



SHABAKA WORKING PAPER

Delivering Localisation: Lessons from Diaspora Humanitarians

'As local as possible, as international as necessary'
– transnational action and localisation of aid.



AUG 2023

Executive Summary

Following the 2023 Grand Bargain Annual Meeting in Geneva on 19 and 20 June 2023, this working paper explores the limitations of localisation in the humanitarian sector and challenges to its implementation. It also examines the role of diaspora humanitarians, who are already 'doing' localisation in many ways.

At the 2016 World Humanitarian Summit, governments, institutional humanitarian partners, and civil society groups committed to reforming the humanitarian sector by increasing the 'localisation' of humanitarian resources and decision-making in crisis-affected areas. Such commitments included allocating at least 25% of humanitarian resources to local partners by 2020 ([IASC, 2021a](#)).

However, despite Grand Bargain signatories recognising that more progress was needed in 2021, things have not so much stalled as gone backwards. In 2020, only 5% of funds were locally allocated ([New Humanitarian, 2023](#)). In 2022, only 0.4% of humanitarian funding for food security was channelled to South Sudanese NGOs ([CAFOD, 2023](#)), and less than 0.003% was allocated to local civil society groups in the case of Ukraine ([National Network of Local Philanthropy Development in Ukraine, 2022](#)).

Indeed, frustrated at the slow pace of change across the sector, a group of

INGOs agreed in October 2022 to the Pledge for Change, attempting to instigate more equitable partnerships with local civil society organisations, and are increasingly seeking ways to move from commitments to reality ([New Humanitarian, 2022](#)). Some donors, such as USAID, have made ambitious new localisation policy statements and targets, including the target of 25% of all US humanitarian assistance going to local NGOs in crisis-affected countries by 2025 ([USAID, 2023a](#); [Devex, 2023](#)).

Drawing on experiences from the current Sudan crisis, we argue that localisation is being driven from below by civil society groups (and their diaspora humanitarian partners) within the Sudanese context. Due to the deteriorating security situation and lack of secure aid corridors, humanitarian access in Sudan remains extremely challenging. In the absence of a large-scale response from institutional humanitarian partners, few international organisations are still operating in Sudan, and some donors are even turning, in new ways, to grassroots Sudanese civil society groups and networks to deliver humanitarian assistance.

This builds on the experiences of Sudanese diaspora, who have invested time, money, and skills--and shared risks-- over the last ten years to build trust and relationships with grassroots civil society groups in the country, who have a close knowledge of local contexts, needs, opportunities, and challenges.



We also argue the need for a greater emphasis on the complementarity of humanitarian activities and capacities between institutional partners, local civil society, and diaspora humanitarian actors. To achieve this, we suggest a number of recommendations.



Recommendations

01

Business as usual is no longer an option.

With growing humanitarian needs worldwide and increasing pressure on humanitarian financing, all humanitarian partners must not only embrace localisation as a slogan, but actually deliver on it. Failure to do so risks further fragmentation of the humanitarian system, and creating a culture of distrust and a lack of credibility; this requires leadership and vision on the part of the international humanitarian sector. Near Network has published a [useful Localisation Performance Measurement Framework](#) to monitor delivery of localisation commitments ([NEAR Network, 2019](#)).

02

Local civil society and local communities should be at the heart of humanitarian response.

This requires real dialogue with local communities, local civil society, and diaspora humanitarians on their perspectives and experiences of local needs and meeting these in crisis-affected areas, including those of less formally organised groups and networks.

03

Learn from local civil society and diaspora partners.

There should be a focus on the complementarity of activities and adding value to areas of comparative advantage. If humanitarian partners continue to favour established ways of working with local partners in the Global South, they risk both missing innovative approaches proposed by local partners and blocking new ideas from flourishing.

04

Treat local civil society, local communities, and diasporas as equal partners.

There should be a focus on the complementarity of activities and adding value to areas of comparative advantage. If humanitarian partners continue to favour established ways of working with local partners in the Global South, they risk both missing innovative approaches proposed by local partners and blocking new ideas from flourishing.



05

Invest In local civil society and diaspora humanitarian partners in the Global South and Global North

Such investment should include systems, processes, organisational capacities, staff upskilling, and leadership of local civil society partners and diaspora humanitarians 'there', in the Global South, as well as 'here', in the Global North.

06

Don't hide behind technical jargon and organisational systems and processes.

Increased flexibility in the application of institutional systems and mandates is needed when working with local civil society and diaspora partners to facilitate sustainable partnerships, trust building, and sharing of resources.

07

Share resources—and risks—with local civil society partners and diaspora humanitarians.

This can include funding schemes dedicated to piloting new approaches to supporting the localisation of aid, as well as access to resources to scale up responses in times of crisis. Donors and institutional humanitarian partners also need to modify their risk management strategies to share risks more equitably with local civil society partners and diasporas.

08

Recognise diaspora humanitarian activities as part of the Grand Bargain process.

