HPG
Humanitarian Policy Group

Briefing Note

Beyond local and international

Humanitarian action at the margins

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A key commitment of the 2016 World Humanitarian Summit and resulting Grand Bargain was to increase direct funding to local and national responders and make humanitarian aid 'as local as possible, as international as necessary'. The latest analysis of progress towards this goal identifies improvements and normative shifts regarding the place of local actors in humanitarian response. It also suggests we have a way to go to achieve targets and systemic reform (Metcalfe-Hough et al., 2019).

The Grand Bargain commitment to rectify funding inequalities followed emotive and charged debates about 'institutionalised discrimination' (Wall, 2015), only to give rise to new discussions around whether funds routed through intermediaries counted towards the aim of 25% of donor financing going 'as directly as possible' to local organisations by 2020 (Edwards, 2017). Global amounts of *direct* funding to local and national actors (without intermediaries) – 0.2% of all humanitarian funding – lag far behind the target, as opposed to an estimated 12.4% via 'intermediaries' such as the UN, Red Cross movement or international non-governmental organisations (INGOs) (Local to Global, 2019). Even though these percentages are higher in some countries, they still fall short of the 25% goal (Els, 2017; Willitts-King et al., 2018).

Discussion about the contributions of and dynamics between local and international actors is likely to continue well into the future. In rhetoric, if not necessarily in intent, the contrasting terminologies of 'local' and 'international' imply roles that are fixed, with associated value judgements about who is or should be primary responders, and with implications for the responsibilities, power and funding that accompany these actors in times of crisis. In reality, however, the categories

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Cover photo: Community representatives visit a family on the outskirts of Beni, DRC to raise awareness about Ebola. World Bank/Vincent Tremeau

of local and international are often fluid and relative. HPG's research on local humanitarian action exposes varying degrees of localness covering everything from geography and affinity to linguistic or experiential differences. For instance, local organisations responding to refugee crises often do not reflect the identities or experiences of the displaced. National organisations based in a capital city may be more local than international organisations, but are still not necessarily considered local by communities themselves. Meanwhile, the 'local' organisations participating in coordination or other formal processes may be the largest and best known, rather than representing the full diversity of 'local' actors in a crisis context (Wake and Bryant, 2018; Mosel and Holloway, 2019; Fast, 2019; Bennett and Fast, forthcoming). The diversity of language and lived experience in crisis suggests a variety of ways that organisations or staff members may be considered 'local'.

Equally, the notion of 'intermediaries' alludes to the fact that some categories of actors and institutions do not fit neatly into binaries of 'local' and 'international'. This leads to a series of questions: who are these intermediaries and who are the actors at the margins? What roles do they play in humanitarian action? Do intermediaries act as gatekeepers and go-betweens, or can and do they also function in supportive or complementary ways to local action? How should we categorise national faith-based organisations with extensive networks outside the country? Or the in-country offices of international federations, whose staff are almost entirely national but whose funding base may be primarily external? What about organisations that receive funding and other forms of support from diaspora organisations?

Intermediaries play a plethora of roles – some more bureaucratic than others – that fulfil important functions in the middle or at the margins of a response. These groups operate in the between spaces, at multiple levels between the international and the local, somewhere in the middle of initial donors and final implementers. Others operate at the margins, outside of but linked to the formal system, or move back and forth between the formal system and the informal spaces of humanitarian action. As such, intermediaries and marginal spaces represent additional lenses through which to explore local humanitarian action and the localisation debates, helping to move us away from the binaries of local and international actors and towards a more capacious vision of humanitarian action.

This paper is the third and final in a series of briefing notes (Fast 2017; 2019) related to HPG's local humanitarian action research, titled 'From the ground up: understanding local response in crises' (HPG, 2017), and complements the final report of this two-year project (Bennett and Fast, forthcoming). As part of this research agenda, HPG hosted a roundtable discussion in November 2018 about the roles of intermediaries in humanitarian action to further explore the nuances of local action.

