

# Transcript

00:00:00 Speaker 1

Hello and welcome to the Migration Oxford podcast.

00:00:03 Speaker 1

I'm Delphine Bogie.

00:00:04 Speaker 2

And I'm Rob McNeil.

00:00:05 Speaker 1

So Rob, what are we talking about today?

00:00:08 Speaker 2

Well, so today we've been talking about the localisation of aid and its relationship to migration issues, which has been an absolutely extraordinary conversation and something that from my point of view as a former member of staff at Oxfam, for example, has been really, really interesting.

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And the primary crux of what we've been talking about is the importance

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of funding small scale organisations in very specific kind of geographical and international contexts, rather than simply thinking of aid as something that should be done on a mega scale with mega organisations.

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And it makes a lot of sense and it's really, really interesting.

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But as the conversation sort of has shown, it's also really, really hard to implement.

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The conversation

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particularly for this episode, it was a bit too short to kind of cover so much knowledge exchange with different research institutes and countries and specific country examples.

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The conversation with Ruta and Dinilo today introduced the principle of localisation and how this can affect migration flows.

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We talked about people who have, thanks to receiving humanitarian aid, then gone on to receive stronger educations,

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more opportunity, resources in their home countries, and potentially have had more opportunity and more choice to migrate.

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Why do you think localisation efforts are important to understand when we talk about migration?

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I guess my view on this is all my thoughts, having had this conversation, but also having been working in this area for quite a while, is that there's a sort of a conceit among politicians internationally

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certainly politicians who want to justify spending money on aid, that it will help to achieve goals like reducing migration.

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Now the evidence doesn't really support that and actually it's perfectly...

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It's fairly well established that in plenty of situations, if you improve people's financial well-being, then it actually creates scenarios where they're more likely to move than less likely to move.

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But that in itself isn't an argument for not providing aid in situations where it's necessary.

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It's just to suggest that the relationship between migration and development is complex.

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There's a lot of discussion throughout the conversation that we had with Danilo and Ruta about this kind of the idea of there being a hump.

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a sort of development hump where there's a certain point that you have to get to in providing support to organisations and civil society in different places around the world that if you don't get past that, then you're going to be in a situation where rather than discouraging migration, you're simply providing people with the mechanisms to do it.

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The other thing that I thought was really interesting in the conversation that we had was this really important question about governance, right?

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Because clearly,

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Irrespective of what your objectives are, whether it's simply to improve the quality of life for people in somewhere, or whether it's, or whether you do have these kind of like slightly problematic ideas that if you put money into a place, you might reduce immigration.

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Irrespective of any of that, you know, if you put money into national government,

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It looks unlikely sometimes for that to be able to reach the spaces where it's really needed.

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But if you put money into these hyper-local organisations, then you create a situation where the governance of those places, knowing that the money is actually being used appropriately, knowing that the organisations are well run and not and don't have kind of problems with kind of, you know, any issues of corruption or whatever, is a big problem too.

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So there's all of this big complex set of things going on.

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And it's just been a

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really, really interesting opportunity to dig into that.

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Absolutely.

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There was a really interesting phrase that Danilo referred to, and it was particularly when talking about localized AIDS efforts and moving AIDS to being as local as possible, as international as necessary.

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And I wonder if a lot of the conversation, we discussed negative impacts of migration and the complexities and intricacies of aid and development as it stands in the 21st century.

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But when I was listening into the conversation, I was really considering how this topic requires so much sensitivity and an awareness of how a top-down approach negatively impacts aid efforts.

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It seems really vital that we question in this conversation the we, who's the one giving

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or receiving aid and the power dynamics that are at play and also the why.

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is the aid being given and even where, will resources be placed and be best placed?

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What are your thoughts on this?

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I mean, yeah, as you say, that phrase, you know, as local as possible or as international as necessary was super interesting.

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I also think that it speaks to a broader kind of zeitgeist at the moment, if you'll excuse the pretentious term, insofar as this move, this sense that big mega international organisations like, you know, like the major development organisations and big governments and stuff like that, imposing a structure of kind of how money should be spent and all that kind of stuff is problematic now.

