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Localisation and Decolonisation: the difference that makes the difference

Localisation: definitions and critiques

According to the UN InterAgency Standing Committee, localisation "enables the meaningful engagement and leadership of local and national actors in humanitarian response, enhancing capacity exchange and increasing direct funding." Following the Grand Bargain, the focus of localisation efforts has been on (1) Engagement and leadership of local actors in humanitarian coordination; (2) Agreeing on minimum standards/arrangements to strengthen the sharing of capacity, and (3) Supporting efforts to increase and channel more direct funds to local NGOs.

The IASC did not precisely define localisation, instead asking IASC members and Grand Bargain signatories to define the term themselves, develop a localisation strategy, and operationalise the localisation agenda.

While there have been many critiques of the implementation of the Grand Bargain agreement, including the poor progress made in funding local CSOs, this paper will focus on the critiques made by some Global South activists about the localisation agenda itself.

Based on various consultations Peace Direct has had with activists and practitioners from the Global South over the past two years, the critiques of localisation centre on the following arguments:

- First, the emphasis on 'engagement of local actors in humanitarian coordination structures' centres around Global North actors and their decision-making power,
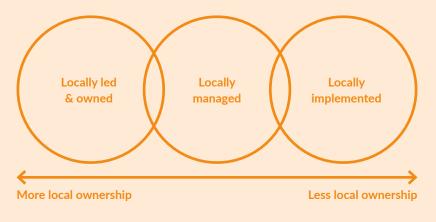
Purpose

The purpose of this discussion paper is to outline Peace Direct's understanding of the concepts of localisation and decolonisation, two terms that are at risk of being used interchangeably, specifically in relation to humanitarian, development, or peacebuilding actions.

rather than centering the Global South actors. It implies that Global South actors remain passive recipients of the discretionary goodwill of Global North actors who have to consider how to engage with Global South actors, even though Global North actors are visitors and guests in the Global South.

- Second, to *localise* suggests *transforming* something that was imported (i.e. humanitarian intervention) into something that is more locally managed. While there is much truth in this definition, given the dominance of international agencies in humanitarian action, the act of transposing international for local humanitarian action risks reducing the localisation agenda into a technocratic exercise in identifying local implementing partners for specific humanitarian activities, rather than a more holistic approach to supporting genuinely locally owned civil society efforts. Peace Direct has used the below diagram, developed in 2014 but still relevant today, to illustrate the different aspects of 'local'. According to this diagram, much of the localisation agenda only fits into the right hand and centre circles, with almost no focus on the left circle.

Local peacebuilding

Local peacebuilding in this report refers to peacebuilding initiatives owned and led by people in their own context. It includes small-scale grassroots initiatives, as well as activities undertaken on a wider scale. Peace Direct distinguishes between initiatives that are (1) locally led and owned, where local people and groups design the approach and set priorities, while outsiders assist with resources; (2) locally managed, where the approach comes from the outside, but is "transplanted" to local management; or (3) locally implemented, primarily an outside approach, including external priorities that local people or organisations are supposed to implement.

Locally led & owned   Locally managed   Locally implemented

More local ownership ←→ Less local ownership

- Third, the failure to define localisation, along with what constitutes a 'local' organisation, has created a perverse incentive for INGOs to reposition themselves and their country offices as 'local', thereby undermining the spirit of the localisation agenda. Worse still, some Global South practitioners and actors fear that there may be a 'gold rush' of INGOs establishing themselves in-country and registering as a local entity in order to future proof their access to donor funding by claiming local ownership, while benefitting from the INGO brand, infrastructure, capacity, funding, and networks. Many local actors already believe that the term has been co-opted by INGOs wishing to participate in the localisation debate but who do not want to make any meaningful changes to their own organisations.

- Finally, one of the biggest critiques of the localisation agenda is that it fails to address the underlying structural problems which have given rise to such an imbalance of power in the current system in the first place. Issues of structural racism and power are almost completely absent in localisation conversations, giving the impression that they don't matter or aren't an ever-present impediment to progress.

As a result of the reasons outlined above, there are many local organisations who would prefer to scrap the term 'localisation' altogether, and instead focus on supporting locally-led development and local leadership.

Decolonisation

The decolonising agenda, which first emerged from Global South activists and academics (including those from the decoloniality movement), is a radical departure from other forces for change in the recent past in that it attempts to address the fundamental structural issues of racism and power that are seen as root causes of the problems in the system. As highlighted in Peace Direct's 'Time to Decolonise Aid' report, structural and overt racism has been a taboo subject in the humanitarian, development, and peacebuilding sectors up until very recently.

