



Localising humanitarian aid during armed conflict

Learning from the histories and creativity of South Sudanese NGOs

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Issue

Although the number of South Sudanese NGOs engaged in humanitarian operations has increased, the quality of funding has not and organisations struggle to build institutional capabilities. This is despite the increasingly important role of these organisations in delivering large programmes in areas that are hard to access, especially in contexts of conflict. As elsewhere, there have been some efforts towards meeting the localisation commitments made during the 2016 World Humanitarian Summit but progress towards targets has been limited. The way that South Sudanese operations are funded, organised, and delivered continues to result in significant economic and security risks being absorbed by them and contributes to a culture of distrust.

This paper is for humanitarian donors and funders seeking to provide a more enabling environment for South Sudanese NGOs. It provides a summary of key findings from research commissioned by DFID and published by the London School of Economics (LSE) in January 2020, which explores the reality of the struggles and strategies of local and national organisations during complex emergencies.¹ It outlines recommendations for donors and funders relating to each of the key findings.

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Cover photo: distribution of supplies in Tochriak. Photo credit: Latjor Dang.

¹ Moro, L., Pendle, N., Robinson, A. and Tanner, L. (2020). 'Localising humanitarian aid during armed conflict: learning from the histories and creativity of South Sudanese NGOs'. London School of Economics.

Background to the research

1. At the 2016 World Humanitarian Summit, donors and humanitarian organisations committed to increase multi-year investment in the institutional capacities of local and national responders, and to channel 25% of humanitarian funding to local and national responders 'as directly as possible' by 2020.² At a global level, there has been limited progress towards meeting the commitments, because of a disjuncture between the commitment to localisation in headquarters and how staff behave in country programmes,³ compounded by the breadth and scope of the commitments, tensions between commitments, a lack of practical methodologies for measuring progress and other issues.⁴ On localisation, there is also insufficient agreement about whether the problems that the commitments address are primarily economic or are related to power imbalances and decentralisation.⁵

2. Humanitarian actors have worked through South Sudanese organisations to deliver aid for four decades. NGOs became active in South Sudan from the 1970s. A significant cohort of South Sudanese NGOs emerged in the 1990s during Operation Lifeline Sudan (OLS) - an aid operation responding to the wars and famines of the 1980s and 1990s.

In recent years, international reliance on South Sudanese NGOs has continued to rise in times of crisis, especially to cope with the high risks during complex emergencies.

3. This funding environment has shaped the South Sudanese NGO sector. There have been repeated shifts in focus from 'relief' to 'development' and back again, including as far back as OLS. At different times, INGOs have also sought to channel funding to southern Sudanese NGOs and initiated 'capacity building' activities. Most recently, the post-2013 period has prompted a rapid increase in the numbers of South Sudanese NGOs involved in the humanitarian response⁶ and an increase in the absolute quantity of funding they receive. The research highlights that founders are motivated to start NGOs because of a lack of alternative ways to instigate change at the community or national level, in order to channel resources to particular underserved locations or needs, and because of a lack of alternative employment. Some have been able to prove themselves, building trust and reputation, and becoming well-known, well-resourced and influential humanitarian actors. Others have struggled to survive the changes in context and shrunk or became dormant.

² For more information see <https://interagencystandingcommittee.org/grand-bargain>

³ Charter for Change (2018) Endorsers survey analysis report. C4C

⁴ Metcalfe-Hough, V. et al. (2018). 'Grand Bargain Annual Independent Report 2018'. Humanitarian Policy Group, Overseas Development Institute

⁵ Van Brabant, K. and Patel, S. (2018). 'Localisation in Practice: Emerging Indicators and Practical Recommendations'. Global Mentoring Initiative.

⁶ For example, 92 South Sudanese NGOs were members of the South Sudan NGO forum in 2012, 106 in 2014, 242 in 2015, and 263 in 2019. Similarly, 40 South Sudanese NGOs were included in the Humanitarian Response Plan (HRP) in 2016 and 95 in 2018.

