

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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**SUPPORTING LOCAL ACTORS: EVALUATION OF SWEDEN'S
APPLICATION OF THE GRAND BARGAIN LOCALISATION AGENDA
AN EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

Sophia Swithern, Charlotte Lattimer, Teddy Atim, Gang Karume,
Dmytro Kondratenko, Kateryna Korenkova, Cheery Zahau

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Foreword by EBA

At the Global Humanitarian Summit in Istanbul 2016, 66 agencies – UN and other intergovernmental organisations, donor countries, international civil society organisations – signed the Grand Bargain to ‘get more means into the hands of people in need’.

Progress has been made along the Bargain’s workstreams. The use of cash-based programs, harmonised reporting and joint needs analysis have increased, and humanitarian and development actors work somewhat better together. However, when signatories met to reconsider overall progress in 2021, they agreed in a “Grand Bargain 2.0” to focus on two lagging areas: access to timely and flexible funding, and the ‘localisation agenda’.

The localisation agenda stems from the call for a ‘participatory revolution’. Local and national actors are first to respond when crises hit, they know their local context, and they remain in place when others leave. Hence, increased influence of local actors over the design and implementation of responses would increase their effectiveness.

As Sweden continues to stress the importance of an effective international system for humanitarian assistance, and promotes localisation, it is important to know why progress has been weak in this particular area. This is why EBA decided to commission an evaluation of how Sweden has applied the localisation agenda.

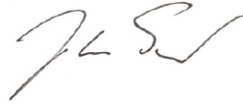
We believe this report will be of use to Swedish policy makers, staff within the Ministry for Foreign Affairs and Sida as well as within those organisations that serve as intermediaries and implementors of Swedish humanitarian assistance. We also hope the report will be of relevance for other actors within the international humanitarian system. The study has been conducted with support from a reference group chaired by Johan Schaar, who previously served as vice chair of EBA.

The authors are solely responsible for the content of the report.

Stockholm, February 2024

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'T. Becker', with a long horizontal stroke extending to the right.

Torbjörn Becker, EBA Chair

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'J. Schaar', with a stylized, looped structure.

Johan Schaar

Executive Summary

Background, rationale and context

Local and national actors (LNAs) are the first responders in humanitarian crises, and they are central to providing ongoing support and protection in the longer term. Yet they have been structurally marginalised by an international humanitarian system which has dominated power and resources while still relying on LNAs for last mile delivery. This not only places LNAs in an unjust and precarious position, but it is also potentially detrimental to the effectiveness, relevance and sustainability of humanitarian action.

Long-standing concerns about this status quo culminated in calls and promises for change around the 2016 World Humanitarian Summit, including localisation commitments in the Grand Bargain on humanitarian aid. Sweden is one of the 66 signatories to this agreement, as are many of the partner organisations which receive its humanitarian funds. In 2023, after several iterations of the Grand Bargain process June 2023, signatories renewed their original commitments to “greater funding and support for the leadership, delivery and capacity of local responders”, in recognition that insufficient progress has been made. Most quantifiable among the shortcomings in action is around funding: in 2022 only 1.2 percent of international humanitarian aid went directly to LNAs – against the agreed target of 25 percent of funding to reach LNAs ‘as directly as possible.’

Sweden is therefore not alone among donor signatories in failing to live up to its localisation commitments. But there is a new level of scrutiny and urgency for it to do better, particularly as other major humanitarian donors including the US and European Commission, have recently articulated plans for accelerated action. At time of writing, Sida was in the process of concerted action to address this: its Unit for Humanitarian Assistance had convened a localisation

task team which was developing a policy brief and was working with a selection of in-country teams on pilots to – for the first time – directly fund a small number of LNAs.

However, seven years on from signing the Grand Bargain, there had been no evaluation of Sweden’s application of its localisation commitments. Apart from the submissions to the annual Grand Bargain review process which are brief and self-reported, there was no substantial evidence base on which to build future actions. The EBA commissioned the present evaluation in order to fill this evidence gap and support improved efforts and outcomes by Sweden, its partner organisations and the wider humanitarian community.

