CSO partnerships faced by organisations serving women, youth or marginalised groups specifically.
- Donors should deploy resources in a flexible and durable way that focuses on building understanding, trust and adaptation into local-international partnerships.

3. Strengthen the broader ecosystem of civil society rather than just individual organisations, even if conflict dynamics limit the range of support that INGOs can provide
- Understand and challenge the shrinking of civil society space in conflict contexts.
- Broaden the distribution of resources for local capacities to include informal organisations and groups.
- Support spaces for learning, coordination and collective action for CSOs.
- Invest early in locally-led crisis response systems and institutions in communities.

This briefing paper shares research findings about how international organisations and local organisations can work in partnership to respond to crises.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

Save the Children's collection site on localisation:
resourcecentre.savethechildren.net/document-collections/localisation

Saferworld's web site:
saferworld.org.uk

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