

Working Paper

A REVIEW OF UNICEF'S APPROACH TO LOCALIZATION IN HUMANITARIAN ACTION

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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The United Nations made its localization agenda a priority 48 years ago, when it issued the call to complement national systems in natural disasters. In UNICEF, the Strategic Plan, 2018–2021, the Core Commitments for Children in Humanitarian Action (2010), Gender equality and the empowerment of women (2010), Guidance on preparedness for emergency response (2016), Civil Society Organizations Procedure (2019) and other policies underscore the need to work closely with local actors. The World Humanitarian Summit and the Grand Bargain commitments emphasized the importance of providing more support and funding tools for local and national responders and to make humanitarian action as local as possible, as international as necessary. Respecting, supporting and strengthening local leadership and capacity in humanitarian action by reinforcing rather than replacing national and local systems are therefore key priorities for UNICEF and all humanitarian organizations.

The objective of the review was to develop a conceptual framework for localization in UNICEF’s humanitarian action, taking stock of UNICEF’s current strategies and practices that enable UNICEF to contribute to the localization agenda in humanitarian action, and to provide recommendations on how UNICEF could further advance its localization commitments. This review focused on a conceptual framework building upon the following seven dimensions of localization:

Partnerships	Participation	Funding	Capacity strengthening	Coordination	Visibility	Policy
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Respectful and equitable • Reciprocal transparency and accountability • Decision-making and not just 'implementing partners' 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Deeper participation of at-risk and affected populations in what relief is provided to them and how (accountability to affected population) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Quality: flexible, long-term, covering core costs, maintaining cash flows • Quantity: at least 25% of funding reaching local actors as directly as possible 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sustainable organisations and collaborative capacities: more effective support for strong and sustainable institutional capacities • Stop undermining capacities 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • National governmental and non-governmental actors have greater presence and influence in coordination mechanisms such as clusters and leading such structures 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Greater public recognition and visibility for the role, effort, contribution, innovation and achievements of local actors 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Local and national actors greater presence and influence in international policy debates; greater accounting of their views and proposals

The review primarily draws on an analysis of UNICEF’s current approach in Lebanon, the Niger and South Sudan, and done through individual interviews and focus-group discussions held with UNICEF staff and local actors – including civil society organizations (CSOs) and government authorities – during country visit. The results were complemented by an online survey targeting 10 additional countries (Afghanistan, Bangladesh, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, India, Indonesia, Myanmar, Nigeria, Pakistan and Ukraine), a desk review of available documents both internal and external to UNICEF and key informant interviews at UNICEF headquarters in New York and Geneva.

Observations and findings

1. **UNICEF has a strong partnership with governments and with national and subnational CSOs, either directly or indirectly through international non-governmental organization (INGOs), and is committed to find ways to work more with national and subnational CSOs and with governments at subnational level.** However, the capacity of UNICEF to establish direct partnerships with local governments and local CSOs at subnational level is dependent upon country dynamics, where the decentralization of government structures and authority/strength of UNICEF field offices and subnational CSOs have a major influence. While local actors acknowledged UNICEF’s role in supporting them, they advocated for a shift in the quality of the relationship, asking to be considered more as ‘decision-making partners’ and less as ‘implementing partners’ or

'subcontractors'. Establishing qualitative and principled partnerships with local actors requires an emotional intelligence competency and interpersonal skills among UNICEF staff. It also needs regular face-to-face interactions and substantial presence in the field for monitoring and capacity strengthening purposes. CSOs called for more decision-making power in the designing, targeting or implementing of programmes, and more flexibility to adapt programmes if required.