The Grand Bargain process and framework does not explicitly recognise or reference diaspora humanitarian activities. Thus, in order to align this process and framework with the 2015 SDGs and Addis Action Agenda, future iterations of the Grand Bargain should address this gap by explicitly recognising diaspora contributions to humanitarian response and their support for, and partnerships with, local civil society partners.



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1. Introduction

In this paper, we explore some of the limitations of localisation in the humanitarian sector and the challenges inherent to implementing the localisation agenda. We also examine the role of diaspora humanitarians, who are already ‘doing’ localisation in many ways, and consider how they, and the broader humanitarian sector, could learn from one another to achieve more effective humanitarian (and development) outcomes.

At the 2016 World Humanitarian Summit in Istanbul, governments, institutional humanitarian partners, and civil society groups committed to reforming the humanitarian sector by increasing the ‘localisation’ of humanitarian resources and looking to the decision-making of local (or at least national) actors in crisis-affected areas--i.e., governments, civil society, and local communities (IASC, 2021b). The discussions highlighted the transformations needed to enable local and national actors to play a greater role in leading humanitarian action, which were outlined in three major sets of commitments endorsed at the summit: the [Agenda for Humanity](#) (2016), the [Grand Bargain](#) (2016), and the [Charter for Change](#) (2015).

The Grand Bargain, in particular, was launched by ‘some of the largest donors and humanitarian organisations who have committed to get more



means into the hands of people in need and to improve the effectiveness and efficiency of the humanitarian action’ (IASC, 2020). This included a commitment to allocate at least 25% of humanitarian resources to local partners by 2020, alongside strengthening transparency and accountability in humanitarian aid (Ibid.).

In 2021, the fifth year of the Grand Bargain, signatories recognised that more progress was needed. Thus, they agreed the Grand Bargain 2.0 with the reframed objectives of: ‘Better humanitarian outcomes for affected populations through enhanced efficiency, effectiveness, and greater accountability, in the spirit of quid pro quo as relevant to all’ (IASC, 2020). Two enabling priorities were agreed to achieve this objective and measure progress: ‘(i) A critical mass of quality funding is reached that allows an effective and efficient response,

ensuring visibility and accountability (ii) Greater support is provided for the leadership, delivery and capacity of local responders and the participation of affected communities in addressing humanitarian needs' (IASC, 2021b).

However, despite Grand Bargain signatories recognising that more progress was needed in 2021, the 25% target has still yet to be reached. Using this metric, progress has not so much stalled, but gone backwards: in 2020, approximately 5% of humanitarian resources were allocated to local actors, which dropped to 3.4% in 2021, and was less than 0.1% in 2022 in the case of the Ukraine crisis (New Humanitarian, 2023; National Network of Local Philanthropy Development in Ukraine, 2022). In South Sudan, only 0.4% of humanitarian funding for food security is directly channelled to South Sudanese NGOs, despite the fact that they are the most effective at tackling hunger (CAFOD, 2023).

While the proportion of resources allocated locally has reduced, local civil society groups, communities, and the diaspora are still doing critical work and being increasingly vocal about disparities in the sector (NEAR Network, 2021). Indeed, frustrated at the slow pace of change across the sector, a group of INGOs agreed in October 2022 to the Pledge for Change, attempting to instigate more equitable partnerships with local civil society organisations, and are increasingly seeking ways to move from commitments to reality (New Humanitarian, 2022).

Some donors, such as USAID, have made ambitious new localisation policy statements and targets, including the aim of 25% of all US humanitarian assistance going to local NGOs in crisis-affected countries by 2025 (USAID, 2023a; Devex, 2023).



The objective of the Annual Grand Bargain meeting in Geneva on 19 and 20 June 2023 was two-fold: taking stock of progress vis-à-vis Grand Bargain 2.0 commitments and agreeing to the operationalisation of the new iteration of the Grand Bargain by identifying the key actions signatories will need to undertake collectively or individually, as well as building on the caucus outcomes delivered in 2022 and 2023 (IASC, 2023).

The 2023 independent review of the Grand Bargain identifies four long-standing challenges to implementing Grand Bargain 2.0 commitments and delivering localisation: poor data (with inconsistent methodologies used to measure progress as well as 'creative reporting'), no systematic connection at the country level, lack of incentives





for change, and lack of confidence in the quid pro quo that localisation promises ([Metcalf-Hough et al., 2023](#)).

Progress reported by signatories vis-à-vis the Grand Bargain 2.0 framework and indicators is welcome, as is the focus on the humanitarian-development (-peace) nexus, despite resistance from signatories querying its feasibility, as the Grand Bargain process focuses on and engages with humanitarian rather than development actors ([IASC, 2023](#)). Among other 'elephants in the room', tension also remains between the honest reporting of reality for local and diaspora humanitarian partners and the need to maintain consensus among signatories and stakeholders in the process itself.