Methodology, scope and limitations

Evaluation questions and framework

Sweden’s efforts and effectiveness cannot be investigated without first defining localisation, which although a ubiquitous term is also a highly contested one – and which Sweden has not yet defined on its own terms. Recognising the problematic assumptions about agency and proximity contained in the term, this evaluation adopts a definition aligned with that in the Grand Bargain, in brief: “making principled humanitarian action as local as possible and as international as necessary.” Drawing on the indicators contained in the Grand Bargain and those set out other well-established localisation measurement frameworks, the evaluation investigated Sweden’s progress in six dimensions of localisation:

- Strategy: articulation and promotion of localisation as a strategic priority
- Funding: quantity and quality of direct or indirect humanitarian funding to LNAs

- Partnerships: quality and equality of partnerships between Sweden's International Strategic Partner Organisations (SPOS) and LNAs
- Capacity: nature and extent of direct and indirect support for strengthening the capacities of LNAs
- Leadership and participation: promotion and support for LNAs engagement in decision-making
- Knowledge: generation of evidence both about localisation and led by local and national experts.

Methodology

The research team sought to embody localisation principles in its ways of working, as a collective comprising both national experts originating from and living in recipient countries of Swedish humanitarian aid, alongside international experts with experience of working with the global system. Understanding that application of localisation commitments is de facto contextually variable, the team complemented global analysis with country-specific case studies selected to reflect a range of crisis types and humanitarian spaces in which Sweden provides humanitarian funding at scale. Three of these case studies were led by the national researchers in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), Myanmar and Ukraine and involved interviews with the LNA partners of Sweden's international partners, as well as with Swedish officials and senior figures in aid coordination. A further eight case studies were conducted remotely for a lighter assessment in a wider range of contexts: Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Ethiopia, South Sudan, Palestine, Syria, Yemen and Somalia.

The country case studies complemented global level research. This involved headquarter level interviews with all of Sweden's international humanitarian partners as well as a review of their latest annual reports against their grants, obtained through a freedom of

information request. Swedish officials from Sida's Unit for Humanitarian Assistance and other departments, and from the MFA, were also interviewed and engaged in an analysis workshop. In addition, the team undertook a literature review and an online survey of stakeholders – two thirds of respondents to which were working at the national or local level.

The research team identified and sought to mitigate several limitations in the evaluation. These included: the problem of attribution of efforts to Sweden, given that support to LNAs has to date only be channelled via international partners; the lack of reliable and comprehensive financial data tracking indirect funds to LNAs; and the fact that the evaluation was conducted at a time of ongoing progress and planning within Sida.

Findings

The evaluation revealed the following picture of Sweden's performance against the six assessed dimensions of localisation.

Localisation dimension one: Strategy

Signing up to the Grand Bargain sent an initial and well-received signal that localisation was a priority for Sweden. However, stakeholders were less convinced or clear how commitments translated into operational priorities, given that Sweden has hitherto had no written policy or guidance detailing its position and expectations. This resulted in inconsistent promotion of localisation between country teams, and between Sida's Unit for Humanitarian Assistance and the MFA which manages core humanitarian funds to UN agencies, ICRC and IFRC. It was striking that Swedish officials responding to our survey were the least convinced that their institution prioritised localisation. Inconsistency bred uncertainty on the part of international partners, contributing to pervasive risk-aversion – a fear of falling foul of compliance regulations – which

inhibited power and resource sharing with LNAs. Although Sweden is highly appreciated as a ‘hands-off’ and flexible donor, there were widespread calls for it to be bolder in setting out requirements for its grantees to show progress on localisation. The forthcoming publication of Sida’s humanitarian policy will therefore be welcome, but the experience of other donors suggests that concerted efforts will be required to socialise this policy across all parts and levels of the Swedish institutions involved in aid financing in humanitarian contexts.

