NGO Coordination Structures and the Localization Debate

Recommendations paper

InterAction

About InterAction

InterAction is a convener, thought leader, and voice for nearly 200 NGOs working to eliminate extreme poverty, strengthen human rights and citizen participation, safeguard a sustainable planet, promote peace, and ensure dignity for all people.

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Introduction, Scope of Research, and Methodology

NGO fora play a critical role in strengthening local and national civil society and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in the countries they operate, regardless of their membership makeup. Both fora with only international NGO (INGO) and fora with both INGO and local and national NGO (LNNGO) members fundamentally change the humanitarian response ecosystem. As the fifth year of the Grand Bargain continues beside other global-level localization pushes, there is increased expectation for NGO fora to take a more proactive role in working with civil society actors and promoting the localization workstream. The authors of this paper undertook a desk review and thirteen key informant (K.I.) interviews with NGO coordination staff and experts, investigating where normative views drive these expectations and how they can better consider the diversity of the contexts in which NGO fora are operating.

This paper presents an overview of the localization discussions, including some of the main contextual factors that influence NGO fora's ability to contribute to localization workstreams' progress. It also takes a more in-depth look at interactions between actors—internal and external—within NGO coordination structures. Throughout, lessons learned and good practices of NGO fora's current support of local and national NGO are included. Annexed to the paper are additional tools aimed at NGO forum secretariat staff, including a list of specific recommendations per type of forum, a checklist for INGO fora considering opening up membership, and talking points to modify by context and share with key stakeholders.

Thirteen people were interviewed for this recommendation paper. The interviews included discussions with forum directors and coordinators (heretofore both positions are shorthanded to "forum directors"); advocacy and partnership staff of 10 country NGO fora; one representative of a regional NGO coordination forum; one from a sister global NGO coordination forum; and one independent expert.

Topline recommendations

To NGO coordination structures:

▶ Ensure all changes to forum governance and membership criteria are undertaken consciously and carefully, reflecting upon criteria in a way that ensures both current members and potential new members will receive the services and support they need from the forum.

▶ Invest in information and knowledge management. In every context, there are high expectations for NGO coordination structures to contribute to localization. With a two-year average turnover of forum directors, the recording of the rationale behind the forum governance design is critical to ensure continuity of understanding.

▶ Organize recurring spaces for dialogue with LNNGO actors, in which uncomfortable but important discussions on power dynamics can occur.

▶ Ensure that aspects of partnership management are a part of every secretariat member's job description.

▶ Engage regularly with INGO members who have a specific localization mandate. Encourage mainstreaming of localization approaches.

To donors:

▶ While supporting large INGO and mixed membership fora, increase funding for local and national coordination structures where relevant.

▶ Support NGO fora to ensure that they only undertake massive membership criteria changes upon in-depth reflection, thoroughly reviewing the context and their capacities.

Lastly, to the overarching humanitarian system:

▶ Global engagement on localization is important, but these should not remain normative and should include local voices.

▶ If a second Grand Bargain is adopted, this should be driven bottom-up and include LNNGO coordination representatives with a clear framework for their engagement.

▶ More effort must be undertaken at both a country and global level to ensure that existing humanitarian coordination mechanisms are inclusive to local actors. For example, adopting quotas and adapting existing coordination mechanisms to create a more enabling environment is necessary.

▶ Before setting up any new NGO coordination structures, assess the full and map existing structures and actors. These should be collective exercises and must ensure the participation of LNNGO actors.

Overview of the Global Localization Framework

The concept of "localization" is not new, as several initiatives for over two decades have been calling for localizing aid (through funding, partnerships, or other means) or ensuring more "local ownership."[1] However, the Agenda for Humanity and the World Humanitarian Summit (WHS) in 2016 had outcomes that reflected the need to work more specifically on this topic and speed up localization. Examples include the Grand Bargain, the Charter for Change, and the Network for Empowered Aid Response (NEAR), which was created and launched during WHS 2016. Since then, several initiatives have been created or strengthened that focus on progressing humanitarian aid's localization.

Global Localization Initiatives

With "More support and funding tools to local and national responders," as well as a specific workstream on localization, the Grand Bargain's second commitment has become an essential framework for discussing the localization agenda. The commitment to "Support and complement national coordination mechanisms where they exist and include local and national responders in international coordination mechanisms as appropriate and in keeping with humanitarian principles" is especially relevant for NGO fora structures. There are questions on how tangible progress against the Grand Bargain commitments is in countries most affected by humanitarian crises. One challenge is that the Grand Bargain has remained very normative, with mainly northern organizations leading discussions and with limited space for civil society organizations (CSOs) from southern countries to participate. The overly bureaucratized character of the Grand Bargain and the lack of ownership at country-levels—often due to no roadmaps for implementation—have limited the results.[2] For some specific commitments, however, targets have been achieved. For example, direct funding to national and local organizations has continued to increase over the years (although work still needs to be done on funding quality, according to some interlocutors). Other commitments, such as the inclusion of local actors in coordination mechanisms, are harder to assess.

According to an OCHA-prepared note which reviewed IASC coordination structures at the country level in 2019, in 26 operations where HCT structures were operational, LNNGOs were present at 22 HCTs.[3] They had overall 7% of the seats, compared to 25% by INGOs and NGO consortia (represented by the director). Some directors interviewed for this paper mentioned that LNNGOs often could

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1   The "Nairobi Joint Statement" of a collection of civil society groups of previous South Sudan in 1993, for example, called for more direct funding to local organizations. The Red Cross/Red Crescent Code of Conduct in 1994 presented the question of capacity building of local actors as a principle. The Humanitarian Charter, which set the foundation for the Sphere Standards in 1997, already included mentions to this approach, as well as the Core Humanitarian Standard on Quality and Accountability, the Charter for Change in 2014 and the Principles of Partnership which were endorsed by the Global Humanitarian Platform in 2007.

