Pathways to power:
New ways of
deciding and doing
A Symposium
on people-led
development

"Pathways to Power" Podcast Series

Episode 2: Why Localization Matters

Terry: Welcome to 'Pathways to Power' Podcast Episode 2: Why Localization Matters. I'm Terry Gibson, and I've been linking up with people in twos and threes on Skype and in phone calls - conversations have spanned continents, linking people working at the front line of development and humanitarian response with others, who draw alongside them. Episode 1 concluded that localization needs to be more than a buzzword. It's relevance in practice depends on engaging with grassroots situations, which it is intended to improve.

This episode asks: 'why all of this matters?' Is localization just a feeding frenzy about resources and power? Is it about shifting these from one layer of organizations to another - a kind of tug of war between different organizations large and small, all arguing for their unique relevance? Within the echo chamber of aid industry conferences, debates and discussions it can sometimes seem like that. To find out more about why and how localization matters it's worth stepping right out of the echo chamber to hear about aid in action - response and development activities in villages, towns and cities across the world. Does localization help make these activities more effective? Let's listen to people working with local communities far from the conference halls of Geneva and Washington:

Oscar: Particularly on this project we have had reasons to change certain things because of that place of listening, you know, listening to the people. This is what we intend to do, but how do you think we can do it better? Most times you don't have those kind of instances where agencies or organizations do take time to do listening. There is that, that quick, instant, 'we want to seek instant results' but I've seen us go back and forth, back and forth - just because we want to ensure the sustainability of this project even beyond the funding. The communities, as a result of some of the things we've done - the listening, the willingness to allow them to participate - they have come up with the engine to add more value to the project.

Terry: Oscar working in Jos, Nigeria sees the importance of tapping in to community energy, insights and capacity as the basis for sustainable development. Kailash, talking about disaster response in Nepal, also thinks that this has to start with the communities themselves.

Kailash: I mean, the response mechanism is already localized. The first responder is always the next neighbour, we know that. That has been working in Nepal for centuries, so what sort of localization are we exactly talking about? What we need to talk about now, is what needs to be transformed is the structural aid mechanism: the mechanism of recognizing indigenous response systems, the mechanism of linking local responders with the broader, global resource holders.

Terry: Shifting away from treating communities as passive recipients of aid can unlock tremendous potential for change. This is Moyo, who works in rural Zimbabwe:

Moyo: We have seen communities, you know, having what you call economic independence, economic power, where they decide to say 'this is what we want' because they have the resources they are able to do things on their own. They cannot be manipulated by government officials or politicians. As long as people are united and they have got resources, then they become more powerful and they are able to influence the changes and the way of doing things in the local government as well up to a national level.

Terry: Those examples all make the case for community-led development and few are going to argue with that. But what many would say, is 'how can local level activities at such a small scale effect the root causes that lead to the struggles and the vulnerability of many communities?' Doesn't that need larger scale action by bigger organizations? Well, Moyo, in that last clip, hinted that maybe community action can reach wide. He mentioned local government and even national government. Sarwar works in Central Pakistan leading a small NGO and he contrasts their earlier work, which was project-based, with mobilizing people to address root causes with really significant results. By the way, he compares Faisalabad with Manchester because he knows where I live.

Sarwar: We would provide a lot of service delivery to the communities, but gradually we have moved to the accountability side, because there are a number of laws which are not being implemented and the governance is very poor. There's a lot of corruption, so the best way is: we decided that we should organize people and seek out unorganized labour around labour rights. We targeted the minimum wage rates which are announced by government each financial year. They have not been implemented in the past, so we assisted and facilitated the workers to stand up and demand for the minimum wage rates implementation.

In Faisalabad, which is considered Manchester of Pakistan, the third largest city, in as far as the garment and textile industry is concerned, the gap between minimum wage and the actual payment is only now 10% to 12% while in the rest of Pakistan the gap is 20% to 22%. A large number of families are now getting better wages, the poverty has reduced and at least 0.6 million people have benefited from that. We would never be able help the marginalized people at that level if we were working through a traditional NGO model. Of course, no donor is giving money for that kind of activism and it is working much better than before.

Terry: Sarwar is seeing real economic change and progress rooted in citizens claiming their rights, rather than a kind of project, based on service delivery model. The world's growing megacities present a particular challenge and that's no more apparent than in the informal sectors of those cities: areas where people live in slums often with that land rights or registration. And this accounts for over a billion people worldwide. Manu, who works in East Delhi, says that the solutions lie in activities, like institution-building.

Manu: You call them the informal sector and rightly so - these are largely people who have, in our case, people who have moved from rural areas into urban areas. They

are small groups of people, living in urban slums, they don't have access to rights, they don't have a registered ID, and because they don't have these formal mechanisms to be included, they are not able to get the benefits. So the way to work with these kinds of communities is to also find informal ways of community building; of enabling them to find their rights, just like what Sarwar said. Now, the problem is that, it was mentioned before, is that the current model of aid that the INGOs and the international system brings does not have the scope of institutional building, for example, or for informal ways of engagement with the most marginalized because there is no immediate quantifiable change that one can record as output of the investment. So my problem here is then how do I make a proposal for investing my time into these kinds of efforts which are so necessary in bringing them mainstream?

Terry: In East Delhi where Manu works institution-building means often creating institutions - such as local community organizations - where none existed. It means connecting them up with local government, sometimes challenging local government. All of this is to do with creating local cohesiveness, in enabling people to press for the changes that are needed. This kind of work isn't a quick fix, which is why it's difficult to attract support for it. Melvin supports organizations working in areas, like Kibera slum in Nairobi, the largest urban slum in Africa, and he also recognizes the importance of institution building.

Melvin: I'd say that out of the capital outlay that we give communities, at least 55% goes to institutional capacity and institutional development. It's only 45% that goes to the core grants and it's an inverted funnel: we'll start that way, then as you go along then the grants money become more and more - once they were able to receive. As I said, we work with grassroots organizations and you do not want to pour a lot of money in, because that becomes already a distraction in itself.

Sarwar: I believe that it's much more important to engage with people without talking about money. There is a civil society which is being ignored by the NGO sector, which is being ignored by political leadership as well, so I think there is a need to spend some time so that populations of marginalized people could be built up at the district levels - and then you can form a bigger collection at the national level.

Terry: Melvin and then Sarwar have taken us a long way from short-term project responses and an emphasis on money. Clearly long-term sustainable work is important, as is building institutions and services that match the needs of the local context. An obvious question is: 'how can this vision for locally driven development, institution building, and sustainable change be supported by other sectors of the aid industry'? To use another buzzword how can it be 'empowered'?

Rocio: It's about unleashing their power, so it's about kicking off from the very initial assumption that people already have power in themselves. It's just that they haven't been awarded the right mechanisms, or they haven't been put in the right situation to unleash it and to really start exercising it.

Terry: I like Rocio's idea that it's not about empowering people, but helping to unleash their power, the power they have already. She works with Accountable Now, who help INGOs work out how they can be more responsive to local organizations and local communities.

And that's the question we're going to ask in the next episode of this podcast series: if local organizations and local communities have the potential to play a key role in addressing both development and disaster challenges, then what's involved in unleashing that power and how can other elements of the aid industry help?

You'll find the other episodes and much more information including details on all the contributors by Googling "Global Fund for Community Foundations Pathways to Power" where you're also very welcome to contribute your own comments and join in the conversations.

Finally, my thanks go to the contributors to this episode: Oscar, Moyo, Kailash, Sarwar, Manu, Melvin and Rocio.