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Enabling local leadership, capacity and delivery in principled humanitarian action and strengthening resilience

BACKGROUND DOCUMENT

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BACKGROUND DOCUMENT

Enabling local leadership, capacity and delivery in principled humanitarian action and strengthening resilience

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This document provides the background and rationale for the resolution proposed jointly by the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC) and the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) to acknowledge the contribution of the model of the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement (the Movement) to locally led action and to secure more support from states and international organizations, including the Movement components, on advancing local leadership, capacity and delivery in principled humanitarian action and resilience building. The resolution emphasizes the critical role of local actors, including National Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (National Societies), highlighting their leadership and capacity in humanitarian action, in key global agendas for disaster risk reduction, climate adaptation, pandemic prevention and preparedness, support for vulnerable migrants and crisis recovery and across the development and peace sectors. It recalls various international documents and agreements that support locally led action and acknowledges the pervasive barriers that prevent states and international organizations, including the Movement components, from achieving real progress on the localization agenda.

The international community has long acknowledged the importance of and expressed support for local leadership and action. Many international aid agencies, however, continue to inappropriately default to direct implementation, especially when major disasters strike, and tangible support, such as ceding space in decision-making and channelling funding and assistance to address identified capacity needs, has often lagged behind. Likewise, at the domestic level, while many governments have decentralized responsibilities for disaster risk management (especially preparedness) and public health promotion, transferring them to local authorities and local civil society, this is not always accompanied by the corresponding devolution of funds and expertise.

From a narrow focus on funding, the ambition and attention of local actors and a growing number of international actors now extend to securing a fairer and more appropriate distribution of leadership and decision-making authority. Localization is seen as a way to address the inequalities in the international humanitarian system while at the same time contributing to improving the quality and impact of humanitarian assistance. This perspective has given rise to a preference for the use of the term “locally led” as opposed to “localization”, as the former recognizes the role and agency of affected people and local actors in humanitarian response.

The IFRC and the ICRC propose to adopt a resolution at the 34th International Conference that calls for a better understanding of what localization and locally led action mean in the context of the Movement and how states and the Movement components can work together to further improve support for National Society branches and volunteers. The proposed resolution seeks to highlight the important role of local actors, such as National Societies, emphasizing their

leadership, capacity and delivery in humanitarian action, in the areas of disaster risk reduction, climate adaptation (including early warning and early action), pandemic prevention and preparedness, support for vulnerable migrants and crisis recovery and across the development and peace nexus. Further, it proposes specific actions for states and international organizations, including the Movement components, to build momentum in addressing pervasive barriers and achieving real progress on locally led action.

INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

Local action – supported, as and when needed, by global solidarity – has been at the heart of the operating model of the Movement since its inception 161 years ago. Today, the volunteers of National Societies support their communities in building resilience, preparing for future threats, leading healthier lives and weathering crises when they happen. Such a network for local action is not just about matching local needs, it is also a key channel for addressing global challenges, such as the humanitarian impacts of climate change and the threat of future pandemics, at the local level.

Localization, as an ambitious, broad-ranging policy agenda to increase support and funding for local actors in humanitarian response, was given an important boost at the World Humanitarian Summit in 2016. At this event, participants committed to work towards a humanitarian system that was “as local as possible, as international as necessary”. A group of humanitarian donors and agencies signed the [Grand Bargain](#), which included, among other things, a commitment to provide “more support and funding tools for local and national responders”. Similar initiatives have recently been undertaken in the areas of development (see [Donor Statement on Supporting Locally Led Development](#)) and climate change adaptation (see [Principles for Locally Led Adaptation](#)). In the urban sphere, the New Urban Agenda of 2016 called for a greater role for urban authorities in disaster risk management and building resilience.

Global progress against these commitments is mixed. Funding provided to local actors directly or “as directly as possible”, a major measure of progress in implementing the Grand Bargain commitments, has shown little improvement.¹ While some of the big donors are pushing for greater change,² the low risk appetite of others drives hesitancy or can result in an ineffective balance between trust and control. Capacity strengthening, especially for the longer term, remains underfunded, and decision-making power and leadership positions are still largely held by international actors. There is some movement, however, among international intermediaries to review and adjust their business models and partnership practices to enable and support locally led action.³

The term “localization”, popularized by the Grand Bargain, is an approach taken by the formal international (humanitarian) system that aims to strengthen international investment and respect for the role of local actors, with the goal of reducing costs and increasing the reach of humanitarian action. Meanwhile, “locally led action” is a term used to denote approaches where programmes

¹ Only 1.2% of humanitarian assistance went directly to local organizations in 2022 (Development Initiatives, *Global Humanitarian Assistance Report 2023*). COVID-19 was not the tipping point it could have been as only 2% of funding went directly to local partners at the forefront of the response (*A more localized aid system: current status discourse*, ALNAP briefing paper, June 2023).