Localisation dimension two: Funding

The barriers that have prevented Sweden from directly channelling humanitarian aid to LNAs are common to many donors. Sources in our case study countries identified the bureaucratic, legal and human resourcing constraints that make it difficult for Sida to forge and maintain funding relationships with multiple smaller LNAs. Noting these barriers, Sida has embarked on a small set of pilots of direct financing to LNAs. No contracts had yet been signed, but different models and options were emerging including co-financing, channelling funding through consortia, and pooled funding.

Indirect funding, via Sweden’s international partners as intermediaries, has therefore to date been the only means by which Sweden can fulfil its Grand Bargain funding commitments. Sweden’s support to the Country Based Pooled Funds (CBPFs) has been an important part of this, with pass on from Swedish-supported CBPFs reaching 30 percent of the total fund size in 2022. Yet according to Sweden’s own estimates, the total indirect funding from all its partners only accounted for 17 percent of its humanitarian aid in 2022.

Attempts to substantiate this self-reported estimate were unsuccessful, in part because Sweden does not systematically require its partners to track and report on the pass-on of its funds, and because the flexible nature of much of Swedish humanitarian funding means that it is mixed with other sources and used to

support core costs. There is mixed evidence on the degree to which Sweden requires its partners to pass on funds: while prospective grantees are asked to state their intentions, once in receipt of funding, reporting on pass-on appears largely discretionary.

The quality of funding to LNAs was deemed as important as its quantity. The extent to which the benefits of multi-year agreements were shared by international partners with LNAs was a concern. Adequate resourcing for operational overheads however emerged as the most pressing priority. Unlike some other donors, Sweden does not provide a set rate for how much overheads its partners should pass on, and this resulted in a high degree of variation. It was hoped that forthcoming lessons from a recent Sida pilot with Oxfam on overhead cost-sharing would inform a wider Swedish position.

Both the prospects for greater direct funding and the promotion of more indirect funding are affected by Sweden's attitudes and regulations around fiduciary risk. Ambitions for localisation from country and partner programme staff were felt to be at odds with messaging from the audit and control functions which deterred the sharing of funds with local and national partners. Piloting of direct funding to LNAs is expected to generate important learning for Sida on how to balance meeting localisation commitments with ensuring financial risk management.

Localisation dimension three: Partnerships

Moving from a hierarchical sub-contracting model towards equitable partnerships is a core Grand Bargain localisation commitment. Although quality of partnerships with local actors is a consideration in Sida's selection and assessment of its international partners, there is a lack of clear expectation of what 'quality' looks like, and of systematic monitoring to make sure that LNAs are treated as equals rather than implementers.

As Sweden and its international partners seek to increase the number and financial value of their partnerships with LNAs, having fair, feasible and transparent partner selection processes becomes more important. Multiple sources indicated that while international intermediary organisations may have clear selection policies, they still often relied on word of mouth rather than replicating the occasional good practice of proactive outreach. And while the creation of the UN partnership portal has heralded a major step forward in harmonising the partner application and selection processes among Sida's UN humanitarian partners, LNAs voice concerns that there is still some way to go to ensure that eligibility requirements are feasible.

A hallmark of quality partnership is co-ownership of risk, particularly the security risks which local responders are most exposed to. Evidence suggest that international actors are more concerned with 'risks of' LNAs rather than 'risks to' them, placing more focus on mitigating fiduciary risks to international agencies and donors, than on mitigating the security risks to LNAs. Given that working in 'hard to reach' locations is a large driver for Sweden's interest in localisation there is an ethical and operational imperative to address this. There is both precedent and will among Swedish officials and international partners to do so, as well as potential to include joint risk planning with LNAs in proposals and budget lines.

