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**Localization and Complementarity in Humanitarian Action:**

**A Critical Analysis**

**Introduction**

The consultation process for the World Humanitarian Summit[[1]](#footnote-1) saw the humanitarian system struggling. While it has never reached more people in so many locations around the world, its existing resources and current structure are no longer sufficient in addressing the scale of present needs.Nearly 60 million people, half of them children, have been forced from their homes and, in the last two decades, 218 million people each year were affect­ed by disasters at an annual cost to the global economy that exceeds $300 billion.[[2]](#footnote-2) Humanitarian action and the way it is conducted, as well as traditional structures of coordination, cooperation and funding, all require a deep rethink to better address the complexities of humanitarian engagement in rapidly shifting contexts.[[3]](#footnote-3) Needless to say, the Humanitarian Policy Group’s statement for the World Humanitarian Summit Global Consultation (2015)[[4]](#footnote-4) underscores the system’s “crisis of legitimacy”. Despite advances, “these changes have invariably been tinkering at the edges, rather than getting to the heart of the challenges facing the system” (HPG, 2015).[[5]](#footnote-5) Against this background, there is an incentive to forge new alliances and remap the boundaries of that system – How are current actors engaging with one another across their comparative advantages; how can new actors be brought in to allow for more effective humanitarian action, and how?

Crises are expanding and shifting, and so is the world. A multipolar world is becoming a reality wherein national governments and local communities are slowly emerging as key actors in humanitarian action, taking ownership over disaster response, and developing countries are expanding their capacities to respond without international assistance (ALNAP, 2010).[[6]](#footnote-6) There are successes on that front such as India’s rejection of international assistance following the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami, Mozambique’s successful handling of floods in 2007 (Twigg, 2015: 303). The humanitarian role of Western powers is no longer the only player in the field and in some cases – Sudan is a notable example – they are placed under political and security scrutiny (McGoldrick, 2011). The private sector is also stepping up to humanitarian challenges. The Kenyans for Kenya initiative, involving a bank, a mobile network operator and the Kenya Red Cross Society, has managed to raise $7.5m to support the response to the 2011–12 drought and famine (Drummond and Crawford, 2014). In Yemen, the private sector is key in distributing humanitarian aid to regions around Yemen, at a point when political polarization and a military conflict is threatening to starve an entire population. In the lead up to the World Humanitarian Summit, this is the right moment to rethink the parameters and operations of localization in humanitarian response. More particularly, we need to think of pathways to transition from *ad hoc* localization to more strategic and forward looking engagement.

That said, complementarity and the need to support and maximize the role of local, national and regional actors in humanitarian action have been emphasized throughout the WHS consultation process as well as in the Secretary General’s report on it. To “commit to as local as possible and as international as necessary” and to “put people at the center” are two recommendations outlined in the report.[[7]](#footnote-7) The report calls on the international community to respect and strengthen local leadership in crises, and not to create parallel structures that may undermine it. International partners are asked to “make greater effort to support and enable national and local actors, to provide expertise, good practice, and add capacity and capability rather than “take over” and run the response.” (31)[[8]](#footnote-8) Moreover, the World Disasters Report 2015 saw localization as the key to humanitarian effectiveness.[[9]](#footnote-9) The Global Humanitarian Assessment Report 2015[[10]](#footnote-10) states that in 2014, only 0.2% of the total humanitarian assistance went directly to local and national NGOs and thus, the consultations have called for more funding to local actors.

While those recommendations reflect this need for a shift in humanitarian response, they point towards a number of limitations to discussions on localization and complementarity. First, a *conceptual limitation* within which what is described as “local” is approached as a single unit of analysis. There are, as this paper will demonstrate, different layers of locality: regional, national and local. *Instead of a horizontal approach to locality, a vertical approach may be more effective*. Moreover, the “national”, “regional” and the “local” are often conflated with one another when, in fact, they operate according to different rules and with different actors (state versus non-state actors). Second, there is a *definitional confusion*, not only as it pertains to “local” but also as it relates to terms such as “localization” and “complementarity” - Those are often used interchangeably and without clarity on how they are distinguished from one another. Calls for localization and complementarity are yet to be critically approached and unpacked. Third, there is a presupposition that localization, for example, is a fairly *linear* process and that it is key to better humanitarian action, but how? While both localization and complementarity have the potential for better and more effective humanitarian action, their benefits, limitations and incentives require further analysis before they can be applied to good effect.

