Season 2. Episode 13: The Aid Localization Mirage: Dr. Duncan Green on Why Shifting Power Means Rethinking Aid

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Hisham Allam: Hello everyone. Welcome back to DevelopmentAid Dialogues podcast. I'm your host Hisham Allam. Today we are diving into a topic that is both a buzzword and a battle ground - Aid Localization. We are not just asking what it is - we are exploring what is becoming, in fact, and how to reflect the deeper tension and possibilities within the international cooperation.

Joining us is someone who's been both a thought leader and a change maker in this space. Dr. Duncan Green, he's a professor in practice at the London School of Economics, where he co-leads the Activism, Influencing and Change Programme and directs the Global Executive Leadership Initiative's Influencing Programme. For many he's known for his long career at Oxfam GB and the popular from "Poverty to Power" blog. Duncan's work always challenges us to rethink how change actually happens not in theory, but in the mess and the momentum of real-world development. Hello Duncan. We are happy to have you with us today.

Duncan Green: Thanks, Hisham and thanks for that very kind introduction.

Hisham Allam: Duncan, let's just start with the basics. In the view, what does localization actually mean in today's development landscape?

Duncan Green: That's not an easy question to answer. It means different things to different people. There's a very simple version, which is more money goes to local organizations. So locally led, you know, grassroots closer to the people they're trying to help.

And then there's a more sophisticated discussion about what else needs to happen for that to make a difference in terms of the processes, the reporting requirements, the way you monitor and evaluate programs. If you just give the money and you don't do lots of other things, it doesn't always make that much difference. So, I think that that whole discussion is ongoing.

Hisham Allam: Yes. This is helpful framing. You have described yourself as a critical friend in several initiatives. How does this positioning shape your view on whether localization is genuinely processing or just being rebranded?

Duncan Green: So. A critical friend. I, never realized it was a thing until somebody asked me to be one.

And apparently it came out of the military where everyone is scared to disagree with the general. So, they have these people called critical friends who are, not if part of the military hierarchy, who are able to advise the general and disagree politely and all the rest of it. And that's a role I love playing, and it's the way it overlaps with localization is that my power is circumscribed.

I'm not the person with the money. I'm not the person with the line reports, so I can suggest things. But no one has to take me seriously if the suggestions don't make sense. And I was telling you before we came on air, you know, this morning I had a really nice call with a program in Papua New Guinea where I'm a critical friend, where they have taken a simulation of trying to influence the government in the middle of a very chaotic period.

Done it all with local staff, local facilitators in the local language, topian. And this was a kind of download after their first day, and they were absolutely excited about how well it went. And it was a really nice piece of localization in action, and like many pieces of localization, it was actually a bit of an accident.

I was supposed to be there with another outsider, but my colleague hurt her knee skiing so we couldn't go. So, we just handed everything over and it went really well. So sometimes localization happens by accident and that's great. We need to get much better at making it happen by design.

Hisham Allam: That's interesting. And that leads me to wonder about the momentum from your time at Oxfam to your work today. Have you noticed any real shift in how donors and international NGOs approach localization? Or are we circling the same drain with different terms?

Duncan Green: Maybe a bit simplistic is that people have been trying, within the aid sector, have been promising and meaning to try and localize for 20 years or so at least.

And they have largely failed. Now there's one reaction to that, which is they're lying. They're hypocrites. They never meant it. I don't think that's terribly useful. I find it when when something is promised repeatedly and not delivered, and you believe that the people have good intentions, it's worth thinking about the ideas, the interests, and the institutions that are preventing them from getting where they want to get to.

So, the ideas are things like we need, we are worried about money laundering or money for terrorist groups. And that we think our idea is that local groups are more likely to be involved in those kinds of local politics things, not gonna go into whether that's true. I think largely it isn't, but that's an idea and interest is somebody who runs, you know, a large international NGO boss, a chief executive, they are judged by the income they bring in among other things. And it's a very brave CEO who says we are gonna halve our income over the next five years. 'cause we want to give more of it away. You know, make sure it goes through local organizations rather than through us. And then I think the biggest one actually of all these is the institutions, which is that the processes by which aid is taken from donors and delivered to the ground are incredibly complex.