2   Spencer, A., Willitts-King, B., Metcalfe-Hough, V., & Fenton, W. (2020, June). *Grand Bargain annual independent report 2020*. ODI. **https://www.odi.org/sites/odi.org.uk/files/resource-documents/gb_2020_full_report_web.pdf**; and Metcalfe-Hough, V., Fenton, W., & Poole, L. (2019, June). *Grand Bargain annual independent report 2019*. ODI. **https://www.odi.org/sites/odi.org.uk/files/resource-documents/12734.pdf**.

3   Inter-Agency Support Branch (IASB), Coordination Division. (2020, March). *Note on IASC coordination structures at country level*. OCHA. **https://ngocoordination.org/system/files/documents/resources/note-on-coordination-structures-2019-final_for-dissemination.pdf**.

not fully participate in the HCT or cluster/sector coordination meetings. Challenges include language barriers, unclear benefits of coordination structures, legitimacy concerns, and agenda topics focused on international players. The IASC noted that at the national cluster/sector meetings, only 55% reported using an official or local language of the country of operation.

Defining "Localization" and "Local Actors"

There is a lack of a globally agreed-upon definition of localization and different understandings of what makes an actor "local."[4] While the Grand Bargain has defined localization as "making principled humanitarian action as local as possible and as international as necessary," it is debated what localization practically looks like. Some argue the term itself is a problem, and alternative terms have been suggested (local humanitarian action, complementarity, decentralization, etc.) Some authors contend that discussions around localization without a shared definition have led, in some cases, to increased tensions and polarization, where authorities have seized the localization discussions to politicize aid.[5]

Most definitions do agree that the localization workstream identifies funding, partnerships, and coordination as its core aspects. Other critical elements include participation, visibility, and "capacity" (in terms of organizational, operational, and coordination capacities), specifically, the ability to influence policy.[6]

Simultaneously, there can be confusion around the distinction of actors, be they "international" (operating in multiple countries), "national" (operating across a whole country), or "local" (operating in one community or location in a country). Different dynamics impact these types of actors differently.[7] This can also lead to legitimacy questions. Some INGOs structured as alliances or operating similarly to confederations might be legally registered as national NGOs in certain contexts.[8] Indeed, NGO coordination fora—even those with INGO only membership—can be registered as local NGOs if that is what makes the most sense under local law. Other INGOs can be based in the global south and might argue to be considered a national NGO when in their country of origin.

4   Kristina Roepstorff (2020), A call for critical reflection on the localisation agenda in humanitarian action, Third World Quarterly, 41:2, 284-301, DOI: **10.1080/01436597.2019.1644160**; and Roepstorff, K. (2020, May). *Localisation and shrinking civic space: Tying up the loose ends*. Centre for Humanitarian Action. **https://www.chaberlin.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/2020-05-publication-localisation-shrinking-civic-space-roepstorff-en.pdf**; ICVA & Humanitarian Leadership Academy. (2019, October). Unpacking Localization.
5   UNHCR & UNDP. (2019, February). *Localised resilience in action: Responding to the regional Syria crisis*. **https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/Localised%20resilience%20in%20action_final.pdf**; and Barbelet, V. (2019, October). *Rethinking capacity and complementarity for a more local humanitarian action*. ODI.
6   Van Brabant, K., & Patel, S. (2018, June). *Localisation in practice: Emerging indicators and practical recommendations*. DFID-funded Disasters Emergencies Preparedness Programme (DEPP) Learning Project. **https://www.alnap.org/system/files/content/resource/files/main/Localisation-In-Practice-Full-Report-v4.pdf**.
7   Ibid.
8   de Geoffroy, V., Grunewald, F., & Chéilleachair, R. N. (2017, May). *More than the money – Localisation in practice*. Trócaire and Group URD. **https://www.urd.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/05/More_than_the_money_Trocaire_Groupe_URD_Trocaire_2017.pdf**.

The focus of this paper is on aspects of coordination and, in parallel, policy influencing. Because of the matter's complexity, we use the term INGO to cover NGOs who work with multiple LNNGOs to cover multiple types of actors.

Adherence to Humanitarian Principles

Another point of debate that is unavoidable when discussing localization in humanitarian action is local actors' adherence to humanitarian principles. Clearly, as with INGOs, the commitment to principles differs between actors and is differently defined. Some authors believe local actors—due to their ties to the population in the affected areas and the political and financial pressures they are confronted with in the local context—face more challenges in upholding the principles of impartiality and, in some cases, neutrality, often unintended.[9] Others have strongly criticized that point of view as a "colonial" way of thinking—there have been calls to rethink the interpretation of humanitarian principles according to the context ("localizing" humanitarian principles).[10] The type of crisis greatly influences this debate, however, as these questions are less prominent in emergency relief operations in disaster-affected areas, where local actors are more swiftly able to deliver principled aid, compared to contexts with ongoing conflicts, where political and legal risks and pressures can be more acutely felt.

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9   Schenkenberg, E. (2016, November). *The challenges of localised humanitarian aid in armed conflict*. Médecins Sans Frontières. **https://www.alnap.org/system/files/content/resource/files/main/msf-egs03-the-challenges-of-localised-humanitarian-aid-in-armed-conflict-.pdf**.

10   Christian Aid, CARE, Tearfund, ActionAid, CAFOD, & Oxfam. (2019, February). *Accelerating localization through partnership*. ECHO. **https://www.christianaid.org.uk/sites/default/files/2019-02/Accelerating-localisation-research-summary-global.pdf**.

NGO Coordination Bodies' Role in Pushing the Localization Agenda

Several contextual factors influence how NGO fora operate and are structured. From interviews with K.I.s, it is clear that the coordination set-ups are shaped both by the system they operate in and, more precisely, the political and legal space and humanitarian architecture in place and the NGO members' priorities.

