

Localization in the Humanitarian Sector: A Cross Comparative Study

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THE WATSON SCHOOL
of International
and Public Affairs

Completed in collaboration with the Watson School Military Fellows Program

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Introduction

In May 2016, the Grand Bargain launched during the World Humanitarian Summit in Istanbul set an agreement between major humanitarian donors and aid organizations to commit “to get more means into the hands of the people in need and to improve the effectiveness and efficiency of humanitarian action.”¹ Currently there are 68 Signatories including 25 Member States, 26 NGOs, 12 UN agencies, 2 Red Cross/Red Crescent movements, and 2 inter-governmental organizations.

With an original set of 51 commitments, the Grand Bargain sought to address the widening gap between humanitarian needs and available resources, as proposed by the former UN Secretary General’s High-Level Panel on Humanitarian Financing. Through this agreement, the Grand Bargain envisioned a “level playing field where all meet as equals.”² Key commitments included directing a minimum of 25% of humanitarian funding to local and national responders.

Originating as a response to the growing challenges and shortcomings within the humanitarian system, the Grand Bargain aimed at improving efficiency, response time, and transparency. It advocated for more multi-year funding, an increased emphasis on cash-based programs, and the recognition of local actors as crucial first responders. However, acknowledging the evolving nature of humanitarian needs, signatories revisited the priorities and structures of the agreement, leading to the launch of Grand Bargain 2.0 in June 2021 and, subsequently, Grand Bargain 3.0 in June 2023. The intelligence collected from the (number of interviews) we have conducted suggests this goal has not been well implemented since its inception.

¹Inter-Agency Standing Committee. “The Grand Bargain.” interagencystandingcommittee.org/about-the-grand-bargain.

²Inter-Agency Standing Committee. 2016. “The Grand Bargain - A Shared Commitment to Better Serve People in Need.” https://interagencystandingcommittee.org/sites/default/files/migrated/2016-10/grand_bargain_final_22_may_final-2.pdf

The Grand Bargain stands in recognition of the effectiveness and efficiency of local efforts and this is supported by the on-the-ground experiences of employees of both international and local organizations that we have interviewed. The Grand Bargain's recurring call to its members to address issues of funding hints at an important hindrance to localization. We find through these interviews that similar concerns are echoed with even more details of why local efforts do not receive at all or receive a diluted version of the promised support.

Despite the slow and uneven progress toward localization, our findings demonstrate that localized approaches are effective in delivering humanitarian aid and fostering sustainable, community-driven solutions. Local actors lie at the core of humanitarian response, and strengthening their capacity and support is essential for building a resilient and empowered global civil society.

This report begins with an overview of key definitions in the humanitarian sector—particularly what localization is and what it entails today—outlining its benefits and value. The subsequent section provides a broader analysis of both the advantages and challenges of localization. This is followed by a literature review featuring case studies that highlight successful implementation across various contexts—including war, conflict, and climate-related disasters—as well as an examination of the common obstacles encountered in pursuing localization. The report then offers practical recommendations for how donors, INGOs, and national governments can better support local actors. These recommendations focus on key areas such as the importance of context-specific approaches, strong accountability frameworks, capacity building through hands-on engagement, knowledge transfer, and simplifying funding processes. Finally, the report concludes by exploring the broader implications of localization—addressing how LNGOs can potentially deliver more effective outcomes than INGOs for local communities. It also includes a critical review of current initiatives, assessing progress to date and identifying ways the international community can more meaningfully advance localization within the humanitarian sector.

Research Methodology

The research team conducted 37 individual key informant interviews with 34 different organizations including a mix of international NGOs, national and local NGOs, social enterprises, think tanks, academic institutions, healthcare entities, and NGO networks. The interviews were conducted for 45-60 minutes by Zoom and researchers also received written responses from some of the participants. To allow interviewees to express their own understanding of the concept and related issues, the study intentionally did not impose a fixed definition of localization. The research team anonymized all interview discussions to protect the identities of all participants. Interviews with local NGOs were often explored in depth within case studies, while interviews with other organizations contributed to understanding broader themes around localization — such as its benefits, challenges, and informed the development of our recommendations. Overall, the research aimed to synthesize the most general and recurring insights across all interviews.

Key Concepts

Humanitarian aid is assistance provided to suffering populations in emergency situations. It is different from development aid, whose purpose is to improve structural and ongoing issues. The lines between the two are often blurred, but generally, humanitarian aid is given to people while development aid is used to support institutions. Above all, the goal of humanitarian aid is to save lives and alleviate suffering.³

The humanitarian principles of humanity, neutrality, impartiality, and independence are at the center of humanitarian aid. Humanitarian organizations and workers strive to embody each of these principles and more, depending on the codes of the individual organization. The principles help

³ “Who We Are” ICRC. <https://www.icrc.org/en/who-we-are>.

provide common standards as well as bettering access to affected people. The United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) defines the four core principles as follows:

I. Humanity:

Human suffering must be addressed wherever it is found. The purpose of humanitarian action is to protect life and health and ensure respect for human beings.

II. Neutrality:

Humanitarian actors must not take sides in hostilities or engage in controversies of a political, racial, religious, or ideological nature.

III. Impartiality:

Humanitarian action must be carried out on the basis of need alone, giving priority to the most urgent cases of distress and making no distinctions on the basis of nationality, race, gender, religious belief, class, or political opinions.

IV. Independence:

Humanitarian action must be autonomous from the political, economic, military, or other objectives that any actor may hold with regard to areas where humanitarian action is being implemented.⁴

OCHA defines Internally Displaced People (IDPs) as persons or groups of persons who have been forced or obliged to flee or to leave their homes or places of habitual residence, in particular as a result of or in order to avoid the effects of armed conflict, situations of generalized violence, violations of human rights or natural or human-made disasters, and who have not crossed an internationally recognized State border.⁵

⁴ “Humanitarian Principles” *Emergency Handbook*, UNHCR, 22 July 2019.

<https://emergency.unhcr.org/protection/protection-principles/humanitarian-principles>

⁵ United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Assistance [31 May 2014]; Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement. 2004 <https://docs.unocha.org/sites/dms/Documents/GuidingPrinciplesDispl.pdf>

Localization refers to the process of centering humanitarian response efforts in accordance with the preferences and context of an affected community. It involves elevating the voice of local and national actors (L/NAs), including local governments, private sector and non-governmental organizations (NGOs), community-based organizations, and individuals in all levels of humanitarian activities. Localization is characterized by locally led adaptation, rather than that directed solely by external organizations and international actors, and focuses on individual and collective agency from the affected community. The shift of donors towards working directly with local and national actors strengthens the capacity of local civil society in humanitarian action.⁶

Local and national actors (L/NAs) are often the first responders when an emergency occurs. They are integrated into the community in question and can provide valuable insight into relevant challenges and possible viable solutions. These actors are able to leverage local networks and operate with higher knowledge of humanitarian needs.⁷ Local and national actors are essential in a localized response.⁸

International NGOs (INGOs) are headquartered outside of the aid recipient country and carry out operations in one or more such countries. National NGOs (NNGOs) are based within the aid recipient country and typically operate across multiple subnational regions, without affiliation to an

⁶ “Localization” IFRC.

<https://www.ifrc.org/happening-now/advocacy-hub/localization#:~:text=What%20do%20we%20mean%20by,and%20accountability%20of%20humanitarian%20action.>

⁷ “IASC Definition of ‘Local’ and ‘National Actors’ – a barrier to achieving Grand Bargain localisation commitments” IASC.

<https://reliefweb.int/report/world/iasc-definition-local-and-national-actors-barrier-achieving-grand-bargain-localisation.>

⁸ IASC Guidance on Strengthening Participation, Representation and Leadership of Local and National Actors in IASC Humanitarian Coordination Mechanisms, IASC, July 2021, interagencystandingcommittee.org/operational-response/iasc-guidance-strengthening-participation-representation-and-leadership-local-and-national-actors.3

international NGO. Local NGOs (LNGOs) function within a specific, geographically defined subnational area of an aid recipient country and are likewise unaffiliated with international NGOs.⁹

Increasing resiliency of communities involves improving their preparedness for, adaptation to, and recovery from adverse events and their effects, including natural disasters, conflict, or public health emergencies. These capacity building efforts focus on decreasing vulnerabilities and increasing self-reliance through community engagement and sustainable development.

Community engagement and accountability (CEA) is a framework for humanitarian action that centers local actors and recognizes them as equal partners.¹⁰ CEA prioritizes listening to the preferences of affected communities to guide action and improve the effectiveness of programming.

The term stakeholders includes anyone involved in humanitarian response, at all levels. This can consist of local communities and leaders, government and UN agencies, humanitarian organizations, donors, military or security forces, or the media. An effective response integrates collaboration between all stakeholders.

Water, Sanitation, and Hygiene services (WASH) is a key sector of humanitarian aid. It is critical in all stages of aid delivery, ensuring the prevention of health risks and the protection of vulnerable communities.

⁹ IASC Definition of 'Local' and 'National Actors' – a Barrier to Achieving Grand Bargain Localisation Commitments, IASC, 7 Oct. 2019, reliefweb.int/report/world/iasc-definition-local-and-national-actors-barrier-achieving-grand-bargain-localisation#:~:text=National%20NGOs/civil%20society%20organisations,interest%20of%20such%20global%20actors.

¹⁰ "What is community engagement and accountability?" British Red Cross. <https://communityengagementhub.org/about-cea/what-is-cea/>

Information communication technologies (ICTs) in humanitarian aid refers to the use of communication technologies such as radios, phones, social media, satellite communications, and internet to facilitate communication and coordination during a crisis. ICTs are increasingly becoming a critical component to humanitarian aid in the 21st century with OCHA describing prioritizing communication as a form of assistance as important as water, food, and shelter.¹¹

Localization Benefits and Challenges

One of the primary struggles in moving towards a more localized approach to humanitarian aid is the contested nature of the term "localization" and the ambiguity around its practical application, which often hinders effective implementation. The consensus is that a localized response involves decision-making power centered at the local level. Local entities include governments, communities, civil society organizations, NGOs, and the private sector. The shift towards localization means donors must work directly with affected communities to transfer control, power, and resources based on their needs. The process must be regarded as context-specific.

Localization is seen as a mechanism of making aid more effective, as well as making it more ethical. This contrast between ideological versus utilitarian motivations can affect how localization is carried out in specific contexts. A utilitarian approach risks justifying continued international presence by downplaying local capacity when local capacity — often a result of the humanitarian system itself. Yet, one respondent warned that an ideological stance can oversimplify the issue and introduce its own biases of what is the “right thing to do.”¹² Additionally, some INGOs critique

¹¹ UNOCHA (2014). Philippines: Typhoon Haiyan and the Digital Last Mile.

<http://www.unocha.org/top-stories/all-stories/philippines-typhoon-haiyan-and-digital-last-mile>

¹² Robillard, Atim, & Maxwell, “Localization: A ‘Landscape’ Report” Tufts University and USAID.
<https://fic.tufts.edu/wp-content/uploads/Localization-FINAL-12.30.21.pdf>

localization for potentially slowing emergency response; coordination between international and local actors may add delays that could be “obstructive for the expeditious saving of lives.”¹³ Still, these tensions do not negate localization’s potential to improve the humanitarian system. The IFRC aims to leverage localization to “increase the reach, effectiveness, and accountability of humanitarian action.”¹⁵ The impact of these measures needs to be evaluated in a flexible manner within the given context. Impact is defined as a “lasting or significant change – positive or negative, intended or not – in people’s lives brought about by a series of actions.”¹⁴ It is often measured using the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), which can rely on Western, rather than local and contextual, conceptions of what constitutes impact.

