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LOCALISATION: HOLISTIC PERSPECTIVES URGENTLY NEEDED

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I.   Why is Localisation Not More Advanced in Practice?

Four years ago, at the World Humanitarian Summit, international relief donors and major agencies made a promise that is now widely referred to as 'localisation'.

*"We commit to support local and national supporters on the frontline... (We) engage with local and national responders in a spirit of partnership and aim to **reinforce rather than replace** local and national capacities. (...) An understanding inherent to the Grand Bargain is that benefits are for all partners, not just the big organisations. (...) The Grand Bargain is a level playing field where we all meet as equals."*

Since then, there has been much debate, many meetings and conferences and a lot of research, but little structural change in practice. There are several reasons for that, among them

- Lack of purpose: The question of 'who success would look like' is largely avoided. One consequence is that many use the word 'localisation' but mean very different things with it. Recently GMI identified six different interpretations among INGOs.   These range from '*the country office of our international organisation is fully staffed with nationals*' to '*this local/national organisation is capable enough and we ask donors to fund them now directly. As international organisation we can still play a support role on demand from local actors or focus our attention now elsewhere*'. Without clarity of purpose, change aspirations lack energy and direction.

- Fixation on Money: The best known and most referred to target of that localisation commitment is that by 2020, globally at least 25% of humanitarian funding goes to local and national responders, as directly as possible. Rather forgotten is the other component: "*reduce transactional costs*". Already in 2017, GMI pointed out that the quality, and not only the quantity of funding is as important to local and national actors as it is to internationals.[i] We subsequently examined the 20% quantitative target from an outcome perspective and found it several wanting.[ii] Obviously money matters; but the focus on money has cast the shadow of competition for scarce resources on the whole localisation debate.

- A single agency operational issue: Localisation is generally treated as an operational issue for individual international agencies, typically within the context of the collaboration with local and national actors that they have chosen as 'their' partners. This ignores the organisational and collective aspects of localisation.

- Humanitarian exceptionalism: The humanitarian sector, or relief industry, sees itself as a sphere of action separate from other international engagements with local and national actors, that occur under labels such as 'development', 'institution-building', 'governance reform', 'human rights', 'peacebuilding'. The humanitarian sector also refuses to acknowledge its assistance becomes part of political economies and its sector has its own political economy. From the perspective of local and national governmental and non-governmental actors however, reality cannot be so simply carved up into sectoral silos and 'projects'.

II.   Holistic Perspectives on International Engagement with Local and National Actors

GMI believes that holistic perspectives are needed, with different time frames, seeing a larger arena of actors and looking more deeply at what drives behaviours. We find five frameworks useful to do this but start out with the observation that we should pay more attention to 'internationalisation', not just 'localisation'.

a. 'Localisation' is the normal state of affairs

'Localisation' i.e. countries handling challenging situations with their own capacities and leadership, is the normal state of affairs. While some of the 195 countries today are heavily aid dependent, in the majority aid of all kinds, and humanitarian aid in particular, only plays a modest to no role at all. 'Localisation' becomes a new demand or objective only after there has been a process of 'internationalisation', with international actors taking over or exercising significant influence over policy choices, operational priorities and modalities, or even replacing national actors by implementing directly.[iii] 'Localisation' is the effort to reverse 'internationalisation' and reduce the future need for it. Even in situations where local capacities are overwhelmed, there may be little or no international assistance. This is called a '*forgotten crisis*': there is no international media attention or strategic interest, hence no funding for international actors.

b. Framework 1: A dynamic and evolving interaction between key actor groups

Localisation and internationalisation are dynamic movements, over a longer period, in the relationship between different actor groups. The graph shows key actor groups. Non-NGO type civil society organisations refers to community-based associations and self-help groups, trade unions, academia, faith-communities, professional associations etc. Each actor-group is of course not homogeneous: there are internal variations and differences that can be examined. There are also other actors, not visualised here, that can exercise influence, such as national and international media or other political forces in the aid giving and aid-recipient countries.

Factors that influence the changing dynamic between these actor groups are, for example, shocks and stresses within the aid-receiving country and how

different actors interpret and respond to them; political ideologies that shape national policies and international relations; national legislative and administrative regulations that define the space for civil society; evolving donor interests, priorities and country-strategies; and volatility elsewhere in the world that draws away international attention, funding and experienced people.