This briefing note captures some of the insights from this roundtable, drawing upon this and related literature. It uses the metaphor of 'space', particularly the grey spaces of the middle and the margins, to capture the richness and variety of functions and roles beyond the categories of local and international humanitarian action. The note focuses first on intermediary actors and their roles, followed by a discussion of those operating in the marginal spaces of humanitarian response. Such spaces stretch our understanding of terminologies and can shift our perspectives. Moreover, examining *roles* instead of actors can promote inclusiveness and offer ways to expand our conceptions of complementarity. The note draws upon research corresponding to the four themes of HPG's local humanitarian action agenda – capacity and complementarity, dignity in displacement, humanitarian financing, and the protection of civilians – with the aim of exposing pathways to implementing a more effective and locally led humanitarian response.

Looking to the spaces between

The concept of an 'intermediary' in humanitarian action implies a liminal space, where actors function neither as local nor international, or share elements of both (Kraft and Smith, 2019). Analyses of the formal humanitarian system (Bennett, 2018) point both to the need for principled action (Dubois,

2018) and to the contributions of those who operate outside of the formal system (Currion 2018; Zaman 2018). Intermediaries represent one such group of actors who connect and encompass international, national and local groups, networks and individuals. They might be national affiliates of international organisations or international entities outside of the formal system that serve as conduits to local community-based organisations. Intermediary individuals, organisations, networks or institutions possess contextual knowledge, humanitarian expertise and access to local communities and to institutions at the centres of power.

Yet intermediary actors can – and arguably should – be disentangled from the roles they play in a response. They fulfil multiple functions, which often shift according to context (ALNAP, 2018). Despite their influence on the scope, shape, language and quality of humanitarian action, the role of intermediaries in the sector is less understood. This makes it difficult to grasp the extent of their influence or understand how they shape local action, but presents new options for advancing complementarity in humanitarian response.

Researchers have identified a plethora of intermediary roles in conflict settings (Mitchell, 1993). Those most prominent in the humanitarian literature are also the most contentious, such as channels for funding, building capacity and gatekeeping. Intermediaries sometimes operate as a **channel** in the oft-maligned 'humanitarian supply chain', where funding moves from institutional donors through the UN or INGOs and finally through to one or more local organisations (Els, 2017; Mowjee et al., 2017; Metcalfe-Hough et al., 2019; Willitts-King et al., 2019). Here they act as contracting and sub-contracting agents, a well-documented and critiqued role in the humanitarian system that raises questions about the value of each actor in the chain. Another function of intermediaries is to **build capacity** of local actors. Typically, this involves training or transferring skills and processes in ways that tend to replicate local organisations in the image of their international counterparts (Pouligny, 2009; Wall and Hedlund, 2016; Barbelet, 2018), which goes against the idea of locally led or locally owned humanitarian action. While sometimes interpreted in a more negative light, this function can be transformative in shifting the balance in favour of local actors if the capacity building is multi-dimensional and emerges out of local actors' self-assessments (Barbelet, 2019). A third role is that of **gatekeeper**, in which intermediaries monitor the actions of others or control access to meetings (e.g. cluster coordination), funding (donors) or other processes. Consequently, intermediaries may deliberately or inadvertently include or exclude local actors or add bureaucracy and layers to a system that already centralises power and resources (ALNAP, 2018). As gatekeepers, individual and organisational intermediaries make it possible to 'avoid local politics and its discontents' but are key for their access and contextual knowledge and in identifying those in need of assistance (Carpi, 2018).

While these roles reinforce existing power differentials in the humanitarian system, intermediaries can also make positive impacts. For instance, they can function as hosts, as bridges and brokers, as translators, and as mediators or go-betweens. First, intermediaries can function as **incubators or hosts** for newer, smaller organisations. For example, Save the Children UK (SC UK) acted as a hosting organisation for Elrha until its independence in May 2018.[1] Elrha, in turn, supports the Humanitarian Innovation Fund and other initiatives that support research and link academics and practitioners. SC UK also served as host for the Start Network, which recently became an independent entity,[2] and for the European Interagency Security Forum (EISF), a role now played by Christian Aid.[3]

