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# A paradigm shift is needed on Canada's approach to international humanitarian aid

In a time of turmoil and conflict across the world, Canada's choices can set an example for the future of aid delivery.



International Development Minister Ahmed Hussen. Canada will soon release its aid plan for Myanmar for the next three years. *The Hill Times* photograph by Andrew Meade

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In the past decade, international humanitarian agencies have increasingly embraced “localization.” It’s a shift that centres power within local populations, respects community guidance, promotes self-determination and context-appropriate solutions to social problems, and questions narratives that position countries in the Global South as inferior.

In 2022, Global Affairs Canada (GAC) conducted a study on localization that reports a trend in Canadian international non-governmental agencies (INGOs) moving towards this practice. About half of the organizations surveyed said that their projects are now primarily managed by beneficiaries.



Nisha Toomey is a research fellow with the Myanmar Policy and Community Knowledge Hub. *Photograph courtesy of University of Toronto*

As experts on Myanmar—a site of highly challenging humanitarian crises—we have observed decades-long systems of organized, efficient, and wide-ranging aid delivery created by and for local groups. In Myanmar, local and national organizations have been delivering humanitarian aid and social services, including health care, education, food, and goods

distribution, for decades in co-ordination with INGOs and large agencies like the United Nations. However, these partnerships have often been challenging and imperfect.

Although community-governed organizations play a vital role in the provision of humanitarian assistance, they are frequently sidelined from decision-making and resource distribution, and confined to the position of subcontractors overseen by larger, foreign organizations. These foreign organizations tend to download onto local partners onerous bureaucratic demands of donor governments, and often impose additional requirements of their own, often in the name of “capacity building.” Rigid international compliance standards, such as complex budgets, monthly—or even biweekly—reporting, online systems that are hard to access, and huge applications for funding that renew too frequently, can restrict the efficacy of local humanitarian activities and stifle the knowledge and practices of local aid groups.

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Observers have long noted that local relief workers and alternative aid models outside official pathways are more efficient at aid delivery than large groups. In recent years, scholars and aid workers on the ground have released numerous studies that show that ethnic national groups in Myanmar's borderlands, as well as local actors in central Myanmar, are conducting aid delivery in ways that are more efficient than large INGOs and agencies, while also going through channels that do not benefit the violent military junta financially or in terms of legitimacy.



Isabella Aung is a research fellow with the Myanmar Policy and Community Knowledge Hub. *Photograph courtesy of University of Toronto*

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In the context of an ongoing civil war, local organizations are able to deliver aid to communities most in need that INGOs and agencies cannot reach because of the junta's restrictions. These studies show that local organizations' unique understanding of, access to, and trust within communities has put them at the forefront of humanitarian efforts. Their way of working with communities and strengthening local governance and administrative bodies is laying the foundation for the establishment of a future federal democracy.



Mehek Berry is a research fellow with the Myanmar Policy and Community Knowledge Hub. *Photograph courtesy of University of Toronto*

Data from Myanmar aligns with trends in international development in other parts of the world, and more importantly, it aligns with what Canadian international development is saying it wants to do: support local communities and take their lead.

Soon Canada will release its aid plan for Myanmar for the next three years. If Canada cares about a federal democratic process that ensures better human rights standards for people across Myanmar, then the plan for aid needs to robustly prioritize getting funds to small, local organizations. When INGOs are used as intermediaries, they should be supported to do so in ways that enhance, rather than constrain, their local partners: community and civil society groups that deserve trust and confidence from funders and donors.

More localization of aid on the ground, and flexibility on the part of donors can better align with the reality and needs of Myanmar's diverse and marginalized groups, and support their larger objective of building an inclusive and peaceful federal democracy. This transformation is critical to improving the sustainability of humanitarian aid in the region.

Supporting localization aligns with Canada's stated values on democracy and human rights, making this an issue of moral and ethical consistency for this country's foreign policy. A paradigm



Samantha McGavin is executive director at Inter Pares. *Photograph courtesy of Inter Pares*

shift around trusting organizations to do the work they say they will—and not strapping them with complex reporting activities that remove from their important tasks of aid delivery—is much needed.

*Nisha Toomey, Isabella Aung, and Mehek Berry are research fellows with the Myanmar Policy and Community Knowledge Hub (MyPACK) at the University of Toronto. Samantha McGavin is executive director at Inter Pares.*

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*The Hill Times*

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