

HPG literature review

Interrogating the evidence base on humanitarian localisation

A literature study

Executive summary

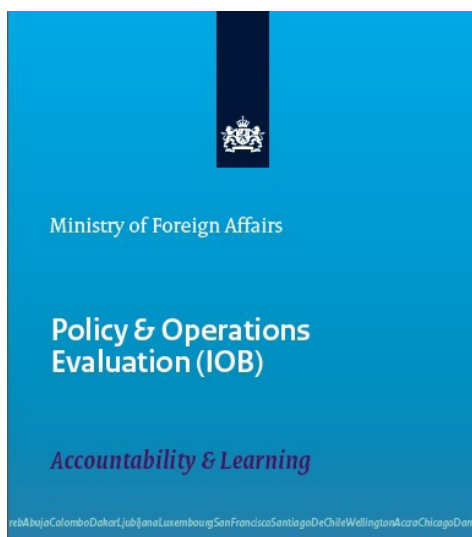
Veronique Barbelet, Gemma Davies, Josie Flint and Eleanor Davey

June 2021



HUMANITARIAN
ADVISORY GROUP





Readers are encouraged to reproduce material for their own publications, as long as they are not being sold commercially. ODI requests due acknowledgement and a copy of the publication. For online use, we ask readers to link to the original resource on the ODI website. The views presented in this paper are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily represent the views of ODI or our partners.

This work is licensed under CC BY-NC-ND 4.0.

How to cite: Barbelet, V., Davies, G., Flint, J. and Davey, E. (2021) *Interrogating the evidence base on humanitarian localisation: a literature study. Executive summary*. HPG literature review. London: ODI (<https://odi.org/en/publications/interrogating-the-evidence-base-on-humanitarian-localisation-a-literature-study>).

This PDF has been prepared in accordance with good practice on accessibility.

Acknowledgements

The research team would like to thank Johanneke de Hoogh and Charlotte van Eijk from the Policy and Operations Evaluation Department (IOB) of the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs for their support and great collaboration on this report. The research team would also like to thank the reference group for their feedback on the report. A special thank you to Saeed Ullah Khan from GLOW Consultants for his constructive and useful comments on the report. The research team was also thankful for the support of Sarah Phillips (ODI's Journals Coordinator) for her help chasing journal articles. Colleagues Kate Sutton (Humanitarian Advisory Group (HAG)) and Sorcha O'Callaghan (Humanitarian Policy Group (HPG)) provided invaluable support in finalising this report. The study could not have been completed without support from the fantastic team at HPG and HAG, including Laura Mertsching (Programme Manager), Marta Lopes (Programme Manager), Kelly Nichols (Operation and Administration Facilitator at HAG), Katie Forsythe (Editor) and Hannah Bass (Publications).

This study was commissioned and funded by the Policy and Operations Evaluation Department (IOB) of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Netherlands. The views expressed in this report are those of the authors and are not necessarily shared by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Netherlands, or the reviewers.

About the authors

Veronique Barbelet is Senior Research Fellow at HPG.

Gemma Davies is Senior Research Fellow at HPG.

Josie Flint is Executive at HAG.

Eleanor Davey is Editor at HAG.

Executive summary

Introduction

Understanding the impact of ‘localisation’ on strengthening effective and efficient responses to humanitarian crises continues to be a key policy and practice concern for donors and the broader sector. The 2016 World Humanitarian Summit (WHS) catalysed a range of commitments to strengthen local humanitarian action, most notably those made via the Grand Bargain. Criticisms of a ‘broken’ humanitarian system dominated by international actors led to commitments intended to bring transformational change. These included promises to address inequalities in the system, such as the inequitable recognition given to local actors despite their frontline role in humanitarian responses.

This report presents the findings of a review of the localisation literature commissioned by the evaluation department of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Netherlands. It responds to the question: ‘what added value does localisation bring in the pursuit of Dutch policy objectives and what are effective ways for the Netherlands as a donor and diplomatic actor to promote localisation?’ As such, the literature review required a focus on the more technical assessment of the impact of localisation, while at the same time providing a critical assessment of this focus. The drive towards more locally led responses has become known as ‘localisation’, a term which has been criticised and rejected by many. By necessity this report uses the language of ‘localisation’ as shorthand, while recognising that this terminology is problematic and can have negative consequences (see Chapter 3).

