

FROM ECO-SYSTEM TO SELF
Support rather than replace: Systems change in the international relief industry

Part III: Mindsets, Attitudes, Behaviours

Abstract: This is the last in a series of three GMI briefs that, together, provide a comprehensive perspective on the changes required in the interaction between international reliefactors and national and local ones. They are an invitation for joint reflection and offer various questions to that effect. This brief explores different layers that require attention and action to effect real systems change; it inquires whether common ways of choosing partners actually encourage real partnership; it invites reflection about negative narratives that amount to prejudice; it draws attention to rank and status in the aid world; it looks at different qualities of conversation and of listening; it concludes by pointing out that change starts with you.

I. SIX CONDITIONS OF SYSTEMS CHANGE

Developed by FSGi, a consultancy group, Diagram 11 brings to the attention that international actors reinforcing rather than replacing local/national actors is not just a matter of policies, operational practices and resources flows. This is the level at which the Grand Bargain and Charter for Change stop, as do many of the conversations and hesitant efforts at putting the localisation commitment into practice.

The diagram points out that systems change (including within your own organisation) requires active attention to relationship management and responsible handling of power. Those in turn are, at a deeper level, influenced by mindsets.

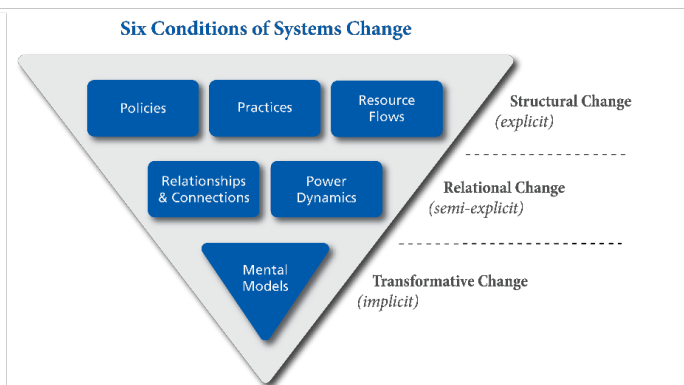


Diagram 11: Six conditions of system change

II. QUALITY OF RELATIONSHIP AND POWER DYNAMICS

In Part 2, we introduced the Powercube and referenced the Power Awareness Tool. We also introduced the GMI ‘Seven Dimensions’ framework and explained why we put the quality of relationship first. If relationships are transactional and full of distrust, not many positive developments are possible. This is not a consequence of ‘short-term’ financing and contracts: good relationships can exist in short-term collaborations.

Consider the prevailing mode of establishing what international relief agencies call ‘partnerships’:

- Little open and deeper conversation about what each can bring to a complementary collaboration in pursuit of a shared objective in a particular context. On the contrary, international agencies alone decide which ‘capacities’ are relevant – typically generic ones that

the international sector has adopted (and resources for itself), with little attention or appreciation for very context-specific ones.

- The international agency unilaterally assesses the ‘capacities’ of the national/local actor, and then decides, sometimes without feedback, whether the national/local actors is worthy of being a ‘partner’ to them. Complete and high-quality capacities of the international agency are assumed or postulated. *Deficit thinking* (focusing on the glass half empty) prevails over *appreciative inquiry* (seeing the glass perhaps half full).
- ‘Capacities assessment’ are actually more of a ‘risk assessment’. In some agencies, ‘partner relationships’ sits within the ‘*Risk and Compliance*’ unit. How do you adequately appreciate the capacities of someone else, and the potential for complementary collaboration, if your starting point is ‘risk’?

Question: Is this a good approach to explore whether you can complement each other, and would be willing and able to collaborate towards a shared objective?

Moreover, as international agencies do not trust the quality of each other’s assessments, each will do so individually, possibly subjecting a national/local agency to several ‘due diligence’ or ‘capacity-assessments’ in the span of a few months. This not only becomes humiliating, but it also wastes their precious time.

International agencies compete for what are considered desirable national and local agencies – a successful outcome leads then to quite a proprietary relationship. If then a national or local agency is ‘selected’ to be a ‘partner’ to an international agency, it becomes ‘its’ partner. The collaborative energy of the national/local agency now must be largely directed towards the needs and requirements of the international agency, not towards other national and local agencies. The harm done is (increased) competition and fragmentation among national and local actors.

