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Horizontal Partnership for Gender-responsive Localisation of Humanitarian Aid

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The World Humanitarian Summit (WHS), which was held in Istanbul, Turkey, in May 2016, was a key event that rekindled the necessity of decolonising humanitarian aid by channelling funds more directly to local humanitarian actors like non-governmental organisations (NGOs), civil society organisations and other members of the humanitarian community at the grassroots level. Despite the essential contribution of local actors as first responders during humanitarian crises, a meagre 0.2% of funds were allocated directly to them in 2014, according to the Global Humanitarian Assistance Report 2015. Therefore, the call for addressing this humanitarian financing gap became the mantra of the Grand Bargain and the Charter for Change (C4C), the two brainchildren of the WHS. Since then, a significant number of scholarly debates have focused on the challenges of localising humanitarian aid, with most of them talking about how to “improve partnership models, and better integrate local voices and needs and views of the affected population into humanitarian responses” (Roepstorff, 2020, p. 292). For instance, Lafreniere et al. (2019) have argued for more gender-responsive localisation with increased recognition for local women’s organisations. At the same time, Roepstorff (2020) has called for a critical (re)-definition of the ‘local’, which is usually considered a binary opposition to the ‘international’, blatantly reproducing the ‘white saviour’ colonial imagery. However, there is a major research gap in assessing the necessity of improving horizontal partnership models among local actors, which is what the essay seeks to highlight.

A major drawback of the current localisation discourse is its blind and monolithic focus on addressing the typical North-South vertical imbalance in the distribution of humanitarian funds by enhancing collaboration between the ‘local’ and ‘international’ humanitarian actors. The deep-rooted structural inequalities, gendered power hierarchies and internal dynamics of elitism and privilege among the local actors and how this negatively impacts localising efforts are obscure in the scholarly debates (Roepstorff, 2020; Lafreniere et al., 2019). In light of this, the essay invites us to revise our existing understanding of the localisation agenda and question: Why is it critical to focus on strengthening ‘horizontal’ partnerships among local actors for achieving efficient and gender-responsive localisation of humanitarian aid? While doing so, the essay highlights the concept of a ‘double-layered’ systematic marginalisation that is deeply embedded in the global humanitarian ecosystem but often overlooked in academic debates or policy development processes. On the one hand, there is the standard vertical ‘local versus international’ power discrepancy; on the other, there is a crucial yet neglected horizontal power hierarchy within the ‘local’.

It is no wonder that women and girls are disproportionately impacted during any humanitarian crisis due to gendered social norms and power relations (UN Women). The pre-existing gender inequalities are exacerbated during humanitarian crises, ranging from increased sexual and gender-based violence (SBGV), lack of access to healthcare, dropping out of schools, etc. Despite this predicament, they are often the first responders owing to their strong local knowledge, skills, and experiences. However, their contributions are often taken for granted and undervalued. Formulating on this, the essay argues that addressing horizontal power hierarchies among the local actors, creating an empowering mechanism which deconstructs the gendered division of labour and acknowledging women’s contributions as essential first responders will not only ensure emancipatory localisation of humanitarian aid but also close the gender gaps in humanitarianism.

Oxfam’s flagship localisation initiative in Bangladesh and Uganda, Empowering Local and National Humanitarian

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Actors (ELNHA), has been chosen as the appropriate case study for the essay because of: (i) its timeliness as it was launched in the same year as the World Humanitarian Summit (WHS) in 2016; and (ii) its initiative of testing a new humanitarian model focused on strengthening intra-local partnership for harnessing collective capacities of humanitarian crisis response. Oxfam, one of the leading humanitarian organisations, originated from a singularly British combination of Quaker and liberal elite. Its fundraising was developed in the 1950s and devoted to the causes of relief and development (Taithe, 2015, Chapter 5). According to official facts (Oxfam Novib), ELNHA's five-year project (January 2016- March 2021) engaged 90 local actors in Bangladesh and 60 in Uganda to create equitable partnerships between the international and local responders, with funding from Ikea Foundation.

The essay agrees that the concept of 'local' is contested (Roepstorff, 2020). However, to adopt a working definition for putting forward the arguments, localisation of humanitarian aid can be defined as a process of acknowledging and strengthening the humanitarian leadership by local authorities for better addressing the needs of affected populations and to prepare the local actors for future humanitarian responses (Fabre, 2017). Anderson and Olson (2003) noted 'local' actors are the 'insiders' (the population who directly experience and are affected by the crisis) and the 'international' actors are the 'outsiders' (those who choose to involve in the situation as responders without having to endure personal losses). However, this dichotomy is not free of controversies, and often the roles of insiders and outsiders overlap in diverse humanitarian crisis settings and contexts. Following ELNHA's three-tiered categorisation, local actors can be categorised into first-tier (actors with large-scale operational capacity), second-tier (specific niche local actors with not enough capacity), and third-tier (smaller local actors at the community level with temporary or no organisational capacity) (Lewinsky et al., 2019). Although Roepstorff (2020) argued that there is no consensus on a distinction between local and national actors, the essay will use the umbrella term 'local and national humanitarian actors' (LNHAs) to refer to local humanitarian responders.

