Voices from the Field

When local actors lead in humanitarian response

12/10/2017

A bigger role for local actors and a more defined role for iNGOs, better access to funding of local actors by international actors, and care for local capacity. These are the most important recommendations of representatives of local actors from the Global South for an audience of humanitarian professionals in the Global North (October 12, The Hague).

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KUNO is an initiative of ten NGOs and five knowledge institutes from the Dutch humanitarian sector. KUNO's goal is to strengthen the humanitarian sector in the Netherlands. KUNO is a platform for joint learning, reflection and debate. We organize expert meetings, working sessions for professionals, webinars, training and public debates. All of our events are cross-sectoral and organized in cooperation with our partners.

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Cover photo : Debate with the panelists, October 2017, from left to right : Smruti Patel, Dr. Rahman, Liliane Paparu Obiale, Sudhansu Singh and Kevin Lee, by: KUNO

Introduction

Partners of the Charter4Change and of the Empowering Local and National Humanitarian Actors (ELNHA) Program of Oxfam gathered in The Hague the second week of October 2017. KUNO and Oxfam Novib utilized the presence of this large group of local actors from the Global South to organize a public debate on localization: more prominence for local and national actors in humanitarian responses. What are the experiences, expectations, perspectives and visions of local actors from the Global South on this important Grand Bargain commitment (2016)?. This report is a reflection of this debate.

Most relevant recommendations:
- Allow local actors a bigger role and define the role for iNGOs more narrowly. This does not mean there is no need for iNGOs, they could focus on knowledge management and facilitate the dialogue in emergency responses.
- Allow or facilitate direct funding of local actors by international donors.
- Care for local capacity: local officers of local actors get hired by big iNGOs and donors, leaving the local actor with a problematic gap in knowledge and experience.

Below you will find the report of this public debate.

The panelists in this debate were:

- **Dr. Ehsanur Rahman**. Executive Director of Dhaka Ahsania Mission (DAM) in Bangladesh. He is also active as Director of the Syndicate of Ahsanullah University, Governing Body member of Khan Bahadur Ahsanullah Teachers Training College, chairperson of the National Alliance of Humanitarian Actors in Bangladesh (NAHAB) and engaged in the Executive Committee of Bangladesh ECD Network.

- **Paparu Liliane Obiale.** Humanitarian Program Manager at CEFORD in Uganda. CEFORD has become one of the most outstanding LNGOs undertaking interventions in response to the influx of South Sudanese refugees to Uganda. Lilian manages programs in Bidi Bidi camp, one the world's largest refugee settlements. Lilian leads coordination platforms for local actors to respond to emergencies, and manages partnerships and consortia with international and local organizations.

- **Sudhansu Singh.** Executive Director of Humanitarian Aid International in India. He is a humanitarian and development professional with over 28 years of experience in program management in the Asia-Pacific region. Sudhanshu has been part of global processes pertaining to localization, including the Transformative Agenda, the World Humanitarian Summit and the Charter4Change. Since 2001, he has managed responses to most of the mega disasters in the Asia-Pacific region, either directly or through partners.

- **Kevin Lee.** Director of A Single Drop in the Philippines. Kevin connects teams of community members with local government task forces to plan, design, and implement locally owned water and sanitation systems. He was honoured as 2007 Echoing Green Fellow, Tech Museum Equality Laureate 2010, Ashoka Fellow 2015, and Standards 2015 Visionary Award.

The debate was moderated by:

- **Smruti Patel.** Director of the Global Mentoring Initiative in Geneva

In this report what was mentioned on the topics of civil society organizations, challenges for local organizations, roles and responsibilities and shifting power relations is summarized. In conclusion, some general recommendations which can be drawn from the debate are provided.

Civil Society Organizations

Localization is dependent on the capability of local civil society to organize itself. There are of course differences in different contexts in the level and amount of civil society organization. The panelists describe their own contexts:

Mrs. Obiale explains that CEFORD was originally focused on community empowerment for rural development, but has changed its development mandate to include a humanitarian one due to conflicts and increased streams of migrants from South Sudan coming into the area. She details that localization is relatively new to Uganda. The general believe was that humanitarian response work is for expatriates and international organizations. Therefore, when CEFORD started working in humanitarian response, they were the only local actor in the north of Uganda. Later on, Oxfam started working on capacity building with CEFORD, and now CEFORD also works together with other local partners, and shares knowledge. So there is a cooperation of civil society organizations who can respond to emergencies when they happen. However, civil society in Uganda is not yet well developed, and still in need of help by international organizations. Steps towards localization in Uganda can be made by changing the types of partnerships which are made, towards more collaborative equal partnerships instead of subcontracting.

