EMERGENCY GAP SERIES 03

The challenges of localised humanitarian aid in armed conflict

Ed Schenkenberg

November 2016

MEDECINS SANS FRONTIERES
DOCTORS WITHOUT BORDERS

Index

Executive summary

At the World Humanitarian Summit (WHS), one message made itself heard more loudly than others: national and local actors should be at the forefront of humanitarian responses in their home countries. On the face of it, this most recent call for localised humanitarian action seems entirely valid. However, upon closer inspection, the current thinking driving the localisation agenda fails to make an essential distinction between the different humanitarian contexts, and ignores the challenges faced by local actors in conflict settings. As part of the Emergency Gap series, this paper outlines MSF's reservations about the blanket endorsement of the localisation agenda, from both a conceptual and practical point of view.

At the conceptual level, the ideological conviction resting at heart of the localisation discourse particularly stands out. The primary objective is to instigate a different way of working in delivering humanitarian aid: one where international actors should make themselves redundant by building local capacity and enabling local actors to run their own response. According to this vision, the objective of humanitarian action must be to achieve sustainability and lay down the foundation for long-term development. Thus, the localisation agenda becomes a perfect fit with the ambition of ending needs, put forward as a core humanitarian responsibility by the WHS.

Those who are trying to push back on the localisation agenda risk being perceived as opposing the idea of sustainable development, a position largely deemed politically incorrect. In MSF's view, making sustainable development the goal of humanitarian assistance would not only diminish its essence, but would work in direct contradiction to the specific role it plays in conflict settings where a distinct and principled approach is required. In that sense, the localisation debate also suffers from a deliberate ambiguity when it comes to defining localised aid, which hampers any context-specific and operationally-oriented discussions that could highlight the conceptual and practical limitations of the agenda.

At the practical level, national and local humanitarian actors face several critical challenges in adhering to the core humanitarian principles when armed conflict is taking place in their country. These may be unintentional, because of the actors' various ties or affiliations with institutions, groups and communities, or because of their deliberate choice to favour a particular geographic area or population group. Striving to assess needs and provide assistance in an impartial manner may simply not be feasible for someone who is part of the local dynamics. Further complications may exist with regards to the principles of neutrality and independence.

Moreover, the space for local actors to build and scale up capacities to respond to conflicts on the ground is limited, often as a result of the political and security situation. Many governments, especially those in conflict-affected states, are keen to assert their sovereignty and retain full control over the provision of aid when their political and social position is at risk. This may result in a restrictive legal and institutional framework for local non-governmental and civil society organisations to operate within, and would ultimately have a negative impact on the scale, type and quality of assistance that people in need receive.

Clearly, the question is not about which approach is better. There should be complementarity amongst actors and operational approaches, and between locally-led and internationally-delivered assistance. Impartial, independent and neutral humanitarian action will continue to be critical in conflict and fragile settings, where local capacities are insufficient or where principled action cannot be reasonably pursued through locally-led approaches. Local capacity-building, remote programming and nationally-led responses will be paramount for building resilience, strengthening institutions and pursuing sustainable solutions in more stable contexts.

However, before moving forward with the localisation agenda, one issue must be reversed as a matter of priority: the political correctness with which a range of NGOs and others have promoted this agenda. For good and bad reasons, governments want to maintain control over what is happening in their countries, and to impose their sovereignty, especially when they are embroiled in conflict. While the localisation agenda is likely to add value and enhance the effectiveness of aid efforts in some contexts, imposing it irrespective of context dynamics is likely to produce suboptimal results for the effective delivery of aid to people in need of immediate relief.

Introduction

MSF has seen many examples of important contributions by local actors, as well as a number of challenges, especially during (internal) armed conflict

It is striking that little attention has been given to the essential distinction between natural disasters and armed conflict. The role of national and local actors in natural disasters is much less controversial than in armed conflicts

At the May 2016 World Humanitarian Summit (WHS), one message made itself heard more loudly than others: national and local actors should be at the forefront of humanitarian responses and lead them in their home countries. Instead of taking over, international humanitarian actors should support the efforts and capacities of crisis-affected people, and the local institutions and organisations assisting them. On the face of it, this call for localised humanitarian response seems entirely valid. Why should national and local actors be bystanders when humanitarian crises cause devastation and prompt the need for urgent relief among their fellow citizens?

As part of the Emergency Gap series, this paper analyses the role of national and local actors in humanitarian response with a view to highlighting the challenges that have been ignored in the current thinking on the localisation agenda. This analysis is grounded in MSF's[1] experiences in the environments it has prioritised: areas in countries in conflict where the most urgent needs are found. The organisation has seen many examples of the important humanitarian contributions that national and local actors make, but it has also witnessed a number of constraints and challenges that confront these actors when delivering humanitarian responses, especially in situations of (internal) armed conflict. These constraints and challenges have been largely ignored in the recent acclaim of their central humanitarian role.

It is striking that in the localisation debate little attention has been given to the essential distinction between natural disasters and armed conflict. In its projects in the war-torn remote areas of countries such as Central African Republic (CAR), Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) or Yemen, MSF does not see local organisations that can bring humanitarian assistance to scale, or who have the capability to deliver sufficient quantities of food or other forms of assistance to help communities survive. However, as this paper will explain, increasing the capacity of local actors to scale up is not just a technical fix or matter of resources.

Furthermore, the call for localisation overlooks the risk that this agenda plays into the hands of regimes who push for state sovereignty, or those authorities (whether government or opposition forces who are in control) who want to prevent foreigners from acting as (international) witnesses of their repression and conduct in war. It also does not question the extent to which local and national actors are often highly

---

[1] The Emergency Gap work is being undertaken by MSF's Operational Centre Barcelona Athens.

compromised in these instances in their ability to adhere to humanitarian principles. Again, it is important in this regard to differentiate between different types of crises: the role of national and local actors in natural disasters is much less controversial than in armed conflicts.

