

PRACTICAL DIMENSIONS OF LOCALISATION April 2023

1. The Interaction between Local/National & International Relief Actors

The global consultations prior to the May 2016 World Humanitarian Summit (WHS) resurfaced the lack of recognition and resources for local and national actors, who are typically the first responders but also continue when the international attention and funding have shifted elsewhere. During the WHS, some initiatives were initiated to address their challenges. These became known under the banner of “*localisation*”. The Grand Bargain, in its ten commitments, contains a significant reform agenda for the international relief sector. The second commitment in particular is for more support and funding for local and national actors. “*We commit to support local and national responders on the frontline, improve the use of cash and increase flexible funding*”, An understanding inherent to the Grand Bargain is that “*benefits are for all partners, not just the big organisations.*” “And the need was acknowledged “*to move from the present supply-driven model dominated by aid providers to a demand-driven model more responsive to the people we are assisting*”

The Grand Bargain puts a central emphasis on the funding available to local/national agencies (L/NA). This is appropriate as weak finances regularly create challenging situations and prevent the development of more robust organisations. However, listening to over 250 local CSOs from Asia, Africa and the MENA region, GMI in 2015-2016 identified five other areas where local/national actors often find the relationship with international relief agencies frustrating – and where they want to see change: the quality of the relationship, the ineffectiveness of ‘capacity-development’, the lack of visibility of their roles, contributions and achievements, the inability to influence policies and standards for the global humanitarian sector/system, and the inability to influence the same at operational level.

Combined, these various dimensions of the interaction between international and local/national relief actors often generate a situation of structural subordination of the latter to the former. Bringing the six dimensions together also enables a systems-perspective that shows their interconnectedness: challenges in one dimension will not be resolved if those in other dimensions are not also addressed.

To this, GMI further added the Grand Bargain commitment to enable a ‘*participation revolution*’, giving those affected by or at risk of a major crisis, a greater say in what is done for their benefit. This is justified, as the ultimate purpose is to effectively help crisis-affected people survive and regain control over their lives. Since we want L/NA to be able to respond to the needs of the affected populations, with less need for international mobilisation and deployment, they too need to master approaches such as people-centred and participatory approaches.

2. Seven Dimensions of Operational Localisation

In 2017, the Global Mentoring Initiative (GMI) developed the ‘seven dimensions’ framework for localisation during its work with the START Fund of the START Network and identified a set of ‘emerging indicators’ during its subsequent work with the Disasters and Emergencies Preparedness Programme (DEPP) of the START Network. The seven dimensions framework draws on the Grand Bargain commitment 2 to localisation and commitment 6 to a participation revolution, Charter4Change commitments, and consultations with local, national and international actors.

The original version put the ‘*Funding and Financing*’ dimension first, adding the quality of funding to the quantity reference of the Grand Bargain. Subsequent testing and reviewing with local/national CSOs (in 2018) led us to put the primary emphasis on the relationship quality. International agencies have roles to play, but local actors want equitable partnerships, with mutual respect and accountability. If there is a good collaborative relationship between international and local/national organisations, a lot of the challenges and friction points in the other dimensions become much easier to deal with. We have also given greater prominence to a ‘*participation revolution*’ because crisis-affected people want to

regain control over their lives, also when they are assisted by local/national actors. The diagram here presents the 2023 version, not different from the 2018 version but adding more detail.

RELATIONSHIP QUALITY	PARTICIPATION REVOLUTION	FUNDING & FINANCING	CAPACITY	COORDINATION MECHANISMS	POLICIES AND STANDARDS	VISIBILITY AND CREDIT SHARING
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •choosing each other •smart trust: intentional trust building •'decision-making', not 'implementing' partner (joint problem-analysis, intervention design; learning; evaluation) •compensating for structural power inequalities •respectful tone and content of communications •reciprocal transparency and accountability (reflected in contracts) •risk sharing •budget transparency & fair sharing of resources •responsible ending of collaboration 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •deeper participation of at-risk & affected populations in problem-analysis and response decisions and -decisions ('nothing for us without us') •community/social group led actions •support and reinforce participatory governance 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •lighter proposal & reporting requirements •better quality funding (management fee, multi-year, flexible, cash flow protection...) •greater quantity of funding •truthful financial reports (real costs; voluntary contributions...) •not competing against national actors for resources •supporting national actors towards financial health (organisational investment; fundraising; income generation...) •network and eco-system funding 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •appreciation of strengths instead of 'deficit thinking' •mentoring, accompaniment & peer learning, more than training •joint learning/capacity sharing •institutionalised and retained capabilities •collaborative capacities •stop undermining capacities (negative self-image; recruiting away; causing inflation etc.) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •national actors have greater presence and influence in decision-making •national actors lead or co-lead •beyond 'coordination' towards 'collective impact' 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •national actors contribute to and influence global and national policy and standards-development, and their application in their contexts •national actors develop their own standards of integrity, quality, accountability •national actors have their own advocacy and policy strategies to influence global decision making 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •roles, results and innovations by national actors are given credit and communicated about by international actors •intellectual property rights of local actors are respected

