

Localization: Views From South Sudan

A FEINSTEIN INTERNATIONAL CENTER BRIEF 

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Background and Context

In 2021, the Bureau of Humanitarian Assistance (BHA) of USAID commissioned the Feinstein International Center at Tufts University to undertake a series of ‘landscape papers’ to explore certain key issues in the humanitarian research space. One of the issues identified as a priority by BHA was that of the “localization of humanitarian assistance.” Localization is a loosely defined agenda meant to correct for historic and systematic exclusion and marginalization of actors from crisis-affected countries, often referred to as “local actors,” in the structures of international humanitarian response. The agenda was somewhat formalized through the Grand Bargain agreements that came out of the 2016 World Humanitarian Summit, which emphasized increasing funding to local humanitarian actors, more equitable partnerships between local and international actors, more integrated coordination efforts, and increased capacity building for local actors.

Many issues related to the localization of humanitarian assistance, including who is a local humanitarian actor and what reforms are seen as necessary to achieve it, are inherently context specific. Therefore, in shaping the broader landscape study, the study team decided to include four case studies that would provide “deeper dives” into four different contexts to provide context-specific insights into key aspects of the localization discourse. Each study worked with researchers who were from or

deeply connected to the countries being studied and engaged with a broad range of stakeholders in those countries. The countries included Uganda, South Sudan, Haiti, and Honduras. The objective of these cases is not to provide a comprehensive or definitive take on localization in each context; rather, it was to provide additional nuance to the concepts being discussed in the broader landscape paper and illustrate how these differ across contexts.

Methods

Key informants were purposefully selected to represent a variety of viewpoints and geographic areas across South Sudan. The study team spoke with total of 16 key informants between June and October 2021, many of whom had experience working for a variety of organizations in their careers. These key informants had experience working for local or national NGOs, international NGOs, government, and one had experience as an academic. 38 percent of the key informants were women. Interviews were conducted by telephone or Zoom. Interview transcripts were coded using NVIVO software for qualitative analysis. The 16 key informants in this study are not necessarily representative of the population of South Sudan, nor of the specific sub-set of stakeholders who are more deeply engaged on questions on humanitarian action.

Country Profile: Conflict, Governance, and Civil Society

Conflict

South Sudan has a long history of civil war, fueled by political tensions and interethnic and intercommunal violence. After nearly 20 years of civil war, South Sudan gained its independence from Sudan in July 2011, becoming one of the world's youngest nations. Unfortunately, violent conflict returned in 2013, when internal power struggles and disagreement within the leadership of the Sudan People's Liberation Army (SPLA) escalated into widespread outbreaks of violence throughout the country.

Longstanding rivalries and unresolved tensions among political factions and ethnic groups, the continued marginalization of specific groups, underdevelopment, and poor governance are responsible for the tension in the country. The tension-fueled mistrust resulting in localized attacks and counterattacks among rival groups, manifested in patterns of intercommunal fighting, cattle raiding, and revenge attacks between rival groups. The result has been the death, injury, or displacement of thousands of people. For example, a report by Human Rights Watch notes that in the first half of 2020, intensified intercommunal and interethnic violence led to the death, injury, abduction, or displacement of over 150,000 people in Jonglei State and Greater Pibor Administrative Area. While in April and May of 2020, sporadic fighting between the government and other armed groups led to the displacement of over 19,000 people in Yei River, Lainya counties and

surrounding areas in Central Equatoria State.¹ The continued violence increases people's vulnerability and undermines humanitarian efforts.

Despite a peace agreement in 2018, the implementation stagnated, in part due to the lack of political will. Notably, there is insufficient funding to implement the agreement, affecting investment in basic services and development, frustrating efforts to attain stability.² A report by The New Humanitarian notes that efforts at disarmament, demobilisation, and reintegration of opposition troops into a new national army stalled, while the peace delegations in Juba were chased out of their hotels due to unpaid bills amounting to over USD 10 million.³ More so, while the peace agreement provides for 35 percent of women in key government positions, only a few women aligned to the political groups were appointed. The vast majority of educated women without connections are left out.⁴ Even the February 2020 peace deal to form a Revitalized Transitional Government of National Unity (RTGoNU) has not yielded much to attain stability and durable peace.⁵

Other Humanitarian Emergencies

The country is also affected by recurrent floods and the impact of Covid-19 that affected people's lives and livelihoods. In 2020, floods affected 865,000 people, displacing close to 400,000 people and also damaged some social infrastructures like schools in nine states. Continued flooding exposes

¹ Human Rights Watch. 2021. "World Report 2021: South Sudan Events of 2020." Accessed on Oct. 18, 2021 at <https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2021/country-chapters/south-sudan>

² UN OCHA. 2020. "South Sudan Humanitarian Fund Annual Report." South Sudan Humanitarian Fund. Accessed on Nov. 13, 2021 at https://www.unocha.org/sites/unocha/files/7%20-%20South%20Sudan%20HF%202020%20Annual%20Report_0.pdf

³ Sam Mednick. 2021. "Old Grudges and Empty Coppers: South Sudan Precarious Peace Process." The New Humanitarian. Jan. 21. Accessed on Nov. 11, 2021 at <https://www.thenewhumanitarian.org/news-feature/2021/01/21/south-sudan-peace-deal-violence-famine>

⁴ Interview 16 (EA 16). Jun. 24, 2021. Interviews were conducted in both Uganda and South Sudan, so were labeled EA for East Africa, and then numbered sequentially.

