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Humanitarian Leader

Through the looking glass: Coloniality and
mirroring in localisation

NAZANIN ZADEH-CUMMINGS



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Abstract

What assumptions underpin the concept of 'localisation' as employed by the mainstream, international humanitarian sector? This paper offers a partial answer to this multi-faceted question. It first considers the meaning(s), or lack thereof, of localisation. It presents coloniality and 'mirroring' as two concepts important to understanding the limitations of localisation. It then considers locally led aid in the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK, or North Korea), using the example of the Eugene Bell Foundation (EBF). The paper argues that assumptions around the actors involved in local response, as well as assumptions around the existence of NGOs and the normative belief that non-state actors could and should play major roles in response, demonstrate the limits of localisation.

Leadership relevance

This paper encourages humanitarian leaders, particularly those based in wealthy, resource-rich, influential countries (often with a history of colonisation), to consider the relationship between coloniality and localisation, and how assumptions around what local contexts look like or how they are structured can limit humanitarian transformation. It informs leadership by adding to the dialogue on localisation.

Introduction

It has been over six years since the 2016 World Humanitarian Summit (WHS) in Istanbul. Efforts to confront the mainstream, Western-based humanitarian sector's status quo and to shift more power to local actors predates the WHS, but the lead-up consultation, the event itself, and its outcomes enshrined 'localisation' as a major aspect of the mainstream humanitarian sector's reform agenda.

In that time, some modest gains have been made, but structures that create and perpetuate inequity, as well as fortify a top-down system, endure. Despite analysis that the COVID-19 pandemic could force the sector into change and herald a new era of locally-led international humanitarian action (Roche and Tarpey, 2020), these hopes have not translated into lasting transformative change. A key outcome of the WHS—the Grand Bargain—laid out commitments by humanitarian agencies and donor states. These included a supposed commitment to channel 25% of funding directly to local actors. In 2020, 4% of funding met this goal and in 2021, only 2% (Metcalf-Hough et al, 2022). Yet the term 'localisation' is everywhere—from humanitarian practice pieces, to blogs, mainstream news stories, press releases, academic articles, and training materials.

What assumptions underpin the concept of 'localisation' as employed by the mainstream, international humanitarian sector? This paper offers only a partial answer to this multi-faceted question. It first considers the meaning(s), or lack thereof, of localisation. It presents coloniality and 'mirroring' as two concepts important to understanding the limitations of localisation. It then considers locally led aid in the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK, or North Korea), using the example of the Eugene Bell Foundation (EBF). The paper argues that assumptions around the actors involved in local response, as well as assumptions around the existence of NGOs and the normative belief that non-state actors could and should play major roles in response, demonstrate the limits of localisation.

I anticipate several potential reactions to this paper as it lands in readers' inboxes, loads on browsers, or otherwise ends up in the hands or on the screens of humanitarians around the world. The first is a slight groan and sigh, as the reader thinks: "Yet another paper about localisation, and yet again it's from a white author sitting behind a desk in a wealthy, coloniser state" (to save readers a Google search, the Centre for Humanitarian Leadership and Deakin University are based in Melbourne, Australia, on the unceded lands of the Wurundjeri people). This is a reaction intimately familiar to me, said white author, because I have—fairly or unfairly—reacted this way myself.

The second reaction I envisage is mild interest and a quick scroll, performed by a reader thinking, "Another paper on localisation—let's see if this one actually has anything interesting to say". I hope not to disappoint this reader, who I also know well because I have had this same reaction to new papers on the topic. But I must also warn them that this is a working paper, small in scope and in the infancy of its ideas, and that I welcome any feedback, critique, and reactions.

Thirdly, I imagine a reader who thinks that because those that hold power are moving at such a glacial pace to reform and change the system, not enough can be written about challenging the status quo. This, too, has been a thought of mine when I see work in this field, even though I sometimes feel as though I've heard the word localisation so many times it has become a meaningless sound.

Finally, I imagine a fourth, non-reader, who is so fed up with the endless chatter on localisation that they don't care to open the paper. I understand this choice, too, particularly when it comes from those who are tired of the talking and just want to see things change.

This paper is my attempt ... to unpack localisation's underlying assumption of the desirability of humanitarian aid led and implemented by non-governmental organisations.

