Editorial: Localization and the politics of humanitarian action

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Editorial on the Research Topic
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Humanitarian action is often considered a non-political undertaking that should exclusively be motivated by ethical concerns—especially by practitioners, but also to some extent in the scholarly community (MacFarlane and Weiss, 2000, p. 112). When aid organizations fail to deliver on their promises of alleviating human suffering, such shortcomings are often traced back to insufficient coordination between stakeholders, restricted "humanitarian access," or a lack of capacities among key providers of aid. However, critical scholars have pointed to more fundamental tensions surrounding the notion of humanitarianism and highlighted deep-seating problems like structural racism and the paternalism of dominant Western actors in the humanitarian system (Barnett, 2011; Rostis, 2016; Rejali, 2020).

The humanitarian sector has attempted to address such issues through "localization," commonly defined as the devolution of humanitarian tasks (and to a certain extend funds) from international agencies to actors that are closer to the humanitarian situation, such as national and sub-national authorities of affected states, local non-governmental organizations, community initiatives and the affected population themselves (Bennet et al., 2016; Barbelet, 2018). While the idea of "localization" has reached near-consensual status in global debates on humanitarian action, recent evaluations have concluded that its implementation remains flawed and incomplete (Roepstorff, 2020).

Our Research Topic takes these assessments as a starting point for a critical interrogation of the localization agenda. Such an examination, we would argue, must be based in a thorough analysis of ongoing efforts to implement the agenda, but also needs to give room to broader reflection on the merits and pitfalls of the idea of localization itself. The collection therefore includes articles that approach the subject from a pragmatic, policy-oriented stance as well as normative and critical inquiries into the concept of localization and how it relates to ethical questions and figurations of power. Combined, they throw the *politics* of humanitarian action into sharp relief. The former point, for example, to the tensions and dilemmas inherent in everyday humanitarian work and its institutional settings, highlighting the need to address risk perceptions, diverging

time horizons, logistical concerns and competition over resources. The latter seek out possibilities of reinforcing the normative thrust of localization by linking it to principles like solidarity or self-determination, but also raise uncomfortable questions about its implication in global hierarchies. All contributions share a commitment to the imperative of harnessing the agency of affected populations, but also an acknowledgment of the challenges in bringing about the fundamental transformations that are necessary for such an undertaking.

The idea that localization is essentially a political act reverberates in Slim's contribution to the Research Topic. Linking localization to the political right of self-determination, his article injects a novel perspective to the debate. As such, it makes a strong case for the right of the population affected by war, hazards and health crises to play their part as citizens and become humanitarian agents, instead of humanitarian subjects of an international aid regime. The contribution concludes by proposing three reforms of the global aid landscape in order to realize people's political rights: reframing localization to give primacy to locally-led aid; recommitting to increased direct funding; and establishing a high-level oversight process within the UN framework.

The notion of self-determination as a guiding principle of humanitarian action is echoed by Boateng, who provides a critical assessment of the localization discourse and suggests restoration as a conceptual alternative. Working out how international actors cemented their dominance in the Global South by subordinating and eliminating pre-existing national and subnational structures, the article offers an important intervention into the current localization discourse, calling for a different perspective in which localization becomes a process of restoration of the Global South's normative and resource structures. This requires an examination of the histories of interaction of the Global North and the Global South to counter the continuation of further erosion of local capacity.

The relationship between the Global North and Global South, and the local and the international, is a theme that also plays a key role in the argument presented by Shults et al. Placing their research on Citizens Initiatives for Global Solidarity (CIGS) in Lesvos in the context of theoretical debates on solidarity and global citizenship, they make a strong argument for thinking about localization and solidarity in conjunction. The article asks what unintended consequences the global orientation of CIGS can have when encountering local efforts toward bottom-up solidarity and empowerment. In their analysis of original research data gathered in Lesvos between 2015 and 2019 they work out an understanding of solidarity as a negotiation of local and global commitments.

The link between humanitarian action, solidarity and localization is further explored by Dany in her contribution on the COVID-19 pandemic. Though arguing for a conceptual distinction between humanitarian aid and solidarity, the article argues that the COVID-19 pandemic presents an opportunity for humanitarian aid as a tool for global solidarity. To be able to express this global solidarity, humanitarian aid needs to regard people in need as equals and strengthen the agency of organizations in the most affected areas—showing a congruence of the demands of the localization agenda and global solidarity.

Moving away from the conceptual debate on localization, the next contributions analyze the opportunities but also obstacles for operationalizing localization in humanitarian practice. In his study on the experiences and everyday politics of three NGOs in South Sudan and Northern Uganda, Dijkzeul shows how an exchange between an NGO in the Global North with three partners from the Global South not only enables South-South cooperation, but also points toward the importance of long-term relationships and trust for localization to work. Based on original research data, the contribution identifies five requirements for successful localization. Next to long-term trust building, shared objectives, sustainable funding and good working relationships on the ground, they point to the managerial aspects of humanitarian action. This matter is also emphasized by Gibbons and Otieku-Boadu, who in their study of Irish humanitarian NGOs shift their focus from whether to localize to the question of how to do so. Their analysis shows how differences in values and strategic management processes explain variation in organizations' progress in putting the localization agenda into practice. Most importantly, their study reveals how localization is not without risk for all stakeholders involved—an aspect that so far has received little attention but needs to be addressed in strategic management processes for organizations to fully embrace localization.

No discussion of localization would be complete without an inclusion of the donor perspective. In their contribution, Goodwin and Ager critically assess how the UK government as a donor implements localization in its policies. Though the Department for International Development (DFID) has taken initiative to implement localization, the paper identifies three major factors that hinder its effective materialization: logistical concerns, conceptual ambiguity and political considerations. In their analysis of current UK policies, they conclude that localization will likely remain a focus for policy deliberation. Though advancements in terms of some of the logistical and conceptual barriers may be made, domestic political issues of both national interest and public perceptions of national interest will likely constrain a more radical implementation of localization in the medium-term.

Taken together, these contributions highlight the myriad complexities that humanitarian actors face when trying to make localization work, but they also interrogate the idea of localization itself as a deeply political project. As such, the Research Topic provides unique perspectives from the humanitarian sector on some of the main challenges in the broader field of Peace and Democracy, where scholars are grappling with the apparent crisis of approaches associated

with the so-called liberal international order and critically investigate various "inclusion projects" that attest to a shifting thinking in global governance (Obydenkova and Paffenholz, 2021). Contemporary humanitarian action fully recognizes, at least in principle, the need to position itself *vis-à-vis* the broader geopolitical and peacebuilding context, and to address the fundamental issues of inequity, as reflected also in the "New Way of Working" (UNOCHA, 2017). By investigating localization processes and debates, the authors in this collection demonstrate that while decolonization efforts and attempts to harness the agency of those affected remain imperative, easy solutions and quick fixes are often out of reach. Instead, they caution us to account for the unintended consequences of well-meaning policies and to be mindful of the way in which concepts shape and constrain our ability to conceive of ways of doing things differently.

Author contributions

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