What does the literature tell us?

Continued power imbalances in driving change

The WHS stressed that **persistent and unjust power distribution keeps communities and organisations most affected by crises furthest from decision-making on how to respond**. A significant section of the literature views localisation as a way to rethink the humanitarian sector from the bottom up, highlighting the importance of greater leadership and delivery by local and national actors.

However, **analysis of discourses and practices of localisation highlights perverse incentives and adverse impacts** (see Chapters 3 and 6), reflecting concerns about motivations in furthering the localisation agenda, critiques of colonial inheritances and ongoing inequalities within the humanitarian system. There is concern that the **construction of the localisation discourse continues to place international actors at the centre**; that localisation debates continue to be driven by international actors; and that little attention has been given to the role of local actors in transforming norms and practices. It is also perceived as being used by some to avoid difficult conversations about power and discrimination. As such, the **prevailing discourse on localisation is perceived as counterproductive to meaningful change**.

Lack of evidence of effect of localisation on impact and quality

There are **assumptions that localisation will improve the quality and impact of humanitarian responses**; however, very little generalisable evidence has tested these assumptions (see Chapter 4). Success towards localisation as set out in the Grand Bargain has focused on tracking progress on commitments to support the act of localising humanitarian responses rather than the benefits of localised responses for people in crisis.

The literature has lacked focus on assessing the impact of localisation in terms of the quality, efficiency and effectiveness of humanitarian responses and outcomes for people in crises.

Additionally, there is no evidence that a comprehensive value for money analysis related to localisation has been carried out. The perceptions of affected populations on the different roles of international and local actors in delivering appropriate humanitarian assistance have not been adequately assessed. There is an **opportunity to strengthen accountability to people affected by crisis through localisation**, rather than treating the two issues as separate requirements of the humanitarian system. Although it has not been comprehensively or consistently documented, there continues to be anecdotal evidence and strong opinions that localisation can deliver increased impact in a number of areas, which provides a strong basis for further exploration or validation.

Drivers of localisation

Motivations for more localised responses tend to be linked to what are perceived as the **possible benefits of localisation for improving the quality of humanitarian responses** (see Chapter 5). The literature particularly highlights resilience, sustainability and links with development; timeliness and improved accountability to affected people; and lower costs and higher cost effectiveness. However, there is only limited evidence that Grand Bargain commitments on localisation drive change at the country level. Ultimately, practice has not significantly shifted to see more power and resources going to local actors.

The desire to **increase the reach of humanitarian responses and ensure access** has also contributed greatly to driving localisation forward. Where international actors are unable to access populations and vice versa, local actors are emphasised as a means to increase coverage and reach. While this has been noted in conflict settings, with resulting concerns about transferring security risks to local actors, as well as concerns of the risks posed by working with local actors, the debate on access has been reignited by Covid-19 as the global pandemic has reduced international actors' access, presence and proximity to those in need of assistance. Some argue that the pandemic has the potential to accelerate localisation in the humanitarian sector.

Leadership also plays a vital role. Leadership by national governments of crisis-affected countries is also seen as a driver for localisation, with some recently imposing it in disaster response. Where this has not yet happened, the literature points to the need for leadership on localisation from international actors. Donor leadership is also argued to be a critical factor to drive localisation forward.

Obstacles based on perception

The **evidence on obstacles to localisation is predominantly perception-based** but has created a strong consensus in the literature (see Chapter 6). While this does not prevent localisation efforts, it affects the terms on which those efforts take place. Issues discussed include perceptions of and attitudes to the fiduciary, legal, reputational and security risks posed by working with local actors; perceptions of capacity and capacity strengthening; and the perceived ability of local actors to uphold humanitarian principles. Such perceptions shape and interact with issues including the lack of trust between international and local actors; the nature of partnerships; the quality and quantity of funding; internationals' self-preservation; and, fundamentally, power dynamics between different actors.

Issues of **risk and risk management** are among those that remain predominantly perception- and attitude-based, with uncertainty as to the likelihood these risks could differentially play out. The literature shows that assumptions about risk and localisation are not grounded in empirical evidence and that reorienting towards a risk-sharing model, including agreeing acceptable levels of residual risk, has benefits. Where risks are identified, there is little evidence to suggest that donors and international intermediaries have been willing to support effective mitigation measures, such as funding overhead costs (including for security management, financial management systems and human resources) to meet the risk threshold of donors.

