

## IASC's Operational Policy and Advocacy Group (OPAG) Meeting

SESSION III

4 June 2020

### Summary Record

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#### INTRODUCTION

The Operational Policy and Advocacy Group (OPAG) of the Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC) held the third session of its third regular meeting on 4 June 2020. The primary objectives of this session was to discuss stepping up efforts around localization in light of COVID, particularly how best to leverage new opportunities created in light of the pandemic to speed up localization efforts and how the humanitarian community can adapt its delivery modalities, not only in response to COVID-19, but in all contexts with existing commitments on localization of aid, strengthening partnerships and operating effectively in an environment impacted by the pandemic.

#### SESSION 3.1: STEPPING UP EFFORTS AROUND LOCALIZATION IN LIGHT OF COVID-19

In his introductory remarks, the OPAG co-Chair, Mr- Geir Olav Lisle, noted the slow advance of the localization agenda, despite long-standing commitments and best intentions by the IASC members as well as at the World Humanitarian Summit and the Grand Bargain. He stressed that localization was essential, not only because local actors as frontline responders are more familiar with the context and better accepted by local people, but also because COVID-19 is making it indispensable to ensure business continuity and our ability to stay and deliver. While the pandemic provides a critical juncture to catalyze the required shifts toward localization, efforts should be stepped up to support, capacitate and fund local actors, including by lifting bureaucratic and administrative hurdles, while at the same time ensuring duty of care and minimizing risks to local actors. Against this backdrop, the IASC Principals tabled the localization agenda at their meeting on 7 May, where they welcomed the [IASC Interim Guidance on Localisation and the COVID-19 Response](#) developed jointly by IFRC and UNICEF (with contributions from Catholic Relief Services, Global CCCM Cluster, Global Protection Cluster, ICVA, IDEAS, NEAR Network, Save the Children, UNFPA, UNHABITAT and UNHC) under the auspices of the IASC Results Group 1 on Operational Response. It was also noted that the last two OPAG sessions on Risk Communications and Community Engagement (RCCE) and donor conditionalities/flexibility highlighted close linkages with localization from different angles - including funding, accountability, capacity strengthening and coordination mechanisms – which accentuates the need for close collaboration across various IASC structures.

The co-Chairs of the Results Group 1 on Operational Response (InterAction, OCHA) informed that the Results Group 1 was initially tasked by the OPAG to support efforts to operationalize localization, including representation of relevant local organizations in coordination structures. In this regard, the Results Group 1's sub-group on Localization, under the co-leadership of IFRC and UNICEF, had been working on guidance for Humanitarian Coordinators (HCs) and Humanitarian Country Teams (HCTs) to engage local representation in HCTs, while UNHABITAT has also been leading the work to draft a framework for better engagement with local government in humanitarian operations, per the IASC Principals action point agreed on 5 December 2019. However, in light of the impact of COVID-19 and the OPAG's decision at its virtual

meeting on 30 March for all Results Groups to urgently reprioritize in support of the COVID-19 response, the Results Group 1 pivoted its focus to provide guidance as to how local and international humanitarian actors can adapt its delivery modalities for COVID-19 consistent with existing commitments of the Grand Bargain Localization Workstream as well as the Results Groups 2 on Accountability and Inclusion and 5 on Humanitarian Financing. While the Results Group 1 took the lead on the development of the Interim Guidance, it should be remembered that the group's focus primarily revolves around coordination structures. A key step moving forward will be to discuss how the OPAG can foster implementation of the Interim Guidance, including through bringing together various strands of work being carried out by different IASC structures, notably the Results Groups 1, 2 and 5.