The call for localisation overlooks the risk that the agenda will play into the hands of local authorities who want to prevent foreign witnessing

The WHS endorsement of localisation comes at a time when, in order to operate in conflict areas, remote programming and remote operations have become accepted, if not standard, practice for a range of international humanitarian organisations. Because of increased security risks in countries like Afghanistan, Iraq, Syria or Yemen, much of the actual delivery of humanitarian aid on the ground is done by local actors, contracted by the United Nations (UN) and international non-governmental organisations (NGOs). MSF's mode of action, however, is characterised by an on-the-ground presence of mixed teams of international and national staff, and proximity to the people they seek to assist. While in exceptional cases MSF may feel that it has no other option but to limit its intervention to what can be done remotely or through local actors, this is always viewed internally as a significant compromise.

This paper captures MSF's conceptual and practical reservations to the blanket endorsement of the localisation agenda

MSF has a number of reservations to the blanket endorsement of the localisation agenda. This paper captures these reservations from a conceptual as well as a practical point of view. It starts with the conceptual level, explaining that the ideological character of the localisation discourse, the use of loose terminology and issues of principle need much closer scrutiny than has been the case so far. The paper then provides a viewpoint on localised aid, based on the practice of MSF. MSF's views on localisation stem from its specific way of working, but contextual specificities and the constraints on the development of local civil society in a number of countries are an equally important practical consideration. The final section of this paper provides some suggestions on the way forward in the discussion on the role of national and local actors in humanitarian response.

To capture the specific perspective of MSF, this paper builds on qualitative research methods. As part of an in-depth document review, the author has looked at recent literature on localisation, much of which has been produced in the context of the WHS consultations. Several recent MSF publications have also been reviewed. In addition, the author has also carried out semi-structured interviews with a dozen senior staff from MSF, as well as with several representatives from NGOs that have been at the forefront of pushing the localisation agenda.

The conceptual point of view

The localisation advocates point to the currently overstretched (UN-led) humanitarian sector and call for its dramatic overhaul

An ideological discourse

At the heart of the localisation discourse lies an ideological conviction: humanitarian aid should strive towards sustainability and lay the foundation for long-term development. The localisation agenda is a perfect fit with the longer-term ambition of ending needs, put forward as a core humanitarian responsibility by the WHS. It is telling that this key priority received the most endorsements and resulted in the highest number of commitments at the summit.

The primary objective of those who support the localisation agenda is to instigate a different way of working in delivering humanitarian aid. International actors should make themselves redundant by building the capacity of local actors who eventually can, and should, run their own business. Pointing to the currently overstretched (UN-led) humanitarian system, they call for a dramatic overhaul, suggesting that the system should be turned the other way around, placing local actors in the lead (see Gingerich, 2015 and United Nations, 2015:94). Their tagline is that humanitarian aid should be "as local as possible and only as international as necessary." (See e.g. Sphere Project, 2016.)

The promotion of local capacities in humanitarian response is far from a new trend. The 1994 Red Cross / Red Crescent NGO Code of Conduct in Disaster Relief (hereafter the 1994 Code of Conduct) sets out in Principle 6 that efforts shall be made to build the response of humanitarian agencies on local capacities. Many prominent evaluations and studies have found that these international agencies have consistently failed to translate this commitment into practice. Funding streams to local NGOs, for example, have remained extremely small. According to the Global Humanitarian Assistance (GHA) Report, between 2010 and 2014, local and national NGOs combined received US$243 million – 1.6 per cent of the total given directly to NGOs and 0.3 per cent of the total assistance reported to the OCHA's Financial Tracking Service (FTS) over the period (Development Initiatives, 2015:74). It should be kept in mind, however, that these figures may be skewed. Many local NGOs receive funds as part of sub-contracts with UN agencies or international NGOs. These amounts have not been recorded by the GHA report or OCHA's FTS, but will become more important in order to realise the target set forth by the 'Grand Bargain', an agreement between major donor governments and aid agencies concluded at the WHS to increase humanitarian aid efficiency. This Grand Bargain sets the target that by the year 2020, 25 per cent of humanitarian funding should

The localisation agenda has mostly been driven by organisations that are 'multi-mandate', i.e. whose focus is not limited to purely humanitarian work but embraces a larger scope of action

be channelled "as directly as possible" to local NGOs.[2] As national legislation prevents several donor governments from transferring funds to local NGOs directly, transparency in the amounts channelled through international mechanisms to local actors will be increasingly important.

The localisation agenda has mostly been driven by organisations that are 'multi-mandate', i.e. whose focus is not limited to purely humanitarian work, but who embrace a larger scope of action. They form the majority of organisations involved in humanitarian aid. Seen from their perspective, localisation makes good sense, as it fits well with societal transformation, sustainable aid and other long-term goals. Other localisation advocates, overlapping with the group of multi-mandate organisations, are church-based NGO networks. For the Western members of these networks (such as Action by Churches Together or Caritas Internationalis), their logical counterparts in the developing world are the local parishes and church communities.

The third group of localisation advocates is also an obvious one: NGOs from developing countries. They do not necessarily define themselves as humanitarian actors, but are present before, during and after any crisis. Using social media, they have become more vocal and better organised. In their advocacy on the localisation agenda, these NGOs from the developing world have pointed to the sub-contracting practices of international agencies. These sub-contracts are often short-term –i.e. their duration is for the time of a project, rarely exceeding 12 months– and only cover the costs directly associated with the implementation of the contract. Further support for organisational development is often not part of these contracts, as it falls outside the scope of humanitarian action.