Given its limited scope, the essay could not indulge in a holistic analysis of ELNHA in both Bangladesh and Uganda, which could have possibly led to other arguments because the humanitarian, socio-economic, political, and cultural contexts are strikingly different in the two countries. ELNHA Bangladesh has been chosen because of Bangladesh's vibrant civil society with multiple humanitarian actors who have been continuously contributing as first responders in Bangladesh's two exclusive humanitarian emergencies, the Rohingya refugee crisis and cyclical natural disasters like tropical cyclones and flash floods (Oxfam Novib). Also, Bangladesh has a strong patriarchal society where women still struggle for gender equality and fight against gender-based violence (GBV), which has fostered the birth of several women's organisations in the country. Taking this into consideration, through a critical scrutiny of ELNHA Bangladesh, the essay argues that the key to effective and gender-responsive localisation calls for an alternative model which will not only focus on curbing the vertical funding gaps between the 'local' and the 'international' but also the horizontal power hierarchies within the 'local'.

Voices of the voiceless: Is localisation genuinely empowering grassroots-level first responders?

Proposing Mac Ginty's concept of 'critical localism,' Roepstorff (2020) argued that a critical trajectory not only helps to assess who represents the local but also who defines who the local is and how this may lead to the marginalisation of certain actors in the humanitarian arena. Therefore, the local needs reconceptualisation "not as opposed to the international, but as an activity that occurs within webs of power and politics in which different people operate and interact" (Roepstorff, 2020, p. 291). Deriving from this, the essay argues that in a particular humanitarian crisis context, multiple LNHA's often try to do the same thing and achieve the same goal. This results in a massive conflict of interests, power differences, marginalisation of smaller actors, and competition over limited funds leading to competitive humanitarianism and a lack of horizontal unity.

During any humanitarian crisis, the affected population (insiders) are always the first responders. They are the ones who are not only aware of the crisis context but also of the humanitarian needs of the population they are serving. These first responders range from personal and domestic entities like neighbours, family members, ad hoc volunteers, local leaders, emergency responders, and small community-based organisations to formally organised medium and large-scale organisations. However, first responders usually exist as informal units without organisational architecture (third-tier actors). For instance, the small diaspora groups or individual activists often put their lives at stake to protect their fellow beings, solely driven by the ethics of care and the 'good Samaritan'. Similarly,

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despite being on the frontline and playing a vital role in the survival and resilience of families and communities, women's humanitarian responses are often taken for granted due to their domestic and regularised nature (Lafrenière et al., 2019). Following Judith Butler's theories (Mazurana and Proctor, 2015, Chapter 4), gender is fragmented and fluid and is more of a 'performance' that is enacted and (re)produced daily. One such aspect is the social construction of traditional gendered roles of women as the caregiver and men as the breadwinner. During any humanitarian crisis, the pressure of serving as the caregiver increases, leading to the feminisation of survival, where families and communities rely on the invisible social reproductive labour performed predominantly by women.

Despite such contributions, strong local knowledge, and crisis response skills, the voices of these third-tier actors are not included in the decision-making processes due to the gendered dichotomy of domestic labour and the lack of formal organisational capacities. Instead, a handful of powerful and elite LNHAAs (mostly male-dominated, formally registered first and second-tier actors) with qualified staff, who have access to broader networks, are aware of complex humanitarian fund application processes and possess English language skills tend to dominate the local humanitarian governance. They are often recognised as the 'appropriate' humanitarian actor with an agency that deserves the allocation of funds, often at the cost of others, which is evident from how the ELNHA initiative was implemented in Bangladesh (discussed in detail below). Unfortunately, for many of these actors, 'being local' is more of a strategic gateway to increase their prestige, reputation, and access to aid by undermining the smaller and weaker ones, thereby constantly reproducing the "social practices of inclusion and exclusion within particular intervention contexts" (Roepstorff, 2020, p. 291). We can argue that such horizontal elitism erodes the traditional norms of humanity, neutrality, independence, and impartiality (Christie, 2015, Chapter 3). Therefore, through the lens of critical localism, we need to question the slogan "as local as possible, as international as necessary" (Roepstorff, 2020, p. 286) and critically rethink if localisation is genuinely going as local as possible.

'Participation revolution' in limbo: Learnings from ELNHA Bangladesh

Participation revolution puts vulnerable and affected people at the centre of the localisation debate, where their voices are heard and acted upon (Lafrenière et al., 2019). The case study of ELNHA Bangladesh is a living testimony that when international humanitarian aid agencies (in this case, Oxfam) work as a 'humanitarian broker' to bridge the gaps within local humanitarian leaders, different tiers of local actors can develop their capacities altogether. While doing a critical review of the project, a major concern was raised: could it genuinely achieve participation revolution by deconstructing grassroots-level power hierarchies and recognising the agency of 'all tiers' of local first responders? It was observed that, veiled under the pathbreaking achievements, the initiative was not devoid of pitfalls.