Localisation dimension four: Capacity-strengthening

As a Grand Bargain Signatory, Sweden has committed to 'increasing multi-year investments in the institutional capacities of local and national responders' and this is explicitly reflected in Sweden's humanitarian strategy and in the Sida guidance for managing humanitarian partnerships. However, Swedish aid officials felt that this was a lower priority than their international partners did – perhaps indicating a tension with Sweden's primary 'lifesaving' humanitarian objective. Responsibility for advancing capacity-strengthening was

delegated to international partners and while several were taking initiatives in this regard, it was not something that Sweden appeared to actively demand or enable.

Where international partners were investing in capacity strengthening it was often top-down, short term and ill-coordinated – focussing on building LNAs capacity to comply with international requirements, rather than led by the operational and technical support needs identified by LNAs themselves. Indeed, the demands created by imposed and duplicative training requirements had the effect of undermining rather than strengthening overstretched resources of local organisations. ‘Brain drain’ and ‘poaching’ of local staff further depleted the LNAs capacity, and there is demand for Sweden to build on the good practice of some of its partners to demand ethical recruitment policies more clearly.

Given that many LNAs span both humanitarian and development work, and that several of their international partners benefit from both streams of Swedish funding, there is scope for better join-up of efforts to effectively strengthen local capacities. In particular, Sida’s investments in civil society support through its CIVSAM unit position it well for internal learning on what works, and to more strategically align its investments to boost and sustain efforts.

Localisation dimension five: Leadership and participation

As the Grand Bargain has evolved, support for local leadership in humanitarian coordination and decision-making remains central within the core commitments – and its latest annual report points to a general ‘sea change’ in terms of the influence of LNAs within the Grand Bargain process itself, and in global clusters. Such change is hard to attribute to Sweden’s efforts, but there are multiple examples of Swedish funding being used to indirectly support the participation and collective voice of LNAs, for which flexible funding had been instrumental.

Our research suggested however, that significant barriers remain to meaningful engagement and influence. Language as well as staff time and budget were raised as practical obstacles which Sweden could use its funding and influence to address. More fundamental however was the resistance to power-sharing by some international agencies resistant to ceding control of decision-making. It is here that Sweden could use its position on advisory boards – including of Country-based pooled funds (CBPFs), as it already has – to advocate for greater access, influence and visibility for LNAs.

Localisation dimension six: Knowledge

While this is not a specific dimension of the Grand Bargain, evidence on the dynamic, progress and outcomes of localisation is foundational to measuring and advancing progress. Sida does provide support for several organisations which have clear objectives to generate evidence and understanding of dimensions of localisation, as well as providing flexible funding to organisations which have produced relevant analysis. However, a piecemeal approach has likely compromised Sweden's ability to capitalise and promote the uptake of its own investments in localisation-relevant knowledge and evidence.

The majority of internationally funded research on localisation is led by and attributed to international experts and organisations. Local and national experts are more likely to be used as sources of evidence or collectors of data than to drive the research agenda. That said, Sida's strategy for cooperation in research for development puts a strong emphasis on local ownership and equality in research, something which humanitarians could build upon. While there are discrete examples of Sweden's humanitarian partners adopting such an approach, there is more that Sida can do to ensure it meets the considerable call for more locally led evidence generation.

Conclusions

Seven years on from signing up to the Grand Bargain, Sweden is at a crossroads in its approach to localisation. There is significant internal appetite and momentum, as well as external demand for Sweden to apply its commitments with a new level of seriousness and profile. But to do so, it faces some important choices in order to change the status quo in how power and resources are shared between international actors and their local and national equals. Confronting these challenges boldly and openly will not only bring clarity and progress for Sweden and its partners but will also help the wider aid community to navigate their own pathways to localisation.

Cutting across the six dimensions of localisation that we evaluated, are the following four normative areas on which Sweden will need to decisively stake its position, and three practical areas in which it will need to take concerted action.

