

“Pathways to Power” Podcast Series

Episode 1: Localization

Terry: Welcome to the pathways to power podcast series. I'm Terry Gibson and I've been linking up with people in twos and threes on Skype and in phone calls. The conversations have spanned continents linking people working at the front line of development and humanitarian response with others who draw alongside them. A Common thread of these conversations is the recognition that despite its stated goals the aid industry often fails in practice to focus on local needs and priorities. Why is this and what changes are needed?

The first podcast in the series looks at the widely used term localization. What is it? Are people even agreed on its meaning? It's become a buzzword, for example at the UN's World Humanitarian Summit where demands for localization led to establishment of a 'Grand Bargain' for wholesale change in the way organizations in the aid industry large and small do business. But what does it mean? Does everyone share the same understanding of what it means and of what needs to be done to achieve it?

Sam: The other conversation, Terry, that I'm fascinated by is that yes in principle they agree. I think they say they agree with it. I say 'they' meaning the larger INGOs. But the way in which they're interpreting this localization is fascinating.

Terry: Sam works at American Jewish World Service, an organization which works very closely with small and unregistered organizations.

Sam: They then are identifying, at least I have seen on the ground and this is from very specific contexts not across the board. Where an INGO came and funded an organization and then told them how they wanted them to implement the project A to Z giving very little control or voice or agency to the local implementer. It really was 'here's all our money.' And now we're going to run your organization to do it the way that we've seen it done in 50 other countries and we have a proven model that works; which even more harmful than just leaving them alone and not giving them the money altogether.

Terry: Moyo and his colleague Stewart have experienced this in their work with a Community Foundation in rural Zimbabwe. He refers to this as 'the old order of development.'

Stewart: How then how do communities have self-belief to challenge the old Order of development? You know, this old order of development that is a top-down approach, whereby donors prescribe to say, this is what we want you to do. They'll be talking of statistics, the number of people now that we have reached out, the indicators of change such kind of things that they prescribe all the time. So we are saying no the donors themselves we want to really respond to the communities issues. You need

to understand how the people live the people themselves, starting from how do they live?

Terry: Lizz Harrison is working on 'accelerating localization' (through partnerships) at Christian Aid and also sees the old order in action:

Lizz: So on a global level, I think a lot of the signatories to the grand bargain are trying to work out ways to meet those commitments without really following the spirit of those commitments and I'll give an example of that:

For example, we know the key Target is 25% of aid funds are transferred to local and National actors. A lot of donors and UN agencies actually are doing good work here, but some are using that '25 percent by 2020' and saying well that can be on a global aggregate for us, a global average. So if we transfer 50% in one country, we don't have to transfer any, you know, 0% in another country. Let's get to 25% on a global level which I think misses the point, of course!

Terry: Sudhanshu became so frustrated with the lack of progress in the International System that he left Geneva moved back to India and started a locally based NGO:

Sudhanshu: So here are in India, and not only in India, but at a global level I'm trying, based on my experience to promote the localization agenda. It's very frustrating and challenging but we cannot give up because so many global processes start and they die down without reaching their intended results know particularly all the humanitarian summit processes and Grand Bargain. Not much has been achieved in last three years so we cannot just leave it only to big agencies we have to act as a smaller organizations.

Terry: When disaster strikes, as in the 2015 Gorkha earthquake in Nepal, the need for understanding localization is particularly acute. Sumeera works with a network of organizations in Nepal. She explains that the many agencies and government offices find it hard to understand what's happening locally and should be putting local organizations first:

Sumeera: The barriers that we have are in terms of understanding localization from different actors, from government to UN agencies from Partners to INGOs and also how we National level NGOs understand localization. Clarity on localization has been one of the prominent issues and that's what we are really working on in regards to make it understandable in terms of creating accountable system and also a system which promotes the local level actors in decision-making, putting local actors at the center of command and response.

Sam: When you look at the architecture of the humanitarian response system, and even when you look at the cluster system in the meetings how unfriendly they are to a local group and I think that's one piece of it. The architecture is just not set up for ethical and efficient localization if that's what we're going to call it.

