

Localisation in practice: Facilitating equitable partnership in humanitarian project management

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Which management models can facilitate equitable partnership?

Notwithstanding remaining criticisms and continued debates on definitions, a consensus has emerged within the international humanitarian community that humanitarian action should be “as local as possible” (Grand Bargain) and local responders should receive “greater support

[for their] leadership, delivery and capacity” (Grand Bargain 2.0). However, practical implementation remains slow, particularly in the area of equitable partnership between local and international organisations. This paper addresses Project Cycle Management as one of the structural barriers behind the lack of progress in this area and suggests agile management as an alternative management model for equitable partnerships.

Key findings

This paper defines equitable partnership through three components:

- **equality** (each partner having equal value, notwithstanding their contribution to the joint project),
- **mutuality** (including a mutual understanding, participation, commitment, trust, accountability, respect, and benefit), and
- **transparency** (open and honest communication).

Conversations with humanitarian practitioners in South Sudan, Bangladesh, and Germany revealed that all three components are compromised in contemporary humanitarian Project Cycle Management (PCM). While PCM contains equal, mutual and transparent structures in the dialogue and project design phases, these are rarely used in humanitarian practice. Cooperation agreements that are introduced in the project formulation phase of PCM build hierarchies between the humanitarian partners (see figure 1). These strongly dominate the later phases of the project cycle as well and structurally impede equality between the humanitarian partners. In addition, they entail a limitation of relationships and thus prevent mutuality and transparency.

The discussions with humanitarian practitioners identified a wealth of practical solutions to address these impediments to equitable partnership. While many are

already known and incorporated in numerous localisation frameworks, they are only quick fixes. A change to agile management offers the potential to embed equitable partnership principles in project management mechanisms (see figure 2).



Figure 1:
Network model
of humanitarian
actors' relations
in waterfall management

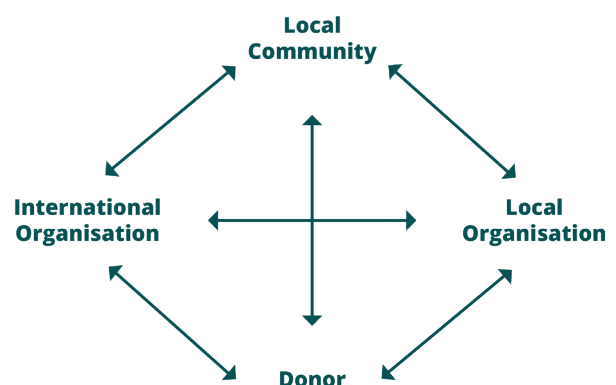


Figure 2: Network model of humanitarian actors' relations
in agile management

Its flexible, iterative “sprint” setup facilitates constant transparent communication between all project partners. Additionally, agile Scrum roles reduce hierarchies (see figure 3). A “project team” approach promotes equality among local and international humanitarian partners while the newly introduced role of “project owners” provides affected communities with a clear leadership role.

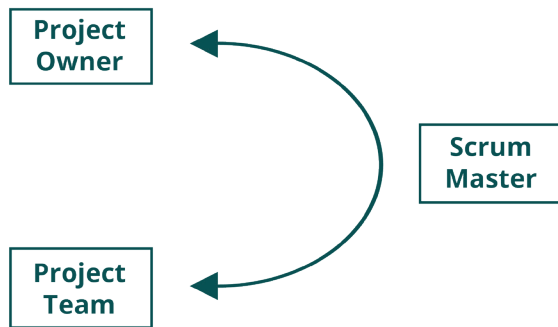


Figure 3: Project management roles in Scrum

The conversations conducted for this paper confirmed the potential positive impact of this management approach for equitable partnership. Some informants have already piloted aspects of it. However, participants have also raised various challenges that agile project management may face in practice. To implement agile management, donors and international organisations must be willing to become ordinary team members.

They must have the courage and capacities to actively engage in flexible and equitable project processes as well as the patience to deal with more complex decision making. Project owner representatives must carefully consider possible divides within affected communities and serve as reliable partners. Local organisations and affected communities must be encouraged to take active leadership roles and related responsibilities. All this makes projects more complex and less timely. In addition, new approaches always come with uncertainty and risks. Acknowledging this, while not giving up a promising approach for more equitable partnerships, this paper suggests using hybrid models and sandbox setups that are supported by external supervision and research to explore agile management models in selected humanitarian contexts.

Key implications & recommendations

1. Equitable partnership involves equality, mutuality, and transparency.
2. Project Cycle Management contains practices and structures that can impede the three components of equitable partnership.
3. While there are practical solutions to address these impediments, agile management models are better suited to structurally anchor equitable partnership in daily practices.
4. To apply agile management:
 - Jointly define overall **objectives** (outcomes) but refrain from predefining project outputs and activities whenever possible.
 - Introduce the role of a “**project owner**” for local community representatives.
 - Introduce the understanding of local and international organisations and donors as being part of one “**project team**”, all carrying equal value and power.
 - Introduce **platforms** of regular mutual and transparent exchange for the project team to discuss and jointly agree on next steps to reach the overall project objective(s).
 - Introduce the role of **project facilitators**, responsible for enabling good communication between project owners and project teams and capacitating the project team to fulfil their tasks.
5. Since the application of agile management in humanitarian action comes with a variety of practical challenges, it should first be tested in sandbox setups under favourable conditions. In less favourable contexts, hybrid approaches can build on the strengths of both models.

Methods in brief

The paper is based on a comprehensive literature review and findings collected in a total of 10 workshops with 13 Germany based international NGOs, 31 local and 10 international NGOs operating in South Sudan, and 12 local and two international organisations operating in Cox’s Bazar, Bangladesh. Further insights were gained through 29 interviews with key informants from seven international and 22 local organisations and three management experts from Germany, Bangladesh, and South Sudan.