

Localization: will the Sulawesi response be a game-changer?

*A public debate at Humanity House, The Hague
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Cover photo: Jemilah Mahmood at the public debate

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Humanitarian Hot Topics

KUNO & Humanity House organize the series '**Humanitarian Hot Topics**'. For each edition they invite a speaker with an outspoken vision on much-discussed hot topics within the humanitarian sector, such as migration, #metoo and localization. After a short statement, the speaker enters into dialogue with guests from the humanitarian sector and the audience. This series is made possible through the financial support of ten humanitarian emergency aid organizations.

Speakers

- Jemilah Mahmood: Under Secretary General of the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC). She is also the founder of MERCY Malaysia and worked as the chief of the World Humanitarian Summit secretariat at the United Nations in New York.
- Christine Pirenne: Head of the Department for Humanitarian Affairs at the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs.
- Saskia Harmsen: change manager for the Charter for Change (C4C) at Oxfam. Harmsen coordinates and supports internal organizational change processes that enable local humanitarian leadership and localization of humanitarian aid.
- Roanne van Voorst: postdoctoral researcher, involved in the research project "When disaster meets conflict: disaster response of humanitarian aid and local state and non-state institutions in different conflict scenarios" (moderator).

Part one: introduction

Expect the unexpected

An introduction by Jemilah Mahmood and interview by Roanne van Voorst

i. Localization: It's hard to change old habits

Jamilah Mahmood kicked off with the remark that the meaning of the Grand Bargain Commitment *Localization* strongly depends on who you are asking. In the context of the Grand Bargain, it means shifting the power; it is about who leads and who has access to resources. During the consultations for the Grand Bargain, searching for measurable targets, for localization the target was set to reach at least 25% funding directly for local and national NGOs. Other elements of the Grand Bargain are about increasing support and capacity development of local actors, and about the quality of partnerships, instead of only the quantity. Nowadays, local and national actors do not care about this 25% anymore, because they know it is very hard to achieve within the system. They rather want quality partnerships, respect, and a real investment in their capacities. In the consultations at the World Humanitarian Summit, it became clear that local civil society and local government want to have the lead in humanitarian responses. During a crisis, some INGOs come in and push everyone aside and deliver a response that is completely out of context. This needs to change.

Local organizations want international organizations to train them, and they want INGOs to work with them in their offices. Local organizations do not want INGOs to take away their staff. There is also a lot of criticism from local organizations when international NGOs open a branch in a country and call it a national NGO, which they find insulting.

Localization is about complementarity. It is about changing our mindsets of how we operate, about giving up power, and about convincing donors that international actors have a very important role to play. INGOs have a lot of resources, knowledge, learning and capabilities that they can offer local and national actors. Local and national actors are, however, not uniform. Some of them are pretty horrible. Some are pretty good. One could say the same about international organizations. You must choose systematically: what organization is best to invest in. We should also focus more on women's groups. They are often overlooked but offer a very different perspective on the crisis and how to respond and build resilience. And we have to be more patient; we have to take time; we have to invest in really understanding the communities and asking the communities themselves who is best placed.

Mahmood stressed that local and national NGOs need to step up as well. They have to demonstrate that they are capable. They have to make sure they have the systems, the governance, the integrity and the accountability to play the same game. That is what she did with her own organization, MERCY Malaysia. She got it certified to expose the organization to international settings, and she built a network in Asia for local NGOs to ensure mutual accountability.

Furthermore, there is the issue of advocacy. Sometimes, local organizations cannot reach the platforms where their voices should be heard. INGOs could support or provide a platform for local voices.

Why is localization so difficult? Jemilah Mahmood argued that this is the case because everyone is trained to do business, to do their work in a certain way. We need to accept that the world is changing very fast. In about ten years the new role for international actors will be about building strong partnerships and capacity development. INGOs do not have a choice. There will be crises

where INGOs will depend on local actors, because international actors have no access. INGOs will have to make sure that the standards by which our local actors act are high.

For this, INGOs need to adapt and learn continuously, to change standard operating procedures, and to change their thinking. And talk to different people, perform collective scenario planning. And expect the unexpected.

ii. The Sulawesi response: a regional approach

In the second part of the introduction, Jamilah Mahmood reflected on the Sulawesi response after the earthquake in September 2018, and what this response tells us about Localization. Mahmood first recalled the Indian Ocean tsunami that hit Indonesia in 2004. A crisis in which the right aid was not always provided, and the culture was not respected. The Indonesian government decided not to allow the same thing ever to happen again and tightened up its laws and policies. The government has been very vocal at many international meetings, certainly during the World Humanitarian Summit. It said it wanted to have a regional approach.

