the
Humanitarian Leader

The power to lead

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THE HUMANITARIAN LEADER:
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Acknowledgements

Editorial Office

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Cover image: Two children learn about coronavirus in their tent in Idlib, Syria. The Violet Organisation for Relief and Development has been holding 'awareness raising' plays for children in camps to increase their awareness of the pandemic, teaching them how to wash their hands and stay safe © Save the Children

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Abstract

The staff in local organisations are taking on the largest proportion of risk in a humanitarian response by being on the frontlines and endangering their physical and mental well-being. This paper reflects on how local organisations are taking leadership over the responses within their countries despite the challenges of bringing the localisation agenda and commitments into reality. Further, it recommends how international actors can reflect on their localisation efforts to reach a more tangible change that aligns with the Grand Bargain commitments. In addition to advocating for more access to direct funding, the paper also provides examples of how to shift leadership to a more community-driven response aligned with the concept of the triple nexus, and shares firsthand experience from the work of a local organisation that is active in the Syria response and driven by the commitment to create youth-led change.

Leadership relevance

Local organisations working in crisis settings, such as in northwest Syria, are not only capable of taking on leadership, but are also pushed to do so through the communities they serve. However, their efforts are limited due to the lack of influence over funding priorities and few opportunities to access funding directly, which is a topic much discussed among the international community. The paper reflects on the leadership a local organisation was able to take due to strong community acceptance and also points out how the organisation has limited opportunities for further success within the current system. This paper seeks to offer international leaders and decision makers new insights in how to approach localisation and leadership in protracted humanitarian contexts, such as Syria. Further, it offers practical examples on how the local leadership agenda can be pushed forward by investing in community initiatives.

Introduction

Over the past five years, the international community has increasingly advocated for locally led humanitarian action. This shift has been discussed at the World Humanitarian Summit 2016 in Istanbul, as well as in the 'Grand Bargain'—a commitment to agree on planned results and steps for localised aid (IASC 2017). While several humanitarian organisations and donors have shared those commitments and put it into their multiyear agendas, tangible actions have been slow and burdened by bureaucracy and red tape.

This paper reflects on how local organisations are taking the lead in responses within their country despite this, and working to bring the localisation agenda and commitments into reality. Further, it recommends how international actors can reflect on their localisation efforts to reach a more tangible change that aligns with the Grand Bargain commitments. The paper is based on personal reflection and the experiences of international staff working with a Syrian-funded national organisation—the Violet Organisation for Relief and Development (referred to in this paper as Violet), which is active in the cross-border response from Turkey to northwest Syria. The reflections made may not reflect the perspectives and experiences in other humanitarian responses or organisations. When speaking about community, community members, youth or volunteers, the paper considers all different members within the community.

Defining localisation

According to the OECD, 'localisation' is "a process of recognising, respecting and strengthening the leadership by local authorities and the capacity of local civil society in humanitarian action, in order to better address the needs of affected populations and to prepare national actors for future humanitarian responses" (OECD 2020).

Working for a local organisation, localisation is a term we use to advocate for our work, however it often feels like being caught between two worlds when referring to this topic. On the one hand, we speak up in meetings and advocate for a more localised response, knowing our staff have proven their capacity to do so over the last ten years. On the other hand, localisation often seems to appear as a mere communications buzzword among partners, donors and grant proposals. So what does a genuine local response look like? This is the question that organisations like Violet have been tackling.

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Localisation and leadership

At the beginning of the Syria crisis, communities and families in and around Idleb, a city in the northwest, were motivated to come together and create small, self-organised relief operations, as there were a limited number of civil society organisations in existence. In the case of Violet, the leader of this volunteer effort was a young Syrian from Idleb named Fouad Sayed Issa. Issa was 16 years old at that time, and his goal was to support vulnerable families in his neighbourhood. Due to their rapidly increasing needs, his grassroots movement grew and was able to register as an organisation in Turkey so that they could receive funding from international organisations.