They retain a lot of power and language and ideas which are shaped in the global north. And it makes it very, very difficult for local organizations to actually use that money in a way that works. Just for example, you know, the focus on one year project timetables maximum three years is hopeless if you're trying to do long-term change in many situations, which takes decades or the idea that you have to have a plan and stick to the plan with indicators and evaluation.

When as soon as something happens, you need to change the plan. So yeah, it's very difficult to adapt. So, there's a bunch of institutional obstacles to doing this. So that's a rather long response. But I think those are the reasons why we haven't seen localization do well so far. However, there's a couple of additional things I would say to that, which is there's loads of localization has always been there. You know, if you look at how people respond to natural disasters, there's always a lot of both local response and diaspora response increasingly, that doesn't go through the aid system and that doesn't need to, that doesn't call itself localization in a way. Localization is an external gaze as an external word. And I think that has made a big difference. And then the second thing is that the, the virtual the nervous breakdown that the sector is currently in it's opening up all sorts of doors for unintended localization, and we need to think about how that's gonna happen and whether it can be turned into something lasting and useful.

Hisham Allam: And when disaster strikes, as you have said, as climate disasters which demand urgent action, how can localization balance the speed with community led priorities without falling into disaster capitalism traps.

Duncan Green: Well, I think in a way you've answered your own question. I mean if local responses are led by local people and local organizations and are responsive to local needs and aid is either not in it, not present, or is in a subordinate pre issue, then you can do that. But as I explained earlier, it's very difficult to do that at the moment or historically.

So, I think this question about locally led, genuinely locally led localization. It is very tough for the aid sector to deliver. And I'm actually more excited about going around the aid sector, things like tapping into the huge amount of religious based giving in developing countries. Things like Zakat in Muslim countries or tithing in majority Christian countries.

You know, those are huge amounts of funding. And potential support for communities in moments of crisis, which don't have to jump through all these hoops of the aid system. So, and I think the current situation you got is that with, with the destruction of USAID and the massive step back by a lot of other northern donors, you've got a situation where the money stopped flowing.

There's a kinda wreckage and something will emerge from the wreckage, which could look like localization. But it will be bottom-up localization. It may be very poorly funded. There's not gonna be great careers in that form of localization, but it could be more authentic and very interesting depending on how the next couple of years play out.

Hisham Allam: So just to try to make it easier, how can local NGOs benefit from the current situation of the international aid card.

Duncan Green: Yeah, that's a, you know. Everybody's trying to argue that there are silver linings, and I suppose I'm doing the same thing. I mean, the overall picture is that the aid cut is a disaster.

Especially on a whole bunch of, on health, on humanitarian, there are a range of issues where people are gonna really suffer because of the aid cuts. So, let's not sugar, the pill on that one. But you've got a situation now where it's a bit like COVID. So, when COVID hit, there was some really interesting experiences of localization.

There was a case study in the Pacific where because of COVID, white men in shorts stopped coming and local organizations started working in a different way. They started having meetings in their own language. They started, yeah, many of them are faith-based. So, they started having religious services before each meeting, which they would never do when the secular AIDS guy arrived some people brought their kids to work 'cause they're more family oriented. And lots of things changed, but then they reverted once COVID was over. The situation we have now is analogous but not the same in that the money isn't there. During COVID, the money was still flowing.

But what you've got now is a situation where organizations are gonna have to find other forms of support. Now that can be sort of money, as I suggested with Zakat and tithing and so on, or voluntary efforts. You know, if you look at the community efforts in the Sudan, for example, they have been absolutely massive and the main source of humanitarian relief in the Sudan and have had limited amounts of aid.

So, these kind of ideas are gonna emerge, but there will always hit the problem of how they raise money. And if you raise money locally, that doesn't mean there are no strings attached. Money always comes with strings, but the strings will be different. And so, we might see that actually it's easier to be truly locally led with local funding.

