

L'union fait la force: lessons on localisation from Haiti

May 2021

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'L'union fait la force' are the words written on the Haitian flag: 'unity makes us strong'. Many Haitians may tell you that these words have yet to be fulfilled in Haitian society but the members of the RIHPED (Réseau Intégral Haïtien pour le Plaidoyer et le l'Environnement Durable) network¹ are dedicated to this mantra and have seen it lived out through their work in Haiti. Since 2016, efforts to support localisation, like those proposed within the Grand Bargain, have struggled to generate enough transformational change that satisfies national NGOs and moves the humanitarian system towards integrated collaboration between local and international actors. At first glance the Covid-19 pandemic presents a set of circumstances that seem to favour localisation, especially in light of international travel restrictions. Yet, research² has revealed only anecdotal evidence of shifts to a localisation approach from those working on it prior to the emergence of Covid-19. A sector-wide shift remains hampered by limited funding, mistrust and an assumed lack of openness on both sides.

This case study discusses the localisation journey of a network of organisations in Haiti that has aimed to strengthen local coordination, ownership and decision-making. It draws on three main sources: (1) the Integral Alliance Haiti Partner Listening Forum Report³ from January 2020;⁴ (2) an action plan based on the recommendations of partners following the onset of Hurricane Matthew; and (3) the RIHPED member survey conducted in 2021 to inform this article.

The Origins of RIHPED

RIHPED was formed in 2014 by bringing together six local Haitian organisations: Concile des Eglises Evangélique d'Haïti (CEEH), Fédération des Ecoles Protestantes d'Haïti (FEPH), Fondation Haïtienne de

¹ <https://rihped.info/>

² Barbelet, V., Bryant, J. and Willitts-King, B. "All eyes are on local actors": Covid-19 and local humanitarian action. Opportunities for systemic change'. HPG briefing note. London: ODI (<https://odi.org/en/publications/all-eyes-are-on-local-actors-covid-19-and-local-humanitarian-action/>).

³ https://www.integralalliance.org/files/3116/2037/9968/2020-03_Integral_Partner_Listening_Forum_report.pdf

⁴ In working through the content for this article, some Haitian interviewees gave informal feedback on the narrative recorded in the Partner Listening Forum (PLF). There was concern that it did not make a strong enough distinction between integral partners being critiqued and wider country-level humanitarian coordination being critiqued. The RIHPED member survey, on which the majority of this article is based, reflects more of the positive experience between NNGOs and integral INGOs. In addition, the member survey was taken 13 months after the PLF, which also suggests improvements in relationships between the members, although no formal comparison was done.

l'Enseignement Privé (FONHEP), King's Organisation, Micah Haiti and Union Evangélique Baptiste d'Haïti (UEBH); and five international organisations: Food for the Hungry (FH), Tearfund, World Concern, World Relief and World Renew. The five international organisations are members of the Integral Alliance (IA),⁵ a global network of Christian international NGOs. As members of IA, these organisations coordinated their humanitarian responses internationally, but were not coordinating well enough at the national level, including in Haiti.

The initiators of RIHPED were motivated by their experience of the humanitarian response to the 2010 earthquake in Haiti, which was characterised by limited coordination between NGOs and local organisations being shut out of key spaces where resources were being distributed and decisions were being made. The founding members drafted a contingency plan to prepare for potential future humanitarian disasters and legally registered the RIHPED network as a foundation. They also established a fund called Fond de Réponse Rapide et Efficace (Fond FRERE), an Emergency Fund for Rapid and Efficient Response. While both local and international NGO members contributed to the fund, the decision-making process to allocate funds was locally led, based on the members undertaking collective analysis of where the needs were greatest as equal peers. RIHPED held its first national assembly in 2015 and has continued to grow (it currently has 14 members). All members pay a membership fee proportionate to their size and commit to collaborate, including on fundraising to keep the FRERE fund topped up.

RIHPED in action

In 2016, when Hurricane Matthew hit Haiti, RIHPED was in a strong position to support communities affected because of the contingency plan it had put in place. The resources from the Fond FRERE allowed the members to implement the Assess and Assist programme, which entailed conducting a rapid needs assessment and providing initial assistance to the most vulnerable families in the affected communities. The Hurricane Matthew response included distribution of food and hygiene kits, repair of damaged homes, training and seed distribution for farmers, cash transfers and humanitarian project management training for RIHPED member organisations. The results of the needs assessments spurred member organisations to seek and secure funding for larger interventions.

