

Localisation: we are frustrated, not stupid!

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The Grand Bargain promises much but an inherent lack of trust in the international system is hampering local capacity building.

I work for the Centre for Community Health and Development International (CHAD), a local non-governmental organisation in north-east Nigeria. I work closely with the international community, contributing to a range of local and global initiatives, and I am actively involved in protection and governance responses here in Nigeria (many of which are supported by international partners).

I have been following the localisation agenda and was encouraged by the launch of the Grand Bargain¹ and the commitments that donors made to support local non-governmental organisations (NGOs) like mine. I know the Grand Bargain recommends that 25% of global humanitarian funding would be allocated to organisations like CHAD and other local responders. But the more I have tried to engage with donors and the global community, the more I am made to feel stupid.

I, my colleagues and many other local actors alike are not stupid. We actually

know stuff. And guess what? We are capable of knowing more! We recognise that we are not perfect. Many of us were educated in a country lacking responsible leadership and without much access to information and opportunities. But I also know my community and I am working so hard to be a part of driving the change that we want to see in our society.

So I want you to imagine what it feels like to receive the following feedback – which we received from a donor this year:

“While your strategies are promising, your capacity building needs are a huge concern to us, but thank you for responding to the call for proposals. Wish you luck in your future endeavours.”

How ridiculous. That’s why I wrote to you in the first place.

This is not the first time that we have been knocked back on the basis that we asked for help with building our capacity at the same time as asking for project funds. Now we wonder if donors could possibly be suggesting that we should lie about our institutional weaknesses. Maybe that could get us through their doors.

Instead, our honesty means we continue to be forced to partner with the UN and with international NGOs who then make us go through due diligence checks to determine our ‘weak capacities’. But we already knew what they were (we told you in our proposal). We are then the recipients of elementary training in workshops which focus on topics that my young colleagues and I could



March 2019

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easily have assimilated by reading a PDF document or online resource material. We don't get any mentoring. Or coaching. No long-term commitments. And then we have to spend days pulled away from our programmes in order to host people doing spot checks to tell us what we already know – that we still don't have the right capacities. But we aren't magicians. Without concrete support – people, flexible funding and capital investments (which, incidentally, you provided to the international NGOs instead) – we can't put the systems in place.

These endless due diligence checks (we have had three in the last 12 months alone) continue to portray us and other NGOs like us in a negative light, throwing the spotlight on our limited capacity as a justification for why funds should go to the international NGOs instead. Who is holding international partners accountable?

It is also confusing for us because the Grand Bargain appears to mean opening funding windows to both national and international partners and yet donors still act surprised when we ask for the

chance to manage our own capacity strengthening with the help of trusted and genuine third-party experts.

We urge you to be a little bit more trusting and a little bit less fixed in your approach to engaging effectively with local actors. A little bit smarter, a little less punitive of our inadequacies and a lot more attentive to what genuine and hardworking local actors like CHAD actually need.

I don't want to be part of a new wave of disillusioned young individuals. I want to continue to steer my community to a better future, to realise the potency in harnessing the goodwill of the international community, to fully embrace technological advancement. I – like other local actors – can be a powerful force for change. Use this power. It's untapped, it's fresh, it's hopeful and it's determined.

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1. www.agendaforhumanity.org/initiatives/3861