Among the exhaustive achievements of ELNHA, the one most relevant to the essay was its attempt to strengthen horizontal partnerships among LNHAAs. Using the Joint Action Plans (JAP) and consortia formation processes, diverse local actors could collectively work together for a common humanitarian goal (Lewinsky et al., 2019). For instance, "[i]n Kurigram, before ELNHA, we didn't access each other [...] Before, we used to do things individually, but now that we join forces, [...] through the learnings from each other, we identify the gaps in policy and practice" (Lobo, 2019, p. 3), mentioned Sarker from MJSKS Bangladesh in an interview with Oxfam to explore ELNHA's key learnings on the intersection of partnership and capacity. ELNHA also contributed to enhancing the representation of women's organisations by funding the Bangladesh Women's Humanitarian Platform (BWHP), which came into being in November 2017 (Lambert et al., 2018). Despite being a new organisation, it has already contributed to international discussions on gender-responsive localisation in Bangladesh, a pathbreaking achievement in a profoundly patriarchal society like Bangladesh.

Regardless of the achievements, ELNHA had a major pitfall (its biases towards mostly involving the first- and second-tier actors as the target groups), undermining the spirit of participation revolution and reinforcing existing challenges. The evaluation team commented that third-tier actors' absorptive capacity is limited compared to tier one and two actors, making them less receptive to the ELNHA approach (Lewinsky et al., 2019). The essay finds this problematic as empowering the capacities of actors who already have organisational structures, often at the stake of others, questions the legitimacy of an entire localisation project like ELNHA. It resonates with the idea of making the strong stronger and the weak weaker. Similarly, funding selective women's organisations like BWHP is not considered an

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epitome of gender-responsive localisation. Lafrenière et al. (2019) stated that true gender-responsive localisation can be achieved through a change in social norms and mindsets. Drawing from that, gender justice could have only been achieved if ELNHA had also invested in transformative mechanisms to acknowledge humanitarian responses of all tiers of women's organisations, including those lacking organisational capacities and recognising unpaid domestic labour. It was further noted that irrespective of partnership brokering efforts by international agencies, small actors often found it challenging to enter a national consortium with other more prominent actors, as evident from the experience of ERA, a small local Bangladeshi actor, who had to fight for space in the national consortium ((Lewinsky et al., 2019). ERA had contacted POPI, a larger national NGO, to form a partnership on a proposal to respond to the March 2017 floods in northeast Bangladesh, which POPI refused. Subsequently, ERA had to submit the proposal individually but was advised by ELNHA management to participate in the consortium with bigger actors, including POPI. ERA had to undertake extensive negotiations to ensure that ERA would not be a mere underdog and receive respect and equal footing by other consortium members (the bigger actors).

Considering this, significant learning from ELNHA that other international donors and aid agencies should employ is to internalise that localising humanitarian aid is not only about investing in one or two short-term projects and adding one extra feather to the donor's cap. It is about supporting local-level collective management of humanitarian action because, when horizontal partnerships are successful, it tends to have a life beyond the tenure of a so-called project. It also helps local actors to identify the existing gaps, build on each other's strengths and work collectively after the international agencies depart. Additionally, when the local actors realise that the international organisation is investing in localisation not to fulfil its pre-defined strategies but rather to empower locally-led emergency responses truly, it automatically builds trust between the 'local' and 'international', which humanitarianism is accused of lacking. However, it needs to be done genuinely empoweringly by respecting and recognising 'all tiers' of LNHA's instead of selecting actors with pre-existing capacities. This goes hand in hand with supporting women's humanitarian leadership by recognising their domestic and unpaid contributions and empowering them instead of considering them as voiceless, passive victims and mere beneficiaries of aid. This will not only help transform their positions in households and communities but also help create long-term change in transforming gender relations in communities.

Conclusion

To conclude, we can argue that the key to efficient localisation is addressing the intra-local horizontal power hierarchies capable of simultaneously fostering gender-responsive localisation. By changing the humanitarian management model from delivering services to local capacity building/developing, the vulnerable communities can be better prepared for future emergencies without international organisations' direct on-field intervention, thereby reducing the overall costs of humanitarian assistance and crisis recovery. However, it must be considered that aid interventions by international actors are not easy to execute, especially in conflict zones where they have limited access to crisis-affected people. Therefore, further research is required across diverse humanitarian crisis contexts to test if the localisation model that might have worked in Bangladesh and Uganda would work elsewhere or not because taking a particular model and applying it across diverse contexts would be partial and ineffectual.

Localisation sounds like a promising initiative, but it comes with both opportunities and risks, as delineated through the discussion of ELNHA Bangladesh. Practitioners need to remember that the global humanitarian aid ecosystem has been a historically competitive milieu with strong power hierarchies in both vertical and horizontal ways, where often the ethos and principles of humanitarianism get shadowed under the veil of individual self-interest. Therefore, the humanitarian sector needs to endorse a fundamental shift and aim to deconstruct the long-existing impacts of classism, gendered hierarchies, and power asymmetries not only between the 'local' and 'international' but also among the 'local' to ensure equal, transparent, respectful, and trust-building partnerships. Otherwise, veiled under the glamour of its empowering claims, localising humanitarian aid will continue to be a harbinger of reproducing existing inequalities and the marginalisation of the grassroots level 'local' actors at the edge.

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