- 4.** Despite the deepening reliance on South Sudanese NGOs, the international humanitarian system does not provide an enabling environment for these organisations. There are profound issues around risk transference, including a lack of resourcing for security, insurance and evacuation. Funding is frequently short-term and project-specific with few opportunities to invest in assets, such as vehicles, offices or equipment. As frontline responders, South Sudanese NGOs are often held responsible locally for shifts in humanitarian programming.
- 5.** The research study that informs these recommendations was commissioned by the UK Department for International Development (DFID) and intends to provide insights relevant to the wider humanitarian community in South Sudan, as well as Grand Bargain signatories globally. The objectives of this work were to develop a deeper understanding of the historical, political, social, geographic and ethnic dynamics of local and national NGOs in South Sudan, including a deeper understanding of how they have developed institutionally, and how they navigate conflict; and to understand the extent to which local and national NGOs influence or are influenced by their external environment, including how they engage with national and subnational political economies.
- 6.** This research is based on primary data collection in Akobo, Ganyliel, Juba, Tochriak, Wau and Yambio between May and September 2019 as well as a literature review. These sites were chosen to allow comparisons across contexts with different wartime experiences, histories of humanitarian aid, political dynamics and profiles of current NGOs, as well as a mixture of government- and opposition-held areas and larger and smaller population centres. A total of 171 interviews were carried out, including 105 life history interviews and 66 key informant interviews. Life history interviews were mainly conducted with people working for South Sudanese NGOs and sought to understand the individual's own life history prior to joining the NGO and the history of the organisation itself, as well as its current approach, activities and challenges.

Recommendations

1. In South Sudan there have been some steps towards meeting the workstream 2 commitments, including through the South Sudan Humanitarian Fund (SSHF). However, this represents a small proportion of funding, despite an ongoing reliance on South Sudanese organisations to deliver substantive humanitarian programmes in areas that are hard to access. **Donors and other Grand Bargain signatories should restate their commitment to supporting South Sudanese organisations in South Sudan, clarifying the aims of the commitments in their work and identifying priority areas.**
2. One of the barriers to localisation of aid in South Sudan is a lack of trust of South Sudanese NGOs on the part of international organisations. There are concerns about South Sudanese NGOs' ability to manage international finance, to work according to humanitarian principles and to manage corruption risks. To mitigate risks to themselves, donors and international organisations may require pre- or co-financing or limit the length of projects. However, these measures increase risk-taking behaviour and coping mechanisms and actively hinder the development of trust. **Set up systems which are able to track funds distributed to South Sudanese NGOs. There is also a need to develop interim targets and pilots that are substantive enough to test how and whether localisation achieves its stated aims and to facilitate mutual trust building. These should be complemented by initiatives that facilitate political oversight of spending, including a proportional increase into research initiatives to understand risks, such as the tiered due diligence initiative at the Start Network.**
3. The term national and local organisation includes a variety of organisations with different origins, histories, motivations, and expertise. However, for all the organisations engaged in the formal humanitarian system, unpredictable funding and poor contracting practices make it difficult to build and maintain institutions. Structural factors therefore allow some individuals to found and grow organisations more successfully than others. This results in an overreliance on the charisma of individual founders who are able to navigate the international system and who have pre-existing economic and social capital, which normally includes significant international experience, including of working with INGOs, living and being educated abroad, and being well connected. This excludes many South Sudanese NGOs and also means that even successful South Sudan NGOs struggle to move beyond being a founder-dominated institution. Enabling a more diverse and resilient landscape of organisations requires donors to address system-wide incentives that mean local and national organisations can only access limited and low-quality funding⁷ and face inequalities in access to decision-making. **Invest in longer-term commitments that provide predictability in funding and include support for administrative capacity. This must include reviewing contracts with UN agencies and pooled funds around the length of funding and quality**

⁷ Ali, M. et al. (2018) 'Funding to Local Humanitarian Actors: South Sudan Case Study'. Humanitarian Policy Group, NEAR, Overseas Development Institute, October 2018.

of subcontracting relationships (such as payment terms, and predictability). For example, insisting that indirect costs be provided to downstream partners at the same percentage provided to first tier partners, would make a significant difference to South Sudanese organisations.

