

Is COVID-19 finally delivering the long-awaited localisation of humanitarian aid?

The case of the DRA Joint Response in South Sudan

This article is part of a collection of theses conducted in response to a call from KUNO, seeking to explore the impact of COVID-19 on humanitarian action and crisis response. The research on which this article is based was commissioned by Save the Children (SC), lead of Dutch Relief Alliance's (DRA) Joint Response in South Sudan (SSJR), and was conducted by Kilian Krause, an International Development Management and Disaster Risk Management student at Van Hall Larenstein University of Applied Science.

With the SSJR, DRA, in collaboration with the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs, is committed to localisation through the collaboration of seven DRA member organisations (INGOs) and ten local partner organisations (L/NNGOs), jointly providing humanitarian assistance in a country experiencing protracted crisis resulting from years of conflict and climate shocks, with currently 8.3 million people in urgent need of humanitarian assistance (OCHA, 2021). However, SC lacked information on current partnership practices and the impact of COVID-19 on them, as well as contextual knowledge on „good partnership principles“ that can be applied to further advance localisation and consequently provide better support to L/NNGOs.

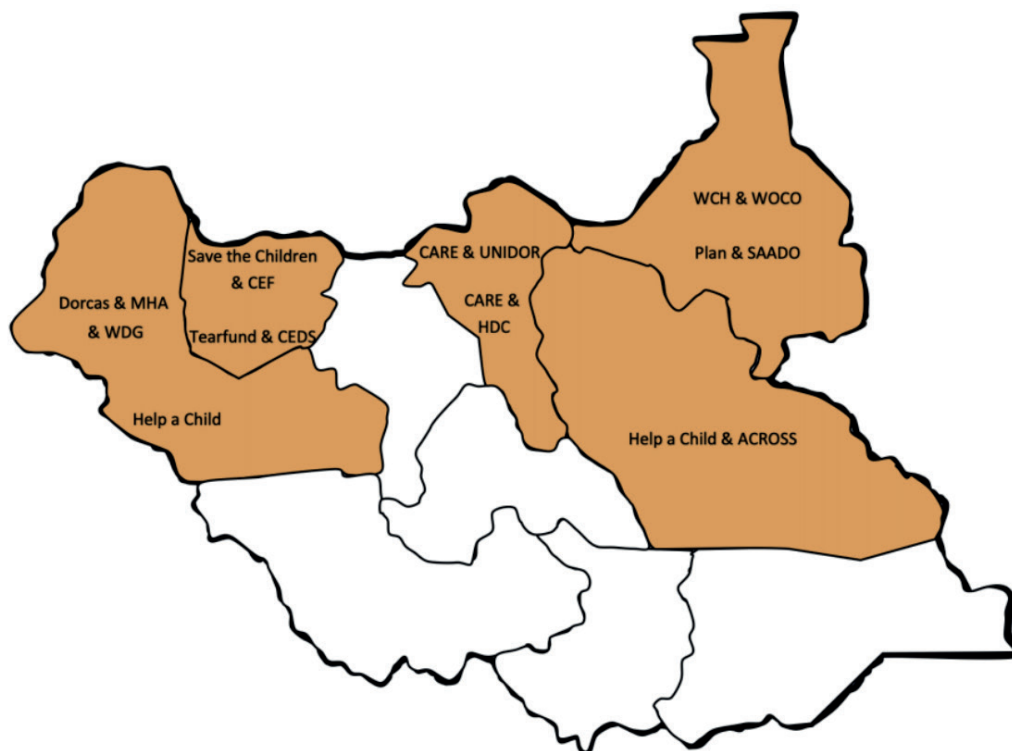


Figure 1: SSJR program/project areas & organisations (Krause, 2020)

¹ SSJR DRA members (INGOs): Save the Children Netherlands, Plan Netherlands, Help a Child South Sudan, Dorcas Aid International, War Child Holland (WCH), and Tearfund. SSJR local partners (L/NNGOs): African Committee for Rehabilitation of Southern Sudan (ACROSS), Charity and Empowerment Foundation (CEF), Centre for Empowerment and Development Support (CEDS), Women Development Group (WDG), Marry Help Association (MHA), Humanitarian Development Consortium (HDC), Universal Intervention and Development Organisation (UNIDOR), Widows and Orphan Charitable Organisation (WOCO), Smile Again African Development Organisation (SAADO) and LiveWell.