1 www.elrha.org/our-history

2 www.startnetwork.org

3 www.eisf.eu/about-us/

Another intermediary function is a that of a **broker or bridge**. Oxfam's Humanitarian Response Grant Facility is one example, where Oxfam acts as a broker between an institutional donor and a platform of local NGOs that makes decisions and provides rapid financing to local and national actors in a crisis (Barbelet, 2019). In Syria, where intermediaries have played a vital role, two intermediary faith-based organisations – the Lebanese Society for Educational and Social Development (LSESD) and the Jordan Syria Lebanon Sub-Regional Forum (JSL) – have connected national actors and donors, acting as a 'marriage broker, pairing international donors with suitable LFCs [local faith communities] that had the capacity and desire to deliver aid to refugees' (Kraft and Smith, 2019: 37). These organisations operate as bridges between international donors and LFCs to provide assistance that is rooted in a local context *and* connected to the international church (Kraft and Smith, 2019). Similarly, in Myanmar, local faith-based civil society actors, primarily affiliated with Baptist or Roman Catholic churches, provided vital protection and assistance to displaced Kachin people, many of whom are Christian. These LFCs drew upon their connections to the international church for support (South, 2018: 18–19).

Yet LFCs are not primarily humanitarian actors and may operate with different values, objectives or worldviews (Gingerich et al., 2017). As a result, intermediaries often perform **translation** functions, interpreting between values and principles, systems and processes, or literally providing language translations. For example, where LFCs express their motivations in religious language, international humanitarian organisations refer to humanitarian principles; the fluency of intermediaries with familiarity with both 'scripts' can assist in coordination and ensure understanding between these groups. In Syria, the LSESD and JSL helped LFCs better understand the accountability and administrative requirements of international donors (Kraft and Smith, 2019). In Bangladesh and elsewhere, groups such as Translators without Borders (TWB) serve vital roles in ensuring effective communication between actors. TWB is an international organisation that hires local and diaspora community members to translate key messages in a response. Communication is pivotal in upholding, or sometimes conversely in undermining, dignity in a response. Correct salutations, for example, can be key in terms of dignified communication (Holloway and Fan, 2018: 17–18). While hiring translators may increase overall costs, they perform essential functions in delivering a high-quality and dignified response, playing a crucial role in bridging communication and linguistic divides.

A final role is that of **negotiators and go-betweens**, particularly in relation to civilian protection (Fast, 2018). Local actors are central in ensuring humanitarian access, even if they face significant obstacles in doing so (Svoboda et al., 2018). In Myanmar, for instance, church leaders negotiated between warring parties (South, 2018: 18–19) and local elders often negotiate on behalf of humanitarian actors to obtain the safe release of kidnapped staff. Organisations such as the Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue[4] support humanitarian mediation, with a focus on safe access and civilian protection, while organisations such as Nonviolent Peaceforce[5] adopt non-violent approaches and dialogue with armed actors to support the protection of civilians. Geneva Call[6] engages with armed non-state actors to promote respect for international humanitarian law. As part of its work to promote the humane treatment of detainees, the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) acts as a conduit for messages between detainees and their families.[7]

4 www.hdcentre.org/what-we-do/humanitarian-mediation/

5 www.nonviolentpeaceforce.org

6 www.genevacall.org

7 www.icrc.org/en/document/what-we-do-detainees

As evident above, both local and international actors can fulfil intermediary roles. While some actively claim an intermediary identity, others are more hesitant. Organisations that see themselves primarily as implementers may downplay their intermediary functions. In some cases they may operate with what one roundtable participant called an 'illusion of proximity' to the communities they assist, referring to the idea that intermediaries may not connect people as much or as closely as they purport. In both cases, the functions and roles mentioned above may influence how organisations self-define or conceive of their identity – whether as local, international, intermediary or otherwise.

The plethora of intermediary roles also points to their fluidity; indeed, individuals and organisations may take on multiple roles in a response. Others claim an intermediary identity over time or in a transitory way, moving in and out of such a role depending on context (Goodhand et al., 2016). In the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), for example, international organisations perceive local actors as representing their community and believe them to be less impartial and less trusted, therefore affecting their ability to act as intermediaries. Local communities can also perceive provincial organisations as 'not local enough' (Barbelet et al., 2019). As one roundtable participant pointed out, 'We need to break the dichotomy of intermediaries as being either in-between or outside the system. This is not accurate, because people wear multiple hats and sometimes people who are involved in a conflict are also people who deliver aid.'