Terry: That was Sam, whose work brings her close to local organizations facing humanitarian challenges. Monica works with Saferworld who focus on conflict situations. She sees the challenges of getting the International System to properly understand local challenges:

Monica: Increasing technical elements sort of mean that there's been more and more of a justification of the permanence of some international functions and I think there is a case for that, when you're talking about engineering and capacity for when there's a huge movement of people and you need to respond with sanitation and everything else. Of course, you need quickly deployable people who can build that but then equally you need to be able to connect them up to local engineers who can make sure that what's being proposed actually is relevant and that it's going to work for those communities. So I think there's a lot running against the genuine implementation of more interconnected system, one that breaks down the sectors and silos and actually just response to people's needs

Terry: Kailash, based in Nepal, certainly wishes the system was more responsive:

Kailash: Yeah. Thank you Terry, this is Kailash Rizal. I have been working in one of the national NGOs in in called DEPROSC. With the whole process of localization what we see is there are local organizations and an indigenous mechanism of response, but the mechanism has not really reached to the donor level. There are a number of intermediary organizations in between where the distortion of communication and knowledge distribution causes a lot of frustration.

Terry: Meredith works with Community Partners International in Bangladesh and she works very closely with local organizations. From that perspective she thinks a real change of mind-set is needed among international organizations to work effectively together with them.

Meredith: There is a quite a difference in this setting where there is a large development sector which is well established in Bangladesh. And that is the lens through which the local actors, civil society from Bangladesh, the national NGOs, and the local NGOs from Cox's Bazar are all coming to this humanitarian response with 20, 30, 40 years of experience. The task for INGOs and the UN is really to sort of help them get to the point to understand the humanitarian contract to try to bring that perspective and to try to shift that paradigm to the local perspective where this is what we've always done things in our country. This is what our government wants us to do. So shifting that mind-set has been a big challenge in this setting.

Terry: Away from the pressures of humanitarian crises, longer-term development work faces similar challenges. Ben and Oscar work in Jos, Nigeria. They've had to break down the suspicion among local people of projects imposed by outside donors with limited relevance to their local needs:

Ben: I think that most of the donor agencies are driven by a set structure in terms of 'project-based' rather than 'people-based.' So we have projects with clear timelines. They want to see results, outputs met at particular times.

Oscar: They've (communities) had similar projects of this nature that come with an external objective, not really an objective to serve the community. So they were a bit suspicious of our project thinking it's one of those projects that will just come and people just take pictures, funding comes and then they see nothing.

Terry: It seems sad, the top-down project driven approach of international organizations. It results in suspicion and apathy rather than engagement and involvement at the local level.

Melvin Works in Kenya with KCDF, an organization which gathers funds for local community organizations, and he too thinks that the whole system has to shift its mind-set:

Melvin: But until they put in enough effort for them to sort of identify the unique selling points that these organizations have and have a sit-down and have session with these organizations on just what is it that they're trying to do as opposed to them being so used to having a finished product. To them it's basically buying projects for communities so it's tough and most donors will always go back to default mode because it it's tedious! It's tedious work dealing with grassroots organizations.

Terry: I like Melvin's point that it's tedious dealing with grassroots organizations. I'm sure he's being tongue-in-cheek, in my experience, it's never tedious dealing with them. But maybe he's got the fundamental point. It seems from our conversations that localization can mean very different things depending on whether you're a UN agency or government, an INGO, a local organization or a local community, but tedious or not, until these organizations draw closer to the grassroots, localization will remain a buzzword rather than a reality.

Other podcasts in this series will look at why localization matters, how it can be supported and what the barriers to it are. You'll find the other episodes and much more information including details on all the contributors by Googling 'Global Fund for Community Foundations, Pathways to Power', where you're also very welcome to contribute your own comments and join in the conversations.

Finally my thanks to Sam, Moyo, Stewart, Lizz. Sudhanshu, Sumeera, Monica, Kailash, Meredith, Ben, Oscar and Melvin who contributed to this episode.