The co-leads of the localization sub-group (IFRC, UNICEF) shared an overview of the concept of localization, key points from the Interim Guidance, synergies with existing IASC activities and Grand Bargain, as well as providing recommendations for the OPAG. They stressed that localization required moving beyond sub-contracting and replacement toward an overall response that is “as local as possible, as international as necessary.” The importance of setting long-term goals was highlighted, including strengthening domestic systems to be self-sufficient in the provision of basic services and enhancing preparedness of local actors and governments for future pandemics. Two schools of thoughts were presented around the dynamics between international and local actors, namely subcontracting versus equal partnership. The Interim Guidance conveys the following key messages: (i) Safety and well-being of personnel of local partners; (ii) Equality, mutual respect, mutual accountability; (iii) Humanitarian principles; (iv) Enhancing leadership and coordination of local actors; (v) Funding availability and risk sharing for local actors; (vi) Promoting visibility for local actors; and (vii) Building back better after COVID-19 in preparation for the next pandemic. Several points were further stressed for the OPAG's consideration, including addressing health risk associated with COVID-19 and duty of care for local actors; capacity sharing between international and local actors; promotion of principled partnership; enhancing leadership and coordination with local actors; streamlining engagement with affected communities; and synergies with the Grand Bargain as well as various IASC structures. Moving forward, the OPAG was requested to (i) Clarify accountabilities for HCs/HCTs commitments on localization; (ii) Advance solutions on duty of care issues (especially in-country health support); (iii) Conduct lessons learned/best practices on the impact of sanctions on local actors in the COVID-19 context; (iv) Advocate for flexibility of funding from donors accompanied with quality reporting from local actors; (v) Harmonize funding due diligence processes of donors and international agencies; and (vi) Ensure internal discussion/roll out of the Interim Guidance.

In the ensuing discussion, OPAG members welcomed progress made by the Results Group 1 around the Interim Guidance, while reiterating the need to widen localization discussions beyond COVID-19, the important roles that need to be played by field leadership to implement the Interim Guidance, as well as the need to continue the discussion around localization at the OPAG level.

The Agency Coordinating Body for Afghan Relief and Development (ACBAR) highlighted the need to have benchmarks and indicators to hold HCs accountable around localization, as well as the need to have local partners as co-leads in clusters. ACBAR further suggested revisiting the localization agenda at the OPAG level three months after dissemination of the Interim Guidance.

The Coastal Association for Social Transformation Trust (COAST) noted that the Interim Guidance was exceptional as it recognized local NGOs and local governments as response actors for the first time. COAST further suggested that the IASC principles request the Resident and Humanitarian Coordinators (RC/HCs) to periodically report back on implementation of the Interim Guidance. UN and INGOs were requested to develop long-term policy to nurture sustainable local civil societies; to manage partnership selection and

treatment in a transparent and competitive manner based on long-term objectives and clear criteria; and to reinforce local-level accountability and transparency.

The Foundation for Rural Development (FRD) underlined the importance of ensuring equal partnership in HCTs by balancing representation between UN and local actors. It was stressed that localization should continue in a longer-term beyond COVID-19, which could be made possible by agreeing on a binding document and conducting evaluations on achieved results. It was suggested to allow the Deputy HC role to be a local actor in situations where both the HC and RC roles are played by a single person, as a way to localize leadership.

Christian Aid reiterated the need for the Principals to request HCs to report back on actions taken to roll out the Interim Guidance, while agreeing with COAST in that RC/HCs could be asked to initiate a dialogue on how to move the Interim Guidance forward in their specific context. Christian Aid further suggested considering the OPAG's possible roles to encourage progress at country level, as well as incorporating a localization lens in the OPAG's future thematic discussions. Christian Aid also assured to encourage the ACT Alliance to have country-level reflections on the Interim Guidance.

ICVA expressed support for the six recommendations suggested by IFRC and UNICEF, stressing the need to regularly consider this important topic, particularly around the crucial leadership role of HCs. ICVA also underlined the need for continued direct engagement of the Principals with HCs to enhance meaningful participation of local actors. ICVA referred to the findings from a recent study "[Participation of National NGOs and NGO Fora Within Humanitarian Country Teams](#) (LSE and ICVA, April 2020)." Noting that the current situation is far from satisfactory despite the progress made, ICVA further suggested jointly exploring the "why" behind it and how to improve, including by developing guidance for engagement of local actors in coordination structures at country level whose implementation could be monitored by the EDG.