4. Related to this, women face heightened challenges to founding, leading and working for NGOs and to accessing funding for their organisations. Deeply-entrenched gender inequalities in South Sudan mean women are less likely to possess the social, economic and political capital (including, for example, education, access to resources and connections) that represent a springboard to establishing a successful or large-scale NGO. Rural women struggle to gain visibility and connections to Juba especially when education levels are low. **Specific support mechanisms are needed to facilitate inclusion of South Sudanese NGOs founded by groups with low social, economic and political capital, including women's associations and organisations. Further dedicated research exploring gendered dynamics within the South Sudanese NGO sector, and the challenges facing women-led organisations in South Sudan, would also be beneficial.**
5. The research documents the ways in which national NGOs express their agency, including through their motivations, coping mechanisms, and activities beyond the international effort. There is a significant amount of voluntary labour and alternative revenue generating activities including renting out meeting halls or guesthouse space, making and selling goods or food, or implementing activities that require little or no funding. **Support capacity building efforts that provide funding for core organisational costs and acquisition of assets to facilitate longer-term organisational sustainability.**
6. The aid system engages with South Sudanese NGOs replicates and reinforces centre-periphery dynamics and a sense of

marginalisation for those not located in the humanitarian centre of Juba. This reinforces broader political economy dynamics and grievances in South Sudan. South Sudanese NGOs situated outside of Juba struggle to build relationships and trust with the Juba-centric humanitarian system and this shapes their organisational profile and opportunities, their ability to build institutional capabilities, and their financial coping strategies.

Decentralise pooled funding decisions to avoid skewing the system and increasing over-reliance on Juba. OCHA sub-national offices might also play a greater role in convening, engaging, and supporting more local actors.

7. The willingness of many local and national humanitarians "to stay and deliver" has been well documented.⁸ However, this has led to high levels of both economic and security risk being absorbed within organisational policies and partnership expectations. The research documents moral dilemmas around organisational priorities and staff safety as well as contracting terms that leave staff vulnerable and unprotected. The current system encourages, incentivises, and sometimes even requires staff in local and national NGOs to accept undue security risks. There are also ways in which smaller community-based organisations face reputational risks by being the organisations on the forefront of needs assessments and community mobilisation, and therefore they are held accountable by communities and local authorities for inconsistencies in the whole aid system. **Donors and UN agencies must consider the reputational and security risks taken on by organisations in remote areas and incentivise their major suppliers to provide for the safety of their subcontractor's staff. Donors and contracting agencies must also work together to ensure that affordable and accessible insurance and evacuation services are made available to downstream partners.**

⁸ See for example Hamsik, L. (2019). 'NGOs & Risk: Managing Uncertainty in Local-International Partnerships. Case Studies: Northeast Nigeria and South Sudan'. USAID, InterAction and Humanitarian Outcomes

8. Finally, the report highlights how South Sudanese NGOs, as all NGOs, often act as public authorities, and notes that the line between the aid sector and politics in South Sudan has been blurred by leaders moving between the two. However, these socially embedded realities in contexts in complex emergencies are complex. While they can result in political cooption, realities are often much more complicated and humanitarian space can be created through local relationships and knowledge. **Donors and international organisations engaging in particular localities should invest in analysis**

of local economies, avoiding assuming clear distinctions between local, national and international. It is essential to pay attention to local dynamics especially as these do not often fit within the clear normative orthodoxies of international debates. In addition, future research could usefully explore the forms of authority that emerge through South Sudanese NGOs. It would be useful to ask if alternative visions of political communities are formed, and how NGO work by INGOs and South Sudanese NGOs contributes to emerging ideas of citizenship and reconciliation.