These four reactions—from those that welcome this paper to those that think it is just another voice in a farcical chorus that is all talk, and little action—are far from the only reactions readers will have to this paper. But I present them to say: firstly, that I want to introduce my own positionality as an American writing from Australia in an academic job; secondly, that my intentions with this paper are to consider elements to localisation that I have found frustrating but that I have sometimes struggled to articulate. This paper is my attempt at this articulation, at my beginning to unpack localisation's underlying assumption of the desirability of humanitarian aid led and implemented by non-governmental organisations (NGOs). Any success I have at this attempt is thanks to the work of the skilled writers, thinkers, and practitioners that I cite throughout this paper. I use quotes liberally, largely because many of these writers lay out their arguments and thoughts in wonderful phrasing that warrants full preservation in their retelling.

The next section considers the meaning of localisation, and how coloniality and a series of assumptions that I call 'mirroring' manifest in harmful understandings of

locally led aid. The following section looks at the DPRK as an example where these assumptions are challenged—in particular, the assumption that international humanitarian actors have local counterparts in the form of NGOs that can slot into the international system. A conclusion offers some final remarks. This working paper is, as its form suggests, very much a work-in-progress, and the author invites dissenting views, clarifications, and pieces of wisdom that further or oppose its argument.

Defining localisation (or not!): Coloniality and mirroring

In his report for the 2016 WHS, then UN-Secretary General Ban Ki-moon does not use the term 'localisation' but does urge the humanitarian system to “commit to as local as possible, as international as necessary” (United Nations General Assembly, 2016, p 30). This simple, elegant phrasing is often used to succinctly describe localisation. However, research from my colleagues Kelly et al. (2021) highlights how this framing represents a failure in listening and action, and how the WHS represented a moment of listening rather than a continuing commitment. Additionally, there is not a consensus definition of the concept of localisation, nor of what localisation means in practice. This paper does not have the scope to do a full review of different definitions nor to propose a definition. Others have already done far better at these tasks than I could (see, for example, Robillard et al., 2021, pp. 13-14; Baguios et al., 2021, pp. 8-16; Ayobi et al., 2017). Additionally, and as many have pointed out previously, localisation is not a singular, static concept. It is context-specific, as Ayobi et al. (2017, pp. 13-17) explore through drawings produced in group visioning exercises in the Pacific. The drawings use local objects and symbols to communicate an understanding and vision of localisation—a kalia (canoe) depicts respect for traditional approaches and survival mechanisms in Tonga, while a taxi symbolises community-driven work with support from passengers sitting in the back seat in Australia. Localisation has also come to hold multiple meanings, with the term acting as a “container to hold the many critiques of the marginalisation of the Global South within the international humanitarian response” (Kelly et al., 2021). It is not an end, but a process to the destination of locally-led practice (Baguios et al., 2021).

This paper focuses on two concepts directly from or derived from localisation literature and related literature. The first is coloniality, or the power structures that privilege Euro- and North American- centric ways of knowing, being, and understanding. These structures endure, oppress, and shape. The second I call ‘mirroring’—the limited assumption that local actors are akin to government and NGOs. This assumption also presumes that these actors are structured and act in

ways that neatly slot into the mainstream international humanitarian system.

Coloniality

In their survey of definitions of localisation, Robillard et al. (2021, pp. 13-14) argue four main points: that there are differing definitions; that many actors dislike the term or find it meaningless; that the lack of common concept creates barriers to actually ‘doing’ localisation and to holding those that should be acting accountable; and that some actors are comfortable with differing definitions and wary of semantics getting in the way of meaningful discussion. On the second point about disliking the term, they feature a quote from a retired UN official who said in an interview, “The very term localisation is a neo-colonial term because localisation is drawn from the perspective of outsiders about locals, and how paternalistically we can help them to become the main drivers and local actors” (in Robillard et al., 2021). The power of the paternalistic, outside perspective is illustrated by refrains to ‘strengthen local capacity’ or to ‘capacity build,’ which Jayawickrama (2018) noted is “based on a fallacious assumption that perpetuates the notion that local actors and the affected population do not have the capacity, or the ability, to take control of their lives”.

Coloniality is “an invisible power structure, an epochal condition, and epistemological design, [that] lies at the centre of the present Euro-North American-centric modern world” (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2015). It is “the perpetuation of colonial systems and technologies of domination into the present” (Rutazibwa, 2018). Coloniality can and does continue and evolve long after colonialism. In other words, a people oppressed under a colonial government who gain sovereign rule are not automatically freed from enduring coloniality. This paper understands coloniality as a pervasive force throughout the modern, mainstream humanitarian system. Power is a major component of failures to localise. A 2021 Peace Direct report (p. 14) explains that the dearth of meaningful steps to surrender power to local actors has led to “many activists now [arguing] that localisation has become little more than a technocratic exercise, leading some groups to call for an end to the term being used”.