Based on the thirteen interviews conducted in October and November of 2020, there is a full consensus that NGO fora have an essential role in the localization agenda and strengthening local civil societies. Yet, according to twelve out of the thirteen K.I.s, creating mixed membership fora or opening up only INGO fora to local and national actors might not be the most appropriate way to do this. This was nuanced, as directors stressed it is highly contextual, and a "do no harm" lens is necessary when considering opening up membership. The reasoning differed as well, but two main two arguments which were mostly named:

1. **Mixed membership NGO fora's ability to prioritize advocacy for principled humanitarian action.**
   LNNGOs can be under different—and legitimate—legal, political, social, and financial pressures than their INGO counterparts. The majority of K.I.s believed that the impartiality and neutrality principles could be more difficult for LNNGOs to uphold in some contexts. However, one K.I. pointed out that INGOs may partner more closely with local governments and may want to temper advocacy to maintain relationships and access.

2. **The (operational) risks to the functioning of the forum when diversifying membership criteria.**
   Opening up membership to LNNGOs requires substantially more resources for a Secretariat, both in terms of financial support and Human Resources, to ensure that the NGO coordination units can continue delivering the appropriate services to an increased number of members with an increased variety of needs.

Although it may seem surprising that some of the directors of mixed membership fora also expressed this point of view, they explained that it is crucial to assess some contextual factors before deciding to open up INGO fora to LNNGOs.

As one K.I. said, "If you sense that opening up membership could mean that the coordination structure will implode, does it make sense to do it? It is better to keep a not so perfect coordination body functioning that can complement and partner with local actors than to push for a bigger structure which might make it impossible to continue doing the work and could lead to a major gap in coordination for NGOs."

Ten out of the 13 K.I.s thought that opening up membership of INGO-only fora to LNNGOs could make sense over time if some contextual factors align. They argued that rushing this process could have negative consequences in the long term. A potential ultimate goal could be for INGOs to join an LNNGO-only forum, thus engaging with civil society as it stands in a given context rather than continuing to pump resources into a parallel structure even as an immediate emergency subsides and some humanitarian NGOs leave a context.

Structural and Contextual Factors Influencing NGO Fora's Structure and Role

Multiple factors influence how an NGO forum is set up (either only INGO or mixed membership) and their role and engagement in the localization debate. Based on the desk research and interviews conducted, we can summarize three dominant contextual factors affecting NGO fora.

1. **Political landscape and ownership by authorities.**
   Whether at the national, sub-regional, or local level, the government's role can define how the NGO coordination fora are shaped and the space they have to interact with LNNGOs and civil society actors at large. More specifically:

   ▶ **The political landscape.** In some countries, the ruling party might not be the one that is recognized as legitimate by LNNGOs and civil society (as in Syria, for example). When political leadership is fragile, contested, or absent, it can be challenging to identify with which political actors to interact with and how the ruling party perceives this. This adds another layer of complexity for all actors involved in humanitarian responses. The ruling leaders' priorities and strategies can significantly shape how open the country is for international aid assistance and civic space actions. As a growing number of conflict-affected countries emphasize their "sovereignty," civic and humanitarian spaces are quickly shrinking.

   ▶ **The leadership and engagement of the government(s) in crisis management.** Throughout the regions, there were strong differences between how authorities engage in coordination mechanisms and assume leadership of the responses. In Asia, for example, in Myanmar and Bangladesh, the government has been active in leading responses. In other countries like the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) and Colombia, state authorities' increased willingness to take leadership of coordination has, according to K.I.s, resulted in a reduction of civic space and the politicization of aid, which affects both INGOs and LNNGOs. Therefore, the modalities and political motivations to assume stronger leadership can also have adverse effects. This is an additional challenge as, overall, there is an agreement that authorities' leadership is also a factor in progressing—or slowing the progress of—the localization agenda.

   ▶ **The legal frameworks for NGOs and CSOs.** Political priorities are often reflected in countries' legal frameworks and define the civic and operational space for civil society and NGOs and, to a greater extent, the possible interactions and partnerships models between INGOs and LNNGOs. Most countries count on NGO laws, which define the role, field of activities, and operational factors, and in some contexts, there are distinctive regulations for INGOs and LNNGOs. In some cases, the absence of a legal framework for NGOs can be an impediment for their role and activities, such as in Syria. In other countries, such as Bangladesh, the legal frameworks for NGOs can have catalyzing effects on localization. At other times, a legal framework that is disadvantageous to LNNGOs—that shrinks, rather than supports, civic space—may dissuade INGOs from joining a joint coordination structure.

2. **The civil society landscape and NGOs' previous practical experience with emergency relief.**
   In contexts where a culture of freedom for civil society existed for decades, the landscape is often marked by a great number and diverse types of organizations operating long-term in the countries. In countries that were more recently affected by a humanitarian crisis or an intensification of crises, a proliferation of new NGOs and CSOs has been noticed (for example, in Jordan and Lebanon, related to the Syrian regional crisis) or an important influx of INGOs and international actors—such as in Bangladesh and Mali. This often strongly defines the relationships between the actors and the types of partnerships that have been established. In contexts where humanitarian crises have been ongoing for several years, INGOs tend to build longer-term partnerships. In sudden-onset crises, a minority of INGOs have been able to build these relationships.

3. **The type of crisis and existing humanitarian architecture.**
   A large-scale, sudden onset, protracted, or recurrent crisis, as well as the type of conflicts and levels of insecurity, are factors that strongly influence the needs for coordination and the set-up of coordination bodies, as well as how these bodies fit in existing or newly created humanitarian architectures. The types of crises also impact the density of international presence, the preparedness of the national and local actors for emergency response, and the security situation and humanitarian access of responders. The type and length of one predominant crisis also impact how many alliances or networks exist already in a country. In Colombia, which was for decades affected by violent conflicts in some regions that created a wide-scale protection crisis, several networks or alliances of human rights defenders exist. On the other hand, in Bangladesh, with extensive Disaster Risk Reduction (DRR) experience, CSO networks existed prior to the Rohingya crisis. The role of other international actors and the overall humanitarian architecture set-up (centralized/decentralized) can also shape the extent to which an NGO forum can, or cannot, engage in the localization discussions. For example, within the humanitarian architecture, localization working groups have been created in Bangladesh and Myanmar. Localization roadmaps have been adopted, such as in South-Sudan. Although NGO fora do not have operational activities in most cases, there are exceptions that are context-specific, which also influences their ability to work with local actors.

