

# Localisation & COVID-19

FIELD STAFF  
PERSPECTIVES

WeWorld - GVC

## Title

Localisation &  
COVID-19 - Field Staff  
Perspectives

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With the inestimable  
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There have been concentrated efforts from the global aid community to recognize and structurally adjust approaches of aid deliverance towards greater localisation, where the implementation of humanitarian and development activities would fall under the responsibility of local responders and NGOs, instead of being traditionally and exclusively a practice of organizations from the “Global North”. This gradual shift has been wholeheartedly embraced as a step in the right direction; theoretically it should reduce the cyclical nature of aid dependency in crises that have no end in sight, and place greater authority into the hands of those most affected by disasters, manmade or natural.

And yet, clear examples of redefining aid to incorporate greater efforts at localisation are few and far between. Most organizations have opted for some form of capacity building or a transferral of decision-making processes to carefully vetted national NGOs, to carry out the work their international counterpart would usually do in its place. COVID-19 has revealed the severe limitations constraining INGOs from accessing crisis-affected countries and implementing humanitarian programmes, further accelerating calls for localisation out of what many view as a pragmatic necessity, instead of the culmination of a painstakingly slow process that should have occurred years prior.

What is evident is the inability to critically examine the state of the humanitarian sector or explore how localisation can assist in reshaping power relations between international aid organizations and the communities they operate in. Often with good intentions, INGOs seek to uphold their commitments to humanitarian principles of humanity, impartiality, neutrality and independence. However, the activities of international actors, institutions, donors and other groups who come to dominate the provision and deliverance of aid, can instead replicate the same inequalities that perpetuate aid dependency, often leaving the recipients of aid outside of decisions that affect their lives the most. **Localisation should be an attempt to break from this convention and recognise the immense contribution of local responders to humanitarian action worldwide, through engaged renegotiations of power.**

Much of the difficulty lies in understanding what meaningful localisation is. Often, localisation entails some combination of expanded accountability measures, the transfer of responsibilities to local agents and capacity building exercises. While these efforts may be appropriate for certain contexts, they do not capture how the conduct of international aid services may restrict or exclude the hard work of local responders and community driven initiatives to crises. After all, UN OCHA's 2020 Global Humanitarian Response Plan for COVID-19 continuously stresses

the importance of local actors and yet, only 0.1% of the Plan's funding this year will go directly towards local NGOs and civil society organizations, with most passing through UN agencies to their established partners.<sup>1</sup> Furthermore, local NGOs, volunteer organizations, faith-based and other community-mobilised groups have been quick to reach out and provide assistance to the most vulnerable during the worst phases of the pandemic, usually without the support of larger INGOs or other international institutions. The recognition of the role that local responders play in mitigating the worst impacts of COVID-19 must not be limited to rhetoric and must be inclusive to the mechanisms of funding and operational support that the aid sector relies on.

How WeWorld-GVC adjusts its global activities amidst a pandemic depends on the close collaboration and trust it has built by the local staff and the affected populations they work together with. With access restricted for international aid workers, the organization relies on regular assessments conducted by its local staff to understand and respond better to the needs of communities impacted by the pandemic. In the occupied Palestinian territories (oPt), from which our field perspectives have been drawn from for this paper, restriction is nothing new; with ongoing programmes having to face constant hindrances due to the delicate political situation. Circumventing such challenges, WeWorld-GVC has sought to place a significant amount of control and responsibility into its local staff who are best equipped to engage with the communities in identifying the risks, vulnerabilities and threats they face. This process is the Community Protection Approach (CPA, for more information, please visit [www.cpainitiative.org](http://www.cpainitiative.org)), a multi-sector, multi-stakeholder programmatic modality that strives for greater community empowerment and ownership of interventions responding to their protection needs. The CPA has been implemented in communities across the West Bank for a number of years, fostering close ties between the organization's field staff and the communities themselves. This familiarity has been essential for regular updates on the wellbeing of families during the lockdown, as they are acutely aware of their needs after playing a central role in the development of Protection Response Plans (PRPs)<sup>2</sup>, one of the empowerment tools resulting from the CPA. The PRPs, revised and updated periodically, are designed to be utilized in the territorial planning of communities together with the local authorities responsible for their safety and dignity, in this case the local governates and the Palestinian Authority. Incorporating the PRPs into the planned activities of the local authorities ensures a direct say in the provision of services, allocation of resources and the guarantee of protection from ongoing violations of the rights of affected populations. **Eventually, the collaboration between communities and the authorities fosters a proactive relationship that can improve living conditions and make redundant the role of the organization, thus localising the responses to protection needs within the communities and their members.**

The success of a CPA process is determined by a number of factors;

predominantly the empowering of communities to demand direct involvement in addressing their protection needs and the overall reduction in the threats and vulnerabilities of affected populations. The withdrawal of the organization as a primary provider of basic services or of protection needs strives towards a greater localization of protection-related activities, designed, planned and implemented by the communities themselves. The centrality of the joined planning communities-local authorities in designing the Programmatic strategies of several International NGOs and the aid delivered by the overall Humanitarian Aid coordination.