⁵ Clayton Hazvinei Vhumbunu. 2020. "The Formation of the Revitalized Government of National Unity in South Sudan: Key Priorities, Tasks and Challenges Ahead." Conflict Trends 2020/2. Aug. ACCORD. Accessed on Nov. 13, 2021 at <https://www.accord.org.za/conflict-trends/the-formation-of-the-revitalized-transitional-government-of-national-unity-in-south-sudan/>

the affected people to waterborne and hygiene preventable diseases like malaria, bilharzia, diarrhea, and dysentery, among others. It also limits access to services required by the population from the damage caused to road networks. Between April and December 2020, up to 60 percent of the country was notably inaccessible by land/road, constraining humanitarian access while increasing the cost of delivery assistance—by air transport.⁶

The mitigation measures to combat Covid-19, such as the closure of markets and the restrictions on the movements of goods, increased the prices of essential commodities, while rendering some essential goods/supplies unavailable. The Covid health response also stretched existing health services, disrupting access to routine health services in the country.⁷

The combined effects of years of conflict, recurrent floods, and other natural disasters contribute to create chronic vulnerabilities and weak essential services. In a nation of about 11 million people,⁸ approximately 8.3 million people were in need of humanitarian assistance by the end of 2020, compared to about 7.2 million and 7.5 million in 2018 and 2019 respectively.⁹ This was noted as an all-time high number of people in need of assistance. In 2020, most households' food insecurity worsened due to several factors: climate shocks, economic crisis, insecurity, lowered agricultural production, and chronic food shortages at household levels. For example, the depreciation of the South Sudanese pound in 2020 led to a rise in the prices of cereals and essential goods. Households' food expenditures rose, stretching their capacity to meet their food needs. As a result, levels of acute malnutrition remain extremely high in the population. By the end of 2020, some 1.4 million children under age five were estimated to suffer from acute malnutrition, an increase from the 1.3 million who were reported at the start of the year. More so, the number of people

facing crisis-level acute food insecurity (IPC Phase 3) or worse, also increased to 6.5 million people in the period May-July 2020, from the 5.3 million people who were projected to be impacted.¹⁰

All the above factors contribute to worsen the humanitarian situation in the country while constraining humanitarian access to those most in need. Importantly, some of the crises like the Covid restrictions, floods, and economic crisis disrupted the supply chains of essential goods, as well as humanitarian assistance. This increased the prices of essential goods while delaying the delivery of assistance, which worsened people's situation and food insecurity.

Governance and Civil Society in South Sudan

The Non-Governmental Organizations Act of 2016¹¹ defines a civil society organization (CSO) as a “[p]ublic or private, non-profit including religious entity, which is representative of a community or a significant segment of a community, and is engaged in meeting human, educational, environmental or public safety community needs.” In this paper, CSO will be used to refer to the broadest set of non-governmental actors operating in South Sudan, particularly with questions of governance. This paper will use the terms “local organizations” and “national NGOs” to refer more specifically to subnational and national organizations founded, registered, and based in South Sudan that are active in the humanitarian space.

Civil society governance and presence in South Sudan date back in the 1960s and 1970s when religious organizations played a vital role to provide humanitarian assistance in war torn southern Sudan. The increased presence of international organizations in southern Sudan from the 1970s created

⁶ UN OCHA. 2020. “South Sudan Humanitarian Fund Annual Report.”

⁷ UN OCHA. 2020. “South Sudan Humanitarian Fund Annual Report.”

⁸ Worldometer. Visited November 21, 2021. <https://www.worldometers.info/world-population/south-sudan-population/>

⁹ UN OCHA. 2020. “South Sudan Humanitarian Fund Annual Report.”

¹⁰ UN OCHA. 2020. “South Sudan Humanitarian Fund Annual Report.”

¹¹ NGO Act of 2016. <https://docs.southsudangoforum.org/sites/default/files/2017-11/NGO%20Act%202016.pdf>

opportunities for local groups and organizations to play a role in the provision of humanitarian assistance in their communities. This was possible since the international organizations prioritized the provision of humanitarian assistance through local connections and contacts.¹²

From the 1990s, studies show that Operation Lifeline Sudan (OLS)¹³ changed the future of the NGO operation in southern Sudan. First, there was a rapid expansion in international NGO (INGO) presence in the region, which facilitated the creation of civic space and structures that supported the formation of local organizations. The international presence and support also provided the much-needed funding and capacity building to local organizations. Importantly, the heightened insecurity and inaccessibility challenges inside most of southern Sudan meant that any assistance could only be provided through local organizations.¹⁴ Second, the shift from relief to development to avoid the politicization of aid increased support to local organizations in southern Sudan.¹⁵ Third, the signing of the Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) in 2005 ushered renewed hope for local organizations in South Sudan. The independence brought the country renewed hopes for peace and a rise in civil society, including local, national, and international humanitarian and development actors. To illustrate, after the CPA, there was increased international NGO presence, from 47 in 2005 to 155 in 2010.¹⁶ These new actors played a key role in the nascent nation's search for stability, state-building, development, and service delivery. Specifically, increased international organizations in South Sudan provided funding and capacity building support to local organizations to provide humanitarian assistance.

However, a shift in donor funding to provide multi-year and multi-million grants to support the creation of the New Government of South Sudan challenged the existence of most local organizations who did not have the capacity to manage such large grants. Moreover, many NGOs leaders were drawn into government positions—as politicians or technical staff—creating a gap in the NGO capacity in South Sudan. Some of the local organizations collapsed once their founders left; at the same time, dwindling international funding sources meant most local organizations were unable to afford their operational costs. In the absence of external funding and weak local leadership and ownership, local organizations had a hard time maintaining their presence and operations.¹⁷

The outbreak of conflict in South Sudan in 2013 was an additional blow to CSOs and local organizations in South Sudan as donors shifted their funding focus to humanitarian assistance away from development. For example, by 2014, 67 percent of aid to South Sudan was targeted for humanitarian assistance, further reducing the funds available to local organizations engaged in development, human rights, and governance programs.¹⁸ Some of the local organizations became redundant and unable to attract funding for their work and meet their operational cost. At the same time, the Revitalized Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in the Republic of South Sudan (R-ARCSS) of 2018 recognizes CSO participation in the country's transitional institutions and the mechanisms that monitor peace agreement implementation, as well as the CSO role in supporting institutional and systemic reforms and transformation.¹⁹ There was a rapid growth of some local organization during this period—evident by increased partnership between local organizations

¹² Leben Moro, Naomi Pendle, Alice Robinson, and Lydia Tanner. 2020. "Localizing Humanitarian Aid during Armed Conflict: Lessons Learnt from the Histories and Creativity of South Sudanese NGOs." London School of Economics and Political Science.