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And there is a change.

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It feels, as I say, as somebody who has something of a background in working in development, it does feel like we're moving away from this idea that you can do that, you can have these big organisations in large western or high income countries just simply, you know, kind of dropping money somewhere else and telling people how to spend it.

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And it does seem like a positive development that people are moving away from that model and towards one that might be more focused on, providing cash, for example, to smaller organisations or, helping very specific locations to do very specific things.

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But as I say, it was very clear from the conversation that it's also very difficult.

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And I think that this has been the crux, I think the crux of the conversation,

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This looks like the right thing to do, but it's also really hard to do.

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And how you get past that, I don't know.

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I think the basic reality is the world is complicated and doing the right thing is difficult, but you have to try.

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And that seems like a good place to any to pause our conversation and turn to our experts.

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I'm joined today by Danilo Angulo, who's a humanitarian consultant and completed the Masters in Global Governance and Diplomacy at the University of Oxford.

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And by Ruta Nimkar, who's the director of Miraki Labs, which is a research company in which products are co-authored by refugees and migrants.

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And she's also a DPhil student at Compass, the Centre on Migration Policy and Society here in Oxford.

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So Ruta, can I start today?

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I mean, we're talking about the localisation of aid and its impact on migration.

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Can you tell us about something called the Grand Bargain?

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Explain what it is and why it's important for discussions about migration.

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Absolutely.

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So the grand bargain is basically a compact that was entered into by donor governments, so EU, the US, et cetera, UN agencies and international aid agencies to try to improve humanitarian and development aid specifically to fragile states.

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Why is this related to migration?

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Basically, there's two ways in which the grand bargain is associated with migration.

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The first is the idea that migration is caused by poor development or lack of development, so people move in order to access better employment opportunities.

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And the second is the idea that migration is forced often due to conflict and insecurity in different areas.

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The idea of the grand bargain is that if it's possible for international agencies to better support

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local communities, aid efforts, stability and wellbeing in fragile states, then fewer people have an incentive to move, especially irregularly.

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Okay, so this is like a UN deal or it's, I mean, you describe the people who've signed up to it.

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Who brokered this in the 1st place?

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If you don't, if I could just clarify that.

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So it was the UN that brokered it.

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It was done at the first World Humanitarian Summit in 2016.

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And the aim of it was to also acknowledge that you need a lot of different people to make stability and development.

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So not only the UN, but also money from donor governments, also small organizations that act in more independent ways, and both international and local organizations.

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Okay, that brings us quite neatly to the next question, which is for you to know if that's okay.

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So I mean, the idea of localization of aid sits really in contrast with the image that we might have of large international organizations.

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So how does the principle of localization actually work in practice?

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So it's important to highlight that the principle of localization is basically defined as a principle of making humanitarian action as local as possible and as international as necessary.

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And what that actually means is that it basically aims to put humanitarian aid into the hands of people in need, right?

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Now, to your question, in contrast to the view that we have of large international organizations, the principle of localizations in practice basically involves providing direct funding to local NGOs and ensuring that their capacity building is strong and ensuring that they have a central role in their decision making, basically ensuring that they are from the very beginning until the very end of the process.

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Okay, and just to kind of clarify that a little bit further, I mean, presumably there are challenges in the kind of management of that.

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Is it something that is more straightforward to distribute things to small local organisations?

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How does one manage the kind of like the practicalities of the governance of those organisations?

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I mean, obviously, larger organisations, we have a little bit more understanding of their workings.

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And reality is actually a very complex process.

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So for example, an important target of the localization bookstream was that 25% of the global humanitarian funding was going to be channeled directly to local and national responders.

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However, according to the, for example, to the 2023 Grand Bargain report, it highlights that basically organizations are holding short.

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been to this, right?

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And there are different reasons why they're fully insured.

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The main one is basically that a lot of them that are trust issues.

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For example, they do not want to transfer large sums of money to local organizations due to concerns of transparency and accountability.

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That highlights that.