Question: What would healthier practices look like, to determine whether each brings complementary contributions first - and to then discuss expectations about minimum requirements?ⁱ

III. PRIDE AND PREJUDICE?

Listen to particularly the informal conversations and remarks among international relief workers and discover the widespread *negative narrative* about national and local organisations. This casts a generalised doubt about their integrity and professional qualities: they are said to constitute a higher fiduciary risk; they struggle much more with the principles of impartiality and neutrality; they generally have weaker capacities, and many of them are visible or not so visible for-profit family businesses. You can hear it from Colombia to Myanmar, and from country-level to international headquarters.

Of course, there have been and will be more instances of unacceptable practices among local actors. But if bad experiences and bad examples could be used to discredit whole institutional sectors and sections of society, not much would be left, including in donor countries. Also in international aid agencies we see personal ambitions overriding values and sense of service; fraud happens regularly in INGOs and UN agencies (which are also not immune to sexual harassment, bullying and other abuses of power that lead to a toxic culture). But this is mostly kept out of the spotlight.

Local actors observe a huge wastage of funds by international agencies on unnecessary and repeat activities. They see clearly how political interests and agendas also influence humanitarian aid, including in its global distribution. Several INGOs and even UN agencies are heavily dependent on a few big donors, which raises questions about their ‘independence’. And while some INGOs operate out solidarity and some UN staff as norm defenders, others act as corporate entities whose primary interest is growth and market share. Localisation therefore requires a hard reflection on what really drives an international aid agency. Is it solidarity, or its own business interests? Is there something called ‘disaster capitalism’?ⁱⁱⁱ

Portraying international agencies as generically professional and operating from high moral integrity, and local/national agencies as generically less reliable for various reasons, needs to be called out for what it is: prejudice and bias, sometimes unconscious, sometimes very consciously. How does this fit with all the stated commitment to inclusion, diversity and social justice?

Question: Does your organisation, do you, tolerate a generalising negative narrative about ‘women’, about ‘Muslims’, about ‘Jews’, about ‘Black or Brown’ people? If not, what is different about an equally generalising, negative narrative about ‘local agencies’?

Question: Will we pursue the transformation in the dynamics between international and national relief actors with the same vigour as we pursue gender transformation?

IV. RANK AND STATUS IN INTER-AGENCY INTERACTIONS

Rank and status are a strong yet ignored component of the international relief sector. Diagram 12 visualises the status pyramid. Higher rank comes with greater power but also greater assumed legitimacy. It manifests itself in different ways. Here are three easily observable instances of status-in-action.

One, when a staff member of a CBO or national NGO becomes a staff member of an international agency, somewhat miraculously they suddenly gain integrity and professional competencies. The intrinsic doubt disappears. During large-scale surge in Level 3 emergencies, hundreds, even thousands of staff of national/local organisations get this swift quality upgrade.

Two, thanks to this upgrade, the same person who is now staff of an international agency, will experience that when in an interagency meeting s/he makes the same point as when s/he was working for a CBO or national NGO before, now s/he will be more attentively listened to and taken serious.

Working for an international agency immediately bestows higher credibility and greater willingness to be listened to. (Evidently, an international staff member of the same international agency, has even higher rank and therefore higher intrinsic credibility.)

Three, however, when a national staff member of an international agency subsequently returns to work with a local agency, or sets up his or her own NGO or CSO, s/he will automatically lose quite some intrinsic credibility, and be confronted again with the generic shadow of doubt that is cast over local agencies.

This is not a product of imagination. Many who have experienced it, have testified to it.

Question: Have you observed such rank and status dynamics at work in interagency interactions? What will you do next time you observe it? Do you observe it within your own agency?



Diagram 12: Rank and Status

V. THE QUALITY OF THE LOCALISATION CONVERSATION

Listen to the localisation conversations around you: what is the prevailing style of conversation? Diagram 13, from the U-Lab at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, invites us to observe the quality of our conversation with national and local actors.^{iv}

Are we both ‘talking nice’ to each other? Are they ‘talking nice’ to us – telling us what we want to hear? International relief workers sometimes refer to the practices in their sector as ‘*playing the game*’.

If local actors want to have a better place in the relief arena, they need to learn to play the game! They need to learn international aid speak, they need to learn the rules of its game, and above all: they need to please upwards, all the way to the donor administration. We please with continuous ‘success’ stories full of results achieved (‘delivered’). Because experimenting and failing forward (i.e. rapid learning and making course corrections) are not acceptable. ‘Talking nice’ expresses itself also in regular self-censorship by local actors. Many will not talk about pain points in their relationship with their international ‘partners’, for fear of negative repercussions. Only when speaking with someone they trust, and privately, may a fuller story come out.