This country-wide and more historical perspective sees localisation not through the lens of an operational project, but as a dynamic process, playing out over years, between actors and factors that sometimes strengthen local capacities and leadership, sometimes do the opposite. In some situations, where a major crisis is very geographically contained to a specific sub-national area, both trends may coexist: in the crisis zone internationalisation takes place, in the rest of the country local capacities and leadership prevail.

A frequently heard argument among international humanitarian actors is that they don't have the time to get much deeper insight into a context and appreciate the histories and capacities of local and national actors, when responding to an acute emergency.[iv]

> « I don't need to know anything about the context, to do my work!"
>
> Senior humanitarian programme manager in Afghanistan, with has received international aid for over 30 years.

Indeed, in an acute emergency, fiercely focused action is appropriate. But if three years later, when the situation has somewhat stabilised, the decisions and approach of the international actor are still not shaped by a deeper understanding of the context and of the local and national actors, then intense focus has turned into tunnel vision.[v]

Promoting gender equality is now a staple of longer-term humanitarian engagement. So too is the importation and imposition of normative ways of gender-programming. In the process, an indigenous women's movement can get overlooked and even get side-lined. Is this wise?

c. **Framework 2: Institutional and sector-wide incentives and disincentives**

Created by GMI in 2018, this diagram signals that localisation is not just an issue in the *operational* practice of individual international organisations and their local 'partners'. International organisations have to be willing and able to work in equitable partnerships with and a supportive role to local and national actors. That requires certain *organisational* values, clarity about its purpose in the world, and a culture and business model that are aligned to those values and purpose. 'Solidarity' is a bigger drive than 'growth', 'market share' and own 'brand recognition'. If leadership is at times exercised by the international organisation, it is servant leadership. Some are fit-for-partnering, others are not.

At a broader level, how the international aid system and national governments respond to a particular crisis situation, creates an overall environment that is more or less enabling for localisation. If there is a crisis, and donors support, and a national government allows, large scale deployment of teams of international 'experts, then the *overall crisis response* is likely to lead to rapid internationalisation. If national governments contain the numbers and influence of international assistance actors, local actors have the space (and responsibility) to step up.

Ultimately, there is the political economy of the international humanitarian and development sectors, with its power and at times conflicting *sector-wide* incentives and disincentives. Several donors talk favourably about localisation yet demand increasingly stringent oversight and compliance measures, pay no attention to whether local 'partners' get their core support costs adequately covered, rely entirely on international organisations' narratives about local capacities, and expect adherence to international standards that only well-resourced organisations can meet. Nor is localisation well served by short-termism, where *the pressure to spend* precludes any investment perspective or legacy thinking, that yield returns only in the medium-term.

The diagram invites us to ask more strategic questions.

- How do we make our collective, global, or 'system-wide' capacity better prepared to respond to a crisis in ways that maximise the participation of affected populations and reinforces rather than replaces local and national capacities?
- What strategic decisions for the collective response to a particular crisis will create a situation where the international assistance reinforces rather than replaces local and national actors'?
- What will make our own organisation better prepared to do this?
- What does localisation mean for our individual (and collective) operational practices?

d. Framework 3: Deeper layers that influence practice

Developed by FSG, a consultancy group, the '*six conditions of systems change*' bring to the attention that international actors reinforcing rather than replacing local/national actors is not just a matter of policies and resource flows, which is where the Grand Bargain and Charter for Change stop. It requires active attention to behaviours, relationship management and responsible handling of power. Those in turn are, at a deeper level, influenced by mindsets.

Mindsets matter. The stereotyping and prejudice against local and national actors in the relief sector is strong: they are invariable portrayed as '*high risk*': risk of fraud and corruption, risk of bias and partiality in the choice of their beneficiaries, risk of being primarily set up to serve the economic and perhaps political interests of the founder and her or his family. Of course, there have been and will be more instances of such. But if bad experiences and bad examples could be used to discredit whole institutional sectors and sections of society, not much would be left, including in donor countries. Also in international aid agencies we see personal ambitions overriding values and service, fraud may be well controlled against but wastage is a common occurrence, and political interests and agendas certainly influence aid, including the global distribution of humanitarian aid. Several INGOs and even UN agencies are heavily dependent on a few big donors, which raises questions about the humanitarian principle of 'independence'. And while some INGOs operate out solidarity, others have become 'corporate NGOs', whose primary interest is growth and market share. Portraying international agencies as generically professional and operating with integrity and local/national agencies as generically less reliable for various reasons, commits the intellectual error of the 'non-distinction of the distinct'. Its persuasiveness however comes more from a popular underlying storyline in which the universe is made up of 'heroes' and 'villains'.