Humanitarian aid does and can do good, but it is impossible to consider localisation without considering the sector’s ability and propensity to use hegemonic power structures to the detriment of those who fall outside these paradigms and those who actively resist the Eurocentric, North American-centric world. While colonisation tried to change societies, cultures, systems, and environments by force, the mainstream humanitarian system is, by contrast, “built on tenets of care and compassion that are meant to assist, not lead, in rebuilding the lives of affected populations”

(Jayawickrama, 2018). Or, as Baguios titled a 2020 article, “Aid may be inherently racist and colonial, but altruism is not—that’s a cause for hope”. These words do not excuse the humanitarian system, but instead serve as a reminder that humanitarian aid should be an expression of compassion, respect, and care.

Mirroring

In Robillard et al.’s (2021, pp. 15-16) unpacking of the term ‘actor,’ they argue that the word usually refers to governments and to formal, organised NGOs, but that there are many other types of actors that respond to humanitarian emergencies. These include, but are not limited to: non-organised volunteer groups, faith communities, educational institutions, media, and grassroots associations. Robillard et al. (2021, p. 16) posit that the term ‘actors’ usually focuses on governments and NGOs because “it is more challenging for the formalised and professionalised international humanitarian system to identify and work with groups that may have very different structures, values, and priorities”. This suggests the desirability of the local mirroring the international, where local actors, systems, and levels of formalisation neatly reflect and slot into the international, Western-based humanitarian system.

Because current concepts suppose the existence of NGOs in a local context, this assumes that environments ‘worthy’ of localisation should not only have political structures that allow for NGOs but that these NGOs should use the same degree of structure and formalisation that the international system does. In a later section, I consider the case of the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea (DPRK, or North Korea)—a country that does not fit this assumption. The DPRK is in some ways an extreme example, but it is unfortunately not unique for political actors to constrain civil society space. While in the DPRK this means it is impossible for humanitarians to work with local NGO counterparts in the way that NGOs are understood in the international humanitarian system, in other contexts it means that NGO counterparts cannot organise and formalise their work in the way the international system desires and demands. Al-Abdeh and Patel (2019) present the case of Women Now, a women’s organisation working in Syria and neighbouring countries. Even before the conflict in 2011, Syrian government restrictions meant it was virtually impossible for groups focused on women’s rights and/or human rights to register as NGOs. Women Now registered in France in 2012 and has also registered in countries neighbouring Syria. This results in challenges in operating freely in Syria, securing adequate funding for operations, and dealing with donors who impose their own agendas (Al-Abdeh and Patel, 2019).

Current approaches also struggle to adequately imagine the relationships between international humanitarian aid actors and state governments. DuBois (2018) points out that the mainstream sector’s interpretation of localisation as transferring resources to NGOs “largely [circumvents] localisation’s oldest and clearest directive—the primacy of state responsibility”. Mainstream humanitarian actors, he further argues, must reconfigure the way they work with and relate to state governments—and to do so, they must gain a better understanding of governments’ political positions and challenges (DuBois, 2018). Baguios (2021) proposes that localisation shouldn’t be about localising the humanitarian sector, but instead about supporting local solutions by “fertilising the soil of state-led humanitarian solutions”. International NGOs, he argues, must not hide behind calls for principled—meaning neutral and independent—work as an excuse to not engage with governments.

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The Dunantist, or classical, paradigm of aid, is named for Red Cross founder Henri Dunant. In this paradigm, humanitarian crises are exceptional times that create humanitarian needs, for which international humanitarian agencies provide aid guided by the principles of humanity, impartiality, neutrality, and independence (Hilhorst, 2018). These principles are known collectively as the “humanitarian principles”. Dunantist approaches have faced challenges—for example, debate about the humanitarian principles has called for their replacement with new, more fit-for-purpose principles (Clarke and Parris, 2019) and highlighted the linkage between neutrality and white supremacy (Adeso, 2020). However, the paradigm is still powerful, and renders national authorities as ‘invisible’, untrustworthy, and/or as objects that require capacity building (Hilhorst, 2018, p. 4).

