Localization: Why Language Matters

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The humanitarian sector is known for often coining buzzwords, a term or phrase that is made popular for a particular time or context. For individuals who are outside of the humanitarian sector, many of these terms are unfamiliar and can seem unclear. One of the buzzwords that has gained traction within the past few years is *localization*, a concept defined by transitioning ownership, decision-making powers, and service duties to local populations. If you have been in the company of humanitarian practitioners within recent years, you may have heard this term described as a newer and more effective approach to humanitarian actions. Localization has been promoted as a solution to ensuring the longevity and sustainability of humanitarian actions — but what is it exactly?

Humanitarian Actions

Humanitarian Actions are responses that assist people affected by disasters or conflict and enhance the safeguarding of their rights through provision of essential goods and services, building resilience, advocacy, and supporting recovery.

What is Localization?

In the simplest terms, localization means empowering local populations — responders, program participants, and the surrounding impacted communities — to lead and deliver humanitarian aid.[1] It is an open-ended, transformational process that results in a shift to individual communities. The localization process aims at increasing reach, effectiveness, and accountability in humanitarian action by transferring decision-making powers to local actors and complementing already existing local resources. HIAS puts localization into practice through a process of direct engagement, respect, and deference to local actors and stakeholders in the definition, design, and delivery of humanitarian action including potentially transferring all programming roles to local actors.

The Importance of Localization

Partnering with local actors is not a new concept, though the formal commitment to engagement with them in humanitarian action occurred at The World Humanitarian Summit in 2016, which resulted in the launch of The Grand Bargain. The Grand Bargain is a collective commitment by donors, international/regional organizations, and UN agencies to *improve the efficiency and efficacy of humanitarian action and to put more resources into the hands of people in need*.[2] The summit resulted in pledges (made by Member States, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), UN agencies, and inter-governmental organizations) to share the resource burdens of communities that host the largest proportions of displaced populations by ensuring resources go directly to where they are needed. It concluded with setting 51 commitments[3] for improving transparency, efficiency, efficacy, and participation, and localization was one of them. The commitment to localization calls for all humanitarian actions to be "*as local as possible and as international as necessary.*"[4]

The process of localization entails a conscious and strategic transfer of decision-making powers from traditional, international apparatuses to local communities, community-based organizations, and leadership structures. This decision-making power relates to all aspects of humanitarian action: what the services will be, who will lead and who will receive services, the timing of administration, the local area in which it occurs, and how the services are administered.

Localization highlights the importance of humanitarian actions being driven by communities affected by the issue at hand, not by international geo-political and socio-political factors. It prioritizes the international community making resources available to the people who need them with no strings attached and trusting the capacities of communities to make decisions in their own best interest. International actors' roles should be limited to responding to and closing gaps only as defined by impacted communities. This is much easier said than done as it requires organization

and the ability to articulate demands, as well as clarity on who represents impacted communities and clear mechanisms for seeking input from community members. This approach can be difficult, in part, because the humanitarian landscape has its own challenges with efforts to equitably represent communities which can sometimes result in negative outcomes or benefit only certain community members. While localization must be driven by communities, in practice, the process may initially be imperfect.

Localization is a continuous process, not a project, a goal, an end, or type of funding arrangement. Although difficult to measure, it may be possible to note the benchmarks or to quantify the resources invested in the process. The process of localization is characterized by flexible objectives and timeframes, larger initial investment of resources, use of local infrastructure, and a local knowledge base. Smaller, shorter-term partnerships in support of a larger strategic goal are also driven by those communities involved in the process.

Why Language Matters

Localization, like many approaches within humanitarian action, is a concept that many agree is important but only few can say what it is. In fact, many practitioners use localization interchangeably with several other interrelated terms.

The localization process consists of local individuals, communities, networks, and organizations setting their own agendas, developing solutions, and building the capacity, leadership, and resources to make those solutions a reality.[5] As such, there is a long way to go before we can assert that the humanitarian sector has "fully" embraced localization. Therefore, it is important to recognize how using these terms loosely can hinder critical reflections on the process. Conflating language can lead to challenges and tensions to localization efforts. Here are a few examples of common terms that are typically conflated with localization and how this conflation can affect the process. Although these terms are related to the concept of localization, they do not necessarily mean the same thing.

"*Local actors*" *are any entity that operates at the local level*. The term is also one of the many broad,

confusing, and potentially misleading phrases in the localization field. On the surface, the term seems self-explanatory, however, within the context of displacement, the term local itself loses its traditional meaning, which is someone of, or habitually residing in, a certain location. Within this context, several questions arise: are displaced persons local? Local in relation to who? Do displaced and host communities both count as local? Where do we draw the line on who is considered local or not local? For example, if a U.S. humanitarian practitioner is working with Afghan evacuees in the United States, who would be considered the local actor? Some might consider the practitioner a local actor, but not the evacuees; while others would say both parties are now local actors since the evacuees are residing within the country.

