

## **PROJECT SUCCESS YET STRATEGIC FAILURE? Local leadership & localisation in relation to governmental actors**

9 May 2023

**The policy and practice issue of locally-led development and - crisis response, also referred to in the international humanitarian sector as ‘localisation’ is generally discussed with reference to national and local non-governmental actors.**

**Yet, clearly, national and local government institutions are also local actors. They are, moreover, the formal duty-bearers for the protection of the fundamental human rights and the provision of basic services to all those residing in their territory. Other governmental institutions may also have a critical support role to play e.g. teacher training or governmental survey and mapping institutions.**

**So what are we learning, or what should we be attentive to here? <sup>i</sup>**

### ***1. A common narrative of international aid agencies runs as follows***

We work closely with governmental institutions because:

- We are formally registered in the country.
- We have formal agreements with different line ministries, whom we periodically report to.
- We work within the legal and policy frameworks of the government.
- We ‘coordinate’ with the relevant government entities by keeping them informed about our projects.
- We cannot implement a project or programme without prior formal approval of one or more government entities (in some countries).

In addition, we complement and support government institutions providing services they are currently unable to provide themselves or not at enough scale and reach:

- Our health, WASH, education, agricultural etc. projects reinforce government services (e.g. by increasing the capabilities of a hospital or clinic, of the WASH department, of schools etc.) through financial and/or technical support, or complement them where they cannot reach and deliver basic services.
- Prior to finalising a project, we discuss and agree with relevant government officials its locations and technical approach.
- We provide training or refresher courses to government officials and government entities (e.g. on planning).
- We collect and provide relevant data to government officials so they can make more evidence-based decisions.
- We do joint assessments with government officials.
- We do joint supervisory and monitoring visits together with government officials.

Furthermore, sometimes we act as connector:

- We bring together different government departments and – institutions who should be coordinating closely for more collective impact, but at the moment do not.

- We bring together one or more government entities with other key stakeholders, also from non-governmental and private sectors, to collaborate better for an objective, in whose achievement each has a role to play.

Possibly, we also

- Provide government officials with feedback how the people in the country are experiencing the services (or lack thereof).
- We conduct national level policy advocacy, to have new policies adopted and/or get existing ones modified and/or get improvements in the implementation of good policies.

Note that in all the above, the ‘we’ is the international agency.

The above narrative then concludes with the assertion that close interaction with government means that when projects finish, they can be taken over by them so that sustainability is assured. However, this promise or claim of sustainability is hardly ever tested: no impact monitoring or review is done some years after projects have been ‘handed over’. In reality, in international aid agencies, there tends to be a concern or even admission that, even if some of the action continues, the quality is likely to be lower. In their defense, operational agencies point out that institutional donors do not fund post-project reviews or evaluations. That may be the case, but if the agency continues working in the same environment, it can easily have an idea whether or to what degree its earlier project has been ‘sustained’.

Short-termism, also induced by institutional donors who want to see results and be able to assess their value-for-money quite quickly, is pervasive in the international aid world. This allows it to not take the challenge of ‘sustainability’ too serious. The result may be **project success but strategic failure**.

## **2. What may be justified in the short-term, may not be so in the longer-term**

The issue is that, according to international norms and conventions, protection and basic services are a governance issue. International agencies therefore cannot, and should not, intervene in ways that indefinitely postpone or even substitute for forms of ‘governance dialogue’ between rulers and ruled, that shape the political contract. There are many examples of good practices, but also too many instances still, around the world, where international agencies have been substituting for long years already – with approaches that do not include the objective of having local and national actors taking on the lead roles. That leads to problematic situations, such as

**Comfort with substitution for government:** De facto, it can become comfortable for a government entity *and* for an international aid agency, that the latter tops up, complements or even substitutes for what government should be doing. For the government, it brings financial and/or in-kind benefits that they do not have to pay for themselves then. It also gives it deniability: if something goes wrong or there is public criticism, the government can blame the international aid agency. For the international aid agency, it means that it can continue asking international donors for further funding, with the assurance that the proposal is strongly supported by the government. It keeps itself in business.

**Being the voice for ignored people:** An international agency bringing the ‘voice’ of different social groups and populations to relevant government officials is a good thing – in the short term. In the medium- to longer-term it should be these people themselves who access their government officials, get their ear, and hold them accountable for their actions. That is good, participatory, governance. Substituting for the agency of rights-holders can at best be only a temporary measure – and should not be done without a clear, contextually realistic, strategy on how to get rights-holders and duty-bearers to interact directly. Think, perhaps, about these people not just as ‘in need’ or ‘beneficiaries’, but as ‘citizens’, ‘taxpayers’ or certainly ‘rights holders’.

Incidentally, by substituting for government entities and/or the rights-holders, the international aid system de facto reinforces the disempowerment of the population at large. Inasmuch as they do not work in genuinely participatory ways (feedback and complaints mechanisms are not substantive participation!) they actually replicate the power inequality in the public governance practice.

**Playing the connector role:** Getting multiple stakeholders to actively collaborate (rather than often only passively ‘coordinate’) for greater, collective, impact, is a vital function that tends to be undervalued

in the international aid sector. Sometimes an international agency is best placed to get this going. Once again, it should only play such role temporarily. A strategic question, from the outset, needs to be ‘*which national actor can take on this role*’? That is not so easy, as a connector (who at times may also be the convenor) needs to gain basic trust of all stakeholders, without too close association with any of them, which can lead to a real or perceived conflict of interest.

