

# Aid localisation as a catalyst for resilience during the post-Matthew response in Haiti

Nawal Karroum

Tuesday, 19 December 2017

The following article is based on a study on aid localisation during the response to Hurricane Matthew which struck Haiti in October 2016. It draws on a series of interviews carried out in Haiti in May and June 2017. It presents how and why aid localisation is seen as a way of increasing resilience. It also analyses certain limits that were observed.

Given the trauma and the lessons learned from the response to the 2010 earthquake, and particularly the relentless and recurring nature of the hurricanes that Haitian organisations face and will continue to face, most stakeholders

## Table of contents

[Localisation as a vector of crisis preparedness](#)  
[When localisation and recovery go hand in \(...\)](#)  
[Localisation, for what long-term impact?](#)  
[Innovative initiatives and difficult decisions](#)  
[Lesson learning - the missing link in the \(...\)](#)  
[Conclusion](#)

quickly saw aid localisation during the response to Hurricane Matthew as legitimate and necessary. In this precise context, the different stakeholders involved in the response almost unanimously explain that they believe in aid localisation as a way of building the country's resilience in relation to natural disasters and crisis situations. Three underlying factors of resilience are regularly mentioned when discussing the role and position of national and local actors during the response. These are: crisis preparedness, recovery and the long-term impact of the response.

## Localisation as a vector of crisis preparedness

### Reinforcing risk and disaster management through the Directorate of Civil Protection

Haiti's national risk and disaster management system is more or less in place despite still not having a legal framework. The Directorate of Civil Protection (DPC), the public institution in charge of the operational management of risks and disaster, is not part of any organic law and therefore does not have its own budget, nor does it have genuine leadership status in relation to other public institutions [1]. Its mission is to respond to disasters and also prevent and prepare for risks. It therefore played a central role in the preparations for Matthew, and considerable progress was made compared to the situation during the hurricanes in 2004 and 2008 [2]. This improvement is mainly the result of DPC's reinforced operational capacity [3] due to massive investment on the part of international donors and UN agencies [4] in recent years.

During the 2016 hurricane season, the DPC carried out two simulation exercises involving the national and departmental emergency operations centres. One of these concerned the response to a hurricane in the regions that were hit by Matthew a few weeks later [5]. These emergency operations centres were activated several days before the hurricane, which brought together numerous aid organisations (UN agencies and international NGOs) to prepare and coordinate their operations in collaboration with the DPC, before, during and after the hurricane [6].

International NGOs also provided the DPC with support, particularly at the commune and local level, in partnership with Haitian civil society organisations. However, though skills at this level were reinforced through training [7], operational means in "communes" and "sections communales" remained extremely weak [8]. Yet, this local level proved to be essential, notably during the preparation phase. In addition to the warning and evacuation messages sent to the population by radio and text message, the volunteer staff of the civil protection force (and the Haitian Red Cross) covered the regions concerned to communicate security measures and indicate where provisional shelters were located using megaphones. At the "commune" and "section communale" levels, the civil protection committees and emergency operations centres are less formalised and are made up essentially of volunteers. Those who were mobilized during the passage of hurricane Matthew were therefore mostly inhabitants of the affected regions, and were

both victims of the hurricane and among the first to provide assistance to their families and neighbours. This situation shows the permeability between public actors, civil society and the population at the local level, and, above all, illustrates that the localisation of the response to Matthew was also boosted by local actors themselves, first among which were the population and community leaders. It shows how fine the line is at the local level between localisation, participatory approaches and community engagement.

### **Localisation as a way of preparing for future hurricanes**

The importance of preparedness in Haiti in June 2017 [9] was all the more obvious because the country was about to enter a new hurricane season. All the organisations present in Haiti were therefore preoccupied by this preparation and conscious of the need to contribute to it in their operations in response to Matthew. For a certain number of organisations, such as those that had been involved in the 2010 earthquake response, localisation is primarily about recognizing the legitimacy and responsibility of the state as a key actor of the response, despite its limited capacity. Without denying the importance of pre-crisis preparation which aims to give national and local actors control of subsequent responses, localisation goes further because it consists of increasing the role of national and local actors concretely during a response and putting them back at the centre of the response. As such, the localisation of the response to Matthew (though insufficient according to many interviewees) has helped to build the capacity of Haitian actors (including civil society organisations who have been very involved in the response) through practical experience, and has helped to prepare them to cope with future crises. Thus, in this specific context where there are frequent hurricanes, aid localisation cannot be put off on the pretext that local and national actors do not have the necessary capacity or are insufficiently prepared. On the contrary, it is seen as a way of increasing preparation for future crises.

