

Localization: Summary of a Landscape Report

A FEINSTEIN INTERNATIONAL CENTER BRIEFING PAPER 

Sabina Robillard, Teddy Atim, Daniel Maxwell

Introduction and Context

Humanitarian emergencies are often defined as an event or shock that overwhelms local capacity to manage or respond to the human consequences that result. Therefore, humanitarian response has long prioritized external capacity to address the consequences, relieve the suffering, and assist in rebuilding what has been lost. That external capacity has typically been international actors such as the UN, the Red Cross/Red Crescent, and international NGOs. However, the formal and internationalized humanitarian system that has evolved over the past five decades has tended to operate as if local capacities do not exist—ignoring, excluding, or marginalizing the diverse group of local actors who do respond to crises. In reality, affected populations rely on many sources beyond the formal international system for assistance in a crisis—including local government, local organizations, and even their own social networks. “Localization” is a broad-ranging policy agenda whose aim is to work to correct that exclusion, recognize local action, and prioritize local leadership of humanitarian responses.

Localization gained increasing prominence in the years leading up to the 2016 World Humanitarian Summit (WHS). Localization became a formal part of the mainstream humanitarian reform agenda

through its inclusion in the Grand Bargain, which contained commitments to more directly funding local humanitarian actors (with a goal of 25 percent of funds going directly to local actors by 2020), supporting existing national coordination mechanisms and making international ones more inclusive, improving partnerships while reducing administrative burdens, and investing in building the capacity of local actors. The fact that the humanitarian system is still struggling with some of the core localization commitments from five years ago can be attributed to several barriers, which are well documented in literature on localization that has burgeoned since the WHS.

This study was commissioned by the USAID Bureau of Humanitarian Assistance. The study aimed to illustrate the current landscape of issues, progress, and perspectives associated with the localization agenda in the humanitarian sector as of 2021 through conducting a review of the literature and interviews with 68 key informants from different countries and positions within the humanitarian system. This paper briefly summarizes the key findings and trends of localization, as well as barriers and enabling factors, and proposes a series of recommendations to institutional donors.¹

¹ For a more detailed analysis, see the full report: Sabina Robillard, Teddy Atim, and Daniel Maxwell. 2021. “Localization: A ‘Landscape’ Report.” Boston, MA: Feinstein International Center, Tufts University, 2021. <https://fic.tufts.edu/publication-item/localization-a-landscape-report/>

Definitions

Definitions of localization vary, with no consensus about what the term means in practice. The lack of consensus on a definition presents some challenges in terms of operationalizing the agenda. However, to some extent, both the definition of localization and its operationalization are context-specific, which allows room for some diversity of definition. Some observers note that the term itself is part of the problem—implying that humanitarian action is not already local or is something international that has to be “localized.” The study noted that many local actors are unaware of the term and that it has little to no meaning to them, particularly when translated into other languages.

Two of the most common definitions are those coined by the Grand Bargain by the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD):

- The Grand Bargain: “Making principled humanitarian action as local as possible and as international as necessary.”
- OECD: “A process of recognizing, respecting and strengthening the leadership by local authorities and the capacity of local civil society in humanitarian action, in order to better address the needs of affected populations and to prepare national actors for future humanitarian responses.”

Several key findings are related to labels and definitions of “localization” and “local humanitarian actors”:

- First, the term “**local**” is relative and is not a simple binary opposite of “international,” which tends to homogenize “local” across significant political, geographic, ethnic, linguistic, and class divisions within a country, and may overlook very “localized” relations with groups like international diasporas.
- Second, not all local groups responding to a crisis identify themselves as “**humanitarian**.” Local organizations are, by definition, committed to local concerns, which may range far beyond humanitarian action as it is usually defined.

- Third, the use of the word “**actor**” tends to suggest or prioritize local government and formal NGOs in the affected country, which may exclude other kinds of groups (particularly informal ones) that may be more representative of marginalized populations.