The definition of decolonisation used in 'Time to Decolonise Aid' was, "deconstructing and dismantling colonial-era and neo colonial ideologies of the superiority and privilege of Western thought and approaches." While the global consultation that Peace Direct held with local activists pointed to differences in understanding of the term in some contexts (for example Francophone Africa), the participants of the consultation agreed that it was a useful general term for the current emphasis on tackling the ongoing neo-colonial attitudes that exist within the system. Moreover, participants were clear that *transformation of the system cannot take place without an acknowledgement of the way in which the structural racism is both embedded in the system and how it has evolved from the earliest moments of international intervention.* In this way, tackling structural racism can be seen as the most important decolonising act an organisation can take.

The diagram below, taken from 'Time to Decolonise Aid' shows how structural racism shows up in the humanitarian, development, and peacebuilding sectors, as viewed by participants.

Looking at the diagram, the nine manifestations of structural racism are a helpful reminder of how decolonising differs from localisation. Localisation looks at the inequities in the system with one eye closed, looking solely at a small handful of the symptoms of the problem (such as lack of funding and unequal partnerships) without asking the difficult questions about the deeply problematic assumptions and attitudes that gave rise to the problem (i.e. the centre circle) and which continue to underpin the system. Localisation also fails to address other symptoms of the problem as outlined in the diagram, such as the relationships between donors and INGOs, the recruitment practices and language used by Global North organisations, the way in which knowledge is generated and valued, and the organisational strategies and structures of INGOs.

Recruitment
Implicit bias in recruiting western educated, white staff into management positions over locally educated staff

Strategies
INGO emphasis on professionalisation and impartiality that implicitly devalue local knowledge and ways of working. Organisational strategies that prioritise income growth and expansion of staffing/activities over shifting power to local actors

Fundraising
INGO fundraising/ communications that portray people in the Global South as helpless and without agency, to generate sympathy and funding, and to reinforce the notion of the white saviour or 'professional' INGO

Knowledge Generation and Analysis
Implicit preference for western led analysis of contexts in the Global South. This includes the dominance of western models of monitoring and evaluation.

Partnerships with local actors
Donors and INGOs seeking 'implementing partners' and establishing disempowering partnerships that focus on a contractor-contractee relationship

Attitudes
Donor and INGO assumptions of the inherent neutrality of their work; that local communities lack capacity and skills and require external training; that local communities can't be trusted to manage funds

Funding
Calls for proposals limited to western INGOs or NGOs of a certain size and structure; due diligence requirements that exclude local organisations; lower risk threshold when dealing with local orgs.

Organisational Structures
Establishment and maintenance of INGO country offices which extend and entrench the INGO footprint rather than reducing it over time

Relationships
Establishing networks and ways of working that privilege relationships with people from the Global North, including informal discussions where resource allocation decisions are made

Language
References to low capacity of local actors and 'beneficiaries'; of 'least developed' countries; risks of fraud and mismanagement

The role of decolonisation in systems change

The Grand Bargain and subsequent localisation efforts can be seen as an attempt to change the international aid 'system' by changing some of the metrics within it, such as funding for local actors, as well as changing some of the rules of the system, such as how partnerships are envisaged between Global North and Global South actors. Most systems thinkers would argue that while changing some of the rules of the system is a powerful lever for change, changing metrics (such as the amount of funding for local actors) isn't likely to shift the system if the underlying values, mindsets, and behaviours don't change. They argue that changing the mindsets and paradigms of key change agents within the system is one of the most important leverage points in any system. Tackling structural racism involves a fundamental change in mindset, values, and paradigms, hence the decolonising agenda being such an important leverage point for systems change and one of the most urgent issues of our times.

Conclusion

The emphasis on localisation that emerged from the Grand Bargain has been a step in the right direction towards an international humanitarian system that is fit for purpose. However, it is wholly inadequate if conceived as the means to achieve wider systems change. It may also explain why the commitments made as part of the Grand Bargain have not materialised, since the underlying assumptions and mindsets of those who hold power have not changed. Localisation, even if only using the narrow parameters set by the IASC, is only likely to succeed if situated within a deeper conversation about power and structural racism, a conversation that the decolonising agenda has helped bring to the surface.

Useful Peace Direct resources

Reports

Time to Decolonise Aid (2021):

www.peacedirect.org/publications/timetodecoloniseaid/

Race, Power and Peacebuilding (2022):
www.peacedirect.org/publications/race-power-and-peacebuilding/

Blogs

Are country offices preventing us from decolonising development?

www.bond.org.uk/news/2021/05/are-country-offices-preventing-us-from-decolonising-development

Dear USAID; let's make sure that 'local' really means 'local'

www.bond.org.uk/news/2021/11/dear-usaid-lets-make-sure-that-local-really-means-local

Decolonising at a crossroads:

www.bond.org.uk/news/2022/01/its-2022-and-decolonising-aid-finds-itself-at-a-crossroads-which-path-will-you-take