---

### **When localisation and recovery go hand in hand**

Whether it is seen as a phase of a humanitarian response or as a type of activity, recovery is a concept that is used and understood (sometimes differently) by the majority of actors in Haiti. Whether it is "immediate", "early", "rapid" or "sustainable", it is a transition between, on the one hand, an emergency phase or operation, and, on the other, a longer-term development phase or operation. According to many of the interlocutors met, proper localisation – which allowed local and national actors to play a more significant role – would also promote the recovery transition.

This relatively widely shared idea that localisation and recovery go together in Haiti is based on a number of points. Firstly, in the case of Matthew, there is a major imbalance between the funding of the Flash Appeal [10] of October 2016, which received 62% of the funds requested [11] and covered the three first months of the operation – primarily emergency relief activities – and that of the Humanitarian Response Plan 2017-2018 which has only received 18% of the funds requested [12]. This imbalance obviously has repercussions for the activities that are carried out by field operators, who are essentially international because they are the main recipients of these funds. What is more, certain international actors have fallen behind with the implementation of their relief activities. This is the case, for example, for the World Food Programme which conducted food distributions for several months after the hurricane in areas where, according to certain actors, this had become inappropriate, or even harmful for the economic and agricultural recovery in Grand Sud. The response by international organisations was therefore deemed to be imbalanced between, on the one hand, emergency relief assistance (individualized and short-term, such as kit distributions), which was insufficient and late but relatively massive and sometimes harmful, and on the other hand, extremely limited recovery aid.

Secondly, Haitian organisations who, for the most part, do not define themselves as humanitarian actors, will tend to rapidly prioritise recovery action such as restoring livelihoods, economic recovery and the rehabilitation of infrastructure. This is a result of their mandate and their competencies because, despite the considerable show of spontaneous solidarity, humanitarian assistance is not the main focus of national and local organisations, and quickly becomes unsustainable for them. However, they have excellent knowledge of the context, solid technical expertise and sometimes legitimacy that allows them to contribute to recovery operations, particularly if these are aimed at a community rather than individualized humanitarian assistance [13]. It should therefore be noted that local authority representatives, for example, have a marked preference for (and dual interest in) recovery activities as they have a potentially more significant role in these and they have a more positive impact for the community.

Thirdly, the recovery phase generally leaves more time for constructive dialogue between actors and consequently allows national and local actors to play a more important role in the response. In addition, in contrast to relief agencies who generally provide assistance without in-depth knowledge of the context, international organisations who take part in recovery programmes have often been present for a long time or are used to working closely with local and national actors. It may also happen that donors and recovery objectives encourage more aid localisation than during an emergency humanitarian operation. It is therefore possibly the conditions in which recovery operations are implemented that favour the localisation process. This process is therefore potentially different in a relief, recovery or post-crisis development context as the operational conditions are not the same.

Thus, without necessarily concluding that there is a direct causal relation between localisation and recovery, it would appear that: 1) more localized responses encourage recovery activities; 2) a response more focused on recovery allows greater localisation. Therefore, localisation is accompanied by changes in aid implementation methods and strategic orientation. In addition, funding mechanisms have a significant impact on localisation. It is therefore preferable that donors invest in recovery rather than focusing on emergency aid in order to encourage this process.

Lastly, it remains to be seen whether: 1) localisation is promoted as a means of improving the quality of the response (efficiency, appropriateness, etc.), in which case, emergency relief could remain a priority even though it is less conducive to localisation, or 2) it is one of the objectives of the response, and would become a quality criterion in itself which would justify reviewing certain strategic orientations.