This paper presents a critical analysis of localization and complementarity in humanitarian action. *It approaches complementarity through the lens of localization and not the other way round.* Using a multi-disciplinary approach, a review of various literatures, academic and policy-related, was conducted by the researcher in addition to a deep reading of the literature on state and peacebuilding as it pertains to localization. Definitions and localization methods from the business and private sector world have also been gleaned. The purpose of the paper is to do the following: a) Probe the conceptual and practical dimensions of localization and complementarity in humanitarian action b) Identify opportunities and challenges and c) Look ahead: What does better localization and complementarity mean to the humanitarian system[[11]](#footnote-11)?

**Definitions and Parameters: Unpacking Localization and Complementarity**

The presence of “national”, “regional” and “local” forces at the heart of humanitarian response is not new. The idea that states are entrusted with the core responsibility for their populations in crises is articulated in the General Assembly resolution 46/182 (1991), Good Humanitarian Donorship principles (2003), the ICRC Code of Conduct (1994) and the new Core Humanitarian Standard (2015). The Paris Principles (1993) and Accra Agenda for Action (2008), the Busan Partnership for Aid Effectiveness (2011), the New Deal for Engagement in Fragile States (2012) and the SDGs/2030 Agenda (2015) all underscore the centrality of national and local ownership. Within the humanitarian sector, suggestions to restructure and reorient the humanitarian system invoke localization and complementarity as the means to involve new actors, even from outside the “established” humanitarian sector to mend a system described as both broke and broken.[[12]](#footnote-12) That said, localization and complementarity are a step further from mere acknowledgement of a state’s duties to their people. This section will tackle definitions of both terms in an attempt to a) identify how they relate to one another; and b) come up with a working framework for them within the humanitarian sector.

On complementarity, the Principles of Partnership,[[13]](#footnote-13) a statement of commitment, endorsed by the Global Humanitarian Platform in 2007, describes it as follows:

The diversity of the humanitarian community is an asset if we build on our comparative advantages and complement each other’s contributions. Local capacity is one of the main assets to enhance and on which to build. Whenever possible, humanitarian organizations should strive to make it an integral part in emergency response. Language and cultural barriers must be overcome.

Complementarity is thus described as a contribution to another entity to address a particular need. The result of which is that particular need is addressed, filled or completed. If complementarity is the *outcome*, localization has been one of the *ways* to do it. With the international system struggling to meet the needs of affected populations in disaster and conflict zones, resorting to “local” actors that would complement the efforts of the international system has become less of a choice and more of a necessity. The Ebola crisis, described as a crisis of humanitarian governance, is a case in point.[[14]](#footnote-14) Worldwide, there have been 28,639 cases and 11,316 deaths (WHO, 2016)[[15]](#footnote-15), a staggering loss that could have been curtailed. In addition to what was described as a “criminally-late” response by the World Health Organization, it is argued that better coordination and social mobilization through an understanding of the sociocultural context could have aided the control of outbreaks and helped people protect themselves. Community engagement was key in containing the spread of the virus but it came at later stages of the humanitarian response (HPG, 2015)[[16]](#footnote-16).

Using the Ebola crisis as an illustrative example, we can infer that complementarity in this case is the state that results from *contributions* made by the community to international engagement by raising awareness on proper burial methods to help control the outbreak of the virus, localization, on the other hand, was the *method* to engage the local community in the humanitarian response. That said, *complementarity does not need to happen through localization* – Engaging the private sector, for example, in humanitarian action by contributing know-how and resources can be a form of complementarity. On the other hand, *localization is almost always a form of successful complementarity* because localizing a response is undertaken by international actors primarily because local contributions are *needed* to complement their efforts. While localization in the case of the Ebola crisis has resulted in a successful complementarity, this is not always the case.