In November 2019, all RIHPED members came together to review its direction. As part of a strategic development meeting, the network went through an externally facilitated learning and awareness process, which included recognising the different motivations and drivers between national and international agencies. This encompassed a review of values and a SWOT analysis, which formed the basis of defining the network's new strategic objectives. The exercise increased buy-in and alignment among members.

They also articulated a vision statement for the future: to 'see families less vulnerable and communities more resilient through the actions of a dynamic and representative Haitian network of Christian organisations, capable of influencing major decisions and popular practices in the matters of environment and disaster risk management'.

When Covid-19 arrived in 2020, RIHPED was once again able to conduct needs assessments, which allowed them to quickly fundraise for a two-pronged response. The first intervention addressed food insecurity and tools and seeds to grow crops were provided to communities. RIHPED's response was localised and highly

⁵ <http://www.integralalliance.org/>

coordinated as it assisted health institutions as part of its second intervention. The network distributed personal protective equipment, medical equipment, food and food supplements to hospitals and state-run psychiatric centres. All this was possible due to the ongoing efforts of RIHPED members to respond effectively, rapidly and locally.

Member satisfaction

In a survey conducted among RIHPED members, participants shared their motivations for joining and remaining in the network. The responses included a vision of working together and a desire to pool resources and expertise. Enel Angervil, the director of a local NGO called Fondasyon Kominote Kretyen an Aksyon (FOKA), said: 'I joined RIHPED because I wanted to coordinate with other local actors who could help our organization build capacity. The sharing of resources like knowledge, information, funds, training and technical expertise remains a motivator for our participation in the network'.

Tearfund, an INGO member of the network, shared that it chose to support RIHPED to increase local coordination between national and international NGOs, support locally led decision-making, decrease delays in funding by establishing local pre-positioned finances (i.e. Fond FRERE) and strengthen the humanitarian capacity of local NGOs.

While Tearfund identifies areas of improvement, including its desire to locally fund and independently staff the administration and coordination of the network, it remains encouraged by the impact and steady growth of the network. 'The local and international NGOs work hand in hand in a way that complements the other. We collaborate on all decisions regarding the network', said an INGO member colleague. Some participants explained that the ongoing community presence of some network members has enabled reach and connection to some of the remoter parts of the country. This has proved valuable for trust and early phase information-sharing when it comes to preparedness and early phase needs assessment.

A desire to receive training was another popular motivator for local NGOs to join the RIHPED network. Survey responses indicate that training offered through the network has been of great use to local NGO members. Representatives from one such member, Fondasyon Chanje Lavi, reported that the network has strengthened the capacity of its members through the host of training it offers, especially in the area of project management.

Participation in the network is not without its challenges. One major issue is a power imbalance between the international NGOs and local NGOs, who have fewer resources. One member reports, 'historically there has been a lack of confidence and capacity in the NNGOs. They perceive they are inadequate against the larger agencies'. To respond to this imbalance, RIHPED provides regular training and capacity-strengthening for local organisations. This training is identified by members from their own observations and experience. The RIHPED executive committee sources training from a cross-section of international and local training providers, ensuring as much as possible is done in Creole and that wherever possible the costs are covered by RIHPED.

While international NGO staff often receive capacity-strengthening from their colleagues and teams in head offices, many local organisations do not have that luxury. Being a member of RIHPED helps give access to international standard training on themes such as cash programming, logistics, monitoring and evaluation for both local and international members. Christon St. Fort, the director of Federation des Ecoles

Protestantes d’Haiti (FEPH), explains that one of the premier benefits and successes of RIHPED was the existence and disbursement of locally held pre-positioned cash prior to Hurricane Matthew, the Fond FRERE. This fund was established by gathering membership contributions and securing grants in addition to/separate from the membership fees. In the wake of the hurricane the cash was leveraged and used as a pooled fund. This was not without challenges, as one responder from a local organisation explained: ‘Members who contribute more money hold more weight in the decision making. The international organisations pay higher fees, and therefore have more influence than the local organisations’. Others worry that a pattern of competition between members affects their ability to collaborate. An INGO representative said: ‘we felt there was too much competition among the members, even when the rapid assessments were being done as a team, the results were not made available to all members at the same time’.

