NEAR
Network for Empowered Aid Response

NEAR Localisation Policy

Delivering essential medical care to displaced Syrians **@HIHFAD**

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Background: why this policy note?

This policy note outlines NEAR's position on localisation. Localisation is a central issue for us as it is essential to our vision and our mission. We see localisation as a solution to the current challenges faced by the humanitarian system when responding to the needs of people affected by crises. In this policy note, we set out NEAR's definition of localisation and the change we believe is necessary to better meet the needs of people in crises.

NEAR stands for Network for Empowered Aid Response. We are a movement of local and national non-governmental organisations (NGOs) from the Global South rooted in our communities who share a common goal of a fair, equitable and dignified aid system. We aim to contribute to the movement of civil society actors and help civil society's aspirations. As a movement of Global South NGOs, we work to improve the daily lives of our communities through humanitarian response, peacebuilding and development. Our mission is to reinvent aid through innovative ideas, knowledge sharing, and influencing. We represent a subset of Global South NGOs and do not claim to speak on behalf of all Global South NGOs and actors or local communities.

Remarkable outreach to remote Colombian communities, accessible only by boat. **@SAHED Foundation**

NEAR's Vision

A world where local communities have the resource and agency to address the challenges that impact them.

This policy note has two purposes. First, it informs NEAR's collective work, providing a clear definition of localisation and a clear policy direction for NEAR's existing and future members on the change the network is advocating for. We also acknowledge that as a network of diverse members and partners, context-specific definitions of localisation are necessary and useful. Members will know best when to use this policy note and when to adapt it to their own contexts and realities.

Second, the policy note outlines the change NEAR believes is necessary to create an effective global system of solidarity and support rooted in local communities that is fair, equitable and dignified. At a time when many donors and organisations in the Global North are setting their own policies on localisation, we hope this policy note will act as a compass to drive change in the right direction.

How does NEAR define localisation?

NEAR defines localisation as a process of changing the way support and solidarity are activated, designed, funded and delivered. NEAR sees localisation as a solution to ensure local communities and the local response systems that support them have the resources and agency to address the challenges that impact them.

Locally driven coordination and response

The objective of localisation is to ensure aid is effective, sustainable and meets the needs of affected communities. For local response systems to be effective, communities must have the agency and resources they need to prevent, prepare for and respond to the challenges they face. Local and national actors whether NGOs, CSOs, national authorities or private sector actors are critical elements of local response systems. Localisation is about guaranteeing such local response systems are resilient, and ready to act to sustainably support communities in managing the challenges they face. These local response systems should then define, if, how and when the international response system can support a response to a crisis.

The ultimate objective of localisation is to make sure the needs of local communities are listened to and better served through more effective aid. Effective aid requires putting local communities and local and national actors at the centre of response leadership and decision making, therefore investing in and strengthening local coordination and response systems. Central to localisation is challenging power within the existing aid system and rebalancing the top-down aid system towards local systems of response that are locally driven and owned.

What is localisation?

NEAR defines **localisation** as a process of changing the way support to communities is designed, funded and delivered where local response systems have the agency and resources they require to support communities before, during and after crises. Localisation aims to make aid more effective, sustainable and more able to meet the needs of people affected by crises. Localisation is also a process of challenging power within the existing aid system with the objective of putting local response systems at the heart of supporting communities. Localisation is a solution to current sectoral challenges anchored in the belief that shifting power to local actors and rebalancing roles towards local systems of response will enable better support to communities.

Moving towards more effective response systems

We see localisation leading to more effective and efficient systems of support and solidarity. The debates on decolonising aid and the Covid-19 pandemic in the 2020s have exemplified the inequalities, contradictions and structural problems that have long characterised international humanitarian action and the aid system.

