



Summary report from Donor Dialogue Event, 29 May 2018

How can “localization” be advanced with protection?

Summary recommendations

- Include and ensure local actors can participate in decision making and programme design, e.g. through the participation in HCTs, the development of HRPs, in pooled funds and other funding mechanisms, and when crafting programmes for partnership agreements;
- Invest in institutional capacity building, such as administration, finance and human resources (noting that protection cluster actors may not be the ones with the most appropriate skill set in this area);
- Ensure that localization has an important role in the “nexus” between humanitarian and development responses – drawing in development actors would be one way to ensure a longer timeframe and multiyear funding;
- Local actors to find ways to maximize their strengths by creating Forums or Consortiums as well as encouraging and creating learning opportunities between local actors;
- Hold international actors accountable for funding received for capacity building, for example by looking at the partnership agreements or asking for a concrete handover plan;
- Recognize that the main capital of local actors is the credibility with the beneficiaries, and local knowledge and expertise;
- Acknowledge that a change is needed in the mindset, and that what is required is a shift in the power balance in order to ensure that international actors reinforce and do not replace national actors;
- Best practices in localization need to be shared and replicated.

The Task Team on Donor Dialogue hosted a donor dialogue event as part of the GPC Protection Conference in Bangkok, Thailand, on 29 May, 2018. The dialogue, which is intended to be small, focused and informal, was well attended by around 25 participants representing 5 donors, 8 local actors from Asia, Africa, South America and the Middle East, 2 INGOs and 4 UN agencies representing their clusters or AoRs. The theme centered on how to effectively partner with local actors, with the aim of providing space for a discussion between donors, local actors and international protection actors on what we can do to ensure principled partnerships and institutional strengthening of local actors for better results for beneficiaries.

Opening Remarks

The Coordinator of the Global Protection Cluster opened the dialogue, highlighting the fact that “localization” was one of the main shifts that needs to take place to enable better protection for people on the ground. He stressed that the humanitarian architecture – and that the language used within the cluster setting – is not sufficiently inclusive of local actors. Moreover, humanitarian terms are not easily translated, or even well-defined and understood. He challenged the participants to look at whether or not international humanitarian actors have the right skill set to capacitate local actors. Are we focusing on transferring the right capacities? The GPC Coordinator highlighted that most donors do not have a protection policy, and in reaching out to non-traditional donors we

need to continue to encourage this. Finally, he stressed that many local actors have been capacitated for years and that this should result in funding allocations for local actors.

The main speaker, Mr. Gum Sha Aung from the Metta Development Foundation in Myanmar and representing the Joint Strategy Team,¹ stated that committed NGOs and CBOs have been working in Myanmar since 2011 and have developed good partnerships with a range of actors. He highlighted country based pooled funds (23 % of which was allocated to local actors in Myanmar) and the participation in the HCT (since 2016) as enablers for localization. Mr. Gum Sha Aung underlined some factors that could further advance localization: 1) recognition of countries' informal humanitarian response mechanism; 2) partnerships that allow local actors to maintain talent and enable them to lead and manage the response; 3) transfer of skills, not only from international to local actors, but also between local actors; 4) increased direct and multiyear funding; and 5) the promotion of a single universal locally led humanitarian system based on common values. While capacity building is still important in order to receive and better manage multi-year programmes, he found it problematic that local actors or staff are considered good enough to do the vast majority of program implementation, but not good enough to manage their own funds. Moreover, while LNGOs increasingly play a role in strategic groups and planning, their involvement is still very limited, the international working language is foreign to them, and the technical concepts overly convoluted.

Principled partnerships

Several local actors highlighted the need for a different type of partnership that is not sub-contractual in nature and that allows local actors to design projects, or at minimum be part of the design phase, and to have a more equal role in implementation. The “take it or leave it” approach by international actors in terms of projects was seen as highly counterproductive. It was pointed out that many international actors conduct a number of assessments, but that the actual programme design is not necessarily linked to these assessments or adapted to the context. For many local actors, an INGO or a UN agency represents the donor – they seldom see the government funding entity behind the grant.

For local actors to be able to play a more independent role in service delivery and sectoral leadership/participation, they require a more collaborative partnership based on mutual accountability, which draws on coaching and mentoring relationships rather than sub-contracting/sub-granting. International actors involved in capacity building should be held accountable for realizing capacity building initiatives. One mechanism to do so would be to ensure that partnership agreements reflect measurable and funded commitments to help address institutional capacity constraints or to encourage the hand-over of the programme and to ensure direct access between local responders and the donor Governments.

In terms of other improvements suggested, several actors mentioned the need for local NGO Forums or other means to gather different organizations together to ensure a harmonized local response. The point was made that the number of partners is not indicative of success in terms of localization. Examples were given when the sheer number of partners can hamper an efficient response. These examples included countries where the protection cluster alone consists of 150 registered NGOs; from situations where out of 58 local actors only 8 had access to the population; and from one GBV programme, where out of 120 actors, auditors had determined that only 15 had the capacity to implement the required programme. Thus, alternative measures of success were listed, such as the credibility of the local actors, the ability to access beneficiaries, and the ability to implement programmes in highly complex environments and the ability for international actors to successfully transfer the ownership and running of programmes to national actors. Positive examples of successful localization initiatives were given from several contexts, such as Palestine and Myanmar, including situations where a symposium of local actors are working together. At the same time, it was highlighted that when too many international actors depend on only

¹ The Joint Strategy Team is a coalition of national NGOs operating in Kachin State, Myanmar.

a few partners to implement all programmes over a large spectrum, it may negatively impact the quality of the programmes.