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In order to do that, they basically need to make sure that the organizations have a strong capacity building.

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So it goes back to the root cause of level.

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first, ensuring that organisations have a good, strong system in order to basically channel the 25%.

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Danilo, thank you so much.

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That's really, really interesting.

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Ruchi, if I can come back to you.

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So Compass's MIGNEX project looked at the role of aid in migration decision-making and found that it was very complex.

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So while many predominantly arrival or donor countries want to use aid to deter international migration, in fact, these are complex processes and in some cases international aid, for example, education, can be

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actually shown to increase migration.

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So how do you think the localization of aid sort of impacts on these sort of complex dynamics?

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So it's a really interesting question with basically a lot that's interesting to say on the side of migration theory and also with regard to how aid is delivered and how effective it is.

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In terms of migration theory, as you rightly said, increases in development do not necessarily lead to decreases in migration.

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So there's an idea of a migration hump in which as countries get better off, migration out of poor countries actually increases.

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There's questions about whether or not this is true, and recent academic articles have actually maybe undercut this.

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But there is, it's certainly the case that providing more development aid does not necessarily reduce migration.

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But this is also associated with how aid is provided and how effective aid is.

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There have been clear examples, especially in conflict-affected countries, of aid not producing the desired results, usually in one of two ways.

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The first is that aid can actually achieve negative results.

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For example, there was a WHO intervention in Haiti after the earthquake,

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where due to inadequate procedures, policies, and processes, WHO actually accelerated cholera rather than reduced it.

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Could you explain a little bit about how that actually worked for him?

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So cholera is a waterborne disease.

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And if, for instance, water infrastructure is produced but not maintained, or if it's built in a way that's not appropriate, more poor quality water can lead to more incidents, acute watery diarrhea and cholera.

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So there are examples of poor aid, poor design of aid actually resulting in people being less well-off.

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There are also examples of aid diversion.

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So that's the most powerful people in a country diverting aid to their own purposes and not leaving enough for the average people to build their lives and livelihoods.

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That's certainly the case in many conflict-affected countries, where, for instance,

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In Somalia, there was direct evidence that 90% of aid going to the federal government was diverted.

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In Afghanistan, there was a report from the US Inspector General's office, which indicated very similar percentages of aid being diverted.

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This can result in hilarious situations where, for instance, an organization that was supposed to be building schools didn't necessarily engage adequately with its local staff.

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They put the same picture of the same school in reports over the course of four years and didn't get caught for that length of time.

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So diversion is also an issue in making sure that aid is effective.

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The point about localization is that what it says is we're aiming at least to give this money and give these resources directly to local communities to the extent possible, to form the ways of distributing aid together with them,

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and to make sure that local dynamics are taken into account, both so that aid is put towards things that people consider right, and so it's not diverted.

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The problem is, it's a wonderful idea.

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Actually achieving the goal is super hard.

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Right.

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Yes, that makes perfect sense.

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In terms of what it means for the overall question of

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how wealthier countries deal with aid to poorer countries, I mean, you're describing situations in which there is essentially kind of like arguments against providing aid, full stop.

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Now, does this mean basically that aid is

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problematic fundamentally, or that this is just that we simply need to acknowledge that there are complexities in delivering it and accept that if we are going to deliver aid to places, it is going to be challenging.

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I think there's a wider discussion within the aid community about decolonizing aid, for sure.

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Many aid agencies and many individual programs have produced good and impactful results.

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There have been like the examples of radically improved health in Somaliland due to really interesting programming where local pharmacy companies were strengthened, like their capacity to assess the quality of drugs and to accurately self-prescribe people was actually went up incredibly courtesy of a program from PSI, Population Service Institute.

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So there have been lots of very good aid programs.

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So I'm not saying we should get rid of aid.

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It's not self-interest.

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It's also genuinely evidence indicates that aid done right.

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can be very good.

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The done right is the big caveat and the big assumption.

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What localization is all about, or should be all about in theory, is helping big and small organizations together do it right.

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Okay, right.

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That makes a lot of sense.