In addition, the Grand Bargain process makes no reference to diaspora as significant humanitarian responders in their own right, and arguably remains confused about their position in the humanitarian ecosystem: are they 'local' or 'international', neither, or both? This gap is all the more surprising given that the 2015 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and the Addis Action Agenda financing them both recognise diaspora as development partners. Future iterations of the Grand Bargain should address this gap by explicitly recognising diaspora contributions to humanitarian response and their support for, and partnerships with, local civil society partners.

2. Localisation in theory and practice

The moral and ethical case for localisation is widely accepted across the sector, and is difficult to gainsay. Indeed, the terms of this sector-wide debate have largely moved from ‘should we localise?’ to ‘how do we deliver localisation?’ This trend, as shown by commitments from institutional humanitarian and civil society partners in the Global North to better support their counterparts in Global South, is a welcome one.

As ever, however, the devil is in the details—localise how exactly, and who? The modalities of ‘operationalising’ localisation, and the technical language of accountability and transparency deployed, can seem at times like special pleading from a sector unwilling or unable to change. Humanitarian (and development) agencies in the Global North appear to have embraced localisation, judging by the dizzying output of articles,

guidance and manuals on the topic (c.f., inter alia, DG ECHO’s [2023 guidance on localisation](#); USAID’s [localisation publications](#) and [policy announcements](#); [ICVA, 2019](#); [ICVA, 2021](#); [IASC, 2022](#)). Still, progress delivering on commitments to localise aid remains too slow ([Metcalf-Hough et al., 2023](#)).

The reasons for this are complex and multilayered, but sketching some of the contours is worthwhile. Firstly, systems change is often a necessarily slow, methodical process—the analogy of turning a super tanker is apt. The international humanitarian aid architecture has evolved over decades, often in response to critical events, to move large amounts of relief to affected areas and balance (however imperfectly) competing national, international, and political and geostrategic pressures ([ICVA, 2018](#)).



The humanitarian sector--at the international, national, and local levels--has also understandably prided itself on professionalising humanitarian response ([Walker and Russ, 2021](#) ; [Downham, 2021](#); c.f. also [Fechter and Schwittay, 2020](#)). Secondly, and relatedly, the concept of 'aid' is often anchored in, and freighted with, norms of ensuring value for money and efficiency, especially when taxpayers' money is concerned ([Jackson, 2012](#); [ActionAid, 2017](#); [FCDO, 2019](#)).

Thirdly, sector-wide aspirations and pushes for improvement--especially in terms of strengthening accountability and transparency--are also a driver, as well as increasingly a challenge, for how institutional humanitarian partners and INGOs operationalise localisation ([ICVA, 2018](#); [IASC, 2018](#)). Based on discussions with Global North civil society partners and INGOs, there is growing awareness of and commitment to the substantial investment in capacity, systems strengthening, and risk-sharing between civil society partners both 'there', in the Global South, and 'here', in the Global North, that is required (c.f. [ICVA.HLA, 2018](#); [Howe, Munive, & Rosenstock, 2019](#); [GISF, 2020](#)). It also raises important questions such as accountability for whom? Is it for institutional humanitarian partners, Global North taxpayers, or local communities affected by crises ([CSE, 2023](#))?



3. Challenging or normalising the global aid architecture?

Debates over localisation also underscore the structural inequalities seen in the humanitarian and development sectors, and reflect the broader historical structural inequalities of race, gender, economy, geo-politics, and power between the 'Global North' and 'Global South' ([Robillard, Atim, & Maxwell, 2021](#)). Such debates are also profoundly shaped by experiences of failure (and success) in the humanitarian sector--from Congo to Myanmar, from Haiti to Somalia--as well as broader debates on social, political, and cultural issues ([OXFAM, 2021](#); [ALNAP, 2021](#)).

The death of George Floyd at the hands of the police in the US in 2020, combined with the resurgence of the Black Lives Matter movement and calls for decolonisation across many Global North institutions, have been particularly influential in discussions of localisation, as has (perhaps to a lesser extent) the #MeToo movement ([Barbelet, 2021](#); [Gopal, 2021](#); [ALNAP, 2022](#)). This reflects both the recognition of many aid institutions' colonial roots and de facto neo-colonial positions in some developing countries, and attempts to tackle racial and gender discrimination and improve safeguarding in the sector in response to a series of scandals ([Patel, 2021](#); [Currion, 2020](#)).

Despite the localisation agenda's widespread adoption by institutional humanitarian and civil society partners, there have also been powerful critiques at the conceptual and operational level. Arguably, one of the most trenchant of these is that localisation remains centred on and reifies the 'international' aid sector's position vis a vis the 'local' ([Barbelet, 2018](#); [Fast and Bennett, 2020](#); [Melis and Apthorpe, 2020](#); [Pincock et al., 2020](#); [Roepstorff, 2020](#)). Indeed, most work on localisation has been driven by international actors and does not adequately centre local actors ([Metcalf-Hough et al., 2020](#); [Robillard et al., 2020](#)).