¹³ Operation Lifeline Sudan (OLS) was a six-year large scale multi-agency humanitarian assistance during southern Sudan civil war.

¹⁴ Ø. Rolandsen. 2005. "Guerrilla Government: Political Changes in the Southern Sudan during the 1990s." Nordiska Afrika institutet.

¹⁵ Moro et al. "Localizing Humanitarian Aid during Armed Conflict."

¹⁶ D. Felix da Costa. 2012. "Working in Challenging Environments: Risk Management and Aid Culture in South Sudan."

¹⁷ Moro et al. "Localizing Humanitarian Aid during Armed Conflict."

¹⁸ G. M. Sørbo, M. Schomerus, and L. Aalen. 2016. "Country Evaluation Brief: South Sudan." NORAD and Chr. Michelsen Institute (CMI).

¹⁹ Inter-Governmental Authority on Development (IGAD). 2018. "Revitalized Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in the Republic of South Sudan." Addis Ababa, Ethiopia. Accessed on Nov. 12, 2021 at <https://www.peaceagreements.org/viewmasterdocument/2112>

and international nongovernmental organizations (INGOs) to fill the gap in the provision of humanitarian assistance in the absence of INGOs due to limited access.²⁰ Local organizations involved in humanitarian response increased from 40 in 2016 to about 143 in 2020 under the UN led Humanitarian Response Plan (HRP),²¹ while those registered with the South Sudan NGO Forum increased from 74 in 2011 to 242 in 2015 and 263 in 2019.²²

Nonetheless, challenges still exist for most local organizations in South Sudan. Notable are funding shortfalls. Available funds tend to be short term and unreliable to support organizational institutional capacity development, affecting their ability to attract and manage large donor funds.²³ Some of the organizations face challenges to properly account to their donors. For example, some of the respondents noted that the few local organizations who benefited from the South Sudan Country Pooled Humanitarian Fund were cut out because of accountability challenges for the funds received. Only a handful

of local organizations are still benefitting from the pooled fund.²⁴ More so, despite the important role of local organizations in South Sudan, they do not always enjoy a collaborative relationship with the government of South Sudan. Currently, there is a dwindling civic space in the country.²⁵ The government has placed restrictions on CSO operations, especially those who implement a mix of accountability, governance, human rights, and humanitarian responses, causing tensions between CSOs and the state. The state accuses CSOs of aligning with opposition groups or promoting Western powers and their agendas, partly fueled by the politics of ethnic identity. The National Security Agency (NSA) arrested or assaulted some CSO leaders and staff because of their work—silencing any dissenting voices.²⁶ These security challenges cause fear among CSO actors who must carefully determine what work or activities they can engage in to avoid tension with the state—limiting their creativity and progress.

The State of Localization in South Sudan

This part of the report draws from interviews with respondents inside South Sudan—local, national, and international organizations who were consulted for this study. We wanted to understand what localization meant to the different respondents interviewed. We explore the differences in responses between respondents from local organizations and sought the insight of respondents working with international organizations inside South Sudan.

Defining Localization

Depending on their position and interests, different actors in South Sudan have different definitions of and approaches to localization. Most local actors defined localization as a bottom-up approach in which local residents actively participate in identifying and designing humanitarian interventions.

²⁰ Moro et al. "Localizing Humanitarian Aid during Armed Conflict."

²¹ UN OCHA. 2015. "South Sudan 2016 Humanitarian Response Plan (January–December 2016)." Also see UN OCHA. 2019. "South Sudan 2020 Humanitarian Response Plan."

²² South Sudan NGO Forum. 2016. "2015 South Sudan NGO Forum Annual Report."

²³ Moro et al. 2020. "Localizing Humanitarian Aid during Armed Conflict."

²⁴ EA 25. Jul. 2, 2021, EA 32. Aug. 3, 2021.

²⁵ EA 16. Jun. 24, 2021, EA 25. Jul. 2, 2021.

²⁶ Carine Kaneza Nantulya. 2021. "Will South Sudan Rein in its Notorious National Security Service? The NSS has become a feared agency and a vital tool in the government's campaign of silencing dissent." Accessed on Nov. 13, 2021 at <https://www.hrw.org/news/2021/05/06/will-south-sudan-rein-its-notorious-national-security-service>

In this understanding of localization, community-based organizations (CBOs) or local actors carry out humanitarian interventions, not outside actors. Two main factors influence this view of localization: (1) the deeply ethnic nature of the conflict in South Sudan and the consequent need for conflict sensitivity in any response, as ethnic identity in the country shapes local identity and social obligations to one's own community; and (2) the importance of increasing local engagement to shift humanitarian leadership and decision making to the local level.

Some local actors have another view of localization. Their definition focuses on the importance of funding, but their rationale goes beyond funding; it is really about how funding empowers local actors. In this view, localization requires increased funding that meets or exceeds the Grand Bargain's²⁷ 25 percent local funding commitment²⁸ so that local actors can successfully carry out humanitarian interventions. Without access to adequate funding, local actors cannot negotiate equal partnerships, strengthen their institutional capacities (such as internal policies and human resources, capital inputs such as vehicles, office equipment or rent an office), or participate confidently in coordination mechanisms. Thus, in this view, funding is seen as a strategic conduit for achieving localization more broadly, and insufficient funding prevents local actors from reaching key milestones in localization. This view is influenced by the humanitarian sector's centralized and internationalized Western funding model. As long as humanitarian funding continues to flow from the Global North to the Global South, the shift in power dynamics, influence, and decision making envisioned in the Grand Bargain is unlikely to be attained.

