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EVENT DETAILS

On the 23rd of July, DSAI's Humanitarian Action Study Group held an online panel discussion on humanitarian localisation in conflict contexts.

The discussion brought together humanitarian and peacebuilding actors to discuss approaches, experiences and recommendations, in an aim to understand the barriers to humanitarian localisation in conflict contexts, and strategies for overcoming these.

We are grateful to the speakers for their contributions:

- **Gloria Modong Morris,** Titi Foundation South Sudan;
- **Christine Laura Okello,** Caritas Uganda;
- **Dr Win Tun Kyi,** Karuna Mission Social Solidarity (KMSS), Myanmar; and
- **Claire Devlin,** Saferworld.

We would also like to thank Claire Devlin, Lizz Harrison and Alexandra Warner for their contributions to organising the event.

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BACKGROUND AND RATIONALE

Despite a longstanding, stated commitment to strengthening local dimensions of humanitarian response, some aspects of the humanitarian system have been slow to change. This is particularly the case in complex, protracted crises affected by conflict, which led to a special recognition of the vital role of international responders "in situations of armed conflict" by the latest humanitarian reform effort, the Grand Bargain. Against the backdrop of the current global health crisis and corresponding restrictions on mobility, as well as accelerating efforts to acknowledge and shift inequitable power relations within the humanitarian sector more widely, there is a need to re-assess barriers that have slowed progress on this agenda to date.

The webinar sought to address the following questions:

- What are the unique challenges to humanitarian localisation in conflict contexts, as distinct from the wider humanitarian and development sectors?
- How might the current health crisis positively or negatively affect these current barriers? and
- What strategies are required to overcome these obstacles and make progress on localisation?

LOCALISATION IN CONFLICT

Panellists reflected on the unique challenges humanitarian organisations face in conflict-affected contexts, and the barriers these present for local actors in particular. The protracted and volatile nature of many conflict-driven crises were among the key features that make response in these situations unique. As Dr Win Tun Kyi noted, local responders have no choice but to navigate security risks in conflict contexts every day, and this expertise and experience should be recognised in partnerships and risk management. Similarly, Claire Devlin reflected on how local actors' knowledge, expertise, acceptance and access are invaluable assets in **conflict-sensitive humanitarian response.**

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> **The paradigm has been shifting at global level, but the system remains the same: if you cannot manage risk more equitably across local and international partners, then we cannot reach our goal.**
>
> – Dr Win Tun Kyi

BARRIERS TO PROGRESS IN LOCALISATION

The most common barrier to progress on localisation cited was **financial resourcing**. All speakers referred to the issue of inequitable distribution of resources within the humanitarian system, in spite of high-level commitments under the Grand Bargain. In the example of South Sudan, Christine Laura Okello and Gloria Modong Morris both highlighted how - in contrast to the aim of allocating 25% of humanitarian funding to local partners - the current figure stands at less than 2%. While this is a frequently highlighted issue, it warrants repeating that where adequate funding is not provided for local actors to deliver in line with ambitious targets, long-term, predictable funding is not available, and institutional and running costs are not covered for local actors, the quality and scale of response suffers.

Financial transparency was also raised by a number of speakers: in contrast to the South Sudan example above, as Dr Win Tun Kyi noted, in some contexts, data is simply not available to track levels and flows of funding to local actors. Elsewhere, participants noted that the degree of transparency within partnerships between international and local NGOs can vary, with some partners failing to share full information on budget breakdowns and overall funding. Coupled with **high bureaucratic barriers** related to reporting, administration and risk management, these practices can make funding less accessible, and accountability and progress on the Grand Bargain more difficult.

A wider, systemic issue relates to limited support for national actors' **coordination and leadership roles within the humanitarian system**. As Gloria Modong Morris noted, the failure to prioritise local voices, perspectives and skills - and those of women and women-led groups in particular - in the humanitarian architecture, such as the cluster system undermines high quality response. Dr Win Tun Kyi also highlighted that this makes it more difficult for national responders to carry out humanitarian advocacy aligned with local priorities.