- **Relationship quality:** National and local actors are tired of being instrumentalised and of the prevailing sub-contracting relationship that many international agencies impose on them.¹ They acknowledge the value of international agencies, and do not want to get rid of them. But they want to see more genuine and equitable partnerships. They want to be 'decision-making' and not just 'implementing' partners.² That requires transparency, quality communications, mutual accountability and periodic reviews of the quality of the collaborative relationship. The nature of the relationship is often influenced already by how it came about: Was it the international agency looking for and unilaterally selecting national/local agencies to complement and expand its work; was it the international agency looking for N/LA it could support and reinforce: did both parties really choose each other based on an explicit analysis of what value each could contribute in pursuit of a shared purpose or -objective? Do the formal agreements reflect the rhetoric of 'partnership' or do they overwhelmingly protect the interests of one party? Does the collaboration end in a responsible and respectful manner?

Risk perception is a key issue in the interaction between international and L/N relief actors. Typically, the internationals portray all L/NA as a 'risk', of fraud and corruption, political or social-group bias, inability to achieve international standards etc. Beyond GMI, very few acknowledge the risks to a L/NA of engaging in close collaboration, and becoming financially rather dependent on, an international actor. Risk too is present in different dimensions. For 'funding and finance', there is indeed the risk of fraud and corruption, but also the risk – for L/NA- of not being able to cover its real costs (and hence operating at a loss). There is also always a risk of wastage, not really necessary expenditures. International agencies may be reluctant to risk reducing their own perceived importance and achievements, by giving too much visibility to the role and contributions of their local/national 'partners'. L/NA may be at risk if their political sensitivity work is given to much visibility. In terms of the quality of

¹ The 2007 'Principles of Partnership' are, more than a decade later, little known and even less practiced.

² There are now many relevant references to reflect on and assess the health of a partnership, such as the principles of the Partnership Brokering Association or the Partnership Maturity Indexes of GMI or the Cooperative Capacity consultancy group.

relationship, at the opposite end of the spectrum of course stands ‘trust’.³ Using the dimensions framework as support in constructive conversations between L/NA and international relief agencies, is likely to increase the trust. The 2022 GMI paper on risk transfer and risk sharing provides an in-depth overview of a broader range of risks than are typically recognised in risk matrices, and practical frameworks to discuss what risk sharing means in practice.⁴