2. **Strengthening local actors' capacity is key to localization, especially through alternative modalities such as coaching and mentoring, ideally given priority as part of preparedness strategy.** UNICEF implements a wide range of technical capacity development programmes targeting both CSOs and governments. There is evidence to show that some CSOs became strong humanitarian organizations with excellent emergency sectoral expertise through UNICEF partnerships. Government authorities in Lebanon, the Niger and South Sudan – such as ministries of humanitarian action, national disaster management agencies and technical line authorities acknowledged the role played by UNICEF for them to take lead in emergency response. Investment in local actors' capacity strengthening during preparedness has shown to be more successful than in-crisis capacity strengthening. While UNICEF invests hugely in technical capacity building, there was a general sense that the institutional capacity building part should be prioritized and that capacity building programmes should be implemented through modalities such as coaching and mentoring instead of stand-alone trainings or spot checks.
3. **UNICEF provides substantial funding to national and subnational CSOs and to governments, and CSOs interviewed advocated for further engagement of UNICEF in funding their overhead support costs, providing more opportunities for multi-year partnership modalities and lightening administrative processes.** When several CSOs were interviewed, it became evident that UNICEF was the main funding source, which puts CSO operations at risk in the long run, once UNICEF funding ends. UNICEF's approach towards national/local CSOs emphasize cycles of project-based approaches which, in turn, can confine the CSOs in a rather short-term programming. CSOs called for further engagement with UNICEF in funding their overhead support costs to strengthen their institutional capacity. The 7 per cent of headquarter support costs provided to INGOs and not to national NGOs was perceived as a discriminatory measure. Local actors called for access to the percentage to build their institutional capacity. Programme Cooperation Agreement (PCA) and Programme Document (PD) procedures were generally perceived as relatively heavy for CSOs, especially community-based organizations CBOs with limited capacity. However, the good collaboration and proximity of UNICEF sections/staffs and field offices with partners, in some cases, mitigated the delays in the process and accelerated the PD development time. UNICEF short duration of the PD (often a year) appeared as a major constraint for CSOs. Innovative approaches to long-term multi-year PDs were noted in South Sudan, though no multi-year funding was provided to support them.
4. **Local actors appeared to be involved in Humanitarian Coordination Structures led by UNICEF with a good participation of national NGOs in coordination platforms, showing the need to further support governments to take on full co-leadership.** The inclusion of national NGOs in all Strategic Advisory Groups (SAG) of UNICEF-led (sub) clusters, like in South Sudan, is a good initiative to promote local actors' influence and inclusion in cluster decision-making process. Governments co-lead several clusters/subclusters and still need to be supported to take on full co-leadership, like in the Niger. Local civil society organizations should also be supported to take on cluster co-leadership, where relevant.
5. **The roles, work, risks and contribution of local actors are often made visible or acknowledged in the sampled UNICEF country offices.** Local actors generally face a double constraint: first, they are

not generally visible when they are direct partners of UNICEF – and even less when they are ‘subcontracted’ by an INGO partnering with UNICEF. Developing specific visibility strategies aimed at showcasing the work of local actors in UNICEF communication products and cluster-related products would help advancing localization. Local actors themselves should try to be more proactive in communicating about their achievements.

6. **There was a general sense that national and subnational CSOs wield little influence on UNICEF and governmental policies and plans as well as on international policy debates on humanitarian action.** In regards to programme design and implementation, national and subnational CSOs appeared to not often have influence on UNICEF and government humanitarian action priorities locally. Better institutionalizing of a localization agenda into global, regional and country office strategies is recommended to address the influence imbalance.
7. **While UNICEF is implementing several interesting initiatives within its AAP framework, there is a need to strengthen community engagement and accountability mechanisms.** Systematically engaging communities in a meaningful way increases resilience among the populations at risk of or affected by crisis, and represents one of the main purposes of localization. Actively and proactively involving the intended beneficiaries into UNICEF and its partners’ decision-making processes is crucial but remains challenging for UNICEF, especially in emergencies where the capacities of affected local communities can easily be overlooked.

Recommendations

For UNICEF

1. **Prioritize and scale up institutional capacity building component** to enable local actors to move from short-term project-based approach to long-term sustainability by building up capacity such as finance, logistics, administration, fundraising and reporting.
2. **Shift UNICEF capacity strengthening model** to focus more on coaching, mentoring and secondment of key staff to local actors instead of focusing on stand-alone trainings, and develop appropriate guidance to support UNICEF regional and country offices in that regard.
3. **Allocate more funds to national and subnational CSOs to cover their overhead/support costs** in order to strengthen their institutional capacity. Providing in that sense an additional per cent of the total Programme Document budget (similarly to what UNICEF is already providing to INGOs to cover their headquarter support costs) would be helpful.
4. **Shift from heavy administrative procedures** towards lighter administrative processes to reduce access barriers for national/subnational CSOs (quicker PDs) and minimize their cash-flow related risks (quicker cash disbursements).
5. **Focus UNICEF preparedness strategy at regional and country levels on investing in pre-crisis capacity strengthening** of local actors
6. **Provide more authority and capacities to UNICEF field offices** to engage in partnership processes with local actors and to strengthen field monitoring, supervision and coaching of local actors in their respective geographical areas
7. **Scale up the development of multi-year Programme Documents** ideally along with multi-year funding to enable for a longer-term and more strategic partnership with CSOs and better humanitarian-development linkages. Where long-term funding is not available, UNICEF should develop and encourage multi-year partnership models that focus on non-financial commitments (such as ongoing technical support and joint monitoring).

8. **Develop a global localization policy/strategy and localization strategies in regional/country offices.** This will enable UNICEF to better institutionalize localization, setting benchmarks, monitoring and documenting its advancement on localization.
9. **Raise awareness and sensitize UNICEF staff on the principles of partnership,** especially in relation with local actors.

For donors:

10. **Adapt funding modalities** by providing more multi-year funding and ensuring grant flexibility with the possibility to further support institutional capacity strengthening; and incentivize collaborative and principled partnership approaches, rather than subgranting.