Another important area of critique for localisation relates to the lack of evidence. As an IRC review noted, there remains little evidentiary baseline for the impact or outcome of localisation, as most literature is focused on defining the issue and measuring progress against high-level commitments rather than assessing the impact, effectiveness, and efficiency of humanitarian action (IRC, 2019). Moreover, evidence on the impact of localisation relies on evidence from more formalised local civil society groups; ‘the perceptions of individuals and communities do not significantly inform analysis and recommendations’ (Barbelet et al., 2021: 22). This is a major concern for many in the sector, especially local civil society and diaspora humanitarian partners, who argue that localisation discourses all too often ignore local perspectives and needs (c.f. CSE, 2023; Els, 2019; Gómez, 2021). This reinforces the perception--and, all too often, the reality--that localisation is being led from above rather than built from the grassroots up.

Indeed, as Barbelet notes,

“While localisation is promoted by some as a way to fundamentally transform power in the humanitarian system, it has been criticised by others for not going far enough, for being too technocratic or for creating perverse incentives and adverse impacts. Many of these arguments reflect concerns about motivations behind the embrace of the localisation agenda and wider critiques of the colonial inheritances and continuing inequalities of the humanitarian system”. (Barbelet et al., 2021: 26)

This underscores another powerful challenge to localisation discourses: they can be a way to avoid more difficult conversations about power and discrimination (Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, 2019; Jayawickrama and Rehman, 2018). Related to this is the idea that the sector’s technical jargon helps obscure what Ferguson famously described as ‘aid as an anti-politics machine’ (Ferguson in Sharma and Gupta, 2009). While the politicisation of aid is outside this article’s scope, it can be argued that localisation is inherently political.



Localisation is also not only about ensuring maximum efficiency and value for money--key considerations for taxpayer-funded national and international aid budgets--but also power and decision making (c.f. [Knox-Clarke, 2015](#); HAG and Pujiono Centre, 2019; Howe and Stites, 2019).

To take another, more 'operational', example, the international aid system typically operates in a handful of languages--English, French, Spanish, and other official UN languages such as Arabic, Chinese, and Russian to a lesser extent--even in crisis-affected areas. This not only excludes 'local' civil society actors who do not speak these languages from key strategic and operational discussions, but also narrows the aid sector's recruitment pool to elites educated in such languages. The sector's technocratic terminology and jargon can also further exclude local (and diaspora) humanitarian actors from participating.

Humanitarian assistance (and longer-term development) has never been the sole preserve of states or intergovernmental and multilateral institutions such as UN agencies. Indeed, a proliferation of formal and informal civil society organisations and networks have arisen to help address the impact of state failures in delivering basic services or responding to crises. Communities and individuals organised as groups and networks--broadly conceptualised as 'civil society'--also have a long history of responding to humanitarian and

development needs in both their local area and further afield, mobilising resources and advocating for change (Fechter and Scwittay, 2020).

Social activism and transnational action have long underpinned these community and civil society responses (c.f. Gopal, 2019). Interestingly for our purposes here, diaspora communities are critical links in this process, as their transnational networks and activities help connect communities and social movements across different parts of the world (Ibid.). The concept of 'citizen aid' also remains poorly understood, and researchers and practitioners disagree on whether this forms a subset of civil society or is better understood as a separate, fourth category (Fechter and Schwittay, 2020).



4. Diaspora and localisation: learning from the experiences of diaspora humanitarians



Diaspora humanitarianism as a phenomenon remains relatively understudied. Still, a growing and impressive body of evidence demonstrates that diaspora actors operate across the humanitarian-development-peace nexus, supporting pre-crisis resilience building, emergency response (in person and remotely) during crises, and post-crisis reconstruction (c.f., *inter alia*, [Hammond, 2011](#); [DEMAC, 2016](#); [DEMAC, 2018](#); [Hassan et al., 2021](#); [Kleist, 2021](#); [EU DiF, 2022](#)). Arguably, diaspora remittances are also the pioneer of the cash-based programming widely adopted by the sector in the late 1990s (Faal, 2019).

As noted above, diaspora humanitarians are already ‘doing’ localisation, and we argue their work and experience with local communities and local civil society partners offers potentially useful lessons for institutional humanitarian partners and international humanitarian actors. Researcher and policymaker interest in diasporas as development and humanitarian actors arguably arose in the early 2000s, when the World Bank began publishing data on remittance flows (Page and Mercer, 2018). This showed the scale of diaspora and migrant financial contributions, which outstripped bilateral aid by the 2010s and, in some corridors (such as in Africa), has outstripped Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) since 2019 (World Bank, 2022).