### How did the COVID19 Lockdown affect our presence in the field?

Access to the communities which WeWorld-GVC were working closely with became impossible after the lockdown during the early stages of the pandemic outbreak in the West Bank. Activities where staff would normally engage in person with members of the community had to be relegated to online only communication. For example, all COVID-19 assessments were conducted over the phone, as well as the carrying out of the various assessment and monitoring components of the CPA.

Since then, field staff have been able to return in person to communities for some weeks already. During that time, they have been able to continue with the various phases of the CPA; whether monitoring and planning activities with communities the organization is well established with or introducing the CPA process to communities unfamiliar with the modality. Protective health measures have also been strictly followed, with face masks, social distancing and regular disinfecting of the hands a prerequisite for any engagement with the communities. Furthermore, WeWorld-GVC staff have taken the opportunity of renewed, in-person contact to raise awareness on health measures that residents of the community can adopt to reduce the risk of contracting the virus, as well as distributing hygiene kits.

### How did the organization maintain communication with communities?

Most, if not all communication between local staff and the communities was conducted online and continues to take place. The first assessment conducted after the lockdown took place in April, during messaging activities informing individuals of protective measures against COVID-19. The communities which have had the most involvement with WeWorld-GVC, particularly through the development and application of their PRPs, were able to quickly provide information regarding the difficulties they continue to experience, whereas communication with communities that have had limited contact with WeWorld-GVC prior to the lockdown was more difficult. This difference can be attributed to the direct participation of the communities in the development and ownership of their PRPs, and thus were well informed on the matter of their protection needs. Furthermore, during the early stages of the lockdown, communities who had developed PRPs approached other organizations operating with their plans, highlighting prioritized needs in the wake of the pandemic. This in turn fostered a bottom-up drive to increase the coherence and complementarity of multiple stakeholders responding to the needs and priorities in the communities.

Communication has not solely been conducted in one direction. Communities are very proactive in regularly updating staff on priorities, latest developments and to request new information. To the extent of communities taking the initiative to correct mistakes they identified with mapping exercises conducted by the field staff. As staff are returning in person to the communities they engage regularly in, as well as the new communities where the CPA is being introduced, commu-

1: Charter4Change, CHARTER FOR CHANGE STATEMENT ON THE REVISED UN GLOBAL HUMANITARIAN RESPONSE PLAN ON COVID19, 7TH MAY 2020. <https://charter4change.org/2020/05/07/charter-for-change-statement-on-the-revised-un-ghrp-on-covid19/>

2: The Protection Response Plans are a set of multi-sector short-to-long-term activities in the areas of relief, support and actors' engagement. The activities are shown as complementary humanitarian and development interventions needed to transition out of the external support provided to a targeted area, and guaranteeing an environment conducive to protection of the affected population.

For more information, please refer to our CPA Handbook Overview that you can download at <https://cpainitiative.org/resources/>

nication is beginning to resemble what it was before the lockdown. The burden of online-only transferral of information has been at times overwhelming for the staff, who have often been available both day and night for community members to contact. A return to in-person contact is a welcome relief for all involved.

### **How can CPA promote localization and community engagement in such cases?**

One of the main instruments of the CPA that propels community empowerment are the aforementioned PRPs. The plans are developed with the communities after a series of consultations, culminating in a multi-sectoral, quantitative and qualitative data collection and analysis that provides a contextualised profile of the community and its needs. Coming to terms with decades of marginalization, injustices or continuous oppression is a delicate process that requires introspection and the untangling of complex power imbalances, both blatant and hidden, to grasp the full scope of the issues at hand. This action-led, participatory process forms a community profile and provides the basis by which the PRPs are built from, and yet equally as important, opens up space to explore new possibilities for action. Throughout every step of the way, members of the community identify the threats and vulnerabilities they face, as well as their capacities for resilience, culminating in a PRP specific to their needs which can then be presented to and implemented with the respective authorities responsible for their safety and dignity, as well as inform other actors of their particular demands. A sudden shock, as the COVID19 pandemic could be, is better absorbed by the affected population, since it falls into their existing capacities to strategically analyse how to solve their own problematics and existing needs.

Ultimately, **close coordination on needs between communities and local/national authorities help break cycles of protracted crises as it reconstitutes and strengthens its relations with external groups, with the aim to end repeated acts of violence and marginalisation.** What WeWorld-GVC strives for is to have communities identify how it is that their protection needs are not being met and what is to be done, with the purpose of building capacities of communities in demanding their rights from the relevant authorities. The best ways forward always lie in contextualised responses stemming from those whose lives are most impacted, and the CPA offers a set of tools to realise such initiatives, so that the role of assistance becomes locally driven and not dependent on international aid organizations. In the coming months, the CPA outputs will be updated through conducting another consultation process with the affected population. This update is part of CPA action-research design focusing on collecting evidence of what has been changed, achieved and analysing what are the drivers of changes and their subsequent impact according to the communities' perspectives. Moreover, a number of new communities will commence with the initial stages of the CPA, online at first, then gradually with in-person sessions to familiarize members of the community with the approach. Faced with the new realities imposed by the pandemic, WeWorld-GVC reaffirms its commitment to the centrality of the community and the priorities it determines most essential in its operational activities, in order to quickly adapt to changing protection needs of affected populations.

Localization is possible, but only if it is established as a programmatic priority of International NGOs and Agencies.

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