International agencies supporting development, human rights, peacebuilding etc. by contrast tend to start with a more positive perspective on local and national actors, and more easily adopt a supportive role.[vi] International development, human rights and peacebuilding actors tend to acknowledge that sustained progress in a society and country can only happen when it is owned and underpinned by local and national actors. Relief actors believe they can import the solutions. Different underlying mindsets, different behaviours, different relationships.
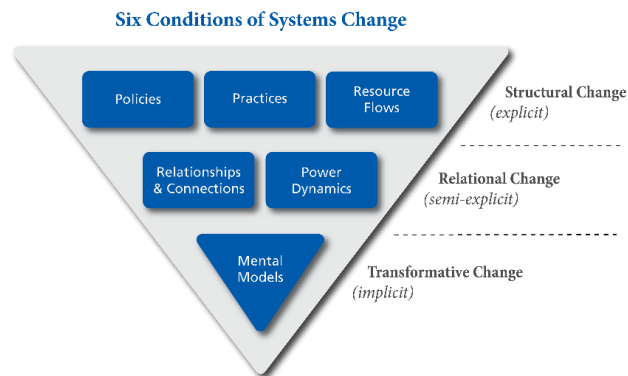
> "*We want partnership with dignity.*"
> Bangladesh CSO leader
>
> Overwhelmingly, local and national CSOs don't want to get international assistance actors out. What they object to is the patronising attitude and being replaced. They want to be decision-making partners in equitable partnerships.

The result can be a context where diverse international actors engage with the same set of local/national actors, with some international actors portraying a generally negative image and spreading distrust, and others portraying a generally more positive image and spending time to build trust. A local organisation may be confronted with very different attitudes from different international 'partners'.

Relief agencies (or the relief units of multi-mandate agencies) claim that supporting civil societies is not their responsibility. Perhaps not, but as Mary Anderson and colleagues at CDA Inc. already pointed out in the mid-1990s: you always impact on the context! Is turning local and national actors into sub-contractors, deflating their self-confidence and energy because they can't meet international standards, depoliticising them on the grounds of 'impartiality' and 'neutrality', and casting a generalised cloud of suspicion on their capacities and integrity, a form of 'doing harm'?

In some countries, local and national CSO leaders assertively demanded that their organisations be treated as 'civil society' and not as mere sub-contractors, and that international relief actors live up to

> « *Localisation will be a long, negotiated, and at times disruptive, process."*   Ben Emmens

their commitment to support rather than replace. They experienced strong backlash. They were accused by some international aid workers of being 'anti-INGO', who then tried to discredit them in international circles: Some international agencies withdrew funding. These are international organisations that once argued the necessity of '*speaking truth to power'*. What mindset does this reveal?

e. <u>Framework 4:</u> Seven key dimensions in the interaction between international and local/national Actors

In 2017, GMI developed what has become known as the '*Seven Dimensions'* framework.[vii] Based on extensive listening and action-research with CSOs in different countries, it highlights six critical aspects in the relationship between local/national CSOs and international aid actors. The seventh dimension, a participation revolution, recognises that crisis-affected people want to regain a measure of control and decision-making power over their own lives. They also want a say in what is being done on their behalf and for their intended benefit, whether by international or by local actors. It invites openness to community-led crisis-response.[viii]

RELATIONSHIP QUALITY	PARTICIPATION REVOLUTION	FUNDING & FINANCING	CAPACITY	COORDNATION MECHANISMS	VISIBILITY	POLICY
• respectful and equitable • reciprocal transparency and accountability	• deeper participation of at-risk & affected populationsT	• better quality • greater quantity	• sustainable organisations and collaborative capacities • stop undermining capacities	• national actors greater presence and influence	• roles, results and innovations by national actors are visible and reported on	• national actors have greater presence and influence in international policy debates

Whereas in the original 2017 version, the funding came first (in a Western left-to-right reading mode), the second version, shown here, deliberately puts the money further down the ranking, to emphasise the quality of relationship.[ix] Relationship with the local/national organized entity, but also with crisis-affected people comes first. When distrust runs high, international actors are not going to make space for local and national ones to lead or be *decision-making-* rather than only *implementing partners*.

