INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted the ability of local actors, in all their diversity, to mobilise and take action. This subsequently has raised questions about the posture and operational methods of conventional humanitarian actors, whether donors, multilateral agencies or international NGOs.

As such, the limits of the dominant model of partnerships in the humanitarian sector have become apparent, both in terms of fairness and in terms of the sustainability of their results. It is a model whereby international actors design and steer projects, while local actors are often simply service providers (or sub-contractors). And yet, today, local actors bear a substantial proportion of operational risks, whether related to security, health or finances.

This study reviews the most inspiring ideas and practices related to aid localisation. Rather than focusing on the usual distinctions between local, national and international actors, it highlights the potential that they have in working together to overcome the large-scale and systemic crises of the future.
LOCAL AND CONVENTIONAL AID ACTORS: TAKING INSPIRATION FROM NEW WAYS OF WORKING TOGETHER

It was in the development sector that the role and importance of local actors first came to the fore. Given Groupe URD’s positioning at the crossroads between humanitarian and development aid, we have always promoted partnerships as a guiding principle and operational attitude, and we have always encouraged aid professionals to ‘give priority to local actors’. Within the humanitarian sector, a consensus on the objective of localisation emerged at the World Humanitarian Summit in Istanbul (23-24 May, 2016) embodied in workstream 2 of the Grand Bargain. Since then, the commitments that were made have not been put into practice. In terms of funding and inclusion in decision-making and coordination mechanisms, the objectives that were established are far from having been achieved. There have nevertheless been some positive trends in terms of funding, or at least visibility, since the beginning the COVID-19 pandemic.

The debates that led to the Grand Bargain have often been summarised as “more support and funding for local and national operators” or the need for humanitarian action that is “as local as possible and as international as necessary”. But many questions remain about the respective roles of international, national and local actors, and particularly about issues of power. The current Grand Bargain 2.0 process is focusing on two main priorities: quality funding and a more central role for local actors and affected communities.

Nevertheless, the term ‘localisation’ itself remains problematic as it is centred on the international humanitarian system, which is mostly made up of actors from the global North, and is often based on the exclusion and subordination of local actors. ‘Localising’ implicitly implies bringing a system closer to a ‘local’ level that is initially or intrinsically distinct from it. But the role of local actors in the response to crises is not ‘new’, it is even perfectly natural: affected people have always reacted to crises, whether as independent members of the community, members of local authorities or private sector representatives. It is aid professionals who have been slow to realise this, perhaps because of a certain ‘institutional blindness’.

It is also important to point out the many different kinds of local or national actors who are involved in aid operations during a crisis. These include local charities, private companies, pressure groups and religious organisations. They also include local authorities and public services as well as spontaneous citizen-based movements. What is more, these actors interact and coordinate with each other outside the conventional humanitarian sphere and are part of a complex network of local actions, where power relations do exist, particularly between the local and national levels. It is therefore a ‘whole of society approach’, recognising the diversity of actors at all levels, that should be promoted in order to localise humanitarian aid.

Different actors have different interpretations of what it means to ‘localise’ the sector. These range from decentralisation, where funding and decision-making powers are transferred, to transformation, where the objective is to establish “stronger national response and decision-making capacities”. There are also differences in interpretation between the main organisations in the sector and the more radical views of organisations from the global South, who are often outside the formal aid system and grouped together in platforms or coalitions.

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In any case, in this rapidly evolving context, it seems clear today that:

- the international aid system is not meeting local actor’s demands and expectations;
- ‘classic humanitarianism’ needs to be rethought in light of the way crises and forms of solidarity are evolving;
- local capacities or actors can no longer be ignored and, what is more, they are a source of social innovation and inspiration for international aid.

A number of promising experiments are already being implemented to deal with the shortcomings of the current international aid system. This study highlights the possibility of fairer partnerships that are more respectful of local actors and which aim to give them more autonomy. In particular, it describes cascading accountability mechanisms, approaches that promote the local steering of responses and the difficulties involved in revising the role of intermediary for conventional or international actors. It also looks at a way of transforming the international system so that it is more inclusive, with a real shift in power and possibly the redefinition of international aid principles.

**Ideas for Discussion and Actions for the Future**

There are several priorities in terms of renewing the way aid actors collaborate, regardless of their ‘label:

1/ Rebuilding the international aid system by giving priority to the complementary aspects of different aid actors, whether local, national or international.

2/ Promoting and developing ‘fair’ partnerships between different aid actors who are at different levels in terms of operations, competencies and assets.

3/ Rethinking the role of the classic humanitarian worker and inventing that of the ‘aid worker of tomorrow’ by prioritising mutual support.

This will involve overseeing changes to the role played by international actors, from direct implementers to multifaceted or multifunctional intermediaries. Despite these changes, they will still have an essential role to play.

The assets that international actors bring include:

- direct funding to support local efforts (assistance, protection, rights and the environment, etc.);
- targeted, long-term support to reinforce local competencies, for example, in relation to protection or disaster risk management;
- access to certain decision-makers and the resources and international presence that make it possible to express concerns and defend people affected by crises (e.g. respect for IHL, protecting people in conflict situations or climate change risk mitigation);
- the ability to help establish connections between local actors and international networks in order to influence public policy more effectively, prevent crisis situations and protect populations.

The question of how to accompany the transformation of international organisations is increasingly important for decision makers and international donors.

4/ Promoting local actors by conducting stakeholder analyses, taking into account associations, local authorities, and community-based and citizen-based actors, and by adopting a geographical or territorial perspective

Over and above identifying needs, this implies focusing on all the actors involved in the response to systemic crises, understanding their functions, their roles and how they interact before deciding what kind of response to implement (assistance, support, protection or influence). Professional aid organisations will therefore need to improve their
understanding of spontaneous aid (also known as 'mutual' or 'informal' aid) and explore ways of supporting it. Regular humanitarians will need to continue innovating in order to coordinate with unorthodox actors and will need to learn to work with them. In the future, the goal will be to have a clearer understanding of the potential that exists regarding development and aid, and then to help to consolidate this, while gaining the greater legitimacy that local people bring. Or, in the words of Xavier Ricard-Lanata, "identifying mobilised actors who have values or objectives that coincide with ours (as western aid actors)".

5/ Promoting mutual and reciprocal learning
Faced with the possibility of global and systemic crises in the future, all actors involved in crisis management (both in the global North and South) have a lot to learn from each other in terms of resilience. Western societies, in particular, have much to learn from the global South about coping with chronic crisis situations. The goal should be to establish genuinely reciprocal aid relations, with each bringing something to the other.

Future prospects should also encourage crisis response actors to consider working with actors in other fields such as environmental preservation, the struggle against climate change, human rights, and social innovation. Joint advocacy, awareness-raising and social transformation activities could be organised.

6/ Considering whether the fundamental principles of aid and solidarity in crisis contexts could be adaptable
The debate is still open regarding whether it would be possible or useful to make aid and solidarity principles adaptable, depending on the type of crisis, and the specific characteristics of local contexts. Do any humanitarian principles or norms exist that are applicable to all aid actors, whether local or international? If not, how do we avoid the abuse and manipulation of aid? And how do we avoid doing harm to the affected population?

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5 From Xavier Ricard-Lanata’s talk at the Autumn School on Humanitarian Aid 2020. See his article « From aid to mutual aid – How development aid could change » in the Humanitarian Aid on the Move review, Groupe URD, March 2021.