The core benefits of localization include the integration of linkages and knowledge networking, cost-effectiveness, and provision of the right kind of assistance. LNGOs are in a position that encourages leveraging local networks through positive working relationships across sectors. They can collaborate through established partnerships to more accurately target areas of programming.¹⁵ Being embedded within local communities offers an opportunity to provide services and assistance at a reduced cost compared to the private sector or government entities. This capacity is interlinked with the ability of local actors to understand the relevance of support and target higher-quality assistance through a deeper understanding of the needs of communities. By sharing cultural proximity, local leaders “can ensure that the measures are context-specific, need-driven, and curate effective solutions.”¹⁶

¹³ Roepstorff, Kristina. “A Call for Critical Reflection on the Localisation Agenda in Humanitarian Action.” (2019). *Third World Quarterly*. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01436597.2019.1644160>.

¹⁴ Roche C (1999) *Impact assessment for development agencies*, Oxford: Oxfam/NOVIB.

¹⁵ Cornman, Helen; Grimm, Curt D.; and Rana, Sujata, "Engaging Local Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) in the Response to HIV/AIDS." (2005). *Anthropology Scholarship*. 2. https://scholars.unh.edu/anth_facpub/2

¹⁶ Hridita, Anindita & Rabbani, Golam, “Climate Bridge Fund: A successful mechanism of applying locally-led adaptation principles in Bangladesh” (2023). *Dhaka Tribune*. <https://www.dhakatribune.com/epaper/302384/climate-bridge-fund-a-successful-mechanism-of>

One aspect of the push toward localization is the intrinsic issues with the large INGOs that dominate the humanitarian space. Humanitarian assistance of this type is subject to political or economic conditionality imposed by donor countries. With governmental aid agencies in particular, it can become part of foreign policy ‘stick and carrot’ strategies that put the focus less on the affected communities and more on the overall internal functioning of recipient countries.¹⁷ INGOs can fail to properly take into account the voices of the affected communities in favor of a large, quick, or seemingly effective response.¹⁸ Following large donor-funded projects, local organizations are often left to continue the process of aid delivery, which often overlaps with development. Thus, strengthening international organizations’ relationship with local NGOs and recipient governments is a key step in moving towards a more effective response.¹⁹

There are, however, myriad challenges to implementing a localized approach. In many places, the execution process of localization faces many obstacles. One aspect of this issue is the discordance between international and local NGOs, and the lack of communication between nonprofit actors. Often, there is no standardized or structured way these organizations are meant to engage with one another, which can complicate the process of collaboration.²⁰ The abstract nature of localization in its framing to local governments can also serve as a barrier to implementation. The language and discussion around the meaning of localization can often be ambiguous and needs to be

¹⁷ Nascimento, Daniela, “One step forward, two steps back? Humanitarian Challenges and Dilemmas in Crisis Settings” (2015) *The Journal of Humanitarian Assistance*. <https://reliefweb.int/report/world/one-step-forward-two-steps-back-humanitarian-challenges-and-dilemmas-crisis-settings>

¹⁸ Dizolele, Mvemba Phezo; Kurtzer, Jacob; Abdullah, Hareem Fatima, “Localizing Humanitarian Action in Africa” (2022) CSIS. <https://www.csis.org/analysis/localizing-humanitarian-action-africa>

¹⁹ Barber, Martin, and Cameron Bowie. “How International NGOs Could Do Less Harm and More Good.” *Development in Practice* 18, no. 6 (2008): 748–54. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/27751981>.

²⁰ Erdilmen, Merve. “Opportunities and Challenges for Localization of Humanitarian Action in Tanzania” (2020) McGill University. https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Merve-Erdilmen/publication/341579860_Opportunities_and_Challenges_for_Localization_of_Humanitarian_Action_in_Tanzania/links/5ec8364e299bf1c09ad59e9a/Opportunities-and-Challenges-for-Localization-of-Humanitarian-Action-in-Tanzania.pdf.

transformed into “transparent and applicable... indicators” so that the process can be understood by local governments.²¹

A critical obstacle is the lack of direct funding to local actors. The *Falling Short? Humanitarian Funding and Reform* reports reveal that Grand Bargain signatories provided only 4.4% of their total funding to local and national actors in recent years, with just 0.6% passed on directly—far short of the pledged 25%.²² This underfunding persists even as global humanitarian needs continue to grow due to protracted conflicts, climate disasters, and food insecurity. According to OCHA, crises are now lasting an average of 10 years.²³ To make things worse, the dismantling of USAID in early 2025—an agency that had delivered humanitarian aid, disaster relief, and health support to over 100 countries since 1961—is expected to have far-reaching global consequences. These include increased instability in fragile regions, greater security risks, higher mortality and disability rates, and faster spread of disease such as up to 18 million additional malaria cases annually.²⁴ With humanitarian funding already declining since 2023 and projected to fall further in 2025,²⁵ direct investment in local actors is more urgent than ever as they play a key role in achieving lasting peace.²⁶ Their roles as first responders and their ability to access hard-to-reach or overlooked areas underscore their importance

²¹ Erdilmen, Merve. “Opportunities and Challenges for Localization of Humanitarian Action in Tanzania” (2020) McGill University.
https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Merve-Erdilmen/publication/341579860_Opportunities_and_Challenges_for_Localization_of_Humanitarian_Action_in_Tanzania/links/5ec8364e299bf1c09ad59e9a/Opportunities-and-Challenges-for-Localization-of-Humanitarian-Action-in-Tanzania.pdf.

²² Development Initiatives, 2024. *Falling short? Humanitarian funding and reform.*
</resources/falling-short-humanitarian-funding-reform/>

²³ *Global Humanitarian Overview 2025*, OCHA, 4 Dec. 2024,
www.unocha.org/publications/report/world/global-humanitarian-overview-2025-enarfres#:~:text=The%20data%20underlines%20the%20tough,longer%E2%80%949410%20years%20on%20average.

²⁴ Enrich, Nicholas. *Risks to U.S. National Security and Public Health: Consequences of Pausing Global Health Funding for Lifesaving Humanitarian Assistance*, The New York Times, 4 Mar. 2025,
www.nytimes.com/interactive/2025/03/03/health/usaid-memo.html.

²⁵ *Global Humanitarian Overview 2025, February Update (Snapshot as of 28 February 2025)*, OCHA, 28 Feb. 2025,
reliefweb.int/report/world/global-humanitarian-overview-2025-february-update-snapshot-28-february-2025-enarfres#:~:text=The%20data%20underlines%20the%20tough,longer%E2%80%949410%20years%20on%20average.

²⁶ Thania Paffenholz, Philip Poppelreuter, Nicholas Ross; *Toward a Third Local Turn: Identifying and Addressing Obstacles to Localization in Peacebuilding.* *Negotiation Journal* 2023; 39 (4): 349–375. doi:
<https://doi.org/10.1111/nejo.12444>

in ensuring timely and effective aid. Direct funding not only enhances their impact but also promotes long-term sustainability and local self-sufficiency.

Another barrier to the spread of localization is the frequent resource competition between international and local NGOs. Many INGOs see their local counterparts as the opposition in their fight for survival. This mindset causes them to “[bid] against local responders” in order to prevent their own organizations from being replaced.²⁷ As LNGOs already face difficulty in gaining access to long-term funding, this competition can further obstruct their progress. Instead of working with LNGOs, INGOs see them as rivals for the limited pool of donors and therefore are less willing to work with them on an equal basis for fear of undermining their own importance.²⁸ Another aspect is the battle for competent and comprehensive staff. Unlike INGOs, who are able to offer livable wages to their staff, LNGOs may only be able to provide a “modest salary” that can lead to frequent turnover of staff leaving to join international organizations.²⁹

Despite these challenges, the overall evidence in this investigation supports the promise of localization. As long as efforts are rooted in local context, backed by equitable funding, and structured through inclusive and transparent partnerships, localization can lead to more sustainable humanitarian outcomes.

²⁷ Savard, Marie-Claude; Duenas, Nelson; Audet, Francois. “International NGOs as Brokers of Trust and Control in the Localization Agenda: A Case Study from the Philippines.” (2019)
<https://occah.uqam.ca/wp-content/uploads/2022/06/Savard-Duenas-and-Audet-INGOs-as-brokers-of-trust-and-control-vf.pdf>

²⁸ Erdilmen, Merve. “Opportunities and Challenges for Localization of Humanitarian Action in Tanzania” (2020) McGill University.
https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Merve-Erdilmen/publication/341579860_Opportunities_and_Challenges_for_Localization_of_Humanitarian_Action_in_Tanzania/links/5ec8364e299bf1c09ad59e9a/Opportunities-and-Challenges-for-Localization-of-Humanitarian-Action-in-Tanzania.pdf

²⁹ Erdilmen, Merve. “Opportunities and Challenges for Localization of Humanitarian Action in Tanzania” (2020) McGill University.
https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Merve-Erdilmen/publication/341579860_Opportunities_and_Challenges_for_Localization_of_Humanitarian_Action_in_Tanzania/links/5ec8364e299bf1c09ad59e9a/Opportunities-and-Challenges-for-Localization-of-Humanitarian-Action-in-Tanzania.pdf

Case Studies

The following case studies were selected to provide diverse geographical perspectives from the background research and literature review. Our aim was to include at least one case study from each geographical region including Asia, Europe, Africa, Americas, and the Middle East. These countries selected face both slow-onset and sudden-onset disasters, covering a range of topics such as conflict, natural disasters, long-term environmental issues, health crises, and education. The case studies aim to illustrate the varied approaches to localization across different contexts, highlighting both differences and similarities. Additionally, the analysis explores the shortcomings of the current humanitarian system, particularly the limitations of INGOs in effectively supporting local communities.

The selected case studies span a diverse set of countries—the Philippines, Bangladesh, Ethiopia, Lebanon, Yemen, Ukraine, Haiti, and Colombia—each facing distinct yet often overlapping humanitarian challenges. The Philippines, one of the world’s most disaster-prone nations, presents a key context for exploring localization in culturally and geographically diverse settings. Bangladesh, highly vulnerable to climate change, faces frequent flooding that impacts marginalized communities. The case study examines community responses to COVID-19 and localization challenges in the Rohingya crisis. Ethiopia is experiencing a multifaceted humanitarian crisis driven by conflict, disease outbreaks, and natural disasters, exacerbated by economic hardship. Lebanon is facing compounded internal and external crises, including the regional impact of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, which has significantly reshaped the operational space for NGOs. Yemen’s crisis, intensified by the ongoing civil war since 2015, involves displacement, famine, and cholera, with a focus on the role of NGOs and civil society networks. In Ukraine, the humanitarian crisis triggered by Russia’s 2022 invasion highlights the critical role of local NGOs in reaching areas inaccessible to international actors. Haiti continues to struggle with a protracted humanitarian

emergency rooted in political instability, poverty, natural disasters, and gang violence. Colombia confronts complex challenges tied to non-state armed violence, drug trafficking, climate change, displacement and increasing migration flows.