Other paradigms don’t necessarily address the issue of relationships with national governments. The resilience paradigm, described by Hilhorst (2018) as one that situates needs within capacities and focuses more on national and local actors supporting active, resilient survivors, works well with neoliberal decentralised governance. This passes responsibility from the state onto non-state and private actors, and—alarming—onto populations surviving crisis themselves (Hilhorst, 2018,

p. 6). A parallel phenomenon can exist in authoritarian contexts, where civil society groups are both tolerated and co-opted by the state to provide services without the threat of challenge to state authority (Teets, 2013).

When I use the term ‘mirroring’ in this paper, it refers to the limited assumptions that a) ‘local actors’ means governments and NGOs, b) NGOs in a context are formalised and organised in ways that align neatly with the mainstream system, and c) neoliberal governance models that pass responsibility onto non-state actors and people surviving crisis are legitimate and desirable. Mirroring rewards states, organisations, and individuals that are able to reflect the mainstream international humanitarian system’s models and ignores or punishes those who do not.

Mirroring rewards states, organisations, and individuals that are able to reflect the mainstream international humanitarian system’s models and ignores or punishes those who do not.

The next section considers humanitarian aid to the DPRK. The DPRK challenges mirroring because of its lack of civil society. Humanitarian organisations have made meaningful impacts and supported locally led work from North Korean government counterparts, though working in an extreme authoritarian context brings clear challenges and limitations to humanitarian support. The section uses the example of the Eugene Bell Foundation (EBF) to show how one NGO worked with government counterparts in health. It also highlights what NGO-local relationships within the restricted environment of the DPRK can teach the mainstream humanitarian sector more broadly.

Localisation and the DPRK

International humanitarian organisations began working in the DPRK in the mid-1990s. The country was experiencing famine, known as the Arduous March. It was also undergoing a political transition as the regime transferred from Kim Il Sung, who ruled from the DPRK’s founding in 1948 until his death in 1994, to his son Kim Jong Il. The regime cited “natural disasters” for the crisis but, while geographic hazards certainly caused issues, the root of the famine was mired in political and economic decision-making. Estimates of famine deaths vary significantly. In a 2001 report to UNICEF, DPRK estimates proclaimed 220,000 excess deaths (Associated Press, 2001). Demographic analysis by Goodkind and West (2001), in contrast, concluded that there were between 600,000 and one million excess deaths from

1995 to 2000. Judith Cheng-Hopkins, then-regional director for Asia with the World Food Programme, described the Arduous March in 1998 as “a famine in slow motion. People cope year after year, and probably a lot drop off. But the totality is very hard to gauge” (quoted in Rosenthal, 1998). Since the post-famine era from the early 2000s, North Koreans have contended with chronic food insecurity as well as weak healthcare systems and widespread human rights abuses.

Delivering humanitarian aid to the DPRK is incredibly challenging, though not without opportunity for meaningful, impactful programming (Banfill et al. 2021). As of writing, the DPRK’s borders have been closed since January 2020, as part of the country’s response to the COVID-19 pandemic. However, even before the pandemic, humanitarians faced difficulties operating within the restrictive authoritarian environment, where movement is controlled, and the Kim regime is the perpetrator of widespread human rights abuses. Contemporary difficulties included navigating complex sanctions regimes (Zadeh-Cummings and Harris, 2020); designing programs that address long-term, systemic needs; low levels of funding; data availability; and finding scope for work that both international organisations and their DPRK counterparts found impactful, feasible, and realistic. Additionally, without an international humanitarian presence inside the country due to the COVID-19 response, the ability to collect data and understand the situation on the ground has been further limited. However, there are fears of a worsening humanitarian situation in the country. Noland’s analysis, published in August 2022, of available evidence related to quantity, price, and satellite imagery led him to conclude that “North Korea is experiencing its worst food crisis since the great famine of the 1990s” (Noland, 2022).

The DPRK is rarely the subject of localisation discussions. There are some special interest groups in the country that claim to be NGOs—for example, the Korean Federation for the Protection of the Disabled (KFPD)¹ describes itself as “the only non-governmental organisation related to the disabled that is approved by the [DPRK] government” (KFPD, n.d.). However, as Hastings et al. (2021) argue, civil society as a space relative to others (e.g., state, markets) that may include an arena for debate and contestation, is limited. State-employed institutions for social organisation “not only serve as tools for surveillance and indoctrination, but also crowd out the emergence of organic civil society networks—the neighbourhood committee, the labor union, the professional association—which form to place demands upon the state, or to address the needs of their members independently of the state” (Hastings et al., 2021). The DPRK is thus a poor candidate for the

¹ The KFPD has had notable and impactful partnerships with humanitarian organisations such as Humanity & Inclusion (formally Handicap International).

type of mirroring dominate forces in the international humanitarian system prefer.