The government decided that the Sulawesi earthquake of 2018 was a provincial crisis, instead of a national disaster. It refused international assistance, deciding that everything had to be coordinated by the National Disaster Management Agency. Any NGO assistance internationally had to be coordinated by the Indonesian Red Cross. They admitted a very limited number of international actors into Indonesia.

INGOs reacted very surprised, but Mahmood is surprised that INGOs did not see this coming. The Indonesian government had sent so many signals, indicating they were strengthening their disaster management system. Furthermore, Indonesia has a strong civil society, although civil society organizations are not humanitarian organizations. CSOs have been working with communities for a very long time and can mobilize very quickly. IFRC is strongly embedded in local action, following a network approach. PMI, the local Red Cross, was tasked with coordinating local response. This was a very new skill for them. It was also about diplomacy. They had to meet the government on a regular basis. You can imagine the pressure down to the PMI. Afterwards, the IFRC did an evaluation of the response. It was not perfect, but it was enough. There were gaps, but people did not suffer. A lot of people's needs were met.

iii. Trends & predictions

Governments will play a stronger sovereignty card. That is a trend. During the earthquake in Japan (2011, over 18,000 casualties), the government called for very specific help. They asked the IFRC to manage internationals coming in to assist and coordinate, as the Japanese government already had disaster response systems in place and needed only specific actions by international organizations. Similarly, with Hurricane Katrina (2005, over 1,800 casualties) and Hurricane Sandy (2012), some assistance was sent to the United States, but it happened very quietly. India would also never accept international assistance, and getting international assistance there is a true challenge. There is also a regional trend. In the South East Asian region in particular, governments take a much more regional approach. First, they want a national response, then a regional response, and lastly an international response. Other examples are the African Union, which is also setting up a humanitarian assistance centre, based on the ASEAN humanitarian assistance model SAARC.

According to Mahmood the context is relevant: the number of situations where international assistance will never be accepted will grow. What Mahmood stresses within IFRC is to become more adaptable. Adapt to local and national organizations, because the drivers for innovation have

to be as local as possible. Innovation is not some gadget that is designed here, and can push on a local level.

Mahmood foresees a future where humanitarian responses are going to be very much self-organized. There is a pattern changing here. We saw it in Greece, and we see it in some places in the Middle East: communities are organizing themselves. During the aftermath of Typhoon Haiyan (Philippines, 2013), people indicated that they wanted SIM cards: “You give us a SIM card and some credit, and we’ll figure out what we need, and we’ll get it. We know where to call.” Evidence is pointing towards this much more distributed network model, P2P (Person to Person), rather than large organizations.

A final prediction that is being discussed frequently, according to Jamilah Mahmood, is that donors will only fund very large organizations and that medium-sized ones will eventually close. Mahmood pointed out that a number of them have already closed down or have been swallowed by big INGOs. So bigger organizations become bigger, and it’s easier for donors to fund them, whereas the medium-sized ones or those that can’t find their place in a rapidly changing world then fizzle out.

Part two: debate

Respect, listening, and co-creation

With: Jemilah Mahmood, Christine Pirenne and Saskia Harmsen

Moderated by: Roanne van Voorst

i. Sulawesi response

Jemilah Mahmood: ‘We have evaluated the Sulawesi response. We found that acute needs were met. There were gaps in WASH and shelter, but the response did not cause life-threatening circumstances to people. It was a satisfactory response. It could have been better, but under the circumstances, that was what we got.’

Christine Pirenne: ‘Sulawesi was an interesting experience. As a government, we were very much at a distance to the response. We did support the crisis through a block grant with Netherlands Red Cross, and there was also a GIRO 555 emergency action to collect money from our citizens. When the Indonesian government was so strict, we took it very positively. When the disaster happened, the international community here immediately got into the modus of ‘what can we do’ because there’s a big disaster going on. But maybe there was no need to do that in the first place at all, because you could expect Indonesia to take care of its own. When we talk about our role and responsibility as countries [in terms of taking in refugees], we must also increase the dialogue with countries such as Indonesia much more.’

Saskia Harmsen: ‘During the Sulawesi response, the Oxfam country office partnered with the local network there, the Jejaring Mitra kemanusiaan (JMK), a local humanitarian knowledge hub. Now, I am championing the models that were developed within Oxfam by partnering with JMK, so that everyone can learn from that model. Originally, Oxfam had intended to have a model where 60% of the total funding for the response was through JMK, and JMK would be the operational and organizational lead, and Oxfam would only take a technical backstopping lead. When it came to implementation, there were shifts in that again. JMK felt like they couldn’t take on all that responsibility. It became a governance mechanism where Oxfam was only one of the actors with the representatives of the JMK as equal roles within that governance mechanism, each bringing in individual expertise.’