Asia

Philippines

The Philippines is one of the world's most natural disaster-prone nations, including tragedies such as Typhoon Haiyan in 2013, Typhoon Ompong in October 2018 and Typhoon Usman in February 2019. Composed of over 7,000 islands and situated in the Pacific Ring of Fire, the country faces a range of hazards, including earthquakes, volcanic eruptions, tsunamis, tropical cyclones, and typhoons. In disaster-stricken areas, people's lives rely on immediate relief and assistance. Additionally, with over 175 ethnolinguistic groups, the Philippines' rich cultural diversity highlights the importance of context-specific approaches to humanitarian aid.

This case study examines the Philippines as a key example of both the need to support local actors as first responders—particularly given the country's frequent natural disasters—and the challenges of implementing localization at scale. The Philippines' extensive engagement from both international and local actors in disaster response offers valuable insight into the shortcomings of the current humanitarian model and highlights areas where localization can lead to meaningful improvements. By focusing on Typhoon Haiyan, the study reveals how many local actors were sidelined during the response, highlighting the importance of representation and direct funding to better allocate resources and address specific needs. Secondly, it highlights the crucial role of LNGOs as first responders, particularly in reaching rural or overlooked areas that INGOs often miss. Third, the case explores the contributions of national NGOs in advancing localization—such as through initiatives like the generational weaving project with the Palawan community—and in

amplifying local voices on global platforms like COP28. Finally, it examines the challenge of balancing scale with customization, especially in a country as culturally diverse as the Philippines.

Lack of Local Representation/Effectively Directed Fund

Typhoon Haiyan, a Category 5 storm, struck the Philippines on November 8, 2013, and was one of the most powerful tropical cyclones ever recorded. It affected 9.7 million people, damaging or destroying 23,200 houses, displacing 615,770 individuals, leading to 792,000 evacuations, and causing 1,774 deaths.³⁰ After Typhoon Haiyan, a massive international and local humanitarian response entered. International humanitarian response and funding included UN, CSOs, Red Cross, ECHO, USAID, WHO, and more. The US government itself provided over \$37 million in humanitarian aid including emergency shelter materials, hygiene kits, food assistance, water containers, and restored functionality of the Tacloban municipal water system.³¹ While the humanitarian response was overall effective the response exposed some challenges.

After Typhoon Haiyan, an immediate humanitarian response was mobilized. For instance, OCHA convened a cluster meeting to conduct rapid needs assessments. An interview with a humanitarian aid worker hired by an international organization to evaluate ICTs during Typhoon Haiyan revealed that local aid workers were sidelined during the response. The decision-makers in meetings determining where aid would be allocated were predominantly foreigners. In these critical crisis moments, local community representatives were notably absent from decision-making processes, leaving gaps in understanding community-specific needs. This exclusion highlighted a key issue: while speed is essential in natural disaster responses, the effectiveness of that response is even more critical—and localization is key to achieving it. Localization ensures representation, which is especially critical for rural communities that are often overlooked in aid distribution. These areas are

³⁰ <https://www.usaid.gov/basic-page/typhoon-haiyan-yolanda-fact-sheet-1>

³¹ <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2013/11/19/fact-sheet-us-response-typhoon-haiyan>

frequently neglected not only because they are hard to reach but also due to the lack of local representation in decision-making processes.

In this context, the role of LNGOs becomes crucial. By collaborating with partners and donors, these organizations provide essential guidance on funding allocation to ensure that resources effectively address community needs, fostering sustainable, long-term solutions.

Organizations like Shared Aid Fund for Emergency Response (SAFER) raises funds for local organizations that provide immediate assistance to victims of crises. Its goal is to release emergency funds to their partners seven days after a disaster. Established by three national NGO networks in the Philippines—Caucus of Development NGO Networks (CODE-NGO), the Humanitarian Response Consortium (HRC), and NASSA/Caritas Philippines—SAFER is the country's first locally-led collaborative fundraising initiative. SAFER's strategy is simple, it encourages “donors to think before they donate,” enabling them to make informed choices about where their money goes and which organizations they support.³²

However, a challenge of transferring more decision making power to LNGOs over resource allocation is the willingness of INGOs giving up some of that power. A humanitarian aid worker from an INGO with operations in the Philippines shared insights on this issue. In the case of the INGO where this humanitarian works, their estimate of the overall budget is that a maximum of only 25% should be allocated to local actors, based on the goal of the Grand Bargain. Some funders and clients even push for a lower percentage, as they often prefer working with INGO rather than local partners. Consequently, in the event of a disaster, employees from this INGO are flown into the Philippines instead of engaging local actors who could provide an effective assessment of needs from their positions on the ground.

³² “Leading Locally-Led Emergency Response in the Philippines.” *Shared Aid Fund For Emergency Response*, gblocalisation.ifrc.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/08/safer_08212019_IFRC.pdf. Accessed 31 Oct. 2024. 3

The aid worker also noted that some local organizations lack fully developed resources, such as human resources and finance teams, which are essential for more efficient fund allocation. A key factor in donors' reluctance to fund LNGOs directly, as well as INGO' hesitancy to transfer decision-making power, is the perceived lack of accountability measures within some LNGOs.³³ This highlights the importance of INGO supporting capacity-building initiatives by educating local organizations on how to distribute funds efficiently and ethically. Empowering and educating local actors on how to determine funding needs increases their accountability and motivates donors to directly fund NGOs. Therefore, education is a key tool for INGOs to transfer their power effectively to LNGOs, highlighting the need for not just a transfer of power but also a transfer of knowledge which is key to capacity building. Additionally, educational measures are more cost-effective in the long run, as removing intermediaries allows for more aid to be directed toward response efforts and NGOs on the ground, enhancing their ability to respond effectively. Finally, the transfer of power from INGOs to LNGOs strengthens civil society in the Philippines in the long term.

Reaching Rural Areas

In a major humanitarian event in the Philippines oftentimes what receives immediate response are the major cities. In an interview with a NGO worker based in the Philippines they noted that “you can draw a three hour circle around major cities that encompasses the major response.” For this NGO worker success in localization “is that every single community regardless of geography or distance has access to aid and isn't forgotten.” The Philippines is experiencing a rapid shift towards urbanization, with 5 out of every 10 Filipinos living in cities.³⁴ Thus, it is likely

³³ *Donor Conditions and Their Implications for Humanitarian Response*, Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC), Apr. 2016, interagencystandingcommittee.org/sites/default/files/migrated/2016-05/20160416_donor_conditions_study_final_0.pdf.

³⁴ “Urbanization in the Philippines: Building Inclusive and Sustainable Cities.” *Urbanization in Philippines: Building Inclusive & Sustainable Cities*, UN-Habitat, 2025, unhabitat.org/philippines.

humanitarian response initiatives prioritize major cities because they can serve as logical hubs for aid distribution and are simply easier to reach than rural areas. However, failure to reach rural areas leaves a significant portion of the population behind in response efforts. Successful humanitarian aid must address both urban and rural needs, recognizing their interconnectedness in the overall development of the Philippines. Therefore, while it is logistically easier for INGO to reach major cities, it highlights the need to empower LNGOs in rural areas, as they are always the first responders.

A faith based poverty alleviation NGO in the Philippines has aimed to tackle this challenge. Exemplifying their efforts is their action on December 16, 2021 when Category 5 Typhoon Rai hit the provinces of Surigao del Norte and Dinagat Islands in Mindanao, in five provinces of Visayas, and in the island of Palawan in Luzon. The typhoon caused hundreds of deaths and left hundreds of thousands of families without homes, impacting approximately 9.9 million people across the six hardest-hit regions.³⁵ Fortunately, this LNGO had 600 full-time staff members living in many of the affected communities, including Cebu, Bohol, Dumaguete, Bacolod, Iloilo, Kalibo, and Palawan. In these areas, the LNGO had strategically pre-positioned anti-malnutrition food supplies specifically for disasters like this. They also worked with 10,000 partner pastors to help identify families in urgent need, enabling quick and targeted assistance. LNGO's staff and resources are stationed in both rural and urban communities, ensuring comprehensive support across diverse areas. The organization's response to Typhoon Rai underscores the critical role of NGOs in reaching remote areas by establishing an enduring presence in disaster-prone regions.

The Role of National NGOs in Advancing Localization

³⁵ OCHA. "Philippines: Super Typhoon Rai (Odette) Humanitarian Needs and Priorities Revision (Dec 2021 - Jun 2022) (2 Feb 2022) - Philippines." *ReliefWeb*, 2 Feb. 2022, reliefweb.int/report/philippines/philippines-super-typhoon-rai-odette-humanitarian-needs-and-priorities-revision.

National NGOs play a significant role in advancing localization efforts by leveraging their resources, larger organizational structures, and wider recognition to advocate for local representation in humanitarian initiatives. National NGOs, which often have more funding and greater influence than LNGOs, are uniquely positioned to champion these localization efforts. They also enjoy higher credibility on international platforms like the United Nations, with donors, and within other international organizations, allowing them to bridge local needs and global support.

For instance, a prominent humanitarian organization in the Philippines has actively promoted localization by working closely with local communities. One exemplary project involved the Tagbanwa community of Busuanga in Palawan, an indigenous group with deep ties to nature whose traditions and livelihoods reflect this connection. The organization approached this community with a commitment to listen to their specific needs, which revealed an opportunity to revitalize traditional bamboo weaving. At that time, only fourteen individuals in the community practiced the traditional weaving methods, so the Tagbanwa asked the organization for help in preserving this cultural skill. The organization responded by providing weaving training and securing additional government assistance. Ten years after initiating this project, the community now has a third generation of bamboo weavers, with the youngest apprentice just fourteen years old. This initiative not only revived an important cultural tradition but also enabled weavers to earn a stable income. Today, the Tagbanwa bamboo weavers serve as official weaving trainers for the region, exemplifying a successful, sustainable capacity-building project that fosters local agency and preserves cultural heritage.

Palawan, the largest province in the Philippines, is home to multiple indigenous ethnolinguistic groups—including the Tagbanwa, Palawano, Tao't Bato, Molbog, Batak, Agutaynen, and Cuyonon—who live in remote mountain and coastal villages. The organization's engagement

with the Tagbanwa community highlights the effectiveness of initiatives that prioritize local input and empowerment, and similar approaches could greatly benefit other indigenous communities in Palawan.