Violet developed from a community initiative into an organisation with over 1,000 staff and a USD $16 million budget in 2020. Violet also shows its leadership capacity through its strong Facebook following of over 500,000 individuals, mostly from northwest Syria, who share their feedback and thoughts on implemented projects. The story that has inspired the foundation of Violet is undoubtedly very similar to many other grassroots movements around the world.

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Building partnerships

The model of partnering with international organisations in joint responses has been relevant in northwest Syria since the beginning and remains the modus operandi in 2021. Those partnerships do not only focus on funding the response, but also on building the capacity of local organisations, which has been a significant contribution to strengthening the civil society landscape in northwest Syria.

Since the beginning of the response, both local and international organisations have been seeking to diversify their partnerships for multiple reasons. Currently, one key reason for diversifying is to be prepared for potential new challenges linked to the outcome of external factors such as the renewal of the UN cross-border resolution. To become the implementing partner of an international organisation, local organisations must invest in organisational governance, capacity and skilled staff. Over the duration of the Syrian crisis, numerous local organisations have already invested heavily in these areas and are able to live up to the sectors' standards. Many have been supported by their strategic international partners over many years in building both individual and organisational capacity.

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The same local organisations that have been operational for almost a decade face seemingly insurmountable hurdles to take the reins in terms of funding and objectives. For example, in 2020 a plenitude of donor funds focused on the COVID-19 response, which was undeniably urgent and important. However, although Syrian organisations advocated for more livelihood projects to mitigate the social and economic effects of the pandemic, these pleas fell on deaf ears.

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Local Syrian organisations are rarely able to participate in decision-making processes on a high level, and thus have little influence on donor priorities. Direct access to funding is only available to a limited extent, even though those same grants have been implemented through international partners for many years. Direct access would not only promote the concept of localisation, but also decrease administrative costs along the way and increase the amount of funding reaching the target groups—something which every actor in the humanitarian sector should be striving for.

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Joint conversations and roundtables between donors, international partners and local actors are rare, despite this being mooted in the Grand Bargain. In this agreement, aid organisations and donors committed to, among other things, removing and reducing barriers that prevent organisations or donors from partnering with local and national responders. A target was even set to channel at least 25% of humanitarian funding to local and national responders as directly as possible (IASC 2017).

While there is funding available to local organisations in the northwest Syria response, a significant amount of this money is channelled through the Syria Humanitarian Pool Fund. To receive this funding, local organisations must undergo due diligence and risk assessment. In many cases, the country pool fund has strict requirements and allows for only limited flexibility. Additionally, many national and international organisations are competing for the available funding. This leads to the need for competitive budgets, meaning support and administrative costs must be covered through other sources.

The impact of limited access to funding

Once international organisations take the decision to leave the response and focus on other crises, local civil society responders remain, and often face an uncertain and fearful future. With limited donor budgets and many crises competing for funding to provide much needed humanitarian assistance, this fear is justified to a certain extent—especially when organisations are unable to access key donors directly. This is a major limiting factor in allowing national and local actors to take leadership over the response.

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Given the political contexts of many crises, there is a clear understanding why donors and the foreign affairs offices of various countries hesitate to provide funds directly to local organisations, however, it is not a solution to take leadership from outside the country without having the affected population also be a key decision maker. Yes, needs assessments and participatory approaches are often applied, but this is not the same as being a decision maker in the response; it is merely giving an opinion as to the priorities and trusting the responding organisations and donors to consider them within the scope of the project or program. Thus, the hesitations seen in localisation are also sparking the debate and conversation about decolonising humanitarian aid.

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Best practice: community-rooted leadership

While the Grand Bargain commitment to more access for local organisations to direct funding stalls, civil society groups in northwest Syria are not sitting around waiting for this high-level topic to be solved. Despite the deteriorating consequences of the Syrian crisis, one positive outcome is a very strong, capable, and motivated civil society—a civil society that is speaking up and loudly advocating for its communities' needs. As there are many different requirements that need covering—reaching from food assistance to education to psychosocial support—Violet has identified youth empowerment as the solution to address several needs within their target community.