The various groups of localisation advocates have joined forces in the NGO campaign Charter4Change[3] or in the new NEAR[4], a network of local NGOs based in developing countries. Together they have been very effective in their call for the localisation of aid. It received wide support by those attending the WHS and, as already mentioned, made its way into the Grand Bargain. As one of the localisation advocates interviewed for this report noted, "the primary objective in promoting the role of local NGOs was to change the funding

2 See The Grand Bargain, Chapter 2, Commitment 4, available at: http://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/Grand_Bargain_final_22_May_FINAL-2.pdf
3 https://charter4change.org
4 Network for Empowered Aid Response. http://www.near.ngo

Those who are trying to push back on the localisation agenda risk being perceived as opposing sustainable development, a position largely deemed politically incorrect

streams and practices. The target set by the Grand Bargain [of 25 per cent] did even surpass our ambitious target of 20 per cent."

The problem, however, with ideology driving the debate is that the conversation becomes polarised. Those who are trying to push back on the localisation agenda risk being perceived as opposing sustainable development, a position largely deemed politically incorrect. MSF, however, has made it clear that making long-term development the goal of humanitarian assistance "reframes [this] assistance in terms that contradict its essence, its core mandate and its relevance in conflict settings." (De Castellarnau and Stoianova, 2016:3) The direct provision of humanitarian assistance to people in need must be the overriding priority. Sustainability as manifested in building local capacities is not an objective for MSF *per se*.

Lost in definitions

When examining the discourse on localisation, one issue stands out: there is great confusion over the terminology. The term 'localisation' has been used as an umbrella term to refer to any and all activities involving local actors. (Wall, 2016:12). But who are these local actors? The expression could include a very wide range of different stakeholders: from government authorities at various levels, via NGOs, other civil society groupings and private businesses, to every native individual or indigenous community. The ambiguity in referring to 'local actors' or 'local capacities' seems deliberate: it creates a convenient space for the large variety of stakeholders to interpret the term according to their own interests and agendas.

The ambiguity in referring to 'local actors' or 'local capacities' seems deliberate: it creates a convenient space for the large variety of stakeholders to interpret the term according to their own interests and agendas

Understandably, governments from crisis-affected countries are likely to be among those who will argue that the term 'local actors' includes them, but as one government representative has pointed out, there is a need to be more precise. At a workshop following up on the Grand Bargain in Geneva in late August 2016, he noted that before talking about localisation, due consideration needs to be given to the role and responsibilities of the national government.[5] This may be a correct view in terms of the international legal framework for humanitarian response, but it hides the reality that there are often various departments and authorities (at different levels) within governments that play a role in the coordination, management and delivery of humanitarian aid. How the localisation agenda will be interpreted in terms of the support to national and local government entities remains to be seen.

[5] From an international perspective, the term 'local actor' has also been loosely used to refer to the national government.

Consideration needs to be given to the role and responsibilities of the national government and to the definition of local organisations

NGOs will primarily define their local peers as local actors.[6] But here too there is a conundrum emerging. Clearly, indigenous home-grown NGOs would qualify as local. They could be national NGOs when headquartered in the capital and working nationally, or local NGOs, if restricted to a geographical area of the country, or (even) community-based organisations (Development Initiatives, 2014:119). But what about the national franchises of large international NGO networks, such as CARE, Save the Children, or World Vision, and their local offices? Does their affiliation with an international network and/or their international governance mechanism define whether NGOs are local or foreign? Or is this determined by the nationality of their staff?

To add to the confusion, views differ on whether or not diaspora groups should also be seen as local actors. Increasingly, thanks to social media networks, individuals who have been living abroad for many years, often in Western countries, have taken initiatives in solidarity with the affected communities in their native countries. While some have noted that the residential population may be sceptical of diaspora organisations,[7] these groups present themselves as the link between local communities and international actors. And indeed, they may have the connections, be aware of local social networks and speak the local language – all of which may contribute to them serving as a go-between.[8]

If local action equates those closest to the epicentre of the crisis, and the aid system is geared towards supporting formal organisations, it remains less clear what this support means in practice

Localisation itself is also a politically attractive, but equally vague term. It has been used at the convenience of different interest groups. Some, for example, have stressed that the term, in fact, refers to 'local action'. In this line of thinking, those working closest to the epicentres of humanitarian crises are those who are directly affected by the crisis: local people, volunteers, family members, faith networks or other informal groupings. As these individuals and groups are 'the first responders', they are well aware of the context, culture and social fabric of affected communities, and they should be supported in their roles. But as the aid system is geared towards supporting formal organisations, it remains less clear what this support entails in practice.

---

[6] When referring to local actors in the rest of this paper, it primarily refers to local NGOs, unless otherwise stated.

[7] A Twitter message from an IRIN journalist attending a conference in Copenhagen on diasporas quoted a speaker at the conference who noted that "localisation and diasporas are not synonymous". She said many locals are sceptical of diaspora organisations.

[8] See, for example, the recommendations of Somali, Sierra Leonean and Syrian diaspora-based humanitarian organisations to the World Humanitarian Summit (2015): http://www.demac.org/about-demac/reports-and-recommendations

Closely related to this thinking are those who see the localisation agenda as an opportunity to "put affected people at the centre of humanitarian response". While this became one of the main headlines in the WHS consultations, one might wonder when, where and by which humanitarian actors this has not been done until now? Why is this even an issue? Still, these advocates see the need to alter the balance of power from current external aid providers to crisis-affected people who should be empowered to decide on what is good for them, instead of being regarded as helpless victims. This sounds like a grand idea, but again, it is less clear how such a bottom-up approach would work in relation to humanitarian financing decision-making by donors, which is usually a top-down process.