Furthermore, it is up to national organizations to push for greater recognition of local climate efforts by engaging in discussions at the international level. For example, the organization mentioned above sent a delegate to COP28, the 28th United Nations Climate Change Conference in 2023. This event, held from November 30 to December 13, brought together 85,000 participants, including over 150 heads of state and government, as well as representatives from national delegations, civil society, businesses, Indigenous communities, youth organizations, philanthropic groups, and international organizations. At COP28, the Local Climate Action Summit convened hundreds of national and subnational climate leaders to advance climate finance reforms, accelerate the global energy transition, strengthen climate action, and enhance resilience and adaptation efforts at the local level. These discussions highlighted the economic growth, health improvements, and financial opportunities that come from reducing emissions and moving away from fossil fuels. Summit participants emphasized that achieving the Paris Agreement targets requires strong local leadership.³⁶ This summit made efforts to empower local leadership by incorporating local leaders into the design of Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs), which are national climate actions submitted to the UN under the Paris Agreement. Strong local leadership is critical in combating the climate crisis, which often leads to humanitarian disasters, due to their essential role in implementation efforts that national or international leadership may lack. Incorporating local implementation of climate action policies and projects at the community level bridges the gap

³⁶ “Hundreds of Local Leaders Convene at First-Ever COP28 Local Climate Action Summit, Eight Years after Inaugural Local Leaders Summit Outside COP21.” *Bloomberg Philanthropies*, 2 Dec. 2023, www.bloomberg.org/press/hundreds-of-local-leaders-convene-at-first-ever-cop28-local-climate-action-summit-eight-years-after-inaugural-local-leaders-summit-outside-cop21/.

between national commitments and on-the-ground action. Local leaders can also mobilize their communities more effectively, as they are familiar with context-specific situations, which can help fast-track the local energy transition.

Despite these efforts, international conferences like COP28 are primarily attended by government leaders and representatives of national organizations, with fewer local organizations present. It falls to national organizations, therefore, to advocate for local voices and ensure that their delegations support and amplify the concerns of local groups. The organization interviewed, for instance, made this a priority on their agenda at COP28 and is already preparing to send local delegates to COP29.

Balancing Scale and Customization in Humanitarian Aid

Localization offers numerous long-term benefits, but the process also presents challenges. One of the challenges is balancing the scale of aid distribution with the level of customization. Customization in humanitarian aid distribution involves adapting solutions to fit the specific context. Donors, stakeholders, and leaders often prioritize scale over customization to maximize the number of people reached, making aid kits more cost-effective. However, customizing kits enables organizations to better meet local expectations and needs. Customization, though, comes at a higher cost. Conducting thorough market research to understand specific needs is expensive, which can reduce the number of people an organization is able to serve. In an interview with a humanitarian aid worker at a LNNGO in the Philippines, they emphasized that tailoring interventions to fit local contexts is crucial. Finding the balance between scale and customization is essential to, as they put it, “maximize the benefit for the maximum number of people.”

The challenge of balancing scale and customization is especially complex in diverse countries like the Philippines. The Philippines is culturally rich, blending indigenous, Southeast Asian, Chinese,

Spanish, American, and other influences. Within this mix, two prominent minority groups are the ethnic Chinese and Muslim Filipinos.³⁷ Due to 400 years of colonization in the Philippines ethnic diversity is huge. While the majority of Filipinos are Christian, understanding the distinct cultural needs of various regions is essential to effectively meet their needs. Islam is the second-largest religion in the Philippines, with most Filipino Muslims residing in the southern areas, including Mindanao, Palawan, and the Sulu Archipelago. The majority of Filipino Muslims follow Sunni Islam, which has specific dietary laws: foods that are permissible (halal) and those that are forbidden (haram). This distinction is critical when providing aid. For instance, food kits sent to Muslim-majority regions may be ineffective if they don't meet halal dietary requirements. Therefore, while less customization and greater scalability might seem more cost-effective, this approach can be wasteful in contexts where an area is culturally diverse. When aid doesn't align with local dietary or cultural needs, communities may not be able to use it, leading to unnecessary resource expenditure.

Conclusion

The Philippines vulnerability to frequent and catastrophic disasters highlights the critical need for localized humanitarian efforts. The importance of LNGOs as first responders, understanding the specific needs of their communities, and reaching traditionally hard-to-access or overlooked areas by international aid cannot be overstated. Given the country's cultural richness and largely rural population, a localized response is essential to ensure the most sustainable and cost-effective approach. However, the transfer of power from the international community to LNGOs remains a significant challenge in achieving localization, particularly in terms of decision-making, resource allocation, and control of funding. This challenge emphasizes the needs of bringing local leaders to the decision-making table in order to create an environment of trust

³⁷ SHARMA, C. L. "ETHNICITY AND EDUCATION IN THE PHILIPPINES." *Philippine Sociological Review* 27, no. 2 (1979): 117–29. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/23892119>.

between international and LNGOs, as well as with funders. Nonetheless, it is also important to recognize that transfer of power cannot be achieved without a transfer of knowledge. Additionally, national NGOs also play a crucial role in fostering this trust by using their platform to amplify local voices. The shift towards localization though challenging offers long-term benefits and stronger fosters stronger communities

Bangladesh

Bangladesh is among the world's most climate-vulnerable countries, with frequent and severe flooding that impacts economically disadvantaged and marginalized communities. These populations face more significant climate risks due to limited access to resources, which takes a toll on their ability to adapt.³⁸ Every year brings reports of increasingly devastating floods, each surpassing the previous in severity. While the Northern flood of 2017 was once considered one of the worst in the country's history, the Bangladesh floods of 2024, which devastated the northeastern and southeastern regions, have now surpassed it in scale and impact. Such events have tremendous effects on marginalized populations, including Rohingya refugees who seek safety in affected areas like Cox's Bazar—a coastal town in southeastern Bangladesh home to the largest refugee settlement in the world. Assisting vulnerable communities becomes even more challenging during climate disasters, especially when compounded by global crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic.

In 2022, Bangladesh joined the Global Hub on Locally Led Adaptation (LLA) to advocate for more control over adaptation initiatives and resources being put in the hands of frontline communities. LLA emphasizes direct community involvement in decision-making and access to funding, thus addressing inequities in adaptation support.³⁹ LNGOs often lead these initiatives, but

³⁸ "PM Hasina to Launch Global Hub on Locally Led Adaptation Sunday." *Dhaka Tribune*, 10 Dec. 2022.

³⁹ "Getting Locally Led Adaptation Right: Examples from Around the World." *World Resources Institute*, 1 Nov. 2022.

securing financial support and gaining the trust of major donors remain significant impediments. While local organizations have invaluable knowledge of their communities, their limited access to funding and resources can hinder their impact and delay response times, especially when considering that INGOs tend to receive the majority of aid. LNGOs in Bangladesh cite capacity limitations, such as underdeveloped finance and human resources departments, as one of the main reasons for not being able to secure and manage large-scale funding effectively. These challenges contribute to donors doubting their readiness for large scale projects.

This case of Bangladesh highlights how locally led adaptation has guided communities in developing resilience strategies rooted in local knowledge and leadership to address climate adaptation, COVID-19 pandemic, and the Rohingya Refugee Crisis. First, it explores how the Climate Bridge Fund (CBF) has supported locally led adaptation and resilience-building, serving as an example of how organizations with greater resources can help advance localization—while also underscoring the continued need for long-term investment in local NGOs. Second, it examines how localized efforts responded to severe flooding events, including the Northern Floods of 2017 and the August 2024 floods, highlighting the role of local actors in reaching marginalized and hard-to-access communities. Third, it looks at the COVID-19 response, in which local organizations like Start Fund Bangladesh led innovative outreach efforts—such as distributing printed leaflets and culturally tailored messaging—to deliver vital health information in remote areas amid restricted international access. Lastly, it analyzes the Rohingya refugee crisis and the structural challenges that prevent local NGOs from playing a leadership role in humanitarian responses, including restrictive government policies and power imbalances with international organizations.

Initiatives Aiding Locally Led Adaptation: Climate Bridge Fund (CBF)

The Climate Bridge Fund (CBF) is an initiative established by BRAC, an international development organization founded in Bangladesh in 1972. Partnering with over 100 million people facing inequality and poverty, BRAC creates opportunities to help individuals realize their potential. The CBF provides grants to LNGOs working with climate-displaced populations to devise solutions to sustain long-term resilience in Bangladesh. Unlike traditional funding channels, the CBF requires collaboration between project implementers and community members to ensure projects align with the specific needs of those most affected.⁴⁰ This approach helps LNGOs address priorities more effectively but does not fully resolve their challenges with securing sustainable, long-term funding. The competitive funding landscape still poses a significant challenge for such local organizations, as they often lack the visibility and financial stability enjoyed by larger, international actors.

CBF supports projects through two main funding windows: a *Climate Change Window* for long-term adaptation and an *Emergency Response Window* for immediate crises, including, under this window, issues arising from the COVID-19 pandemic. LNGOs utilizing CBF resources focus on enhancing resilience in vulnerable areas through projects in WASH and infrastructure.⁴¹ However, the support of a single initiative can only go so far—many LNGOs remain under-resourced, struggling to retain qualified staff and sustain operations without the steady funding available to larger INGOs. In this context, CBF serves as a model for how organizations with greater resources should engage in supporting locally led adaptation efforts. Despite such targeted support, LNGOs in Bangladesh also noted that without consistent investment in the organizational capacities of their organizations—particularly in financial management and professional development—they will continue to risk losing talented staff to better paying INGOs and other employers.

⁴⁰ *Locally Led Adaptation: From Principles to Practice*. World Resources Institute, July 2022.

⁴¹ "Climate Bridge Fund: A Successful Mechanism of Applying Locally Led Adaptation Principles in Bangladesh." *Dhaka Tribune*, 9 Jan. 2023.

Climate-Induced Flooding and Local Response

Bangladesh's location on the Ganges Delta, combined with its wide network of over 800 rivers, makes it highly susceptible to flooding. This vulnerability is especially worsened during the monsoon season which brings with it strong rains and overflowing water from upstream areas.⁴² Recently, these natural conditions have been intensified by climate change which has made flooding more severe than ever before. In Bangladesh, these annual floods cause livelihood disruptions, internal displacement, and loss of life.

The Northern Floods of 2017 are viewed as one of the worst river floods in the country's recent history. These floods, which were caused by heavy monsoon rainfall and water surges from upstream hills in India, affected 31 of the country's 64 districts along the northern and northeastern regions. Around 3.5 million people were affected, with 121 lives lost, and thousands more people who were displaced from their homes. Without access to basic needs such as shelter, clean water, and sanitation facilities, the floods exposed deep vulnerabilities especially amongst marginalized populations. The loss of homes, livestock, and agricultural land contributed to severe food shortages and long-term socio-economic impacts. While the government responded with rice and cash grant distributions, their responses were insufficient to address the diverse and urgent needs of the affected communities.⁴³ This shortcoming highlights the critical importance of supporting local NGOs in humanitarian responses, especially when the state lacks the capacity to respond effectively.

More recently, the August Floods of 2024 affected more than 5 million people in Eastern Bangladesh, displacing more than 500,000 people and submerging thousands of homes. Heavy rains and climate change-induced shifts in rainfall patterns left 11 districts, including Cox's Bazar—a

⁴² "Bangladesh: Flood Situation (August 22, 2017)." *ReliefWeb*, 22 Aug. 2017, <https://reliefweb.int/report/bangladesh/bangladesh-flood-situation-august-22-2017>.

⁴³ *Ibid*

home to marginalized populations such as the Rohingya refugees—completely devastated. The massive destruction of crops and livestock left these communities displaced in overcrowded shelters and suffering from severe food insecurity.⁴⁴ Although relief agencies attempted to respond effectively to the massive scale of displacement, aid was more concentrated in the urban areas and on the highways and was not distributed to remote villages. There were also many delays and complications in the response efforts such as: lack of boats, insufficient fuel, and unpreparedness to deal with issues in historically less flood-prone districts.⁴⁵ These logistical problems forced many flood victims to travel long distances to receive appropriate aid.