Annex: Key findings relating to GB Workstream 2 Commitments

Workstream 2 commitments	Evidence in the research
<p>Commitment 2.1 Increase and support multi-year investment in the institutional capacities of local and national responders, including preparedness, response and coordination capacities, especially in fragile contexts and where communities are vulnerable to armed conflicts, disasters, recurrent outbreaks and the effects of climate change. We should achieve this through collaboration with development partners and incorporate capacity strengthening in partnership agreements.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • There are some examples of individual partnerships between UN agencies or INGOs and LN/NGOs that involve multi-year grants. These can make a significant difference to the development of an organisation, yet are not the norm. • There is no evidence of systematic multi-year investment from any major donors for national NGOs. • There are often repeat contracts from international agencies, though there may be significant gaps between the end of one contract and the beginning of the next, during which time organisations struggle to pay staff and maintain services. • The over reliance on short term contracting of national organisations and the lack of multi-year investment has implications for the institutional capacity, sustainability, and governance of South Sudanese NGOs.
<p>Commitment 2.2 Understand better and work to remove or reduce barriers that prevent organisations and donors from partnering with local and national responders in order to lessen their administrative burden.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The NGO forum, consortiums of INGOs in South Sudan, and think tanks, have all published papers on the barriers and administrative burdens of partnership.⁹ • There have been a few organisational initiatives to address these barriers (for example the current Accelerating Localisation through Partnership initiative) however these are small scale relative to total humanitarian spending. • This research highlights the importance of flexible funding and assets as ways of increasing administrative capacity of local and national organisations.

⁹ See the bibliography

<p>Commitment 2.3 Support and complement national coordination mechanisms where they exist and include local and national responders in international coordination mechanisms as appropriate and in keeping with humanitarian principles.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The research indicates that there has been some increase in local and national organisation's engagement in coordination mechanisms including the clusters in the past decade. • However, as cluster meetings grow in size, it is unclear that meeting attendance includes access to decision-making power. • In addition, coordination is centralised in Juba. Therefore, for NNGOs, strong connections with the centre are essential for formal and informal recognition, access to information and humanitarian networks. Away from the centre, organisations are often unable to build relationships and trust with the Juba-centric humanitarian system.
<p>Commitment 2.4 Achieve by 2020 a global, aggregated target of at least 25 percent of humanitarian funding to local and national responders as directly as possible to improve outcomes for affected people and reduce transactional costs.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A recent study estimated that, in 2017, only 0.3% of humanitarian funding in South Sudan went directly to L/NNGOs, and 4.9% including indirect funding through intermediaries.¹⁰ • Local and national organisations express longstanding frustrations on the quality of funding including provision for overheads, and poor contracting practices in terms of funding gaps and payment terms.
<p>Commitment 2.5 Develop, with the Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC), and apply a 'localisation' marker to measure direct and indirect funding to local and national responders.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • No findings specific to South Sudan. A localisation marker working group (LMWG) was set up in 2016 to develop a marker for assessing signatories' progress against the workstream commitments. But in the absence of any baseline data, and with widely differing views on the definition of national actors, progress against commitments has been slow and assessments of progress have been ad-hoc, self-regulated, and largely qualitative.¹¹
<p>Commitment 2.6 Make greater use of funding tools which increase and improve assistance delivered by local and national responders, such as UN-led country-based pooled funds (CBPF), IFRC Disaster Relief Emergency Fund (DREF) and NGO-led and other pooled funds.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Humanitarian spending was USD 1.2bn in 2018¹². Pooled funds are distributed through the South Sudan Health Pooled Fund (HPF) and the South Sudan Humanitarian Fund (SSHF). • The South Sudan Humanitarian Fund (SSHF) represents a relatively small proportion of overall humanitarian funding, but has significantly increased its funding for South Sudanese NGOs. It made \$53.4 million allocations in 2018 including 39% per cent (\$20.6 million) to South Sudanese NGOs.

¹⁰ Mo Ali et al. (2018) 'Funding to Local Humanitarian Actors: South Sudan Case Study' Humanitarian Policy Group, NEAR, Overseas Development Institute

¹¹ Metcalfe-Hough, V. et al. (2018) 'Grand Bargain Annual Independent Report 2018'. Humanitarian Policy Group, Overseas Development Institute.

¹² <https://fts.unocha.org/appeals/646/summary>

Annex 2: Selected bibliography

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Get Involved

This report examines the policy implications arising from the research project 'Historical and Political Dynamics of the NGO Sector in South Sudan' at the Centre for Public Authority and International Development, hosted by the Firoz Lalji Centre for Africa.

If you would like to learn more about the research project please contact **N.R.Pendle@lse.ac.uk**

You can find out more about the project's findings at the address below.

lse.ac.uk/africa/research/NGO-Sector-in-South-Sudan

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