

LOCALLY-LED DEVELOPMENT & LOCALIZATION IN HUMANITARIAN RESPONSE

How We Got Here: Our Working Notes

Overview

Part of working toward just, fair, and prosperous societies requires shifting power to underrepresented and/or marginalized groups who have historically held less power. In international development and humanitarian response systems, this often means localizing—or shifting power—to communities in the Global South that are most affected by development and humanitarian programming. This necessitates decentralizing power and resources from the Global North and empowering local actors to lead on decision-making, agenda setting, program implementation, financial resource management, and more. It also means acknowledging and strengthening the capacity of local actors, supporting local solutions, and working with humility.

Locally-led development and localization in humanitarian response begin with a belief in the dignity and worth of every human being. These concepts are centered in the respect for, trust in, and recognition of the ability of people of every country to design and implement successful programs. Moreover, they honor self-determination, individual agency, and a participatory, inclusive rights-based approach to development and humanitarian response. Decentralization of power, or “subsidiarity,” means that decision making is as close as possible to the place and people affected by the decision.

Shifting power to countries and local stakeholders in the Global South is both an issue of values as well as of effective, sustainable, and efficient development and humanitarian outcomes. Advancing locally-led development and localization in humanitarian response supports the expansion of a robust, vibrant, diverse, well-resourced, and resilient civil society that is true to its own context, rather than simply replicating international organizations and agencies. A vibrant civil society is an important end in and of itself, however, it also helps ensure that each community can effectively achieve its own development and humanitarian goals.

Localization involves respectful, long-term partnerships with local actors—including host-country national and subnational governments, civil society organizations, and the private sector. However, to ensure that Global North international non-governmental organizations (INGOs) are respectful and inclusive of their southern counterparts, they must examine existing power dynamics and practices within their organizations and the wider aid sector related to funding models and methods, cultural sensitivity, risk management, governance, and accountability.

Adopting localization and locally-led development approaches is not without its challenges. Decades of foreign assistance are the direct result of **colonial-era power dynamics** and barriers to implementation include risk aversion, scale and capacity limitations, and outdated (yet resilient) power structures. Despite multilateral commitments to local ownership and localization over the past 20 years, the pace of reform has been slow and many structural impediments in the aid system remain. Yet concurrent crises related to climate, COVID-19, conflict, and inequity—along with a renewed momentum for changing power dynamics—indicate that there is now the potential, opportunity, and willingness to make significant progress on localization.

Impact

Many humanitarian and development NGOs need to make a conscious shift in mindset and strategies to align with the values they tout and to achieve sustainable and equitable outcomes.

Taking accountability for past wrongs and shifting away from mindsets that perpetuate inequality

Before all else, the aid sector must confront and recognize its origins and culpability in upholding the current power dynamics between Global North and Global South NGOs wherein structural and racial inequalities are largely ignored or overlooked as part of the status quo. Our working notes on [Decolonizing Aid](#) go into greater detail on this topic.

Following that, the aid sector must then determine to whom it is accountable. Accountability is critical to ensure that dollars are used effectively and to the benefit of the populations targeted by aid programs. Although aid organizations are accountable to funders (primarily in the form of data collection and outcome reporting), these organizations must also be accountable to the communities they seek to serve. The “community” an organization is accountable to might be a grassroots NGO, a neighborhood council, a women’s group, local policymakers, and/or any other combination of individuals. True accountability requires precision in knowing who the work is for and by extension, who has final say in whether an intervention was successful. In practice, this looks like deciding with local stakeholders what the desired outcome of a given project is, reporting progress on said project back to the relevant communities, and acknowledging that only the affected community can ultimately determine if a project met its goals. Oxfam, in its [partnership principles](#), calls this “mutual accountability.”