² The United States has committed to ensuring that 50% of all USAID programming will place local communities in the lead by 2030. The European Union has released a guidance note on promoting equitable partnerships with local responders.

³ See the following reports: [Decolonising Aid, Centre for Humanitarian Leadership; Is Aid Really Changing?, British Red Cross; Bridging the Intention to Action Gap: The Future Role of Intermediaries in Supporting Locally Led Humanitarian Action; Outcome Paper Towards Co-Ownership – Caucus on Intermediaries.](#)

are conceived, shaped and delivered closer to the affected communities, highlighting the power and agency of affected people and local actors in humanitarian action.

The special and privileged status of National Societies as auxiliaries to public authorities in the humanitarian field is a commitment by states to locally led action and facilitates community engagement that complements and substitutes for public action ([Resolution 4, 31st International Conference, 2011](#) and Resolution 3, 30th International Conference, 2007). The central role of local actors in humanitarian response is highlighted in [Resolution 3 of the 2015 Council of Delegates](#) “International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement message to the World Humanitarian Summit”, which recognizes that “[l]ocal responders are often in the strongest position to deliver rapid, culturally appropriate and sustainable humanitarian assistance to their communities”, and takes note of the call for “[m]ore sustained investment in national response systems and basic services [which] will deliver stronger partnerships between local and international actors”.

ANALYSIS/PROGRESS

A) The Movement model for locally led action

The Movement is uniquely made up of 191 National Societies with an unparalleled local presence, supported and complemented by two international components, the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC) and the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), each with their specific mandate, roles and responsibilities recognized by states in the Geneva Conventions and the Statutes of the Movement, adopted by the states party to the Geneva Conventions and the components of the Movement through International Conference resolutions. National Societies operate in almost every country in the world. They have 16 million volunteers and 188,000 local branches and units and adhere to the Movement’s Fundamental Principles of humanity, impartiality, neutrality, independence, voluntary service, unity and universality. National Societies, the IFRC and the ICRC work together to fulfil the Movement’s exclusively humanitarian mission “to prevent and alleviate human suffering wherever it may be found”.

National Societies are considered the basic components of the Movement and its vital force. They, empower communities to advance local development and resilience and contribute to maintaining social cohesion and peace. Governments are bound to respect their adherence to the Movement’s Fundamental Principles, Statutes and mission (Resolution 2, 30th International Conference, 2007).

For the Movement, localization is about supporting and empowering humanitarian and development action at the most local level – the volunteers and staff of National Society branches (local units) often come from the communities they work with and so speak the same language, understand local cultural norms and are present before, during and after a crisis. Because of this proximity, branch volunteers and staff are uniquely well positioned to listen and respond to people’s views on their needs, priorities, vulnerabilities and capacities and to facilitate community engagement. The IFRC’s vision of localization, adopted by the IFRC Governing Board in October 2023, is about supporting empowered National Societies that provide sustainable locally led services in the areas of health, welfare, humanitarian response and community resilience building. This shared vision is already a reality and makes the IFRC unique within the humanitarian ecosystem.

National Society auxiliary role and RC law

A National Society's Red Cross or Red Crescent law (RC law) is a fundamentally important document. Typically, it is the legal instrument that establishes a National Society, recognizes its auxiliary role and enshrines the Fundamental Principles. It also usually grants a National Society certain special legal rights (e.g. humanitarian access and tax exemption) and addresses a range of other foundational matters, such as its mission, key activities, duties, emblem protection and funding. The importance of strong RC laws was recognized in Resolution 4 of the 31st International Conference, which encouraged National Societies to initiate or pursue a dialogue with their national authorities to strengthen their legal base in domestic law through sound RC laws. Further, a commission held during the 32nd International Conference identified strengthening the legal and statutory base of National Societies as a concrete step towards strengthening the application of and respect for the Fundamental Principles. In recent years, the IFRC has conducted research and developed guidance on how to strengthen a National Society's legal base. The result is the *Guide to Strengthening the Auxiliary Role through Law and Policy*. Moreover, as the RC model law (which was first disseminated in 1999) has become outdated, the IFRC has developed the draft of a revised RC model law. This draft is currently under consultation with the IFRC membership and will be finalized in advance of the 34th International Conference.