Localisation aims to redress these inequalities, contradictions and structural problems. It does so by ensuring that the most critical stakeholders, local communities and the local actors that serve them, are no longer excluded. Instead, they hold the resources, decision-making power and capacities required to respond to crises. As such, localisation contributes to wider calls for decolonising aid and anti-racism in the sector, while being a separate process of change focused on communities and rebalancing the role of local and national actors.

Through redressing such inequalities, contradictions and structural problems, localisation creates the enabling environment necessary to enable communities and local and national actors to fully fulfil their roles and responsibilities. Localisation can reinforce citizen action and the social contract between communities and NGOs. Ultimately localisation can also strengthen the social contract between citizens and responsible governments through sustaining stronger communities and NGOs better able to hold national governments – as

well as regional and international intergovernmental bodies - to account.

NEAR believes that stronger relationships between communities, NGOs and governments are critical at a time where the civil society space is shrinking.

"Localisation is Global South NGOs reclaiming the humanitarian and development space to ensure effective actions on the ground. Now is the time for LNNGOs to be at the forefront of changing the whole humanitarian and aid architecture."

Loreine Dela Cruz, *CDP, Philippines*

Communities must be at the core of response systems

Localisation is a necessary process of change in the face of rising needs for people in complex and protracted crisis situations. The aid system is no longer fit for purpose and fails to provide effective and sustainable responses that adequately tackle short-term needs and structural challenges at the root cause of crises. The aid system struggles to link up with longer-term, structural and chronic challenges of governance, economic development, climate change and social exclusion. Delivering better aid for communities ultimately calls for systems of response that are not solely humanitarian in nature but that consider the multiplicity of shocks and complex drivers of needs. The international system has struggled to resolve its own siloes across development, humanitarian and peace sectors. Local and national actors by their nature, cannot fall into such categories without losing their legitimacy and undermining their social contracts with the communities they work with. We believe localisation is also a solution to such siloes and will contribute to the triple nexus of humanitarian, peace and development challenges as well as climate change.

What are local and national civil society organisations?

Our interpretation of localisation is based on a distinct definition of **local and national civil society organisations.** NEAR defines these as organisations that are:

- Present in locations before, during and after a crisis
- Accountable to local laws
- Accountable to communities where they are based
- Led by local nationals and not internationally affiliated in terms of branding, governance, or financing (that results from that affiliation).

National NGOs operate in the country in which they are headquartered, working in multiple subnational regions, and not affiliated to an international NGO. This category can also include national faith-based organizations.

Local NGOs operate in a specific, geographically defined, subnational area of an aid recipient country, without affiliation to an international organisation.

Source: NEAR definition paper

Delivering timely and essential relief following earthquakes in Türkiye and Syria **@ELAF**

What is the role of international actors?

We believe that better responses to rising and increasingly complex needs, require harnessing and utilising under-used local knowledge and experience. We acknowledge that international actors, organisations and systems also hold a breath of knowledge and experience. This global knowledge and experience is best used when local and national actors are able to contextualise it. It is least useful and undermines delivering better for communities when it is imposed and does not consider contextual specificities.

Localisation does not mean international actors have no role to play in preventing, preparing for and responding to crises. Increasing needs and more complex crises require all actors to work better together. We believe that international actors have a role to play in supporting communities and local actors. However, this role should be framed within a spirit of trust, equity, solidarity and complementary – complementing and supporting communities and local actors in what they are already doing.

While welcoming international solidarity, NEAR is at the same time concerned by the instrumentalisation of localisation by some international actors. Some international actors use the term localisation to refer to the nationalisation of their country offices or the decentralisation of power from their headquarters to their country offices. In some circumstances, we believe such actions could undermine the objectives of localisation as well as negatively impact the agency of communities and the role of local and national actors.

Finally, NEAR recognises that the term localisation is controversial amongst Global South NGOs. The term localisation can be seen as one created by international actors to make sense of the demands of Global South NGOs to shift power in the system. For many Global South NGOs, localisation continues to put local and international actors in opposition in a way that is not helpful. We acknowledge that, while not ideal, the term localisation remains useful to refer to the process of change needed to deliver our vision.