Localized humanitarian responses played a central role during the Northern Floods of 2017 and the August Floods of 2024. According to a humanitarian aid worker interviewed, community based organizations and volunteers provided timely and context specific aid that often dug deeper than broader government or international efforts. Local actors, as first responders, used their knowledge of affected areas to assist the communities that were hard to reach. However, systemic barriers, including a limited degree and quality of funding and exclusion from early alert systems, also hindered their widespread effectiveness. Bridging these gaps requires shifting power dynamics to put local leadership first by stressing equitable partnerships and increased funding.⁴⁶ When empowered, local organizations can assist in effective disaster response: getting the right aid to the right people, fast and fairly.

Community-Based Responses to COVID-19

⁴⁴ "Climate Change-Exacerbated Flash Floods in Bangladesh." *ReliefWeb*, 6 Sep 2024, <https://reliefweb.int/report/bangladesh/climate-change-exacerbated-flash-floods-bangladesh>.

⁴⁵ "On the Frontlines: Witnessing the Human Struggle and Hope Amid Bangladesh's Catastrophic 2024 Eastern Flood." *ODIHPN*, 4 Oct. 2024, <https://odihpn.org/publication/on-the-frontlines-witnessing-the-human-struggle-and-hope-amid-bangladeshs-catastrophic-2024-eastern-flood/>.

⁴⁶ Alam, Shofiqul. *Localization of Aid – A Case of Bangladesh Flood 2017*. Spring 2017. *Acadameia.edu*, https://www.academia.edu/88559805/Localization_of_aid_a_case_of_Bangladesh_flood_2017.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, LNGOs demonstrated their capacity to respond quickly and effectively when international access was restricted. Travel limitations kept many INGOs out of remote areas, placing greater responsibility on LNGOs like the Start Fund Bangladesh (SFB), which reached 475,000 people across 23 districts in its COVID-19 response. Recognizing that media campaigns might not reach remote areas, SFB distributed printed leaflets and tailored messaging to resonate with local languages, music, and other culturally relevant formats.⁴⁷ This ensured that communities received health information in a clear, accessible, and culturally appropriate manner. The response to the pandemic brought out both the strengths and weaknesses of the LNGOs — their very unique community connections enabled them to reach effectively, but limited resources, such as protective gear for staff, restricted the scope of their impact.

Evidence from the localization and LLA initiatives in Bangladesh demonstrate the essential role that LNGOs play in building community resilience. While such efforts are important, these organizations continue to navigate a challenging landscape marked by funding competition, limited resources, and donor reluctance. In this regard, LNGOs in Bangladesh emphasize that if the potential of localization is to be fully realized, then investment in capacity building must be made. This includes the enhancement of professional skills, the development of robust financial and administrative systems, and securing competitive salaries to retain talent. Programs such as CBF and SFB demonstrate the importance of empowering these local actors, who bring invaluable knowledge and commitment to addressing challenges within their communities.

Localization Challenges in the Rohingya Refugee Crisis

⁴⁷ Raihan, Sajid Raihan. “The Case for Localisation Amidst COVID-19.” *Medium*, Start Network, 19 June 2020, medium.com/start-network/the-case-for-localisation-amidst-covid-19-818a76dfc140.

The Rohingya, an ethnic Muslim minority from the predominantly Buddhist Myanmar, are one of the world's most vulnerable populations. Stripped of citizenship and basic rights, they are subjected to widespread persecution and violence, making them the world's largest stateless population. Decades of persecution have culminated in mass deportations and ethnic cleansing. This violence has compelled over 700,000 Rohingya to flee to neighboring Bangladesh since August 2017.⁴⁸ This influx, combined with the already existing refugee population, has resulted in the establishment of Cox's Bazar as the largest refugee settlement worldwide. Today, Cox's Bazar is home to over one million people living across 33 camps.

The urgency for humanitarian aid for the Rohingya cannot be overstated. More than 90% of households in these camps are entirely dependent on assistance to survive. Over half of the refugees are children under 18 years old, with very limited access to education or opportunities for skills development.⁴⁹ Climate vulnerabilities in Bangladesh compound the crisis: bringing heavy rains, the annual monsoons cause floods, landslides, and widespread destruction in camps that rely on fragile shelters of bamboo and tarp.⁵⁰ These conditions, coupled with a lack of adequate water and sanitation facilities, increase the risks of disease outbreaks such as hepatitis, malaria, and dengue—sicknesses that hit children and the elderly particularly hard. Such conditions make the Rohingya refugee crisis a crucial case for understanding the struggles of localized humanitarian aid in Bangladesh. While most of the response in Cox's Bazar is dominated by international humanitarian agencies, LNGOs also play a critical role in addressing the crisis. LNGOs bring vital on-the-ground knowledge and cultural understanding into their work but face several challenges that limit their ability to deliver aid effectively.

⁴⁸ UNHCR. "Rohingya Refugee Crisis Explained." *USA for UNHCR*, 25 Aug. 2022, <https://www.unrefugees.org/news/rohingya-refugee-crisis-explained/>

⁴⁹ UNHCR. "Rohingya Refugee Crisis." *USA for UNHCR*, <https://www.unrefugees.org/emergencies/rohingya-refugee-crisis/#Rohingya>

⁵⁰ UNHCR, "Rohingya Refugee Crisis Explained." (n 43)

One of the main challenges lies in power imbalances between international and LNGOs. While they are closer to affected communities, local organizations often find themselves excluded from meaningful decision-making processes and are reduced to the role of implementing plans that have been devised by international actors. This not only undervalues their contributions but also perpetuates a condition of dependency, as INGOs maintain control over resources and strategic priorities. Further complicating matters, some INGOs establish their offices in Bangladesh and claim to be “local,” which blurs the distinction between genuine grassroots efforts and international interventions, weakening the recognition of local entities. INGOs may list themselves as LNGOs to more easily meet operational legitimacy and regulatory requirements.⁵¹ However, by doing so, they compete with local organizations for limited funding, ultimately harming the very communities they aim to support. In a 2020 letter by the Bangladesh CSO NGO Coordination Process (BDCSO), 351 L/NNGOs signatories expressed their grievances, highlighting the challenges they face in competing for funding with INGOs misrepresenting themselves as local. They also emphasized the importance of clearly distinguishing between different types of NGOs to ensure fair resource distribution and recognition.⁵²

Furthermore, while international actors often acknowledge the importance of local knowledge, they simultaneously emphasize the limited capacity of local organizations without actively implementing or creating programs to support their development. In this way, the strengths of grassroots organizations are undermined, and their staff depleted. Many of the most qualified people are recruited by INGOs offering higher wages. This leaves the local organizations

⁵¹ Duffy, Matthew, et al. *Beyond Barriers: Bangladesh Context Report*, USAID, Sept. 2024, beyondbarriers.concernusa.org/reports/final-version-beyond-barriers-bangladesh-context-report-.pdf.

⁵² *Isn't It a Deliberate Attempt to Confuse Local NGO (LNGO) Definition? Confederated INGOs Are Indeed INGOs. LNGOs Need Space.*, 17 Sept. 2020, bd-cso-ngo.net/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/Open-letter-to-LITWG_6th-Sept-with-related-hyper-link-_-V10-Final.pdf

understaffed and unable to sustain their efforts. These practices exacerbate existing inequalities and prevent the development of local leadership.

These challenges are further compounded by the Bangladeshi government's stringent policies that view the Rohingya as a temporary population and deny them formal refugee status.⁵³ This stance limits long-term planning and introduces bureaucratic barriers, such as prohibition of cash-based aid and strict controls on the types of projects permitted. Aid organizations face difficulties accessing refugee camps; LNGOs, lacking the financial resources and institutional capacity of international counterparts, are disproportionately affected by these constraints. For example, aid organizations face challenges in accessing refugee camps due to various factors, including security concerns, such as attacks on Rohingya by members of the Rohingya militant group, the Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army (ARSA).⁵⁴ Movement restrictions imposed by Bangladesh authorities present another challenge, including barbed wire fencing around the main mega-camp⁵⁵ and checkpoints where extortion is common.⁵⁶ Moreover, the government's tight control over information and assistance delivery creates a culture of fear, silencing critical conversations about how aid is delivered and delaying much-needed interventions.

The current humanitarian system in Cox's Bazar prevents local organizations from leading aid distribution. Restrictive partnerships, recruitment practices that draw talent away from LNGOs, and heavy government regulations collectively hinder their capacity to operate effectively. Although LNGOs bring an abundance of knowledge regarding the context and proximity to affected

⁵³ Abdul Kadir Khan and Tiina Kontinen, "Impediments to Localization Agenda: Humanitarian Space in the Rohingya Response in Bangladesh," *Journal of International Humanitarian Action* 7, no. 1 (2022): 14–15, <https://doi.org/10.1186/s41018-022-00122-1>

⁵⁴ Sullivan, Daniel P. "Hope Amid Despair: Finding Solutions for Rohingya in Bangladesh." *Refugees International*, 13 Dec. 2022, www.refugeesinternational.org/reports-briefs/hope-amid-despair-finding-solutions-for-rohingya-in-bangladesh/.

⁵⁵ Sullivan, Daniel P. "Hope Amid Despair: Finding Solutions for Rohingya in Bangladesh." *Refugees International*, 13 Dec. 2022, www.refugeesinternational.org/reports-briefs/hope-amid-despair-finding-solutions-for-rohingya-in-bangladesh/.

⁵⁶ "Bangladesh: End Restrictions and Protect Rohingya Refugees." *Fortify Rights*, 20 Dec. 2021, www.fortifyrights.org/bgd-inv-2021-12-20/.

populations, they usually lack recognition, resources, and autonomy necessary to maximize their impact.

Despite discourses of inclusivity and localization, the humanitarian response remains characterized by imbalanced power dynamics that favor international actors. Local organizations are often positioned as implementers rather than equal partners, meaning their voices and expertise remain underutilized in shaping strategies. These challenges highlight a system that, though well-intentioned, falls short of genuinely supporting the development of sustainable, locally led solutions—thereby limiting the potential for long-term resilience in the response to the Rohingya situation.

Conclusion

Local organizations and initiatives in Bangladesh experienced considerable success in addressing climate challenges and humanitarian needs, mainly due to their deep ties to the affected communities. Though funding shortages and the dominating presence of larger INGO created challenges, initiatives like the Climate Bridge Fund (CBF) allowed local organizations to tailor their responses according to the unique needs of vulnerable populations such as the Rohingya refugees and flood-impacted communities. To address current shortcomings of the humanitarian aid model, more initiatives like the CBF are needed—ones that genuinely promote localization by treating local NGOs not merely as subcontractors, but as equal partners. For instance, the Start Fund Bangladesh COVID-19 response, while limited in financial resources, managed to deliver effective humanitarian assistance to remote areas with culturally appropriate messaging. However, such advances are counterbalanced by the continued challenges created by lack of funding, dependence on external support, and other barriers imposed by the governmental policies, which severely restrict the autonomy of LINGOs. The strength of local organizations lies in their localized knowledge and

leadership. However, it is important to address their resource limitations and empower them to take the lead in order to enhance their long-term impact.