Despite these challenges, when asked if they were reconsidering their membership, 100% of the participants responded ‘no’, suggesting a high level of satisfaction. The members of RIHPED are committed to moving forward together while addressing these serious challenges facing the network.

Lessons learned

Drawing on their experience since 2014, there are a number of lessons that RIHPED has learned that have been central to its growth.

Lesson 1: effective coordination improves local preparedness and response capacity

The members of RIHPED created and implemented a common contingency plan, which allowed them to know exactly who was in the best position to intervene in the event of a catastrophe. This plan was immediately referenced and used as RIHPED began coordinating a couple days before Hurricane Matthew made landfall. It has undergone several updates and continues to influence the response strategies of the network, most recently in the Covid-19 response. Having a mapping document that outlines on what themes each organisation works, in what areas they are present and who their target communities are is crucial to synergy among members. Periodic meetings, sharing of information and general coordination efforts have enabled stronger preparedness mechanisms and more efficient responses.

Lesson 2: joint pre-positioning improves response efficiency

RIHPED has been able to put in place systems to pre-position funds to support non-food items (NFIs), public health information and UN cluster-recommended communications. This joint prepositioning, including maintaining a live map of where organisations work and how they can collaborate on logistics such as sharing warehouse space, allows the network to rapidly begin assessments and provide relief in the wake of a disaster. Keeping funds available in Fond FRERE, consistently updating the contingency plan and keeping an updated map of member resources is key to strong pre-positioning. RIHPED has simplified the application process to access money from the pooled fund, such as digitising monitoring and evaluation by using tablets to collect baseline data and reporting, while also improving joint reporting, which has led to increased efficiency.

Lesson 3: to counter power imbalances between members, deliberate structural changes are needed

The network revisits all members' understanding of the role and contribution of local organisations on an ongoing basis. As new members are inducted, they are encouraged to uphold the value that the network places on the role of local actors. RIHPED recently took steps to ensure a majority of local NGO representatives on the executive committee in order to establish the importance of listening to and being led by local voices. Members aspire to set up a separate secretariat for the network staffed by an independent general manager and an administrative assistant to address the current over-reliance on the administrative resources of the larger organisations. This is a critical ongoing issue, but there is recognition that becoming an independent, self-funded network may take many years. These steps will allow responsibilities as well as power to be shared more equally across all members.

Lesson 4: the network's independence will only be achieved with secure and long-term anticipatory funding

For this to happen, all members will need to increase their contributions. The network will also need to extend across the rest of the country to enable more local organisations, including local partners of the member INGOs, to join. RIHPED members will need to do much more to raise donor awareness of the importance of networks like RIHPED and the need to invest in them.

Lesson 5: a strong network does not compete with its members and works to temper competition between its members to avoid self-sabotage

Survey responses indicated a desire for clearer channels of communication between members to prevent a tendency towards competition. One member shared that on one occasion, although emergency needs assessments were carried out jointly, the data analysis report was not available to all members at the same time. Many of these lessons learned resonate with recent analysis by the Humanitarian Policy Group (HPG). In the 2020 report *From the ground up*⁶ questions are asked about whose values are prioritised, especially who 'assigns value', and how resources are allocated. Defining power relationships among international and local actors is at the heart of the international humanitarian debate; RIHPED has stepped into the centre of this conversation through iterative learning and practice.

The way forward

RIHPED members are of the opinion that collaboration between local and international NGOs in their network positions them to better support each other where needed while also supporting the needs of affected communities. They also expressed that their common Christian faith facilitates trust and collaboration: 'Faith helps us to take risks with assurance, and it facilitates the trust that we have in other members so we can work together'.

Going forward, RIHPED members are exploring ways to raise awareness among humanitarian peers and donors about the importance of investing in networks such as theirs that support the work of local actors. They are also working towards setting up an independent secretariat, reducing the reliance on external

⁶ Fast, L. and Bennett, C. (2020) *From the ground up: it's about time for local humanitarian action*. HPG report. London: ODI (<https://odi.org/en/publications/from-the-ground-up-its-about-time-for-local-humanitarian-action/>).

funding sources (that INGOs have facilitated) and extending RIHPED's reach to strengthen disaster risk reduction and humanitarian preparedness and response across Haiti. They know this will take time, but the story so far shows a deep-rooted commitment to ensure this joint initiative between local and international can be a model of collaboration to inspire others.

About the authors

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