Other contextual factors also influence how NGO fora operate, of which some commonly named were: the geographic area (the size of the country, which can lead to legitimacy and identity discussions), cultural diversity (for example, the number of languages spoken in a country and socio-cultural identities), and existing infrastructure which define the type of coordination (in terms of transport and information and communication technologies). In large countries, more decentralized coordination structures are necessary, and the ability to communicate and coordinate over the internet or telephone networks can influence the functioning of coordination structures.

In addition to the contextual factors in which NGO coordination structures are created, the set-up can also influence how much and how INGOs can interact with local actors. Some aspects are related to:

1. **The size of the fora.**
   The smallest NGO forum or coordination group interviewed had 17 members, while the largest had hundreds of members. The support services needed to deliver services to smaller or larger groups of members will vary significantly, and secretariats are staffed with between one full-time dedicated person to teams of over 30 people.

2. **The funding of the NGO coordination structures and financial set-up.**
    In some contexts, NGO fora benefit from a diversity of funding, while in others, the membership fees of NGOs are the only source of income. The financial budgets vary from $US100,000 per year for smaller fora to more than $3 million for larger fora. All mixed membership NGO fora with membership fees applied different rates for INGOs and LNNGOs.

3. **The governance structures and level of engagement of members.**
    As NGO fora should reflect their member's priorities and activities, the engagement of members and elected Steering Committee members shapes the fora's priorities and successes. One director mentioned that the seniority level of the Heads of Mission of INGOs can influence quite a lot the forum's strategic priorities, especially on topics such as localization.

How NGO Fora Currently Work with INGOs and LNNGOs

The interviews conducted with fora showed that there are several aspects of INGO-LNNGO relations that are common to both types of fora. Many, including the INGO-only fora, are already working closely with civil society and local actors.

Common Challenges and Lessons Learned On INGO-LNNGO Relationships and Coordination

Although the two types of NGO coordination structures have benefits and challenges within their contexts, the following elements emerged in all interviews.

▶ **The political context and leadership on the coordination of the government strongly influence how INGOs and LNNGOs interact.** In places where there has historically been greater government leadership, LNNGOs advocate more strongly for localization and are not always willing to interact too closely with INGOs to maintain their independence. In other contexts, where there are extreme—and similar—restrictions on LNNGOs and INGOs have more freedom, such as in some areas of Syria, and interactions tend to be around shared challenges and can be more positive. A modified political context can also create a change in dynamics between the type of actors, as was the case in DRC and Mali, where a regime change politicized more strongly actors with whom INGO fora had built relationships, but due to stronger political positionings of the leaders of LNNGOs in favor or contrary to the new regimes, led some NGO fora directors to take more distance.

▶ **The extent to which NGO fora can or cannot work on enforcing the localization agenda is strongly marked by the humanitarian architecture and the role that some actors, such as OCHA or UNDP, are already taking.** In some countries, localization task forces or working groups have been set up, such as in Bangladesh. In some responses, due to the political complexities in the different regions, which create challenges for the U.N. coordination to operate, a forum may take up a much more operational coordination role than is typical.

▶ **The aspect of capacity of LNNGOs came up in all interviews.** All K.I.s recognized that each type of actor has a specific set of skills and competencies. Still, within the current humanitarian system, LNNGOs were considered to be more often in need of system strengthening support—at least in terms of interacting with the bureaucratic global humanitarian system and western donors. All directors expressed a willingness to work on capacity exchange with LNNGO partners and that this could become part of their role (if this was not the case yet). However, this requires additional capacity for the secretariats. Four out of the five INGO fora had recently added or are in the process of hiring staff who could work on partnerships, liaison with civil society actors and LNNGOs, and act as national NGO focal points.

▶ **The issues of trust and power dynamics were also predominant in the discussions among the INGO only and mixed membership fora directors.** There is a mutual lack of trust between INGOs and LNNGOs, often, according to K.I.s, more strongly expressed by the INGOs, which is difficult to overcome in emergency settings. The type of partnerships between INGOs and LNNGOs

members, especially when they are still in the line of sub-contracting, can also translate into more apprehension from LNNGOs to participate and speak up in coordination meetings.

▶ **The duration of a humanitarian crisis also influences how localization grows as a priority.** In protracted crises and contexts where early-recovery activities start to take more importance, there can be more external pressure on NGO fora to work on localization or strengthen ties with LNNGOs fora. Amid COVID-19-related travel restrictions, national staff have stepped into leadership roles. This nationalization of leadership positions in INGOs may easily continue beyond the pandemic.

▶ **Language is a crucial factor that can enable or discourage LNNGOs from participating or engaging with INGO only fora.** Beyond just vocabulary, NGO directors' ability to adapt to the conversational and decision-making norms of the country in which they are operating can also impact how successful interactions can happen.

▶ **In some countries, the COVID-19 crisis and corresponding need to work online have reportedly created more opportunities to strengthen LNNGO fora ties.** In others, local actors do not have sufficient access to technology, which has created an additional barrier for improved coordination.

▶ **Most countries in which the K.I.s work already had existing NGO platforms, alliances, or networks, but the onset of a humanitarian crisis or the intensification of a situation translated into additional coordination needs for international actors.** This often resulted in changes in funding situations, with more international humanitarian actors benefiting from locally-raised funding. Often, amid an impression that this reduced funding that was previously allocated to both LNNGOs and all development actors, frustrations often arise. This was also an important aspect when the type of funding starts to shift into stabilization funding.