InterAction noted the cascading of safety and financial risks down onto local actors, which is a major ethical and practical issue which will become more acute in the COVID-19 response. Perceived risks by donors of directly partnering with local actors is also a major barrier to directing more funding to them, which points to the need to unpack the issue with donors, UN and INGOs, along with NNGOs. InterAction further expressed support for the growing conversations in the Grand Bargain space, noting that risk serves as a multi-faceted barrier that will compromise progress on localization and other improvements to the humanitarian system.

IFRC stressed the need for a whole of IASC approach to localization, that it can no longer be the willing and the few that continue to work on it, and requested that all Results Groups prioritize localization as part of their common goal in support of the COVID-19 response and beyond. IFRC also reflected that ultimately localization is about power and for many it is seen as a challenge, but power need not be a zero-sum game, there can be win-wins for all involved. IFRC further requested to ensure a sensible division of work between the Grand Bargain and the IASC based on the best comparative advantage to avoid duplicating efforts.

IOM underlined the importance of greater outreach and sustainability of efforts around localization, reiterating the importance of nurturing stronger synergy between the OPAG and Results Groups in taking this forward.

OCHA reiterated the need for follow-up discussions on localization at the OPAG level, while expressing OCHA's full commitments to the agenda. OCHA's focus, among other issues, was concentrated on coordination and financing issues, while continuing to track and report on key data, including how to more effectively coordinate meetings at local level, providing opportunities for local languages spoken in meetings and local representation in clusters and HCTs. The Country-Based Pooled Funds (CBPFs) are also leading by example on direct funding to NGOs, including significant funding to national NGOs.

UNFPA highlighted the need to consider women's key roles holistically within the strong cross-cutting focus of localization. UNFPA agreed on the need to bring together different strands of the IASC to advance localization, considering notably the Results Group 5's *Proposals to Address the Inconsistency in Unlocking and Disbursing Funds to NGOs in COVID-19 Response* and *Proposals for a harmonized approach to funding flexibility in the context of COVID-19*. UNFPA further noted that broader discussion around surge efforts was underway among the standby partner network to ensure a more systematic approach towards localization across sectors.

UNHCR shared its commitments to localization, including strong advocates of localization both in general and in COVID-19 contexts by assisting first responders to stay and deliver according to the "Do No Harm" principle. UNHCR also reached the Grand Bargain target of providing 25 per cent of entire operational budget to national partners last year, which was up from 19 per cent in 2016 when UNHCR was first committed to meeting this target. In addition, 56 per cent of UNHCR's implementing partners spending involved national actors, which corresponded to a total of US\$ 753 million benefitting 930 local actors in 2019. Local actors are also included in UNHCR's flexibility measures introduced in summer 2019, which were greatly expanded to better respond to COVID-19. UNHCR finally suggested establishing open and comparative targets, while stressing the need to acknowledge the unique roles played by refugee-led organizations.

UNICEF briefed its efforts to partner with local actors, include local actors in clusters and advocate for qualify and flexible funding, while continued efforts are required to include women-led and marginalized groups as part of decision-making and to address local needs in two-way and bottom-up approach. UNICEF further highlighted the need to learn from local actors rather than simply support them, as they have significant capacity, trust of the communities and often more experience than international actors.

OHCHR suggested re-convening to discuss localization again at the OPAG level given its importance, while stressing that national response plans are the center piece to be supported.

The co-Chair of the Results Group 2 expressed support for assessing the information needs as well as culturally appropriate and gender-sensitive communication channels of the population, which is essential to all elements of accountability to affected populations, Protection from Sexual Exploitation and Abuse (PSEA) and inclusion. The need and urgency was highlighted to ensure that all decision-making processes are inclusive of different population groups, including women, men, boys, girls and persons with disabilities. The Results Group 2 is committed to working with and learning from local actors by closely engaging with local partners, including the Alliance for Empowering Partnership (A4EP) which comprises of 14 local NGOs from 11 countries. The Results Group 2 is also encouraging languages such as 'learning from, working with' rather than rather top-down narratives such as 'capacity building by, support to,' considering existing power imbalances. All OPAG members were requested to ensure that (i) the voices of all population groups, especially the most vulnerable, are heard and taken into account during the health, humanitarian and longer-term responses; (ii) the response meets and adapts to the changing protection and assistance needs of all the different population groups; and (iii) the risks of social stress and Gender-Based Violence are mitigated, especially for those most vulnerable populations.