COVID-19 in South Sudan: more than a health-crisis

Although South Sudan is currently experiencing a period of relative calm, the country was hit hard by the outbreak of COVID-19 setting back humanitarian achievements made over the last few years. People's already very limited access to basic services worsened due to COVID-19 related restrictions and 1.6 million people have become newly vulnerable with COVID-19 related food price hikes (OCHA, 2021). Moreover, the sharp decline in oil prices in 2020 hit South Sudan especially hard as the country relies on oil exports making 97% of domestic exports and 88% of government revenues (IMF, 2020). According to COVID-19 outbreak model projections by OCHA, the impact of the pandemic on South Sudan will be more severe than elsewhere in the region due to the protracted crisis, displaced populations, weak health capacities and long-standing vulnerabilities of most people.

To assess the impact of COVID-19 on the SSJR and its 17 participating organisations, a questionnaire based on an extensive literature review was disseminated to all SSJR focal persons and executive directors of the respective organisations. With an 81% response rate, it was possible to gather meaningful insights into how DRA members and local partners are affected by COVID-19-related policies and their impacts on localisation. Six follow-up interviews were held to further discuss these issues. Most commonly perceived by all organisations is the increasing closure of humanitarian spaces, accelerated by COVID-19-related restrictions, which poses a major challenge especially for INGOs in accessing affected communities. Those organisations (usually L/NNGOs) with proximity to affected populations through so-called „field offices“ are consequently at an advantage and fundamental during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Towards genuine and equitable partnerships

As INGOs established partnerships with L/NNGOs already before the outbreak of COVID-19, the DRA was able to continue providing humanitarian assistance to more than 131.000 crisis affected people, although partially with some delay. It was recognised that with the Juba-centric nature of humanitarian aid in South Sudan, INGOs that are mostly based in Juba, rely now more than ever on their local partners. As a result, greater flexibility in implementation strategies of SSJR activities are recorded, with increased power and more responsibility over implementation being shifted to L/NNGOs. Furthermore, increased collaboration and coordination have been perceived by both INGOs and L/NNGOs. As national and international measurements restricted physical meetings between respective SSJR partners, online-communication methods were introduced. These new tools are highly appreciated within SSJR partnerships and even proved to increase time and cost efficiency.

Yet INGOs still hold greater power within the SSJR and its INGO-L/NNGO partnerships and often dominate decision-making processes at key moments of programme/project development, strategic planning, resource mobilisation, and operational review and evaluation. Ultimately, to overcome sub-contracting relationships in which L/NNGOs implement projects of INGOs, equitable and genuine partnerships must be established. Such are characterised by the absence of hierarchical structures, financial autonomy of both parties, and co-design of activities and strategies (NEAR, 2019). Therefore, it is highly important for the SSJR, to leave behind L/NNGOs that are stronger positioned in the humanitarian sphere and meet the requirements of institutional donors, instead of being better implementing partners under the supervision of DRA members.

“How we proceed in the future really depends on choices we make now. This is true for both, INGOs and us L/NNGOs. However, the decisions made by INGOs might certainly be even more decisive for the future course of localising humanitarian aid” (Executive Director of a L/NNGO, 2021)