Processes of localization for humanitarian actors in cases of conflict are often less straightforward even as the parameters of the definitions provided above stay the same. *Localization may result in a failed complementarity* because of challenges that include a) the difficulty of maintaining neutrality because partnering with a local actor inadvertently means antagonizing another, as well as b) the need to negotiate with non-state actors (often armed) that may constitute a threat to the state. In the case of Yemen, Saudi Arabia’s humanitarian response continues to be accused of excluding the Houthi populations even as it localizes its response by administering assistance directly through its networks in addition to the multilateral system.[[17]](#footnote-17) Saudi Arabia’s localization efforts have resulted in a compromised complementarity to the international system because it is a key party in the conflict. The politics of localization have compromised the complementarity of the assistance. On the other hand, in Syria, the U.N. continues to be criticized by [Syrian organizations](https://www.documentcloud.org/documents/2693023-HRP-2016-a-Letter-From-Syrian-Networks-20151230.html) for not localizing its response enough and for not confronting Bashar Assad’s regime over the lack of humanitarian access, despite a U.N. Security Council resolution mandating unfettered aid access.[[18]](#footnote-18)

Thus, in the Yemen example, localization is selective while in the case of Syria, localization is limited. A qualitative lens to localization may be the best way to determine its effectiveness in the short and long terms – It is not a matter of needing localization but more a matter of determining the degree and form of localization needed. *The test to localization becomes the degree of its complementarity to the formal system.*

The humanitarian world can benefit from the successes and failures of similar approaches in other sectors and contexts. Outside the humanitarian world, localization has been popular within the context of state formation and peace building. The New Deal for Engagement in Fragile States (New Deal), endorsed by 41 governments and intergovernmental organizations in late 2011, is an example. It emphasized “inclusive country-led and country-owned transitions out of fragility” (Smits and Wright, 2012:3) that would include key national stakeholders and non-state actors. In 2015, looking back at the New Deal reveals “unmet conditions, unrealistic expectations about timeframes, and a lack of sustained dialogue about the causes of conflict and fragility” (Hughes et al., 2014: 3). That said, there is a gap between conceptualizing localization, and actually implementing it. A fairly straightforward integration of non-state actors is *not* the most effective way to do it. Moreover, the inclusion of non-state actors often endorses existing power differentials rather than dilutes it. Recent statements by David Cameron on Libya and Syria exemplify the inherent contradiction within this approach. Where he describes local ownership, he explicitly entrusts international actors with defining the parameters for it. Thus, the “plan” that the UK had for both countries failed, and the path forward is to ensure that a government is put in place that represents the different religious and ethnic groups. That government would be “local”, according to Cameron, even as it is externally engineered and designed.

The indiscriminate upholding and acceptance of localization requires critical unpacking. This is not to argue against localization but there is a need to understand its short and long-term consequences. In addition to delegating a humanitarian response, localization can also take the form of a partnership in what has been packaged as “hybridization” whereby local non-state actors join forces with international actors towards a shared goal. There are critics of this approach too. Meagher 2012 and Podder 2014 argue that a more empirical and comparative approach to hybrid governance should be developed in a manner that makes it capable of distinguishing between constructive and corrosive forms of non-state engagement as well as clearly defining the relationship between formal and informal regulation (Meagher, 2012: 1073). Another criticism of localization has been the disempowerment of local actors in implementation even as the discourse of localization attempts to empower them. The paradox, as succinctly articulated by Oliver Richmond, is as follows: Internationals seek to “relinquish direct control and ownership of the peace-building process” so as to avoid the colonial stigma. Nevertheless, they still continue to use various means to ensure that “their liberal agenda is complied with” by the local actors (Richmond, 2009: 19).

Localization, as mentioned before, is not a humanitarian invention; it is also popular within the business world. Emphasis within the private sector on localization, however, focuses less on the need for it and more on *how it works*. The business world offers a plethora of definitions of localization which can be illuminating to the humanitarian sector. In probing various definitions of localization, one can identify a set of trends or common themes across multiple sectors. A common tension in those definitions is between emphasizing adaptability (i.e. adapting response to needs and context of affected population), on the one hand, and enforcing restrictions on the other (i.e. determining the parameters of locality and thus parameters of a humanitarian response).

