

Humanitarian Cafe: Local leadership in humanitarian action

22 June 2023, The Hague

Summary report by KUNO

On Thursday 22 June, the first renewed Humanitarian Cafe took place with the aim of strengthening the Dutch humanitarian community and 'to feed your brain and strengthen your network'. During Humanitarian Cafes, humanitarian professionals reflect on their humanitarian work and engage into critically constructive dialogues (under Chatham House Rule).

This first cafe was initiated by the Dutch Relief Alliance, hosted by Save the Children and facilitated by KUNO. Tessa Terpstra, head of advocacy at Save the Children, kicked off the session with a brief welcome speech, after which both Arjen Jooze (WorldVision, chair Dutch Relief Alliance Board of Directors) and Paul van den Berg (Cordaid) provided us with a few words about the Humanitarian Cafe.

South Sudan

Moving on the more substantive and important part of the Cafe, James Keah Ninrew, executive director of UNIDOR (South Sudan) and member of the Localisation Advisory Group of the DRA, and Joseph Kayi (Save the Children, manager of the DRA Joint Response in South Sudan) provided the audience with inspiring introductions on local leadership in humanitarian action. The Humanitarian Cafe applies 'Chatham House Rule', so we will not quote the speakers. However, a few key points were raised during the introductions and following discussion.

To begin, the terminology used in the conversation about localisation is interpreted differently by people and sometimes misused. For example, the use of the word *capacity* is very biased because it could signify 'the capacity to assess the needs of the people', something local partners are more than capable of doing, or does it signify 'financial capacity'. Another example is that the concept of *localisation* is used in South Sudan to fuel contradictions/polarisation, as some (ethnic) groups are excluded because they are not seen as 'local'. This is why some think the word 'nationalisation' is a better fit, although that also has certain, not always positive, connotations in other contexts. In short: using the right terminology is challenging. Words matter.

The end goal

Furthermore, the sharing of risks and the sharing of decision-making powers were discussed in the sense that open communication is pivotal: we should not start with communicating of decision making at the end, when all the rules and benchmarks have already been set by

international organisations for local actors to follow. Lastly it was mentioned that it is quite difficult but very important to define the end goal/objective of localisation is. Many organisations have the same purpose: to help people in need. However, everyone has a different understanding of localisation and a different role to play. This was nicely expressed by one of the speakers using the metaphor of the game in which you have to determine what part of an elephant you are touching while blindfolded. In other words, the end-goal, roles and accountability to the population are central to localisation. Besides, it is not only about resources, but also about willingness, openness and how we engage with local partners.

Afterwards, there was a lively ‘borrel’ (drinks) and sharing of afterthoughts. Everyone enjoyed seeing colleagues they had not seen in person – sometimes for years.

Humanitarian Cafe

The series Humanitarian Cafe is an initiative of Artsen zonder Grenzen, the Dutch Relief Alliance, the Netherlands Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Netherlands Red Cross and KUNO.