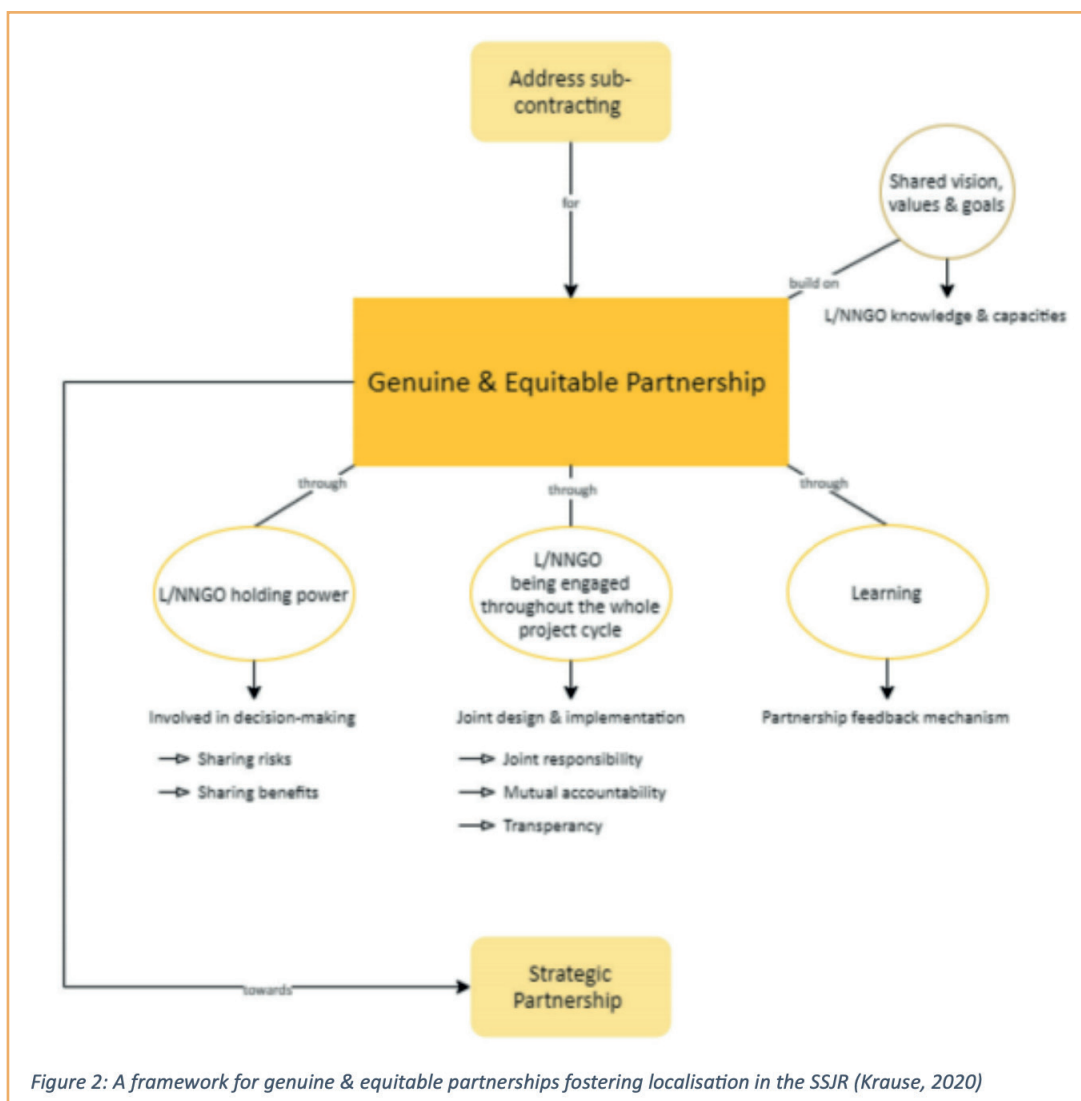


Figure 2: A framework for genuine & equitable partnerships fostering localisation in the SSJR (Krause, 2020)

Why we need a transformative approach towards localisation

“It is too early to tell whether anecdotal evidence of change in the context of Covid19 is a foretaste of the shape of future humanitarian responses, or whether long-term structural imbalances will continue to block fundamental reform.”
(Barbelet et al., 2020, p.5)

Although COVID-19 has brought localisation back to the top of the agenda and INGO-L/NGO partnerships are key to localisation - not only within the SSJR but also at the global level - doubts are growing, especially among humanitarian actors from the Global South. It is suspected that INGOs are once again prioritising cooperation with L/NGOs out of necessity to protect their own presence and brand (#Shiftthepower, 2020). While the impacts of COVID-19 on collaboration between DRA members and local partners, which have compellingly contributed to more power for local partners in implementing joint programmes/projects, can be considered a great success towards localisation, these flexibilities should be forwarded to further dimensions of the SSJR and the humanitarian project cycle. As long as fundamental decisions are made at the international level, often to the exclusion of local actors, localisation will not be achieved. Now, as the five-year timeframe of the Grand Bargain is

coming to an end, many acknowledged that localisation is more than just a technical debate on how to improve the effectiveness and efficiency of international humanitarian aid with its excessive focus on money, manifested in the 25% target of the Grand Bargain (Patel & Singh, 2021). It is much more a political agenda that calls for broader systemic and transformative approaches, with the strategic purpose of a more ethical and sustainable global humanitarian system exemplified by a level playing field. To truly shift the power and take on a transformative approach towards localisation, DRA's SSJR must overcome INGO's „power over“ programmes/projects and funding - and inevitably L/NNGOs.

In light of the above, the following is recommended:

- 1) DRA members and local partners should take advantage of new dynamics arising from the COVID-19 pandemic and extend flexibility beyond implementation strategies to the various phases of the humanitarian projects cycle.
- 2) SSJR organisations should consider establishing a comprehensive and complementary capacity mapping system to reciprocally assess capacities and gaps of all actors, including L/NNGOs, INGOs, the donor (DRA) and crisis-affected people.

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