



A Personal Reflection: National Ownership and Localisation in Displacement Contexts - Are We Ready?

This is the fifth volume in our series on 'Internal Displacement in a Changing World Order'. In it, the author draws on his long experience within the United Nations to reflect on the approach to internal displacement. The piece argues that historical and current efforts on localisation have been primarily driven from a humanitarian and external perspective. Rather than considering it as an exit strategy, by engaging development and peace actors - and somewhat of an afterthought - localisation should be pursued as a pre-emptive and adaptive objective, anchored in full national ownership and principled 'sovereignty as responsibility'.

7 April 2026

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It is appropriate to start by sharing two personal reflections on national ownership and localization in contexts of internal displacement.

First, I vividly remember a discussion I had in 2010, as UNHCR's Representative in Sudan, with the Sudanese Humanitarian Affairs Commissioner, Mr Hassabu (who went on to become Sudan's Vice President from 2013 to 2018 and was arrested in the aftermath of the Sudan Revolution in 2021). This discussion was around IDP returns from camps in Darfur to the countryside, from where families had been violently displaced in their hundreds of thousands. The Commissioner very indignantly questioned me, when I raised the issue of protection, whether Sudanese IDPs needed protection from their own government by the international community. I reassured him of the fact that, surely, safety and security in places of return was the full responsibility of the Government of Sudan.

This discussion ultimately led to a series of participatory protection workshops comprising local authorities, security actors and IDPs themselves and, eventually, a somewhat controversial return programme supported by the UN and NGO's, but not after a series of interviews by UNHCR's Global Director of International Protection had confirmed that a very sizable group of IDPs preferred to restart their productive lives at home if a minimum of physical and social security (including livelihood inputs) were provided.

Camps, for most interviewees were highly politicised and insecure environments. Literally, some told us that 'if they had to die somewhere, they rather would do so struggling at home than in the squalor of the camps'. The donor community was highly sceptical of this initiative as it considered that a return programme provided legitimacy to a regime reviled by the international community, even if it was willing to do the right thing for once.

The second related anecdote is based on a more recent mission I undertook for OCHA, where I discussed humanitarian reform in South Sudan separately with local NGOs, international NGOs and UN humanitarian actors. I was struck by the total disconnect between the perceptions of the different actors, with the internationals expressing their conviction that they were on an irreversible track to eventually 'handing over' implementation to local counterparts through 'twinning arrangements', and local NGOs being furiously convinced that they were merely good enough to 'pick up the crumbs' of the international community and to boldly go where the latter feared for their lives and security.

When analysing the outcome of similar missions to humanitarian complex programmes (including one I did myself to Sudan), I realized that the 'localization disconnect' was not a situation-specific problem but an issue across displacement contexts. Only by pursuing localisation as a pre-emptive and adaptive objective can full national ownership of the response to situations of internal displacement be achieved.

A short history of localization and national ownership

These two real-life stories somewhat illustrate, in displacement contexts, the complexities around the concepts of national ownership and localization, which we assume to have been understood and under implementation for a very long time. However, localisation means many things to many people – although humanitarians still have a very narrow understanding of the term. Localisation, even under the latest thinking around the Humanitarian Reset and UN80 (the initiative to modernise the UN for its 80th anniversary), is still largely driven from a cost-cutting point of view and, whereas a lot is being made about behavioural science and local insights perspectives steering the change, progress has been very limited and uneven at best. Indeed, there is only a broad notion of localisation amongst humanitarians but its application is uneven and ranges from simply more money to local NGOs, to more genuine, non-transactional support for local civil society actors , local actors for derisking action by the private sector.

The current deepening crisis in the Humanitarian World is not a mere outcome of a lack of resources but proof that we really need a true ‘reset’ in the way we work. Earlier international consensus as part of the World Humanitarian Summit outcomes and the UN’s [‘New Way of Working’](#) on a ‘handover process’ to local counterparts has been replaced by a realization that the traditional approach, based on the humanitarian imperative and our own optimal levels of operational readiness– at least in today’s world – is unsustainable. This is where the fundamentals are shifting: our delivery-oriented reflexes need to be reprogrammed and replaced by an entirely different dynamic and not just because they won’t be paid for anymore, but because they are not considered to be the right thing. This means making hard and at times painful choices; however, we cannot have our cake and eat it: promoting national ownership and localization – but on our own terms as international humanitarian community.

Part of the problem or part of the solution?

Localization should be anchored in the realization that prevention, response AND solutions need to be nationally owned and -led. This is particularly difficult in situations where (as was, and is, the case in Sudan) authorities have been part of or at the centre of the cause of humanitarian suffering. As I have pointed out above, and notwithstanding the fact that humanitarian crises are inherently political, we tend to give up too easily on allowing (particularly local) authorities to show some political good will or become part of a solution. Moreover, in conflict-prone environments or situations where state control is repressive and absolute, very little space and security exists for civil society to assert itself and become agents. Traditionally, as humanitarian actors we have not been particularly strong in respecting, engaging, let alone protecting civil society. This shortcoming may well have its roots in the fact that the life-saving aspect of humanitarian work does not leave time for long in-depth conversations.