Another critical challenge for many Global North NGOs is trusting in and respecting local knowledge, capacities, relationships, and systems. INGOs must respect the ability of local organizations and communities alike to know what is best for themselves and to lead and run that process—which includes managing funds. Common pushback on localization from traditional powerholders is rooted in the idea that corruption is pervasive in the Global South and that countries and communities cannot be trusted to use financial resources effectively. Yet corruption exists everywhere that human beings do. It cannot be a rationale to blanketly distrust host countries and local organizations, nor should it be a reason to bar local organizations from access to the funds needed for their own development projects. These assumptions are based in racist and patronizing attitudes and only serve to reinforce the divide between those who hold power and those who do not. Some organizations have explored and used methods to mitigate corruption risk, which are a better alternative to current practices. These methods include rotating staff, layering capital investment where early funds have a higher risk tolerance, and ensuring that they are working with credible partners.

To decolonize aid, pursue equity in global development, and achieve locally-led development goals, donors and INGOs must trust, respect, and hold themselves accountable to key stakeholders—i.e., to the countries, communities, and local organizations that have allowed INGOs into their spaces—and empower those closest to the issue to lead and manage their own development.

Rethinking internal operations, governance structures, and decision-making

Part of aligning aid work to support local goals and priorities includes decentralizing power within our own organizational operations. This necessitates:

- **Reimagining the role of headquarter offices.** One step toward local leadership could be limiting the role of an INGO's headquarters to crafting the overarching strategic framework in collaboration with local partners, establishing standards, managing risk, and acting as an overall fiduciary in a participatory and inclusive manner. In this model, headquarters empowers local decision-making and program design while also providing the resources to support programs that stay in alignment with global strategy, policies, and guidelines. Importantly, the voices of country-level staff and affected communities are part of the strategy process.
- **Restructuring governance and decision-making processes.** One way of restructuring is by adopting a consensus-based approach among local offices and actors via committees. Another way to restructure the decision-making process is by adapting the private sector-created “**Tight, Loose, Tight**” approach for INGO program implementation—meaning that program strategy is tightly controlled by headquarters staff, individual project strategy and execution are left “loose” to give local organizations and stakeholders autonomy, and evaluation and measurement requirements are tight to enable accurate progress reporting). This model allows organizations to respond quickly and appropriately to specific country and situational contexts while also maintaining a unified strategy and measurements of progress to satisfy overarching program requirements and the requirements of donors.
- **Examining how compliance structures can also support power shifts.** Many NGOs assume they are carrying out their work to the highest ethical standards, however, more must be done to codify those standards of operation. For example, within InterAction's own **NGO Standards**—the set of ethical guidelines that InterAction members must attest compliance to on a routine basis—general program standards mandate that “participants from all groups affected should, to the maximum extent possible, be responsible for the design, implementation, and evaluation of projects and programs” and that member organizations “shall consider the full range of potential impacts upon the host country, including the potential to strengthen the capacity of local structures and institutions to absorb constructively financial and other inputs, and where resources exceed capacity, to create new auxiliary structures such as locally controlled foundations or funds.” While these are just two examples of many, they can serve as a helpful baseline for organizations looking to formalize their commitments to localization and locally-led development.
- **Increasing organizational risk tolerance.** Shifting toward locally-led development and localization in humanitarian response means moving away from the outdated notion that putting local organizations in the metaphorical driver's seat presents too much of a financial or reputational risk for INGOs. While there are certain scenarios that local organizations may be less equipped to handle than their larger and more established counterparts, the reality is that those growing pains are part of the locally-led development process. INGOs should provide guidance and resources to help build the capacity of local organizations but cannot let the fear of projects not meeting their expectations impede the localization process or disempower local partners.

Strengthening the capacity of local partners and systems

Many countries already have a vibrant civil society and local organizations that advocate for and organize on behalf of their communities. The aid sector must fully recognize the capacities of these organizations and communities—and invest in them. Investment can strengthen specific capacities related to development or humanitarian response, enable sustainability of those responses, and enhance the speed, quality, and scale of international development and humanitarian response efforts. USAID has already

acknowledged the importance of local capacity strengthening in its newly drafted **Local Capacity Development Policy**.