Africa

Ethiopia

Ethiopia faces a humanitarian crisis due to varying overlapping crises including conflicts, epidemic outbreaks, and natural disasters made worse by economic hardship. Ethiopia is Africa's oldest independent country and second most populous with 126.5 million people. It has one of the fastest-growing economies in the region, led by infrastructure investments, with an estimated 7.2% growth in FY 2022/23, according to the World Bank. However, with a per capita gross national income of \$1,020, it remains one of the poorest countries in the region.⁵⁷ While Ethiopia's economy is growing rapidly, the combination of a large population, multiple crises, and unequal development⁵⁸ has meant that growth has not translated to high per capita income levels, leaving a large Ethiopian population vulnerable when humanitarian crises occur.

Its most recent conflict was the Tigray Civil War, which lasted from November 3, 2020 to November 2022 and ended with the Cessation of Hostilities Agreement (CoHA). Tigray is Ethiopia's northernmost region and is home to the majority of the country's 7 million ethnic Tigrayans. The CoHa agreement ended direct clashes between Ethiopia's federal government and the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF). However, the effects of the war are lasting, having displaced more than 20 million people and generating an estimated \$20 billion in humanitarian and reconstruction needs.⁵⁹ In Tigray, civilian structures including hospitals, schools, factories, and

⁵⁷ "The World Bank in Ethiopia." *World Bank*, 8 Oct. 2024, www.worldbank.org/en/country/ethiopia/overview.

⁵⁸ Abbink, Jon. "Ethiopia's Unrest Sparked By Unequal Development Record." *IPI Global Observatory*, 13 Sept. 2016, theglobalobservatory.org/2016/09/ethiopia-protests-amhara-oromiya/.

⁵⁹ "The World Bank in Ethiopia." *World Bank*, 8 Oct. 2024, www.worldbank.org/en/country/ethiopia/overview.

businesses were destroyed through shelling and looting. Since early 2015, Ethiopia has experienced multiple severe droughts affecting millions with food insecurity. The ongoing humanitarian crisis in Ethiopia highlights the urgent need for on-the-ground assistance to provide immediate aid and support local relief efforts. In this region, organizations at the provincial, town, and village levels are often the first to respond to crises.⁶⁰ Over the past decade, the role of LNGOs has been instrumental in advancing gains in education and food security in Ethiopia.

This case study focuses on Ethiopia as a compelling example of how localization can help address large-scaled, layered crises especially where state responses may be obstructive or lack the necessary capacity, and where international efforts may fall short due to limited access or trust. The case highlights the critical role of local leadership in areas such as conflict recovery, food insecurity, epidemic response, and access to education. The study examines the work of the REST in responding to famine risk, providing emergency relief, and supporting income-generating activities in local communities. It then looks at how local NGOs like AISDA and HIWOT Ethiopia have addressed cholera and other health crises, often reaching areas the state has struggled to serve. Finally, it explores how organizations such as Ethiopia Reads and youth-led literacy initiatives are tackling the country's education crisis by tailoring responses to cultural and linguistic contexts, demonstrating how localized, context-specific approaches better meet the needs of underserved rural and displaced communities.

Local Recovery and Resilience in Tigray: The Work of REST

Tigray is a drought-prone region facing severe food insecurity. According to a study published in the *Journal of Health*, 81.2% of households in Tigray experienced hunger due to lack of

⁶⁰ Dizolele, Mvemba Phezo, et al. "Localizing Humanitarian Action in Africa." *CSIS*, 27 May 2022, www.csis.org/analysis/localizing-humanitarian-action-africa.

food.⁶¹ The study found that 46.1% of children aged 6-59 months suffered from moderate acute malnutrition (MAM), while the prevalence of MAM among pregnant and lactating women (PLW) was 59.5%. Additionally, many rural districts lacked connection to road networks, leaving 87.9% of the elderly and 20.4% of women and girls without access to food markets. With a growing population of about 7 million, local officials in June 2024 said two million in Tigray are at risk of starvation.⁶² Rates of starvation increased due to the recent conflict. During the war the Ethiopian government issued a blockade on Tigray preventing the access of humanitarian aid and trade. The economy was devastated by the destruction of infrastructure like factories as well as the seizure of productive farmland.⁶³ Compounding the crisis is a healthcare emergency; hospitals were destroyed during the war, and severe medical supply shortages hinder the treatment of illnesses, including COVID-19. Reconstruction efforts are ongoing while Ethiopia is currently facing one of its worst droughts in recent history placing Tigray at risk of famine.

Since local actors are often the first to act,⁶⁴ The humanitarian crisis in Tigray highlights the need for assisting local support. Organizations like the Relief Society of Tigray (REST) are an example of locally led organizations focused on solutions based on development in Tigray. REST was established in 1978 with now more than a thousand Ethiopian members. REST aims to improve food security for the poorest rural households through a participatory approach to rural development. The organization's initial approach to engaging with a community begins with a focus on watershed restoration and water management, supporting communities restore the landscape to

⁶¹ Gebre T, Abraha Z, Zenebe A, Zeweld W. A comprehensive analysis of food insecurity in the drought-prone rural areas of Tigray. *J Health Popul Nutr.* 2024 May 16;43(1):66. doi: 10.1186/s41043-024-00564-w. PMID: 38755735; PMCID: PMC11097430.

⁶² Peter Mwai, Girmay Gebru and Merlyn Thomas. "Two Million at Risk of Starvation in Tigray, Aid Official Warns." *BBC News*, BBC, 25 July 2024, www.bbc.com/news/articles/c10l2vvjy9lo.

⁶³ Waal, Alex de. "Ethiopia Starvation: Fear of Famine in Tigray Grows." *BBC News*, BBC, 24 Jan. 2024, www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-68061876.

⁶⁴ *IASC Guidance on Strengthening Participation, Representation and Leadership of Local and National Actors in IASC Humanitarian Coordination Mechanisms*, IASC, July 2021, interagencystandingcommittee.org/operational-response/iasc-guidance-strengthening-participation-representation-and-leadership-local-and-national-actors. 3

produce sufficient food. Additionally, REST offers training and support for various income-generating activities, such as harvesting grasses for livestock feed. REST also provides food distribution, emergency WASH services, emergency nutrition support, and non-food items (NFIs). Although REST has maintained its commitment to provide relief during droughts and crises, the organization shifted its focus on the need for rehabilitation and development in the region with the end of the civil war. REST has completed over 1,000 projects in the Tigray area, with the organization currently serving two million but is hoping to expand to reach the other 60% of Tigray's population.

As a grassroots, Ethiopian-led organization, REST benefits from a deep cultural understanding of the communities it supports. Often, communities may feel hesitant to accept help from foreign organizations; thus, a locally led approach fosters greater willingness and openness to support. For example, a report from the conservation nonprofit Maliasili, which surveyed local organizations based in Africa, found that more than half of the respondents cited a lack of trust as a challenge in partnerships with INGOs.⁶⁵ This is due to a number of reasons. First, the intentions of an INGO can seem unclear and confusing. It may be difficult to determine whether they prioritize retaining influence for themselves or genuinely engage in partnerships that support local visions. Additionally, concerns by the local population arise about whether foreign humanitarian aid is politically motivated and interfering in domestic affairs. Furthermore, it is critical to consider the role of colonialism in Africa, where historical exploitation and unequal power dynamics have contributed to a post-colonial legacy of significant distrust between communities and foreign aid.⁶⁶

⁶⁵ Buzzard, B., J. Chick, and E. Sulle. Rooting for Change: Strengthening Local-Global Partnerships in African Conservation. Maliasili, August 2023. maliasili.org/ 33

⁶⁶ Thania Paffenholz, Philip Poppelreuter, Nicholas Ross; Toward a Third Local Turn: Identifying and Addressing Obstacles to Localization in Peacebuilding. *Negotiation Journal* 2023; 39 (4): 349–375. doi: <https://doi.org/10.1111/nejo.12444>

Meanwhile, higher trust in local institutions can be attributed to their physical proximity to citizens, established relationships, and cultural understanding. For these reasons, communities often view LNGOs as more legitimate representatives of their interests and more open to their support. Furthermore, a locally led organization can better understand and listen to the specific challenges that community members face. This trust between the LNGO and the community is crucial for effective education, training, and communication. Additionally, the work of REST highlights the importance of including local participants in all steps of the project cycle in order to make responses to localization more targeted as well as more cost effective in the long-run. Local leaders are often the first responders, and by supporting LNGOs they can be equipped with the tools and training necessary to respond effectively and sustainably.

Local Leadership in Epidemic Response: AISDA and HIWOT Ethiopia

Ethiopia has experienced multiple epidemic outbreaks of cholera, malaria, and measles. Between 2015 and 2024, Ethiopia has experienced cholera epidemics every year.⁶⁷ The total of suspected cholera cases from 2015 to 2021 was 99,548 and 637 deaths.⁶⁸ Over 15.9 million Ethiopians, accounting for approximately 15% of the nation's population, live in regions that have experienced repeated cholera outbreaks.⁶⁹ Factors contributing to epidemic outbreaks in Ethiopia include, poor sanitation and lack of access to clean water, climate change including droughts and flooding, conflict and displacement leading to disruption or destruction of healthcare systems, and low vaccination coverage.⁷⁰

⁶⁷ Hussen M, Worku Demlie Y, Edosa M, Kebede M, Wossen M, Mulugeta Chane A, Abate G, Hailu Asfaw W, Hailu D, Teferi M, Jeon Y, Gedefaw A, Park SE. Ethiopia National Cholera Elimination Plan 2022-2028: Experiences, Challenges, and the Way Forward. *Clin Infect Dis*. 2024 Jul 12;79(Supplement_1):S1-S7. doi: 10.1093/cid/ciae200. PMID: 38996038; PMCID: PMC11244260.

⁶⁸ Moore, S., Worku Demlie, Y., Mulunch, D. *et al*. Spatiotemporal dynamics of cholera epidemics in Ethiopia: 2015–2021. *Sci Rep* 14, 7170 (2024). <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41598-024-51324-z>

⁶⁹ Hussen M, Worku Demlie Y, Edosa M, Kebede M, Wossen M, Mulugeta Chane A, Abate G, Hailu Asfaw W, Hailu D, Teferi M, Jeon Y, Gedefaw A, Park SE. Ethiopia National Cholera Elimination Plan 2022-2028: Experiences, Challenges, and the Way Forward. *Clin Infect Dis*. 2024 Jul 12;79(Supplement_1):S1-S7. doi: 10.1093/cid/ciae200. PMID: 38996038; PMCID: PMC11244260.

⁷⁰ World Health Organization (31 October 2024). Disease Outbreak News; Malaria in Ethiopia. <http://www.who.int/emergencies/disease-outbreak-news/item/2024-DON542>

Given these recurrent and overlapping challenges, it is crucial to have LNGOs actively involved in emergency response efforts especially because they have experience in dealing with such crises. Through their experience, they have developed practical knowledge of what works in their specific context, such as navigating local infrastructure, communicating with community leaders, and understanding the priorities of the local population. The flexibility of LNGOs allows them to make mid-course adjustments and tailor programs, unlike the large, rigid operating structures of government bureaucracies, which can slow response times. Moreover, through the cultural competency they possess due to the connection to the communities they serve, enables them to communicate effectively and take actions that are perceived as appropriate and acceptable by the community.