▶ **Strong information management and information sharing policies are important to ensure ownership of all types of forum actors.**

▶ **Principled humanitarian action becomes more challenging to define and promote when there are multiple types of actors in a conversation (not exclusively LNNGOs, but also development or stabilization actors).** Several K.I.s expressed the concern that adding LNNGOs to INGO-only fora could add another layer of complexity to the fundamental commitment to promote humanitarian principles. However, according to three directors, there is a mandate to interrogate how the understanding of humanitarian principles needs to evolve in complex and dynamic contexts. NGO fora—especially those with a diverse membership—can be a space for these reflections.

Mixed Membership Fora

Of the 11 fora represented by the K.I.s, five are mixed membership. They are of variant sizes, composed of less than two dozen to hundreds of members. Their profiles and structures are influenced by the type and length of the humanitarian crisis, the degree of civic freedom in the country, and the number of NGOs operating in the humanitarian responses. Two of the fora have existed for more than a decade and a half—the Iraq forum, NCCI, was founded in 2003, and the South Sudan forum in 1996. Three have been formalized within the last five years—Cox's Bazar in 2018, North Eastern Syria (NES) in 2016 and the Partnership Coordination Group (PCG) in 2015. Two were initially INGO-only and expanded their

membership, while three started as mixed membership fora. The duration of existence influences quite a lot on how the internal structures work, as both NCCI and South Sudan explained that some trials and errors marked the way to today's structures and that those were key moments in their history. All are operating in contexts where humanitarian needs continue to be high. Except one, they all mentioned that early-recovery discussions are becoming more important, which has influenced the way the expectations towards the forum have changed.

According to the directors interviewed, some of the benefits of a mixed membership forum structure are:

▶ Greater legitimacy when talking to external actors (governments, the U.N., donors), as they also represent local voices.

▶ Internal spaces for dialogue are created between INGOs and LNNGOs, which offers opportunities for experience exchanges, streamlined external messaging, and platforms to reconcile different views and approaches. LNNGOs often bring historical elements and in-depth contextual analysis to discussions, while INGOs often bring experiences from other contexts and connect more regional and international opportunities. If organized and capitalized upon, this has a strong advantage in influencing policy compared to other actors.

▶ In very restrictive contexts where operational space for LNNGOs is very limited or non-existent, a coordinated partnership approach can contribute to elevating their voices when LNNGOs cannot do it directly due to the risks.

▶ External stakeholders, including donors and U.N. agencies, can get in touch with local actors through the fora, creating opportunities to strengthen their voices at the regional and international levels.

▶ Mixed membership fora can advocate directly and from a more legitimate position for more opportunities for LNNGOs to participate in decision-making coordination mechanisms or at high-level events.

Some important lessons learned of mixed membership fora include:

▶ According to our K.I.s, there is often a discrepancy in LNNGOs members' expectations of what fora can do for them. Multiple directors mentioned a need for greater outreach from the Secretariat toward LNNGOs, specifically members, to ensure their understanding of what concrete benefits they can receive from becoming an active, contributing member. It is important to note that three of the 11 directors interviewed mentioned that this challenge also exists with INGO country directors and external stakeholders—but they are more likely to have previous experience with country-level humanitarian responses and the broader humanitarian infrastructure.

▶ Expanding fora to include more LNNGOs or other types of actors, such as INGOs working on development and peacebuilding matters, means bringing in organizations with more diverse activities and mandates, translating into increased polarization and politicization of discussions on humanitarian action. In contexts where early-recovery debates are starting to take more space and development, and peacebuilding INGOs and LNNGOs join, advocating for humanitarian principles can become more difficult to prioritize. When more diverse actors join the fora, there are increased

expectations for the fora to engage in other matters related to human rights, early recovery, and peacebuilding. This makes focusing on principled actions a greater challenge. Specifically, for LNNGOs, it can be more complex to advocate publicly for the respect of humanitarian principles due to the political and financial pressures they can occur, and the advocacy of INGOs can pose increased risks when they are associated with them through a forum.

▶ K.I.s from mixed-membership fora expressed challenges with the amount of engagement of LNNGOs with forum activities. They cited theories, including the differences in priorities between INGOs and LNNGOs (such as on issues with visas and access), the power dynamics between the types of actors, and communication-related barriers. However, this challenge may also be a hallmark of all medium and large INGO fora. The larger a forum is, even with INGO-only membership, the greater the diversity of member needs and the more challenging it can be to achieve robust member engagement at all levels.

INGO Fora

Five out of the ten country fora reviewed are INGO-only fora. Most have formalized their existence in the last decade—Lebanon Humanitarian INGO forum (LHIF) in 2012, Myanmar in 2014, the DRC in 2015, Colombia in 2018, and Mali in 2018. In Mali, the fora is officially a "Humanitarian Working Group" (HWG), which sits within a longer-existing (but voluntary) INGO forum. However, it functions as an independent NGO coordination body, with the only full-time paid director within the overall forum leading the HWG. In Myanmar, the forum used to be mixed-membership, but split. Following the split, some historical donors of the forum only funded the INGO-only forum. Except for the DRC, which has a complexity of ongoing humanitarian crises above a protracted crisis, the other fora were formalized in the wake of a sudden-onset crisis or due to specific humanitarian coordination needs.

Fora are often supported by humanitarian donors with expectations that they are funding robust advocacy activities promoting principled humanitarian action. Meeting these expectations can sometimes be difficult when fora have within their ranks a wide diversity of fora members with divergent views, challenges, and needs. Both Myanmar and the DRC have a majority of "hybrid" NGOs (who work on several areas) or development and peacebuilding actors and often include organizations working on human rights or other areas related to socio-economic rights.

Some lessons learned were:

▶ The focus on localization is highly dependent on the individual members' priorities. In two countries, there is an internal push from members to strengthen relationships with NGO fora or include LNNGOs in the current coordination mechanism, allowing them to define localization or partnerships as strategic priorities. In three other countries, the directors mentioned that this was not explicitly a priority for the INGO Heads of Mission (HoM) and that the Secretariats took upon the role more proactively to work on the partnerships.