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As part of the Brussels V conference, 'Supporting the future of Syria and the region', held in 2021 (EEAS 2021), the Syrian NGO Alliance has produced a report as "an insight into the lives of Syrian youth" (Syrian NGO Alliance 2021). Youth is very important from the perspective of Syrian civil society, and so the international community were asked to "listen to their voices, dreams and visions" (Syrian NGO Alliance 2021). Key advocacy messages in the report included "recognising youth as a resource with motivation and drive to become active change agents", "investing into developing a comprehensive strategy for engagement with youth", and "prioritising youth (14 to 25 years old) as a special target group across all sectors" (Syrian NGO Alliance, 2021).

As a youth movement, Violet has seen the success that can stem from young people's motivation, passion, and urge to create change. Young people make up most of the population in Syria—when the crisis started, they were the children who had to drop out of school and who grew up in a place characterised by conflict and displacement. A new generation of children in Syria are now experiencing the same, which puts them at high risk too. Young people are role models for children in their community and can influence them in a positive or adverse way. Thus, building their resilience has a significant impact on younger generations too. No matter the outcome of the crisis, the youth will be the ones taking the lead in rebuilding the country. Therefore, youth seemed a very logical resource to invest in.

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Since 2016, Violet has been investing in young people as emergency responders within their community. The organisation has managed to build a strong network of young men and women who are willing to participate in a humanitarian response as volunteers, or for a small per diem, to cover emerging needs within their community. The youth receive holistic training, learning everything from first aid, to how to handle evacuations, to providing psychosocial support. They work with children and lead zero points during peaks in displacements. Utilising existing community resources, such as youth volunteers, has multiple benefits, including the ability to respond very rapidly, a strong acceptance among the community and lower human resource costs.

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Another highly successful element of the Violet project has been the increased capacity of volunteers to go on to find paid jobs in other organisations, which is a clear win-win for all parties. The approach taken by Violet is locally driven and focuses strongly on community ownership.

From a leadership perspective, training community volunteers is a significant and promising approach to building both resilience and ownership as well as creating sustainability. Training local youth to conduct need assessments and develop and design needs-based projects also allows the affected population to decide upon the response themselves and operates within the limit of the available financial or human resources in the community.

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Despite all this, it remains challenging for Violet to receive funding to run this volunteer response.

Local leadership and the triple nexus in a protracted crisis

Since 2011, millions of Euros have been mobilised to support internally displaced Syrians within Syria and Syrian refugees in neighbouring countries. This has improved the situation of the crisis-affected families and individuals significantly, but only in an unsustainable, short-term way. It does not solve any of the fundamental problems or consequences of the crisis. Currently, over 80% of Syrians live below the poverty line, the destruction of basic infrastructure is significant, and access to health care or education, especially secondary education, is limited (UN OCHA 2021).

The situation in Syria aligns with the changing characteristics of several crises observed globally. According to UN OCHA:

> "The volume, cost and length of humanitarian assistance over the past 10 years has grown dramatically, mainly due to the protracted nature of crises and scarce development action in many contexts where vulnerability is the highest. For example, inter-agency humanitarian appeals now last an average of seven years, and the size of appeals has increased nearly 400% in the last decade" (UN OCHA 2019).

While there is no legal or unified definition of a protracted crisis, the following paragraph of the ICRC is applicable to the situation in northwest Syria:

> "The humanitarian consequences of protracted conflict are severe and can be immediate and cumulative. People's experience of a protracted conflict typically involves immediate direct suffering as a result of attacks, deprivation and displacement, and more indirect suffering due to the cumulative deterioration of basic services, life chances and livelihoods. People's needs cut across many different sectors and extend over many years" (ICRC 2016, p. 5).

Due to the changing factors in crises, the topic of the triple nexus has emerged as another angle to support affected populations with resilience building. The triple nexus, or the 'humanitarian-development-peace' nexus, is defined as "interlinkages between humanitarian, development and peace actions" with the aim of "strengthening collaboration, coherence and complementarity" (OECD DAC 2021). The triple nexus offers another opportunity for local actors and civil society to take the lead in long-term responses to the crises they experience.

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Ten years in, the situation in northwest Syria remains catastrophic and yet the nexus is rarely applied by those involved. This raises the question—why? This is an especially urgent question, as long-term livelihood building projects have regularly been among the advocacy messages of local actors and several areas within northwest Syria are now considered as safe for livelihood projects.