In turn, perceptions of and approaches to risk management impact **partnership models**. The literature predominantly focuses on the risks to international actors when partnering with local actors, rather than vice versa, raising issues of power imbalances. Similarly, **capacity-strengthening approaches** further entrench such power dynamics: despite moves towards more sustained and participatory approaches, capacity-strengthening requirements are still largely identified by international organisations and predominantly focus on local actors' organisational capacity and their capacity to fulfil donor requirements.

These obstacles are repeatedly evidenced through systematic documentation of the attitudes of international actors towards local actors and their capacity, as well as local actors' frustration with how slow progress has been. Attitudes of international actors and their perceptions of obstacles create a clear, evidence-based picture to understand why **change is not happening on a wider scale**. The lack of more systematic evidence on the added value of local humanitarian action, local leadership and complementarity – that is, the lack of evidence on the impact on quality of humanitarian response, as highlighted above – has also undermined advocacy efforts and evidence-based policy change. Placing the burden of evidence on local actors – rather than international actors – to prove they are better placed to respond to crisis has hindered investment in localisation and momentum for change, providing another example of how self-preservation and power dynamics are deeply entrenched in the humanitarian system. Evidence on the performance of local actors almost solely focuses on financial compliance and risk management as opposed to impact. Finally, evidence-based policy change has been criticised as a technocratic approach to localisation, which many see as a normative, ethical and political imperative.

Priority strategic recommendations for donors

The literature consistently reminds donors of their critical role in creating effective policies and incentives to support localisation. However, it also points to the fundamental lack of clear strategic and policy direction from most donors on localisation. Additionally, existing recommendations to donors and other actors are based on emerging good practice and evidence that have yet to be implemented widely or systematically.

The priority strategic recommendations below are based on the findings of this literature review as well as existing recommendations in the localisation literature, framed within the realm of what is possible within the current system and the constraints faced by donors. However, proponents of localisation are demanding a more revolutionary change in the role of people affected by crises, not only as receivers of aid but as aid actors finding local solutions for local crises. To truly realise the calls for more local humanitarian action and leadership, a system-wide shift is required. This starts with local crisis response systems, local capacities and expertise, local leadership and solutions, and looks to regional and international actors to complement and support local aid through partnerships, funding and capacity strengthening as needed and outlined by local actors. However, there is very little generalisable and empirical evidence of how to shift the system towards a bottom-up local aid model, which requires strong political will across donors and humanitarian actors. **Chapter 7 of the report further elaborates on these recommendations, including approaches to operationalise them.**

Strategic recommendation 1: Work collectively with other donors – for instance through the Good Humanitarian Donorship Group, or the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) – to develop a common vision. Test different collective approaches to incentivise partners, particularly United Nations (UN) agencies, to change their practice.

The evidence shows there are limited strategic approaches to conceiving of and implementing ways to strengthen localisation in donor policy and practice.

This recommendation can be achieved by (see detail in Section 7.1):

- donors working collaboratively to develop strategic approaches; individual donors ensuring these strategies are incorporated across portfolios;
- creating incentives through rewarding intermediaries for their partnership practices, for cascading quality funding to local actors, for risk sharing and investing in bottom up and coordinated capacity-strengthening;
- donors using their collective diplomatic powers to influence UN agencies and other international actors including through requesting more transparency and through monitoring and evaluation of funding and partnership practices;
- ensuring requirements in grant agreements will improve partnership terms from the perspectives of local actors;
- supporting national localisation strategies.

Strategic recommendation 2: Develop a risk-sharing agenda and harmonise due diligence, compliance and audit requirements across donors.

The evidence shows that the range of assumptions about risk and localisation do not have grounding in empirical evidence, and that reorienting long-standing approaches to risk towards a risk-sharing model shows positive benefits. This requires consensus on the interpretation of zero tolerance and residual risk when considering risk sharing, with agreement on what is an acceptable level of residual risk.