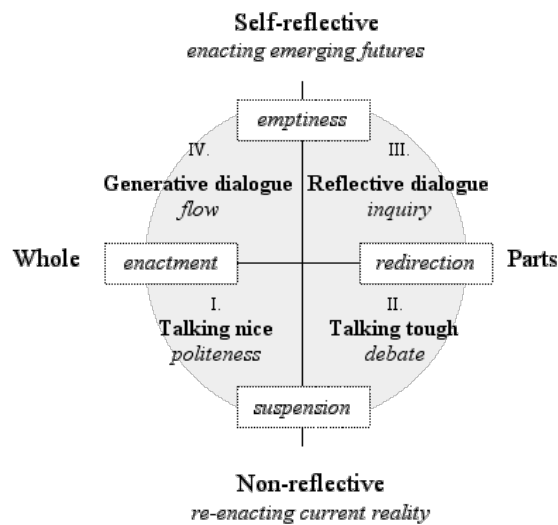


Diagram 13: Different conversation styles

Alternatively, the localisation conversation is one of debating and talking tough: international and national actors each argue forcefully their point of view, defending their respective demands. While the other is

speaking, I am not really listening but mentally busy preparing my counterargument.

As diagram 13 shows: those types of conversation simply reproduce the current reality - they offer no potential for meaningful, more transformative, change in the relationship.

Only reflective dialogue, based on real listening to each other, has the potential to break the deadlock. Now the quality of our listening is very different: we try to hear and feel where the other comes from, their experiences, needs and aspirations that shape their perspectives and behaviours. In reflective dialogue we also see a wider system that we are part of, that we are influenced by but that we also can influence.

When that happens, the possibility emerges that our conversation shifts to ‘generative dialogue’. Now we start building a relationship and a collaboration where we really complement each other, in a manner that maximise the best potential of each, and for a collective impact that is more than the sum of our individual parts.

Reflective and generative dialogue are often confused with ‘talking nice’. That is wrong. ‘Talking nice’ conversations avoid what is felt to be sensitive and difficult. Reflective and generative conversations are *courageous conversations*. They do not avoid sensitive and difficult issues, but approach them with responsibility, self-awareness and respect. Disagreement and ‘no, I’m sorry’ are very possible. But they are not expressed from a position of superiority and power, and with a tone of contempt.

Question: What international aid workers call ‘the field’ is someone else’s ‘reality’. In your ‘field’ trips, how much effort do you make to understand the others’ reality?

Question: If you are an international aid worker, how often have you, openly, patiently and attentively, listened to the story of directors or core staff of national and local organisations, what drove them to set up or sustain an organisation, what challenges they have lived through, why they did not choose for better material rewards in the private sector or with an international relief agency?

Question: What would a localisation conversation sound and feel like, if it happened as a reflective and generative dialogue?

Question: What would a conversation about ‘risk’ be and feel like, if we both really listened to each other’s perceptions and concerns about risk, changed position from facing each other to sitting next to each other and together look at all the risks we have identified and now ‘share’? What changes when we then also put ‘opportunities’ in the picture, and then think and decide together how we are going to handle our shared risk, and maximise the opportunities to achieve our shared objective?

Question: On a scale of 1 to 10, how good do you rate yourself – in practice- at disagreeing with and saying ‘no’ to someone, in a manner that, however firm, maintains basic respect`?

VI. THE QUALITY OF OUR LISTENING

Transformative change starts from a different quality of listening. Diagram 14 on the next page, also from U-lab, invites us to reflect on the quality of our own listening.^v Are we listening with the conscious or unconscious purpose of confirming our opinions and judgments (‘downloading’)? Are we listening with the willingness to pick up new data or information, that may lead us to change our analysis? Often we listen with our own set agenda: either of these two modes of listening can happen then.

Empathic listening happens when we listen deeper and with a more open mind, not burdened with our own agenda. Now we listen with conscious intent to understand where someone else comes from, what past experiences may influence her or his current behaviours, what emotions are at play? Attentive and empathic listening is already enough to create a deeper quality connection: For many of us, it happens so rarely that we are grateful when someone really listens to us.

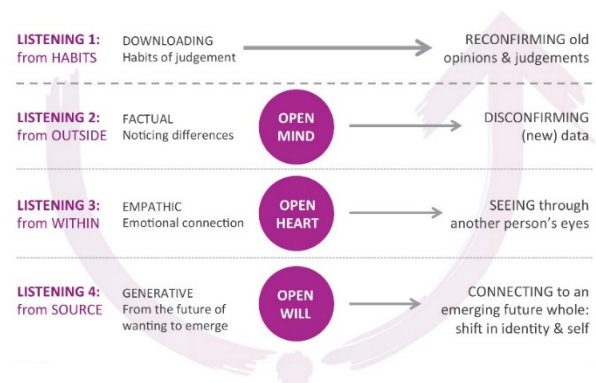


Diagram 14: Different qualities of listening

For us at GMI, change started when we started listening more openly and deeply. Very quickly, that led to deeper level conversations from which more meaningful ways of collaborating became possible.