Beyond definitions per se, the intent of the policy agenda itself varies. Some stakeholders view localization as a process of making the existing international humanitarian system more inclusive of local actors, but others view it as a process of transforming the international humanitarian system so that it better adapts to local realities. Some observers holding the “transformation” view believe that the humanitarian system must be “decolonized” to truly address fundamental power imbalances. In addition, while some stakeholders emphasize that localization will make humanitarian action more effective, others believe that localization is an ethical issue and should be done simply because it is “the right thing to do.” These differences of perspective about the goals and reasons for localization may translate into different approaches towards operationalizing the agenda.

Main Issues and Current Progress

The Grand Bargain agenda centered around four main areas of reform: 1) ensuring that local actors have access to more direct funding; 2) improving the participation of local actors in coordination mechanisms; 3) increasing the number and equity of partnerships; and 4) increasing local actors’ capacity. Recently, more emphasis has been given to local actors’ leadership in decision-making spaces and influence on policy that affects them, and on ensuring participation from and accountability to crisis-affected populations. Each of the Grand Bargain areas of reform is briefly outlined below.

The issue of **direct funding** has long drawn the most attention, particularly through the Grand Bargain’s commitment to channel a minimum of 25 percent of all funding to local organizations by the year 2020—and with a “localization marker” introduced to track progress towards this goal. While overall amounts of funding have increased, the proportion has hardly changed. Different accounting mechanisms show

slightly differing outcomes, but they are mostly in the range of 3–4 percent, all well below the 25 percent goal. More progress has been made using pooled funds—especially Country Based Pooled Funds (CBPFs) or the Central Emergency Response Funds (CERF).

The development of meaningful and **equitable partnerships** between international and local organizations continues to be a concern, but less information is available to judge progress in this area. Local organizations remain frustrated with the subcontracting model of partnership, which shifts responsibilities and risk onto them, but often fails to provide adequate funding to cover basic administrative costs, denies them an equal or meaningful voice in decision making, and rarely translates into opportunities for direct funding or leadership. International organizations tend to compete for the local agencies that are seen as the “most capable” and “successful” based on international standards—often overwhelming these organizations with requests for partnership while others are excluded. This compounds concerns about equity, as organizations that meet international administrative standards tend to be composed of relatively elite and privileged members of the affected society. The most functional and equitable partnerships are built on engagement both prior to and after acute crises to build relationships of equity and trust.

Many local actors feel excluded from international **humanitarian coordination** mechanisms, particularly the cluster system. There may be physical barriers, such as distance; political or security-related barriers, such as the lack of necessary credentials to access coordination spaces; and language barriers, both in terms of the language spoken in meetings and the use of humanitarian jargon; as well as practical considerations like limited staff time. In addition, less formally organized local groups or those that do not typically categorize themselves as “humanitarian” may not even be aware that international coordination mechanisms exist and/or may be using parallel local structures. There have been some changes in recent years with respect to coordination. Globally, national NGOs constituted 43 percent of cluster members by 2019 and local languages were being spoken in about half of cluster meetings. However, only 8 percent of all cluster leadership

positions were held by local or national NGOs. The extent to which increased participation translates into meaningful leadership opportunities remains unclear.

Much of the focus on **capacity building** is on ensuring local actors’ ability to meet international standards—particularly in terms of administrative, accounting, and compliance procedures. “Capacity” is thus defined by what the international partner or donor needs rather than the priorities of the local partners or the needs of the people they serve. This underscores the criticism that localization is a form of “isomorphism” or ensuring that local organizations become more like their international counterparts, which may undermine local forms of action and accountability. In addition, capacity building tends to be short-term, project-based, and designed as “one-off” trainings, which are frequently not seen as actually building towards local leadership. Further, there is little consideration of “capacity building” that local actors provide to external partners about issues such as social dynamics, cultural sensitivity, political processes, etc.