We might not, but it's something that needs to be explored. I think.

Hisham Allam: But speaking about the examples you have given most of the Muslim countries that the CAT money goes to state owned or established organizations that control the expenses and how the money is spent. So, I don't think that this support the approach of localization.

Duncan Green: Okay, so I'm not a Muslim, and I've only read about Zakat, but my understanding is that the management of Zakat varies massively between countries. The volume of Zakat is absolutely huge between one and $2 trillion a year. So, several times the volume of global aid before before the current crunch. So you're not arguing that all Zakat needs to go to something to go to these kind of purposes, just a small portion and that some elements of the Zakat.

Yeah, there's lots of scholarship and people arguing about this could go to community development for example. And I know there are rules about how the Zakat is spent, but it's not the only form of giving within Islam either. But I think organizations like Islamic Relief are doing a lot of thinking about how you can harness

a small portion of this huge exercise in altruism. It definitely doesn't go to government in many places, it goes to the local imam or the local mosque or to family connections to put kids through school. There's a many, many different ways it's given, it's my understanding. But you know, I stress my very superficial knowledge on this, but it's certainly something that we need to explore as is giving by diasporas and just to see whether the governance and the effectiveness of those forms of giving could be improved in terms of the impact on communities.

Hisham Allam: From your view, what you see the biggest structural or institutional incentive that currently hinder genuine progress on localization?

Duncan Green: Back to those three eyes I mentioned earlier. I think it's a combination of ideas. Some of them sort of semi racist, some of them just a question of domestic politics institutional processes, which I think are underestimated and interests in terms of what shapes the incentives of leaders in the aid sector, those three things come together.

And I think that's one way to think about the lack of progress. I think that's a much better way of thinking about it than seeing it as a moral question or a question of double standards. I think you can actually try and understand why it isn't happening and then decide whether you can change any of those things.

Whether you can change the ideas, incentives, or institutions or whether actually. Those are always gonna frustrate efforts at localization. And you follow a different path. Like some of the things I've mentioned.

Hisham Allam: Of course, not all localizations are created equal. What did ginger arise when localization becomes a box tick exercise. How do you avoid romanticizing local at the expense of real accountability and effectiveness?

Duncan Green: This is a really good question, Hisham. I mean, even as I used the word community, I was feeling uncomfortable because community is one of those phrases people use, which is not always helpful because within a community there is power, there is inequality.

There's the classic aid scenario of an aid donor saying, look, we built a borehole, you know, to deliver water to the community. And the borehole is in the grounds of the headman of the village, and the headman charges everyone else to get their water and just exacerbates inequality. So, I think you need to think of always about power and the systems in which these interventions and changes take place.

You can't be naive about local being pure. One of the areas I work on in Papua New Guinea at the moment is a rather exotic one at least to western sorcery, accusation related violence, which is that people are accused of sorcery and then driven out of the villages or killed.

Now that's something which, it's hard to argue that it's externally caused it. It's quite a process which has accelerated in recent years, partly due to sort of shifts and instability within Papua New Guinea. And outsiders are coming in to try and change the social norms around that violence. That's an example where

it's not some romantic concept of community. You've got high levels of gender-based violence, horrendous levels of violence against people accused of witchcraft. And those things are quite endogenous. They're quite local. And they need a whole effort from both outsiders and insiders to shift.

Hisham Allam: That brings us to power. Why localization is often framed as shifting power, but how do we measure whether power is truly being redistributed, not just tasks or responsibilities?

Duncan Green: In my latest book, I talk about power as the kind of false field of social change. It's everywhere and in all places.

You know, the community, the village, the family, we all know that. And many processes of change actually involve the renegotiation and redistribution of power. And it's hard to measure. I think in a sense measurement itself contested is the academic word. So, you know, why are you measuring it? What are you measuring it for? Is it enough to measure it by asking people whether they feel more or less power in a certain situation, or do you have to put a number on it to satisfy a donate, in which case you're in real trouble because this is a subtle and difficult thing to measure. Oxfam has done interesting work to try and measure women's empowerment, and I think that's a great piece of work.