▶ In some INGO-only fora, the divide between development, peacebuilding, and humanitarian NGO members can complicate work on localization. This is partly related to the lack of definition of what localization is and the different interpretations by humanitarian and other actors. As some development and peacebuilding actors have longer-term relationships with local partners, they do not always see the importance of an NGO forum Secretariat to dedicate collective time to working

on localization. In one case, there was even a mention that some members with a mandate to strengthen civil society could see the work that INGO fora could do on localization as "competition."

▶ Building a relationship with LNNGO fora requires capacity, and there is the need to have dedicated staff to work on this relationship building. Although in some contexts INGO fora produce mappings of national and local actors, this requires a dedicated capacity and needs to be conducted in a transparent and participatory way to ensure it is not perceived as an exercise driven by a Western perspective. One director also questioned whether the INGO fora should be doing such mapping at all.

▶ The cultural and linguistic diversity in some countries makes engaging with LNNGOs challenging. For example, in the DRC, which has over 35 official spoken languages, the work culture between NGOs based in the Eastern areas is very different from that of the Western areas. Working meaningfully to reduce the language barriers requires considering at least three languages (more if there is a need to work at more localized levels).

▶ In some contexts, LNNGOs have said that they do not want to join INGO-only fora due to concerns about impartiality. Some have reported seeing these types of fora as competition for their own coordination structures.

Conclusion

Considering that the International Federation of the Red Cross' (IFRC's) definition of localization's objective is "improved humanitarian response," and that this is also the aim of NGO coordination structures, it is important to review how NGO fora in their current form are contributing to the localization movement and how they can increase the impact of their work.[11]

The increased expectations of donors, individual agencies, and others on NGO fora is understandable. As NGO fora are mechanisms that operate in a larger system that has adopted the localization agenda and Principles of Partnerships, they do have a role in supporting localization pathways. Better coordination among NGOs can undoubtedly enable principled responses and positively impact INGO/LNNGO relationships, and, with work, reduce harmful power differentials. Of course, this responsibility cannot be held by NGO fora alone—it is shared across all players in humanitarian response.

Increasingly, many NGO fora need to respond to non-humanitarian coordination needs. NGO fora membership more and more often spans the nexus, increasing the tension on principled humanitarian action and a forum's ability to achieve member-wide consensus. When LNNGOs are also added as members to such a body, more adaptations are needed to internal ways of working, communication norms, staff job descriptions, and coordination capacities. All these changes take increased resources and may result in more general, less sharp advocacy demands of key players.

Multiple fora have reviewed their contexts and responsibly opened their membership to include LNNGOs or merged with standing LNNGO coordination bodies. Other fora have reviewed their contexts and decided to remain INGO-only while using their resources instead to support sister LNNGO coordination bodies to advocate for their funding and inclusion. Which direction is right for a specific forum is a complex question based on context, capacities, and donor engagement. There are some crucial attention points to consider:

1. **The process of changing forum membership criteria must be well planned and have a clear strategic objective.**
   Rushing an expansion too quickly can harm the forum both through internal governance crises and damaged external relationships.

2. **There must be a consensus among the members and support from external stakeholders to change the membership criteria.**
   Reaching perfect consensus in NGO fora is rare, but it is important to ensure that there is a buy-in from members to expand the membership. If the decision is taken, the secretariat's internal structure will need to be adjusted. Also, donors must be willing to fund the additional capacity to ensure an expansion happens smoothly. Most importantly, LNNGO actors' support—from both potential members and other strong LNNGO coordination bodies—is necessary to ensure that the process works.

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11   IFRC. (2018, May). *Localization – what it means and how to achieve it*. **https://media.ifrc.org/ifrc/document/ifrc-policy-brief-localization/**.

3. **Complementarity is key to keep in mind.**
   Creating mixed membership NGO fora or transforming only INGO fora into mixed membership fora needs to be evaluated in terms of complementarity of what exists already and the impact of creating a mixed membership forum on the broader humanitarian response community. In contexts where strong national civil society platforms existed before, phasing out an INGO forum or merging it with an existing platform might be a more appropriate pathway when expanding an INGO-created forum could weaken the local civil society landscape.

If there are already strong LNNGO coordination mechanisms contributing to principled humanitarian action, how should the international community and INGO fora work to strengthen them? This happens already, often in non-humanitarian situations, where INGOs join alliances and networks working on non-humanitarian topics. For example, if strong LNNGO structures exist, a specific humanitarian working group could be created to engage INGOs. This, like all coordination structures, would be a highly contextual decision, completely contingent on the willingness of already existing LNNGO structures to open up their space for INGOs.

In the meantime, through regular meetings and by inviting local actors as observers, defining themes for joint advocacy actions, and setting up a type of mentorship program with a focus on transitioning, NGO fora are contributing to the localization workstream within the system they are working. NGO coordination structures are shaped both by the system they work in and the members' priorities. Some structural changes might need to happen to ensure a more active role in the localization debate. NGO coordination structures can play a key role in this process, with or without explicitly becoming mixed membership fora.

Overall Recommendations on NGO Coordination Structures and Localization

▶ **To NGO coordination structures:**

▷ Ensure all changes to forum governance and membership criteria are undertaken consciously and carefully, reflecting upon criteria to ensure that both current members and potential new members will receive the services and support they need from the forum.

▷ Invest in information and knowledge management. In every context, there are high expectations for NGO coordination structures to contribute to localization. With a two-year average turnover of forum directors, historical understanding of the rationale behind forum governance design can be lost.

▷ Organize reoccurring spaces for dialogue with LNNGO actors, in which uncomfortable discussions on power dynamics can occur, as these are important steps in any process that requires change.

▷ Ensure that some aspect of partnership management is a part of every staff member's job description.

▷ Engage is a systematized manner with INGO members with a specific localization mandate

▷ Encourage mainstreaming of localization approaches.

▶ **To donors:**

▷ Increase funding for local and national coordination structures, as they are key actors all humanitarian systems.