Finally, increasing attention has focused on ensuring **local humanitarian leadership**—not only in responses, but also in policy and decision-making forums. At the global policy level, the emphasis on local leadership may be most evident in the framing and execution of the “Grand Bargain 2.0,” with greater representation of local and national actors in the localization workstream—such as the Network for an Empowered Aid Response (NEAR) and the Alliance for Empowered Aid Partnership (A4EP). However, there are ongoing challenges to local humanitarian leadership, particularly for national and local government agencies involved in humanitarian and disaster management. These challenges have been particularly glaring given the nature of the COVID-19 pandemic and the role of national health systems in managing the response. In general, the pandemic was widely viewed as an opportunity to accelerate progress toward localization, and there is evidence in some contexts of changes favoring local actors. However, overall, the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic appears to be short-lived and will be seen in retrospect as having been a missed opportunity for transformational change.

Barriers and Enablers of Localization

Despite localization becoming a relatively high-profile reform agenda in the five years since the World Humanitarian Summit, barriers are still preventing the agenda from being fully realized. These include the following issues identified from this study's key informants and the most recent literature:

- Many issues are both outcomes and drivers for limited progress towards localization. These include **limited availability of quality funding** for local actors, which keeps them trapped in **sub-contracting relationships** that in turn undermine local actors' ability to act from a position of leadership. Many **humanitarian decision-making spaces remain inaccessible** to local actors, including coordination and policy spaces, which further limits how their voices are heard.
- One of the reasons these structures remain unchanged is because of **limited capacity of donors** to administer a greater number of smaller and more diverse grants. There is also a broad sense that the **UN is not providing adequate leadership** given its power in the humanitarian system and that existing global frameworks, such as the Grand Bargain, are **not providing clear and strong enough accountability** to localization commitments.
- The more fundamental reason that many of these structures have not changed is because the underlying power dynamics of the humanitarian system have not changed. Localization is still perceived by many to threaten the **entrenched interests of international actors**, who continue to be at the center of many humanitarian reform efforts. **Neocolonialist** power dynamics may be preserving the status quo, and **systemic racism** may be driving the double standards for and lack of trust in local actors.
- Both **real and perceived capacity constraints** are used to justify the slow rate of progress in terms of localization. There are issues with the way **capacity is defined**, often by international

actors, in a way that minimizes and makes assumptions about the capacity of local actors. Even when real capacity constraints exist, international actors' **capacity strengthening efforts are typically inadequate** and their presence may even contribute to **undermining local capacity** through the "poaching" of local staff and other practices.

- Underlying the concerns about capacity are broader issues with **risk management and risk transfer**. Donors are typically seen as being **risk averse** because of domestic pressure and legal constraints, while international actors tend to **transfer risk** to their local partners. These practices tend to undermine trust between local and international actors while continuing to trap local actors in cycles of compliance and sub-contracting.
- Individual crisis contexts also have factors that can serve as barriers to localization. This can include **repressive, corrupt, and/or weak government structures** that limit the humanitarian space for both local and international actors. In some contexts, certain local actors may be more exposed to certain **security risks** or be excluded from humanitarian spaces because of **local power dynamics** (based on race, ethnicity, gender, etc.).

There are, however, signs of progress and reasons for optimism. Factors were identified, both by the study's key informants and in the broader literature that significantly enable the localization agenda:

- Local and national actors have been **networking, mobilizing, and advocating** for themselves in ways that have advanced the agenda in significant ways at the local, national, and global levels. In addition to efforts that are intentionally related to the localization agenda, local actors all over the world are doing the work of humanitarian action every day, including **community- and survivor-led responses** that build on **local social connections**, which is perhaps the most fundamental kind of localized humanitarian response.
- Certain international actors and mechanisms have been working to translate the policy dialogue around localization into action. This

includes **progressive international humanitarian organizations** and **progressive donors** that are trying to “walk the talk” by changing internal policies and supporting country-level efforts at localization. **Country-based pooled funds**, which often (although not always) provide better funding opportunities for local actors, and more **inclusive coordination mechanisms** at the country level have both increased.