---

## Localisation, for what long-term impact?

The long-term impact is relatively clear in almost all the objectives and strategic orientations of the two planning documents for the response to Matthew: *the Humanitarian Response Plan 2017-2018* (United Nations) and the *Post-disaster Needs Assessment* (PDNA) [14] (Haitian government) which contains a "recovery strategy".

An in-depth reading of these different strategic orientations and objectives shows that the international community's response remains a "humanitarian" response primarily geared towards the most urgent needs of the affected population. For its part, the government strategy "follows on from the humanitarian response [and continues] through early recovery programmes in order to achieve sustainable recovery", and is geared towards the "Major Projects" of the Haitian Strategic Development Plan. This shows the Haitian state's desire (which is shared by a certain number of other organisations) to ensure that there is as much continuity as possible between humanitarian and development programmes, and to avoid the establishment of an emergency regime. The link between humanitarian and development action here is not limited to ensuring humanitarian operations have a long-term positive impact (sustainable solutions, resilience, and "build back better"), but rather it aims to include the response to the crisis in a development approach, with the aim of a deeper transformation.

In practice, the reference plan is the one which was developed by the United Nations and their partners, the full version of which only exists in English, which is not a national language and is not spoken a great deal by Haitian stakeholders. These dual strategies are evidence of the persistent difficulty of effectively linking humanitarian and development actions beyond consensual strategic objectives. It also underlines two distinct approaches among international organisations, and within certain United Nations and European Union organisations, who supported the development of both plans and fund certain of their work streams without, on the other hand, having any clear overarching logic.

For certain national and/or development organisations that we met, greater localisation is needed because it would mean that the response adopted the objectives of the Haitian development organisations from the start and contributed to reinforcing pre-established operational strategies. In contrast, for many traditional humanitarian aid organisations, such an approach would involve numerous risks, beginning with the risk of not meeting the essential needs of the most vulnerable people and not respecting humanitarian principles, and particularly the principle of impartiality.

---

## Innovative initiatives and difficult decisions

Certain multi-mandated or multi-phase international NGOs have tried to establish a certain continuity between their humanitarian operations and their development programmes. Two have thus chosen to manage the crisis through their staff on the ground and the "development department" rather than through an external team from the "relief department". In both cases, this decision (which was not unanimously supported internally) was partly motivated by the desire to guarantee a partnership approach with local actors and communities which contributes to localisation.

In the first case, the international NGO immediately became involved in the emergency response, notably via food distributions, using a strong community-based approach and actively collaborating with local public and civil society organisations. This community acceptance strategy was possible due to the NGO field staff's in-depth knowledge of the context and local organisations. This approach allowed a very rapid intervention, and a unique level of security for distributions (the organization in question was the only international actor which did not need to call for assistance from the police or the MINUSTHA), as well as a very high quality of food distributions that was recognized by numerous actors (its methodology subsequently became the reference for the WFP's distributions of food kits). This strategic choice was nevertheless harshly criticized internally because certain aspects of operations were not judged to be sufficiently in keeping with humanitarian standards, notably in terms of targeting, taking needs into account systematically in all sectors, and monitoring and accountability. Indeed, there does not appear to have been any written record or clear vision, particularly regarding the reasons why certain communes were targeted. The targeting was not only based on the seriousness of the humanitarian situation in the different communes, but also on the knowledge and connections of the staff on the ground, two necessary factors for the implementation of a community- and partner-based approach. In addition, the setting up of beneficiary targeting committees in the selected communes was recognized as a way of helping to take protection needs and gender characteristics into account. However, the reporting that was carried out did not show whether or not the community targeting was rigorously based on pre-established vulnerability criteria. This tension around targeting in relation to localisation is not just a detail and was often mentioned as a source of discord between international and national organisations. As a general rule, local actors tend to favour broad targeting, which some see as a way of spreading the assistance too thinly (more beneficiaries - communes/families/individuals - but less assistance per beneficiary). However, this allows a certain form of social cohesion to be maintained within and between communities and secure access to the most vulnerable and isolated populations (distribution trucks are able to get through more easily if they also provide assistance to the communes they cross). Finally, the approach adopted by this international NGO, which involved the massive mobilization of staff in charge of development programmes for the emergency response, considerably affected and slowed down these development programmes.