Although the importance of RC laws is widely recognized, many National Societies have a relatively sparse RC law that has not been updated for many decades. Therefore, the IFRC proposes that the resolution on local action should contain an operative paragraph reiterating the importance of this issue. It would call on states to initiate a dialogue with their National Society on strengthening their legal base and to enact detailed and comprehensive RC laws. The IFRC further proposes that the preamble to the resolution note the development of the revised RC model law and its utility as an assessment tool to guide the development and review of RC laws.

B) Overall state of play on localization and locally led action

While the Grand Bargain brought localization to the forefront of global policy discussions among stakeholders in international humanitarian action, the notion of empowering local actors or responders is not particularly new. Over the years, the policy discourse has moved beyond the narrow view that localization is about strengthening the role of local actors in the context of international aid and delivering on the Grand Bargain commitments⁴ to focus on rethinking and/or shifting the balance of power in the humanitarian sector from the bottom up, recognizing that the overwhelming majority of humanitarian action is already being carried out by local actors. There is also increasing debate about the use of the terms "localization" and "locally led action" and the relevance of the concepts of inclusion and participation.

Recent reports and evaluations on localization mainly describe overall progress as either "slow" or "poor", and locally led action as a "missed opportunity". Slow progress on the Grand Bargain is most often attributed to the poor performance of signatories in terms of providing direct and as direct as possible funding to local actors. The COVID-19 pandemic, for instance, underlined some of the systemic advantages of supporting local and national actors in their critical roles both as first responders and the providers of long-term support. Despite this, "the quantity of funding disbursed to [local actors] has reduced again and there has been little change to the power that [local actors] have in partnerships or their level of involvement in decision-making bodies".⁵

⁴ In 2021, a thorough review of the Grand Bargain was made, and this resulted in the launch of [GB 2.0](#). The original (2016) Grand Bargain localization commitments can be found here: [GB Localization Commitments 2016](#).

⁵ [Inter-Agency Humanitarian Evaluation: Localisation in the COVID-19 Response, Learning Paper, Inter-Agency Standing Committee \(IASC\)](#).

In terms of progress, less remarkable but important to note is the growing number of donor policies⁶ and practice changes beyond humanitarian action and aid agency initiatives that are supportive of localization.⁷

Local leadership, capacity and capacity strengthening

Capacity strengthening in humanitarian action is predominantly framed as a one-way transfer of capacity from international to local actors, with the latter expected to prove their capacity to the former in order to be able to access resources and play a role in decision-making. Capacity is largely defined in terms of ability to satisfy donors' financial and reporting requirements rather than in terms of institutional competencies, including the ability to provide rapid and effective assistance. The strategic and systemic capacity required by local actors takes time and significant resources to build, but the humanitarian funding available is, by its very nature, short-term, lifesaving or focused on service delivery and project-based. While there are a number of instruments and funding streams across the humanitarian, development, peace and climate sectors that support institutional capacity strengthening for local actors, many of them were found to be poorly coordinated within and across donors and international (intermediary) organizations. Many local actors, including civil society organizations (CSOs) that work across the development, humanitarian, peace and climate nexus, are either not aware of these funding opportunities or find them difficult to access. A Grand Bargain report⁸ has also highlighted this issue, noting that "there is no comprehensive data available to quantify this kind of support from donors, and as yet no effort to coordinate the different funding modalities available across humanitarian and development spheres to strengthen local capacities". While the participation of local actors in humanitarian coordination mechanisms, where important information of this kind is available, has slowly improved over the years, they are still under-represented in decision-making bodies such as Humanitarian Country Teams (HCTs).⁹

National Society Development (NSD) is a key anchor for localization and locally led action. The aim of NSD is to support National Societies in fulfilling their potential as effective local humanitarian actors and achieving and maintaining a sustainable organization able to deliver relevant, accessible, quality services in response to community needs and in full respect with the Movement's Fundamental Principles. National Societies are supported in building governance and leadership, strengthening their core capacities and designing and delivering programmes to help the most vulnerable, including in emergencies. An IFRC study¹⁰ on the effectiveness of NSD and its relevance to localization demonstrates that long-term purposeful investment in NSD increased humanitarian impact even in challenging, diverse and complex environments. NSD pooled funds include the re-engineered Capacity Building Fund, designed to support specific development priorities and address acute and time-critical National Society needs, and the National Society Investment Alliance, a joint initiative of the IFRC and the ICRC, is a demand-led fund that provides substantial, multi-year support to National Societies, especially those operating in contexts with heightened humanitarian needs or risks.

