



An Overview of Localization Research

June 2023

Building Markets



Building Markets
Small **Business.** Big **Impact.**

Preface And Acknowledgements

Building Markets is a non-profit organization that unleashes the transformational power of small businesses to address pressing social challenges by driving job creation and inclusive growth. Founded in 2004, the organization finds, builds, and connects competitive local SMEs to supply chains and investment. Utilizing this model, Building Markets has supported more than 27,000 SMEs, assisted those businesses in winning \$1.36 billion in contracts, and \$21 million in loans, and helped create over 23,500 jobs across diverse markets like Jordan, Myanmar, Afghanistan, Liberia, and Haiti.

In Türkiye, Building Markets has provided ongoing livelihood and business development services to SMEs in refugee and host communities since 2018. The long-term impact and support of refugee community livelihoods and economic development prospects are vitally important from the perspective of maintaining and increasing refugees' economic contributions to the Turkish economy, improving social cohesion, and potential future reconstruction and economic development in the country of origin. To this end, Building Market is constantly looking for innovative technical solutions and partnerships to achieve its objectives in the long run.

Parallel to that, as the development and humanitarian aid actors look for ways to make their work more effective, there is growing interest among major organizations in the field around sustainable solutions involving local actors. The increasing adoption of a localized-driven approach by major international and multilateral institutions and actors of international aid reflects this trend on a global level. The United Nations (UN), United States Agency for International Development (USAID), and the African Union (AU) have all developed roadmaps aiming at making their work more decentralized and providing more participatory programs.

In this context, Building Markets has launched a reflection on the localization issue. While its work has always been primarily based on local knowledge and expertise, Building Markets wants to take this new momentum to reflect on its work and think about ways to create programs that are even more connected to its beneficiaries. As a first step, this literature review brings together various internal reports and studies on the work of international aid actors. The objective is to draw from this literature a series of recommendations applicable to the challenges that all organizations face in their work to a greater or lesser extent.

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Context - Why a literature review on localization?

Over the past twenty years, humanitarian aid professionals, international organizations, and recipients have repeatedly raised the question of development aid effectiveness from a local ownership perspective.¹ Whether it is a question of building local capacities or working in partnership with local organizations, there has been a feeling for some time among international aid actors that the aid provided is somewhat disconnected from its recipients.²

The concern to involve recipients as much as possible in the design, implementation, and continuation of aid is as old as international aid itself. An early example of localization stems from the period following World War II when the United States (US) required its European allies to come together and map out how to deploy US assistance under the Marshall Plan.³ At the beginning of the 21st century, despite a significant increase in aid funding, many voices pointed out that international aid is not having the desired impact. These criticisms, which most often revolve around recipients' involvement in how aid is allocated, can be approached from two angles. The first, more technical, is that aid is more sustainable and effective when local recipients lead in identifying needs, designing programs, implementing projects, and evaluating the work done. The other face of the debate revolves more around political considerations where international aid should contribute to making the international system more equal between the "Global South" and the "Global North."⁴

Building Markets and the Localization Agenda

With a network of over 27,000 SMEs spread on three continents, Building Market has developed a dense network of partners and collaborators in the countries where it operates. To develop its services and create relevant programs, Building Markets must constantly rely on local knowledge and skills. Indeed, the environments in which we operate are complex and constantly changing. To provide our beneficiaries with services that can truly enhance their ability to grow their businesses, we must constantly monitor the latest market trends and evaluate our impact based on the data we receive from the field.

To better inform its future actions, Building Markets has initiated a reflection on how to further localize its programs. The discussions around localization currently taking place are particularly relevant to our programs, as Building Markets is constantly looking for the most inclusive solutions and processes. This is not only an important aspect of Building Markets' values but also a central concern for providing relevant services that can be informed and shaped by the people who will eventually benefit from them the most. Building Markets also seeks to develop more inclusive local partnerships and collaborations that harness local knowledge and

¹ Koenraad Van Brabant & Smruti Patel. "Understanding the localisation debate". Retrieved online from <https://www.alnap.org/help-library/understanding-the-localisation-debate> (2017)