A recent quick survey by the Child Protection AoR in Somalia highlighted that INGOs and LNGOs don't speak or understand each other very well; they have different perceptions about how equal partnerships are and about the general power dynamics (see attached ppt). A recommendation to donors and clusters looking for principled partnerships is to look at the partnership agreements and ensure that these agreements include approaches such as coaching, mentoring, secondments, etc. This helps ensure that partnerships are on a more equal footing and that they encourage mutual learning.

Institutional capacity building

Several participants pointed out that in addition to protection and assistance, local actors are crucial when it comes to building an inclusive, tolerant and empowered civil society. Many of today's conflicts emerge in highly authoritarian societies, where local actors will continue to be present when the humanitarian situation has abated. The belief in and support of "the other" within their own societies was the basis for the involvement of many local actors in the first place. The ultimate aim for some was the transformation of their societies, rather than a narrow focus on providing protection and assistance within the humanitarian context.

The current humanitarian structure and architecture was cited as a limitation for true localization, partly due to its complex language, norms, assurances, and monitoring systems, and partly due to donor funding mechanisms. Learning from each other and direct access by local actors to unearmarked institutional resources, including over multi-year timeframes, were highlighted as crucial mechanisms to overcome these challenges. While work should be done to ensure that the humanitarian system is better suited for the inclusion of the local actors and voices it intends to support, capacity building efforts should also improve local capacities to function within this evolving system. More emphasis should be placed on financial, administrative, and operational capacities, not only technical ones. There was, however, agreement among participants that while international humanitarian actors do not always have the capacity to provide this support to local actors, it is clearly within the remit of Protection Clusters and Areas of Responsibility to facilitate capacity building.

It is also important to look at risk transfer, especially because local organizations often do not get the necessary financial and technical support to protect themselves. This is particularly important for GBV NGOs who are often the worst funded frontline implementors. Several participants also pointed out that local actors are the most vulnerable in conflict scenarios and that their staff often face severe protection risks, including in the most severe cases execution. In this respect, capacity building should include protection training and support.

One donor pointed out that it is hard for some donors to justify investment in capacity building if it does not lead to concrete results in service delivery in acute responses, while for other donors their funding structures allow for support to both acute and more long-term programs in emergencies. From the donor perspective it was highlighted that localization was not only about local organisations, but also about local systems and national and local institutions and ensuring that these can respond to sudden shocks. It was also noted that the burden for institutional capacity development should not rest solely with humanitarian donors, but that there may be opportunities to work together with development donors/development funding streams to complement the humanitarian donor contributions. A risk with this however is that in some low and middle-income countries, the national government will substitute its own resources and national capacity with international actors, letting them cover the cost of basic services.

One local actor pointed out that the protection of the most vulnerable are embedded in most communities and many religions, hence this does not have to be "taught", but contextualized. An example of this was that some local actors hire staff with disabilities to ensure they can provide for themselves and their families. Another local actor highlighted that the success of a localization programme can often be measured by the credibility and confidence that the community has in the local actor.

Only as international as necessary

Some local actors urged international NGOs to take more risks and not be too careful and protective of their own operations in contexts of high political volatility where host governments are parties to the conflict. Local actors need more help with advocacy and principled humanitarianism; they can't stand up and take all the fallout alone. Speaking up together can help alleviate some of the scrutiny and discrimination local NGOs experience. If the UN and INGOs can't fulfill their mandates, for example due to access restraints, they should question the reason for being in the countries they operate in. Another participant argued that advocacy does not always help, and some areas are inaccessible due to non-state actors, not only governments. There was also a short discussion on how actors could engage with all sides to a conflict without being accused of unlawful activities, having strict registration procedures imposed; or curtailed access.

At the same time, caution was expressed to the expectations of the humanitarian community, which cannot replace a national government's obligation to protect its citizens and residents. The Mine Action AoR pointed out that as part of political or peacekeeping missions in certain countries, and due to its involvement in humanitarian mine action and demining, they have a different set of relationships that they can leverage for collective protection outcomes.

Dialogue on the difference donors can make

Participants highlighted that not only local actors, but also donors come in all different sizes and shapes. Some donors only disperse funds, while others can do direct implementation. Overall, however, humanitarian funding is more stretched than before and thus donors need new tools and ways of working. In a context where some donors are more actively engaged than others, it is important that donors make their protection policies public so that they are well known. In addition, there is still much work that needs to be done to develop common standards among all the different types of donors. One donor mentioned that in overcoming current capacity building issues and searching for better partnerships, we need to change our mindsets and working culture.

If we are serious about working more locally, international NGOs need to become comfortable with the fact that the power balance will shift in favor of local actors. INGOs will have to be willing "to let go" and hand over more of their work to LNGOs. Donors need to become more comfortable with the increased risk this entails. Instead of using LNGOs for access and a way to cut costs, more effort needs to be put in developing good partnerships and supporting operation budgets (administration, finance, security, etc.).

One donor mentioned that they can accelerate global advocacy, place more emphasis on clusters of agencies/actors, and require that a bigger portion of proposed budgets goes to capacity building. However, this needs to be systematic.

Addition Information

International agencies participating in the GPC Donor Dialogue Task Team include InterAction, Oxfam, NRC, IRC, DRC, ICRC, OHCHR, the Child Protection AoR, the Gender AoR, UNMAS, OCHA, and UNHCR. Local actors who participated in this dialogue were: Metta Development Foundation (Myanmar), NEEM Foundation (Nigeria), CINA (South Sudan), Corporacion Infanace y Desassotto (Colombia), Hand in hand for Syria, Syrian Society for Social Development, Convention Pour le Bien-Etre Social (DRC). Donor participants were: BPRM, DFID, ECHO, OFDA, SDC.

For any questions or additional information, please feel free to contact the co-chairs of the Donor Dialogue Task Team:

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