This recommendation can be achieved by (see detail in Section 7.2):

- engaging in an honest dialogue at senior political levels on zero tolerance to risk and acceptable levels of residual risk;
- developing a joint risk agenda across donors, harmonising due diligence and reporting requirements;
- ensuring risk analysis and risk management are carried out jointly with local partners;
- explicitly linking approaches to risk sharing with quality funding, including through the provision of adequate funding for overhead costs and ensuring intermediaries pass on funding for overheads.

Strategic recommendation 3: Support and invest in the development of equitable, ethical and quality partnerships between international and local actors based on the principle of complementarity.

The evidence shows that multiple initiatives and efforts have shown the benefits of investing in longer-term, equitable partnerships that support the needs and priorities of local actors. The role of intermediaries is important in supporting this shift and evidence shows that international actors need to be incentivised and made accountable to change their partnership practices.

This recommendation can be achieved by (see detail in Section 7.3):

- monitoring, evaluating and incentivising intermediary actors based on the quality of their partnerships with local actors;
- engaging UN agencies and large international non-governmental organisations (INGOs) in dialogue and more effective accountability on their partnership practices;
- supporting processes for national and local actors to report directly to donors on partnership quality and using this feedback to inform funding decisions.

Strategic recommendation 4: Increase the quality and quantity of funding going to local actors, including through pooled funds.

The evidence shows that multiple initiatives have demonstrated the benefits of increasing quality funding to local actors, although funding to local actors has increased unequally in the system. The use of country-based pooled funds (CBPFs) seems to have addressed the desire of local actors to receive funding as directly as possible while managing the risk appetite of donors. Funding from donors continues to flow mainly through international intermediaries, which calls for a focus on the quality

of partnership practices by these intermediaries. There remains a critical gap in terms of the quality, amount and duration of funding local actors can access as well as transparency on how funding flows down to local actors.

This recommendation can be achieved by (see detail Section 7.4):

- ensuring long-term funding covers core costs to local actors as a mandatory requirement and linking funding with commitments to risk sharing;
- using diplomatic influencing to achieve greater transparency on funding flows;
- monitoring, evaluating and incentivising intermediary actors based on the quality of partnerships;
- increasing funding to pooled fund mechanisms, particularly those that focus on support to national and local actors, and non-UN pooled funds led and/or governed by local actors;
- exploring blended humanitarian–development funds.

Strategic recommendation 5: Invest in coordinated and bottom-up capacity-sharing and capacity-strengthening efforts based on the principle of complementarity.

The evidence shows that long-term capacity-strengthening efforts have been a key area of focus over the last five years and these initiatives have shown a range of significant benefits in practice for supporting locally led response. Yet, these efforts remain unidirectional, ad hoc, uncoordinated, lacking the right investment, and often use ineffective approaches to capacity strengthening.

This recommendation can be achieved by:

- making resourced capacity sharing an objective of all partnerships supported by a budget line for capacity sharing; and monitoring progress;
- requiring partners to coordinate capacity sharing through, for instance, coordination systems and working with other international actors partnering with the same local actors;
- articulating a donor approach for systematic investment in capacity sharing, including through disaster preparedness and resilience funding.

In addition to the priority recommendations, the study highlights two actions to help improve understandings of localisation outcomes and opportunities:

Action 1: Link localisation with the humanitarian–development–peace nexus: Ministries such as the Netherlands Ministry of Foreign Affairs should adopt a comprehensive strategy across its humanitarian, peace and development donor portfolio to support local civil society’s role in local humanitarian action and leadership in crisis response, including through strengthening blending of humanitarian and development financing.

Action 2: Build evidence, evaluate impact and reshape the research agenda on localisation: Donors and others with capacity to commission or produce research should invest in ways of

10 HPG literature review

measuring the impact of localisation on the quality of humanitarian responses and outcomes for people in crises. They should also invest in approaches to understand the perspectives of crisis-affected people on the relative advantages of the status quo and more locally led aid models.



The Humanitarian Policy Group (HPG) is one of the world's leading teams of independent researchers and communications professionals working on humanitarian issues. It is dedicated to improving humanitarian policy and practice through a combination of high-quality analysis, dialogue and debate.

Humanitarian Policy Group

ODI
203 Blackfriars Road
London SE1 8NJ
United Kingdom

Tel: +44 (0) 20 7922 0300
Fax: +44 (0) 20 7922 0399
Email: hpgadmin@odi.org
Website: odi.org/hpg