What stands in the way? Unhelpful mental habits are

- You are not worth listening to: I invoke my superior rank or status.
- I only listen to and hear what confirms my current beliefs and judgements: My mind is closed to information that does not fit with my set beliefs.
- Disconnect: A common manifestation is ‘us’ and ‘them’ thinking – I simplify and put into a judgmental category the ‘others’, the ‘them’. I am not willing and therefore not able to try and see a situation from their point of experience. Another level of disconnect is indicated by sentences that starts with ‘yes, but’. That is then followed by various reasons why anything different from current practices is not possible.
- Cynicism: One example of cynicism is the comment that the relief industry is a market like any other; in it, the strongest ones win and that is just how it is. Another example, the comment that the problem with weak local agencies is that they are not learning ‘to play the game’. Or that those who argue for a different type of relationship and quality of collaboration with national and local actors are ‘naive idealists’.
- Fear: The hyper focus on risk, and risk only, spreads fear among all, from donors to local actors. Fear does not bring out the best in people or in organisations. It is certainly not an enabling atmosphere for the innovation that we say we want to see more of. And fear is also the deeper undertone for many local actors in their collaboration with international ‘partners’, sometimes still after years of relationship.

Question: How is it that an international relief system, that mobilises in solidarity to help people in distress, who evidently experience high degrees of uncertainty and fear, itself generates so much distrust and fear through how it operates?

Task: In the next three conversations you have today, observe and identify your level of listening and the quality of conversation. Later in the day, write a reflective journal entry on it and include observations about your own emotional states and mindsets that shaped it.

VII. INTERNATIONALISATION AND LOCALISATION STARTS WITH YOU

In parts 1 and 2 and so far here in part 3, we have explored internationalisation and localisation mostly at the systemic level. Now is the time to point out that it also lives in, and therefore starts with you.

Localisation invites personal reflection: How do I, as staff member of an international relief agency, whether in a donor administration, a UN agency, INGO or consultancy, behave? What are my beliefs, views, opinions of national and local actors? How do these beliefs influence my behaviour? Do I listen deeply and attentively to national and local actors, without agenda and open mind? Do I make the effort to see things from their side? Do I learn from them? How do I use the power I have? Do I always use it responsibly? Do I never abuse it? Am I willing to share it, to pursue 'power with'? Do I treat others with respect, even when I must be firm and say that something is not possible? What do I do to shift the conversation to a deeper and more authentic level?

Question: With what attitude are you in someone else's country: guest or master? Are you there as a guest, conscious of how little you know, that people of the country have been dealing with their challenges for a long time without your (and other internationals') presence, and will continue to do so long after you have left? Are you listening, then asking 'How can I be useful?' Or are you only considering that country through the lens of your presence, believing that you have the solutions, and tell and teach the people of the country how they need to change to deserve your assistance?

"The quality of results produced by any system depends on the quality of awareness from which people in the system operate." Otto Scharmer

Systems change starts with you. The time to start is now!

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ⁱ Kania, J., M. Kramer & P. Senge 2018: *The Waters of Systems Change.* FSG

ⁱⁱ For some ideas see GMI Oct. 2019: *Partnerships: Pre-conditions, Principles and Practices;* March 2020: *Value Contributions in Partnerships. Are you having the conversation?* And GMI April 2020 *Grant Agreements and Partnership Agreements. Towards a new level of maturity and competency.* Available on <https://www.gmentor.org/facilitation-and-partnership-brokering>

ⁱⁱⁱ Klein, N. 2007: *The Shock Doctrine. The rise of disaster capitalism.* Penguin Books

^{iv} For more on the U-Lab open course see <https://ocw.mit.edu/courses/sloan-school-of-management/15-975-u-lab-leading-profound-innovation-for-a-more-sustainable-world-fall-2010/>

^v Learn about the importance of listening and levels of listening. Otto Scharmer 2015 *On the Four Levels of Listening* <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eLFXpRkVZaI> For a fuller insight see Scharmer, O. & K. Kaufer 2013: *Leading from the Emerging Future.* Berrett-Koehler Publishers