In his article on ALNAP, Tarek Tawil reflects on why the Syria crisis shows us the triple nexus is a myth:

> "The concept of the triple nexus is promising, it is closer to a fairy tale. How would life-saving actors survive in protracted crises and remain efficient? How would development actors operate in hostile contexts? Would they need to adjust their mandates? As peace processes are essential to ending armed conflict, should we incorporate them in humanitarian and development operations? How would humanitarian action remain principled? Could development agencies invest in areas controlled by the donors' enemies?" (Tawil 2020).

While the "triple nexus talk (is) very present in meetings and global conferences, at HQ level it has hardly been applied in operations. A first step to resolve this may be contextualised research on an operational level to explore limitations and opportunities for piloting humanitarian-development operations" (Tawil 2020). At the same time, some local organisations in northwest Syria are seeing the triple nexus as a key part of the pressing need to respond to the situation they observe among the affected population.

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Active relief organisations are mostly governed by mandates designed for short-term/life-saving purposes. In a protracted crisis, such as the case in Syria, humanitarian aid may cause the adverse long-term impact of creating dependency. In northwest Syria, this can be observed in the dependency on food or cash assistance due to limited livelihood and income opportunities, or when young people consider joining armed groups to cover family needs.

The triple nexus approach needs stability, and many Syrian cities and rural areas are now secure. As Tawil says:

"In such areas, there has been an opportunity to start rehabilitation of infrastructure, public health facilities and services, markets, schools, and housing. This should have led to a restoration of livelihoods and boosted economic growth. Yet, development projects in Syria remain small in scale and function as patchwork rather than addressing the roots. Why is there a lack of large-scale development projects in safe and secure locations? What is the meeting or transition point between the two domains? What is the role of politics in launching long-standing interventions to change people's lives?" (Tawil 2020).

While these discussions may be taking place on global and donor levels, many local organisations are not included in these conversations. This is despite the importance of civil society being engaged, "as these organisations have an opportunity to influence what collaboration looks like. It is important to evaluate the situation and conversation and bring concrete recommendations and influence the conversation" (ICVA 2016).

While it is still not clear what the nexus would mean in northwest Syria, how peace would be defined and what role local organisations would play, it is certain that the focus has to shift from short-term, one-off humanitarian aid to multi-year projects with strong early recovery and development components. At Violet, the need to engage with triple nexus programming is seen, but due to the conflicting priorities of donor or partner driven agendas, the limited existence of nexus funding and the lack of direct access, this engagement mostly remains a far-off dream.

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For some community initiatives emerging from Violet staff or volunteers, the organisation is unable to find a donor or partner to implement them. An option here is to conduct those initiatives independently or through fundraising from private donors, allowing the organisation to decide what ideas are worth investing in, despite the limited unearmarked funds. One such example that has been recognised globally is Violet's efforts to host an Olympic Games for children in a camp in northwest Syria—a recreational and joyful activity that is not part of a humanitarian program (Aljazeera 2021). The idea aligns with the approach of sports for development, which is not a funding focus in northwest Syria, but which has a strong impact on children and youth in their personal development journeys. For Violet, such initiatives are relevant and important. They are designed to build a strong, positive confidence among young people so that they can be ready and able to take the lead in rebuilding their country. Self-confidence, team spirit and soft skills are the starting point for doing so.

Thanks to its experiences with volunteering, short-term projects and community initiatives such as these, Violet plans to build a large, sustainable youth empowerment program to build livelihoods and resilience. This is planned to be inclusive for young men, women and youth living with disabilities. The goal is to not only build resilience, but also to foster the youth's motivation to become change makers for Syria's future.

The triple nexus is an attractive concept to build this around and is often used when advocating for such funding. However, due to the number of open questions (outlined by Tarek Tawil above), the triple nexus is still not a concept that is applied, despite the local organisations' interest, readiness, and willingness. Syrian organisations have strong experience in managing funds responsibly, transparently and while maintaining accountability to affected persons. They can also create a significant difference even with small grants, as training for livelihoods and skills is not costly to implement.