² Alison Gardner, Kara Greenblott and Erika Joubert. "What We Know About Exit Strategies Practical Guidance For Developing Exit Strategies in the Field". Retrieved online from https://www.scotland-malawipartnership.org/assets/resources/c-safe_exit_strategies.pdf (2005)

³ Locally driven development Overcoming the obstacles, p.5

⁴ Mvemba Phezo Dizolele, Jacob Kurtzer, and Hareem Fatima Abdullah. "Localizing humanitarian action in Africa". Retrieved online from <https://www.csis.org/features/localizing-humanitarian-action-africa> (2021)

expertise. This overview seeks to identify key points from the literature around localization and share them with other organizations interested in pursuing localization strategies.

Framework: The Leading International Agreements about Localization

The debate around locally led development started to gain institutional weight in the international community around twenty years ago with the advent of a series of agreements that constitute the first real commitment taken from the international community for more localized international aid. From the Paris Declaration to the most recent Grand Bargain, despite the broad mobilization of the international community, these multilateral commitments have had minimal effect on the ground.⁵ While there are many reasons for these modest results, international aid actors agree that there is a lack of consensus on what localization is and how it should be implemented. From a more technical point of view, several reasons can be mentioned, such as an overemphasis on financial transfers (instead of responsibilities), cumbersome administrative procedures, and a lack of attention to the limited resources of partner states.⁶

International Agreements about Localization & Aid Effectiveness

Paris Declaration (2005)

The Paris Declaration (PD) on Aid Effectiveness was endorsed in March 2005 by more than 100 countries and international agencies with specific commitments for donors and partner countries to improve aid effectiveness. The Paris Declaration was endorsed to base development efforts on direct experience of what works and what does not work with aid. It is built around five central pillars: Ownership, Alignment, Harmonization, Managing for Results, and Mutual Accountability.

Istanbul Agreement (2009)

These principles guide the work and practice of organizations on partnerships in both peace and conflict situations, in different areas of work from the local level to policy advocacy, and along a continuum from humanitarian emergency to long-term development.

Grand Bargain (2016)

The Grand Bargain committed donors and aid organizations to provide 25% of global humanitarian funding to local and national responders by 2020, as well as more unrestricted funds and increased multi-year funding to ensure greater predictability and continuity in humanitarian response, among other commitments. After four years, in the face of very modest progress, new negotiations for a second round of agreements resulted in Grand Bargain 2.0 in 2021. This new version attempts to address concerns raised by the original agreement by emphasizing an improved consultation process with local organizations.

⁵ Laurence Chandy. "It's Complicated: the Challenge of Implementing the Paris Declaration on Aid Effectiveness". Retrived online from <https://www.brookings.edu/opinions/its-complicated-the-challenge-of-implementing-the-paris-declaration-on-aid-effectiveness/> (2011)

⁶ Christian Aid, CARE, Tearfund, ActionAid, CAFOD, Oxfam "Accelerating Localisation through Partnerships: Recommendations for operational practices that strengthen the leadership of national and local actors in partnership-based humanitarian action". Retrieved online from <https://reliefweb.int/report/world/accelerating-localisation-through-partnerships-recommendations-operational-practices> (2018)

After the significant socio-economic and logistical disruption caused by the global pandemic, the localization debate is now gaining new momentum, as evidenced by the belated commitments made by the international community at large⁷ and prominent multilateral actors such as the United Nations⁸ or the African Union.⁹ In the United States, this movement is reflected by the development of USAID’s new strategy presented in 2021.¹⁰

USAID’s New Vision for Global Development

USAID uses a variety of methods and metrics to capture several dimensions of localization and locally led development. These efforts are anchored in two interconnected, Agency-wide targets that Administrator Power announced in November 2021. Specifically, USAID will provide at least a quarter of its program funds directly to local partners by the end of FY 2025. And by 2030, fifty percent of USAID’s programming will place local communities in the lead to set priorities, codesign projects, drive implementation, or evaluate the impact of the agency’s programs. Recognizing the role national and subnational governments play in advancing many development objectives, USAID also encourages, tracks, and reports project-based assistance to governments. USAID also plan to improve how it tracks subawards to local actors.