Areas of comparative disadvantage for diaspora humanitarians

However, diaspora humanitarian activities are typically small-scale, operating at the local or micro-level, as diaspora humanitarians leverage their close personal networks of trust to extended families and communities in origin countries ([ADEPT/Shabaka, 2021](#)). They can lack organisational capacity and resources, especially to scale up their humanitarian activities ([EU DiF, 2022](#); [DEMAC, 2018](#)). Their liminal position in legal and aid frameworks also means they can be perceived with suspicion by institutional humanitarian, government, and national civil society partners as ‘meddlesome amateurs’ at best, and ‘peace-wreckers’ at worst (c.f. [Page and Mercer, 2018](#); [Smith and Stoares, 2007](#); [Omar and Asquith, 2021](#)). As with local civil society partners, diaspora organisations, networks, and individuals may not share the same mandates, professional structures, and norms as their counterparts in the institutional humanitarian sector.

For example, the humanitarian principles themselves can be a pain point for some local civil society partners and diaspora humanitarians. In Haiti, Iraq, Sudan, and Syria, local civil society and diaspora partners have had to grapple with difficult discussions about neutrality when targeted or risk being targeted by factions involved in the insecurity of these complex emergencies ([Robillard et al., 2020](#); [CSF, 2023](#); [Ragab and Khatba, 2018](#)).

For example, it is understandable that many local Syrian civil society organisations in opposition-held areas and diaspora humanitarians will not work with the Syrian government in Damascus or the Syrian Arab Red Crescent (which is seen as not independent of the government). That is not to say, however, that Syrian diaspora humanitarians are not involved in crossline aid deliveries or do not distribute relief supplies according to local needs ([Ragab and Khatba, 2018](#); [Shabaka, 2022](#); [DEMAC, 2018](#)). These challenges are not new and reflect wider debates around the role of neutrality in the humanitarian sector ([ODI, 2022](#); [Shabaka, 2021a](#)).

Institutional humanitarian partners can thus be wary of engaging with diaspora humanitarians, who do not always find engaging with mainstream humanitarian structures, such as the Cluster System, to be easy ([DEMAC, 2016](#); [EU DiF, 2022](#)). Diaspora humanitarians also struggle to access institutional humanitarian partner resources, especially at a scale commensurate with their activities or ambitions ([ADEPT/Shabaka, 2021](#)). As a result, diaspora humanitarian activities are often conducted in parallel to more established humanitarian structures and systems ([DEMAC, 2016](#); [Hassan et al., 2021](#); [Kleist, 2021](#)). Leaving aside the potential for duplicate activities and the broader context of concern around the ‘fragmentation’ of aid systems globally, diaspora humanitarians hence often prioritise and focus their finite resources on working directly with local communities and local civil society partners in origin and other countries ([EU DiF, 2022](#), [Ahmed, 2020](#)).



Areas of comparative advantage for diaspora humanitarians

Diaspora humanitarians have developed systems and processes for quickly mobilising cash and non-cash resources in times of crisis, sharing information on the needs of affected communities, and monitoring the delivery of relief supplies and activities by leveraging close networks of trust in origin and settlement countries (Hammond, 2011; Kleist, 2021; ADEPT/Shabaka, 2021). Despite--perhaps also because of--low overhead costs, a small number of paid staff, reliance on volunteers, and limited capacities to operate at scale, diaspora humanitarian organisations and networks are often able to deliver critical humanitarian activities in crisis-affected communities potentially unreachable by other humanitarian organisations (DEMAC, 2018; EU DiF, 2022). Moreover, diaspora can be both 'international' and 'local' actors through their close connections to local communities, their knowledge of local cultures and conditions, as well as through dual citizenship in countries of origin and settlement (Ibid.)

Two factors have, arguably, enabled these areas of comparative advantage. The first is the ability to deploy different forms of diaspora 'capital'--financial, intellectual, social, political, cultural, and voluntarism--in countries of origin (and settlement),



including private trust networks that extend to the local level in origin countries (Hammond, 2011; Faal, 2019; EU DiF, 2022). The second is the widespread adoption of internet-enabled mobile devices giving access to social media platforms, common media, and digital tools, including mobile money. These two factors combined, particularly diaspora access to extensive trust networks in origin countries, enable real-time (or near real-time) information-sharing with local communities in crisis-affected regions (EU DiF, 2022). Power and internet connectivity permitting, money can be sent to communities in need in seconds. Aid deliveries and the impact of activities on beneficiaries can be monitored and life-saving knowledge and expertise can be exchanged cheaply and quickly.

Challenges for diaspora humanitarians

None of the above is to understate the myriad challenges and capacity limitations diaspora humanitarian actors face, especially those operating 'on the margins' of existing humanitarian systems and institutional structures. Diaspora humanitarian activities are often limited to the local or micro-level due to lack of resources and organisational capacity. Diaspora staff and volunteers can lack accredited skills, access to training, and mentorship opportunities as compared to their counterparts in larger, more established INGOs or agencies ([DEMAC, 2018](#); [Kleist, 2021](#); [EU DiF, 2022](#)). They may not have as close a knowledge of local contexts as local civil society, and even some institutional humanitarian partners, and their diaspora identities may not always be warmly received by stakeholders in origin countries ([DEMAC, 2018](#); [Kleist, 2021](#); [Page and Mercer, 2018](#)).