But in general, it's very hard to measure. And so I think you need to have faith in people's judgment about whether what you are doing is distributing power in the right direction or the wrong direction. So, in the example I gave earlier, if you ask the head man, have we empowered this community with this borehole, with this well. People will say yes if you ask the community and the head man is there, they will say yes. If you ask the community and the head man is not there, maybe they say yes. If you ask the women in the community. They'll give you a different answer from the men in the community. So, you've really gotta think about your method, who you are talking to, in what situation, and what you know, answers you might get because of that influence of power and that's difficult work. It's long-term work. It requires a level of sort of understanding of the context and it's not something you just come in with a clipboard and, you know, tick and then go back to your hotel.

Hisham Allam: So, we cannot have a solid reference for this.

Duncan Green: I think qualitative research can be rigorous, right? So, I think that is, I would call that solid. So, for example when I was at Oxfam, we piloted some work with diaries where you get local students to go back to the same families regularly over a period of six months or a year and ask 'em about a particular question.

How they've resolved disputes, how they've managed money, how they've got access to water and sanitation. That is painstaking work, which builds up a picture of reality. If you come in once with a survey, it's garbage, right? So. So, I think you have to actually do the work differently, and it's gonna cost more and take longer.

But you can get solid evidence on this kind of thing. And I'm very excited about that diary's work, which is popping up in various places now because I think it's one way to do what somebody called a cut price ethnography. It's a way of sort of doing what anthropologists do and getting deep. With families, but in a way that is affordable and gives you some sort of picture of what's actually going on inside that community.

Hisham Allam: Do you have in mind, a success story or a model, do you prefer to share with us about localization?

Duncan Green: Mean a couple of stories really. One, is that the example I gave you from the Pacific. Another one, a long time ago, I used to work at the Catholic Aid Organization in England and Wales Cathode. They were asked by their sister organization, Caritas Nigeria, to send over a couple of fundraisers just to help with them lo raising money from Nigerian Catholics.

And they did that. And Caritas Nigeria were astonished. They were overwhelmed with the amount of money they raised locally. So the idea of raising money locally is possible in some contexts. I think COVID, we saw really interesting forms of localization in many countries. We ran a research project called emergent agency in a time of COVID. Where we collected stories of social movements popping up. Many people who had not ever done socially organized work before, just initially formed for helping relatives and neighbors, but then became organized and it became a sort of galvanizing moment for many communities and we charted what were the patterns of that localized response, which took place in COVID because no one else people couldn't come from outside, the aid system was sort of set back and people stepped into the breach. So, I think there's a number of case studies we've seen of actually existing localization. And I collected quite a few of them on my old blog from Poverty to Power.

So, if people go in there and just search on localization, there's a few stories there from different NGOs.

Hisham Allam: Great. Now zooming out to the global picture with rising South South cooperation and distrust of Western aid, how must localization adapt to these geopolitical undercurrents?

Duncan Green: Well, power doesn't go away. Whether you get your money from Brazil, China, or America, the people who give the money have more power than the people who receive the money in general. Right. So, I think localization will change. When you talk to African and Pacific leaders about the role of China, it's quite fascinating because people say, well, you know, the thing we like about China is that they don't give lectures. They don't patronize, they don't have that colonial vibe that we get from the Brits or from the US. On the other hand, they sometimes bring their own workers, not just their own managers, but their own workers in which doesn't create jobs. Sometimes there are debts which are hard to pay. So, there's a bunch of different things around that's the Chinese investment or from anywhere. So, I guess localization will always be a question. When money is coming from outside, it'll just look different because of the different traditions and relative powers. Money doesn't come without strings, but the strings are different. Localization funded locally will also have strings. Some local tech bro funds a big project in any given country. The money will still come with strings. If you raise money from subscriptions, from membership, that helps there will still be issues around how much you charge, who gets excluded. So, I think the message of what

I've been writing recently is just don't look for a place where power does not exist. 'cause there isn't one you just have to get better at seeing what the relationship between power and money is. 'cause we need money often to help people. Get better at seeing and understanding how power and money are connected. And then what can you do to actually make sure that doesn't stop you achieving your own.