More details on <https://www.usaid.gov/localization>

Part 1 - Lessons from Localization Research: Ensuring Localization is at the Heart of Program Development and Implementation

A broad review of the publicly available literature on localization indicates that at the heart of the debate is the challenge of rectifying the power imbalance in the relationship between local NGOs and international actors. Underlying this question is a multitude of technical challenges related to issues as diverse as access to funding, impact monitoring, and the broader question of the division of labor between local and international NGOs.

⁷ [The Grand Bargain \(Official website\)](#)

⁸ Oosterhof, Pytrik Dieuwke. "Localizing the sustainable development goals to accelerate implementation of the 2030 agenda for sustainable development." (2018).

⁹ African Union. "Call to Action: Addressing humanitarian health challenges in Africa in a rapidly changing world." (2022) Retrieved online: <https://africacdc.org/news-item/a-call-to-action-to-address-humanitarian-health-challenges-in-africa-in-a-rapidly-changing-world/>

¹⁰ USAID. "Administrator Samantha Power On A New Vision for Global Development." (2022). Retrieved online:

<https://www.usaid.gov/news-information/speeches/nov-04-2021-administrator-samantha-power-new-vision-global-development>

Before addressing these different issues, it is necessary to address the organization and planning of a localized project. This question can be approached from the point of view of planning localization over time and how to measure it through a reference framework.

Localization should be embedded at the start of program planning

To ensure that localization of development efforts takes root, several leading organizations have identified the design phase of the project as a critical starting point,¹¹ and at various points through a project's life cycle. This enables the planning of partial or total handover of a program's operations with a local partner and includes their leaders in the discussion so that sufficient resources are prioritized.¹² It is also essential to develop this phase with peers, document work, and share it internally and externally to avoid "reinventing the wheel."¹³ Finally, a chronological approach has been identified as a reliable method to order our thinking, the gaps highlighted, and areas for improvement.¹⁴

Measuring Localization: A Performance-Based Approach

Localization through partnerships should be managed using an evaluation framework. In most cases, the tools for measuring localization are performance-based. They are divided into six to seven categories that cover all aspects of the relationship between an international actor and a local organization, like the Performance Measurement System (LPMF), for instance.¹⁵

Developed by NEAR to fill the gap in the measurement of localization, the LPMF was designed to demonstrate progress in meeting localization commitments. While its focus is on local and national actors, it is also relevant to international non-governmental organizations (INGOs). Available in six languages, the principal value of this framework is that it allows for a detailed description of the desired change that is anticipated, provides impact indicators, and summarizes key performance indicators. Also, this framework offers detailed explanations on how to develop benchmarks and establish an action plan.

¹¹ Hayman, Rachel, et al. "Exit strategies and sustainability. Lessons for practitioners. intrac for civil society". Retrieved online from <https://www.intrac.org/wpcms/wp-content/uploads/2016/11/Exit-strategies-and-sustainability.-Lessons-for-practitioners.-November-2016.pdf> (2016)

¹² *Ibid.* p. 10.

¹³ *Ibid.* p. 5.

¹⁴ *Ibid.* p. 8.

¹⁵ NEAR, "Localization Performance Measurement Framework". Retrieved online from <https://www.near.ngo/lpmf>

The table below summarizes an example of each localization component included in the Performance Measurement System (LPMF) and the expected change, relevant impact indicator, and key performance indicators.