The fluidity of roles and lack of precision of the terminology itself means that the concept of what an intermediary is or does is broad and potentially all-encompassing, which may limit its value as an analytical framing. A focus on roles instead of actors, however, helps to illustrate the various ways in which intermediaries contribute to humanitarian action in meaningful ways.

Looking to the spaces at the margins

The margins of humanitarian response offer another lens that can shift our understanding of local action. HPG's research has mapped household-level resources and coping mechanisms in times of crisis, illustrating the importance of looking to the marginal spaces. While international assets are important sources of sustenance, households draw upon a range of other resources, both financial and non-monetary, in times of crisis (Willitts-King et al., 2019). This range is crucial, illustrating the importance of complementary resources that originate outside the formal humanitarian system. Moreover, the stresses for those on the margins differ greatly. Those under the threshold and who receive international assistance have greater flexibility and a wider range of resources upon which to draw in times of crisis, whereas those over the threshold may not share these advantages and are therefore in danger of falling through the cracks. For example, in Nepal, flooding greatly affected marginalised groups, while a 'missing middle' of poorer households lacked sufficient resources but did not receive targeted support that was offered to minorities and marginalised groups such as *dalits* (Willitts-King and Ghmire, 2019).

In other places, actors working at the margins of humanitarian response can broaden our conception of humanitarian action. For example, diaspora members, who are both of and outside a context, often provide crucial financial and other resources in times of crisis (see for example Willitts-King and Ghimire, 2019). Private sector actors such as MasterCard directly support cash transfers in humanitarian response, while others provide remote mobile or broadband connectivity,[8] logistics support (e.g. DHL or UPS), shelter (e.g. IKEA) or geospatial mapping (e.g. Google) (Zyck and Kent, 2014).

Likewise, digital humanitarians operate remotely and at the margins of a response, often thousands of miles from the crisis itself (Meier, 2015; Currion, 2018). Volunteer mappers in the UK or US are one example, working in

8 www.gsma.com/mobilefordevelopment/resources-2/?resource_cats=mobile-for-humanitarian-innovation

coordination with organisations such as Humanitarian OpenStreetMap.[9] They map roads, health facilities or government services in places like Uganda or Haiti, and these are subsequently verified by on-the-ground volunteers. The membership and reach of these networks are extensive, expanding the community of those assisting in an emergency response. Humanitarian-to-humanitarian (H2H)[10] organisations are often, but not always, based in the North and support operational actors but do not directly provide assistance or protection. As such, their work happens at the literal margins of a response and is neither local nor entirely international. Nevertheless, they contribute resources in terms of volunteers and, particularly in the case of the private sector, financial capital to a response effort.

Marginal spaces, however, like the contribution of intermediaries, are not necessarily or universally positive. Including such a plethora of actors among those that provide assistance (and sometimes protection) in the context of violence and armed conflict can complicate efforts to maintain a space for principled humanitarian action. The inclusion of remote and digital technologies in humanitarian action can magnify distance (Duffield, 2013; Donini and Maxwell, 2013) and may undermine presence and proximity as central elements of humanitarian action (Svoboda, 2015; Jackson and Zyck, 2017; Fast, 2016). In this way, marginal spaces may create distance and amplify disconnection.

Implications for humanitarian action

The roles and functions of intermediaries and those at the margins of local or international humanitarian action are complex and multi-faceted. They illustrate the need to pay attention to what happens in the liminal and marginal spaces. Conceiving of intermediaries in terms of the roles and functions they serve and recognising the contributions of those at the margins can help us move away from the binary conception of local and international actors. This view adds nuance and complexity to how we understand local response and comprehend the possibilities of complementarity.

What implications do intermediaries suggest for reforming humanitarian action? Two ideas may be helpful here.