Co-Chairs of the Results Groups 4 on Humanitarian-Development Collaboration and 5 expressed support for contributing to the localization agenda from their respective expertise, while noting the opportunity to move the agenda forward across all Results Groups and link with the Grand Bargain. A follow up discussion was suggested among the co-Chairs and sub-group leads of relevant Results Groups.

**Follow-Up Actions<sup>1</sup>:**

1. Arrange a follow-up discussion on localization [*IASC secretariat*]

**AOB**

The OPAG co-Chairs noted that the fourth session of the OPAG meeting would take place on Friday 12 June as an opportunity to discuss linkages between the COVID-19 Global Humanitarian Response Plan (GHRP), Strategic Preparedness and Response Plan (SPRP) and the socio-economic plan GHRP as a follow up to the IASC Principals' tasking agreed on 28 April, as well as to discuss the progress made by Results Group 4 on the OPAG-agreed 2020 workplan and its reprioritization as a results of COVID-19. The OPAG co-Chairs concluded by thanking the OPAG members and presenters for their constructive engagement throughout the meeting and their continued work in support of the normative work of the IASC.

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<sup>1</sup> Further action points will be consolidated in the summary discussion on localization scheduled for 19 June.

## ANNEX: PARTICIPANTS LIST

<b>OPAG Co-Chair</b>	Ms. Valerie Guarrieri, Assistant Executive Director, WFP Mr. Geir Olav Lisle, Deputy Secretary-General, NRC
<b>FAO</b>	Mr Daniele Donati Ms. Angela Hinrichs
<b>ICRC</b>	Ms. Avigail Shai
<b>ICVA</b>	Ms. Mirela Shuteriqi Mr. Jeremy Wellard
<b>ICVA - ACBAR</b>	Ms. Fiona Gall
<b>ICVA - COAST</b>	Mr. Rezaul Karim Chowdhury
<b>ICVA - FRD</b>	Mr. Azmat Khan
<b>ICVA - IMC</b>	Ms. Mary Pack
<b>IFRC</b>	Prof. Cecile Aptel Ms. Victoria Stodart
<b>InterAction</b>	Ms. Kate Phillips-Barrasso
<b>InterAction - Care USA</b>	Ms. Sheba Crocker
<b>InterAction - Global Communities</b>	Ms. Pia Wanek
<b>IOM</b>	Ms. Tristan Burnett Ms. Angela Staiger
<b>OCHA</b>	Mr. Rein Paulsen
<b>OHCHR</b>	Mr. Roberto Ricci
<b>SCHR</b>	Mr. Gareth Price Jones
<b>SCHR - Christian Aid</b>	Mr. Michael Mosselmans
<b>SCHR – Save the Children</b>	Ms. Leah Finnegan
<b>UNDP</b>	Ms. Rachel Scott
<b>UNFPA</b>	Mr. Ingo Piegeler Ms. Maryline Py
<b>UNHABITAT</b>	Mr. Filiep Decorte
<b>UNHCR</b>	Mr. Arafat Jamal
<b>UNICEF</b>	Mr. Manuel Fontaine Ms. Segolene Adam
<b>WFP</b>	Mr. Brian Lander Ms. Cristina Benvenuti
<b>WHO</b>	Mr. Rudi Coninx

### Presenters:

Mr. Julien Schopp and Mr. Rein Paulsen, co-Chairs of the Results Group 1 on Operational Response  
Ms. Victoria Stodart and Mr. Philimon Majwa, co-leads of the localization sub-group

### IASC secretariat:

Ms. Mervat Shelbaya, Head of the IASC secretariat