International actors, such as INGOs, United Nations (UN) agencies, and private groups, also defined localization differently. Some understand localization as the process by which international actors

empower local actors through capacity building, funding, and collaborating in ways that complement local efforts. There is an emphasis on capacity building because of the desire to harness each actor's relative strengths in a humanitarian response. Capacity building includes trainings designed to strengthen the systems, structures, and policies of local organizations to make them more effective and better able to attract funding. In this understanding of localization, capacity building would help local actors gain credibility and trust among international actors, which would then fund local actors, making their work complementary.

Some international actors believe that South Sudan is not ready for localization. In their view, when they "recruit local staff," they are contributing to localization. Their hesitancy to localize is fueled by a lack of trust in local capacity and the fear of competition for relatively limited humanitarian funds. A 2018 Humanitarian Policy Group (HPG) report observed a shift in direct funding to INGOs in South Sudan and a growing proportion of funds passing through an intermediary to local and national actors.²⁹ The HPG study also noted increased INGO funding to local and national actors, although this funding was uncoordinated, unplanned, and unmonitored. There were also no deliberate efforts to shift funding to local and national organizations. Instead, in what many viewed as efforts to maintain the status quo, there was a reported reluctance among international actors to invest in local capacity.

The majority of local actors viewed the 25 percent local funding commitment as a right; however, some international actors argue it then becomes an entitlement rather than a policy or strategic intervention. These differing views have caused some tensions between local and international humanitarian actors, frustrating efforts at better coordination and complementarity in humanitarian responses. For example, under the South Sudan

²⁷ An agreement among donors and humanitarian organizations to "get more means into the hands of people in need and to improve the effectiveness and efficiency" of humanitarian aid. <https://interagencystandingcommittee.org/about-the-grand-bargain>

²⁸ The Grand Bargain commits donors and aid organizations to provide 25 per cent of global humanitarian funding to local and national organizations in the country of operation. The commitment also includes more un-earmarked money and increased multi-year funding to ensure greater predictability and continuity in humanitarian response.

²⁹ Barnaby Willitts-King, Nisar Majid, Mo Ali, and Lydia Poole. 2018. "Funding to Local Humanitarian Actors—Evidence from Somalia and South Sudan." Policy Brief 73. Humanitarian Policy Group (HPG), Overseas Development Institute (ODI), London.

Humanitarian Fund also known as the Country-Based Pooled Fund (CBPF)³⁰ tensions have been noted between local and international actors related to fund allocations and some local actors have been removed from the CBPF. In addition, some local actors noted that including international actors in the national NGO coordination mechanism affected local participation. Of note, introducing a membership fee of USD 500 disproportionately limited the participation of local actors.

Defining Local

In addition to the varied understandings of localization, the definition of who qualifies as “local” remains highly contested in South Sudan. Within the country itself, the understanding of who is “local” is highly nuanced and often based on the type of organization or the region where it operates. For example, the African Medical and Research Foundation (AMREF), a Global South organization headquartered in Kenya, but registered and working in South Sudan, does not carry the same “local” status as a South Sudanese organization. Notably, from a South Sudanese perspective, AMREF is viewed as an INGO; however, from a global perspective, it is seen as a local actor, founded and operating in the Global South.

Most local respondents defined a local actor as a native, homegrown organization, registered and working in South Sudan. The more remote and localized the founding, leadership or management, and operation that an organization has, the more “local” it is considered. Indeed, national NGOs based in Juba, the capital, are viewed differently than local organizations based at subnational level or state levels—despite having operations in these local areas. Furthermore, an organization’s “local” status may be questioned if its in-country leader is not South Sudanese. This is especially true if the organization’s leader enjoys privileges and benefits not

available to other, similar local organizations. How well an organization and its staff reflect a crisis-affected population both in terms of physical proximity and other social identities is of particular importance in determining how “local” that organization is perceived to be at the grassroots level. However, in most cases, these local organizations tend to have low visibility, weak institutional capacity, and limited or no funding. In comparison, national organizations in Juba tend to enjoy relative strength, including greater visibility, capacity, and funding.

In sum, the definitions of both “local” and “localized” remain unclear in South Sudan, with implications for how both terms are applied or understood in the new nation.

The Current Status of Localization in South Sudan

Prior to 2017, South Sudan’s humanitarian network did not focus on localization. Interest in localization shifted following an influential 2018 Humanitarian Policy Group (HPG) study that examined funding access in South Sudan and Somalia in the context of the Grand Bargain.³¹ An international organization representative who played a crucial role in the South Sudan localization agenda noted that this study was instrumental in kickstarting the localization debate in South Sudan.³² Indeed, the study’s findings on funding access in South Sudan were remarkably appalling: only about 4 percent of donor funds for humanitarian aid were channeled directly through local or national organizations, falling well short of the Grand Bargain’s goal of 25 percent. The HPG study also found that power dynamics in the humanitarian system greatly undermined local access to funding and, more broadly, the localization agenda.

³⁰ The South Sudan Humanitarian Fund (SSHF) also known as the Country-Based Pooled Fund (CBPF) is a multi-donor humanitarian fund established in 2012 to support the timely allocation and disbursement of donor resources to address the most urgent humanitarian needs and assist the most vulnerable people in South Sudan.

³¹ Willitts-King et al. “Funding to Local Humanitarian Actors.”

³² EA 32. Aug. 3, 2021.

From 2017 to date, several initiatives have aimed to advance the localization agenda in South Sudan. These include

- an Oxfam project to support humanitarian programming among local actors in South Sudan;
- a partnership between Save the Children and the South Sudan National NGO Forum focused on capacity building for local actors in humanitarian responses;
- a Tearfund project with a consortium of other organizations to support the role of faith-based actors in humanitarian activities; and
- a CARE project that developed a localization framework for South Sudan and used a partnership approach to enhance understanding of localization.