Local humanitarian action is about 'shifting the power' but perhaps equally it needs to be about shifting perspective

At present, localisation debates in the sector tend to approach the concepts of local and international as good or bad, or in terms of the need to shift power from international actors to local ones. It follows that humanitarian action is status-driven, in the sense that organisations are categorised as local or international, and they assist those who become refugees or internally displaced people (IDPs), vulnerable or conflict-affected people. These distinctions – and their associated identities – are not just important in terms of perspective; they have very practical implications for who receives assistance and who is eligible for donor funding. In this way, these status-based categories themselves become gatekeepers, relegating people and organisations into identities they may neither want nor accept. Liisa Malkki's (1996) now-historical study of refugees is instructive in this regard, documenting how Burundian refugees defined their refugee status as a positive identity, one handed down across generations rather than as a legal status that granted them rights. HPG's dignity research in Colombia likewise found that refugee or IDP status affirms a positive identity in that it confers a legal status and identity but may simultaneously create stigma that undermines dignity (Ángel, 2019: 10). Yet this is also contextual: for Syrians, the same label of refugee signified 'suffering, poverty and a lack of dignity' even as it conferred rights (Grandi et al., 2019: 5). These examples illustrate the importance of context and, in turn, differences in perspective.

Many of the examples above, however, do not fit neatly into essentialised and binary categories. Instead they illustrate the grey zones of the margins and middle spaces, as well as the agency of affected populations. Refugees and

9 www.hotosm.org

10 www.h2hworks.org

IDPs often straddle conflict lines and function as bridges in order to protect themselves and their families. HPG's research in the Kachin state, for example, showed how IDPs have 'feet' in camps controlled by and for different groups as a protection strategy. They draw on cross-border ties and allegiances to avail themselves of opportunities to access better education or economic prospects. Individual family members associate with multiple armed groups in an effort to adapt to a dynamic and fluid context with shifting frontlines and the allegiances (South, 2018). This contrasts with the siloed structures of the humanitarian response and labels of displacement.

While intermediaries, which operate in the grey zones, may divert funding from local actors, they also facilitate action and serve vital roles in providing assistance. Thinking in terms of intermediary roles and functions helps decentre the dominant conceptualisation of the 'assets' belonging to locals and internationals – that locals have contextual knowledge and that internationals have funding and expert knowledge. The current and previous responses to Ebola disease outbreaks in the DRC and West Africa, respectively, illustrate the dangers of a response that is not appropriately contextualised and reflective of local realities, regardless of the amount of funding and expert knowledge available (Dubois and Wake, 2015; Daffe, 2019). Turning attention to the specificities of context and, simultaneously, the variety of roles in a contextualised response can shift our perspective towards contribution and complementarity.

Setting 'local' in opposition to or in tension with 'international' ignores the ways that such friction generates new opportunities for complementarity

Reform efforts are about enlarging the tent and increasing the effectiveness of the humanitarian response (Bennett and Foley, 2016). Marginal and intermediary spaces illustrate some unusual possibilities, even as they exemplify the frictions inherent in relationships among local and international actors and those in between. This friction plays out in the form of the debates about capacities, funding, targets and processes. As Björkdahl and Höglund write with regard to peacebuilding, the 'global and the local are in constant confrontation and transformation with each other' even as they are often seen in terms of dichotomies (Björkdahl and Höglund, 2013: 292). Instead, they write, this friction between conflicting ideas, practices and processes produces new dynamics and may also catalyse change. Thus, perhaps it is less about humanitarian actors and more about humanitarian roles; less about the positive or negative influence of intermediaries and more about what they hinder or facilitate; less about attributing capacity or effectiveness to one category of actor and more about contributing to capacity and the effectiveness of a collective response.

The aspirations of the Grand Bargain and similar reform efforts are to reduce the numbers of intermediaries to improve efficiency, but intermediaries can add value that cannot be accounted for in terms of economic efficiency (South, 2018; Barbelet, 2019; Willitts-King et al., 2019; Bennett and Fast, forthcoming). Rather than judge their value only in economic terms, an effective intermediary role helps to rebalance power between local and international actors, as opposed to simply adding bureaucracy. A more nuanced understanding of intermediaries and those at the margins can help to generate new roles that are neither exclusively local nor international.

The discussion above affirms that we cannot uncritically accept the status quo, where internationals hold the mechanisms, processes, and levers of power in the system, just as we must not uncritically value the local. Instead of claiming that 'local is always better', the localisation agenda should be about rebalancing a system that is overly top-down and led by international priorities.

We cannot pretend that intermediaries or those at the margins are an answer to the challenges of shifting initiative, power or leadership to local humanitarian actors. But expanding our view of the landscape of humanitarian action to account for the spaces of the middle and the margins nudges open multiple pathways to a more complementary, and ultimately effective, humanitarian action.

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