**Policy engagement:** It is not appropriate, ultimately, that external actors, lead the policy engagement with national policy-makers. Once again, this bypasses and therefore undermines participatory governance, where ‘citizens’ and other rights-holders in the national territory lead those engagements. International agencies can provide advice, learning from comparative experience and/or some support – but it are ultimately national actors who must define the objectives, priorities, content and approaches. This also holds for UN-agencies. UN agencies can engage with more intrinsic legitimacy on national policy issues, because they should defend and promote international norms, also towards member states. But they too should not substitute for the wider public in that member state.

**Public expenditure choices:** In many instances, a central problem of government institutions that are supported or complemented by international aid agencies, is their lack of funding. They simply do not get the resources to attract and retain capable and committed people, and deliver basic services of decent quality across the national territory. Ultimately, this can only be addressed by looking at the national income and the public expenditure choices that are made. Informing people about their rights has become a more regular component of programming. But this needs to be complemented with learning about the de facto governance practices and public expenditure choices. Advocacy that ignores this is likely to miss the structural point – which incidentally is key for sustainability. External actors can never have the same legitimacy in raising public expenditure issues as citizens and tax payers do.

### **3. Good practices**

There are good practices of international agencies working with governmental entities to step up in delivering on their responsibilities, and/or working with people associations and civil society organisations to improve the situation of rights-holders. Some, for example, help people who do not have them get necessary identity documents, or connect them to governmental social protection, training or entrepreneur-supporting schemes. Others strengthen people’s financial literacy and may help them get a bank account. Too few support people’s broader economic and public budgets literacy, and their efforts to demand quality and accountable public services and expanded social protection.<sup>1</sup>

### **4. Dilemma management**

International aid agencies providing basic services where governments are unable or unwilling to do so addresses a fundamental human right. But it inevitably results in privatised, fragmented, and unequal service provision, that cannot be sustainable nor just and inclusive in the medium term. Governments must be encouraged to step in and step up.

You may argue that this is fine in theory, but in practice governments may be unable or unwilling to provide better protection and services. What do you do in a country where ‘public’ income and expenditure is shaped by elite interests and even well-meaning local officials cannot get any decent budget from the central level? How and how far does one engage with, for example, the current rulers in the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, with the Damascus regime in Syria or the military junta in Myanmar? Not for nothing has ‘*independence*’ been upheld as a key principle of humanitarian action, though its other principle of ‘*political neutrality*’ - always and everywhere – is now challenged by the notion of ‘*humanitarian resistance*’.

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<sup>1</sup> A notable example was ActionAid’s ‘economic literacy and budget accountability in governance’ programme. See e.g. [bodhigram: Economic Literacy and Budget Accountability for Governance\(ELBAG\)](#) Another would be the national and regional policy dialogues on social protection organised by Jordan-based CSO Arab Renaissance for Democracy and Development. [Briefs about the state of Social Protection in the Arab world – Arab Renaissance for Democracy and Development \(ar-dd-jo.org\)](#)

First, the limited space for and even repression of civil and political rights does not automatically mean that ruling elites will also deny social and economic rights, if only to prevent large scale unrest that would threaten their grip on power. There may be scope for influencing here.

Secondly, international aid agencies can find a situation to be such that they must take a lead. International lobby and advocacy may have indeed have some influence here, although it can also be counterproductive and harden the positions of the de facto rulers. It may also be comparatively safer for internationals to lobby and advocate: they are more likely to be expelled while national activists may end up detained, tortured or killed.

Still, internationally-led advocacy for government institutions to better take up their responsibilities towards their population, that is not grounded in organised and expressed demands from the population itself, is likely to result in cosmetic or short-lived changes at best. While there can be situational exceptions, the default mode of operation for international agencies must be to support and reinforce and not to replace national and local actors.

Where circumstances justify their taking the lead, this must be complemented with clear strategies and actions to get rights holders and their national and local associations better informed and organised, and to co-lead at least. Information about rights must be complemented with information related to governance (e.g. on policies, public budgets); rights holders must be supported to strengthen their own collective agency, already in the first place towards the international aid organisation itself (e.g. through participatory problem-analysis and action; participatory budgeting; participatory monitoring and evaluation; people's advocacy).

This is by no means standard practice: 'needs-based' programming continues in many situations where more 'rights-based' programming is possible. There is much room for improvement. And agencies are not alone: There is a global movement in defense of public services, which in 2022 led to the Santiago Declaration for Public Services. Are you part of this? Do you know about it? <sup>2</sup>

What are your experiences in this regard?  
What good, practical, advice do you have to offer?

Global Mentoring Initiative (GMI) is a values-based and purpose-driven consultancy and advisory service. Collaboration, within and between organisations and with other stakeholders is one of our core competencies. For more information and resources on locally-led development, localisation and transformation of the international aid system, see our webpage: [Equitable Partnership – Global Mentoring Initiative \(gmentor.org\)](https://www.gmentor.org)

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<sup>1</sup> This working note was originally inspired by a critical reflection of GMI with the Swiss umbrella organisation Interaction platform and four of its member agencies: Association Moriija, The Leprosy Mission Switzerland, FH Switzerland (Food for the Hungry), and Medair. It also draws on our participation in the review of numerous international agency project proposals, in different countries, over the last 6.5 years. The observations shared here are not a direct reflection of any particular agency's approach, some of which show clear awareness of attention points that are relevant for all international agencies.

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<sup>2</sup> Access an English, Spanish and French version of the Santiago Declaration here [Our Future is Public: Santiago Declaration for Public Services - Eurodad](#)