These different initiatives helped reshape the localization dialogue in South Sudan. However, they also have limitations: all were led by international actors, meaning local and national actors lacked the opportunity to implement or lead initiatives directly. Nonetheless, the combination of these various initiatives together with increased localization advocacy in recent years has led to more discussions about localization in South Sudan. This increased focus on localization represented a large paradigm shift from the past.³³

At a practical level, a number of UN agencies reportedly took deliberate steps to demonstrate their commitment to implementing the localization agenda, such as disaggregating their funding based on the recipient, including local actors. In addition, to acknowledge their commitment to localization, some INGOs and UN agencies increased their partnerships with local actors³⁴, especially for capacity building. However, despite this progress, these partnerships

occurred mainly through fixed short-term subcontracts, with limited opportunities for local actors to determine program priorities. In addition, some international actors working in remote areas of the country, such as Bahr el Ghazal, implement programs directly instead of working through local actors.³⁵

In terms of coordination, more local actors are participating in coordination mechanisms and platforms for humanitarian efforts, although the proportion of local to international actors remains low overall. Nonetheless, a handful of local actors currently participate in

- the Humanitarian Country Team (HCT), the highest decision-making body at the country level for humanitarian response and intervention, fund allocation, and engagement in humanitarian response;
- the cluster coordination mechanism;³⁶
- the South Sudan Country-Based Pooled Fund (CBPF), its advisory board and strategic review committees (SRCs) that review and select projects for funding.³⁷

Even this minimal local participation represents a significant shift from a few years ago, when all participation in coordination mechanisms was reserved for international organizations alone.

There should be a central coordination mechanism in South Sudan, but in practice, international organizations have their own forum. The HCT and the cluster coordination mechanisms exist; however, the leadership of these coordination mechanisms remains highly internationalized. Leadership roles in the HCT and the cluster coordination mechanism are still reserved for UN agencies and INGOs only.³⁸ Local actors were only recently admitted to leadership roles at the subcluster level, and then

³³ EA 32. Aug. 3, 2021.

³⁴ When international actors, such as INGOs and UN agencies, operate in partnerships where they pass funding from donors onto local organizations, they are often referred to as “international intermediaries”

³⁵ EA 20. Jun. 30, 2021.

³⁶ The cluster coordination system was developed by the Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC) Cluster System to address gaps and to increase the effectiveness of humanitarian response through building partnerships. It seeks to strengthen system-wide preparedness and technical capacity to respond to humanitarian emergency.

³⁷ See UN OCHA. 2019. “South Sudan—Country Report. OCHA Evaluation of Country Based Pooled Funds.” Accessed on Nov. 13, 2021 at <https://www.unocha.org/sites/unocha/files/2019%20OCHA%20Evaluation%20of%20CBPFs%20-%20South%20Sudan%20Report.pdf>

³⁸ EA 25. Jul. 2, 2021, and EA 31. Jul 6, 2021.

only in two sectors. At the national level, international organizations are also represented in the National NGO Forum of South Sudan coordination mechanisms. In addition, international staff from UN agencies and INGOs involved in the coordination mechanisms are more respected and influential than their local counterparts. The few local actors participating in the coordination mechanisms are especially those with international connections or ties to the bigger, more affluent nationally based organizations. Furthermore, some of the “more local” actors outside Juba and closer to crisis-affected populations are unaware these coordination mechanisms even exist. If they do know about them, they are generally unable to participate in them due to their remote location and related access challenges. Finally, the government of South Sudan plays a minimal role in the coordination mechanisms or, more generally, the South Sudan humanitarian response.

There have also been changes noted in South Sudan’s CBPF, a funding mechanism for humanitarian responses. Currently managed by the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), the CBPF provides funding to humanitarian actors in South Sudan, including local actors, UN agencies, and INGOs. Today, nearly 32 local actors benefit from the CBPF, receiving about 33 percent of the funds.³⁹ This is a decline from three years ago (2018), when 39 percent of the funds were allocated to local actors. Despite the statistics, the changes still indicate an overall improvement in the allocation of CBPF to local actors from 12 percent in 2016.⁴⁰ Indeed, it has been a long struggle for local actors to gain access to the CBPF, which was long prioritized for INGOs and UN agencies and lacks a clear and separate funding amount designated for local actors.⁴¹

Despite local actors’ increased access to the CBPF, the gap in their funding as compared to what international actors receive is still quite wide. In the beginning, local actors reported receiving USD 50,000 to 100,000 for a six-month period. Over time, as local actors engaged in greater advocacy and negotiations, funds received from the CBPF increased to USD 300,000 for a one-year period, benefiting local actors in particular. Donor contributions to the CBPF has also stagnated over the years, from USD 99 million in 2015⁴² to only USD 66.3 million in 2020,⁴³ which was 4 percent below the 2019 allocation of USD 68.9 million.⁴⁴ Overall, most local organizations in South Sudan depend on UN agencies and INGOs subcontracts and less on the CBPF. Yet, the total amount of funds for humanitarian response that local organizations receive is still a small proportion of the total humanitarian aid received. For example, in 2017, local organizations in South Sudan received approximately USD 68.9 million in direct and indirect funding, representing around 4.9 percent of total funds given to the humanitarian response. The funds were mainly channelled through UN and INGO intermediaries.⁴⁵

Nearly all local study respondents noted that most of the localization agenda remains on paper, limiting its success. For example, the CBPF lacks a clear and separate amount of funds available to local actors. Since the inception of the fund in 2012, the OCHA Humanitarian Financing Unit (HFU) and the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) Technical Secretariat (acting as the managing agent for NGOs) jointly supported the Humanitarian Coordinator (HC). However, as of Jan. 1, 2020, OCHA took over as managing agent for NGOs to support the HC on a day-to-day basis.⁴⁶ The shift in the coordination

³⁹ UN OCHA. 2020. “South Sudan Humanitarian Fund Annual Report.”

⁴⁰ UN OCHA. 2018. “South Sudan Humanitarian Fund Annual Report.” South Sudan Humanitarian Fund. Accessed on Nov. 13, 2021 at <https://www.humanitarianresponse.info/sites/www.humanitarianresponse.info/files/2019/06/South-Sudan-Humanitarian-Fund--Annual-Report-2018.pdf>

⁴¹ EA 25, 31, and 32.

