

Reflections

Discussions on locally-led humanitarian assistance amongst European INGOs and donors — shifting practices or challenging mental models?

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Džigurski, S. & Horst, C. (2025) Discussions on locally-led humanitarian assistance amongst European INGOs and donors — shifting practices or challenging mental models? *Fennia* 203(1) 144–150.

<https://doi.org/10.11143/fennia.159961>

This reflection piece explores the mental models underlying the formalized humanitarian system and the localization debates within it. The authors argue that these mental models draw on neoliberal and Eurocentric development logic that have been challenged in post-capitalist, post-development and post-postcolonial theory. A demand for more radical transformation of the system would entail acknowledging other mental models that de-center the global north while at the same time creating space for conversations about power that recognize historically grounded, structural power inequalities. These alternative perspectives are grounded in a relational ethics that emphasizes interconnectedness and interdependence, is rooted in reciprocity, solidarity, and care, and values long-term relationships shaped by shared histories and collective futures. While at present, discussions on locally-led approaches often separate the realm of mental models and practical operationalisations, we argue that there are elements that connect the two — with mental models impacting ideas about technical solutions and vice versa.

Keywords: relational humanitarianism, locally-led, practice-based knowledge, mental models

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Introduction

With the Grand Bargain that was agreed during the World Humanitarian Summit in Istanbul in 2016, the humanitarian sector committed to 'localization' to ensure that the humanitarian system is "as local as possible and as international as necessary" (Slim 2021, 2). Many of the debates on this topic take place in European headquarters amongst international non-governmental organizations (INGOs) and

donors. In this piece, we argue that it is important to distinguish between two crucial elements of the transformation towards locally-led humanitarian response. While debates often focus on addressing practical hindrances, underlying mental models are equally relevant to address. Mental models are ways of seeing and interpreting the world that come from individual and communal beliefs, experiences, histories and materialities, which influence people's decisions and actions and thus that same world. They are often taken for granted and assumed to be shared when discussing the need to shift humanitarian practice, or — when made explicit — discussed on an abstract level disconnected from their practical implications. Furthermore, practical hindrances and mental models are often discussed in separate spaces amongst separate categories of staff that speak different professional languages and have to relate to different sets of requirements, such as those at headquarters versus country offices, or program versus finance staff.

This reflection piece is based on the two authors' co-learning interactions with staff members of INGOs, policymakers, researchers and donors. The first author engaged in these through the Knowledge Platform Security & Rule of Law (see www.kpsrl.org) where, as the Head of Secretariat, he was facilitating critical debates between aid practitioners and policymakers in the Netherlands and beyond to challenge dominant ways of thinking, encouraging changes in aid practices and enabling a stronger impact. The second author engaged in interactions with INGO staff in Norway as part of a 'humanitarian lab' co-learning approach for a research project on accountability. Insights we draw on come from a wide range of sources and geographies, reflecting different perspectives. People and organisations we engaged with included those promoting locally-led responses and those being sceptical, those in initial stages of discussion as well as those who have been championing this transition for many years. We draw on interactive workshops and dialogue sessions between various stakeholders (including from country offices), podcast conversations, debates in a professional magazine for the aid sector in Norway, conference contributions and implementations of small grants. With hundreds of people contributing to these discussions we feel the insights we gained reflect current debates amongst European INGOs and donors well.

Informed and inspired by these discussions, in this reflection piece we aim to show the implications of mental models on practical requirements and vice versa — arguing that the two are in fact intrinsically linked and that dialogue is needed across. To do so, we briefly sketch the debate on locally-led responses, followed by an exploration of the two realms of its mental landscape and practical operationalisation. We conclude our reflections by drawing implications for the future that acknowledge the intersection between mental models and technical practices.

Locally-led responses to (protracted) crises: a reoccurring debate

Discussions on locally-led crisis responses — in situations where crises are often reoccurring or protracted and the distinction between humanitarianism, development and peace is thus difficult to maintain — have been ongoing for decades in different forms. For instance, the government-heavy interpretation of 'locally led' in terms of alignment with national development plans was present as early as the 1950s. In the early 2000s, the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development - Development Assistance Committee (OECD-DAC) Paris Declaration on Aid Effectiveness (2005) focused on ownership, alignment and mutual accountability, with a strong emphasis on measurable results. Most recently, calls for shifting the power and decolonisation have been connected (and often conflated) with striving for localization (Peace Direct 2021; Mathews 2023).