Those trends include the following:

* *Process-oriented* – To localize a business is to engage in a process of organizing its services and products to cater for national or local needs, rather than international ones. It involves a mapping of other local business partners and/or competitors, studying the feasibility of customizing a product to a local context and whether there will be profit or not. Despite the fact that the stakes may be lower in the case of businesses (loss of profit) than in humanitarian action (loss of lives), the business world does not engage in ad hoc localization. Proper market studies are conducted prior to the engagement to ensure success.
* *Suitability* – To ensuring that a product or service is suitable to a particular place or country. This involves understanding the culture, traditions, and needs of that local context.
* *A multi-tiered understanding of “local”* – To understand that there are variations between the national and the local. What is suitable at the national level may not be so at the level of a local area of the nation.
* *Parameter-setting*– This involves assigning a “locality” and confining a product to a particular area.

In GCC countries, localization is gaining popularity but it has been inward looking and closer to “nationalization” than to “complementarity”. Because unemployment among local citizens and a reliance on foreign workers has created an imbalance in the composition of the population, GCC governments started creating localization programs. That said, their definition of localization became “the process of replacing expatriates with nationals in several economic roles. The localization efforts take various shapes, from developing human capital through education and training programs to mandating specific quotas of national workforce on the private sector” (Salih, 2010: 169).[[19]](#footnote-19)

Based on the discussion above, we propose the following definitions to both terms within the humanitarian sector:

*Localization:* The *process* of having a humanitarian response owned in part or as a whole by a national and/or local constituency well-versed in the needs and socio-cultural context of the area in crisis. This process can be in the form of a partnership, delegation and/or lack of need of international assistance.

*Complementarity:* The *state* of an actor (state, non-state) having successfully contributed to another within the context of a humanitarian crisis. This can be at the international, national and local levels.

Based on the definitions listed, we compare opportunities and challenges to localization.

**Localization as an Opportunity: Access, Cultural Familiarity and Ownership**

1. *Ability to mobilize, better access and cultural awareness*

A locally-led response has the advantage of better access and deeper networks with affected populations, not to mention better understanding of history, cultural and geopolitical specificities of the area within which the crisis has taken place. As stated by Elhadj As Sy, the Secretary General of the IFRC, “Local actors are always the first to respond. In 2015, we saw local people and organizations at the center of operations rescuing thousands trapped in the rubble after the earthquake in Nepal, setting up evacuation centers in the wake of Cyclone Pam in Vanuatu, and on the frontline of the protracted conflict in Syria”. A humanitarian response, thus, can be facilitated if more trust and support is given to local actors and “their comparative advantages could strengthen the response as a whole, filling the gaps in action left by international actors” (Teall, 2015).[[20]](#footnote-20)

In a study conducted by HPG (2015) on the role of the local private sector (small, medium and large businesses) in humanitarian action in Yemen, respondents described how they were able to access different regions through their networks. They acted as distributors of aid in various regions and were acutely aware of how the burden of the war was felt in certain areas more than others. A Yemeni micro-finance bank managed to work with a small core team, had them organized in shifts and mobilized across the country. Another example is the Kachin IDP crisis in Myanmar in 2011-2012. With the outbreak of hostilities in June 2011, international organizations complained of restricted access to 60,000 fleeing civilians displaced in a number of locations of the Kachin State and along the Myanmar-China border. While the UN struggled with the government to get access, local NGOs were able to reach Kachin IDPs – “While international agencies have had a troubled time in doing so, local agencies have effectively navigated a complex political and military environment to ensure consistent delivery of assistance to, and protection of, IDPs.” (Jaquet and O’Loughlin, 2012)[[21]](#footnote-21)

Moreover, knowledge of faith and traditions play a key role in raising awareness and empowering populations to protect themselves. In the case of the Ebola outbreak, control of the virus was made possible when faith and tribal leaders in Sierra Leone and Liberia were brought on board. Faith leaders were instrumental in using religious texts to interpret biomedical messages on the control and prevention of Ebola to the population.[[22]](#footnote-22)