Desired Change	Impact Indicator	KPI's
1. Partnerships		
More genuine and equitable partnerships and less subcontracting.	Equitable and complementary partnerships between local and international actors to facilitate the delivery of timely and effective humanitarian response.	(1.1) Quality in relationships, (1.2) Shift from project-based to strategic partnerships, (1.3) Engagement of partners throughout the project cycle.
2. Funding		
Improvements in the quantity and quality of funding for local and national actors.	Increased number of local actors describing financial independence that allows them to respond more efficiently to humanitarian response.	(2.1) Quantity of funding, (2.2) Quality of funding, (2.3) Access to 'direct' funding, (2.4) management of risk.
3. Capacity		
More effective support for strong and sustainable institutional capacities for local actors and less undermining of those capacities by international ones.	Local actors can respond effectively and efficiently to humanitarian crises and have targeted and relevant support from international actors.	(3.1) Performance management, (3.2) Organizational development (3.3) Quality standards, (3.4) Recruitment and surge.
4. Coordination and complementarity		
Greater leadership, presence and influence of local actors in humanitarian leadership and coordination mechanisms.	Strong national humanitarian leadership and coordination mechanisms exist, but where they do not, local actors participate in international coordination mechanisms as equal partners and keeping with humanitarian principles.	(4.1) Humanitarian leadership, (4.2) Humanitarian coordination (4.3) Collaborative and complimentary response.
5. Policy, Influence, and Visibility		
Increased presence of local actors in international policy discussions and greater public recognition and visibility for their contribution to humanitarian response.	Local actors shape humanitarian priorities and receive recognition for this in reporting.	(5.1) Influence in policy, advocacy, and standard-setting, (5.2) Visibility I reporting and communications.
6. Participation		
Fuller and more influential involvement of crisis-affected people in what relief is provided to them, and how.	Affected people fully shape and participate in humanitarian response.	(6.1) Participation of communities in humanitarian response, (6.2) Engagement of communities in humanitarian policy development and standard-setting.

Source: NEAR, "Localization Performance Measurement Framework" Retrieved online: <https://www.near.ngo/lpmf>

Part 2 - Lessons from Localization Research: Unequal Partners?

At the heart of the aid localization debate is the unequal relationship between international and local actors. While local organizations are often relegated to the status of "subcontractors," the degree to which a project is localized depends on them because they are most likely to maintain a long-term presence on the ground. This section presents a series of studies that address the different dimensions of this unequal relationship and how it delays the localization agenda. In the end, a form summarizes the challenges and potential solutions from the literature.

Local and International NGOs: a distant relationship

A myriad of reports has been written on the role of partnering in relation to localization. Still, very few reports have focused on operational and practical partnership practices that provide a replicable partnership model. To fill this gap, the European Union commissioned a report¹⁶ to establish what operational elements of partnerships are most likely to foster the localization of humanitarian action. Surveying more than 350 organizations, this report covers projects in Myanmar, Nepal, Nigeria, and South Sudan. The most salient element is the distant relationship between local and international actors. To illustrate this point, only 1/3 of surveyed organizations view their partnership as "authentic."¹⁷ As a result, the same proportion of respondents believe that there is a better way to accelerate localization and that it is through more capacity building and fewer partnerships.¹⁸ More generally, it has been observed that while understanding of localization appears to be high, clarity of the "Big Bargain" commitments is low (only 22%), which has a very negative effect on local participation.

Accelerate localization by strengthening the leadership of national and local actors

Another instructive article looks at the issue of partnership from the perspective of local capacity building and how this affects the relationship between local and international actors.¹⁹ In this work, produced by the Catholic Agency for Overseas Development (CAFOD), it is argued that how capacity building is currently conducted illustrates the top-down nature of the relationship between international and local actors. They note that through the capacity-building agenda, local actors often must ingest programs developed elsewhere by people with no connection to the local context. The researchers also point out that this training model creates a strong dependency on local actors, even regarding access to funds.

¹⁶ Christian Aid, CARE, Tearfund, ActionAid, CAFOD, Oxfam "Accelerating Localisation through Partnerships: Recommendations for operational practices that strengthen the leadership of national and local actors in partnership-based humanitarian action". Retrieved online from <https://reliefweb.int/report/world/accelerating-localisation-through-partnerships-recommendations-operational-practices> (2018)

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 5

¹⁸ *Ibid.* p. 10

¹⁹ Howard Mollett and Laura Donkin. "Capacity-strengthening and localisation: perspectives from CAFOD and its local partners." (2021).