Also, whether unwittingly or otherwise, diaspora humanitarians can end up supporting actors responsible for prolonging crises. Some diaspora remittances are used to fund civil wars and insurgencies, although this is arguably overblown, as militant groups such as Somalia's El-Shabaab have developed their own sophisticated fundraising strategies and do not rely on remittances ([Omar and Asquith, 2021](#); [Ahmed, 2022](#)).

Diaspora politics in settlement and origin countries have intensified through the use of social media and the efforts of politicians, who increasingly recognise diasporas as an important political constituency of influence ([Page and Mercer, 2018](#)). In extreme cases, this can lead to polarisation and incitement of ethnic hatred, especially via social media platforms, as tragically seen in recent years in Ethiopia and Myanmar.



5. Driving localisation from below? The case of Sudan

Suspicion of diaspora humanitarian actors in the wider institutional humanitarian sector, or dismissing them as ‘activists’, misses the point in many ways. In part because they operate at the margins of formal humanitarian structures and systems, diaspora humanitarians have learned to work directly and closely with local communities and civil society partners in origin countries. They also maintain long-lasting and sustained relationships with these communities and partners, which helps build trust ([EU DiF, 2022](#); [Ahmed, 2020](#)).

Sudan presents an interesting case study of how local civil society and their diaspora supporters worked together prior to the 2019 popular revolution to respond to multiple, overlapping crises, including the current conflict engulfing the country since 15 April 2023 ([Shabaka, 2023a](#)). In the past, Sudanese civil society benefitted from strong trade unions and professional associations, but these have been hollowed out by political interference and increasing political involvement and politicisation since the 1980s ([Assal, 2016](#); [CSF, 2023](#)).

Partly in response to this, grassroots civil society groups known as ‘Neighbourhood Committees’ arose at the local level from 2013, although their

roots go back to the 1990s ([TIMEP, 2021](#)). Neighbourhood Committees took over the ‘Popular Committees’ established by Sudan's former military dictator, Omar El-Bashir ([The New Arab, 2020](#)). These civil society groups were locally organised and inclusive in terms of membership, and the Sudanese diaspora worked with the Neighbourhood Committees by providing strategic and technical advice as well as some financial support (Personal communication, Dr Sara Abdelgalil, 2023).



Moreover, due to decades-long governance failures around recurrent crises—including cholera outbreaks, the COVID-19 pandemic, and record Nile floods, even before the current crisis erupted—hybrid community responses by local civil society groups and diaspora humanitarians have, in effect, substituted for state functions ([EU DiF, 2022](#)).

Local and diaspora responses to the COVID-19 pandemic can also be seen as evidence-based localisation in Sudan (Ibid.; see also [African Union, 2021](#)).

Large-scale popular street protests from 2018 helped overthrow Omar El-Bashir, who had presided over the country for over thirty years, in 2019 ([BBC, 2019](#)). Neighbourhood Committees took a more active role in leading the protests following the April 2019 peaceful sit-in protests in Khartoum and other cities, bringing together Sudanese of all backgrounds and regions ([Gamal & Bachellerie, 2022](#)). At this time, Neighbourhood Committees evolved into 'Popular Resistance Committees' (PRCs) (Ibid.). The Sudanese diaspora supported the protest movement and Popular Resistance Committees by providing skills, time, and resources in Sudan, settlement countries, and digital spaces ([EUDiF, 2022](#); [Shabaka, 2020](#)). The new transitional government appointed in 2020, under the civilian leadership of PM Abdalla Hamdok, provided a powerful motivation and window of opportunity for the diaspora to extend engagement with Sudan ([Shabaka, 2020](#)).

Following the military coup of October 2021, Popular Resistance Committees (PRCs) led a campaign of large-scale, rolling street protests calling for an end to military rule and the introduction of a civilian-led, democratic government ([TIMEP, 2021](#)). Again, these efforts were supported and amplified by the diaspora through offline and online campaigns, resource mobilisation, philanthropy, and technical assistance ([EUDiF, 2022](#)). For example, Sudanese diaspora health networks were active in sending relief and medical supplies, providing telemedicine, and training deployments in Sudan.

