

Localization across contexts: Lessons learned from four case studies

A FEINSTEIN INTERNATIONAL CENTER BRIEF

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The Feinstein International Center, Friedman School of Nutrition Science and Policy at Tufts University and Save the Children Denmark conducted research on the localization of humanitarian action in several different contexts—Indonesia following the 2018 earthquake in Sulawesi, and the Horn of Africa, specifically humanitarian situations in Kenya, Somalia, and South Sudan. The goal was to unpack assumptions related to locally led humanitarian action and to identify the factors that lead to effective, timely, and principled responses. Research was qualitative and primarily focused on engaging with local actors¹ in each context. While the studies were substantially different in scope and context, this brief is meant to highlight some of the key similarities and differences found across localization processes, and to begin to identify lessons learned that may reach beyond these specific emergencies.

This brief is based on two studies available in full at: <https://fic.tufts.edu/publication-item/perspectives-on-localization-sulawesi-earthquake-indonesia/> and <https://fic.tufts.edu/publication-item/perspectives-on-localization-in-the-horn-of-africa/>

Case contexts

The Indonesia study focused on a single acute natural disaster (an earthquake) in a single country/context that has a strong civil society and government presence. The Horn of Africa study was a comparison of broader trends across three different countries dealing with a complex mix of conflict, displacement, and climate-related challenges like drought, each with varied degrees of government and civil society strength. The presence of international actors in these contexts varied widely as well: in Indonesia, a government directive limited international organizations to indirect participation in the response; in Kenya, there is a significant presence of international organizations, many of whom have their regional headquarters in Nairobi; and in Somalia and South Sudan,

international organizations are significantly involved in responses but tend to have a limited physical presence on the ground due to security restrictions, and they often operate through remote partnerships.

By definition, the discussions over localization and local humanitarian leadership are context specific. They require an acknowledgement of and reckoning with different types of crises, types of civil society, roles of governments and international actors, and even conceptions of what the word “local” means in practice. At the same time, there is an ongoing global discussion about localization. By comparing the results from these diverse cases, we can identify sets of common and divergent themes that can contribute to the broader discourse.

¹ While the binary between local and international is reductive and does not reflect the full diversity of actors in a crisis-affected area, this synthesis brief uses the term “local” to describe organizations based in the affected countries and “international” to describe organizations based outside of the affected countries. Nationalized non-governmental organizations (NGOs) (international NGOs that have formed independent but affiliated organizations in the affected country) are considered “local” in this context.

Funding and partnerships

Modes of funding and methods for partnership were topics of importance for local actors in all case countries. The main concerns and priorities of participants in both studies are summarized in the following table and further explained below.

In the Horn of Africa in particular, the most important issues were related to the international humanitarian funding systems. Local actors in Kenya, Somalia, and South Sudan reported numerous frustrations, including barriers to accessing funds, an unwillingness of donors and INGOs to cover core costs, and short-term funding cycles. There was broad frustration with the gap between the theory and practice of the localization agenda: many actors reported having more adversarial and competitive relationships with international actors, with some alleging that INGOs actively blocked their access to funding.

This narrative of active competition between international and local actors was less apparent in Sulawesi, as the Indonesian government’s policies required international groups to cooperate, at some level, with local actors. These relationships had their own pressures and tensions, but the very structure of the response shifted the locus of competition away from internationals and towards larger Indonesian

NGOs, particularly nationalized ones. While funding concerns were not as prominent in the Sulawesi study, some local and national NGOs did express frustration at only being given operational funds or that funding was released too slowly. Participants in the Sulawesi study focused more on how Indonesia’s government could improve the policies, standards, and coordination mechanisms of the response to better facilitate partnerships.

Despite the obligation for international NGOs to work through Indonesian NGOs in the Sulawesi response, there was a wide range in the quality of those partnerships. While some international partners were commended on their transparency and engagement, others were critiqued for treating Indonesian NGOs as “workers rather than partners.” This critique was reflected in the Horn of Africa study, where participants in all three countries expressed their frustration of being “worked through” rather than “[worked] with.” This criticism of local actors being treated as sub-contractors instead of meaningful partners or leaders by international actors is well-reflected in the [literature](#).

In line with the sub-contracting dynamics of many international-local partnerships, there were concerns from actors in the Horn of Africa that capacity-

Concerns and priorities of study participants	
Horn of Africa study	Indonesia study
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Competitive and exclusionary nature of international funding Gap between theory and practice of localization 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Inflexible and limited nature of international funds Interest in reforming national systems to facilitate better response and partnerships
Both case studies	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> “Sub-contracting” nature of some international non-governmental organization (INGO) partnerships Need for a different approach to capacity building 	

strengthening measures were ill-fitted to their actual needs and primarily designed for “upwards accountability” towards donors. In addition, for capacity strengthening to better reflect the diverse needs of local actors, there were calls for capacity strengthening to be a longer-term effort with periodic training and testing in the field. These calls

were echoed in the Sulawesi study, with local actors also calling for longer-term and more field-based approaches to capacity strengthening. Participants in both studies questioned the assumption that capacity building is the exclusive domain of international groups, highlighting examples of local and national actors building each other’s capacity.