Hisham Allam: But some local actors say they feel an instrumentalized invited into the room, but not into the decision making.

Duncan Green: Yeah, absolutely.

Hisham Allam: What would it take to flip that dynamic for real?

Duncan Green: We're going back to the aid sector really now. So how do you sanitize that flow of money so that it doesn't come with some 23-year-old graduates from the LSE, for example, where I work telling a lot of very experienced local people what they should be doing with the money.

How do you, how do you avoid that? And one way I think is pulled funds where donors put money into a common fund. And that fund is actually managed by local people. They make decisions on funding. Now that is a good idea. Technically, it can work. It's difficult politically. 'cause as soon as one bit of that money goes on, something wrong or some suspicion arises that it's going on something wrong, it's very tempting for the donors to say, no, no, we can't risk this, we want the money back. We want to run it directly by ourselves. So, but it's, it's something that's been tried with some success. I think actually, and this is totally against the current flow of events, scholarships are quite a good, distributed form of aid which are a form of localization of two local elites, but they are a form of localization. The place where I work at the LSC runs a very large master's program with hundreds of scholarships for African students. And those people come to the LSC, they get the benefits of SC education. They go back, they don't then get told by the LSC what they should be doing when they go home.

They go back into government, into the private sector, into civil society, and they do really good stuff. So, scholarships are interesting as a kind of distributed form of aid. It's not how people normally see scholarships, and they definitely have a soft power motive in that you are trying to influence people to be friendly to the LSE or to the UK or to the US or wherever.

But they do have a different feel to them than project funding. So, I think. Project funding is just one way of funding things and it's not a good way in terms of localization. We need to think about other forms of funding. Start with, you know, imagine there's no project, and think about how else we could support people.

Hisham Allam: In your leadership training work, what is the most common blind spot you see among international staff when it comes to local power dynamics?

Duncan Green: I mean, the people we are training are part of an international aid system. They're very smart. Their intentions are almost universally honorable. But they are part of that system. So, they are in the UN, they're in international NGOs, they're in the Red Cross and Red Crescent. So, it's very hard for them to step outside of that system and talk about some of the things I've been talking about today.

So, I think, you know, one of the things I've often thought should happen and it doesn't. Is immersion that maybe in order to sort of get people out their fixation with internal processes, with sign off, with funding, with committee meetings, people should spend a week or two weeks a year just living in a small community, not trying to deliver aids, just seeing how they live, how they work understanding more what the lives, the like, of the people they think they are helping. So, I think there's a sort of cultural mindset, which makes it quite hard to take localization out of this kind of top-down model and think about what it actually means.

Hisham Allam: That sounds great. The international NGOs often talk about building local capacity, but who gets to define what capacity looks like? Are we imposing models that don't fit the context?

Duncan Green: So, I remember when I, I worked very briefly for the British Aid Ministry, it was called then. And we got an application from an Indian NGO for funding to build the capacity of British NGOs. And I thought that was a fantastic idea and I was really disappointed when our department said no.

It just highlighted essentially the colonial nature of this word, this phrase capacity building. 'cause the assumption behind that is that we, the global north, the aid sector, the experts will build the capacity of them, the global south, the grassroots organizations, the local CSOs. And that is just such a partial picture of reality where some of the organizations I've worked with their local staff are supremely politically savvy. They're well connected. They know how to make change happen in their context and is laughable to think that we would be building their capacity on anything other than how to manage the aid system. A lot of the capacity building is actually about how to manage the aid system, which is almost like reinforcing the problem.