The shift towards local ownership also reflects a broader recognition of the need for more inclusive, sustainable, and context-specific solutions. Here, the need to take context into account is often mainly put into practice through conflict analysis, political economy indicators or data of various indexes (think of democracy index, systemic conflict analysis, political economy analysis). However, "once emotions, narratives, sensemaking, behaviours are recognized as shaping the context, context-specific takes on a whole new meaning" (Schomerus 2023, 112). Then, the need for an interpretive approach that emphasizes the importance of understanding the mental models that influence people's beliefs and actions becomes apparent.

The many definitions of 'locally-led', include a focus on increasing local power over decision-making and funding, and facilitating local leadership through equal relationships of trust. For example, the OECD-DAC Results Committee talks about:

Development co-operation that supports locally led humanitarian and development assistance by recognising and enabling diverse local actors' agency in: i) framing; ii) design; iii) delivery, including resourcing; and iv) accountability and learning (OECD 2024).

Simultaneously, USAID (before its recent dismantling) described locally-led development as

the process in which local actors – encompassing individuals, communities, networks, organizations, private entities, and governments – set their own agendas, develop solutions, and bring the capacity, leadership, and resources to make those solutions a reality (USAID 2020, 1).

These definitions suggest an alternative understanding of the roles that local and international actors have. At the same time, these commitments and definitions reveal some of the underlying ideational biases, such as the emphasis on measurable results or resource allocations. We argue that there is a tension between causality — and linear logic on the one hand, and a relational, process-based understanding on the other. A related tension appears between the foreign policy interests of donors and local aspirations. More specifically, for donors, transactional mindsets often result in perceptions of development as a (measurable) project with best practices and scalable approaches.

Examples from Afghanistan, Somalia and South Sudan show how over-engineered aid can undermine existing social contracts and dismiss relational ways of living, governing and resolving conflicts. This happens through imposed governing structures that deny traditional ways of decision making or through setting up services based on Western structures and practices in parallel to a variety of local initiatives. In notoriously unpredictable (post)conflict settings, local actors believe that societal change is non-linear, constantly transforming and only sustainable if locally owned and carried. However, even if international actors often see the need for systemic transformation of the international aid system, this observation is rarely followed by bold decisions or deep reflections towards paradigm shifts. Instead, technical fixes dominate the spectrum of responses. Yet what also needs transforming is "the mental model that keeps returning to transaction, growth, linearity, causality, certainty, and manipulation" (Schomerus 2023, 196) as humans often do not feature in the picture, with their histories and materialities.

Debates within two realms: the mental landscape and its practical operationalisation

The concept of a 'mental landscape' refers to deeply ingrained mental models which "shape what is imagined as being in the realm of the possible. They are the discourse" (Schomerus 2023, 4)¹. As Eyben (2008, 17) argues, "The frame of a picture directs the eye to what is inside the frame, momentarily rendering invisible everything outside the frame". In the mental landscape underlying international aid in protracted crisis situations, mental models "create the norms, the logic and the stories that underpin development engagement; they formulate the questions and the understanding" (Schomerus 2023, 4). Such mental models determine what and how we can think. They are both individual and collective: We each have our own unique mental models, but these are developed in interaction with others, through socialization, education, media etc. Thus, they appear to us as the natural state of the world, even though those with different backgrounds operate with different mental models.

Besides the mental model, a second realm is the practical, focusing on how to operationalise the shift towards more locally-led responses to protracted crisis situations. This is a common focus for aid practitioners, who are often doers, and inevitably leads to discussions on funding models, budget allocations, capacities of different actors, types and length of contracts with local partners, or roles within consortiums. These operational elements mainly explore technical solutions. As such, most of these debates sit within the material realm and relate to structural elements of 'doing aid'. However, the question remains how and why we do certain things, not only what those actions are.

Debates on locally-led responses have so far been predominantly embedded in a particular overarching mental model, one that originates from a neoliberal and Eurocentric perspective that

understands responses to protracted crises in terms of (social) engineering, causality, linearity and a transactional logic. By focusing on efficiency and effectiveness as ultimate objectives, most often measured through countable outputs, without questioning the underlying mental model or exploring alternative ways of seeing things, they often miss the intangible and subtle yet crucial aspects of, for example, relational mental models (e.g. Eyben 2008; Brun & Horst 2023).

Mental models underlying 'localization'

Examples of mental models that have driven Western societies for centuries are linear ideas of progress where societies are malleable and progress can be socially engineered; related Eurocentric understandings of the world in binary 'developed'-'underdeveloped' oppositions; the transactional, profit-based logic of cost-benefit analyses; the rational actor theory that is based on the idea that individuals are rational decision makers that act according to self-interest (based on cost-benefit analysis); and hierarchies of knowledge that favour scientific data over other forms of knowing, academic over experiential and professional knowledges. Since this mental landscape is so ingrained in people's understanding of the world, it is often hard for those socialized in these mental models to fully understand the positioned nature of these assumptions and discover alternative ways of understanding the world.