- **A ‘participation revolution’:** Fuller and more influential involvement of crisis-affected people in what relief is provided to them, and how. As some displaced people in the Philippines put it: ‘*Nothing for us without us!*’ Genuinely participatory approaches are very rare: Although crisis-affected people around the world want to regain some control over their own lives, humanitarian actors tend to portray them as ‘vulnerable’, ‘in need’ etc. In other words, they are helpless and dependent on humanitarian assistance. In the 1990s, humanitarian actors talked about ‘vulnerabilities and capacities assessments’. The contemporary emphasis is only on ‘needs assessments’. The move, over the past decade, to more ‘accountability to affected populations’, has reduced this to feedback and complaints mechanisms, satisfaction surveys, and communicating with communities. There is little, early, and effective, participation in decision-making by crisis-affected people, and little attention to their social organising beyond the household level. In recent years, a number of humanitarian actors have experimented with community-led relief approaches, with participatory budgeting and ‘voices to choices’ approaches – but this remains marginal compared to the mainstream approaches.
- **Funding:** The commitment to ensure that at least 25% of internationally raised funding reaches national and local actors ‘as directly as possible’. ‘As directly as possible’ has been interpreted as no more than one grant intermediary. The Grand Bargain largely refers to *quantity* of funding, although it does call for less earmarking. For local actors however, just as for international ones, the *quality* of funding (flexible, longer-term, covering core costs, predictable, maintaining cash flow etc.) is as important as the quantity. They also feel they cannot easily compete with INGOs if a grant is offered on condition of the grantee providing a percentage of co-funding. Advancing the funding, to be reimbursed for real and justified costs, is obviously impossible, as they are unable to build up any reserves. Furthermore, in emerging economies and countries with expanding middle classes, local and national CSOs are now looking at more domestic fundraising. They are deeply worried about the entry of international agencies (or their national affiliates) as competitors into these ‘emerging markets’.
- **Capacities:** More effective support for strong and sustainable institutional capacities, and less undermining of those capacities by international actors. A long and contentious topic: Some of the key issues are: a narrow understanding of capacities by international actors that results in lack of recognition of various capacities and competencies that local/national agencies have; an assumption that local/national actors lack capacities and that international agencies have them; uncoordinated and ineffective capacities that rely too much on generic and one-off training and is not tailored to the context or the agencies (the preference is for mentoring and on-the-job learning via accompaniment); too much emphasis on technical and compliance capacities which is a priority for international agencies but not necessarily so much for local/national ones; undermining capacities e.g. by hiring away the best staff of national actors, causing inflation when large numbers of international agencies come in etc. Particular problems arise during general surge, when internationals rapidly hire large numbers of local for their own capacity, and then tell local agencies they do not have the capacity. A related issue is how to maintain capacities for emergency response, during long periods when no emergency takes place. The strategic failure of the international aid system is the dissociation between capacity-support and financial stability: the main dilemma for national actors is not to strengthen but to maintain capacities (experienced people, but also assets and systems) in the face of chronic underfunding. Local/national actors point out that even as they get stronger in many ways, the internationals shift the goal posts, so there is no finishing line. That then also means there are never significant role changes: they are not allowed to take on roles that the

³ See GMI 2019: *Prepared-for-Partnership? Trust and distrust in international cooperation.*

⁴ GMI 2022: *At Last: More appropriate perspectives on risk and risk management in the aid sector.*

international agency kept to itself. There is never a ‘graduation’: they remain eternal students. A second strategic failure is the emphasis on individual agency capabilities, rather than collective capabilities of national and local actors, a replication of the single agency silo-thinking in the international aid system.

- **National actors leading in coordination mechanisms:** More presence, influential participation and (co-) leadership of national governmental and non-governmental actors in ‘coordination’ mechanisms and forums such as clusters.⁵ Obstacles are the ability (and cost) to attend large numbers of meetings; meetings in a European language only, not understanding the complex architecture, jargon and acronyms of the international humanitarian system, but also the status differences that put local actors at the bottom of the hierarchy, possibly useful as sources of information but not otherwise to be listened to too seriously etc. At a deeper level, ‘coordination’ often remains at the level of ‘avoiding duplication’, and ensuring a good ‘division of labour’ – it is not focused on achieving collective impact, which typically requires a much stronger readiness of different agencies to actively collaborate and complement each other to achieve a major outcome and deeper impact.
- **Policy and standard-setting influence:** Increased and meaningful presence of national actors in international policy and standards-setting discussions. Standards are typically developed in Western countries by groups of internationals. They may not be realistic for particular contexts. Local actors must be involved to determine what is realistic in particular contexts and situations.
- **Visibility and credit sharing:** Greater public recognition and visibility for the role, effort, contribution, innovation and achievements of local actors.⁶ A particular irritation can arise when a local/national agency has been creative and innovative, and an international agency (‘partner’) takes up the idea and publicises it as its own.

3. Are there Dimensions Missing?

Transparency and accountability? These are indeed not explicitly listed but are present in different dimensions: ‘transparency’ comes into play, for example, in the dimensions of ‘funding & finance’, ‘relationship’, ‘participation revolution’, and ‘visibility’. So does ‘accountability’, which can also be invoked under the ‘coordination & collaboration’ dimension.