The Philippines is often named as a context in which civil society is highly developed. Mr. Lee explains that while there is a large quantity of civil society organizations in the Philippines in general, and some of these organizations are quite strong, there is also a considerable section of the Philippines which is less organized, or is organized in civil society organizations which are not that strong. What is needed for localization, according to Mr. Lee, is for local organizations to build capacity and reassert their position, to be treated as equal partners.

"Subcontracting does not help social development, partnering does. Partnering ensures mutual accountability, dignity and local expertise."

Mr. Lee says that his organization sees localization as them taking a leading role in the design and implementation of projects. Mr. Lee: '*We work in partnerships, looking at where we need help, often we need financial help and technical expertise to do the job. Localization is a must if we are going to effectively look at the situation in the Philippines.*'

In Bangladesh, civil society has grown over the past forty years since independence. DAM, the organization dr. Rahman represents, defines localization as local level decision making. Dr. Rahman indicates that civil society organizations, NGOs and community-based organizations in Bangladesh prove that they can do decision making closely linked with the community. In order to do local level decision making, DAM is involved in the institutionalization of an alliance of local responders.

Dr. Rahman provides another reason to work on localization: '*We also have to think about the situation from a social development perspective. Subcontracting does not help social development, partnering does. Partnering ensures mutual accountability, dignity and local expertise.*'

Another issue that was raised concerning local capacity is the fact that local organization gets locals involved in the provision of aid, gets them acquainted with the ways of working and educates them. Once these locals start to perform well, they often get noticed by iNGO's which hire them. INGO's are interesting employers since they can provide higher wages and more stability than local organizations can. However, this hiring of locals by iNGO's leads to a brain drain from local organizations to iNGO's, which of course does not facilitate the localization agenda.

Challenges for local organizations

What are some of the challenges that local organizations face in the process of localization? The intention is to have diversity in the humanitarian system. However, newcomers will face some barriers as they try to work the institutional framework.

To Mr. Singh the biggest problem for newcomers to enter the international humanitarian system is the knowledge bar. In the humanitarian sector power is money. The established international actors within the humanitarian system know where they can get money and know how to ensure access to it. He says: '*Those organizations who can provide visibility for the corporate house or big donors will be chosen to get the funding, over us, no matter*

how effective we are, or how much work we do on the ground.' Mr. Singh explains that this has to do with the ability of NGOs to do branding, not necessarily with the credibility of an organization. Local organizations don't have the knowledge nor the experience to do branding, which results in a lack of access to funding.

This difficulty to access funding for local actors is also faced by mrs. Obiale in Uganda. It is difficult for local organizations to get UN funding directly. Meeting the conditions for funding is challenging. Moreover, Uganda is battling with corruption, which makes donors reluctant to fund local organizations in Uganda. Another issue is that donors sometimes have regulations which do not allow them to fund southern ngo's directly. These conditions add up and make it hard for local responders to access international funds. However, the panelists agree it would be logical to fund local responders directly since they can do the work more cost effective and timely, since they are present in the context of the emergency both before, during and after the emergency.

Local responders, in turn, should make sure their organizations are capable to work with that funding. In Uganda, mrs. Obiale mentions that civil society is not yet well developed. There is a need for civil society organizations in Uganda to work with international organizations. However, these organizations would like to do so in partnerships instead of through subcontracting. Currently, the partnerships CEFORD is engaged in are not collaborative, the international organization takes a leading position. Moreover, local responders aren't perceived as strategic partners by iNGOs. Most partnerships come into being because of funding requirements. In the future, mrs. Obiale would like to see more equal strategic partnerships. Donors can help this process by making international- local partnerships a precondition to funding.

One of the main challenges mr. Lee faces are people. In humanitarian response, consensus decision making needs to be quick; when there is an emergency, there is no time to spend a couple of weeks negotiating about how to respond. However, consensus amongst the collaborating parties is needed, because goals need to be clear and there is often a diverse group of actors collaborating in humanitarian work. Mr. Lee's organization for humanitarian response is a collaboration between three development organizations. Recently, they have started to expand and they are now working together with nine organizations. Mr. Lee has noticed that especially communication and setting a common culture of working together is hard.