Linearity and causality are for example central components of the dominant mental model that guides international responses to (protracted) crises — they influence humanitarian, development and peacebuilding models equally.

For the last three centuries mainstream western thought has understood historical change as linear progression; specific causes produce particular effects in proportion to the significance of the initial cause. This paradigm of change assumes that it is possible to gain sufficient knowledge to engineer the desired result (Eyben 2008, 305).

As is maybe most clear in conflict or post-conflict contexts, however, reality is much more complex and "conflictual environments are both polarized and decentralized, rigid and fluid, archetypal and exceptional." (Schomerus 2023, 7). Yet recognizing the complexity and messiness of such environments – acknowledging that outcomes cannot be engineered — is not attractive as certainty and strong narratives are preferred over uncertainty and ambiguity. Other mental models, such as those that acknowledge the complex interconnectedness of communities and events through relational and processual ways of thinking (Eyben 2008), would understand any response as part of a complex environment of actors and actions — thus making it impossible to fully understand its implications.

Localisation is a term that is mostly heard in the global north within diverse circles of policy, practice and research — as for example in discussions on localization of humanitarianism. The term 'local' — which already suggests a Western gaze in itself (Sabaratnam 2013) — is often used in a generic way to include gatekeepers, 'local' INGO offices, big national NGOs and local community groups, indicating the importance of the need to be clear about what exactly is meant. The concept takes its starting point in the humanitarian system and its need for change. It suggests that this system needs to become 'more local', by transferring funds and decision-making power to actors in the countries where humanitarianism is provided, including affected populations. An alternative approach would be to look at humanitarianism as saving lives and alleviating suffering, which is mostly done by local actors in the first place.

If the main question is phrased as how to localize the narrowly defined existing formalised humanitarian system of governments, agencies and organisations providing international aid, solutions will be found in including more local actors in this system, by giving them more resources and decision-making power, as well as the skills needed to make use of both. If one on the other hand starts from the broad understanding of humanitarianism as saving lives and reducing suffering (Brun & Horst 2023), where local actors already play a central role, the key question changes to how the humanitarian system can best support this humanitarianism in ways that does no harm to what already exists and works well. These are fundamentally different questions with fundamentally different answers.

The first approach is likely to lead to local NGOs with similar profiles as international NGOs functioning as implementing partners, or creative solutions that include influencing statistics by counting country offices with local staff as part of localization efforts. The second approach on the other hand, would demand a more radical transformation of the system and is possibly better covered with the concept of 'locally-led' humanitarianism. It would require investing in local civil society and communities and valuing local knowledge and expertise.

Practical operationalisation

A second realm in which debates on locally-led approaches take place, is the practical, focusing on how to operationalise localization. In discussions on 'localization', there is often a focus on changing technocratic practices, such as those related to funding models, accountability practices, donor requirements for equal partnership and the like. These discussions hide (in plain sight) the underlying mainstream neoliberal and Eurocentric mental models with its assumptions about linear progress; understanding of interactions as always transactional; and belief that growth is a necessary aim of any type of activity. Such models assume malleable societies that can be transformed through social engineering, based on hierarchies of norms and values, practices and types of knowledge.

One common assumption, for example, is that local partners lack the capacity for greater levels of direct funding or decision-making, leading to a focus on capacity building. However, "capacity building has a patchy track record due to its narrow focus on transferring technical skills and a simplistic understanding of how change comes about" (Schomerus 2023, 43). The focus on capacity deficit closely relates to understanding of what counts as relevant knowledge and skill. More recently, the process of rethinking capacity building and reframing it into mutual capacity strengthening is evolving. There is a growing recognition that everyone in the system has a lot to learn and unlearn, and that complementarity is the key, leading to new practices. Examples of these trends are visible in the current Strategic Partnerships funded by the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs, some of which were also shared through Partos Strategic Partnership Lab².

Another area in which hindrances to achieving locally-led responses are understood to be high, relates to finance. This includes, for example, what costs donors allow for national INGOs versus their local partners, and what accountability and reporting requirements they have. Even though an increasing number of donors — in line with global pledges — are willing to move towards more direct funding, they find that localization is not always easy to implement. Their concern often relates to local stakeholders' and partners' financial 'absorption capacity'. But even when the absorption capacity is there, donors' systems are often unwilling to relax administrative hurdles, resulting in overburdening demands for accountability and reporting, or short-term contracts with little flexibility.