Humanitarian principles? A major concern continues to be raised about ‘localisation’ in conflict-settings. International agency staff tends to assert, in generalising manner, that L/NA may be less willing and able to abide by fundamental humanitarian principles. Deeper reflection and actual observation show a much more nuanced picture, including about the alleged ability of international agencies to be totally independent, neutral and impartial.⁷ The ability to operate in accordance with humanitarian principles is seen here as the outcome of organisational capacities: sufficient financial autonomy, a strong ethical foundation and the skills to navigation complex political and military/security waters.⁸ Several researchers and analysts have pointed at the exceptional ability of

⁵ Which is not so easy, given that international coordination mechanisms are complex, slow and very time consuming. Not all national actors want to be burdened by them or can afford the staff time required.

⁶ A recent study that looked at 28 projects implemented by 5 ECHO partners (3 UN, 2 INGO), found that the reporting provided some descriptive information about the roles of national actors in programmes and projects, but not much on their added value. The report also continues to refer them as ‘implementing partners’. Mowjee et alii 2017: *From Grand Bargain to Beneficiary*, London, ODI, HPG p. 2/20-21

⁷ In 2017, the ICRC held an internal workshop to 1) take stock of the institution’s experience in engaging with and supporting local and national actors, within and outside the Movement; 2) identify areas where the ICRC could improve its own practice; and 3) draw from its operational experience in order to inform the localisation discussion as it moves forward. While recognising challenges, it did not see a fundamental obstacle to localisation in conflict.

⁸ Elsewhere, GMI has argued that the question of humanitarian principles is very relevant but is too easily generalised by stereotypical assertions that local and national actors are unable or unwilling to work with neutrality and impartiality, and that international agencies, as a category, are far superior in doing so. GMI 2017: *Understanding the Localisation Debate* p.p. 6-7 <https://www.gmentor.org/localization/> For an insightful study

local/national actors to navigate very complex environments in order to protect principles. The question has also been raised whether impartiality requires that every agency is able to work across divides, or whether it is achieved at aggregate level, i.e. different local actors providing similar services to the different, divided, social groups. There is also the not-recognised question of ‘constituency’. If local organisations have no ‘constituency’, they can be accused of being just an income-generating venture of the founder(s) – if they have a particular constituency, they can be accused of not being ‘impartial’. The principle of ‘neutrality’, notably with regard to the political causes and responsibilities for large-scale violence, is now also contested. First, it cannot override the obligation to respect and defend fundamental human rights; secondly, there is a long history of ‘humanitarian resistance’ that draws also on other principles such as dignity, courage, accompaniment, secrecy.⁹

Gender? The Grand Bargain as a whole, and preceding references to the interaction between international and L/NA relief actors (e.g. 1994 Red Cross and INGO Code of Conduct; 2007 Principles of Partnership) are all weak on gender. A sub-theme in the broader localisation debate therefore has emerged that draws particular attention to L/NA working on women’s rights, and/or women led. This is being reinforced by stronger voices for gender equality and women leadership in humanitarian action.¹⁰ Gender can play a role in the relationship between international and L/NA actors, but also within each group. Women’s organisations, often more local, have challenged what they perceive as ‘male-dominated’ national CSOs and international relief sector. Although they may be very strong in terms of ‘participation’ of affected people, women’s rights and women led organisations often find it harder to access quality funding, be active in coordination mechanisms, and get visibility for their work. At the same time, it cannot be assumed that a male-led organisation would not be working effectively for equal rights and the protection of women and girls. Local women-led organisations are also cautious about a division being created between them and male-led local organisations. The purpose is to mainstream gender equity, not to locate it in a block of women-led organisations.

Leadership: Localisation is sometimes framed as ‘locally-led’ crisis response. ‘Leadership’ has therefore sometimes been added as another key dimension in the interaction between L/NA and international relief agencies. GMI prefers to see stronger local/national leadership as the outcome of changes in the key dimensions, rather than a dimension in itself. Which also requires a willingness of international agencies to relinquish some of their very tight control.

