Rhetoric vs reality: the challenges of delivering on World Humanitarian Summit localisation commitments

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One of the biggest themes emerging at the World Humanitarian Summit (WHS) concerned the localisation of aid. The most significant concrete outcome of the WHS was the Grand Bargain. It includes a pledge to provide more support and funding tools for local and national responders, including through a target of at least 25 per cent of humanitarian funding to local and national responders as directly as possible.

Another key WHS outcome was the Charter for Change (C4C), which makes 8 commitments to ensure best practice in partnership with local NGOs.

Donors and INGOs are finding that some of the commitments we signed up to in the Grand Bargain and C4C are easier said than done, and that it will take time to turn HQ policy commitments into consistent country practice. Some of the challenges include the following.

Investing in partner capacity

C4C commits us to increase support for partner capacity strengthening. But some INGOs, including Christian Aid, struggle to find the funds to do this. Most of our funds come from institutional donors who earmark funding to specific projects which do not include longer-term partner institutional strengthening. Christian Aid used to support a lot of interesting work via DFID’s PPA and DEPP funds, but the PPA has been abolished and the DEPP’s future is uncertain. We need to persuade donors to fund the organisational support and capacity strengthening that is required.

Are local NGOs reliable partners in conflict settings?

One of the main arguments deployed by critics of the localisation agenda is that national and local partners are a good option in natural disasters, but difficult to work with in conflicts, because they find it hard to meet the humanitarian principles of impartiality, independence and neutrality. Since 80% of humanitarian finance goes to conflicts, this argument risks marginalising national actors in terms of financial share. InChristian Aid’s view, this argument unfairly generalises. It overstates the performance of international agencies who also struggle with humanitarian principles in complex conflicts. It is easy to selectively identify examples that support one view or the other. We should be wary of generalising and situations should be considered on a case by case basis.

Do donors practice what they preach?

Whilst at HQ level, donors emphasise the Grand Bargain localisation commitments, our country teams find that some donor representatives at country level are not yet as committed to localisation as their HQ counterparts. Christian Aid country teams have submitted proposals to major donors in some countries who have rejected the proposals on the grounds that they are not enthusiastic about local partners, and prefer direct implementation. This leads some Christian Aid country teams to move away from Christian Aid’s partner-based implementation model and experiment with direct Christian Aid implementation, because they find that there is more funding available for that.
Financial challenges

INGOs currently face challenging financial circumstances. DFID’s closure of the PPA scheme was a significant blow to the overall incomes of many NGOs. This leads to tension between our humanitarian teams who advocate that we should give NNGOs a fair share of the overhead costs donors allow on projects, to comply with C4C principles, vs. finance staff who feel the organisation needs to retain such costs in these difficult times.

Decentralisation

Christian Aid is rightly moving toward a decentralised vision, where country teams have greater autonomy, because Nigerian staff in Nigeria understand Nigeria better than Londoners and are better placed to determine what works there. This means that whilst Christian Aid’s leadership in London believes in C4C, it is hard to guarantee that all CA country offices will energetically adhere to all 8 commitments.

25% as directly as possible

Whilst the 25% Grand Bargain commitment was a headline WHS achievement, donors and the UN are not going to deliver on 25% in the way that our national partners hope. There is ambiguity over the meaning of ‘as directly as possible’. Southern NGOs feel that only money passing directly from a donor to them or coming directly from a pooled fund should count. But donors interpret ‘as directly as possible’ as meaning up to one intermediary, because it is challenging for donors to fund national and local partners directly and be confident about fiduciary requirements. UN agencies are determined that 25% should include in-kind contributions, such as food, as this makes it easier for them to reach the target, but such an approach goes against the principle that we should maximise the agency of local partners, rather than treat them as sub-contractors.

Do local branches of international NGO confederations count as national actors?

National and local actors feel strongly that national branches of INGOs should not count as local actors. However, there is strong lobbying from some INGOs that since their national branch in say Kenya is staffed by Kenyan staff and governed by a Kenyan board with a long-standing presence in Kenya, it deserves to be thought of as Kenyan. The way the Grand Bargain is interpreting this leaves some unfortunate ambiguity. There is no doubt that national branches of INGOs have great staff doing a great job in many contexts. But with their link to international resourcing, they are not starved of funding by the current system in the way non-affiliated local organisations are. To include them in the 25% defeats the object of the Grand Bargain to strengthen resources to those parts of the system that cannot access them. The visionaries who created the Grand Bargain surely intended that it deliver genuine change in the humanitarian system, not just a reinforcement of the status quo.