Following a more or less similar line of thought, some have said that they prefer the term 'locally-led responses'. (See Wall, 2016:10). But this, in turn, raises another sensitive issue. The meaning of the word 'led' is highly delicate. If local actors are in the lead, are they then the ones who ultimately set the priorities in times of crisis? The world's largest humanitarian network, the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement, offers an interesting perspective on this issue.

Composed of a Red Cross or Red Crescent National Society in every country, the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC) and the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), this movement is both global and local. With this in mind, one might have assumed that the localisation debate is less of an issue for the Red Cross and Red Crescent family. In reality, however, localisation has become a hotly debated topic there too, especially in light of the fact that, increasingly, National Societies in countries in crisis want to lead the response on behalf of the Movement. However, as they are auxiliaries of the public authorities, some National Societies may be perceived as too closely aligned with the government, which is problematic when this government is a party to an internal armed conflict, and it can impact on the whole Movement's response.

Pointing to the ambiguities in terminology, one can only argue for more specificity, nuance and contextualisation in the discourse on localisation.

> Pointing to the ambiguities in terminology, one can only argue for more specificity, nuance and contextualisation in the discourse on localisation

The question of which
humanitarian principles
are relevant to national
and local NGOs is one
that requires further
reflection

Opening up a debate
on the validity of the four
core principles would be
counter-productive for
the necessary strive to
strengthen humanitarian
response

Issues of principle

One controversial issue consistently coming up when discussing the role and contribution of national and local actors is their ability to adhere to and apply humanitarian principles. The question of which humanitarian principles are relevant to national and local NGOs is one that requires further reflection. The 1994 Code of Conduct, for example, is primarily written from an international perspective, which makes it hard for these NGOs to relate to it. Although some groups may feel that the traditional four core –and internationally recognised– principles (humanity, impartiality, neutrality and independence) are too Western in origin, the global (and inclusive) WHS consultations did not come up with any new humanitarian principles. Opening up a debate on the validity of the four core principles would be counter-productive for the necessary strive to strengthen humanitarian response. Moreover, a 2011 study by OCHA found that 91 per cent of local and national UN and NGO staff interviewed in complex and violent contexts acknowledged that adherence to humanitarian principles helps enhance their safety and that of humanitarian operations. (See OCHA, 2011). For MSF, the relevance and application of the four humanitarian principles is a key element in humanitarian work. The principles are never an end in themselves, but they are essential in demonstrating to warring parties and others that MSF's intentions and efforts do not include any other motives than that of bringing relief to people in need.

In many of the interviews held in preparation for this paper, there was a great deal of scepticism, not only with regard to the ability of local actors to adhere to humanitarian principles, but also regarding the adherence to the principles by international agencies. Several interviewees noted that it would be hypocritical for international agencies to refuse to collaborate with local actors on the basis of their inability to comply with the humanitarian principles, especially when international agencies can find it very similarly challenging. However, downplaying the relevance of humanitarian principles for local NGOs on the basis of questioning the degree to which international NGOs uphold these principles, in a sense reflects the general malaise with regards to principled humanitarian action. It seems increasingly unclear which humanitarian principles NGOs are prepared to uphold and what evidence they can provide in terms of their efforts in applying these principles. (See Schenkenberg, 2016: 295-318). Some compromises in the application of and adherence to the principles framework may be required but not all compromises are equally acceptable. This warrants a more

Some compromises in the application of and adherence to the principles framework may be required but not all compromises are equally acceptable

nuanced policy and operational discussion, but ultimately, it is down to humanitarian actors to determine which compromises are completely unacceptable and under which circumstances compromises may be valid.

Monitoring the application of humanitarian principles by international humanitarian actors would be complicated enough, although much needed, but to do this for local actors would take a huge effort. Arguing that donor governments' funding streams have compromised many international NGOs in their ability to uphold humanitarian principles, Marc DuBois cautions that national and local NGOs risk falling into the same trap of donor government dependency and allegiance, and urges them to look for more private funding sources. (See DuBois, 2016).

Localisation from a practical point of view

Religious, ethnic and political affiliations, as well as economic privilege and power relations, all play a key role in the interaction between local actors and their domestic contexts

Operational challenges of localised responses

Adherence to principles

In terms of applying the principles, national and local actors may find several of the principles particularly challenging. As part of their defining characteristics, they are part of the society in which they work and live. Religious, ethnic and political affiliations, as well as economic privilege and power relations, all play a key role in the interaction between local actors and their domestic contexts. In Somalia, for example, local NGOs are often known for their clan affiliations. In such situations, family members or local communities may have specific expectations as to who should be prioritised in the delivery of assistance. This may be at odds with the principle of impartiality which determines that those who are most in need should receive aid first. Conversely, although local church-based groups often claim that they will provide aid irrespective of religious affiliation, communities from other denominations may be reluctant to accept receiving aid from them.

Crucially, at a time of turmoil and critical scarcity of basic goods and services –such as security or access to medical care– humanitarian organisations find themselves in a position of power by means of controlling the access to essential assistance. For local actors (as an organisation and even more so as individuals) it may prove particularly difficult to withstand the direct or indirect pressure that humanitarians can be subjected to in such extreme circumstances, not least because the repercussions and retaliation may well go beyond the professional sphere. For someone who is part of the local dynamics, striving to assess needs and provide assistance in an impartial manner may simply not be feasible.