In the second case, the international NGO worked for the Ministry of Public Health and Population (MSPP) and provided the latter with support in delivering basic services. It chose not to develop its own specific operations, but rather to adapt its different ongoing development programmes and support the MSPP. One of the tensions that the NGO wanted to avoid between its emergency operational method and its long-term intervention logic concerned free healthcare. Emergency and vital healthcare needs were relatively limited after hurricane Matthew. This is relevant because when the public health system is fee-paying, as is the case in Haiti, free but provisional assistance from humanitarian organisations often has negative effects on the national or local system in place.

The NGO adapted its approach by conducting operations over a broader area, adjusting its operational method due to the constraints caused by the crisis, revising its priorities and implementing new activities with additional funds from the donor. This approach was possible because of the quality of the partnership between the international NGO and the donor, in addition to the latter's flexibility and reactivity. As an example, when the NGO became aware of communication problems between the national and departmental public health institutions. It therefore began to copy and transfer documents between these institutions until logistical conditions and means of communication were re-established.

However, this strategic decision to adapt its development programmes rather than launch new humanitarian projects was not unanimously supported, notably within the NGO in question. Indeed, it is the result of a difficult choice between the humanitarian imperative of providing assistance to populations in need and the imperative of achieving coherence with the intervention logic of the NGO's development programmes.

## Lesson learning - the missing link in the localisation process

Whether it concerns innovative approaches like those mentioned above, or more generally the successes and difficulties encountered by the different organisations during this response, lesson learning and experience sharing very often seem to have been overlooked. However, certain interesting and promising initiatives deserve to be analysed in depth.

Indeed, we often forget that this response is characterized by the spontaneous mobilization of Haitian organisations [15], particularly civil society organisations, who have played a fundamental role. Though there was national solidarity, with considerable aid from the capital, it was particularly local organisations in the most badly affected regions who brought the most added value. These organisations are very reactive and often had access to the population before international organisations arrived and when the latter were momentarily prevented due to security concerns or constraints. Civil society organisations based in large towns like Jérémie and les Cailles provided precious assistance, and community-based organisations in the isolated rural zones of the "pays du dehors" [16] organized the assistance locally and went looking for aid in urban centres for their communities.

The private sector also contributed significantly to this response. For example, the supermarkets in Port-au-Prince rapidly took action on a large scale by supplying basic goods to the population in the south. Aid organisations (including at least one international NGO) collaborated with the supermarkets and distributed the goods which were not always adapted to the means of transport (dairy products), did not take environmental impact into account (distribution of small plastic bottles of water) or were not in keeping with food aid quality standards (quantity and nutrient intake per individual). Though certain of these difficulties were understood and corrected by the companies during the response, there was no real assessment of this type of collaboration which ended as quickly as it had started when the distributions came to an end. As there was no obligation in terms of budgetary follow-up for these activities, which did not use funds from international donors, there is little in the way of a written record of this collaboration. In addition, with the high turnover of the international NGO in question, institutional memory is in the process of being lost and soon it will be necessary to start all over again if another crisis takes place.

Very little was recorded about these local initiatives, and the way local, national and international solidarity mechanisms came together and supported each other. This lack of lesson learning appears to have been due to: 1) the lack of organisation and knowledge management capacity of certain local organisations, 2) the lack of time and availability of the different aid organisations for an exercise of this kind, and also 3) the reticence of organisations to discuss the difficulties encountered or the less conventional approaches implemented, including internally, when these had sparked debate. In addition to this is the difficulty of evaluating the real impact of certain isolated but more ambitious operational methods in terms of localisation, and thus the difficulty of promoting them for future responses. For example, certain sporadic (but often old) partnerships between international and Haitian organisations contributed to reinforcing the capacity of local organisations and led to a "locally led" response *by and for* the population. There were very few cash transfer programmes implemented via local informal micro-credit structures like the "caisses populaires" and "tontines". And yet, this approach is considered by certain organisations to be a major opportunity which makes it possible to provide vulnerable people with assistance while at the same time supporting local solidarity mechanisms through these community-based social safety nets. Consequently, this approach helps to build community resilience.