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Risk taking

Leadership driven by local actors can take several forms: being active in coordination mechanisms to influence the response, using social media for two-way communication, engaging volunteers to assist with humanitarian needs or exploring concepts such as the triple nexus. All forms of local leadership are relevant to the needs and hopes of affected populations—be it directly or through advocating to partners or donors.

Unfortunately, several forms of local leadership are limited or affected by available funding and external factors. For instance, engaging volunteers is best practice for community engagement and a prime example of a successful locally-led response, but what is not often talked about is the risk local organisations and local communities are taking to do so.

Volunteers, such as those engaged at Violet, are taking on risk in being first responders on the frontlines and serving their communities—and do so without insurance or coverage by the duty of care of international donors or partners. If an incident happens, which is not unlikely, local organisations must find their own way to support the volunteer or the family.

Yet while being a volunteer is a high risk, it also comes with big benefits. Volunteers not only support their families and create a sense of community, they also develop skills that can help them to find employment afterwards. Risk taking is frequently discussed when initiating new partnerships with international organisations, but local staff often brush it off with the simple statement that this is their duty. They are responding to people in need—despite the risk.

Reducing the barriers to local leadership

Because staff in local organisations are taking on the largest proportion of risk in a humanitarian response by being on the frontlines and endangering their physical and mental well-being, they should not only take leadership on the ground, but also leadership over funding objectives and decision-making processes that affect their country and community.

Because staff in local organisations are taking on the largest proportion of risk in a humanitarian response by being on the frontlines and endangering their physical and mental well-being, they should not only take leadership on the ground, but also leadership over funding objectives and decision-making processes that affect their country and community.

There are several donors and organisations that are leading the way with outstanding efforts on localisation. Nonetheless, the conflicting priorities in a humanitarian response pushes the attention to a rapid response with immediate outputs in form of cash or kits distributed to the most vulnerable people. However, humanitarian agencies and donors might consider several other ways to foster an inclusive, community-rooted response with local leadership.

Empowering local community leadership

Shifting the long-term focus from established organisations to community-rooted initiatives.
Creating lasting change must come from within the community, and community-rooted initiatives are able to lead such a change due to their acceptance, understanding and motivation.

Due to the protracted situation in northwest Syria, the international community is relying on well-established national organisations to uphold access to services for crisis-affected populations in need of humanitarian assistance. While this is a solution for now, it is built on unstable ground. Since the beginning of 2020, international and national organisations have been fearful that the UN cross-border aid resolution might not be renewed, which would jeopardise the whole response. It is also feared that the attention of international donors might switch to other crises in Yemen, Afghanistan or the global climate crisis.

To reduce the negative consequences of a potential drop in funding or the non-renewal of the cross-border resolution, and to decrease the overall dependency on humanitarian assistance, community initiatives and grassroot movements must be on the priority list for the international community. Such initiatives may include identifying needs within the community and coming up with a collective solution that is within the scope of the affected community. In a humanitarian response, participatory approaches can be limited due to the time constraints and often consist of rapid need assessments, feedback mechanisms and lessons learnt. But local community committees can still identify their own needs and seek to cover them through advocacy or their own initiatives. Many of these initiatives will likely also focus on creating livelihood opportunities, business ideas and other ways to create income, which is much needed given the economic impact of the protracted crisis.

There is strong potential to integrate community initiatives in the concept of the triple nexus: engage them as first responders, enable them to identify solutions to community problems in a participatory way and support them to take leadership in the peace process—starting with building social cohesion between internally displaced persons and the host community.

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While established national organisations are representing the community they serve in UN-led coordination mechanisms, they are not able to represent every community member's view or preferences. This approach is limited and not fully inclusive. By investing into community initiatives, supporting local organisations in engaging volunteers or with community development funds, community members can group together and take leadership in a field that is relevant to them or the group they represent.

As local as possible: enable communities to become first responders.

Despite rapid response mechanisms and commitment to timely assistance, the timeframe between requesting funds and releasing them is significant for those affected by the crisis.