Further complications may exist with regards to the principles of neutrality and independence. Some interviewees made it clear that they see the expectation for local actors to apply these principles as denying the reality in which they operate. It is inherent in war, especially when this is happening in one's own country, that one takes sides or, at least, is perceived to be taking sides. This is, of course, even more the case when 'the other side' does not observe the rules of war. In Syria, the White Helmets are known for their heroic acts of bravery as they pull people out from under the rubble of buildings destroyed in the (aerial) bombardments. They note their adherence to neutrality, but only operate in areas that are not controlled by the Syrian Government. In these latter areas, it is the Syrian Arab Red Crescent (SARC) that is the main (national) humanitarian actor and also one of the few that is authorised to work across frontlines.

It is inherent in war, especially when this is happening in one's own country, that one takes sides or, at least, is perceived to be taking sides

Expectations as to the ability and willingness of local actors to implement the principled framework in a situation of war may need to be revisited altogether

The leadership of SARC has gone to great lengths to stress the relevance of the Seven Fundamental Principles of the Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement in public, but it is still perceived as closely associated with the government in Damascus[9], which designated SARC as the only legal channel of international aid to Syria. It has become standard practice for the Syrian Government to deny or at least delay aid convoys from Damascus, especially to besieged areas. SARC is able to work across frontlines, thanks to a number of its local branches and volunteers as well to its collaboration with the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) and the UN, but it is unclear how much aid from Damascus reaches the people in opposition-held areas. The fact that local actors work (mainly) in areas on opposite sides of the war is illustrative of the (inherent) limitations of localised humanitarian aid in armed conflict.[10]

There is a wide array of reasons that can lead a local group or individual not to adhere to the key humanitarian principles. These may be intentional (such as a conscious choice to privilege a particular group), unconscious (a repetition of culturally normalised patterns of exclusion) or driven by a (perceived) fear of immediate or future reprisals (when local power actors demand specific types of responses or benefits may be threatening the organisation, its members and/or their families). In a situation of war, expectations as to the ability and willingness of local actors to implement the principled framework may need to be revisited altogether. Furthermore, there are marked differences between individuals and groups: while organisationally SARC may be perceived as closely aligned with the Syrian Government, many of its staff and volunteers continue to risk their lives to provide principled humanitarian assistance across the country. The perception of a group is partly made of the perceptions of its members and in certain contexts it is simply not possible to find a group where everyone is able or willing to adhere to humanitarian principles unequivocally. Whether this difficulty is intentional or unconscious, this is a very real dilemma, which the localisation agenda needs to acknowledge.

---

[9] For a National Red Cross or Red Crescent society, ensuring it is perceived as independent is even more complicated as it holds the position of auxiliary to the government.

[10] Since the start of the war in Syria, 54 SARC staff and volunteers have been killed in the line of duty, and the White Helmets have lost 141 of their colleagues. Clearly, these local humanitarian workers have paid the highest price for being on the frontlines, and one can only pay tribute to their work.

The perception of a group is partly made of the perceptions of its members and it is simply not possible to find a group where everyone is able or willing to adhere to humanitarian principles unequivocally

Ultimately, this becomes a matter of identifying where the red lines are, and what decision-making criteria should be used when planning humanitarian response operations. In operational terms, practical ways need to be found to ensure adherence to principles when it comes to establishing priorities and programme decisions but also to protect the group and its members from excessive pressure from the community and local power actors (be they armed groups, or people with political or business interests) which could escalate into direct harm. It may involve a division of labour where certain decisions must remain at the international level, while others can be delegated to the local one, especially in contexts where traditional humanitarian access is not possible and response operations need to be managed remotely.

Negotiating access

One aspect that is critical to the success of MSF's work in the volatile (and often violent) areas that it has prioritised, is its ability to negotiate access. As two MSF representatives note: "In settings of armed conflict, remote management and other compromised modes of intervention call into question an aid agency's ability to conduct independent assessments and deliver aid impartially. It is generally understood that in armed conflict, belligerent parties seek to control, appropriate, divert or withhold aid for various obvious tactical and political reasons." (Hofmann, 2014:1179).

In settings of armed conflict, remote management and other compromised modes of intervention call into question an aid agency's ability to conduct independent assessments and deliver aid impartially

In line with its model of direct implementation, MSF attaches great importance to being able to assess needs, deliver assistance and verify its work independently, so as to avoid political interference. Whereas it is often said that because of their contacts and networks, local groups may be in a better position to enter areas that are off limits to international staff and organisations, the counter-argument is that they are much more exposed to manipulation or intimidation. In negotiating humanitarian access and presence, international staff will not need to consider the wider repercussions of such interaction with armed groups on their family members or community, and will be in a better position to withstand undue expectations or manipulation.

Similar concerns in relation to the vulnerable positions of local organisations apply to the ability of these organisations to play a role in providing safety and security to local communities. MSF staff interviewed for this paper also noted that, in several instances, they have experienced that their international presence is especially appreciated by local communities. Knowing that MSF's international eyes and ears are on the

In negotiating humanitarian access, international staff need not consider the wider repercussions on their family or community, and will be better positioned to withstand undue expectations or manipulation

There is a long list of countries that have put serious restrictions on the presence of international humanitarian actors, often because they do not want any international observers around

warring parties provides these communities with a sense of safety, even though the organisation is not in fact able to guarantee the protection of its staff and population of concern, as demonstrated by the recent attacks on MSF hospitals. And yet, international presence is believed to act as a deterrent to a blatant violation of International Humanitarian Law and to reduce the likelihood of violent attacks against local communities and workers.

