

Localization in Humanitarian and Developmental Action

The Afghanistan Context

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Localization in the humanitarian and developmental sector is often touted as the key to sustainable, community-driven solutions in complex crises like Afghanistan. The principle is clear: local actors, who best understand their communities and their needs, should be empowered to take the lead in responding to emergencies and driving development efforts. However, the realities of implementing localization remain fraught with challenges, particularly for national organizations like the **Shining Star Educational Organization of Afghanistan (SSEOA)**.

The Promise of Localization: Capacity-Building and Twinning Initiatives

One of the most effective ways to foster meaningful localization has been through capacity-building initiatives such as the Twinning Programme, supported by FCDO (formerly DFID) UK. I had the privilege of managing this programme, which aimed to build the capacities of national NGOs in Afghanistan. The Twinning Programme paired international NGOs (INGOs) with local organizations, providing mentorship and technical support to help the latter take on leadership roles in humanitarian action. This model allowed for mutual learning and stronger collaboration between international and national actors, facilitating skill transfer, knowledge sharing, and a more grounded understanding of local realities.

The success of the Twinning Programme has demonstrated that with adequate support, national NGOs can deliver humanitarian services as efficiently and competently as their international counterparts. These capacity-building efforts created a ripple effect: national organizations were empowered not only to implement programmes but also to participate actively in the strategic planning and decision-making processes that shape Afghanistan's humanitarian and development landscape.

Critiquing the Current Localization Efforts: Risks and Misinterpretations

Despite these successes, many localization efforts by INGOs remain deeply flawed. A key criticism is the misinterpretation of the Grand Bargain Commitments of 2016—a landmark agreement that aimed to make aid more efficient by localizing humanitarian action. While many INGOs claim to champion these commitments, in practice, they often engage in what can be termed "token localization." Rather than genuinely transferring power and resources to local actors, INGOs frequently shift the risks and burdens onto national organizations without the necessary financial support, training, or strategic oversight.

This "risk transfer" is particularly egregious in Afghanistan, where national NGOs like SSEOA face an array of operational challenges—high implementation costs, volatile security conditions, and fluctuating donor priorities. While the burden of delivery is placed squarely on local actors, they are often left with minimal administrative or programme support. In some cases, national NGOs are asked to take on projects with unrealistically low grant rates, particularly for essential budget heads like staffing, logistics, and overheads. This not only undermines the quality of programming but also jeopardizes the long-term sustainability of national organizations.

The Reality & Challenges in the Localization Process

For SSEOA, the road to localization has been particularly rocky. As a national NGO operating in one of the world's most challenging environments, we face significant funding constraints, particularly when grants offer insufficient allocations for operational costs. The demand for local NGOs to "do more with less" is not only unrealistic but also counterproductive. Without adequate financial resources, it becomes nearly impossible to invest in staff training, programme monitoring, or the administrative systems that ensure accountability and effectiveness.

One of the greatest challenges for SSEOA has been the high cost of implementation in Afghanistan. Transportation, security, and logistics costs are exorbitant, and national NGOs often struggle to meet these demands with limited funding. In some cases, donors have been unwilling to fully acknowledge these challenges, resulting in budget frameworks that fail to account for the true cost of humanitarian

action in a conflict zone. Moreover, local organizations like SSEOA are often sidelined in funding cycles, with INGOs taking the lion's share of direct donor support.

Best Practices and Lessons from Capacity-Building Efforts

Despite these challenges, there have been significant successes worth highlighting. ACBAR's lead and over 40 national NGO's participation in capacity-building efforts, such as the Twinning Programme and other technical assistance initiatives, has yielded important lessons that can inform future localization strategies, although the recommendations from the program learnings were endorsed to UNHCR during Global NGO Consultation June 2022 & June 2023 in Geneva (by the writer). By investing in Coordinating Bodies, specifically for the training and mentorship, these initiatives empowered local actors to develop not just the technical skills needed to deliver aid, but also the strategic vision required to engage with donors and international partners more effectively.

Innovative approaches in capacity-building have included the development of context-specific monitoring and evaluation (M&E) frameworks. These frameworks allow national NGOs to gather and present data that better reflect the realities on the ground, while also aligning with donor expectations for transparency and accountability. This bridging of local and international approaches to M&E has led to improved programme outcomes and strengthened partnerships between INGOs and national actors.

Recommendations for Donors: A Path Forward for Genuine Localization

To achieve true localization, international donors and INGOs must adopt more equitable and transparent funding models that prioritize the needs and capacities of national NGOs. Below are several innovative recommendations for donors that are both actionable and grounded in the Afghan context:

1. **Increase Direct Funding to National NGOs:** Donors should commit to channeling a greater percentage of their humanitarian and development funding directly to national organizations. To do this effectively, donors must simplify application processes and provide flexible funding that covers overheads, administrative costs, and security needs.
2. **Support Long-Term Capacity-Building:** Rather than short-term, project-based capacity-building initiatives, donors should invest in **long-term partnerships** with national NGOs. This includes sustained funding for organizational development, leadership training, and technical assistance in areas such as programme design, financial management, and M&E.
3. **Ensure Context-Sensitive Budgeting:** Donors must recognize the **true costs of implementation** in complex conflict environments like Afghanistan. Budgets should reflect realistic allocations for staffing, transportation, security, and administrative costs, ensuring that national NGOs are not forced to operate on shoestring budgets.
4. **Co-Design Programmes with Local Actors:** Instead of imposing externally-driven programme designs, donors should **co-create initiatives** with national NGOs. This ensures that programmes are tailored to the local context, while also fostering a sense of ownership among national actors.
5. **Create Multi-Stakeholder Accountability Mechanisms:** Donors should establish **joint accountability frameworks** that include both international and national actors. These frameworks should prioritize transparency, ensuring that funding decisions, risk management, and programme outcomes are made collaboratively and openly.

Way forward: The Future of Localization in Afghanistan

Localization holds immense potential to transform humanitarian and development action in Afghanistan, but only if it is implemented in a genuine and equitable manner. National NGOs like SSEOA are ready and willing to take on leadership roles, but they cannot do so without the necessary support from the international community. INGOs and donors must move beyond rhetoric and deliver on their promises of empowerment, capacity-building, and direct funding for local actors.

The road to true localization requires a fundamental shift in how humanitarian and development aid is delivered—one that places national actors at the centre, rather than relegating them to the periphery. Through innovative partnerships, flexible funding models, and a commitment to long-term capacity-building, the international community can ensure that Afghanistan's future is driven by those who know it best: its own people.

--KHARKA Ravi, PhD Research Scholar.