⁴² UN OCHA. 2015. “South Sudan Common Humanitarian Fund Annual Report.” Accessed on Nov. 13, 2021 at https://www.humanitarianresponse.info/sites/www.humanitarianresponse.info/files/documents/files/southsudan_chf_2015_annual_report_web_0.pdf

⁴³ UN OCHA. 2020. “South Sudan Humanitarian Fund Annual Report.”

⁴⁴ UN OCHA. 2019. “South Sudan Humanitarian Fund Annual Report.” South Sudan Humanitarian Fund. Accessed on Nov. 13, 2021 at <https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/South%20Sudan%20Humanitarian%20Report%202019.pdf>

⁴⁵ Moro et al. 2020. “Localizing Humanitarian Aid during Armed Conflict.” Pg 34.

⁴⁶ UN OCHA. 2019. “South Sudan Humanitarian Fund Annual Report.” Pg. 10. Accessed on Nov. 13, 2021 at <https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/South%20Sudan%20Humanitarian%20Report%202019.pdf>

of the CBPF from UNDP to OCHA as the managing agent for NGOs was noted to have reversed the ability of local actors to benefit from the fund. As many as 55 organizations (46 of them local actors) were removed from the CBPF over reported irregularities (such as accountability and compliance issues). However, the CBPF's management approaches have been criticized for being insensitive to local realities and promoting unequal treatment, as investigations disproportionately targeted local actors regarding due diligence questions. The decision to remove organizations from the CBPF was seen as a means of absolving the fund of its responsibility to build local capacity and distribute the risks of fund administration. Yet, despite these challenges, there was still some room for local actors to voice their concerns. For example, some local actors that had been removed from the CBPF petitioned the fund management to reevaluate the decision and address their concerns. As a result, several local organizations without severe cases against them were reinstated to the fund. Yet, even though international actors received most of the funds for humanitarian assistance, local actors remain central and at the

forefront of providing humanitarian assistance to crisis-affected people in their communities.

The role of South Sudan's government in the country's humanitarian response remains weak. In particular, the South Sudan Relief and Rehabilitation Commission (SSRRC), which is responsible for humanitarian affairs at the state and national levels, plays a very minimal role—if any at all—in the humanitarian response. For example, the government is not involved in decisions about the South Sudan Humanitarian Fund/CBPF and, to avoid conflicts of interest, it is not consulted on fund allocation or prioritization.

International humanitarian responses often fill the gap (up to 80 percent) created by a government's inability to provide basic services, and this situation often weakens the government's role in holding humanitarian actors accountable. The government feels powerless to act in some situations. These combined factors limit the government's involvement in the humanitarian response and, specifically, in the localization agenda.

Contributing Factors and Barriers to Localization

Contributing Factors

Two main factors help strengthen localization efforts.

- 1. Supportive international intermediaries:** For some local actors, opportunities are increasing for direct engagement with potential donors. Here, international intermediaries play an important role in laying the foundation and providing opportunities for local actors to receive sustained funding and institutional strengthening. For example, collaboration between a local actor and an international intermediary, usually over a long period, say five years, strengthens a local actor's ability to attract funding on its own.

During this collaborative period, the local actor builds the systems, knowledge, and procedures needed to attract and manage large donor funds and meet a donor's due diligence requirements.

These collaborations help local actors gain the trust and commitment of potential donors, opening up the possibility of direct funding. For example, one local study respondent received funding from the German Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ) and Irish Aid after a successful collaboration in South Sudan with the Catholic Agency for Overseas Development (CAFOD), Trócaire (an Irish organization), and a German organization.⁴⁷ Notably, international intermediaries can

⁴⁷ EA 31. Jul. 6, 2021.

also introduce local actors to donor spaces at the international, regional, and country levels, offering them increased exposure to potential funding opportunities.

- 2. Increased engagement with donors:** Some bilateral donors are open to exploring the localization concept with local actors. One local actor participated in a roundtable on localization and made many presentations to the United Kingdom's Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office (FCDO). This organization is also scheduled to interact with the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Danish Government on their localization policies and their potential work with local actors.

However, though spaces are emerging for local actors to directly engage donors, there are still no known donor commitments to localization or local actors. Generally, local actors that already have connections with international actors get access to better opportunities than their counterparts without such connections. While this represents progress, it does not represent a shift in donors' inclination to fund local actors; rather, direct local funding seems to occur on an ad hoc basis based on the particular local actor and its capacities. A comprehensive shift in donor conversations, interactions, and, eventually, direct funding of local actors will likely take time.

Barriers to Localization

Several factors act as barriers to localization efforts.

- 1. International domination of coordination mechanisms:** In South Sudan, staff from international organizations dominate and influence decision making in the HCT and the cluster system. Both of these coordination mechanisms are headed by international organization staff from outside of South Sudan; they enjoy the connections, affiliations, and reputation of the entity they represent, giving these international voices an edge over their local counterparts and bestowing them with greater power and influence. Similar power dynamics exist between local actors at the country level. Local and national organiza-
- tions with connections to the right authorities or to international actors enjoy more funding and influence than local actors without such connections. Conversely, local actors in remote regions (such as Bahr el Ghazal or Jonglei) that have limited access to communication services (such as Internet and phone connectivity) and limited opportunities to participate in coordination mechanisms do not have equal access to funding, capacity building, or other organizational supports.
- 2. Donor conditions and restrictions:** Donor conditions and funding requirements—whether real or perceived—are strict and stringent and undermine local actors' access to funds. For example, under European Union (EU) rules, EU donors can only contract with entities legally registered in an EU member state. Such requirements disqualify many local actors from the South Sudan from competing or applying for these funds. There is a low donor appetite for risk, and donors do not trust in local actors' capacities. In addition, there is a lack of donor capacity to manage and monitor more partners in country, limiting local actors' chances of receiving direct funding. Instead, local actors rely on international intermediaries to access funds. In addition, the lack of judicial services to enforce funding of contractual obligations in South Sudan adds to donor hesitation to fund local actors directly. Overall, the existing donor framework aims to mitigate risk, but it does not address the contextual differences of and challenges to local actors, thereby impeding attempts to localize humanitarian efforts.
- 3. Diversion and targeting of humanitarian aid:** Armed violence remains a persistent threat in most of South Sudan, and it impacts humanitarian efforts. There are fears that funding directed to local actors, especially those in remote areas of the country, could be easily diverted to armed groups, causing more harm to the crisis-affected population. There have been accounts of corruption among humanitarian workers—at both local and international organizations—who divert humanitarian funding for their own personal use, sometimes resulting in a project's closure and of course disadvantaging

