

Has the Grand Bargain made the humanitarian system better or worse? Responding to a Global Pandemic

With one year remaining to achieve the Grand Bargain commitments, NEAR is calling for a bold and inclusive transformative shift in the humanitarian system. Despite having been adopted four years ago, the Grand Bargain is just beginning to gain traction amongst implementers in the Global South. An extension and urgent acceleration of efforts is needed as we respond to the COVID-19 pandemic, so that local and national organisations who are closest to affected communities and who understand the nuanced and complex local dynamics are fully resourced to lead efforts. There is power of possibility in this moment – to reshape and reorder the status quo and create an enabling environment for an effective and efficient humanitarian aid system.

NEAR has been calling for an improved, equitable and more accessible humanitarian system since 2016. To bring the voices of local and national organisations from the Global South to the fore, NEAR conducted a survey inviting their perspectives on the implementation and impact of the Grand Bargain at the country level. The survey produced 93 responses with a wide geographic balance across Africa, Asia, Latin America/Caribbean, and the Middle East. Although the findings show that the Grand Bargain has somewhat improved collaboration, coordination and accountability, transformative change has yet to take place. Our Network has expressed that localisation is the area most important to them, however, progress on localisation is slow and uneven, with transition to real change on the ground still in its nascent stages. Eighty-three percent of respondents have not seen an increase in funding in the past year, which is contrary to what is stated amongst various financing reports. This pattern is also reflected in the COVID-19 Global Humanitarian Response Plan. Despite there being an increased reliance on local and national organisations due to closed borders, in May the level of funding to national and local NGOs stood at a mere 0.1 percent of total funding reported for the response to date.

Localisation is of course about more than funding, it is about recognising, respecting and strengthening the role and contribution of local and national NGOs in humanitarian action. NEAR is comprised of leaders with close ties to communities, having worked as implementers and also grant makers. However, these organisations continue to face barriers in engaging with the Grand Bargain and its signatories. Those who have participated in planning discussions at the national level question how meaningful they are. The frustration felt by local and national organisations speaks to the persisting barrier of unequal level of influence.

Inconsistent awareness of the Grand Bargain across countries and within communities prevents meaningful participation. Sixty-five percent of respondents to the survey are familiar with the Grand Bargain and its commitments, of those, a mere 50 percent use it as a tool to engage and implement. Sensitisation efforts have not gone far enough, therefore ownership remains at the top. Challenges also remain around transparency – 68 percent of respondents are not familiar with the International Aid Transparency Initiative (IATI) and its standard and 75 percent of respondents have never used the data reported into the IATI Standard. Furthermore, 45 percent of local and national organisations are not registered on the UN partner portal thereby restricting their access to partnership opportunities and UN tenders. An enabling environment must be created for organisations to engage in the Grand Bargain process. This includes more equitable and meaningful partnerships between local and national organisations and donors and partners and easier access to and transparency in engaging

with the Grand Bargain. Varying capacities amongst local and national organisations must be supported to allow for inclusive engagement.

There are embedded assumptions about how things are done in the humanitarian system, along with underlying structures which must be challenged. Now is time to name the possible. A rebalancing of the global humanitarian system requires the creation of an equitable ecosystem which shifts power, recognises complementarities and allows for more open and transparent communication. If local and national organisations are to be the drivers of humanitarian action, they must be brought in from the margins, and have real power so that they are an integral part of the system. As stated in the COVID-19 Global Humanitarian Response Plan (GHRP) putting local and national organisations at the heart of humanitarian operations ‘has the potential to provide the blueprint for humanitarian operations in the longer-term.’¹ Future iterations of the GHRP can be a catalyst for reform, presenting a timely moment to change how local and national organisations are resourced to act in the response, including by the urgent provision of priority and flexible funding, and as equal partners in response plans.

As we look forward to what comes after the Grand Bargain, there is one thing that cannot be negotiated and that is the position of local and national organisations in the Global South who must take the lead in setting and implementing the humanitarian agenda. If we are to respond to the current and future crises effectively, equitably and sustainably, we need to reset. By becoming more flexible and recognising interdependencies and solidarity in decision making, we can achieve the Grand Bargain commitments and create a humanitarian system that celebrates equality and an inclusive localisation agenda. We need to engage in a conversation around what happens next, things must change from the humanitarian structure itself, to its indicators and outputs, with representation of the Global South at the forefront.

¹[https://www.humanitarianresponse.info/sites/www.humanitarianresponse.info/files/documents/files/global_humanitarian_response_plan_covid-19 .pdf](https://www.humanitarianresponse.info/sites/www.humanitarianresponse.info/files/documents/files/global_humanitarian_response_plan_covid-19.pdf)