▷ Don't push for a quick change in membership criteria for NGO fora. Instead, ensure that any changes are undertaken carefully.

Annexes

Annex 1: Fora and organizations employing the key informants

Annex 2: A Tool for INGO fora considering expanding their membership

Annex 3: Recommendations for mixed membership fora to continue strengthening local civil society actors

Annex 4: Recommendations for INGO fora on strengthening civil society and local networks through partnerships

Annex 1 – Fora and Organizations Employing the Key Informants

TYPE	NAME	FOUNDING DATE	CURRENT MEMBERSHIP MAKE-UP
Country-level NGO Forum	DRC INGO forum	Revived in 2015	INGO-only
	NGO Coordination Committee for Iraq (NCCI)	2003	Mixed Membership
	Rohingya Response Forum	2018	Mixed Membership
	INGO Forum Myanmar	2007	INGO-only
	South Sudan NGO Forum	1990	Mixed Membership
	Colombia INGO Forum	2019	INGO-only
	Partnerships Coordination Group	2019	Mixed Membership
	Forum des ONG Internationales au Mali / INGO Forum Mali	2000	INGO-only
	North-Eastern Syria Forum	Formalized 2017	Mixed Membership
	Lebanon Humanitarian INGO Forum	2012	INGO-only
Regional-level NGO Coordination Forum	Syrian INGO Regional Forum (SIRF)	2013	INGO-only
Global-level NGO Coordination Fora	ICVA	1962	Mixed Membership
	InterAction	1984	INGO-only

Annex 2 – A Tool for INGO Fora Considering Expanding Their Membership

The following recommendations are for INGO fora experiencing continued interest from members and the broader humanitarian response to expand their membership to include LNNGOS.

Any changes to membership must be made consciously and carefully, reflecting upon criteria to ensure both current and potential members receive the services and support they need from the forum and that governance models clearly reflect that need.

Criteria for the inclusion of new members should be defined by the coordination structure's governance bodies and should consider both internal structural aspects and context-wide factors. Two scenarios are possible: the assessment indicates that the timing is right to expand membership—a checklist on the process can be found below—or the assessment shows that opening up membership is not the most appropriate forward. Some talking points may be found below as well to explain this reasoning.

Key attention points for internal assessment:

1. **Conduct a historical review of the NGO structure.** Invest in a lessons-learned process and overall review of the structure. This can be useful in identifying previous discussions on opening up membership and understanding what factors impeded the process.

2. **Discover what additional human resources and other positions would be required when opening up membership.** What practical considerations need to be made to expand the team? Remember that, when recruiting NGO coordination staff, it can be challenging to find the right profiles.

3. **Ask what is the required additional budget to deliver services to an increased number of diverse actors?** Think of this not only in terms of human resources capacity or even operational capacity (bigger meeting spaces? simultaneous translation?), but also how some practices should be adapted to adjust to different needs and priorities. Think about means of working and what that means for meeting norms and decision-making in different cultures.

4. **Review existing initiatives from INGO members and other actors.** Some INGOs may have invested in partnership programs with, in some cases, the funding or setup of national or local networks, which may have similar objectives as a mixed membership NGO forum.

5. **Assess INGO members' interest in opening up membership** and ensure a majority approach to reach consensus. There must be full comprehension of the dramatic changes that expanding membership can entail, specifically in terms of capacity and changes in service delivery.

6. **Consult donors** on their interest in continuing funding the NGO coordination structure if these changes happened.

Key attention points for the context-wide analysis:

1. Review the current political context and how it defines space for interaction between INGOs and LNNGOs. In more democratic political situations, the environment will be more enabling for mixed membership fora. It is crucial to consider political stability. For example, a change in political leadership can quickly alter the landscape.

2. Consider the evolution of the humanitarian crisis. Monitor discussions around early recovery in strategic coordination meetings and take note when INGOs begin leaving the country.

3. Analyze the civil society and LNNGO landscape. If other strong NGO coordination platforms or alliances deliver similar services, consider whether opening up membership will negatively impact their functioning and role.

4. Assess the interest of LNNGOs to join the forum. Tracking the number of requests and reaching out to those who express interest to understand their motivations would be useful to assess the needs and interests of the LNNGO actors.

Proposed Checklist When Opening Up Membership

1. **Capture the decision in a formal report, which details how the decision was taken, and develop a strategic work plan with a clear deadline for change.**

   ▶ Recommendation: Be realistic in terms of timing, as such a project can easily take several months. If the forum has annual membership renewals, align the process with existing procedures. If proposals for donors have a clear deadline, attempt to aim for this moment, as the changes should also be included in the proposals.

2. **Discuss the changes in activities and funding needs with donors.** The proposals should incorporate activities specific to LNNGO members through indicators and outcomes.

3. **Create a working group—which should include steering committee members, INGOs working with civil society platforms, and LNNGO partners—to ensure that the discussions take into account their views, opinions, and needs.** Ensure that the working group produces a work plan with clear deadlines for changes to governance documents (statutes, charters, etc.) and a budgeting and capacity assessment of financial and human resource needs for the change.

4. **Adapt governance documents using the working group.** Statutes, charters, and external communication tools should capture the change in the forum's structure.

5. **Regularly inform the members on progress and ensure their buy-in.**

6. **Develop specific briefings and self-assessment surveys for new LNNGO members to strengthen approaches.** Consider also creating mentoring programs between INGOs and LNNGOs.

Proposed Talking Points When Not Opening Up Membership

▶ **When speaking with the U.N.:** Review the current functioning of strategic coordination meetings to ensure the meaningful participation of LNNGOs. Advocate for a language-sensitive approach in meetings.

▶ **When speaking to donors:** Consider increasing funding for LNNGO coordination structures, as they are key partners and actors in humanitarian response. Funding should aim to increase their staffing and financial resources to conduct coordination activities.

▶ **When speaking to members:**

   ▷ **In situations of limited civil society space due to authoritarian regimes or political instability:** Work toward policy changes. This will be more effective through a complementary approach between INGO and LNNGO platforms.