Saskia Harmsen: ‘The government restrictions that Indonesia put in place were very helpful in being much more thoughtful about what difference we can make and how we can complement existing capacity. Without those restrictions in place, restrictions have to come from an internal intrinsic motivation for the agenda, but this is more difficult.’

ii. Funding

Christine Pirenne: ‘The donor can provide funding as locally as possible and internationally as necessary. The ministry will not channel the full annual humanitarian budget directly to national responders. We do make use of country-based pooled funds. The trend is that the money from the international donor community going to country-based pooled funds is increasing. The number of local and national NGOs that pool from those funds is also increasing. We support a large extent of funding calls to international agencies: UN, IFRC, Dutch Relief Alliance. Three key channels to fund a response. We are trying to have them build capacity to their partners.’

Jemilah Mahmood: ‘Country-based pool funds were never designed to be a mechanism for local actors. Most of the time the money still goes to same organizations, not to local actors. It was never meant for localization, but it is a default mechanism. Only when it is absolutely impossible for internationals to act is money given to local actors. Jemilah encourages donors to invest in the whole approach towards capacity development: We don’t invest in that enough because capacity building can’t happen in an emergency; it has to happen before an emergency.’

Saskia Harmsen: ‘Oxfam is intermediating between local organizations and donors, but it differs from country to country. Oxfam is trying to do it more. Oxfam set up the Empowering Local National Humanitarian Actors (ELNHA) project. It is not focused on training and capacity building but instead on humanitarian response grant facility where smaller local actors in districts and provinces are able to access response grants. It is an intermediate between the funder and local actors. Criteria for accessing funds are significantly difficult. The project enables them to access and demonstrate capacity in many cases.’

iii. Partnerships for co-creation

Jemilah Mahmood: ‘How many of us remember the principles of partnerships? Respect, listening, planning together. Most of the time, when you ask local organizations what they want, they never say money. Most of the time, they say they want to be at the table when you make these decisions, because some of the decisions may hurt the communities. And to be co-creators, for example in needs assessment. How do you decide on needs when you don’t understand the context and the culture? So it think it is about being on equal footing, to be able to make some of these decisions. If I had to design my own INGO now, I know exactly what I would do. It has to have a special niche to be able to build strong partnership, to be able to be a strong mentor. I still think there’s a huge role for international actors. I think that it will be some time before we get national and local organizations to a level that donors are comfortable funding. But I think the next step must be about real investment in capacity development and leadership.’

Saskia Harmsen: ‘Charter4Change is an agenda for internal organizational change to enable local and national actors to play a more significant role. Different commitments are key progress indicators on whether we are a good partner for local organizations. If you look at country level humanitarian response staff, very few people know what those principles of partnership entail. It is about putting in place the systems, the reviews, the conversations, the collaborative partnering capability in an organization, that’s much more soft skill. What I would like to bring home is the capability of brokering partnerships, being an enabler of others, rather than always being the doer. It is a philosophy change, mindset change, culture change, which is huge within Oxfam. Partnering and brokering partnership needs to be seen as a profession, a professional skill, which is not something that you do on the side, but something that you take with you with everything that you do. Also, we need to focus on systems strengthening, in terms of supporting the collectivity of actors of public, private and civil society and media from the ground up, everybody who’s involved in the local knowledge system.’

Christine Pirenne: ‘It’s really about having innate partnerships, a frank and transparent discussion. Also about risks. We will always work in an environment where it is difficult to achieve the best possible results. So, let’s talk about how we can work with risks. What is acceptable, what is not acceptable, if we take risks, what is it that we get in return? How can we share them, what is the role of each and every stakeholder in the whole process of delivering humanitarian aid?’

iv. Politics

Jemilah Mahmood: 'It happens that governments do not give space to NGOs or CSOs. But even that is changing. I was in Iraq. Central governments and local governments can have very different perspectives as well, so it's all about context. Governments are recognizing, especially because of the Arab Spring and all, that civil societies cannot be contained. They will take power.'

Christine Pirenne: 'Humanitarian diplomacy is also a lot about the more politicized issues of what is going on. We've been talking a lot about natural disasters. But indeed, in cases such as Syria and Yemen, talking about localization is a very different ball game. Because localization is not necessarily a good thing, it needs to work, it needs to be credible in the eyes of the people that were hit by a disaster. I think that's the bottom line of all we do. And sometimes it's very difficult to flesh out a discussion about localization in a very politicized conflict setting. And we didn't talk so much about safeguarding the humanitarian principles and to what extent our local institutions are maybe also taking a position. So how can we preserve the space of humanitarian principles in a context that is always politicized?'