So, I think, a different approach to capacity building where you say, what do you want to know? Who do you think is best placed to do that? Would the best way to build your capacity be to send you to a similar context to spend a week with another NGO or another government body that's done it rather more than better than you? Or has our track record on that? If so, we'll fund it, not, yes, we can arrive with our PowerPoints and enlighten you and then fly out again. Because that is a terrible model of capacity building, even though sometimes what I do I try to minimize that level of white privilege in delivering capacity building and it's not good.

Hisham Allam: Speaking about managing the aid system, there is often tension between speed and participation. When donors say they want local ownership but also need quick results, who usually compromises and what is lost in the trade-off?

Duncan Green: Great question, Hisham. I mean, you won't be surprised to hear that I think it's the communities that have to compromise, and the tradeoff is less impact. So, an example from an old Oxfam program I worked on, I'll give a lot of examples from Oxfam 'cause I was there for 20 years. So, I built up a lot of my kind of pool of stories when I was there. We had this really interesting program in Tajikistan. Where nothing was working on water and sanitation in Tajikistan. And so we went to the Swiss Donut, Swiss government and said, look, there are 17 government ministries working in water and sanitation. There are all the UN bodies, there's the World Bank, there's private sector, there's NGOs. What we wanna do is actually just form a community of practice we'd call it now a, a meeting of everybody working on water and sanitation to get 'em together regularly and see whether, how we do things better. We don't know what the results will be. We cannot predict, we cannot give you what they call a logical framework, a log frame with our predicted outcomes.

We just think that that conversation is worth having and to their credit. The Swiss said, okay, we'll fund you for five years. And the guy, a really charismatic Palestinian engineer went back and said, no, give us 10. And the Swiss said yes. And what that meant was that you could just create a space where everybody concerned about water and sanitation could get together and talk about the problems and the solutions. And after that came some really interesting initiatives. So, there was one where they found an old water investment law because investing in water in Tajikistan's really difficult takes, you know, 180 days to get approval and all the rest of it. They found an old investment law, which had been kind of drafted but then forgotten.

They took it out, tweaked it and the government passed it, and the time it took to make a new investment in water or sanitation dropped drastically. The president agreed to co-fund an investment in water and sanitation, and then really started to get results going. Now, none of that was foreseeable when they applied, and it took more than the one or three year time horizon that an a project typically needs.

So, it was only possible because the Swiss willing to do something different and innovative. There are very few donors who are doing that right now. So, I think there's a real problem about, that slow change we can produce results. A second example. Increasingly in the aid sector, people are talking about the importance of social norms. It's not about laws, it's not about policies, it's about the underlying views of people about what is normal, natural, acceptable, something like gender-based violence treatment of LGBTQI individuals. Though shifting social norms is not something you can do in a year. This example I gave from witchcraft in the in Papua New Guinea.

These are things that take generations to change. Aid is very poorly designed for this kind of work. In a way, AID is designed for building stuff. Let's build a, well, let's build a road. Let's build some infrastructure that morphed into let's build schools, let's build hospitals, let's deliver medicines.

All of these were short-term interventions. Increasingly, we are looking at longer term issues, like shifting social norms. IT aid is very poorly designed for those.

Hisham Allam: Could you tell me one hard truth about localization that people in the sector don't like to admit?

Duncan Green: Okay. This is where I get into trouble, but that's why you're asking me the question. Right? Okay. So, there's this, there's a view on localization of the people who resisted, which is that local players are more likely to be politically involved and more likely to cause political problems because, for example, they're members of local parties they're linked to local groups. They may take money and give it to local groups. There is an element of that which is true, which is that obviously people who are politically aware, who are involved in their societies. Are much better at delivering local programs, but they're also much more likely to be involved in local politics than foreigners.

So, you have to come up with a way of thinking about that. Which manages that, not says because of that we're not gonna do any localization. But you, there's no point in being naive and saying that's just racist. Because actually it's entirely understandable that people from local societies working in local context are part of local politics and many people working in the aid sector go on to then, stand for office, and many of the people that the aid sector helps goes on to stand for office or go on to be involved in politics.