In addition, traditional humanitarian work is largely supply- rather than demand driven: we have proven and tested deployment, supply chain and other operational mechanisms which have been honed to perfection, if the resources are made available at the right time. So, the question for us has been whether we did things right, rather than did the right thing. Even the shift to using the local private sector and cash-based mechanisms was more inspired by risk, logistical and operational or efficiency considerations on the part of the international community rather than anchoring response in sustainable locally owned systems, which pre-existed the humanitarian reality – and will continue to be there well after the humanitarians have repatriated.

Are risks around localization worth taking?

Localisation and enhanced national ownership must be accompanied by comprehensive risk assessment- and mitigation. No one will dispute this as moving towards untested and opaque alternatives to a more traditional humanitarian regime constitutes major fiduciary, reputational, security and even political risks. On the other hand, when

considering risk, we tend to disregard the flip side of the shift: how less of a risk does an externally-driven humanitarian system constitute and how much of the resources actually make it to the level of 'communities'. All the risks notwithstanding, we cannot further delay the shift from an independent (humanitarian imperative driven) humanitarian approach to one that engages and empowers principled local counterparts and state institutions. Such an approach needs to be accompanied by a clear definition of 'red lines' which would in themselves form the basis for incentivising political will.

Our systems of 'Accountability to Affected Populations' are largely supply driven and more designed to ensure that humanitarian 'suppliers' maintain their competitive edge rather than constituting a true reflection of what populations really need or even of the coverage of the assistance. Proof of this is that Humanitarian Coordinators like me have found it extremely difficult to get agencies and NGOs to share or publicise the results of AAP mechanisms. OCHA statistics demonstrate that delivery costs through local counterparts typically are 60% cheaper than of international actors. However, cost or administrative overheads are only one part of the equation here and there is no doubt that delivery in zones inaccessible for international actors through local entities comes with certain risks, particularly if there is an active conflict or insurgency.

Through engagement with either credible or legitimate local authorities, or reputable and principled civil society groups or religious/traditional leadership structures, such risks can be mitigated. An honest reflection on the losses by local entities in the delivery of assistance, services and protection through the intervention of spoilers would probably lead us to conclude that, at worst, these would lead to highly valuable lessons learned on how to do better, and at best, a worthwhile sign of hope to local communities that they matter – whilst increasing pressure by those feeling left out as a result. All this to say that a localization effort always must be made, and that we should not assume for external delivery to be a given, even in complex and politicised environments. Localisation thus should no longer be seen as either a 'fall back option' or a risk transfer by

the international community due to lack of access, but as a starting point to engagement.

Localisation as an entry strategy and the role of development agencies

As I have mentioned in a number of publications and lectures, localization has to be seen as part of prerequisite national ownership towards a comprehensive Humanitarian-Development-Peace Nexus approach and thus be an entry- rather than an exit strategy. Even if a situation does not immediately allow for full engagement and implementation through local stakeholders, an effort must be made to identify, protect and capacitate local representative and authoritative voices. If we take localization as a starting point to our engagement, not only on humanitarian issues, but equally to development and peace- and state building, we can make use of the strong country-based presence of development actors (multilateral, bilateral, non-governmental and corporate) on the ground. These country-based long-term partners have, over time, built a relationship of trust with the authorities – an argument often used against them by traditional humanitarian actors who still operate under the ‘humanitarian imperative’ which presumes that the international community should operate ‘independently and impartially’.

Development agencies adhere to the same principles as humanitarians, are subject to the same international laws, frameworks and institutions and thus should be incorporated, rather than left out, of, humanitarian realities. Moreover, prevention and addressing of underlying causes is part of their core mandate, whereas development interventions in the UN context are firmly embedded in promoting local and national governance. Where the HDP Nexus previously was largely driven by humanitarians as a sequential- or exit mechanism to their own interventions, our collective mentality, language and mode of operation need to change against the realities of yesterday and today. National and local ownership, driven at the closest point to the constituencies we serve must instrumentalise localization. In this respect, the response to internal displacement must be anchored in full national ownership and principled implementation of ‘sovereignty as responsibility’.

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This topical paper is part of the special series on ‘Internal Displacement in a Changing World Order’, led by the [Internal Displacement Research Programme](#) at the RLI. The experts contributing to this series assess how rapid shifts in contemporary politics, plummeting levels of humanitarian aid and escalating global crises are impacting displacement-affected communities. The series ties into the launch in April 2026 of a 45-chapter [‘Handbook of Internal Displacement’](#) that comprehensively addresses this issue.

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