Investments in local organizations and communities should not be solely based on discrete projects. In the same way that INGOs use funding from donors and the public to cover the operational costs essential to effective project implementation, local and national organizations also need resources to fund those same operational costs—which many do not currently have access to at an adequate level. Peace Direct’s **partnership principles** note the importance of the availability of unrestricted and core funding. With emphasis on more funding—and specifically, more funding for core operational costs—the aid sector could strengthen the capacity of local and national organizations to lead development and humanitarian response.

Programming: Including local voices in implementation at the project level

Local ownership of development and humanitarian projects has long been a widely accepted tenet of aid effectiveness, supporting both the ultimate impact and sustainability of results, as well as the actualization of self-determination ideals. This includes local stakeholder engagement at the national level and with community-based civil society, the private sector, and governments. In coordination mechanisms at the project level, and especially for humanitarian contexts, strong representation of and leadership by local actors is critical.

To avoid perpetuating power inequities that currently exist in a national or local context, engagement should be diverse and seek to meaningfully elevate the voices of groups who are historically impacted by discrimination and inequality, such as women, children, youth, people with disabilities, people of a lower socioeconomic classes or caste, and people from marginalized racial, ethnic, or SOGIE (sexual orientation, gender identity, and gender expression) groups, as well. At all stages of engagement—from project prioritization, to project design, implementation, and subsequent monitoring, evaluation, and assessments of projects—local stakeholders should be consulted and ideally drive or lead decisions. In the vein of accountability, INGOs should be answering to the needs of communities as opposed to delivering externally-imposed solutions, and projects should be evaluated based on the response of those who are affected by the project.

Increasing intentional and systematic local engagement has been encouraged by the development of tools such as Save the Children and Oxfam’s **Local Engagement Assessment Framework (LEAF)** and the Movement for Community-Led Development’s **Participatory Community-Led Development Assessment Tool**. Donors like USAID have also adopted the perspective that local engagement is needed, especially for **sustainable transitions** to local ownership of projects after INGOs and donors exit. USAID has published a **Locally-Led Development Spectrum** and **Checklist** for implementers to consider how to move toward local leadership in their projects.

Advocacy and funding: Increasing visibility

When it comes to policy advocacy on matters of foreign aid, it is necessary for INGOs who advocate on these issues to consult with the individuals, communities, and organizations who are recipients of aid. The people closest to the situation have valuable perspectives on whether interventions are achieving their

intended impacts, and how to improve projects based on the challenges they see on-the-ground and in community settings that INGOs may not always be privy to.

Beyond consultations, INGOs have a crucial role in connecting and amplifying the voices of affected communities with policy-makers and donors. As a result of the historical relationship between INGOs and major donors, INGOs have clearly defined channels through which to communicate program priorities and are therefore at an advantage when it comes to funding conversations. Instead of speaking on behalf of the affected groups, INGOs need to amplify the voices of local populations who are experts on their own situations by virtue of their lived experiences. INGOs should be cautious of even accidentally acting as a gatekeeper to funding for local organizations.

INGOs can be incredible champions for locally-led development, acting as powerful allies for the communities they work in by encouraging donors and policymakers to prioritize locally-defined needs. However, the inclusion and empowerment of local actors must be at the heart of that allyship and those efforts.

Recommendations

1. **Recognize the historic inequities in the aid sector between NGOs from the Global North and Global South:** Organizations must acknowledge and reflect on the unequal power dynamics between organizations from the Global North/South and shift away from the language and mindsets that perpetuate that inequality.
2. **Establish equitable and inclusive local partnerships:** Organizations should strive to build holistic relationships with local partners, beyond project-based cooperation or subgrants, and work to strengthen the capacity of these partners.
3. **Strengthen local ownership of projects:** Organizations should follow the lead of local and/or national governments, organizations, and communities to determine development and humanitarian priorities and approaches, while also prioritizing the inclusion of diverse local community stakeholder input in the design, implementation, and monitoring and evaluation of projects.
4. **Connect and facilitate:** Instead of gatekeeping, organizations should enable the participation of local partners in policy and funding discussions and connect donors with local organizations.
5. **Hold the U.S. government and other donors accountable to their localization commitments:** INGOs should review and advance systems that increase accountability for donor reform commitments related to locally-led development, funding local and national actors, and elevating local voices in their work.