1. Ownership of the response and investing in infrastructure

Localizing a humanitarian response may give more ownership to local actors, provide incentives for the development of local structures. The rising number of regional organizations is indicative of a growing need for regional actors more attuned to the needs of affected populations. According to a study on regional organizations by HPG (2016), respondents perceived regional organizations as more interested in investing in core infrastructure problems rather than simply injecting assistance. When compared to the UN and other European humanitarian actors, Islamic ROs were described as “more noticeable” because while the UN “spends hundreds of millions of dollars in Somalia, we [they] don’t know where the money went”. ROs seem to be evolving a development-based approach to assistance. According to an RO professional: “The best humanitarian practice is to help, but not give all the time, but rather take affected communities out of their situation. We have to invest/encourage more development projects instead of focusing only on humanitarian assistance.”

Regional engagement, a level of localization, is becoming a key humanitarian actor. Needless to say, the number of ROs that have established humanitarian departments or centres increased dramatically in the late 1990s and 2000s. While in 1990 there were only five regional humanitarian institutions, by 2015 this number had grown to 30 (HPG 2016). This increase in number, nevertheless, is not directly indicative of an increase in impact which remains riddled with contextual, governance and outcome considerations.

**Challenges to Localization: Politics and Access**

1. *Asymmetrical Power and capacity between international and local actors*

Power inequities (availability of funds, human resources and know-how) create a gap between local actors that are more active on the ground but lacking in capacity, and international actors that are less close to the local context but are better equipped with resources. Findings from an MA thesis on South Sudan at the Geneva Centre for Education and Research in Humanitarian Action concludes that localization as a process remains a “rhetoric” because of a number of factors that include short-term humanitarian funding, inaccessible in most parts to local actors and a fixation on donor priorities (Nzeyimana, 2015).[[23]](#footnote-23) In the case of ECOWAS, for example, the organization’s humanitarian engagement has limitations that result from an insufficient financial capacity and a lacking of technical capacity to support the build-up of a sustainable socio-economic structure. Nevertheless, it still has the advantage of superior regional knowledge, the commitment of its member states to regional security and integration which may constitute the basis for systematic peacebuilding in the region (Olonisakin, 2011: 27).

1. *Localisation can be politically charged*

In conflict zones, localization can be a politically charged exercise wherein local actors are suspected of siding with one party to the conflict rather another. In the case of regional organizations for example, they fall prey to limitations often defined by the fact that its decision-making is largely bound to member states, and as such, they can be restricted in their choice of areas and mechanisms of engagement. For example, while ASEAN did readily step in to respond to the Cyclone Nargis disaster in 2008, it played no role in addressing the religious violence affecting Rakhine state in Myanmar between the Muslim Rohingya minority and the Buddhist Rakhine majority (Zyck, Fan and Price, 2014: 2). ASEAN, which has a policy of non-interference in its members’ affairs could not intervene in the Rakhine crisis, especially with Myanmar’s position as Chair of ASEAN.

**Recommendations: Taking Localization Forward**

1. *Entrenching localization in evidence and multidisciplinary analyses*

While there is a body of analysis on the role of local non-state actors in peace and state building, there is yet to emerge in-depth analysis of the successes and failures of localization within the humanitarian sector. A critical unpacking of localization can benefit from a multi-sectoral and multi-disciplinary approach whereby the various layers of locality are approached and understood in context. It is taken for granted that localization is complementarity and that it is the key to effective humanitarian response without clearly identifying how and what mechanisms are needed to achieve that in the short and long term. While this is not an argument against localization, it is a call for localization entrenched in multidisciplinary analysis and perhaps, using complementarity as an indicator of the success of localization.

1. *Mapping actors and defining mechanisms*

Empowering local actors is bound to affect the balance of powers within a local context in positive or adverse manners, especially in conflict. In the same way that market analysis is needed before a product is localized within the private sector; prior to crafting a strategy for localizing a humanitarian response, a mapping of actors as well as a working of mechanisms for engagement should be worked out in the short and long-term. Humanitarians can benefit from experiences of localization in other sectors such as the private sector as well as other fields, particularly development and state building. In state building, for example, localization efforts have been met with little success.