---

## Conclusion

There is general consensus among the organisations involved in the response to Matthew that localisation is a catalyst for resilience, for a number of reasons. There is almost unanimous agreement that localisation is a way of increasing crisis preparedness in as much as it contributes to building the preparedness and response capacity of Haitian organisations who are, and will continue to be, the first to take action in the event of a hurricane. The view that localisation favours recovery is relatively widespread. However, it raises questions about the operational and strategic changes that localisation implies and what is "understood by" and what is "expected from" localisation in the different phases of a response.

The objective of a positive long-term impact is widely shared among aid organisations, but a variety of approaches are adopted depending on the organization. It therefore highlights the issue of linking humanitarian and development action, and also the potential influence that the localisation process can have on this link. The innovative approaches put in place by different

international organisations show a genuine desire to establish greater coherence between humanitarian and development action and to work differently with local organisations. Beyond the limits and risks of these different approaches, the lack of knowledge management during this response is a major drawback for the localisation of future responses and the reinforcement of local resilience.

As Haiti was partially spared by the 2017 hurricane season (the damage done by Irma and Maria was marginal), let us hope that the respite between now and the next hurricane season will provide an opportunity for a collective effort in terms of knowledge management and experience sharing by the different stakeholders involved in the response to Matthew. Resilience and localisation are long-term processes and need to be implemented before, during and also after and between crises.

**Nawal Karroum**, *Researcher, Groupe URD*

[1] The DPC answers to the Ministry of the Interior and therefore does not have any authority over the representatives of other ministries.

[2] Andrea Binder, François Grünewald, *IASC cluster approach evaluation, 2nd phase, country study Haiti*, GPPI - Groupe URD, avril 2010.

[3] Capacity reinforcement here refers to the reinforcement of competencies (training), resources (human and financial) and operational means.

[4] UNDP, the EU, the World Bank and certain bilateral donors and NGOs.

[5] François Grünewald, Ed Schenkenberg, *Real-time evaluation of the response to Hurricane Matthew in Haiti*, Groupe URD – HERE Geneva, January 2017.

[6] In the Sud department, as the DPC's emergency operations centre's offices were not accessible for several weeks following the hurricane, they were moved to the MINUSTHA's offices.

[7] Communal emergency operations centres (COUC) are committees of varying levels of formality made up of volunteers and led by the mayor. Their capacities vary a great deal from one commune to another, particularly as the municipal elections took place a few months before the passage of hurricane Matthew. Though some newly elected mayors had already been voluntary members of the civil protection force beforehand, other mayors had never had any training or had never spoken with the COUC members, and some did not even know what their role and responsibilities were in the event of a disaster.

[8] "Communes" and "sections communales" only have search and rescue equipment (rope, boots, waterproofs, etc.) stored in containers. In many communes, these stocks had not been renewed in June 2017.

[9] When the field visit and discussions that are the basis of this article took place.

[10] See : [https://docs.unocha.org/sites/dms/Documents/Flash\\_Appeal\\_HTI\\_v3\\_LR.pdf](https://docs.unocha.org/sites/dms/Documents/Flash_Appeal_HTI_v3_LR.pdf)

[11] A total of 119 850 000 USD for a period of 3 months.

[12] These figures, from June 2017, covered a period up till the end of April 2017. In October 2017, 20.3% of the Humanitarian Response Plan's 291 500 000 USD had been funded.

[13] Though recovery often has a more direct impact on the community, this does not exclude individualised operations. For example, recovery in the shelter sector often consists of financial aid or supplying sheet metal and reconstruction materials per household (whereas the emergency relief phase consisted of tarpaulin distributions).

[14] See : <https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/UNDP-HT-PrevCri-EvaluationBesoinPostCatastropheCycloneMathieu-PDNA-31012017-SM.pdf>

[15] JP Jérôme, E Sartorius, J Flécher, JD Sénat, *La réponse haïtienne à l'ouragan Matthew, une aide vitale sous-estimée*, Le Nouvelliste, April 2017.

[16] This expression refers to isolated rural parts of Haiti that are neglected by the Republic of Port-au-Prince where most international organisations are based.