LNGOs like Action For Integrated Sustainable Development Association (AISDA) have helped to combat the recurring epidemics Ethiopia faces. The organization, founded in 2006 is one of the leading national humanitarian organizations based in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, with several project coordination offices located in its operational regions, including Afar and Amhara. AISDA has helped reach nearly 1.5 million people to support the livelihoods of poor and vulnerable communities in Ethiopia. Of its many projects AISDA has helped combat cholera epidemic outbreaks, including its Emergency WASH response for cholera-affected communities in Gulina Woreda of Afar Region, from January to March 2024. The mission for this project aims to improve access to safe WASH services for communities affected by cholera. Key activities include providing water treatment chemicals with flocculation, coagulation, and rehabilitating non-functional water systems. Capacity-building efforts focus on training health workers and Water, Sanitation, and Hygiene Committees (WASHCos) while implementing regular water quality monitoring at both source and distribution points. Additional measures include constructing latrines and sanitation facilities at the Cholera Treatment Center in Kelewan Hospital, running hygiene promotion

campaigns, and distributing WASH and NFIs to 2,000 affected households. In this project, AISDA worked with donors, including IOM and USAID, for funding. This is an example of effective ways INGO and government agencies can support LNGOs in enabling local decision making and funding distribution.

HIWOT Ethiopia is another LNGO contributing to combatting the recurring health crises in Ethiopia. The name “Hiwot,” meaning life, reflects its mission. It was initially established as a youth club. Since then, continuing its commitment to children and youth it has helped deliver a variety of multi-year projects including in health, education, children rights, economic empowerment, gender equality, and emergency response in collaboration with local and international partners. One of its projects in 2018, “Communication for Health” aimed to increase knowledge and healthy practice of community members across multiple health areas including: reproductive health, maternal newborn and child health (RMNCH), Malaria, Tuberculosis (TB), WASH, Mother to Child Transmission of HIV (PMTCT) and Nutrition.⁷¹ The intervention fostered improved communication between married couples on household management related to RMNCH, family planning (FP), hygiene, nutrition during pregnancy, safe delivery, optimal breastfeeding, complementary feeding practices, birth spacing, modern contraceptive use, and the prevention of HIV transmission and communicable diseases such as malaria and tuberculosis. Additionally, the project empowered children and adolescents with healthy practices through school-based and community-wide communication initiatives. By localizing education on health practices, the project built trust between the NGO and the community, leveraging cultural understanding to effectively address sensitive topics in a respectful and impactful manner.

Ethiopia’s government has also taken steps to tackle the recurring epidemics in its country however face many challenges in its implementation which highlights the critical role of supporting

⁷¹ “Communication for Health.” *Hiwot Ethiopia*, 2018, hiwotet.org/galley/page/22/.

LNGOs to aid implementation efforts. An example of an initiative is Ethiopia's government National Cholera Elimination Plan (NCP) for 2022 to 2028 intended to reduce cholera fatalities by 90%. The NCP cholera vaccination strategy, which includes a five-year oral cholera vaccine (OCV) plan with “2 doses (30,604,889 doses) and a single dose (3,031,266 doses) in selected cholera hotspot areas,” faces significant implementation challenges.⁷² These include insufficient financial support, difficulties in accessing hard-to-reach areas, vaccine shortages, recurrent cholera outbreaks, and the country's overall high humanitarian needs. Thus, the role of LNGOs in this case is to help ease these challenges the government faces in reducing cholera. For example, by educating local communities like HIWOT Ethiopia LNGOs can educate communities on measures to stop future outbreaks such as on hygiene measures. Similarly, providing access to clean water and sanitation facilities, as AISDA has done, addresses major cholera transmission factors. Additionally, because LNGOs operate in these hard-to-reach areas, they can assist the government in transporting vaccines to these regions. Thus, for INGO seeking to help these regions it is important to support LNGOs by providing the funding needed in order for them to implement preventative measures on the spread of epidemics. Furthermore, LNGOs offer added value by leveraging their existing frameworks, including established national networks and relationships. Unlike INGOs, which often lack country-specific knowledge and must invest time and resources to build these connections from scratch, LNGOs can operate more efficiently and effectively from the outset. This example recognizes the importance of the transfer of power from INGO or foreign government agencies to build a strong civil society network in these vulnerable countries to become self-sufficient in the long term to tackle health issues like these.

⁷² Hussen M, Worku Demlie Y, Edosa M, Kebede M, Wossen M, Mulugeta Chane A, Abate G, Hailu Asfaw W, Hailu D, Teferi M, Jeon Y, Gedefaw A, Park SE. Ethiopia National Cholera Elimination Plan 2022-2028: Experiences, Challenges, and the Way Forward. *Clin Infect Dis*. 2024 Jul 12;79(Supplement_1):S1-S7. doi: 10.1093/cid/ciae200. PMID: 38996038; PMCID: PMC11244260.

Localized Responses to the Education Crisis: Addressing Access and Cultural Relevance

Due to Ethiopia's overlapping crises, the country's education system has suffered serious setbacks. Approximately 40 percent of Ethiopia's population is under the age of 15,⁷³ with at least 13 million children out of school. According to UNICEF, although many young children are enrolled in school in Ethiopia, a significant number do not continue, with only 33.1% making it to secondary school.⁷⁴ It also faces a challenge with the quality of learning with 90% of ten year olds not knowing how to read or understand age-appropriate text.⁷⁵ The learning crisis is aggravated in rural settings with the likelihood of enrollment even lower. As the World Bank has coined the concept of "learning poverty" it recognizes that reading proficiency is critical to achieving sustainable growth and poverty reduction, which is an especially urgent priority in a developing country like Ethiopia.⁷⁶ However, the education crisis in Ethiopia is compounded by various barriers, including inadequate infrastructure, traditional gender norms, high domestic workloads, long distances to school, and the growing number of internally displaced communities.

LNGOs in Ethiopia have structured their goals to elevate the literacy of Ethiopian children by adapting to the cultural and social framework they are surrounded with. Thus organizations have been working towards increasing literacy by creating spaces for children to read outside of school. An example of this type of work is a student-run NGO in Ethiopia with the initiative of creating a holistic and comprehensive development space for children (7-14 years old). Through establishing story books' libraries, with spaces for art, music, and craft-making, they are promoting the creation of more inclusive and effective spaces for children. Through this platform, the LNGO has been

⁷³ "Ethiopia Fact Sheet: Education and Youth." *USAID*, Oct. 2020, files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED628406.pdf.

⁷⁴ Assefa, Bethlehem. "Learning and Development!" *UNICEF Ethiopia*, 2023, www.unicef.org/ethiopia/learning-and-development.

⁷⁵ "Ethiopia Learning Poverty Brief." *World Bank*, Oct. 2019, thedocs.worldbank.org/en/doc/431381571223517237-0090022019/original/SSAAFCE3ETHLPBRIEF.pdf.

⁷⁶ World Bank. *United States - Learning Poverty Brief 2024*. Learning Poverty Brief Washington, D.C. : World Bank Group. <http://documents.worldbank.org/curated/en/099090524113025161>

training and supporting local staff and organizations working on literacy and early childhood development. In addition, they are also doing a project of empowering local authors and illustrators for children's story books. Such approaches are crucial in the long term, as they equip communities to become increasingly self-sufficient, allowing knowledge and skills to be passed on, thereby boosting literacy levels. A challenge of humanitarian aid, as the the directing manager of the organization discusses is it a global task that is free of race, religion, and socio-economic barriers, however, “the term of communication and cooperation is highly affected by language, shared history, and collective psyche” which emphasizes the need for localizing cooperation.

Another NGO focusing on education is this NGO that is aiming to enhance the reading habit of children in Ethiopia. It has impacted many children in all regions through reading and literacy. The NGO has established more than 70 libraries spanning every region of the country, shipping more than a quarter million books and serving over 130,000 children per year. It supplies books, library furniture, and critical librarian training, mentoring and networking to library staff – most of whom work in school-based environments. With over 20 years of experience in both urban and rural areas, it has also uplifted other LNGOs. For example, this NNGO collaborates with the LNGO listed above, supporting training and local staffing efforts. This partnership highlights the need of localizing cooperation, as it not only promotes self-sufficiency but also enhances communication through shared cultural understanding. By having this cultural understanding, LNGOs can meet the individual needs and differences of the local communities they are working with. Cohesive cooperation is critical, and to have that create a healthy and fertile ground for a productive and well functioning local community. In this way by localizing cooperation NGOs can also tailor challenges to individualization in Ethiopia. One of the key challenges to localizing literacy development is the lack of reading materials for children in their native languages. Ethiopia has five official languages—Amharic, Somali, Tigrinya, Oromo, and Afar—and is home to around 86

languages. This NNGO, through its own efforts and partnerships with LNGOs, strives to develop children's storybooks in several of these Ethiopian languages, tailoring resources to meet the country's linguistic diversity.

Conclusion

These local initiatives in Ethiopia were successful because they empowered locals, respected local cultures, operated efficiently, and directed funds wisely. By empowering locals, these initiatives helped build their skills and involved them in decision-making processes. They tailored aid to fit each community's unique needs and customs, such as creating literacy spaces outside of schools and developing storybooks in several Ethiopian languages. Additionally, through partnerships, aid reached people more quickly and was better targeted, as seen in the collaboration between the Ethiopian NGOs to provide training efforts. Lastly, they allocated funds wisely by prioritizing local organizations and resources when most effective, ultimately helping communities become self-reliant. Overall, these approaches to local initiatives gave locals more control and resources to solve their own problems, fostering stronger and more self-reliant communities over time.