Reassess capacities and complementarity for more localized action

From a different perspective, in 2017, the Humanitarian Policy Group at Overseas Development Institute launched a study that addresses the lack of complementarity actions between local, national, and international actors responding to humanitarian crises.²⁰ The question is how capacities can be better understood and applied to support a more complementary humanitarian response. One element that emerges from this study is the disconnect between the definition of capacity by local and international actors. The study shows that this situation is highly problematic because the capacities to be deployed are generally defined by the donor, which creates a significant delay with local actors during implementation.²¹ This also has a counterproductive effect when considering capacity building for local actors. Finally, the last element is that complementarity is often reduced due to the lack of knowledge about the capacities that exist locally.²²

More flexible financing tools for better local ownership

Regarding financial considerations, it can be observed that, despite the Grand Bargain's objective of allocating 25% of aid locally by 2020, most direct funding still goes to INGOs. The main reason given by international actors is the difficulty finding organizations with sufficient compliance capacities at the local level. In response, a study presented a pilot program by Street Child and Save the Children Denmark that experiments with providing flexible funding to six organizations in six conflict countries over three months.²³ After three months, four of the six organizations spent the entire grant within the project period, with an average spending rate of 95% for all six organizations. The other two organizations needed more time to use the grant and recommended that future grants have more flexible timelines. This pilot program allowed local non-governmental organizations (LNGOs) to keep unspent funds in reserve to spend as they wished. In response, the study recommends that funders invest in an increased proportion of flexible funding with flexible timelines. (e.g., using no-cost extensions). In addition, donors should offer flexible funding to LNGOs at the outset of a crisis. Indeed, this pilot program demonstrates that access to flexible funding for LNGOs allows them to adapt programming to meet changing circumstances and community needs.

The need for localized training for local and national organizations

Finally, in the relationship between local and international actors, actors must also pay attention to cultural and language barriers that make it difficult to access even the most basic information on sector standards. These difficulties also extend to the operations themselves and the coordination mechanisms. In response, Translators Without Borders (TWB) conducted two research projects with the Global Education Cluster and the Child Protection Area of Responsibility, with funding from Save the Children to understand this issue.²⁴ The research found that practical language arrangements can improve local and national organizations' access to

²⁰ Veronique Barbelet. "Rethinking capacity and complementarity for a more local humanitarian action." (2019).

²¹ *Ibid.* p. 15

²² *Ibid.* p. 28

²³ Ben Munso & al. "Innovating to increase flexible funding for local-level organisations." (2021).

²⁴ Mia Marzotto & all. "How can we contribute if we can't participate?' The accessibility of humanitarian guidance to local and national organisations." Retrieved online from <https://odihpn.org/publication/how-can-we-contribute-if-we-cant-participate-the-accessibility-of-humanitarian-guidance-to-local-and-national-organisations/> (2021)

technical advice and tools. This allows them to take more initiative in humanitarian programming and decision-making. The research also provides recommendations that revolve around the need to make training materials more localized. It is important to note that localization is not only about language but also the medium used to communicate and share information (some populations favor audio video over other media). Moreover, when it comes to digital support, issues of digital illiteracy must be considered.

Challenges & Solutions for local and national actors can increase localization efforts

Challenge	Solution
Nature of partnership	
Misalignment between partners on program goals and the nature of partnerships.	Increase integration of local partners in program design.
Lack of awareness of best practices in localization.	Provide more localized material (culture, language, and geography).
Capacity	
Training materials not adapted to local needs.	Develop pedagogical material with local competencies and resources.
Disconnected definitions.	Rethink “capacity” and “complementarity” out of the gap assessment.
Underutilization of local capacity.	Integrate local NGOs in defining what capacities are to be deployed.
Funding and accountability	
Rigid financial rules.	Granting funds with simplified compliance requirements
Unhealthy competition between local NGOs.	Alternative to pool funds.