4. Influence of the Seven Dimensions Framework

The framework has been tested with various local and national CSOs. It is actively used as such, or has been the source of inspiration for, e.g. the START Network, the Dutch Relief Alliance, the Humanitarian Advisory Group in Australia and PIANGO (Pacific Islands Association of Nongovernmental Organisations), UNICEF, the NEAR network and others, and in localisation conferences in e.g. Jordan, Bangladesh, Ethiopia and the DRC.¹¹

5. Uses of the Seven Dimensions Framework

The framework provides a comprehensive overview that captures critical aspects of the relationship between national/local actors and international relief actors, that national and local actors –often for years- have been concerned and at times critical about. What is its utility?

see Stephen, M. 2017: *Partnerships in Conflict*. London/Oxford, International Alert & Oxfam; see also Bennett, C. 2016: *Time to Let Go*. ODI, HPG p. 50-53

⁹ See e.g. Slim, H. 2021: *Humanitarian Resistance and Military Dictatorship*. Humanitarian Practice Network 14 April, and Slim, H. 2022: *Solferino 2021. Warfare, civilians and humanitarians in the 21st century*. Hurst Publishers

¹⁰ Canada has adopted an explicitly ‘feminist’ approach to humanitarian action. So too does ActionAid.

¹¹ HAG and PIANGO maintain seven dimensions but dropped visibility and added leadership. NEAR reduced seven to six dimensions by merging visibility into policy and influence.

a. *A framework for individual agency review and reflection.*

Local and national and international agencies each can use it to reflect on their current practices with regard to the various dimensions (and cross-cutting issues, if we want to call them such), and the internal and external enabling and constraining factors they experience.

b. *A framework for review and development of the collaboration.*

The framework can help to structure the conversations between agencies planning to collaborate or already doing so. Rather than jumping from one topic to another (as there are systemic interconnections), it provides a visual landscape through which to move in a more step-by-step manner.

	Where are we now?	What needs to change?	What obstacles can we anticipate & how will we overcome them	What would success look like?	What progress markers can tell us whether we are advancing?
Relationship quality					
Participatory approaches					
Funding and financing					
Capacities					
Influencing coordination & contextual policies and standards					
Sharing credit & giving visibility					
Influencing international policy and standards					

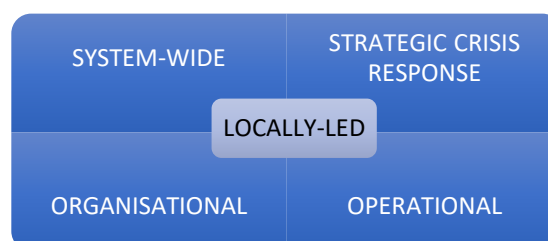
If there is willingness for changes in various dimensions of the current interaction, then the framework can again be helpful in identifying priorities. Perhaps the financial vulnerability of the L/NA needs to be reduced first, before investing in strengthening its capacities, as it will not be able to retain its best staff if it cannot regularly pay them. Perhaps some more trust-building is needed, before the difficult conversation about sharing the management fee for a project can take place. This can then lead to an agreed 'localisation plan' in that particular collaboration.

c. *A reference for evaluation*

The framework also provides a practical reference for an internal or independent review or evaluation, as was done e.g. by UNICEF in 2019.¹²

6. A Broader Systemic Framework

The above dimensions framework is particularly useful at operational level, and in the context of collaborations between a number of specific agencies. But the Grand Bargain commitments, including the ones on localisation and a participation revolution, aim at a more wholesale reform of the practices of the international humanitarian system. Operational improvements by individual and sets of collaborating agencies are not enough to effect systemic change.



¹² UNICEF Humanitarian Policy Section 2019: *A Review of UNICEF's Approach to Localisation in Humanitarian Action. Executive summary.* New York

And progress is also hindered by systemic obstacles and disincentives. A broader perspective therefore is needed, that asks more strategic questions.

- How do we make our collective, global, or ‘system-wide’ capacity better prepared to respond to a crisis in ways that maximise the participation of affected populations and reinforces rather than replaces local and national capacities?
- What strategic decisions for the collective response to a particular crisis will create a situation where the international assistance reinforces rather than replaces local and national actors’?
- What will make our own organisation better prepared to do this?
- What does localisation mean for our individual (and collective) operational practices?

Strategic decisions shape the initial landscape: In every emergency or crisis response, certain strategic decisions will set the scene and create conditions that are more or less favourable for a localised response with early and strong participation of affected populations. Examples of key scene-setting strategic decisions would be: Where bilateral donors allocate most of their funds (e.g. whether a pooled fund is rapidly created, what proportion of overall funding is allocated to it); whether the national authorities allow ‘new’ international agencies into the crisis area; whether international agencies are allowed direct implementation or obliged to work with and through L/NA¹³; whether the government insists on leading and controlling the coordination; whether a common framework with salary parameters is set for all actors responding in a given operating environment etc. Such decisions shape the nature of the overall response and create a more or less enabling overall environment for localisation.