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Danilo, if I can come back to you.

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Engagement in local government has been used as a tool to advance localization efforts in Bangladesh, in Iraq, South Sudan and Yemen.

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Can you tell us a bit about these efforts and the impact that they've had?

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Definitely.

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So, for example, in Bangladesh, particularly during the Rohingya refugee crisis, the international organizations have

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collaborated with local governments to enable coordination, right?

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So for context, there are tensions between the Rohingya refugees and the host communities in Bangladesh, and the collaboration by the organizations with local governments has enabled these organizations to address the needs of both groups more effectively, you know, without letting one or the other group behind.

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So essentially, this has allowed the organizations to ensure that the aid responses align with the local development plans and community priorities.

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And that has also helped reduce the tensions between the refugees and the host populations, as the host populations argue that the aid is being directed more to the refugees.

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So by working with local governments, there has been a balance in terms of this.

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So this is basically a successful example of it.

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Another one, for example, could be in Yemen.

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Working with local governments has been essential in delivering aid during the country's long and complicated conflict.

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As of right now, the country is divided into half and different areas are controlled by different groups.

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And despite these, organizations have basically partnered with local authorities in each area to ensure that the help is basically reached.

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So for example, this includes education, health, water, job support and whatnot.

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However, it is important to highlight that the current conflict has made the process more difficult as it has created significant challenges in terms of security, access and coordination.

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So this is basically a factor to take into account as well.

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This is interesting as well, Danilo, because I mean, part of what you're talking about here as well is that localization

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effort, recognising that, I mean, in the Bangladesh case, for example, you're talking about specific efforts to provide local aid, which mean that a migrant community is better able to integrate.

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Is that correct?

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I mean, obviously, the effects of migration, we know from lots of research, tend to be felt most profoundly at the local level.

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And do you think that that's a big deal from the migration perspective?

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I think it is a big deal.

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Something that we talk about when it comes to migration is about how we can support the migrants when they move to a different country.

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And I think that these organizations has done tremendous work in terms of like offering legal support, you know, water, sanitation and health shelter.

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But it is also important to mention that, you know, when we had the migrants, the migrants coming in, there are also populations that are perhaps

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by the peace, right, within the country.

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So by working with local governments, these organizations have ensured that aid is local and that it supports different communities within the whole country itself.

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Also, maybe if I add something specifically about Bangladesh, it's a really interesting example because the Rohingya came from Myanmar to Bangladesh, most of them.

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They've come over a wave since the 1970s.

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But many, many people came in, I think, 2016, 2017.

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The government of Bangladesh does play a super strong role in coordinating efforts to provide aid to the Rohingya.

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But the role of the international community is actually less than it should be.

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So of the amount of money that's needed to fund provision of services to the Rohingya, in 2024, only 45% of the required amount of money was given.

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Meaning that suddenly the government of Bangladesh, the local government, had the weight of that extra cost on its shoulders.

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So it's kind of thinking about stuff like that.

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That's the reason why localization both is important as a thing at the international level and is important to better understand migration dynamics.

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Right, absolutely.

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Yeah, that makes a lot of sense.

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Ruchi, if I can just continue with you for a moment.

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I mean, local civil society is obviously crucial, in particular in relation to the decision-making processes of migrants.

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There's also a sense that local groups can amplify the voices of migrants more effectively.

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Can you tell us what you've learned about this from this work in Colombia, in Iran, Somalia and South Sudan?

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Absolutely.

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I think it's kind of very interesting to look at how civil society

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contributes to migration, especially in the context of Somalia and South Sudan.

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So South Sudan has obviously been driven by civil war for many years.

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And there's a whole bunch of different tribes and different localized conflicts, as well as the national conflict.

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Migration is really complicated in this context for pretty much anybody wanting to leave.

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It requires a couple of things.

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It requires money and it requires logistical support, like how do you do things?

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How do you understand the papers?

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How do you understand the processes?

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We as Meraki did some research on a community in South Sudan that bordered Ethiopia.

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There were two things that were interesting about the research.