The change we want to see: transformational, cultural and incremental change

NEAR recognises the investment the humanitarian system has made through the Grand Bargain and the IASC to reform the system. It acknowledges that many individuals and organisations have contributed to that change. However, progress towards localisation has been slow. Past and current efforts through the Grand Bargain and the IASC have contributed to some change but change that we believe does not go far enough. Change has also been inconsistently happening across regions and countries, too often staying at the policy and global level with little observable change locally in crises. As NEAR, we are unsatisfied with current efforts towards localisation and have concerns with the direction international actors are taking.

NEAR believes our vision requires a fundamental transformation of the ways in which current responses to crises are designed, funded and delivered. This transformation will take time and requires cultural change, incremental change as well as longer-term transformational change.

Syrian youth in action, spearheading post-earthquake clean-up efforts and paving the way for recovery.
@VIOLET

Transformational change

A new system of international solidarity should be designed based on the principle of complementarity and which works as called upon by local and national actors to fund, resource and complement what systems, structures and capacities already exist. Localisation requires a radical shift in the role of international actors and their systems. International solidarity must follow the principle of complementarity which requires international actors to work with and complement what systems, structures and capacities already exist.

As part of the new system of international solidarity, local, national and international resources should be invested in supporting, sustaining, strengthening and creating local and national response systems, local and

national coordination structures and modes of collaboration. These must be designed and led by communities, local and national actors, including local and national authorities who are ultimately responsible for providing the assistance and protection to their citizens.

To make these local response systems sustainable, we want to support solutions that increase domestic resource mobilisation and reduce the dependence on international funding. We believe we need to find innovative aid financing and provide new funding solutions that change who controls funding, who receives it and how it is used. We also believe that having greater South-South funding mechanisms will help change some of the existing power dynamics that exist around funding.

Finally, local response systems must be strengthened and sustained through enabling capacity to be shared and strengthened across local and national NGOs at national, regional and global levels. This calls for creating knowledge sharing systems that are based on locally grounded experiences and knowledge.

We recognise that the transformational change we want to see will take time. However, transformational change can start now. We believe that is it important to set a clear aspirational vision for how the aid system needs to change so the direction of travel for the cultural and incremental changes outlined below is clear.

We also believe that when it comes to transformational change, the change is not just about humanitarian, development or peace sectors but reimagining the current aid system entirely. We believe all actors in the Global North and in the Global South have responsibilities for making this transformational change happen. NEAR commits to work in partnership with others also contributing to that change.

Critical aid delivery in action: PACIDA staff distributing vital grain supplies to the elderly amidst Kenya's ongoing food crisis. **@PACIDA**

Cultural change

Cultural change is required to change attitudes and behaviours of actors and organisations working in the international humanitarian system as well local and national NGOs, local and national authorities, and regional organisations.

As NEAR, we call for these actors to make a cultural shift. This cultural shift must be based on the belief that people located where crises happen are best placed to lead and respond to these crises. National, regional and international solidarity when needed is only effective when it accepts, recognises and respects that leadership role.

A Somali woman beams, showcasing the work of Save Somali Women and Children's swift and secure cash transfer programming **@SSWC**

A cultural shift is not possible without international actors acknowledging the systematic exclusion of local communities and local actors from decision making roles. This exclusion creates ineffective aid response systems that are unsustainable and lack impact. International actors must acknowledge local and national actors as equal contributors in humanitarian action. International actors must also uphold the right of communities to fully participate in the decisions that impact their lives. International actors should consider and mitigate their role in sustaining inequalities in response systems and barriers to accessing funding. In that sense, international actors should accept the extent of their power and reflect on how they can use their power to enable more effective aid delivery through local systems of response and greater accountability to communities.