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> Localisation is a work in progress [...] From the angle of funding and resource mobilisation, it's very challenging. How long can local partners hold up in this game? Funds are shrinking and the reality is, we need to address that if we are to remain where we are or even make progress.
>
> – Gloria Modong Morris

HUMANITARIAN LOCALISATION IN COVID-19: A NEW PARADIGM

The global health crisis has prompted calls for more locally-led response, particularly in light of mobility restrictions. However, some panellists were sceptical about the degree of progress to date. In fact, in some contexts, levels of localisation have **declined over previous years**. Panellists attributed this in part to donors' focus on domestic conditions and addressing the pandemic in their own countries. Elsewhere, as Claire Devlin noted, even where donors may want to direct more funding to local partners, bureaucratic and administrative systems were not in place previously to channel more funding to local organisations, and as such, Covid-19 response plans are likely to still direct the bulk of assistance to international agencies better able to access and navigate these systems.

The **role of technology** in transforming humanitarian response was discussed by a number of speakers. While the potential for technology to support innovation in locally-led design of PPE, for example, was highlighted; panellists also raised concerns about the accessibility of technological platforms that are now becoming more central to humanitarian coordination and response. As Christine Laura Okello noted, online communication and technology still present a challenge for many actors on the ground. New platforms may be difficult to navigate without extensive tech support, and the cost of online systems - from regular communication to accessing webinars - can be prohibitive for many local organisations.

Claire Devlin noted that humanitarian localisation in conflict contexts seems to be an idea whose time has come, however slow progress has been. Further progress during the global health crisis will require **interrogating oft-cited concerns** by humanitarian actors that local organisations lack capacity, are too enmeshed in local power dynamics to be principled, or are vulnerable to conflict parties' intimidation, and comparing them with the real-world experiences of humanitarian actors across all levels of the system.

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RESOURCES

IASC, *Interim Guidance on Localisation and the Covid-19 Response* (May 2020).

IASC, *The Grand Bargain (Official Website)* (monthly updates).

Saferworld, *Turning the Tables: Insights from Locally-led Humanitarian Partnerships in Conflict Situations* (May 2020).

Trócaire, *Covid-19 and Localisation: No Turning Back?* (April 2020).

DSAI's Humanitarian Action Study Group, *Building Equitable Research Partnerships: Summary Document* (July 2020).

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FOUR STRATEGIES FOR MORE MEANINGFUL PROGRESS

- **Fund local responders.** There is no substitute for funding local humanitarian actors. Despite global and organisational commitments, donors and INGOs alike can be reluctant to provide local humanitarian organisations with funding that reflects expected outputs, supports sustainable response, and covers institutional costs. Transparency in funding remains a challenge in many contexts, and internally within some parnterships. Even where data *is* available to track funding levels, there is no doubt that resources to local response remain well below high-level targets. Dedicated, accessible funding streams for local organisations can help to shift this imbalance.

- **Challenge double standards and old narratives.** Persistent characterisations of local actors as 'lacking capacity' often underplay local agency and expertise, and rarely acknowledge international actors' capacity gaps in language, knowledge, access and acceptance. Local-international complementarity, capacity transfer, and local-to-local capacity building offer alternative frameworks for mapping and addressing capacity strengths and gaps across the humanitarian system as a whole.

- **Share risk equitably and in ways that do not systematically disadvantage local partners.** In any conflict context, calculated risks must be taken. More genuine collaboration with local partners is required to define parameters and tolerance of risk, and manage it more equitably. Current practices often transfer security risks downwards to frontline responders, while creating disproportionate financial and bureaucratic burdens for local partners.

- **Support local humanitarian leadership and coordination.** NGO coordination structures that are dominated by international organisations and exclude or marginalise local responders should be reformed to recognise, include and promote local leadership, network-building and advocacy priorities.