A framework political agreement between the main political power bases--the Sudanese military, comprised of the Sudan Armed Forces (SAF) and the Rapid Support Forces (RSF), and the civilian-led Forces for Freedom and Change (FFC)--on a transition to civilian-led, democratic rule was signed in December 2022 ([International Crisis Group, 2023](#)). However, relations between military players soured in 2023 over the timetable for RSF's integration into SAF, leading to an outbreak of conflict on 15 April in Khartoum and across the country that, by June 2023, had killed



and wounded thousands and displaced millions both internally and outside the country ([OCHA, 2023](#); [IOM, 2023](#)).¹

The deteriorating security situation in Khartoum and other cities since the start of the crisis made a challenging evacuation of international staff necessary, and the transport and distribution of relief supplies by institutional and civil society partners increasingly dangerous ([OCHA, 2023](#)). So-called 'Emergency Committees' and 'Emergency (Response) Rooms' evolved out of Neighbourhood/Popular Resistance Committees and have been active in distributing relief and medical supplies in local areas ([The New Arab, 2023](#)). Such Emergency Committees have also been active in identifying safe routes and assisting in the evacuation of local people, foreign nationals, and international UN agency and INGO staff ([Shabaka, 2023a](#)). In these activities, Neighbourhood Committee and Emergency Response Rooms have been supported by the diaspora, who have mobilised cash and non-cash resources, conducted crisis advocacy and media engagement in settlement countries, and supported migrant protection for those displaced both within Sudan and to neighbouring countries such as Egypt, Ethiopia, South Sudan, and Chad ([Shabaka, 2023b](#)).

Perhaps for understandable reasons, many institutional humanitarian partners and INGOs working in Sudan

have shown caution towards working with the Neighbourhood Committees and Emergency Response Rooms ([Jaspars and Oette, 2023](#)). Indeed, many international actors viewed the Neighbourhood/Popular Resistance Committees as too political, and they were thus side-lined in negotiations between Sudanese factions mediated by the 'Quad' (US, UK, Saudi Arabia, and UAE), the 'Tripartite Mechanism' (UNITAMS, AU, and IGAD), and the 'Troika' (EU, Norway, and UK), as they were not fully engaged in the process ([Chatham House, 2023](#); [State Department, 2023](#)). Lack of trust and mutual experience, alongside the limitations of institutional systems and mandates, also present very real practical challenges for institutional humanitarian partners seeking to work with local civil society groups like the Emergency Responder Rooms.

As international humanitarian efforts remain hindered by the deteriorating security situation across the country and urban warfare rages in Khartoum and other cities, this has further highlighted the role of local civil society networks, such as the Neighbourhood/Emergency Committees, in providing life-saving relief activities, as far as their limited resources allow ([Jaspars & Oette, 2023](#); [The New Arab, 2023](#)). Indeed, a few INGOs still operating in Sudan, like the Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC) and Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF), as well as some bilateral donors such as the UK and US, are increasingly supporting such local civil society networks to help



deliver aid to affected communities (NRC, 2023; MSF, 2023; USAID, 2023b). Some institutional humanitarian partners are also exploring working with local civil society networks, despite the limitations posed by institutional mandates.

The diaspora continues to support Emergency Committees and Emergency Response Rooms through financial contributions, media advocacy, information-sharing, and technical and strategic advice (Shabaka, 2023b). The relationship between the Neighbourhood/Popular Resistance Committees, the Emergency Committees, and their supporters in the diaspora has been ongoing since at least 2013, but is not uncritical (Personal communication, Dr Sara Abdelgalil, June 2023). There have been, and will continue to be, differences of opinion around approaches, strategies, and priorities, as well as concerns about the sustainability of efforts given the increasingly difficult security situation, the collapse of Sudan's financial system, and uncertain power and phone networks (TIMEP, 2021; OCHA, 2023). However, sustained relationships established between the diaspora and local civil society networks over several years make it easier to discuss and resolve such differences, as well as build trust and manage risks.

A 2023 review of Sudanese perspectives on, and experiences of, localisation is illuminating in this regard, although published before the current



Health workers at the UNFPA Tunaydbah field hospital in Sudan's eastern Gedaraf state provide critical maternal health care (UNFPA Sudan)



crisis (CSF, 2023). Many of its findings will be familiar to those working to implement localisation in the humanitarian sector: tendencies among institutional humanitarian partners to privilege the experiences of more formalised civil society networks, as well as the national over the local; failures to listen to local perspectives or recognise local expertise, skills, and experience; and prioritising donor perspectives on accountability and transparency over those of local communities and civil society networks (Ibid.). Moreover, the localisation approaches taken in Sudan before the current crisis were all too often top-down and technocratic, and even translation of the term into Arabic (rendered as *tawṭīn*, which can mean ‘Sudanisation’ or ‘nationalisation’, amongst other connotations) is challenging to local communities’ understandings (CSF, 2023: 5).

While it is too early to draw firm conclusions, tracking how and whether events on the ground can shift the dial on realising localisation in Sudan will be interesting. Indeed, the context of the Sudanese crisis is quite unique, inasmuch as the challenges faced by international (and some national) humanitarian actors operating in Sudan have forced greater reliance on local civil society networks, such as Emergency Committees/Rooms, in a relatively short period of time. This, arguably, can be seen as a form of localisation from below. But more than this, the Sudanese experience shows the importance and value of sustained engagement and building trust with local civil society networks, especially grassroots movements and less formally organised groups.



