Challenging the established order: the need to 'localise' protection

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The growing criticism of protection actors for neglecting indigenous coping strategies and capacities should prompt a radical, creative re-think of attitudes and approaches.

In 1977 Pierre Bourdieu wrote that "every established order tends to make its own entirely arbitrary system seem entirely natural".[1] In the case of humanitarian protection, that established order has been made up since 2005 of the cluster approach, with a global protection cluster in Geneva and 28 protection clusters in the field. These clusters formulate a programme of action for protection at the country level (within a broader humanitarian response plan), based on a common definition of 'protection' dating from 1999:

Protection encompasses all activities aimed at obtaining full respect for the rights of the individual in accordance with the letter and the spirit of the relevant bodies of law, namely human rights law, international humanitarian law and refugee law.[2]

It is only recently that this common definition of protection, rooted in international humanitarian, human rights and refugee law, has been challenged, and the challenge has come from an unexpected quarter: people affected by crisis themselves and community organisations. They say that the definition of protection is a Northern construct, does not take into account the traditions and concerns of local people, and reflects the supply-driven biases of humanitarian agencies rather than the needs of affected people. This is a simplified version of a complex argument but, nonetheless, the challenge has been made and remains to be addressed.

In the 2015 report *Independent Whole of System Review of Protection in the Context of Humanitarian Action*[3] the authors criticised protection actors for neglecting existing and potential indigenous coping strategies and capacities and noted that indigenous crisis response systems and customs do not necessarily fit easily with mainstream humanitarian approaches. They wrote that: "looking ahead, it is fair to assume that there may well be more fragmentation, that the universality, which has been at the centre of the traditional humanitarian ethos, will be increasingly confronted by new thinking and practices and that there will be far more diversity in the humanitarian arena". How can this change be channelled to be constructive rather than destructive?

It is very hard to change an established order, where system and culture play such a strong role. In terms of the inclusion, or rather exclusion, of the Global South, partnership is not just about dialogue but about a broader range of actors shaping the system and how it operates. In order for local actors to be valued within the system the nature of the inter-relationships between national capacity and the international system needs to shift from a largely paternalistic and sub-contracting relationship to one of more equal partnership. This would also require a shift in the current framework that predisposes North-based standards and norms and largely overlooks indigenous or community values.

In some cases local or traditional norms may result in negative coping mechanisms and 'harmful practices' but in many other cases effective community mechanisms and local resilience are being undermined by 'ready-made' responses that are imposed without consultation or awareness of context. That can produce behaviour that conforms on the surface only, without enabling meaningful or sustainable protection measures to be adapted and integrated into community life.

Breaking the mould

The dynamics of the cluster approach need to be examined to see if it is itself an

impediment to greater inclusion of local actors. Coordination of a strategy for solutions to displacement in south-east Myanmar, for example, was done outside the cluster approach and yet was more inclusive of a broad range of partners, including local agencies, than the protection cluster response in Rakhine State. In the Humanitarian Policy Group's report of March 2015 on international, local and diaspora actors in the Syria response, the authors wrote that: "The formal system has seen many changes over recent years; some have improved it, others have not, but none has been what one might call radical or fundamental. Even if radical change is unrealistic in the short term – and it probably is – the formal system should take Syria as an example of the challenges to come. It needs to explore creative ways of responding, and do so not in isolation but by involving new players, even unfamiliar ones."[4]

Inclusion of a wider range of actors requires more substantial change than simply setting another place at the table and asking them to participate in a structure that does not meet their needs. National NGOs are often the first responders in an emergency but there is scope for national NGOs to engage in all phases of response. They sometimes are excluded from coordination mechanisms or do not participate because they do not find them relevant or do not have capacity to do so.

The structure of Humanitarian Country Teams and the cluster approach inherently reinforces international leadership over local ownership. The question is how to break out of a sub-contracting mindset. Much work has been done on capacity building but it is the quality of partnership that

is important, and three issues in particular need to be unpacked.

Financing: Money is key. Better access to financing is critical for local agencies but there is a need to simplify access to funds by thinking about proportionality. Why do national NGOs need to overcome high regulatory hurdles to get small amounts of money? Particular issues include auditing requirements and the constraints imposed by counter-terrorism legislation. One approach could be to make separate pots of money available through protection clusters for disbursement to local NGOs (the Start Network[5], for example, has seed funding for local response), since pooled funds at the country level have excluded local NGOs so far. At the May 2016 World Humanitarian Summit it was agreed that more funding should be channelled – and more directly – to local agencies; the target agreed was to direct 25% of humanitarian funding "as directly as possible" to local and national agencies.[6]

Decision making: There is a need to find better ways to include local agencies in the international architecture at global and local levels. The way national NGOs are included in Humanitarian Country Teams is not sustainable owing to the imbalance in

IDPs in Rakhine State, Myanmar. The site is home to thousands of Muslim IDPs who were forced to flee from their homes when inter-communal violence in 2012 displaced up to 140,000 people.

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the resources that national NGOs can devote to participation. The networking power of clusters can also be undermined by the atmospherics of clusters – such as the attitudes of international staff or something as simple as whether the local language is used for communication or not.

Respect: The Principles of Partnership need to be inculcated in organisations across the sector.[7] This means increasing awareness and building more equal relationships, which in turn will entail changing the attitudes of international aid workers, who need to attune themselves to local culture and learn to talk with local people as equals.

What is the Global Protection Cluster doing to address some of these issues? At the core of our Strategic Framework for 2016-19 is the objective of engaging local and national actors more meaningfully, including through a revitalised governance structure. The Global Protection Cluster is also creating a Protection Lab to define the challenges associated with localisation; based on this analysis, it will then identify

possible solutions and run pilot programmes so that proposed strategies can be further refined before they are shared more widely. The work of the Lab will be explicitly shaped as a dialogue, in which our understanding of protection is changed in practical ways to conform to what is locally understood. This aspiration has been expressed before but needs to take concrete form.

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1. Bourdieu P (1977) *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, Cambridge University Press. http://bit.ly/CUP-Bourdieu-1977

2. This definition, which was originally developed over a series of ICRC-sponsored workshops involving some 50 humanitarian and human rights organisations, has been adopted by the IASC.

3. http://bit.ly/ReliefWeb-2015-whole-of-system-review

4. Svoboda E and Pantuliano S (2015) *International and local/diaspora actors in the Syria response: A diverging set of systems?*, ODI, HPG Working Paper http://bit.ly/ODI-Svoboda-Pantuliano-2015

5. www.start-network.org

6. See box The Grand Bargain on p62.

7. Equality, Transparency, Results-Oriented Approach, Responsibility and Complementarity http://bit.ly/ICVA-Principles-Partnership