Quality and effectiveness

Both studies asked participants to provide their insights into which capacities were necessary for an organization to deliver a principled and effective humanitarian response. While both studies also spoke to actors who would be considered international, the following table displays the responses provided by national and local actors.

There were several key institutional qualities that participants in both studies identified as important capacities. Participants in the Horn of Africa study focused more on institutional and administrative capacities, which have typically been areas in which local and national organizations are seen as lacking. However, this focus could be due to the fact that capacity has typically been framed in terms of “upwards” accountability and the ability to manage

large volumes of funding. It may also be a reflection of the intense competition for funding in these environments, in which these capacities are seen as essential for donors. In contrast, participants in the Sulawesi study described capacities that were more related to emotional and relational capacities, which may be a reflection of a different operational environment, one that allowed actors to prioritize these skills.

In both studies, participants were asked to identify what factors enabled and inhibited an effective, timely, and appropriate humanitarian response. While both studies also spoke to actors who would be considered international, the following table displays the responses provided by national and local actors.

Necessary capacities identified by local actors for an effective humanitarian response

Horn of Africa study	Indonesia study
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Strong procurement and logistics systems Ability to advocate and build relationships with governments, INGOs, and donors Strong resource mobilization skills Expertise and professionalism of staff Sector-specific technical skills 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Emotional capacity to respond to a disaster (empathy, solidarity, etc.) Local knowledge and relationships Ability to communicate with the affected community
Both case studies	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Strong monitoring and evaluation systems Strong coordination skills Strong management and administration systems 	

Factors identified as enabling or inhibiting a timely, appropriate, and high-quality response

Both studies	
Enabling factors	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Proximity to and relationships with affected communities Accountability to the affected population Broad geographic coverage and access High-quality needs assessments Strong organizational capacities Ability to mobilize staff and volunteers Existing relationships that can be leveraged for a disaster (in Horn of Africa, specifically relationships across ethnic groups and clans)
Hindering factors	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Lack of sufficient or flexible funding

There was relative consensus around enabling factors between the studies. One point of divergence was that participants in Indonesia emphasized a sense of solidarity and empathy as an important enabling factor, echoing the capacities section. In addition, participants in Indonesia brought up the availability of funding as an enabling factor, whereas in the Horn of Africa, funding (or the lack thereof) was only brought up as a hindering factor.

There was more divergence in terms of hindering factors, which could be a reflection of the different operating environments. Some of the main hindering factors identified by local and national actors can be found in the table below.

The majority of the factors seen as facilitating effective and principled responses are those that are typically associated with local and national

Factors identified as inhibiting a timely, appropriate, and high-quality response by context

	Horn of Africa	Indonesia
Hindering factors	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Lack of direct access to donors Competition with INGOs for implementation and funding Lack of access to appropriate capacity-strengthening activities or a “graduation” process Rigid and pre-determined donor priorities, with little room for holistic or cross-sectoral approaches Rigid and narrow risk mitigation plans that shift burden to local NGOs Lack of trust between local and international actors 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Conflicts of interest at the local level Language and cultural barriers Lack of electricity and phone communication in aftermath of disaster Responders also victims Lack of clear standards and policies guiding the response Local-level community conflicts

actors. These factors include relationships, access and coverage, context-specific knowledge, and accountability with the affected population. The hindering factors largely focused on the extra-organizational context. Findings from the Horn of Africa study were mostly concerned with the international response environment, while the Sulawesi study focused more on the Indonesian response environment.

There is significant discussion in the literature about whether local actors' relationships with and proximity to affected populations, expressed as a strength above, may hinder their ability to provide a principled response. In both studies, there were narratives of local actors attempting to navigate complex webs of local politics and relationships,

which sometimes resulted in a response that was not entirely impartial. However, in both studies, local and national actors pushed back on the assumptions that they were inherently less able to carry out a principled humanitarian response. They also cited certain attributes more commonly associated with local actors, such as greater downward accountability and greater coverage, as favoring principled responses. Actors in both studies noted that international organizations struggle with adhering to humanitarian principles in their own way. Indeed, there is not sufficient evidence in either of these two studies to support the hypothesis that local and national actors are inherently less able to deliver a principled response than international actors are.

Comparing recommendations

The recommendations from these two studies diverge significantly in their respective areas of focus, which corresponds to the different priorities and challenges of actors in these diverse contexts. The recommendations for the Horn of Africa study centered largely on reforming international humanitarian funding mechanisms, shifting the burden of risk away from local actors, and integrating local actors more fully into coordination and project development mechanisms. The recommendations from actors in Sulawesi were more inward facing, with a greater emphasis on reforming government policies, decentralizing national response and coordination systems, and reckoning with the relationships between Indonesian organizations. However, it is notable that despite the vastly different contexts, there were some common recommendations:

- Donors and international partners need to ensure **longer-term and more flexible funding** structures.

- International actors need to invest in **building relationships and trust** with their local and international partners.
- International actors need to **adapt capacity-building/strengthening activities** to be more tailored to local priorities, more long-term, and more field-based.
- Local and national actors should **build and invest in networks** that can facilitate advocacy, donor engagement, and collaboration in the field.