Centering Local Leadership in Humanitarian Coordination
A Dialogue Between National Civil Society Networks & International Actors at
Humanitarian Networks and Partnerships Week (22nd April 2021)

While the slogan of localisation efforts has been: "*as local as possible, as international as necessary*", the reality often still feels like "*as international as possible, as local as necessary*"; including in the context of efforts on humanitarian coordination. On 22nd April 2021, Charter4Change and NEAR, with organizational support from CAFOD, hosted an event at Humanitarian Networks and Partnerships Weeks to facilitate a dialogue on this topic.[1] Panellists from national NGO and networks of NGOs were invited to share examples of both good practices and challenges in local leadership of crisis response coordination; including observations on how international actors and coordination structures engaged with these. International actors from UN agencies and donors were invited to share their reflections in response to this and to identify options for ways forward. The audience included 120 participants from all regions globally, including UN agencies, INGOs, donor governments, national NGOs and networks.

Based on consultation with the national NGO moderators and panellists in this event, the following recommendations emerged:

"The international humanitarian system has been founded on and models structures for coordination, which assume that there is a failed state in the country affected by crisis. But in fact, most countries no longer fit that category. Do not assume that we have no capacity and mobilise in that way. Recognise the capacities we have and ask yourselves how you can support those."
Puji Pujono, Indonesian Development and Humanitarian Alliance

1. International and national humanitarian coordination actors should assess how national and local actors interact with one another to optimise their efforts, and identify ways to engage with and support this, rather than expect local actors to submit and participate in processes framed by international actors.

2. Roll-out of the new IASC guidance on coordination and localisation should encourage clusters, both at global and country-level, to adopt a more systematic approach to promote national/local NGO leadership and/or co-leadership. Coordination agencies and individuals recruited into coordination roles should be required to demonstrate progress on this. As such, OCHA's annual coordination mapping exercise could provide analysis that reflects on progress in this both across global IASC coordination structures and on-the-ground cluster processes. This could provide the basis to identify priority gaps and potential ways forward to overcome bottlenecks, as well as to capture and disseminate good practices in implementation of the new guidance. UNHCR should adopt a similar process for its coordination efforts in forced displacement settings.

3. Coordination processes should address cross-cutting thematic issues of relevance to effective local leadership – including attention to inclusion of diverse national/local actors

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[1] National NGO and NGO Network Panelists:
- Puji Pujono, Indonesian Development and Humanitarian Alliance
- Gloria Soma, Titi Foundation, South Sudan
- Dr Aisha Thawab, Yemen Civil Society Organisations Union

International actors:
- Hilde Salvesen, Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs
- Stephen Williams, FCDO UK
- Philimon Majwa, UNICEF

(eg faith groups, women's groups, youth associations, disabled peoples organisations, LGBTQ networks, refugee-led organisations), and a partnership approach to risk management ('risk sharing').

4. Donors should support local leadership in coordination both through support to national/local actors on this, and through incentivising change amongst international humanitarian agencies. As donors in our panel did not share any current examples of this, there is clearly scope for dialogue and sharing of good practices; informed by feedback from national/local actors. Opportunities for follow-up include increased support to local/national NGO led, or co-led, funding platforms and consortia which foster local leadership of humanitarian coordination; integrated within wider capacity-strengthening efforts.

5. Document and scale-up good practices in area-based coordination, which can put communities and local actors at the heart of coordination mechanisms. Identify ways to link area-based coordination at local level up to national coordination processes.

> *"The humanitarian architecture is dominated by the UN and bigger INGOs. Most of the time, local NGO leadership is not given space in the name of 'lack of capacity' or 'language barrier' or 'lack of technical knowledge'. How do you think this architecture could be changed? Though many INGOs and UN agencies commit to change at global level, the reality is completely different at the country level."*
> Audience contribution to discussion

Good practices shared in the presentations focused on the power found by local and national NGOs by creating their own independent networks, to bring their issues in a single voice and not be dependent on international mechanisms which are not designed for them. It also focused on the needs to invest on leadership capacities in national or internationally led networks and clusters.

- In Indonesia, a network-of-networks has been established, which managed to raise a national - level platform and to invite government and international agencies to their coordination meetings, rather than participating in the processes established and led by international agencies.

- In South Sudan, after concerted lobbying by national NGOs supported by INGO allies, the Food Security and then the Nutrition Clusters opened up co-chairing roles for national NGOs, and also provided support to build their capacity to take on this role over time.

- In Yemen, when the Covid19 pandemic broke out, international organisations indicated that they were struggling to respond and did not have funding available to pass onto local actors. So local organisations created a union to be able to have their own space and coordinate themselves, comprised of over 10 national organisations, which received support from ICVA, Oxfam, and CARE.

Challenges highlighted in the presentations included:

- From experience in Indonesia, concerns were raised over how over emphasis on technicalities and risk -averse attitude drive international actors to engage only with local /national actors who overtly resemble 'humanitarian organisations' and already work with international agencies rather than local actors, for example , women's groups, youth associations, or other local actors who may not resemble them, but in fact, contributing to life-saving and protection efforts. Local organisations most rooted in local communities

often end up feeling disrespected or disregarded when dealing with and having to navigate foreign and unfamiliar international coordination processes.

- From South Sudan perspective, the marginalization of women-led and women's rights organisations was highlighted. Local women's groups are often invited to contribute to the needs assessment and talk in the launch events for HNOs and HRPs, but do not have a seat or a role through-out the prioritisation and decision-making process. Unless there are specific, dedicated steps to engage them, eg through dedicated seats in inter-agency coordination and decision-making processes, then their voices and expertise will not get heard. Examples were also shared from other contexts of how civil society organisations from marginalized sections of society often find dynamics of social exclusion replicated in processes of humanitarian coordination (exclusion by both national and international actors).

- From Yemen, an experience was shared which illustrated the lack of a genuine partnership approach between donors, coordination processes and local actors in terms of understanding the risks involved in delivering health services, and where costs should fall in case health facilities are damaged as a consequence of the conflict. This raised questions about how cross-cutting issues like a partnership and localization approach to risk management might be better factored into coordination structures and processes.

Perspectives from international actors:

- *"Ten years ago, donors used to say there is not enough organisations with capacity. Now there are too many of them, and we don't have enough staff to manage relationships with all of these. So we have to work through intermediaries. So we need to find ways to strengthen the quality of those intermediary organisations and funding mechanisms; building on steps taken by the CBPFs but also going beyond those other kinds of platforms and mechanisms that effectively foster local leadership. As a donor, we have started to address this; like through clarifying our expectations of INGOs that we fund on how they pass on overheads and tracking the level of funding to them. But we can and must do more."*

- *"I like the idea, as explored by the Indonesian civil society colleagues, of thinking about the Grand Bargain from an "upside down" perspective. If our starting point is not international institutions, but rather seeing how local networks and organisations mobilise during a crisis response, and supporting these. Our (donor) deparment has made important steps towards supporting localization; with strengthening national and local partners a priority in our humanitarian strategy. Investment in country-based pooled funds and setting out expectations of our international intermediary partner organisations are two entry-points for us, as we do not have the capacity to administer grants directly to local NGOs."*

- *"Practical examples I would like to share from UNICEF including the following: In South Sudan, we have worked with Save the Children to support 4 local NGOs to build capacity for leading coordination mechanisms. Both the child protection AOR within the Global Protection Cluster and Global Education Cluster have local NGOs included as part of the global strategic advisory group. We are now looking to replicate this at the global strategic advisory group level for the cluster globally."*