Closing space to operate for local NGOs

One issue that did not receive the attention it needs in the WHS and Grand Bargain commitments on localisation is state sovereignty, and the related trend of shrinking civic space. A growing number of states, especially those with authoritarian regimes, have been keen to emphasise their sovereignty in recent years. Asked if the call for localisation would be playing into the hands of these regimes, a number of localisation advocates interviewed for this paper admitted that it might be an unwelcome side-effect. Other interviewees made it clear that they see this risk as one that deserves much more attention. The case of Sudan is one that illustrates their concern. In March 2009, the government of Sudan did not hesitate to stop more than a dozen international NGOs from operating in the country. It did so as part of its effort to "Sudanise the humanitarian activities" under the claim that Sudanese organisations had more than enough capacity to do the job of their international colleagues (see Darfur Consortium, 2009). The government neglected to mention that it had also stopped three leading local Sudanese NGOs from operating. These happened to be organisations working on human rights and protection issues. The case of Sudan is not unique and the trend to push back on the presence of international humanitarian organisations is not a new one. One could produce a long list of countries that have put serious restrictions on the presence of international humanitarian agencies, or regularly refused them access to war-torn areas in the last two decades. While these restrictions are often put in place under the claim that an area is unsafe, in reality, national authorities may want to keep their hands free and do not want any international observers around.

It is self-evident that the clamp down on civil society activity is particularly an issue in countries with authoritarian regimes. A number of these countries which have adopted laws regulating civil society, have made NGOs into sub-contractors of the government, which in turn seriously compromises the local NGOs' independence of action and represents a major obstacle towards their adherence to humanitarian principles.

Under the claim
of counter-terrorism,
a growing number of
countries have adopted
measures that are
erecting legal and
logistical barriers for
domestic civil society
organisations

It is surprising that in
promoting the role of local
actors in humanitarian
aid, the issues of the
pushback on civil society
combined with the
sovereignty agenda have
not been recognised as
serious risk

This is not a new trend but one that has become very serious, as more and more countries have curtailed a number of fundamental freedoms that are essential for civil society to grow and blossom: the freedom of association, the freedom of assembly and the freedom of expression. (See Civicus, 2016:7).

Moreover, often under the claim of counter-terrorism, an increasing number of countries have adopted measures that are erecting legal and logistical barriers for domestic civil society organisations. With one of these measures, they have prohibited local NGOs from receiving funds from abroad. As two experts write: "The pushback phenomenon [on civil society] has far-reaching implications for the effectiveness and sustainability of civil society organisations in recipient countries." (Carothers, 2014:3). The international community has treated the issue of the closing space for domestic civil society mostly as a human rights problem, i.e. one that is outside the realm of humanitarian action. Clearly, this perspective is too short-sighted. Seen from an international perspective, local NGOs' suspected affiliations with groups or factions labelled as terrorist have become a serious obstacle for international humanitarian agencies operating in armed conflict. Counter-terrorism legislation prevents them from engaging with any such groups at the risk of being criminally prosecuted. (See, for example, Mackintosh, 2013).

In a sense, it is surprising that in promoting the role of local (civil society) actors in humanitarian aid, the issues of the pushback on civil society combined with the sovereignty agenda have not been recognised as serious risks. As noted, many of the localisation advocates come from multi-mandate organisations that also work on social justice and human rights. It is strange that they did not make the link between their promotion of the role of local civil society actors in humanitarian response and the need to counter the pushback on civil society (and the related promotion of the sovereignty agenda).

Capacity to scale up

A practical factor that adds a reality check to the localisation agenda is the simple fact that in most of the remote areas where MSF is present, it does not see local actors that are in a position to scale up to a level that corresponds to the requirements of the situation. Promoting the role of national NGOs in South Sudan, a paper commissioned by several international (and multi-mandate) NGOs admits that the majority of South Sudanese are localised in their reach and

Strengthening the capacity of local NGOs is not just a technical fix

In protracted conflicts, capacity building of local actors is a matter especially for development actors, but their investments are few and far between

limited in their ability to scale up to respond to wide-scale acute emergency scenarios on their own. (Lydia Tanner, 2016:6 and 19). When at the outbreak of hostilities, the numbers of displaced people are in the thousands –and there are numerous examples where there have been tens of thousands, if not more– even the largest international organisations will find it challenging to scale up and address the needs of these populations. In certain situations, local humanitarian capacity is not even available. For example, as one interviewee noted, in the context of the Diffa region in Niger, all local human resources capacity was sucked up by international actors. MSF has similar experiences in other remote areas, for example in CAR or Yemen, where chronic poverty and under-development are prevailing. In several of these locations, MSF does not find local actors that can even act as first responders, let alone local systems on which it can build its programmes.

To add to this reality, strengthening the capacity of local NGOs is not just a technical fix. As noted, the space for local civil society is more and more curtailed, especially in countries in conflict. The limitations for local NGOs to receive funding from foreign sources have far-reaching implications. UN-managed local pooled funds in humanitarian crises have been seen as a significant potential funding source for local NGOs to scale up their operations. But internal UN procedures dictate that these pooled funding mechanisms must have a bank account outside the country concerned, which makes it practically impossible for these local NGOs to get the funds into their accounts, even when approved in-country by the pooled-fund mechanism.

Among the most challenging situations nowadays are those protracted conflicts, areas where periods of relative stability alternate with moments of high-intensity clashes and violence, e.g. Ituri and the Kivus in eastern DRC or (parts of) South Sudan. Capacity-building of local institutions and civil society in such contexts is a matter especially for development actors, but their investments are few and far between. As soon as there is renewed fighting and instability, any possible development gains, if realised, are quickly undone.

Also among the limitations for scaling up rapidly are the measures that donors have taken to address the risk of corruption or fraud. Again, this risk will be amplified in armed conflict settings as environments will be even more challenging, and remote-control operations will make financial control and oversight less feasible. At the time of writing, there are strong rumours that several NGOs in Turkey undertaking cross-border operations into Syria are heavily

hit by fraud as they have been infiltrated by the local mafia. These rumours complement earlier reports implicating well-known international NGOs that operate in the Syrian region by remote management.[11] Yet, raising the issue of increased risks of corruption or fraud when involving locals is sensitive, as it may be perceived as stigmatising them as unreliable or unable to manage financial resources. It may also prompt donor governments to put (further) limitations on local procurement, thereby significantly raising the costs of aid operations.