6. Conclusion and Recommendations

Achieving localisation requires a radical transformation in how humanitarian stakeholders conceptualise, organise, and deliver aid ([IASC, 2022](#); [ICVA/HLA, 2019](#)). It also requires significant investment in systems, processes, and capacities for all humanitarian actors in both the Global North and Global South ([Robillard et al., 2021](#); [NEAR Network, 2023](#)), and there are still considerable technical and operational challenges to overcome. How can donors ensure limited humanitarian resources are deployed effectively? How can institutional humanitarian partners know which local civil society groups and networks to trust? How can they support local civil society partners, especially more informally organised ones, in strengthening their accountability and monitoring mechanisms in order to facilitate the transfer of power and resources to them within existing institutional frameworks, restrictions, and mandates? How much risk are institutional humanitarian partners willing to manage in order to achieve localisation (c.f. [USAID, 2021](#))?

In this paper, we explore how diaspora humanitarians have significant experience working directly with local communities in crisis-affected areas, partly due to their position within the humanitarian ecosystem. There are

areas where diaspora humanitarians face a comparative weakness in relation to institutional humanitarian partners and local civil society partners, especially in terms of mounting relief activities at scale. Equally, however, diaspora humanitarians also show areas of significant comparative advantage over institutional (and national) humanitarian partners, such as in responsiveness and access to private networks of trust in crisis-affected areas. In particular, as the example of Sudan shows, diaspora time and resource investments in building relationships with local civil society partners underscores the importance of sustained engagement and building trust, as such has facilitated the provision of support and management of risk in the current crisis.

We also argue the need for a greater emphasis on the complementarity of institutional, local civil society, and diaspora partners' humanitarian activities and capacities. This requires greater openness to local needs and perspectives, greater investment in upskilling local civil society partners, and greater flexibility in how systems for managing resources and risk are applied. It also requires an approach to partnerships in which local civil society (and diaspora) actors are considered equal partners in



humanitarian action, rather than merely beneficiaries and cash machines' (Shabaka, 2021b). Local civil society and diaspora humanitarians are keen to take advantage of opportunities to improve the impact of their humanitarian activities, to learn and strengthen organisational systems and processes, offered by institutional humanitarian partners. However, this must be a two-way street, and institutional humanitarian partners and INGOs can also learn much from the successes (and pain points) of local civil society and diaspora humanitarians.

To achieve this, we have a number of recommendations for institutional humanitarian partners, local civil society, and diaspora humanitarians:

RECOMMENDATIONS

Business as usual is no longer an option.

With growing humanitarian needs worldwide and increasing pressure on humanitarian financing, all humanitarian partners must not only embrace localisation as a slogan, but actually deliver on it. Failure to do so risks further fragmentation of the humanitarian system, and creating a culture of distrust and a lack of credibility; this requires leadership and vision on the part of the international humanitarian sector. Near Network has published a [useful Localisation Performance Measurement Framework](#) to monitor delivery of localisation commitments (NEAR Network, 2019).

Local civil society and local communities should be at the heart of humanitarian response.

This requires real dialogue with local communities, local civil society, and diaspora humanitarians on their perspectives and experiences of local needs and meeting these in crisis-affected areas, including those of less formally organised groups and networks.

Learn from local civil society and diaspora partners.

There should be a focus on the complementarity of activities and adding value to areas of comparative advantage. If humanitarian partners continue to favour established ways of working with local partners in the Global South, they risk both missing innovative approaches proposed by local partners and blocking new ideas from flourishing.

Treat local civil society, local communities, and diasporas as equal partners.

There should be a focus on the complementarity of activities and adding value to areas of comparative advantage. If humanitarian partners continue to favour established ways of working with local partners in the Global South, they risk both missing innovative approaches proposed by local partners and blocking new ideas from flourishing.

Invest In local civil society and diaspora humanitarian partners in the Global South and Global North

Such investment should include systems, processes, organisational capacities, staff upskilling, and leadership of local civil society partners and diaspora humanitarians 'there', in the Global South, as well as 'here', in the Global North.

Don't hide behind technical jargon and organisational systems and processes.

Increased flexibility in the application of institutional systems and mandates is needed when working with local civil society and diaspora partners to facilitate sustainable partnerships, trust building, and sharing of resources.

Share resources—and risks—with local civil society partners and diaspora humanitarians.

This can include funding schemes dedicated to piloting new approaches to supporting the localisation of aid, as well as access to resources to scale up responses in times of crisis. Donors and institutional humanitarian partners also need to modify their risk management strategies to share risks more equitably with local civil society partners and diasporas.

Recognise diaspora humanitarian activities as part of the Grand Bargain process.

The Grand Bargain process and framework does not explicitly recognise or reference diaspora humanitarian activities. Thus, in order to align this process and framework with the 2015 SDGs and Addis Action Agenda, future iterations of the Grand Bargain should address this gap by explicitly recognising diaspora contributions to humanitarian response and their support for, and partnerships with, local civil society partners.



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