⁶ These include new localization policies and guidelines from USAID, ECHO and FCDO, among others, and initiatives such as the [Pledge for Change](#) and [Locally Led Adaptation](#).

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ *The Grand Bargain in 2021: An independent review*, 2021, <https://interagencystandingcommittee.org/sites/default/files/migrated/2022-06/Grand%20Bargain%20Annual%20Independent%20Report%202022.pdf>

⁹ In 2022, local and national actors held 10% of all HCT seats, 9% in 2021 and 7% in 2020 (United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), Note on IASC coordination structures at country level in 2022, 21 December 2023).

¹⁰ [Study: Localization of Humanitarian Action in the Red Cross Red Crescent | IFRC](#)

Funding and partnerships

Funding, which is a major measure of progress on localization, is where least progress has been made, in particular, in implementing the Grand Bargain. Direct funding to local actors in 2022 accounted for a mere 1.2% of overall assistance (the lowest share since 2018). Combined direct funding and trackable indirect funding amounted to just 2.1%.¹¹ An independent review report on the Grand Bargain noted that progress was very limited in 2022, with data suggesting “a further decline in the percentage of funding provided for coordinated appeals reaching local actors, and the self-reports [of Grand Bargain signatories] evidencing only a minor increase in the number of signatories having met [the 25%] target institutionally”. Short-term and project-based funding, most often the only types of funding accessible to local actors, continues to be a major challenge in sustaining operations and services, especially among those working across the humanitarian, development, peace and climate nexus.

The perceptions and attitudes international actors have to risk sharing, capacity strengthening and ownership and doubts about the ability of local actors to uphold humanitarian principles are obstacles to genuine partnerships with local actors. Strengthening local actors’ institutional capacity and providing evidence on the impact of locally led action to crises-affected people and communities can contribute to overcoming many of these obstacles. The Movement’s efforts in this regard include the IFRC’s new certification scheme, which covers key areas of due diligence including safeguarding, IFRC strategies and tools and joint Movement funding mechanisms to support National Societies in strengthening key aspects of integrity and the ICRC’s action¹² to promote more equitable risk sharing.

RESOURCE IMPLICATIONS

The implementation of the proposed resolution requires human and financial resources to be made available by the IFRC and National Societies. For the IFRC, in particular, this may include dedicated personnel to provide technical advice and coordinate specific initiatives or projects under the proposed resolution.

IMPLEMENTATION AND MONITORING

The IFRC will provide the members of the International Conference with progress updates on the implementation of this resolution through its global reporting platforms, including the Grand Bargain annual self-reporting exercise. The IFRC will also provide a progress report on the resolution ahead of the 35th International Conference in 2028.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The IFRC and the ICRC propose to adopt a resolution at the 34th International Conference that calls for a better understanding of what localization and locally led action mean in the context of the Movement and how states and the Movement components can work together to further improve support for National Society branches and volunteers. The proposed resolution seeks to highlight the important role of local actors, such as National Societies, their leadership, capacity and delivery in humanitarian action, in the areas of disaster risk reduction, climate adaptation (including early warning and early action), pandemic prevention and preparedness, support for vulnerable migrants and crisis recovery and across the development and peace nexus. The IFRC

¹¹ [Development Initiatives, Global Humanitarian Assistance Report 2023, Chapter 3.](#)

¹² ICRC, InterAction and the Netherlands Ministry of Foreign Affairs are co-leading the Risk Sharing Platform, where Grand Bargain signatories seek to improve the way organizations share risk, with the ultimate goal of better supporting affected people.

and the ICRC anticipate that this resolution will lead to concrete actions and plans for states and international organizations to increase and improve support and partnerships with local actors. Further, the resolution can also contribute to system-wide policy and practice changes towards a more locally led humanitarian system that delivers a principled and effective humanitarian response and strengthens community resilience.

Local actors, for their part, are called on to claim their space in shaping and driving the changes they want to see, on the one hand, and implementing and providing evidence on the impact of principled locally led action, on the other. National Societies, for instance, as champions of the call to make humanitarian action “as local as possible”, could increase their focus on branches and branch development, strengthen their role as convenors of local actors and work with local government, CSOs, local businesses and others to build coalitions to support local resilience solutions. These are all actions that can be incentivized with government grant support, investment by local businesses and business networks and collaboration on community mobilization from CSOs and other local volunteer organizations.