Operational approaches: MSF's direct action model

MSF's default mode of programming is a "direct action" model, which involves mixed national and international teams in every project it runs (Hofman, 2014:1178). The organisation puts great emphasis on having a physical presence on the ground, including international staff, close to the epicentre of the crisis. This may often be in areas which are extremely insecure, and where few other (local or international) humanitarian actors are present.

MSF's operational model and contexts play a fundamental role in determining how the organisation interacts with local organisations. First, it should be recognised that working with local civil society actors is not in MSF's DNA. But before portraying MSF as opposed to working with local actors, it should be noted that the organisation has a long tradition of providing training to improve the technical skills of Ministry of Health (MoH) staff, and supporting MoH hospitals and health structures. However, when speaking with MSF representatives, several of them acknowledged that the organisation needs to do a better job in understanding the environment in which it works. Mapping local actors, in order to understand who is who, is not (yet) one of the organisation's strengths. As one representative noted: "We work on the basis of the acceptance from populations, but we forget that populations are not homogeneous. With the average length of an expat mission now at 5.4 months, developing a thorough understanding of local relationships becomes very hard. By the time one has developed this understanding, the mission of the expat is over."

More investment in understanding local societies is potentially beneficial, also in view of developing exit strategies

---

[11] See IRIN, US probe into Turkey-Syria aid corruption deepens, 9 May 2016. http://www.irinnews.org/news/2016/05/09/us-probe-turkey-syria-aid-corruption-deepens

Throughout the interviews for this paper, more investment in understanding local societies was identified as potentially beneficial, also in view of developing exit strategies. In 2015, the ICRC announced that it had abandoned the idea of leaving a country: as long as there is war in a country, there will be humanitarian needs. Many protracted wars alternate between low –and high– intensity conflicts. It is these situations that require both direct humanitarian responses to address immediate needs, and longer-term aid that strengthens local capacities. This point is one that the ICRC has spelled out further in a recent publication on protracted armed conflict, where it explains in detail that in protracted conflict humanitarian organisations should adapt to longer-term perspectives: "The longer the conflict lasts the more necessary it becomes to engage with people and communities at a structural level to enable their immediate survival and their ability to live in dignity in evidently deteriorating conditions." (ICRC, 2016:12).

This is a lofty but very ambitious direction. Combining short and long-term approaches within the same organisations and with limited funding is more easily said than done. Suggesting that humanitarian and development actors work closer together in a complementary fashion is not an argument for conflating these different approaches, as has been done by the WHS (HERE-Geneva, 2016:6). Hybrid models of operations in protracted crises and humanitarian contexts experiencing fluctuating levels of violence have been successfully explored by a number of organisations, including MSF. Such models require local partners, supported by development actors, to take on a more prominent service provision and assistance role in periods of reduced emergency levels, and for MSF teams to add a surge capacity in emergency periods.

Moreover, there are sector-related specificities to take into account: emergency medical care requires specialist knowledge and expertise which may be difficult to find. This is different from, for example, the distribution of non-food items, which can much more easily be taken over by a local organisation. In this sense, some MSF interviews noted healthcare promotion, vaccination campaigns and outreach activities as examples of activities that could be undertaken by well-trained local civil society groups and NGOs, depending on the context.

Hybrid models of operations in protracted crises and contexts experiencing fluctuating levels of violence have been successfully explored: local partners will take on a more prominent role in periods of reduced emergency levels and internationals will add a surge capacity in emergency periods

Within the large and diverse community of humanitarian actors, there are few organisations that operate a similar direct action model as MSF. Interviewed for this paper, one representative from the Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC) noted that his organisation holds a similar view on localisation as it also follows a model of direct implementation. Although the majority of NRC's in-country staff are also nationals of the country concerned, he noted that they will be accompanied by international staff to ensure that NRC's work, including on protection, will not be compromised. However, with humanitarian access severely challenged by the increasingly direct and indirect targeting of humanitarian workers and operations, remote management of local actors is becoming an established operational model within the humanitarian sector.

With humanitarian access being challenged by the increasingly direct and indirect targeting of humanitarian workers and operations, remote management of local actors is becoming an established operational model within the humanitarian sector

Working remotely, exclusively through local partners, is a measure of last resort for MSF, which should be temporary in nature. As a medical humanitarian organisation, MSF is used to rapid scale-up and onsite international deployment. Working with or through local actors takes more time, something the organisation is not necessarily used to doing, nor prepared to do, in light of imminent needs. In terms of MSF's experiences in remote operations, one context stands out. In Syria, MSF has found itself in an unfamiliar role as it is directly delivering medical care and increasingly providing technical, clinical and resource support to Syrian medical actors, as just one medical actor among many within a complex and dynamic network of medical service (Armstrong, 2016). While the latter is not entirely unique to Syria, nor to other (medical) international actors, it is a new and challenging role for MSF in many respects. Working as a part of a networked medical system has not typically been one of MSF's strengths. MSF is often among very few providers of healthcare in places where it works and, on top of this, medical systems are often non-existent in these areas. Whereas MSF has initially focused its support on assisting facilities to continue to function, especially by supplying them with drugs and resources, it will now seek deeper partnerships where the quality of care provided can be monitored and improved.