1. *Transitioning from ad hoc to multi-tiered localization*

There are tiers/levels of locality and thus, there is a need to distinguish between local, diaspora, regional and national/state actors. Often times, local actors and national state-run actors are conflated with one another. This is also the case with diaspora actors. On the ground, those actors may have very different modes of engagement, access mechanisms as well as legitimacy with populations in need.

1. *Incorporating a longitudinal approach to complementarity and localization*.

While humanitarian action is governed by an interest in the immediate, engaging local actors is bound to shift power dynamics on the ground and thus have long term repercussions. A long-term, process-oriented approach to local actors may therefore be needed.

1. *Re-orienting focus – More humanitarian financing of local actors is not enough for effective localization*

While there are calls for more humanitarian financing directed to local organizations, this should not be taken at face value. As demonstrated in the paper, localization is a process that is rarely linear. It is also multi-tiered (regional, national, local) and can be politically charged. In short term crisis response, the more local the response, the more likely it complements international efforts. The fact that regional organizations need to adapt to the politics of its members is quite straightforward – Its decision-making is determined through its member states, and the power dynamics among the members, to a large extent, determine the injection of funds and its priorities. That said, in the case of local NGOs and other faith actors, the long-term trajectory remains unclear – Are local actors able to act independently of international actors in protracted crises? What are the geopolitical implications of that engagement in a conflict zone, particularly in the long term? Those remain caveats in our understanding of localization within the humanitarian sector.

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5. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. ALNAP. (2010). “The State of the Humanitarian System - Assessing performance and progress. ALNAP Pilot Study.” Available through: <http://www.alnap.org/resource/8746> [Accessed: 5 March 2016] [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. UN General Assembly. (Jan. 2016) “One Humanity: Shared Responsibility Report of the Secretary-General for the World Humanitarian Summit” [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. IFRC. World Disasters Report 2015. Available through: <http://ifrc-media.org/interactive/world-disasters-report-2015/#1440799919607-4e155ada-bb27> [Accessed: 6 March 2016] [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Global Humanitarian Assessment Report 2015. Available through: <http://www.globalhumanitarianassistance.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/06/GHA-Report-2015_-Interactive_Online.pdf> [Accessed: 7 March 2016] [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. The humanitarian system can be broadly defined as “the network of interconnected institutional and operational entities through which humanitarian assistance is provided when local and national resources are insufficient to meet the needs of a population in crisis” (ALNAP, 2015a: 18). [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. In his remarks to the High Level Discussion on the Future of Humanitarian Financing, Under-Secretary General Stephen O’Brien describes the humanitarian system as broke, not broken with Humanitarian appeals have grown by more than 600 per cent in the past decade. In an op-ed, IRIN columnist, Paul Currion contends that the system is broken and is in need of fixing and questioning the status quo. See: Reliefweb. (2015). “Under-Secretary-General Stephen O’Brien Remarks to the High-Level Discussion on the Future of Humanitarian Financing , New York, 26 September 2015” Available through: <http://reliefweb.int/report/world/under-secretary-general-stephen-o-brien-remarks-high-level-discussion-future> [Accessed: 2 March 2016]; and Currion, Paul. (2015) “A Desert Called Reform” Irinnews. Available through: <http://www.irinnews.org/opinion/2015/11/03/desert-called-reform> [Accessed: 2 March 2016] Also, see Bennett, Christina. (2016). “Why Ban Ki Moon’s Report on the World Humanitarian Summit Worth a Read.” ODI Blog. Available through: <http://www.odi.org/comment/10324-whs-world-humanitarian-summit-un-agenda-humanity> [Accessed: 7 March 2016] [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
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17. See: El Taraboulsi, Sherine. (2015) “Saudi Blockade Threatens Famine in Yemen.” Open Democracy. Available through: <https://www.opendemocracy.net/arab-awakening/sherine-el-taraboulsi/saudi-blockade-threatens-famine-in-yemen> [Accessed: 3 March 2016] [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
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