We call for international actors and national governments to support this cultural shift through clear policies, principles and strategies on localisation. These must clearly state their approach to localisation, their interpretation of

localisation and how they will contribute to better aid delivery systems driven by the needs and leadership of local communities and local actors. In doing so, donors must commit to holding to account organisations they fund and partners. They can use their power to ensure intermediaries are changing their role towards support, facilitation and complementarity with an emphasis on the quality of that change.

Without cultural change, incremental and transformational change will not lead to the vision NEAR has for the future of aid. This change can happen in the short term and only requires political leadership, the will of individuals and organisations to embark on a journey. This change must happen not only at global and headquarters level but importantly needs to be made by international actors deployed to countries to respond to crises.

Incremental change: steps towards transformational change

Incremental change refers to change that can happen within the current aid system and that requires tinkering with the way the humanitarian system works. These are critical steps towards transformational change. This change can happen in the short to medium term as they reflect commitments already made by the majority of donors, UN Agencies and international NGOs through the Grand Bargain. Importantly, we want to see this change happening at crisis response level and not only in global and headquarter policies. The incremental change NEAR is calling for is outlined in our Localisation Performance Measurement Framework. This change can be best advocated for by local and national NGOs in their own countries with the support of NEAR at the regional and global levels.

Funding. We call for improving the quantity and quality of funding for local and national NGOs. Without adequate funding, local and national NGOs are unable to fulfil their roles before, during and after crises. Accessing adequate quantity and quality of funding remains a significant challenge for local and national NGOs. This challenge stems from the often-held assumption that funding local actors means decreasing cost and effectiveness mean cost reduction. Humanitarian funding continues to be largely directed to international actors who too often do not extend the same quality of funding to local and national NGOs.

Local and national NGOs must be able to enjoy the same funding conditions included accessing multi-year flexible funding with an equal percentage for overhead costs. Donors and intermediaries acting as donors must seek strategic inputs from local and national NGOs when designing their funding strategies and plans to reflect their priorities. Donors and intermediaries must address their lack of capacity to engage and interact with local and national actors in their own languages as well as facilitate complex funding management processes to enable local and national actors to fully access funding opportunities. National and local pooled funds led by local and national actors should be supported. We acknowledge that progress has been made with regards to harmonizing reporting, but that systematic implementation is still an issue.

Funding key indicators

- 25% of funding is given as directly as possible to local and national actors.
- Local and national NGOs are provided with the same percentage overhead costs without additional reporting conditions.
- The Harmonised Reporting Template (8+3 template) is used by all donors and intermediaries.

Essential post-earthquake clearing **@VIOLET**

“If we can’t shift the power immediately, let’s start sharing it, then the shift will come.”

Hassan Jenedie, *Bousla Development and Innovation, Syria*

Coordination and complementarity. We call for greater leadership, presence and influence of local and national NGOs in humanitarian leadership and coordination mechanisms. In most large-scale humanitarian responses, humanitarian coordination is led by the Inter-Agency Standing Committee-led coordination system (IASC coordination system). This IASC coordination system is deployed in countries where large scale responses happen. The IASC coordination system hold a lot of power: they decide the strategic direction and priorities of the response; the strategic direction of each sector; the allocation of limited resources across sectors and across actors; advocacy agendas and strategies. The IASC coordination system is led globally and in country by international organisations and international actors, mostly United Nations offices and agencies (UN). In large scale refugee situations, the United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR) often leads the coordination system. As such there tends to be very little space for local and national CSO leadership as well as extensive barriers to their participation. Too often, the IASC coordination system exists in parallel to national and local coordination structures. Having parallel systems means limited local human and financial resources are spread thinly over multiple systems leading to an ineffective use of resources.