Interpersonal and cross-cultural competencies have not been core competencies in the professionalisation of the relief sector. No time is taken to get to know local and national actors and the histories of their organisations. Not because there is no time, but because it is deemed irrelevant. Few international relief workers have taken the time to listen to the life stories of directors and other key people in local and national organisations. If we do, we may discover that many have shown extraordinary commitment and endurance in the face of adversity. And continue with less means and comforts than many international relief workers.[x] They merit more respect.

Respect does not mean diminished accountability. Nobody expects blind trust. On the contrary, active attention to relationship management expands the sphere of accountability and renders it reciprocal. Current partnering practices in the relief sector overvalue the contribution of money over other important and necessary value-contributions.[xi] And current accountability practices are structured around grants and largely one-sided. If good project management -and partnership practice- involves both task management and relationship management, then grant agreements need to be complemented by partnership principles or partnership agreements, that spell out behavioural expectations in the collaboration.[xii] Each has to be accountable to the other for what they do and how they behave in the collaboration. However, the primary and ultimate accountability is to those alleged to benefit from the collaborative action!

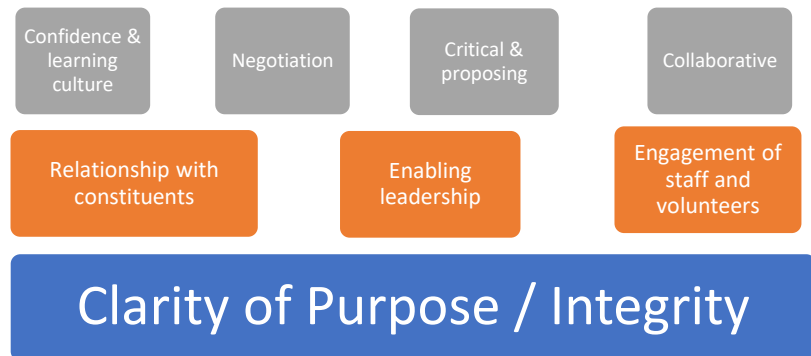### III.   Responsibilities of Local and National Actors

In situations of power inequality, achieving a more equitable collaboration depends first and foremost on behavioural change of the most powerful one. But the advancement of localisation also depends on the behaviours of local and national actors. However, the ability to meet stringent compliance

requirements imposed by the international 'partner', or an organisational form that mimics that of Western agencies[xiii], should not be the most central issue.[xiv]

<u>Framework V:</u> The 'élan vital' or 'life force' of organisations

We tend to assess organisations based on form rather than on function and on whether they have the policies and procedures on paper rather than whether they have purpose, commitment and a culture of integrity. That is a partially understandable expression of societies that rely heavily on written contracts. But even there, we know how far the distance can be between paper and practice.

The real strengths of an organisation lie in its clarity of purpose; its connectedness and accountability to primary constituencies i.e. the people it intends to serve; styles of leadership that strengthen the commitment of staff and volunteers; integrity as a core of the organisational culture; a good measure of self-confidence mixed with self-critical reflection and an eagerness to learn; and a willingness and ability to collaborate with others towards shared objectives. Add to that the ability not only to critique but also to present proposals, negotiation skills, and a readiness to say 'no' to offers and opportunities that do not fit with the core purpose and core values.

Confidence & learning culture	Negotiation	Critical & proposing	Collaborative
Relationship with constituents		Enabling leadership	Engagement of staff and volunteers

Clarity of Purpose / Integrity

Which 'partner assessments' formats and processes of international organisations pay attention to that?

You doubt whether local and national actors meet these criteria? Some don't - but more do, to quite a degree, than is commonly assumed. Some had several of these ingredients but lost them when they learned that the international aid sector requires an ability to '*play the game'* which too often means being competitive with other local actors and subservient to the agendas of internationals.[xv]

> *"The fact that we are not money-hungry confuses them".* Lebanese CSO director

You work for an international organisation?
Please self-assess how your organisation does against these criteria?
How often do you say 'no' to a potential grant, if you are not comfortable with the terms on which it is offered? If you regularly accept such grants, what -over time-is the cumulative impact on your organisation's purpose and life force?