Part 3 - Lessons from Localization Research: Donors and INGOs: from an international actor’s perspective

In the localization literature, the most influential actors remain international donors and, to a lesser extent, INGOs that carry out implementation on the ground. Despite this, it is interesting to note that while the literature is rich in studies focusing on local actors, donors, and INGOs seem to receive less attention.²⁵ A starting point

²⁵ Global Finance Strategies (GFS). “Going Local: The Promise and Challenge of Aid Localization”

for reflection might be that the acceleration of the localization agenda depends primarily on ownership by local actors, while the role of donors (especially funders) is primarily political.²⁶

Innovative approaches to reducing the operational burden of localization

A report developed by the consulting firm, Global Finance Strategies (GFS), examines the increasing operational burden that localization has sparked on donors and local actors, as well as the creative solutions implemented by the humanitarian aid professionals facing these challenges. Based on more than 50 in-depth interviews with key players in the international development community, this report indicates that more than 94% of local actors surveyed believe that the localization agenda and the complications it entails are an obstacle to their work. Similarly, the report indicates that 84% of donors are concerned about their local recipients' operational and systemic capacity.²⁷ In response, the study reveals that innovative solutions have been implemented to address these issues. One interesting approach by donors has been to create regional training centers to directly impact the capacity of their partners. In turn, many local actors are turning to external services to fill their gaps or establish collaborations with the local private sector.²⁸

International NGO leaders face the challenge of localization

From the INGO perspective, a study²⁹ featuring interviews with CEOs of major INGOs on the challenges facing the sector was launched in 2022 in partnership with Oxford University. This report details the findings of 50 interviews with development leaders. This work, which goes well beyond the issue of localization, includes interviews with leaders who talk about their challenges concerning the localization agenda.³⁰ The most salient element of this work is the significant divergence on what localization is, to what extent it is necessary, its feasibility, and what it might entail in practice. Concerning their donors, many CEOs also expressed the donors' strict approach to risk and compliance, which makes it difficult for INGOs to empower local actors. Many CEOs also fail to embrace the idea that "getting out of a project" and downsizing is a sign of mission success. Finally, CEOs spoke at length about the "elephant in the room" or their view that there is a lack of local talents and that that is a hindrance to the localization agenda.³¹

Challenges & Solutions: How donors and international actors can increase localization efforts

²⁶ David Booth "Politically smart, locally led development". Retrieved online from <https://odi.org/en/publications/politically-smart-locally-led-development/> (2014)

²⁷ Going Local: The Promise and Challenge of Aid Localization [Global Finance Strategies, 2015], p.9 Retrieved online on <https://static1.squarespace.com/static/550a2277e4b00f7ac2f656e1/t/55419fd0e4b029f3456de473/1430364112704/GFS+Going+Local+Report.pdf>

²⁸ *Ibid.* p. 50

²⁹ INGOs & the Long Humanitarian Century, "Leadership Survey Report: What leaders of international NGOs think about the challenges they face, and the future of the aid and development sector" Retrieved online from <https://reliefweb.int/report/world/ingos-long-humanitarian-century-leadership-survey-report-what-leaders-international-ngos-think-about-challenges-they-face-and-future-aid-and-development-sector> (2022)

³⁰ *Ibid.* p. 24

³¹ *Ibid.* p. 30

Challenge	Potential solution
Administration, operations, and finance	
Excessive reporting and monitoring requirements for the local partner.	Employing local agents or firms (e.g., fiscal, technical norms.)
	Include general operating assistance in the grants
	Outsourcing or pooling operations (e.g., back-office.)
Lack of harmonization of both the grant application process and reporting.	Regional coordination and technical hubs
Local capacities	
Lack of local capacities	Creating a local affiliate
	Regional training centers
Skilled staff drain to the private sector	Public-private partnerships
Mindset	
Growth mentality	N/A
Endless project cycles	N/A

Conclusion

Localization is a highly complex topic, as it involves political, economic, and social considerations. This explains why the very definition of localization differs between development agencies and multilateral organizations, which are exposed to different contexts. In addition, while much of the literature on localization focuses on humanitarian projects, it is also important to remember that the elements to be considered in other types of projects that aim for longer-term effects are very different.

Building Markets sees the lack of consensus and clarity about localization as an excellent opportunity to define and design development assistance that is more impactful and better connected to beneficiaries. As Building Markets continues to think about where to locate its programs, it intends to draw on the recommendations from the literature in this document and other resources under development.

Also, because the very principle of localization is to design projects that are directly linked to the beneficiaries, Building Markets invites its partners to join it in this reflection and to bring their contribution. Indeed, the localization of aid must reflect all stakeholders, especially those who are in constant contact with the field.

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