Conclusion

The largely ideological drive behind the localisation agenda has polarised the debate. Instead there should be a complementarity among the different approaches

This blanket endorsement lacks nuance, avoids a range of definitional issues, and overlooks the risk of the localisation agenda becoming counter-productive in the search for humanitarian space

The wide consensus seen at the WHS on making localisation a priority implies that those who question this agenda find themselves in a minority position – a position made all the more inconvenient by the largely ideological drive behind the call, which has polarised the debate. For any outsider (and no doubt for many insiders as well), settling the debate on the localisation of humanitarian aid does not necessarily appear all that complicated. There should be complementarity among the different approaches: direct action through international humanitarian staff on the ground, and remote programming and strengthening of local capacities.

The problem seems to have started with the blanket endorsement of localisation through the WHS and the Grand Bargain. This endorsement lacks nuance, avoids a range of definitional issues, and overlooks the risk of the localisation agenda becoming counter-productive in the search for humanitarian space. Most of all, it ignores the reality on the ground in a number of armed conflicts, where local capacities are few and far between and where expecting there to be adherence to humanitarian principles might be nothing short of utopian.

National and local humanitarian actors face several critical challenges when an armed conflict is taking place in their home country and their ability to implement the core humanitarian principles may be particularly challenged for a number of reasons. These may be intentional (e.g. from a conscious decision to privilege a particular group), unconscious (such as a repetition of culturally normalised patterns of exclusion), or driven by a (perceived) fear of immediate or future retaliation by local power actors towards the organisation, its members and/or their families. And it is also the case that striving to assess needs and provide assistance in an impartial manner may simply not be feasible for someone who is part of the local dynamics. In a situation of war, expectations as to the ability and willingness of local actors to implement the principled framework may need to be revisited altogether.

Moreover, in a number of acute humanitarian crises local capacities are few and far between, or their ability to scale up the existing capacity is limited, because of their localised reach and the small scale on which they are used to operating. In addition, the ability of local actors to extend their organisational reach and response may be severely limited because of the political situation on the ground. Many governments, especially those of countries in conflict, are keen to assert their sovereignty and to curtail fundamental civil society freedoms. Authorities are particularly likely to want

Before moving forward, there is one issue that should be reversed as a matter of priority: the political correctness with which a range of NGOs and others have promoted this agenda

to retain full control over aid and assistance when their political and social position is at risk. This could result in a very restricted and restrictive legal and institutional framework for local NGOs and civil society organisations to operate in, and ultimately could have a negative impact on the scale, type and quality of assistance that people in need will receive.

Before moving forward on the localisation agenda, there is one issue, however, that should be reversed as a matter of priority: the political correctness with which a range of NGOs and others have promoted this agenda. For both good and bad reasons, governments want to maintain control over what is happening in their countries, especially when they are embroiled in conflict. To assume that they will let go and not twist or manipulate the localisation agenda to their advantage would be naïve. While the localisation agenda is likely to add value in more permissive environments, it is not a magic bullet to address the gaps seen in humanitarian responses in armed conflict. Imposing this agenda in an unnuanced way on emergency operations in fragile and conflict settings is likely to produce suboptimal results for the people in need of immediate relief.

References

Armstrong, J. (2016). *Changes in medical practice in Syria: dilemmas and adaptations in medical facilities continually threatened by attack*. MSF (October 2016).

Carothers, T. and S. Brechenmacher (2014). *Closing space, democracy and human rights support under fire*. Carnegie Endowment for International Peace.

Castellarnau, M. and V. Stoianova (2016). Emergency Gap Series 01. *Emergency Gap: Humanitarian action critically wounded*. MSF (April 2016).

Civicus (2016). *State of civil society report.*

Darfur Consortium (2009). *One month on in Darfur and Sudan: the expulsion and suspension of international and national humanitarian and human rights organisations*. (April 2009).

Development Initiatives (2014). *Global Humanitarian Assistance Report.*

Development Initiatives (2015). *Global Humanitarian Assistance Report.*

DuBois, M. (2016). *Be careful what you wish for.* Opinion. IRIN (8 August 2016). Available at: https://www.irinnews.org/opinion/2016/08/08/be-careful-what-you-wish.

Gingerich, T.R., and M.J. Cohen (2016). T*urning the humanitarian system on its head.* Oxfam America (July 2016).

HERE-Geneva (2016). *On the Right Track? Reasserting the Priorities of Humanitarian Action.*

Hofman, M. and A. Heller Pérache (2014). *From remote control to remote management, to remote encouragement? The evolution of MSF's operational models in Somalia and Afghanistan.* International Review of the Red Cross (Vol. 96).

ICRC (2016). *Protracted conflict and humanitarian action: some recent ICRC experiences.* International Committee of the Red Cross, Geneva.

Mackintosh, K., and P. Duplat (2013). *Study of the impact of donor counter-terrorism measures on principled humanitarian action.* OCHA and NRC (July 2013).

OCHA (2011). *To stay and deliver: good practice for humanitarians in complex security environments.* Policy and Studies Series.

Schenkenberg van Mierop, E. (2016). *Coming clean on neutrality and independence, the need to assess the application of humanitarian principles.* International Review of the Red Cross (Vol 97).

Sphere Project et al. (2016). *As Local as Possible: Humanitarian Standards in Context, Joint Statement Global Humanitarian Standards Partnership.*

Tanner, L., and L. Moro. *Missed out: the role of local actors in the humanitarian response in the South Sudan conflict,* report commissioned by a consortium of UK-based international non-governmental organisations (April 2016).

United Nations (2015). *Restoring humanity, global voices calling for action. Synthesis of the consultation process for the World Humanitarian Summit.*

Wall, I. and K. Hedlund (2016). *Localisation and locally-led crisis response: A literature review.* Available at: http://www.local2global.info/area-studies/localisation-and-locally-led-crisis-response.