In the aftermath of the Syrian earthquake, the Takaful Al Sham team steps up, preparing hot meals for survivors and rescue workers. **@Takaful Al Sham**

We call for equitable leadership and participation in decision-making processes and in coordination systems for local and national NGOs including in Humanitarian Country Teams, Inter-Cluster Coordination Group, National and Sub-National Cluster leadership, national and global Strategic Advisory Groups and Global Clusters. International actors must enable local and national NGOs leadership through identifying and removing barriers to effective participation and accessing leadership positions. This may be for instance through using

inclusive language in place of jargon and locally spoken languages. It may also be through mapping out in collaboration with local and national NGOs the specific strengthens and weaknesses of different humanitarian actors to ensure complementarity in the response and that local and national leadership capacity is identified.

Internationally led coordination systems should plan and invest in strategies to transition away from internally led coordination and leadership towards locally led coordination and local leadership. This requires working with and supporting existing local and national coordination and leadership structures. In most crises, some coordinated forms of assistance either led by communities, religious actors or governments already exist. Greater efforts from the IASC coordination system are needed to complement these existing forms of coordinated assistance.

We call for more systematic joint needs assessments designed and led by local and national actors. Currently, needs assessments often use local actors' knowledge but do not fully recognise their role or allow their participation from the design of assessments.

NEAR acknowledges that some current practices are opening the way towards the transformational change we are advocating for. The Survivor and Community Led Response approach that supports collective and collaborative community action is an example of how communities can coordinate responses. Similarly, the Area Based Model of response provide another positive step towards local level based coordination that could improve responses and give more space to local leadership.

"Sharing what we learn from one region in the Global South with others is vital, allowing us to understand and replicate best localisation practices to support local communities."

Sumera Javeed, *HANDS Pakistan*

Partnerships. We call for more genuine and equitable partnerships. Most local and national NGOs receive funding through a partnership with an international actor. These partnerships tend to leave very little space for local and national CSOs to influence the design of responses. These partnerships also tend to be based on short-term funding with little flexibility. Risks in current partnership models tend to be transferred onto local and national NGOs. Partnerships should instead be guided by the Principles of Partnerships: Equality, Transparency, Results-Oriented Approach and Responsibility.

The role of international actors as intermediaries should be defined as a facilitating, supporting and strengthening role, supporting local and national NGOs to fulfil their role, including through mutual learning and capacity sharing. International actors should invest their resources to identify strategic partners to collaborate with on longer-term response and action including through 5-year strategies with clear collective outcomes. Partnerships should adopt principles and approaches for risk sharing and mutual accountability. Partnerships should

have a review process where all actors involved can equally feedback on the quality of the partnerships including directly and independently back to the donor. Partnerships should allow local and national NGOs to co-design, implement, monitor and evaluate projects and budgets. This does not only fulfil the Principles of Partnerships but also help sharing risk and having mutual accountability.

Participation. We call for fuller and more influential involvement of crisis-affected people in the decisions that impact their lives. Crisis-affected people have the right to be part of the decisions that impact their lives. Too often, humanitarian responses see involving crisis-affected people as something that is nice to have rather than a fundamental right that communities hold. All actors involved in responses must facilitate the participation of communities in decision-making spaces systematically listening to communities and the needs they express. Listening to communities should be the most critical input in designing a response. Mechanisms that facilitate two-way communication between communities and organisations responding to crises must be set up and resourced so that communities can continuously communicate on their evolving needs and get the support they require. It is critical that the majority of actors involve in responding to crises are able to use the language spoken by people affected by crisis to engage with them.

The SAHED Foundation in Colombia, reaching out to communities in remote areas **@SAHED**

Capacity. We call for more effective support for strong and sustainable institutional capacity for local and national NGOs and less undermining of capacities by international actors. International actors often feel localisation is not possible because they believe local and national actors lack capacity. Capacity and who has it tends to be defined by international organisations with little consideration for the specific capacities needed in a specific location and crisis. Local and national actors should lead on defining what capacity is needed to respond to a specific crisis in a specific context and help identify where that capacity is.