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The first was that refugees from South Sudan would go to Ethiopia to access public services they couldn't access at home.

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So short distance migration helped a little bit to relieve the pressures that sometimes lead to long distance migration.

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One of the other things that was interesting was the scope that people used to engage with migration.

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So people were looking for money in order to fund migration journeys.

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There's so few logistics in that area that there were no real banks, there were no real money transfer services, but there were a lot of local churches.

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So diaspora communities could fund efforts

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sometimes to directly pay for migration journeys through money transfer that took place through local churches.

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So it's a kind of an interesting example of civil society not just being NGOs, but being whoever was active in an area with very little infrastructure.

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So when you talk about funding migration journeys, are you still referring to funding short distance migration, sort of smaller migration journeys, or are you talking about basically these civil society organisations funding those longer, more significant intercontinental potentially journeys?

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So the civil society organizations didn't actually fund the journeys.

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They were the conduit through which diaspora got money to people in very difficult situations in order to allow them to migrate.

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And depending on the amount of money that it was available, it was either short term or long term.

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So that's an example of both an unusual form of civil society.

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So not just an NGO, but a religious organization.

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And also of like,

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promotion of using a logistics infrastructure in order to support actual migration journeys.

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In addition to this, however, one of the things that's also interesting is the ways in which civil society can actually support local solutions.

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So Iran is an example of that.

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There's a huge population of Afghans in Iran, something like just under a million registered and probably another million, million and a half unregistered.

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And there is actually quite a strong civil society landscape in Iran.

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It's just it operates in an unusual way given government restrictions.

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So one of the things that's very interesting is that there are civil society organizations who directly engage with the government to support improved outcomes for Afghans in Iran.

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And they do so with a lot of input from Afghan communities themselves.

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Does it make things easy?

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No, the context in Iran is super hard.

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But it does show the way in which local civil society can actually help to improve conditions for a long-term protracted displacement population.

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So can you just explain a little bit about how research institutes and companies such as Meraki Labs support or evaluate localization efforts?

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Basically, Meraki started six or seven years ago now.

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And for the first

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three years, our focus was not on co-authorship.

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I was fresh out of the field, as were my colleagues.

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And we did a lot of consultancies in a lot of places, ranging from consultancies for local NGOs to consultancies for big Western governments.

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One of the things that was really noticeable in those early years was that when we did consultancies for big governments,

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Usually, I was the most diverse person on the team.

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And for the record, while I might be both female and not white, I'm also not from a displacement-affected background, and I do not have any form of lived experience.

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It was really noticeable that the bigger the customer, the less likely there was to have lived experience in the team, meaning that the analysis

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that informed decisions on the part of government actors or UN agencies was also not informed by lived experience.

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So I genuinely think that getting to the point where more people who are refugees and migrants are writing the analysis that informs big decisions, I think that will make a difference.

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Thank you so much.

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And so, Danil, if I can move over to you.

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We've seen a global move towards cash-based assistance humanitarian aid in recent years.

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How do you see this impact and potentially challenge localization efforts?

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So cash and budget assistance has become prominent over the last few years.

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And the use of CBA, which is cash and budget assistance, has the potential to empower communities, enhance dignity, and also meet the needs of these communities, while at the same time assimilating the local markets.

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And to answer your question, I think that the global shift toward cash-based humanitarian aid has both positive and challenging impacts on localization efforts.

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For example, on one hand, the cash transfers can be more flexible and allow communities to prioritize their own needs, so they can use the money according to their own needs, which aligns with the principle of localization.

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It can also empower local actors to distribute aid directly to the communities.

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by then enhancing their role in their response and then reducing the dependency of international organizations.

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On the other hand, there are challenges as well, because the use of cash-based assistance can sometimes bypass the local markets and undermine the capacity of local systems to manage and distribute aid effectively.

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In practical terms, this means that

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if CVA is provided to beneficiaries, to community members, they have the cash, right?

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However, if the local markets are not stimulated, if they don't have all these good and services, then it will be really difficult for the communities to access this, right?