To conclude: Localisation is the normal state of affairs. It becomes an objective only because events have changed the dynamic interaction between a range of key actors, that has led to strong internationalisation. While rapid internationalisation may bring short-term benefits, it risks causing deeper structural harm in the longer term. In the pursuit of localisation, the quality of relationship comes first. That requires self-awareness about behaviours and power dynamics, in the first place among the more powerful actors. This will be influenced by whether an organisation, in its culture and business model, is fit-for-partnering, and by the mindsets of its key personnel. The nature of the relationship is also influenced by the prevailing culture of a sector, with its determinant incentives and disincentives. Power is not often shared spontaneously. Local and national actors will need to negotiate. They need to show that their strength does not lie in being a paper-copy of international agencies.

It is time to revisit 'localisation' - with more holistic perspectives.

GMI is a values-based and purpose-oriented consultancy. A core area of competency is constructive collaboration, within and between teams, within and between organisations, and between organisations and other stakeholder groups. www.gmentor.org and https://www.gmentor.org/equitable-partnership

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[i] Patel, S. & K. Van Brabant 2017: *The Start Fund, Start Network and Localisation. Current situation and future directions*. Start Network, London

[ii] GMI June 2019: *The Finance and Economics of Localisation. Is the 25% target a key performance truth?*

[iii] Particularly with large-scale international mobilisation see B. Ramalingam & J. Mitchell 2014: *Responding to Changing Needs? Challenges and opportunities for humanitarian action*. They say this about the 'comprehensive response' modality: "*The model is based on the notion of limited or no national capacity and a central role for international agencies in managing, coordinating and delivering assistance. It tends to be insensitive to context, lacks engagement with local and national actors, and has a tendency to be supply-driven.*" (pp. 29)

[iv] Yet a quick internet search often rapidly yields some relevant reports, in European languages. Decades of development assistance to various civil societies have led to many studies e.g. Denoeux, G. & D. Toukan 2016: *Jordan. Civil society assessment*. USAID

[v] See e.g. Barbelet, V. et alii 2019: *Local Humanitarian Action in the Democratic Republic of Congo. Capacity and complementarity* for a case of continued replacement rather than reinforcement, and Seymour, C. 2019: *The Myth of International Protection. War and survival in Congo*. Univ. of California Press, which provides a sobering perspective on the effectiveness of aid, from the perspective of crisis-affected people.

[vi] GMI February 2019: *Prepared-for-Partnership? Trust and distrust in international cooperation*. Geneva

[vii] It is being used as such or with some adaptations, and with or without attribution, by e.g. the Start Network, the Dutch Relief Alliance, UNICEF, NEAR and the Humanitarian Advisory Group.

[viii] For more on this see e.g. IARAN 2018: *From Voices to Choices*. With Action against Hunger, Deutsche Welthungerhilfe, IRIS

[ix] START Network, CEDAC Network, Action Against Hunger, GMI June 2018: *Localisation in Practice. Emerging indicators and practical recommendations*. London, Start Network DEPP

[x] For a recent, informative, example, see Moro, L., N. Pendle, A. Robinson & L. Tanner 2020: *Localising Humanitarian Aid during Armed Conflict. Learning from the histories and creativity of South Sudanese NGOs*. London, London School of Economics

[xi] See GMI March 2020: *Value Contributions in Partnerships. Are you having the conversation?*

[xii] See GMI 2019: *Partnerships: Preconditions, principles and practices*: GMI 2020: *Relationship Management Skills in Organisational Partnerships* and GMI 2020: *Grant Agreements and Partnership Agreements*.

[xiii] The normative imposition of organisational and institutional forms by international assistance actors results in a lot of "*isomorphic mimicry*" by national governmental and non-governmental actors: in simple words, copy the form -or the policies- but without the willingness or ability to make them function as intended. Andrews, M. 2013: *The Limits of Institutional Reform in Development. Changing rules for realistic solutions*. Cambridge Univ. Press

[xiv] Form is deemed more important than function, and policies on paper more than values lived in practice. How is it, that international organisations that claim to promote and protect 'diversity' at the same time only trust that which looks like them?

[xv] See GMI February 2020: *No Shared Risk No Partnership?*