Without a consistent, on-the-ground presence or even the regular, quick channels of communication that much of the world is now accustomed to, [non-Korean] NGOs [in the DPRK] must trust their local partners to implement and lead projects.

However, since the mid-1990s, non-resident, non-Korean NGOs working in the country have demonstrated the power of positive working relationships and trust, as well as the potential for locally led response centring North Korean wellbeing. Without a consistent, on-the-ground presence or even the regular, quick channels of communication that much of the world is now accustomed to, NGOs must trust their local partners to implement and lead projects when international staff are not on-site or in-country. Since international NGOs cannot be a constant presence to force, or lure with the prospect of funding, local partners down routes that the local partners are not truly interested in, successful projects need a mutual belief in their potential to be effective and impactful. This paper considers EBF as an example. EBF began its work in the DPRK in 1996, with food aid during the famine. Two years later, the NGO began supporting North Korean health facilities. Since 2007, EBF has been working to fight multidrug-resistant tuberculosis (MDR-TB) in the DPRK. This involves working with the Ministry of Public Health (MPH) across 12 MDR-TB treatment centres.

What is notable about the EBF's approach, and how does it relate to localisation? First, EBF's entry into MDR-TB work came only after several years of engagement with the DPRK. It was not the case of an international NGO arriving with a pre-formulated plan and merely seeking an implementing partner. A 2018 article quotes a humanitarian regional director in the Middle East as saying, "I see most NGOs, and their main approach seems to be to come with a program in mind, and then find local partners to help implement it" (in Tipper, 2018). This approach is not about true partnership. It instead is one form of what Khan (2021) warns against when she writes, "We do not want your international experts to come and resolve our crisis for us, let alone delay the response". These quotes highlight the deployment of coloniality, where outsiders with access to power and resources determine local courses of action. Such work demotes local actors from leaders and counterparts to contracted service providers.

EBF's model, by contrast, almost flips that approach. Local actors—namely the Ministry of Public Health—approached EBF to help implement programs. In a

2009 newsletter, EBF Chairman Dr Stephen W. Linton explained, "From the beginning of [EBF's] medical work in 1997, when the Vice Chairman of the Ministry of Public Health formerly invited Eugene Bell to provide tuberculosis-related assistance, we have walked 'step-by-step' with our North Korean partners. Perhaps most importantly, each step we have taken has been a step together. From the beginning, we have tried to support, rather than replace, North Korea's hardworking medical caregivers" (EBF, 2009).

Second, before the DPRK closed its borders in January 2020 in response to COVID-19, EBF medical delegations only visited the country biannually. International organisations working in diverse contexts should ask themselves how they would continue programs if the organisations were forced to support partners remotely. If the programs would likely fail, or if the local partners would come to act essentially as sub-contractors, then these organisations need to ask themselves if they have truly fostered partnership, if they are supporting local efforts or if they are imposing priorities, and if they are fully trusting their local counterparts.

This is not to suggest that the EBF or any other international NGO does or should always follow a North Korean government actor's programming ideas. Of course, working with government—or to recall a phrase quoted earlier in the paper, "fertilising the soil of state-led solutions" (Baguios, 2021)—brings its own challenges. This is abundantly clear in a context like the DPRK, where opponents of aid accuse it of propping up the regime. Globally, Roepstorff (2020, p. 292) questions "to what extent local humanitarian actors represent a (national) elite rather than the affected people"—a salient consideration in any context, including the DPRK. But, as Baguios (2021) writes, "given that government actors are not homogenous—with different levels, ministerial/departmental mandates, and approaches—the possibility of working with them in a principled way should not be blankly ruled out". He is writing generally, not about a single specific state, but the sentiment holds true for the DPRK as it does for other contexts.

Conclusion

This paper explored three threads of localisation. First, it looked at coloniality in the context of localisation. Even where formal colonisation has ended, coloniality endures. Next, the paper considered the assumptions of the sector around what it means to be a local actor. It highlighted the assumption that local structures reflect international humanitarian systems, or 'mirroring'. Finally, the paper looked at a case that challenges this assumption. The DPRK does not have civil society organisations in the way that dominant understandings of localisation require, but organisations like EBF have still found ways to engage in ethical, locally led, impactful responses.

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