"*Locally led organizations*" *implies programming is led by organizations and people close to the issues being addressed*.[6] But in many instances, the actual decision-making power rests in the hands of behind-the-scenes power brokers (also colloquially referred to among local communities as "puppet masters.") The phrase creates the impression that humanitarian action is led by "locals" without any evidence of them holding actual decision-making power.

Some of the most common practices that are disguised under the term "locally led organizations" includes having a national head of organization "advised" by international "experts"; local organizations headed by persons from the diaspora, often handpicked by donor agencies; and programs designed based on needs identified through expatriate "expertise."

"*Local partnerships*" *are any form of bilateral or multilateral engagement with any entity in the geo-socio-political parameters of a humanitarian action*. Local partnerships do not always mean localization as there is no direct correlation between local partnerships and local communities being decision-makers. Local communities may take part in the partnership, but they are not always the drivers of the process. The most common example of such an arrangement is when an international organization(s) partners with a local NGO/CSO into a consortium due to donor requirements. The local organizations are not the primary decision-making bodies and can be seen as just a means of fulfilling requirements.

The terms "partnerships" or "working with local partners" refer to a relationship between two or more entities, bound by resources and time, to achieve a specific goal.[7] These terms are characterized by well-defined parameters of the beginning and end of the partnership. These parameters, however, may or may not be defined by local communities. They are often driven by the political and humanitarian policies of donor entities. Working with local partners is an important building block of localization, but the two are not the same. For instance: a sub-award agreement to respond to a specific service gap is partnership with local entities. However, without further efforts and commitments, it does not mean localization.

Using the above and similar terms interchangeably with localization can often result in humanitarian practitioners believing that they have been implementing the concept for a long time. Practitioners may have been incorporating some elements of localization in their work but claiming to have "implemented" localization in its entirety can impede true localization efforts and create a false sense of success.

Approaches to Localization

To mitigate some of the issues with language misuse and conflating concepts, humanitarian practitioners should ensure that they are educated on what localization is, through the participation of local trainings and direct engagement with local actors. Each humanitarian context is unique, and that determines the type and level of engagement in the localization sphere. Practitioners' mindfulness, thorough understanding of local capacity, and the potential for more effective, sustainable, and culturally appropriate responses is a key to a stronger outcome.

It must also be recognized that progress in this area will be much slower than expected. Localization strategies are not "one size fits all." It will differ depending on country, service, and program. Strategy execution can be difficult and mandated expectations and high costs may be barriers. This means that while some localization elements may have been incorporated into

the humanitarian work, it is unlikely that a thorough transition has been made. As such, more international investment is needed for the long-term institutional capacity of local actors. To advance localization, it is also important to identify and encourage strong internal drivers. Studies suggest that external pressure from powerful stakeholders (including host governments and donors) is also necessary to force the transformative change.[8]

The push to increase the direct participation in decision-making by affected populations is not new. Rights-based programming and community-based programming are two of the many approaches used to this effect:

Rights-Based Programming[9]

A humanitarian principle that frames humanitarian aid as a human right and an obligation (not a burden) and affected people as participants (not passive recipients).

Community-Based Programming[10]

A principle that acknowledges the resourcefulness of communities and the material, intellectual, and socio-political value they add to programming.

Both approaches focus on using the inputs from communities to complement the international communities' efforts and to ensure that the local knowledge and experience are actively considered in programming. Humanitarian organizations should continue to use these approaches to help reverse the traditional, top-down systems and enable local communities to participate in decision-making.

In contrast to some traditional approaches, where international organizations influence policy or practice and local communities are the beneficiaries, localization focuses on the systematic transfer of decision-making powers from international to local actors. If successful, localization reverses the traditional roles of local communities. It facilitates local communities' access to resources and builds their capacities to transition from participants to decision-makers.

HIAS' Approach

HIAS sees localization as one of its priorities. HIAS is also committed to facilitating localization at all levels of engagement, with key strategic priorities to help achieve this goal. HIAS plans to create a knowledge base to inform policy and educate HIAS staff and external partners on localization. HIAS is cognizant of the effects of language and discourse on policy and practice. This explainer is the first of many educational materials and avenues HIAS will be employing to advance its localization agenda with the goal of more critical thinking, conscious analysis, and the ability to see beyond words.

About the Center

The HIAS Center for Refugee Policy seeks to advance the rights of refugees and displaced people across the globe by publishing research and policy analysis, generating new policy-relevant ideas, and bringing new voices to the public conversation. The Center leverages HIAS' global presence and over a century of experience to provide practical responses and policy solutions to the most pressing challenges concerning displaced populations.

Contact

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Endnotes

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Protect the refugee.