With the humanitarian sector being defined by a complex web of relationships, it is no surprise that the way partnerships are established and nurtured occupy the centre stage of locally-led debates. While what is being aspired is described as equitable partnerships, solutions are often pursued through requirements related to consortium composition and participation in decision making. Yet equitable partnerships first and foremost require acknowledging power imbalances, which are closely related to unequal access to resources. These could for example be addressed by finding systems and building cultures of reciprocal accountability mechanisms, where all those in the web of relationships can hold each other to account, and this has actual consequences for practices.

However, it is important to acknowledge that the humanitarian landscape is increasingly diverse, with implications for resources and decision-making. There is a growing trend of community philanthropy and participatory grant-making, for example Africa Philanthropy Network and Global Fund for Community Foundations³, which appreciates and is built for local stories and lives. Besides, a number of more flexible funding models which call for adaptive programming and focus on local voices and lived experiences are setting a new standard⁴.

Concluding remarks: an integrated approach

The mental models underlying the formalised humanitarian system and the localization debates within it, draw on neoliberal and Eurocentric development logics that have been challenged in post-capitalist (Fisher 2009; Srnicek & Williams 2015), post-development (Esteva & Escobar 2017; Rutazibwa 2018; Kothari *et al.* 2019) and post-postcolonial theory (Sabaratnam 2013). A demand for more radical transformation of the system would entail acknowledging other mental models that de-center the global north while at the same time creating space for conversations about power that recognize historically-grounded, structural power inequalities. These alternative perspectives are often based on a relational ethics that recognizes interconnectedness and interdependence; is based on reciprocity, solidarity and care; and recognizes long-term relationships including both shared past and futures (Brun & Horst 2023).

Unpacking the way we deal with locally-led responses can be broad and deep, conceptual and specific. The current trends that aim to transform structures and practices

highlight the need for non-hierarchical entry points, appreciating unseen connections, recognizing non-binary choices and moving away from seeking causality along clearly defined lines (Schomerus 2023, 101).

While at present, discussions on locally-led approaches often separate the realm of mental models and practical operationalisations, we argue that there are elements that connect the two — with mental models impacting ideas about technical solutions and vice versa. We conclude this paper with a few examples that operate at the intersection of the two realms.

Structural change within NGOs requires reimagining roles for different actors in the 'humanitarian landscape' (introduction, this issue), based on examining underlying mental models. This is also about initiating difficult conversations about topics such as power inequalities, exploitative histories and present realities or divergent norms and values. Once some of this is unpacked, understood and challenged or unlearned, it needs to be translated back to technical adjustments that make different kinds of relationships possible. A concrete example relates to the role of intermediaries, where discussions in the mental landscape realm would unpack power relations, positionalities and biases, while practical discussions would tackle the types of contracts, funding mechanisms, evaluations and other requirements that support this transformation process. In practice, this may lead to INGOs downsizing and repositioning to focus on watchdog and advocacy functions. Alternatively, umbrella organisations could take over intermediary roles that support smaller organizations to deal with reporting and other technical requirements.

Mutual capacity strengthening, co-creation or shared learning approaches similarly both require conversations about underlying mental models as well as on their consequences for technical programming. Here, it is important to address the ways in which different types of knowledge (e.g. experiential, professional or academic) are valued, as well as whose knowledge counts. Shifts in practice can implement ways to increase the acknowledgement and appreciation of local knowledges and draw attention to the importance of working with a variety of co-learning methods on the one hand and processes of unlearning on the other. As the transition is a complex change process, it is important to create and allow time and space to stop, think, reflect, learn and adapt. This process benefits from a dialogical approach of humility and curiosity, where people aim to increase their awareness of their own biases and remain open to different ways of thinking and doing, combined with a willingness to invest in mechanisms and cultures of truly reciprocal forms of learning, sharing and of accountability.

Notes

¹ Similar arguments can be found in other theoretical frameworks and methodologies, e.g. within the narrative approach or discourse analysis, such as through discursive institutionalism.

² See <https://www.partos.nl/nieuws/strategic-partnerships-lab-juicy-mangoes/>

³ See <https://apn.or.tz/> and <https://globalfundcommunityfoundations.org/>

⁴ See for example the Contributing to Peaceful and Safe Societies Programme Grant of the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

Acknowledgements

The projects from which this paper emerged were funded by the Research Council of Norway titled *Holding Aid Accountable: Relational Humanitarianism in Protracted Crisis* (AidAccount, 301024), and *Expanding the search for new ways of working along the Humanitarian-Development-Peace nexus* (EXPAND, 352385).

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