We believe that where local capacity is lacking it is the result of a lack of adequate funding and a lack of investment in local and national NGOs. The changes in funding quantity and quality we call for are already steps forward to enabling stronger and more sustainable institutional capacity especially the equal sharing of overhead costs. Similarly, the changes in partnership quality also allow local and national NGOs to have longer-term, more predictable funding through partnerships which allows them to retain staff members between projects. In addition to this, local capacity must be supported with dedicated and adequate funding for capacity sharing and learning at both the response level through coordination systems as well as through partnerships. Capacity can only be strengthened sustainably if international actors adopt ethical national level recruitment procedures that do not undermine local and national capacities. Where capacity is lacking, international actors should shadow and mentor staff of local and national NGOs within their organisations rather than substitute capacity.

"Without the ability for LNNGOs to access quality funding and establish institutional sustainability, all these discussions on partnerships and leadership will be fruitless."

Jonas Habimana, *BIFERD, DR Congo*

Local and national NGOs often have the capacities and the know-how needed to respond to the specific crises in their localities. However, these capacities and knowledge often sit within organisations that may not be perceived as institutionally strong, often due to inequalities of access to funding especially to quality funding. We believe it is critical for local and national NGOs to continue making the case that while their organisations may not appear institutionally strong, their capacities to respond to the needs of communities are strong. Equally, international actors must invest systematically in identifying and strengthening organisations so these existing capacities can be used to effectively respond to crises.

Policy, influence and visibility. We call for increased presence of local and national NGOs in international policy discussions and greater public recognition and visibility for their contribution to humanitarian responses. Policy decisions too often happens at the global level in closed spaces. We believe it is critical to enable direct representation of Global South NGOs on an equitable basis in policy development process and reform processes. This could be through funding participation or institutionalising the presence and role of Global South NGOs in decision making processes. Direct representation is the best way to ensure that global policies are based on community priorities and the priorities of local and national NGOs.

Policy development process and reform processes should be relocated away from Global North capitals, for instance using regional capitals to become the centre of policy development process and reform processes. Regional policy and aid reform forums could help local and national actors' participation as well as rooting these discussions closer to local realities and experiences.

Global South CSOs are best placed to advocate for the situations they face in their own countries. International donors and partners should support local and national NGO leadership in advocacy and communication on humanitarian issues affecting their countries at national, regional and global levels. International donors and partners should systematically credit and promote the role of local and national NGOs.

How do we measure progress and ensure accountability?

NEAR believes that progress towards localisation must be measured in a transparent and accountable way. This is why NEAR invested in the Localisation Performance Measurement Framework. While this framework can evolve with time, actors in the sectors must commit to providing their status on their progress towards localisation as well as the benchmarks they are working towards. Otherwise, commitments to localisation will not deliver change.

Local and national NGOs provide vital health services to displaced people **@HIHFAD**

Measuring progress and ensuring accountability

The change we want to see:

- Systematically measure and report progress.
- Use indicators of progress and success that are defined by local and national actors.
- Hold yourself accountable by measuring progress based on the feedback and experiences of local communities as well as local and national NGOs

NEAR acknowledges that the Grand Bargain process through its Annual Independent Report has paved the way towards building some accountability in this change process. NEAR believes that self-reporting on localisation commitment and measuring progress is critical and should continue. Self-reporting and measuring progress must however rely on indicators of success that are defined by local and national actors. Self-reporting and measuring progress should also rely on feedback from local communities and local and national NGOs.

We believe localisation calls for a revolution and fundamentally transforming the system. It is the combination of all the changes outlined below that will over time overhaul the international humanitarian system and create myriad of local and national response systems which when called upon, can be supported by international actors in solidarity and complementarity with communities and local and national NGOs.

Because localisation essentially requires changing the dynamic of power, localisation is inherently political. The incremental changes advocated for in this policy note if approached in a technical manner will not on their own deliver effective aid systems. The cultural and transformational changes outlined above provide the necessary political groundings to truly deliver different local and global response systems that effectively meet the needs of communities.

Contact Us

P.O.Box 70331-00400, Nairobi, Kenya

info@near.ngo

www.near.ngo