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And if local actors are in quality, prepare or support you with the necessary resources, they may struggle to then manage cash-based programs properly.

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On the other hand, CBA accounts for a total of 21% of international humanitarian assistance, and that is an increase of about 7% since 2017.

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However, there is a potential to increase to 50% if this is used whenever and wherever appropriate.

00:28:50 Speaker 4

So although there are challenges as well as opportunities for CBA in terms of localization, I think that this has become a prominent modality

00:29:02 Speaker 4

that has not only empowered communities, but also empowered the local markets as a whole.

00:29:07 Speaker 2

This brings me to quite a neat point to ask you both.

00:29:11 Speaker 2

My last question, it's been very clear from this conversation that the relationship between migration and development is complex.

00:29:21 Speaker 2

and that it's often kind of counterintuitive.

00:29:23 Speaker 2

So can I ask you both, how do you see the impact of localization efforts on this kind of intersection of migration and development, both now and moving forwards?

00:29:36 Speaker 4

Localization efforts, they have a big impact on their migration and development relationship, but it's not always straightforward.

00:29:44 Speaker 4

So when local organizations are in charge and communities have more control,

00:29:48 Speaker 4

the programming can be more effective in tackling the migration issues.

00:29:54 Speaker 4

However, I mean, in addition to that, the local groups usually understand the communities better, which helps create like a more practical and lasting.

00:30:04 Speaker 4

solutions the community is trusting even better as well, and especially for displaced people or those affected by migration.

00:30:12 Speaker 4

However, localization can also bring challenges.

00:30:14 Speaker 4

For example, there are tensions between local and international organizations, and there is also unpredictable funding that can make these efforts less effective with everything that is going around the world.

00:30:26 Speaker 4

And if marginalized groups are left out, then localization could even make existing

00:30:33 Speaker 4

inequality is worse.

00:30:35 Speaker 4

So I think overall the localization works depend on how inclusive and fair it is and when it focuses on hearing from the right people, especially from migrants and especially communities, I think that localization can help address the reasons people migrate, but also improve the people's ability to cope and support development as a whole.

00:30:54 Speaker 2

So Rusha, just asking you the same question.

00:30:57 Speaker 2

I mean, obviously, Danilo's painted a picture of a complex space, right, which is not, where it's not like a kind of slam dunk win.

00:31:05 Speaker 2

You do localization and all of a sudden all of your migration and development issues are resolved.

00:31:12 Speaker 2

How do you see the impact of localization efforts in this space?

00:31:17 Speaker 3

Basically, what I'm going to do is add to Danilo's picture of complexity.

00:31:21 Speaker 3

Not only are the impacts of localization sometimes difficult to predict because there's unequal power structures within different communities and because localization can kind of favor one group over another, but in addition to that, localization is hard to do.

00:31:39 Speaker 3

Aid is set up to do big transfers of money from countries to institutions like the UN or the World Bank.

00:31:46 Speaker 3

When we're talking about localization,

00:31:48 Speaker 3

We're talking about making sure that a tiny little organization in Honduras can get maybe \$10,000 in order to work more effectively to address migration issues more effectively, et cetera.

00:32:02 Speaker 3

But we're talking about making sure that an initial transfer from a government to an aid agency of hundreds of millions gets distributed to a tiny little local organization as effectively as possible.

00:32:14 Speaker 3

Making that infrastructure is really hard.

00:32:17 Speaker 3

It's worth it, but it also involves changes at every level of the system, including making higher level policy and program decisions.

00:32:26 Speaker 2

That's a really, really interesting point to leave this.

00:32:29 Speaker 2

And I think this point that this is, yeah, worth it, but really difficult, seems like the crux of the conversation that we've had.

00:32:38 Speaker 2

So I would just like to say thank you so much to both of you.

00:32:42 Speaker 2

That's been a really, really interesting conversation and I'm sure will be really helpful for our listeners.

00:32:48 Speaker 1

You've been listening to the Migration Oxford podcast.

00:32:51 Speaker 1

I'm Delphine Bogie.

00:32:52 Speaker 2

And I'm Rob O'Neill.