LOCALISATION: HOW LO(CAL) CAN YOU GO?

25 years ago, we realised that the results that aid delivered were too localised. Small pockets of isolated impact didn't spread beyond those that won the development lottery. Often these small changes didn't last either. Benefits stopped when providers of information, inputs or infrastructure ran out of donor funding. It didn't matter whether they were local, global or glocal – when the money ran out so did the goodies. This was repeated across siloed sectors of development, from agriculture to finance to water, sanitation and health. Not thinking about how goods and services would remain available in the long run undermined the likelihood that changes would last. Which is, ahem, the point of development, last time we checked.

Pundits pontificate about what's next for development and the localisation agenda in the context of shrinking aid chequebooks. We're pretty sure they've all been human-powered, but what do the bots think?

OMG, what do we mean when we talk about localisation? Is there a shared definition that we can use to make some sense of things?

Oh, you sweet summer child, absolutely not.

Donors often define localisation as "channelling more funding through local entities". They'll slap numbers on it – "25% direct funding to local actors by 2025" – without unpacking what type of local actor or who decides what counts. INGOs twist it into "strengthening local partnerships" which is code for keeping control but subcontracting delivery to national NGOs (aka 'localwashing'), so they can still justify their overheads while waving the localisation flag. Local NGOs/CSOs may see it as full ownership of strategy, resources and decision-making but they're still stuck applying for funding through labyrinthine donor systems designed in Brussels or D.C., not Bujumbura or Dhaka.

Private sector folks? They usually just roll their eyes and get back to fixing supply chains because 'localisation' isn't really a thing for them. After, all what does 'local' mean in, say, the specialty coffee value chain? Does it include an international buyer, with a long-term interest in buying from domestic firms and farmers? National exporters trying to raise quality to penetrate higher value markets? They are all integral parts of the specialty coffee system but not local in a geographic sense. Or does it just mean local farmer groups with no connection to specialty markets, limited resources, no buying and selling power or access to traceability and certification services?

To evoke the wise words of our late colleague Alan Gibson, we're in "wholesome and meaningless" territory here. Localisation stands on the shoulders of the many development giants that came before it: 'participation', 'empowerment', 'resilience' etc. All sound good and feel morally correct, but are so broad, fuzzy and universally agreeable that they end up losing their meaning.

Or it means something VERY different, as is the case in Bahasa Indonesia: next time you see an Indonesian colleague, ask how the 'lokalisasi' agenda is going there.

So… in a quest to be more local (dealer's choice on what you mean by it), what are the risks of going too far? Or as it were, staying too local?

OMG, how lo(cal) can you go?

It doesn't make sense to localise everything. Global public goods aren't local problems: Climate change mitigation, trade standards, cross-border regulations – these aren't things you 'localise' to a sub-national organisation. Some challenges require international cooperation and systems-level interventions. Try 'localising' carbon markets or pandemic responses and watch the chaos unfold.

Some local actors are the problem, not the solution. If local power structures are corrupt, patriarchal or exclusionary, your funding is just reinforcing local kleptocracies and gatekeepers. Not every local actor deserves capacity-building; some deserve to be shut down.

Supply chains, transport, communications, finance, labour, information – these don't stop at village or district boundaries. Over-localising can break critical linkages to national or global systems, isolating communities and creating pockets of stagnation. And economies of scale matter. More so to those who are excluded from them. Some things simply don't make sense to localise.

So, it depends? Now you sound like a consultant, OMG. But you're not wrong. We all know that development is context specific. But it's often a widening of opportunities, not localising them, that offers better possibilities for more money or better services. Coffee farmers pluck cherries that will be roasted into coffee in Milan, workers manufacture clothes to be sold on British high streets and Japanese designed toilets are sold in rural Bangladesh. And critically, in emergency and disaster contexts, where the calls for localisation are often the loudest, longitudinal research found that "factors outside of and beyond people's communities were most important for livelihoods and social connections". It's naïve at best to pretend that localisation is the missing ingredient in the development puzzle, isn't it?

It is certainly simplistic. In essence, localisation is all about who leads change. You systemic types emphasise how systems change.

That's a nifty distinction but systemic change has always had a 'who' dimension too: supporting actors with incentives, capacity and ownership to make change happen – and endure.

It seems to us that the impetus for localisation has two crucial over-simplifications. First, it interprets ‘local’ crudely, as those closest to target beneficiaries. Not necessarily those best placed to drive change. It neglects a more useful distinction: not ‘local’ versus ‘un-local’ but ‘in a system’ versus ‘outside a system’. No amount of localisation is going to result in sustained change if activities are localised but reliant on external funding. The brutal demise of USAID has shown this with tragic clarity. And no amount of capacity building of local communities to do tourism, for instance, is going to achieve lasting impact unless national and international travel operators also change.

Second, it reduces aid to the transfer of funds from donor to beneficiary, the funnelling of dosh to the localist of levels. It ignores the catalytic role that aid can play in transferring knowledge and technology, stimulating innovation, reducing risk and acting as neutral broker, a critical interlocutor or creative disruptor.

If our goal is sustainable development and not simply localising delivery of aid-funded goods and services, don’t the people we aim to benefit with our dwindling development dollars deserve something that lasts? That’s the pathway to independence from aid.