Normative shifts

Prioritising localisation

Implicit in Sweden's humanitarian approach as a principled, needs-based donor is that it supports the 'best placed actor' to deliver effective response. Localisation is therefore strategically a means to the end of improving life-saving effectiveness, particularly in hard-to-reach areas. While this does not run counter to the localisation commitments, it risks a reductive view of the value of LNAs. Following the example of the CBPFs, Sweden can signal that localisation is important 'per se' by elevating it to an explicit secondary priority and articulate what 'constitutes 'best placed' in a way that recognises their value beyond access. Sida's forthcoming localisation policy and guidance present a clear opportunity to do so, laying the ground for the next four-year humanitarian strategy.

Balancing flexibility with assertiveness

Sweden is prized and prides itself on being a flexible donor. This is core to its practice of good humanitarian donorship and can also free up budgets to invest in localisation. However, realising Sweden's power to incentivise substantial transformation will require it to be clearer about what it expects from its partners and to set specific ambitions for them to fulfil. There is both demand for it to be more assertive in this regard, and space for it to do so without abandoning its flexibility. While there is consensus that Sweden becoming a more 'micro-managing' donor would be a detrimental backward step, it can make much more of the many tools and opportunities for requiring and monitoring localisation action which are already built into its processes. In order to achieve change, this will demand consistent application, particularly towards the UN agencies that receive the majority of Sida and MFA humanitarian funds.

Adapting risk management

Humanitarian aid is inherently fraught with risks, and Sweden must responsibly manage these. However, high thresholds for risk management compliance, combined with a lack of clarity about exceptions, disincentivise Sweden's SPOs from passing on funds to LNAs. Many SPOs experienced mixed messages from Sweden's programme facing staff, and from its financial control functions and chose the 'safe option'. Better cooperation between these two functions combined with open dialogue with SPOs about fiduciary risk challenges, could provide the necessary clarity as well as identify appropriate adaptations. The preoccupation with fiduciary 'risks of localisation must also be balanced with co-ownership of 'risks to' local actors. Systematically ensuring and enabling co-ownership of security risks between SPOs and LNAs has to be a particular ethical imperative for Sweden, given its reliance on local actors to work in the hardest to reach places.

Improving sustainability

Moving towards localisation demands more sustained engagement. Yet, while a significant proportion of humanitarian funding from the MFA (80 percent) and Sida (20 percent) is multi-year, most funding that is passed on to LNAs is, at best, annual – placing these organisations in financial precarity which further disempowers them. The MFA and Sida must therefore require and monitor the pass-on of multi-year benefits, in particular by the UN agencies which receive the bulk of these. This should be part of a wider discussion with international and local partners on supporting LNAs' institutional sustainability, which includes ethical recruitment practices that mitigate 'brain drain'. Connections with Sweden's longer-term development and civil society strengthening work are also crucial – current systemic disconnects are resulting in missed opportunities to align efforts, learn from experience and amplify good practice.

Practical considerations

Leveraging Sweden's influence

Sweden is a well-regarded and influential donor with considerable presence and 'soft power' on the global and country level humanitarian stages, but it is conspicuously quiet on localisation. While Sweden has demonstrated that it can demonstrate powerful leadership on localisation in some country-based humanitarian fora, this has tended to be driven by individuals and there is scope and demand for more globally strategic and consistent external engagement on localisation. This will require a new level of engagement from the MFA backed by signals of support from the highest levels. As it maximises its position in coordination and decision-making fora, it can also use these opportunities to elevate the voices and access of LNAs in these spaces.

Improving internal coordination

Sweden's progress on localisation has been compromised by missed opportunities for internal cooperation. Disconnects were evident between country and HQ levels, between MFA and Sida, and between units within Sida – including between the regional development cooperation teams, the Unit for Humanitarian Assistance and CIVSAM. The Localisation Task Team, a laudable recent initiative, only comprises staff from Sida's Unit for Humanitarian Assistance. With humanitarian crises increasingly protracted, complex and constrained, there is a clear need for a more concerted 'Team Sweden' approach to localisation if it is to address the systemic and political challenges to localisation and provide relevant support to civil society's first responders.