One key aspect in better supporting locally rooted initiatives is to enable them to respond to their needs. In a context such as northwest Syria, this also entails responding to disasters or emergencies within their community. If an emergency in a community occurs, for instance due to an airstrike, the affected persons must be trained not only in first aid, but also in psychosocial first aid, leading an evacuation and taking first measures. Even before that, communities should be able to identify potential threats in their area and how to prevent them.

Not all leadership positions are taken voluntarily, but an emergency pushes those immediately available to become leaders to handle the situation. Therefore, investing into community emergency leadership, especially in areas close to frontlines, can save lives.

Invest in innovation.

In settings with limited resources, new ideas come up or must be developed to cover existing needs with the available capacities.

When one of the largest displacements in the history of the Syria crisis happened, organisations struggled to find shelter for the displaced families. At Violet, the volunteers came up with the idea to host a hotline for house or landowners to offer their available apartment, room or house to internally displaced families. Internally displaced families could also call to request a shelter free of charge. All that was done by Violet's volunteers was to facilitate between the two parties. The initiative was created on the ground and proved to be successful in assisting the displaced families.

This simple idea provides evidence for why community development funds should be available to cover needs identified within the community. Simultaneously, there should be access to resources to pilot new ideas and innovations. Different community members are facing challenges in their daily life and may have an idea how to solve it for several people, however resources are too limited. Investing in innovation hubs, training or funds can enable communities to take leadership over the challenges they face with ideas created from within.

The power to lead

Leadership is the power or ability to lead a group of people—but it is a process, and it is connected to social influence. A leader can come from within, or from the outside. Empowering local communities to create change by leading from within is one approach that can encompass the idea of localisation and the concept of the triple nexus.

In the context of the Syrian crisis, national organisations connect between the community level and international partners or donors. They are the port between the affected persons and those who are committing to provide financial assistance, which does not only make them negotiators, but also leaders.

Their leadership efforts, combined with the risks they take, should allow them to access the needed resources to be in this position. Despites all the efforts of Grand Bargain signees, in 2020 only 13 signatories (compared to 5 in 2017) allocated 25% or more of their humanitarian funds to national and local responders as directly as possible. COVID-19 has given many local actors a higher responsibility to respond to the global health emergency within their countries. When reflecting the Grand Bargain five years on, "there were hopes that the pandemic would accelerate progress on both availability and cascading of quality funding down the transaction chain from donors to frontline responders. If COVID-19 was a test this regard, then some aid organisations feel the Grand Bargain has failed" (HPG 2021).

Direct access to institutional funding means being able to influence donor objectives, it means being part of the conversations that are taking place at a high level and bringing in the local perspective. It means taking leadership over a crisis that affects your own country. Accessing funding directly also means reducing administrative costs and allowing national organisations to access multiyear contracts with budget for their own capacity building. The local organisations I have worked with are trying desperately to live up to international requirements, as it enables them to receive funding and allows them to continue responding to the needs within their communities. However, not all capacity building needs are related to a specific partnership, project, or intervention. Some capacity building needs derive from the organisation's future plans, self-assessments and the desire to engage in new areas of work. Accessing funding could allow local organisations to budget for advocacy staff, to invest into new fundraising mechanisms or to pilot new community initiatives.

Direct access to institutional funding means being able to influence donor objectives, it means being part of the conversations that are taking place at a high level and bringing in the local perspective. It means taking leadership over a crisis that affects your own country.

Direct access to funding cannot solve all problems regarding localisation, but it can make a significant difference by giving local organisations the power to lead.

Conclusion

When we are speaking in the office about localisation and the issue of access to direct donor funds, we usually circle back to one point, which seems the most promising idea: pooling together general funds to open an office in Europe or Great Britain, as other Syrian organisations have already done. Then, the organisation would at least be able to apply for funding over there.

Localisation strives to empower a local response; it is meant to reduce the barriers local responders are facing. So far, there is still a resistance to committing to the concept fully, especially to shifting the power when it comes to funding. But seeing local organisations trying to overcome barriers by becoming international organisations themselves seems like the wrong outcome of localisation efforts.

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