- **The Grand Bargain**, while it has its critiques and limitations, has been cited as an important enabler of localization by elevating it to a global reform priority and providing some structure for making and following through on commitments to it. Recent efforts such as Grand Bargain 2.0 and the country-specific Grand Bargain pilots are also seen as reinforcing the global structures to support localization.
- The increasing rate and complexity of crises, driven by climate change and protracted conflicts, have brought about **access issues** that favor local humanitarian response. This was exemplified by the challenges brought on by **the COVID-19 pandemic**. Although it did not bring about the structural changes many hoped to see in the humanitarian system, it highlighted the importance of local humanitarian response in an unprecedented way.
- The **global discourse around equity, racism, and decolonization** that was amplified by the 2020 Black Lives Matter protests has made localization more urgent and mainstream. It also opened space for the discourse to focus on ethical and rights-based arguments for localization, in addition to more pragmatic or utilitarian ones.

Recommendations for Institutional Donors

To build on these enablers, overcome these barriers, and translate commitments to localization into more meaningful action, the study examined the literature and asked key informants for recommendations for major donor agencies. These recommendations include the following:

- Donors can make some reforms directly to the humanitarian funding system. These include making funding **more direct, flexible, and longer-term** for local actors while reducing barriers throughout the funding process related **to risk, compliance, and language**.
- Even when donors may not be directly funding local actors, they can provide **more and stronger conditions, benchmarks, and accountability for international intermediaries** to incentivize progress towards localization. Donors can also **fund consortia**, or channel support to **pooled funds**, in ways that intentionally promote local humanitarian leadership
- Donors can also **invest in creating an enabling environment** for localization by helping to build and transform humanitarian structures. This includes investing in local, national, and regional coordination and networking platforms, as well as domestic response capacities and local philanthropy.
- Donors can also **invest in different forms of capacity building**, including non-project-specific opportunities such as professional training or even university programs. Donors can also support **third party compliance support** and **“alternative intermediaries”** based in the Global South, which may help to supplement the administrative capacity that some local organizations may need.
- Donors can amplify diverse voices by **investing in local research** carried out by people and institutions based in and connected to crisis-affected areas. They can also **support greater inclusion of local actors in global forums** related to localiza-

tion through advocacy and financial and logistical support.

- Donors were also called upon to **examine their own internal systems** and **build their own internal capacity** to implement the reforms that localization requires, particularly with respect to direct funding. There was also broad consensus that **donors should be coordinating and collab-**

orating more among themselves to advance localization, particularly in terms of due diligence and compliance requirements.

- More broadly, many key informants prioritized donors **listening to and building relationships with local actors** to better understand the realities, strengths, and constraints of local actors in different contexts.

Conclusion and Ways Forward

Localization is, in essence, a context-specific endeavor. All related policies need to be based on deep research in, engagement with, and accountability to actors in that context. This includes future research on localization itself: it is essential that ongoing research on localization engages a more diverse and representative set of researchers and works to overcome language (and other barriers) in knowledge-sharing.

While context is essential to the discussion around localization, many of this report's findings are applicable more generally, and they go beyond the well-known 25 percent marker for direct international funding to local organizations. These findings include:

- **Local action** to protect or assist people caught in conflict or crisis **should be valued**, and at a minimum, outside intervention should **avoid undermining or instrumentalizing local action**.
- While acknowledging all constraints, there is more than enough evidence to **support partnerships that are equitable**, capacity building that recognizes and meets the priorities of all actors, and more **inclusive coordination mechanisms**.
- Improving **intermediary accountability**, local **access to mechanisms for funding** and decision-making, and **coordination** among donors are imperatives across nearly all contexts.

The nature of the enabling environment may vary, but the opportunity to identify and address constraints can be pursued in most contexts.