Roles and Responsibilities

What has to change in the roles and responsibilities that iNGOs take in relation to local responders?

The panel has two suggestions for possible future roles of iNGOs. Firstly, iNGOs can take a role in knowledge management and the facilitation of dialogue, making sure that knowledge on humanitarian aid is shared an a variety of actors remain in contact. Secondly, iNGOs could change their supply driven way of working to a demand driven way of working. In their turn, local responders would have to focus on how to formulate their demands towards iNGOs. Overall, it is remarked that growth and development are not necessarily synonyms. Organizations can become smaller, but still develop. Local responders can take over part of the work of iNGOs. This doesn't mean iNGOs will become obsolete. It just means that they will shrink in size and will define their activities more narrowly.

Shifting power relations

Is localization a matter of shifting or reclaiming power? There was a time when iNGOs did not exists and response to emergency situations was always local. Later iNGOs came into being. Does this mean that local responders are now reclaiming the power that they once had?

The panelists agree that localization is not in itself a reclaiming of power. Localization is about sharing responsibility based on respective competences, looking at the types of roles each actor can play. Mutual accountability is key in localization, local actors should hold international actors accountable to the localization agenda's they are the signatories of and international organizations should hold local actors accountable to their actions.

"Local organizations don't understand how much power they have"

Mr. Lee adds that localization is a sector issue. Development and Humanitarian aid are linked. Within the sector, with the way funding is distributed, aid agencies are not rewarded for doing a good job, but for knowing the right people. The budgets are already

divided, so there is no space for new actors. The bigger the pie, the more funding, the more the big agencies subcontract. There is no bidding, no space for negotiation. As a local organization, it is difficult to push back against this system. What local organizations can do, according to mr. Lee, in order to get more control is to think about the way they want to be funded.

In the case of mr. Lee: '*My organization has changed the way are funded. We do not breakdown what they pay us, we do not show exactly what we use the money they give us for. Instead, we say what we will do with the money and provide funders insight into our final output. Our funders do not need to know how much we spend on stationary for our offices. They need to know whether what they provided the funding for gets done. That is a way of grabbing the power as a local organization. Local organizations don't understand how much power they have. My organization, we calculate our strength by the amount of money we leave on the table. Sometimes you have to walk away from funding, because you want to have a certain amount of impact and the money that they are providing simply isn't enough for you to do that job.*'

Conclusion

The general attitude of the panelists on localization is optimistic. Challenges to overcome include learning how to build equal strategic partnerships, changing funding and building capacity of local civil society. However, the will to take the lead by local actors and the moment of opportunity to do so and overcome the challenges are there. Also, the sector understands that local humanitarian response is the best way, because it is more effective in saving and improving lives. Mutual collaboration between local responders and iNGOs for localization will help the localization agenda go further. Different initiatives on localization have started and it is now up to the sector to carry on and reach the goals.

Recommendations

What are some of the recommendations that we can take from this debate?

- A careful look at role division in the current system has to be taken. There is a possibility for a win-win situation, which allows for a bigger role for local responders and more narrowly defined role for iNGOs. A possibility would be for iNGOs to deliver technical expertise and for local NGOs to combine this expertise with their local knowledge.
    - o iNGOs can take a role in knowledge management and the facilitation of dialogue, making sure that knowledge on humanitarian aid is shared an a variety of actors remain in contact. Secondly, iNGOs could change their supply driven way of working to a demand driven way of working. In their turn, local responders would have to focus on how to formulate their demands towards iNGOs.
- Local responders feel like knowledge on international issues, such as the grand bargain, does not reach them and if it does it is hard for them to understand how to act upon it.
- Local responders want to be equal partners. Partnering helps social development, it ensures mutual accountability, dignity and local expertise. In order for local partners to become equal partners several things need to happen on each side:
    - o INGOs could partner up instead of subcontracting.
    - o Local organizations need to build capacity and assert their position.
    - o Donors can help by making international- local partnerships a precondition to funding.
- Internationally, restrictions on funding local responders directly should be dropped.
- Local responders, in turn, should make sure their organizations are ready to work with that funding and think about the way in which they want to be funded.
- Care for local capacity: local officers of local actors get hired by big iNGOs and donors, leaving the local actor with a problematic gap in knowledge and experience.