Investing for change

There is compelling evidence that, in the longer-term, localisation may be a more cost-effective use of humanitarian aid. However, it is clear that investments will be required in the short- to medium- term as new partnerships and ways of working are required. As well as scaling up pilots for direct funding, Sweden will need to ensure that SPOs have the requisite funds to support LNAs, including for security risk management and capacity strengthening. This evaluation also does not underestimate the task of allocating adequate human resources within Sida and MFA to support progress on localisation, requiring a clear-eyed review of what configurations and investments of effort are required.

Scaling up Sweden's ambition, profile and effectiveness on localisation will require shifts in mindsets, priorities and investments across 'Team Sweden'. As we present this evaluation, there are encouraging signs that there is both a new level of seriousness about making this happen, at least within Sida's Unit for Humanitarian Assistance. It remains to be seen whether this can be more widely scaled up and rolled out across other relevant parts of its institutions, in order to meet the clear demand for overdue change.

Recommendations

Finally, falling under the three areas of conclusions above, the evaluation makes sixteen recommendations to unlock the substantive change needed for Sweden to meaningfully contribute to the Grand Bargain’s localisation agenda. Few of the recommendations are new – in many cases, they echo lessons that have been identified before, but not yet learned or acted upon. Acting on the lessons learned and implementing the following set of recommendations will require a concerted and coordinated effort on the part of Sweden and its partners.

| # | Recommendation | Priority |
|-------|---|-------------|
| 1 | Maximise the roll-out of Sida’s forthcoming policy brief on localisation to signal localisation as a non-negotiable priority across the diverse range of humanitarian contexts in which Sweden works. | High |
| 2 & 3 | Elevate and integrate localisation as a priority in Sida’s broader humanitarian strategies, including within HCAs at country level. | Medium |
| 4 | Apply existing Sida guidance on localisation to vet partner proposals and monitor progress. Adopt the same principles for MFA’s core funding to UN agencies. | High |
| 5 & 6 | Adopt a target rate of overheads for INGOs to share with local partners and advocate for UN agencies to provide adequate funding for the overheads of their local partners. | High/Medium |
| 7 | Find practical ways of overcoming compliance barriers to funding LNAs through dialogue between Sida’s Unit for Humanitarian Assistance and compliance sections. | High |
| 8 | Collaborate to acknowledge and address the security risks faced by LNAs, including through the provision of sufficient funding to support security risk management. | High |

| # | Recommendation | Priority |
|----------|--|-----------------|
| 9 & 10 | Incentivise the passing on of longer-term funding to LNAs and provide multi-year funding to CBPFs where possible. | Medium |
| 11 & 12 | More boldly advocate for localisation in global and country fora and proactively create opportunities to signal Sweden's prioritisation and leadership on localisation. | High/Medium |
| 13 | Expand and capitalise on the Localisation Task Team to create synergies across Sida and capitalise on the good practice of other units in areas such as capacity strengthening, local ownership of research, and operationalising the nexus. | High |
| 14 | Harmonise Sida and MFA approaches on localisation to align good partnership practices and capitalise on external opportunities to speak up on localisation. | Medium |
| 15 | Accelerate the piloting of direct funding to LNAs and use the learning from them to scale-up good practice. | High |
| 16 | Invest in the necessary staffing within Sweden's departments, country teams and institutions to more effectively support localisation. | High |

Local and national actors are the first responders in humanitarian crises. They provide ongoing support, and they stay on when the international organisations leave. Yet they have been structurally marginalised by the international humanitarian system. This evaluation investigates how Sweden is living up to its promises about increased localisation.

Lokala och nationella organisationer och aktörer är först på plats vid humanitära kriser. De hjälper oförtröttligt, och de finns kvar när internationella organisationer lämnar. Trots det är de marginaliserade i det internationella humanitära systemet. Denna utvärdering undersöker hur Sverige lever upp till sina löften om ökad lokalisering.