the intended beneficiaries. In addition, as governments face reduced revenues and funding, some government officials and community members look at humanitarian funding as a source of income. There is a general assumption that humanitarian workers have access to foreign currency; as a result, staff of both local and international humanitarian assistance organizations are at increased risk for their safety. Accounts of individuals or groups carrying out targeted, armed raids of local humanitarian staff to demand money is a challenge for localization.

- 4. Conflict sensitivity and varying views of localization:** The ethnic nature of the conflict in South Sudan raises concerns about the role of local actors in the delivery of humanitarian services. Local actors from ethnic groups deeply involved in the conflict often find it difficult to work in other ethnic groups' localities; there is a fear of being victimized or inflaming the conflict. Thus, to "do no harm," international actors need to act with sensitivity when determining partnerships with local actors and even when hiring local staff. Often, these constraints limit the extent to which international actors can localize the humanitarian response, especially if localization is likely to hinder humanitarian principles, imperatives, or assistance.

Varying perceptions of what constitutes "local" also present challenges to localization, especially in states with relatively low levels of education, weak local organizational capacity, and undertones of ethnic strife. In different parts of South Sudan, communities have protested against humanitarian responses because of the limited opportunities they offered the local population. Yet, when the local population lacks the necessary levels of education, capacity, or experience, humanitarian organizations are forced to employ people from outside that area who do have the needed qualifications; this generates resentment and anger in the local population. In addition, achieving localization at the country level and promoting conflict sensitivity in the humanitarian response is challenging in a context of South Sudan, which experiences highly charged conflicts with deep ethnic undertones.

- 5. Subcontracting power dynamics:** As discussed previously, local actors have limited opportunities to access donor funding directly. Instead, many receive funding through subgrants from international intermediaries, primarily INGOs working in South Sudan. Given the nature of the funding, international intermediaries are often preoccupied with meeting donor conditions, a concern that is passed on to local actors. There is no harmonized project assessment tool; thus, each international actor has and administers its own capacity assessment tool, resulting in extensive and numerous assessments that are repetitive and overburden local actors. Representatives of both local and international organizations acknowledged that these capacity assessments are themselves embedded with power dynamics and therefore affect the ability to promote equal partnerships. The international intermediary acts as a de facto donor, giving it disproportionate power and influence over local actors. For their part, local actors have a limited voice and little autonomy in setting priorities and shaping the relationship with the intermediary. Importantly, local actors generally viewed capacity assessment as a fault-finding process and something to fear. Some local actors hide or do not disclose their organizational capacity needs to meet funding criteria.

- 6. Low-quality funding available to local actors:** Most local actors we spoke with expressed concerns about the nature of subgrants: small, short-term, inflexible, and unpredictable funding that does little to help crisis-affected populations. Subgrants often limit overhead costs, making it difficult for local actors to cover the costs of staff time, institutional development, capital cost, and benefits, despite working in hazardous environments. The study showed that some local staff moved to international organizations, which offer better remuneration and working conditions than local organizations. There is a continuous need for local organizations to invest in capacity building for new staff, but they have limited institutional funding to do so. Some organizations end up hiring low-salaried, but unqualified staff to fill the gap.

7. Risk is transferred to local organizations:

Local staff and staff of local organizations working on the frontlines to provide humanitarian assistance face grave dangers from armed violence, including injury or even death. However, the existing international humanitarian system does not provide local actors with a means for relief or redress against these dangers. The current system prioritizes international organizations and their international staff over local staff of international organizations, even though these local staff carry out the bulk of the work. Moreover, international actors working with local actors are unwilling to cover the risks of dangers on local actors' staff. Partnership agreements generally do not recognize eventualities like injury or death. But without sufficient and flexible funding, local partners are left in a terrible predicament: they cannot provide assistance to their injured staff or deceased staff's family.

8. Exclusionary nature of the humanitarian system:

Several actors in South Sudan—including some government actors, some faith-based organisations (FBOs), and the private sector—did not appear to be actively participating in the more formal humanitarian coordination and response mechanisms. Many humanitarian actors operate on their own terms, outside the existing coordination mechanisms. Although some local and international actors collaborate with the private sector to implement humanitarian efforts, these partnerships generally differ from traditional humanitarian assistance partnerships and are reportedly based on business models. The exclusionary nature of the humanitarian system in South Sudan means that the country's humanitarian response lacks coordination, leadership, and a unified strategy.

9. NGO coordination and registration fees: The government of South Sudan recognizes and supports NGO operations at the national and state levels through the SSRRC. The SSRRC is responsible for registering NGOs and, ideally, should coordinate their operations. However, the reality is quite different. In practice, the government plays a much more limited role, with interna-

tional humanitarian actors taking on most of the NGO coordination efforts.

Notably, nearly all local respondents consulted expressed concern about the government's high NGO registration fee (USD 200 annually), which is particularly expensive for remote and rural-based local organizations that lack steady funding sources. The high registration fee has caused some local organizations to close and end their operations altogether. This fee-induced closure of local organizations undermines local initiatives and their potential to promote a context-appropriate humanitarian response.

