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Too Little Aid Money is Reaching Grassroots Women's Organizations

When governments in the global north provide aid to the global south, they rarely invest directly in the organizations that are already making a difference on the ground. Jessica Neuwirth of Donor Direct Action says that needs to change.

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The World Humanitarian Summit promised much in direct aid, but there has been little action on the ground since. [Metin Pala/Anadolu Agency](#)

The [Tasaru Rescue Centre](#) is fighting female genital mutilation in Kenya. [ORMUSA](#) in El Salvador works to end the murder of women. In Nepal, the [Forum for Women, Law and Development](#) supports survivors of rape and acid attacks; and [Embrace Dignity](#) works to end sex trafficking in South Africa.

What do these organizations have in common? All are run by brilliant leaders, all are making changes for women in their community on a shoestring budget. And they are all partnering with Donor Direct Action in an effort to get support from donors online because they hardly have any outside funding at all from governments, international NGOs or foundations.

As the human rights movement has grown, the need for increased funding at all levels has also

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“Only 8 percent of the \$10 billion given to NGOs that work on gender equality in developing countries was given directly to groups who were located there.”

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majority of this increased funding is given to the

United Nations and large nongovernmental organizations based in the global north. While these organizations have grown significantly, other front-

line organizations doing critical work have been left behind.

The Grand Bargain

For as long as I can remember, the development sector has discussed the need to increase direct funding to local groups working at the grassroots level around the world, but we have yet to see this come anywhere close to reality.

The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development estimates that only 8 percent of the \$10 billion given to NGOs that work on gender equality in developing countries is given directly to groups who were located there. This simply doesn't make sense.

Last year's World Humanitarian Summit in Istanbul was a great opportunity for donors to find solutions to this well-recognized financing gap. The Grand Bargain initiative agreed by 22 governments and 28

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supposed to snake things up and ensure that 25 percent of global humanitarian funding would go directly to local and national responders by 2020.

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To date though, funding is not moving in this direction. [Development Initiatives](#) found only 2% of donor funding was given directly to national and local responders last year.

Unless governments and aid agencies actually change their budgets to reflect these commitments, it seems unlikely that the agreed target can be reached any time soon.

Cutting Out the Middle Layer

Despite its huge value to global economic and social prosperity, international aid has always been attacked by those who see it as less of a priority than domestic interests. For governments in particular, it has been a hard sell politically. This has also meant that organizations based in donor countries are more likely to initially receive any funding available for international aid than organizations based in other countries.

The United Kingdom's Department for International Development (DfID) has traditionally given funding either to international aid organizations or the U.N., or to [for-profit management consultancies](#) in the U.K. as "preferred suppliers" to deliver programs. In

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monitoring and evaluation to a third party.

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This adds an expensive layer in the middle, which controls how funding is directed and makes significantly less funding available for program work. In practice, often next to nothing reaches the front lines. Decisions on what should be funded are made in London rather than in collaboration with a local partner, which becomes the implementer of an imported idea that may well be less effective than a local one. In the end this approach offers little value for money.

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Colonial Overtones

Since most international aid originates in the global north, the rather colonial concept of rescue and rehabilitation has often dominated decision making. Front-line groups have simply not been trusted with direct funding.

This means grassroots leaders are left disenfranchised by those who hold the money they require to continue their work. While it may be true that local NGOs have less experience and skill in managing large amounts of funding, this approach ensures that they will never get this experience.

This, in turn, leads to the type of long-term dependence on aid that donors rail against.

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South must be trusted to deliver their own success and must be supported with patience rather than diminished with condescension."

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must be trusted to deliver their own success and must

be supported with patience rather than diminished with condescension. If not, the Grand Bargain is likely to pass by without anything

changing. Donors have to develop an entirely different understanding of how aid should work.

Getting this right is of critical importance, but it means that serious financial adjustments need to be made in the international aid arms of governments, and in the configuration of aid agencies within the next few months. The mandate should be “front lines first,” and grants should reflect this agreed priority.

Canada’s commitment that women and girls will be at the heart of its future development assistance is promising in this regard. International Development Minister Marie-Claude Bibeau has proposed giving \$150 million in direct funding to women’s organizations around the world – a very significant amount if it gets to the grassroots level.

Numerous pledges to act have been made, but many tough decisions still remain. The desire for increased impact and efficiency must triumph over



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deep-seated resistance to change.

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About the Author

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FOUNDER, DONOR DIRECT ACTION

Jessica Neuwirth is founder of Donor Direct Action, an international group that partners with front-line women's organizations around the world.

This article has been amended to clarify the relationship between Donor Direct Action and the Tasaru Rescue Centre, ORMUSA, the Forum for Women, Law and Development and Embrace Dignity.

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