Operational crisis-response decisions: Individual international agencies also make influential decisions e.g. to support a L/NA to rapidly scale up for the response the L/NA has decided; to find L/NA to implement the response the international agency has decided, or to scale up heavily itself for direct implementation. Of great consequence is also what it does about decision-making positions e.g. all staffed by expatriates, or (also) with expatriates working under national staff, or second international experts to a L/NA partner as resource people. It can burden its collaborating L/NA with heavy financial accounting requirements, second finance staff to the L/NA to ‘unburden’ it or keep financial reporting light. It also decides whether to provide the collaborating L/NA with quality funding, the needed operating facilities and equipment - or not etc.

To get to different strategic and operational decisions in a crisis-response, more enabling conditions will need to be created to make the global ‘system’ and individual organisations more ‘*fit-for-localisation*’ i.e. better prepared to reinforce rather than replace local and national capacities.

Organisational preparedness: International organisations will have to review, not just their operational practices in a particular response, but their missions, their legal framework, their policies, their administrative requirements, their procedures, the required core competencies of their staff, their business model, fundraising and external communications strategies etc.¹⁴ At a deeper level, it may require an evolution also of mindsets. As one INGO staff member tasked with identifying the implications for her organisation puts it: “*this goes to the DNA of the organisation.*”

System-wide preparedness: The global response capacity is currently well prepared for a ‘comprehensive response’ that replaces rather than reinforces local and national actors.¹⁵ Better preparedness for localisation may mean e.g.

¹³ As the Nepal government required, when faced with a massive influx of international aid agencies after the 2015 earthquakes. See Featherstone, A. 2016: Opportunity Knocks. Realising the potential of partnerships in the Nepal earthquake response. Christian Aid, CAFOD, ActionAid, Oxfam, Tearfund, CARE

¹⁴ The first progress report of the signatories to the Charter 4 Change contains many examples of organisational adaptations, such as the reviews and amendments of organisational documents and guidance documents related to partnership, capacity assessment, HR policies and procedures etc. C4C Coordination Group 2017: *From Commitments to Action. Progress report 2016-2017*

¹⁵ See B. Ramalingam & J. Mitchell 2014: *Responding to Changing Needs. Challenges and opportunities for humanitarian action*. London, ALNAP p. 29-30; and E. Schepers, A. Parakrama & S. Patel 2006: *Impact of the Tsunami Response on Local and National Capacities*. Tsunami Evaluation Coalition

- A greater readiness to establish pooled funds early on, have them jointly managed by international and national actors, and channel a larger proportion of available funding through them to local responders.
- Creation of coordination environments that are more enabling for local and national leadership, in terms of who participates, the languages that can be used, but also in their conversational and decision-making culture.
- Individual and collective international surge-capacity is refined so that it is better able to respond with ‘fitness-for-context’. In practice that implies, for example, that emergency response rosters also have people with particular ‘partnering competencies’ and ‘partnership brokering’ expertise, with rapid ‘applied anthropology/research’ experience, with organisational development expertise etc. Part of the preparedness training of a significant number of international experts ready to be deployed anywhere at short notice, will be to work within and in support of local and national organisations. Critical components of preparedness-enhancement of local and national actors, that currently do not seem to be a standard component of the humanitarian-capacity-building repertoire, would be the organisational ability to manage a rapid scaling up and scaling down, and effective leadership in crisis management coordination.

The greater the organisational and system-wide preparedness for a participation revolution and localisation, the easier strategic and operational decisions in a particular crisis, will be aligned with these commitments.

**REFRAMING THE FUNDAMENTAL
STRATEGIC, PLANNING AND OPERATIONAL QUESTION**

Key question without localisation: *How do we deliver relevant aid and protection fast, at scale and with adequate quality?*

Key questions with localisation: *What goods and services do these affected populations need, that will save lives but also increase their ability to cope, and how do we get it to them fast, at scale and with adequate quality, in ways that reinforce rather than replace and undermine local and national organised capacities?*

What legacy do we, as international actors, want to leave in terms of strengthened capacities of not just individuals, but social groups, organisations and eco-systems in which different organisations collaborative effectively for greater cumulative impact, thereby increasing the value of our spending, by making it simultaneously an investment?