10. Restrictive national legislation on civil society:

Local respondents expressed fears about the government's repressive laws and its attitude toward civil society. Local organizations that implement a mix of projects—including initiatives related to governance, human rights, and accountability, along with humanitarian efforts—were particularly concerned. These local organizations often found their work under government scrutiny, which at times landed them in trouble with the government. Respondents shared accounts about their NGO and civil society colleagues being arrested and brutalized by state security agents. A few civil society leaders are reportedly still under detention by state security operatives. The government is particularly critical of civil society efforts they believe promote a "Western agenda" that could delegitimize or discredit the government. Tensions with the government have constricted the space available for civil society engagement; there are fears of arrest or the deregistration of organizations.

To exert even more control over civil society, the government has established a provision under the current security law that requires National Security Services (NSS) clearance for any meeting or training involving more than five people. Even when such gatherings are approved, NSA agents attend these meetings to ascertain the nature of the discussion, thus generating fear and limiting civil society participation in discussions about important topics, with adverse implications for humanitarian action.⁴⁸

⁴⁸ Nantulya. "Will South Sudan Rein in its notorious National Security Service?"

11. Unclear regional commitments: Regional commitments to localization remain unclear. In particular, there are concerns that, compared to West Africa, localization has not gained as much traction in East Africa or the Horn of Africa. Instead, localization seems to be part of a still-evolving agenda for many institutions in the region, including the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD) and the regional office of the United Nations. Although regional offices of international organizations are responsible for advancing their organization's agenda in the region, in general, they have not actively promoted localization; this causes

reluctance in some country-level offices (for example, of the UN) to prioritize localization. A UN regional official interviewed for this study confirmed this, reiterating that the UN is preoccupied with its own specific institutional agenda and mandates—such as UN reform and the call for a unified presence in the country or region of operation—which take precedence over other commitments.⁴⁹ The lack of regional leadership, for example, by IGAD and the UN regional offices in the region has resulted in a lack of clear commitments—especially from international actors working at the country level—to advance localization in humanitarian efforts.

Lessons Learned: Local Recommendations for Supporting Localization

1. Expand opportunities for local actors to engage directly with donors.

Existing direct relationships between donors and local actors in South Sudan are not part of a deliberate donor strategy, but rather occur on an ad hoc basis. International intermediaries continue to be the main conduit between donors and local actors working on the ground, which can limit donor understanding of the local context. Study participants recommend that donors open more spaces for interacting and engaging directly with local actors. This would provide donors with a better sense of what is happening on the ground, including local needs, the response required, and the role of local actors in providing humanitarian assistance in their communities. These spaces would also allow local actors to strengthen relationships with donors and expand their opportunities for direct donor funding.

2. Increase direct funding to local actors.

In South Sudan, most local actors struggle to obtain direct donor funding for their work. At least in part, this is due to strict donor funding conditions and compliance requirements that do not recognize local contexts and realities. The few local actors that manage to obtain direct donor funding are those with connections to international actors. To increase direct funding to local actors, respondents suggest that donors adopt an institutional strategic approach and incorporate localization into their funding frameworks and policies. This could mean that donors apply more flexible compliance rules or different regulations to local actors to account for the local context. For example, local actors may not have to meet a requirement that applicants match donor funding, whereas INGOs may have reserve funds to do so. Institutionalizing localization into donor policies and frameworks helps ensure that eligible local actors have an equal opportunity to access and benefit from donor support

⁴⁹ EA 37. Aug. 10, 2021.

3. Measure donor commitment to localization.

To promote donor commitment to localization, specific milestones or indicators should be incorporated into funding frameworks to assess donor progress toward localization over time. This can help encourage donors to make humanitarian aid directly available to local actors.

4. Focus on the crisis-affected population to inform donor priorities.

Donor funding priorities often do not reflect the needs and priorities of the affected population. In fact, instead of building community resilience and capacity, most of the ongoing humanitarian assistance in South Sudan has created dependence. Furthermore, despite the huge investments aimed at a peaceful solution for the country, the protracted nature of the conflict is also a source of concern. Overall, to achieve effective and sustained impact, the specific circumstances and needs of those most affected by conflict should inform donor funding priorities.

5. Increase the operational funds available to local actors.

The operational funds available to local actors remain very limited, making it all but impossible for them to do their work effectively—especially in the hazardous environments where they often operate. Without sufficient operational funds, local organizations cannot afford to hire qualified staff, provide safe working conditions, strengthen organizational development, or carry out capacity building. Donors should increase the amounts of operational funds available to local actors so they can perform their work more effectively. This can also help build the institutional capacity of local actors and reduce or eliminate existing inequalities between local and international organizations that provide humanitarian assistance in the country.

6. Increase local participation in project capacity assessments.

Donors and their international intermediaries dominate project capacity assessments and due diligence, leaving local actors with a limited voice in these processes. Not surprisingly, some changes are recommended for capacity assessments and due diligence. For one, they should be seen as shared processes that local actors and donors or international intermediaries carry out in partnership. There should also be changes in the way assessments are construed; instead of finding fault or assigning blame, they should focus on growth and learning opportunities. These changes could help build trust and confidence among local actors, encouraging them to share their institutional challenges more freely and to seek and receive the support they need to build local capacity.

7. Increase local allocations from Country-Based Pooled Funds.

The Country-Based Pooled Funds (CBPF) do not specify allocations for local, national, or international actors, but to date, the allocation for local actors has been relatively small. The CBPF compliance and due diligence requirements disadvantage local actors, and the Fund's risks are not equally distributed among all actors. According to local actors, the CBPF should create a separate but equal allocation of funds for local and international partners, thereby increasing the quality and quantity of funding available to local actors. Compliance and due diligence requirements should also be lowered to account for local conditions and to increase funding access for local actors. Finally, CBPF risks should be distributed among all actors involved—local actors, intermediaries, and CBPF management—to reduce the risk of providing funding to local actors. For example, CBPF should invest in sufficient and consistent funding to support the strengthening of local actors' institutional capacity to better manage the funds—lowering the risk to fund local actors under the CBPF.