   ▷ **If there are already existing LNNGO platforms:** According to the several initiatives on localization, seek to strengthen and complement the existing structures through different activities. Opening up INGO forum membership could negatively affect the current civil society landscape and INGO structure. We are focusing on strategic partnership activities to complement the other structures, but our aim is not to replace existing structures.

Annex 3: Recommendations for Mixed Membership Fora to Continue Strengthening Local Civil Society Actors

▶ Remain aware of the socio-cultural differences, which can translate into barriers for LNNGOs members. Invest, when possible, in tools and services that can contribute to overcoming linguistic barriers. Tip: Some NGOs, such as Translators without Borders, are increasingly offering services to INGOs to support them with these types of needs.

Meetings

▶ Organize separate Country Director meetings for INGO HoM and LNNGO HoM prior to joint Country Director meetings. Ensure that the agenda is balanced in terms of discussion points on both types of actors' priorities.

▶ Organize separate and regular meetings for national directors and national staff of INGOs in leadership positions to ensure that the forum's activities respond to their needs and raise their voices in general meetings.

▶ Ensure regular briefings to remind both INGO and LNNGO directors of the importance of focusing on common goals and objectives—with simultaneous translations and minutes shared in multiple languages, if necessary.

▶ Develop tailored briefings for national leaders and staff separately to ensure their understanding of what services they can expect from the NGO forum.

▶ Review how all meetings are organized and identify barriers to the meaningful participation of LNNGOs. For example, in countries where telecommunications infrastructure is limited, ensure that printed copies of key documents remain available.

Staffing, Representation, and Governance

▶ Hire a dedicated staff member to engage with LNNGOs directors.

▶ For smaller fora, adopting a quota system to ensure LNNGO members' representation in the steering committees can contribute to having their voices heard.

▶ Establishing localization working groups, which create a space for dialogue and can help identify activities to help implement capacity exchange projects.

▶ Invest in information management and documentation.

Capacity Sharing

▶ Conduct specific capacity assessments of new and existing LNNGOs members and develop in a participatory way "tailored" approaches for capacity sharing. For example, the South-Sudan forum has been implementing a "tailored trainings" program. When LNNGOs become members, they complete an online self-assessment and rank themselves within six months of joining the forum. Consultants then cross-check the information. Primary areas are identified where the LNNGO needs strengthening, after which a tailored workplan is developed.

▶ Consider organizing "mentoring" initiatives between INGOs and LNNGOs members in which specific system strengthening activities can be organized. Other fora (Afghanistan, Somalia) have implemented similar activities. These project designs and lessons learned have been shared through InterAction.

External Partnerships

▶ Ensure regular meetings and contacts with other NGO platforms to strengthen the relationship and formalize these interactions.

Annex 4: Recommendations for INGO Fora on Strengthening Civil Society and Local Networks Through Partnerships

Governance

▶ If members agree that strengthening localization should be an objective of the forum, ensure that this is captured in governance documents (Terms of Reference, action plans, proposals, etc.). Include language on responsible partnership practices and the principles of partnerships in charters and code of conducts. Ensure these are included in briefings to new members.

▶ Create a working group on localization, in which members' work on localization can be captured, shared, and built upon. Ideally, this working group should be chaired or co-chaired by an LNNGO actor. One of the group's activities could be to organize annual exchanges between LNNGO and INGO directors—as well as with U.N. and donor representatives—where "uncomfortable" discussions (i.e., discussions on power dynamics) could take place. A mentoring project could also be initiated by the group.

Meetings

▶ Organize regular exchanges, formalized in the work plan, with corresponding LNNGO platform representatives to understand their priorities and needs and identify common advocacy and representation opportunities. In the absence of a corresponding LNNGO platform, meet with LNNGO leadership and partners.

▶ Consider, when appropriate within the context and with the members' approval, inviting LNNGOS or NGO platform representatives as observers to meetings. Ensure that important norms—such as confidentiality—are understood and that expectations for the meeting are clear.

▶ Invite LNNGO partners to update members at monthly or bi-monthly meetings on the work being done.

Joint Advocacy

▶ Invest in joint advocacy actions and ensure after-action feedback to LNNGO partners. Review the advocacy sign-off procedures and develop one specific for joint opportunities with LNNGO platforms and LNNGOs.

▶ Invite LNNGOs or NGO platform representatives to preparatory meetings of strategic coordination meetings or high-level meetings and briefings, when appropriate.

▶ To ensure joint advocacy actions are successful, attempt to hold meetings with equal participation from INGO and LNNGO representatives, identifying one focal point for each type of NGO to run the process. An agreed procedure on sign-off for the collective messages and ensuring inclusiveness in the follow-up and feedback were identified as good practices.

▶ Invite LNNGOs to high-level briefings when possible and insist on having LNNGO partners present. In appropriate cases, INGO fora and members can explicitly pass their seat to LNNGO actors.

▶ Dare to take bold actions to ensure the participation of LNNGO representatives in high-level meetings. Some directors mentioned that they refuse to participate in meetings when no LNNGO representatives have been invited.

▶ Advocate consistently to the humanitarian system for more representation of LNNGO platforms in decision-making bodies.

Information and Capacity Sharing

▶ Identify information that could be shared with LNNGOs, according to their identified needs, and create mailing lists for regularly sharing information. Capture this in the information management protocols. (Topics could include funding opportunities, meeting opportunities with donors and U.N. representatives, and specific information on advocacy topics.)

▶ Work to build relationships so that INGO fora can consult with their corresponding LNNGO platform directors to seek advice on interacting with authorities and navigating the system.

▶ Assess whether current trainings offered to members could be open to—or adapted to include— LNNGOs. For example, in some countries, trainings organized on humanitarian principles are open to non-members as well.

▶ Invest, when possible, in tools and services that can help overcome language barriers by translating advocacy documents to local languages and offering translation services during briefings and meetings with LNNGOs.

InterAction