So, you have to find a way where politics is not a dirty word, where politics actually a good thing and think differently about the involvement of local staff and local partners in their local political contexts.

Hisham Allam: That is a very diplomatic answer. Looking at the next five, 10 years, do you see any tipping points, political, financial, or social, that could force a measure shift in localization, or will it remain incremental?

Duncan Green: Oh, we're in the middle of it. UN person I was talking to recently said, well, look, we've gotta make a call on whether the current chaos in the aid system is a tide which goes out and comes back to where it was a change, a long-term change of ocean current, where suddenly we're swimming against the current it's just get really hard work or a tsunami that does blitzes everything. And then new stuff arises from the wreckage. I think we're seeing a tsunami. So I think I think the UN system is massively damaged by what's going on at the moment. The World Bank is talking about relocating out of Washington. One of the really surprising and shocking things is how many other donors jumped on the bandwagon behind USAID or behind the Trump administration and cut their aid. So, we are seeing a situation where aid is gonna be massively cut and it may not come back. So, in terms of localization, that means that there will be this tsunami wreckage and then organizations will come out of that wreckage.

Yeah. There will still be a need to help people in distress. There will still be people who want to influence their national government, or their provincial government, local government. The things which motivate aid will still be there, but the aid won't be. What we need to do, I think, is to be very, very attentive to look for early signs of what kind of architecture is emerging.

You know, it may just be multipolar, it may be that Turkey is the main player in East Africa. China is the main player in Southeast Asia. Brazil is the main player in Latin America. It may be just that, or it may be something much more complex and interesting, but we need to actually understand that. And then what that means for people like me, and I think probably you as outsiders, how do we show solidarity and find a useful role in

this new architecture rather than try and drag it back to how things were before? 'cause how things were before, at least in terms of localization, was not working.

Hisham Allam: Finally looking ahead, if localization succeeds, what becomes the role of international NGOs? How can they avoid relevance or worse abstraction in this new ecosystem?

Duncan Green: Well, in a way, I don't care. I mean, INGOs always say we're trying to work ourselves out of a business. Yeah, it's never very convincing, but this may be the thing that happens.

So, on one level I don't care, but on another level, there are clearly places where the INGOs will retain a big role. I'll point to three, I think. I mean, one is there are disasters which overwhelm local government and local capacity to respond. And the capacity of diaspora there will be a need for a humanitarian response there.

Another one is global challenges. You know, you can't solve climate change one country at a time. INGOs are very well placed to do that convening catalytic role to bring people together to bridge between very local, national and international, on issues like, you know adaptation or loss and damage.

So, I think there'll be a role in terms of global, the Japanese global public goods, global, global good things will require global organizations to deliver and especially if the UN is damaged because it's had its funding card, iron NGOs will be part of that answer.

INGOs are actually quite good at influencing governments. They've learned a lot over the years. I draw a lot of lessons from Oxfam and other IGOs in the work I do at the LSE London School of Economics. I think there's a role there for supporting local organizations to get more effective at influencing decision makers in their countries, not telling 'em how to do it, supporting them. The kind of stuff that I was doing this morning in terms of the, the simulation game in Papua New Guinea, people in Papua New Guinea, trying to work out how they use some of the tools like stakeholder mapping and thinking about strategy to get better, a more responsive government.

If INGOs can find a respectful and humble role to support that, that would be great.

Hisham Allam: Duncan Green, thank you for pushing us to interrogate the assumptions behind the words we use. You remind us that changing how we do aid is ultimately about changing how we see power, where it sits, how the shared, and who gets to define success. As always, we would love to hear your reflections. Is localization in your world more talk than transformation, or are you seeing signs of genuine shifts?

To everyone listening, if this conversation steered something in you, let it move beyond the echo. Talk about it. Question, what is working? Lift up the voices that don't always get the mic. I'm Hisham Allam, signing off, and this was DevelopmentAid Dialogues. Until next time, stay curious, stay compassionate, and above all, stay human.

Goodbye.