Middle East

Lebanon

Lebanon is grappling with a series of interconnected external and internal crises that have severely impacted its humanitarian services. Decades of civil conflict have left Lebanese public institutions fragile and susceptible to instability, a situation further aggravated by the 2006 Lebanon War and the onset of the Syrian Civil War in 2011, which brought an influx of millions of refugees into the country. The challenges escalated dramatically with the COVID-19 pandemic and the

devastating Beirut Port explosion in 2020, which triggered hyperinflation and brought Lebanon to the brink of economic collapse.⁷⁷ Since then, many Lebanese have turned to the over 11,676 NGOs operating throughout the country often seen as more reliable to government institutions long plagued by corruption and inefficiency.⁷⁸ NGOs have recently become a vital lifeline in Lebanon, especially during the armed conflict between Hezbollah and Israel from September to November 2024, providing shelter and medical assistance to tens of thousands of Lebanese displaced from the south. NGOs also took on an advocacy role for Lebanese citizens amidst a consortium of NGOs operating in Lebanon sending an emergency rights letter to the U.N citing that armed conflict was “spiralling out of control.”⁷⁹

Recent events in the Middle East have significantly reshaped the operating environment for NGOs in Lebanon. The fall of the Assad regime in December 2024 prompted the return of many Syrian refugees from Lebanon, though stability in Syria remains uncertain. Compounding this, the Lebanese government has made it clear that it will not permit the refugees to return to Lebanon, creating additional challenges for NGOs navigating this complex and volatile landscape. These challenges include the inability of NGOs to access the legal documentation and paperwork for supporting refugee communities and government crackdowns through security raids and the refusal of Lebanese state security to protect NGO offices in refugee camps from arbitrary violence.⁸⁰

Lebanon has also experienced significant internal changes, with Hezbollah, its most powerful armed

⁷⁷ Lebanon Response Plan. (2024). *Chapeau document*

^{78*}While the LRP does not explicitly state a preference for local NGOs over international ones, it does highlight the importance of supporting national systems and institutions. This includes bolstering Lebanese institutions and public services to ensure they can continue to provide essential services to vulnerable populations, Lebanon Response Plan. (2024). *Chapeau document*

⁷⁹ United Nations OCHA. (2024). *United Nations and Lebanese government launch \$426 million flash appeal for urgent humanitarian aid*. Retrieved January 21, 2025, from <https://www.unocha.org/publications/report/lebanon/united-nations-and-lebanese-government-launch-426-million-flash-appeal-urgent-humanitarian-aid-enar>

⁸⁰ International Policy Digest, 2024.

group, suffering substantial setbacks in its armed conflict with Israel. As a result, Hezbollah's presence in southern Lebanon has been considerably reduced, with the Lebanese Army stepping in to fill the void as part of a U.S.-brokered ceasefire agreement. This has led to significant political changes with the election of new leadership. On January 9th, 2025, the Lebanese parliament elected Joseph Aoun, the commander of the Lebanese armed forces since 2017 ending a two year vacancy in the presidency.⁸¹ Aoun then appointed ICJ judge and diplomat Nawaf Salam as prime minister on January 13th 2025 creating a newly stabilized government independent of Hezbollah's governing coalition. The formation of a new Lebanese government after years of internal instability and armed conflict has partially restored trust in the public sector, which NGOs have long viewed as unreliable. In the absence of a strong government, NGOs have relied on partnerships with private firms and foreign aid projects, making them less inclined to prioritize localization efforts. Nonetheless, there is much work to be done to improve the humanitarian situation in Lebanon that the government is financially unable to do on its own. The recent armed conflict has destroyed over 100,000 homes displacing up to 1.2 million Lebanese from the south many of whom are still unable to return. The World Bank estimated total damages and economic losses at \$8.5 billion, including \$3.4 billion in physical infrastructure damage and \$5.1 billion in economic losses.⁸² According to the United Nations, approximately 3.9 million people in Lebanon—including Lebanese citizens, Syrian and Palestinian refugees, and migrant workers—will require humanitarian assistance in 2024.⁸³

⁸¹ Al Jazeera. (2025, January 13). *Nawaf Salam wins enough backing to become Lebanon's prime minister*. Retrieved January 21, 2025, from <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2025/1/13/nawaf-salam-wins-enough-backing-to-become-lebanons-prime-minister>

⁸² World Bank. (2024, November 14). *New World Bank report assesses impact of conflict on Lebanon's economy and key sectors*. Retrieved January 21, 2025, from <https://www.worldbank.org/en/news/press-release/2024/11/14/new-world-bank-report-assesses-impact-of-conflict-on-lebanon-s-economy-and-key-sectors#:~:text=WASHINGTON%2C%20November%2014%2C%202024%20%E2%80%93%20exceeded%2034%25%20of%20GDP>.

⁸³ ReliefWeb. (2024, March). *Multi-sectoral needs assessment of Lebanese households in Lebanon*. Retrieved January 21, 2025, from <https://reliefweb.int/report/lebanon/multi-sectoral-needs-assessment-lebanese-households-lebanon-march-2024>

In response to Lebanon's humanitarian crisis, the United Nations and the Government of Lebanon (GoL) launched a \$426 million Flash Appeal from the Serial in Beirut. The appeal, supported by UN agencies, member states, and international and local partners, aims to mobilize urgent resources for roughly one million people affected by the conflict, addressing needs in food, basic assistance, shelter, healthcare, water, and municipal services.⁸⁴ The case study of Lebanon demonstrates key insights on how localization can sustain and improve NGOs operation through a protected political crisis. The case first explores Lebanon's unique and fragile institutional fragility. Armed conflict, refugee influxes, and economic collapse has left the Lebanese population vulnerable and reliant on non-governmental support. Moreover, a large portion of Lebanon's population being refugees are unable to access public services and are specifically reliant on NGOs for both aid and employment. Secondly, the case shows the emergence of complex NGO networks run at both the local, national and international levels. Lebanese NGOs have achieved various degrees of localization through their collaborations with the Lebanese private sector and donors from the Lebanese diaspora who are more aligned with local NGOs than intergovernmental donors. Lastly the study examines two local NGOs and how they have successfully implemented community driven sustainable solutions through localization models training and employing Lebanese women and Syrian refugees in their operations.

Evaluating NGOs capabilities in Lebanon

The Lebanese NGO sector is highly fragmented, with numerous organizations vying for limited support from both private and intergovernmental donors. A 2025 study assessing the influence of organizational capability on fundraising success in Lebanese NGOs found that

⁸⁴ United Nations OCHA. (2024). *United Nations and Lebanese government launch \$426 million flash appeal for urgent humanitarian aid*. Retrieved January 21, 2025, from <https://www.unocha.org/publications/report/lebanon/united-nations-and-lebanese-government-launch-426-million-flash-appeal-urgent-humanitarian-aid-enar>

competition for funds plays a pivotal role in determining fundraising success, emphasizing the intense competition among NGOs for scarce donor resources.⁸⁵ The study found that factors traditionally used to assess NGOs such as, financial management practices, organizational capacity, and donor funding conditions have minimal influence, marking a significant decline in efficacy standards. This is further compounded by the country's brain drain in which educated and skilled Lebanese tasked with running NGOs have quit their job or emigrated amidst currency devaluation.

The reliance of Lebanese NGOs on foreign funding, particularly in terms of wages paid in foreign currency, has negatively influenced their operational and accountability frameworks. Recent studies highlight that these NGOs dedicate considerable effort to monitoring and evaluating their projects' implementation, with 27.9% focusing on these activities. Additionally, 23.3% of NGOs conduct frequent visits to observe outputs, 17.8% revise plans as needed, and 16.3% carry out surveys to monitor outcomes.⁸⁶ NGOs attribute their success to several key factors, including international collaboration and funding (26.8%), partnerships and engagement with local communities (18.8% each), localization of resources (18.1%), and resource optimization (18.1%).⁸⁷ The data underscores a critical tension in Lebanon's NGO sector: while foreign funding enables operations, it also disproportionately prioritizes donor-driven agendas over community-rooted development. International funding and collaboration (26.8%) dominate NGO success metrics, whereas localization efforts—such as community engagement (18.8%) and local resource mobilization (18.1%)—remain secondary. This suggests that many NGOs are shaped more by the expectations and priorities of international donors than by the needs and voices of local communities. As a result, organizational strategies often center on appealing to external funders,

⁸⁵ Jabbour Al Maalouf, N., Sawaya, C., & Elia, J. (2025). Evaluating the influence of organizational capability on fundraising success in Lebanese non-governmental organizations.

⁸⁶ Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung. (2024). *Lebanon's non-governmental organizations' needs assessment*. from <https://www.kas.de/documents/284382/284431/Lebanon%E2%80%99s+Non-Governmental+Organizations%E2%80%99+Needs+Assessment.pdf/47c72d1c-00c0-1b84-ed1d-c4b826616b74?version=1.2&t=1672214105828>

⁸⁷ Ibid

sometimes at the expense of investing in sustainable, locally driven solutions. This imbalance reflects a deeper structural issue: NGOs are often trapped in a cycle of dependency, where survival hinges on satisfying external financiers rather than fostering self-sustaining, locally owned solutions.

Intragovernmental aid is only one of the types of donor funding Lebanese NGOs compete and prioritize. The large Lebanese diaspora has created a robust philanthropic network set on donating back to Lebanese communities in the wake of recent economic hardship. International aid to Lebanon has been reduced in comparison to its neighboring countries which have received more attention in recent years partly due to the severity of their humanitarian crisis relative to Lebanon's. There are three existing pools that the international community can fund humanitarian relief efforts in Lebanon, namely the Lebanon Humanitarian Fund (LHF), the Lebanon Recovery Fund (LRF), and the Lebanon Financing Facility (LFF).⁸⁸ These three funds represent a blend of intergovernmental and private donor resources, channeled through the UN and the World Bank as funding mechanisms to address Lebanon's humanitarian needs. These funds work in conjunction with international response clusters like UNOCHA, UNHCR, and WFP in allocating funds to the most severely affected, largely the over 1 million Syrian refugees, 180,000 Palestinian refugees and recently internally displaced Lebanese.⁸⁹ These funds which have accumulated 15 billion USD since 2015 only exist to tackle disaster relief and largely do not focus on the development of the Lebanese public sector but rather on preventing it from full collapse. While not NGOs, the mechanisms set in place by these three international funds have prioritized localization approaches working with

⁸⁸ ReliefWeb. (2024). *DEMAC receives grant to strengthen diaspora humanitarian response in Lebanon*. Retrieved January 21, 2025, from <https://reliefweb.int/report/lebanon/demac-receives-grant-strengthen-diaspora-humanitarian-response-lebanon>

⁸⁹ Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung. (2024). *Lebanon's non-governmental organizations' needs assessment*. Retrieved January 21, 2025, from <https://www.kas.de/documents/284382/284431/Lebanon%E2%80%99s+Non-Governmental+Organizations%E2%80%99+Needs+Assessment.pdf/47c72d1c-00c0-1b84-ed1d-c4b826616b74?version=1.2&t=1672214105828>

Lebanese municipalities and refugee camps to meet their immediate needs. This has made remittances and funding from Lebanese expats and diaspora communities essential in ensuring that Lebanese NGOs can operate long term and promote local development. It is estimated that aid given from Lebanese communities abroad in terms of remittances and donor consortium funding constitutes around 7 billion USD annually for the country making the Lebanese diaspora essential to NGO efforts.⁹⁰

Impact Lebanon: Support for Localization through Auditing

Donor consortiums regularly carry out audits on the account of NGOs inspecting if their funding has been used for its intended purpose. Audits of Lebanese NGOs conducted by foreign donor consortiums have often posed challenges to advancing localization efforts. Due to the widespread perception of corruption in Lebanon, E.U. and U.S. aid organizations often believe that granting Lebanese NGOs full autonomy in allocating funds would result in misuse of donations. Consequently, these organizations impose strict spending guidelines on recipient NGOs, subjecting them to intense managerial oversight by foreign donors. This approach limits the ability to localize relief efforts and bases interventions on donor assumptions rather than the nuanced challenges faced by Lebanese communities.

To address concerns about transparency and accountability in Lebanon, many Lebanese diaspora organizations have stepped in to support LNGOs in meeting funding requirements while ensuring proper oversight. These organizations play a critical role in bridging the gap between donors and on-the-ground initiatives. One such organization, Impact Lebanon, exemplifies this

⁹⁰ ReliefWeb. (2024). *DEMAC receives grants to strengthen diaspora humanitarian response in Lebanon*. Retrieved January 21, 2025, from <https://reliefweb.int/report/lebanon/demac-receives-grant-strengthen-diaspora-humanitarian-response-lebanon>

approach. A non-profit organization, Impact Lebanon serves as a social hub for initiatives that create meaningful change in Lebanon. Its mission is to foster idea generation, promote the exchange of knowledge and resources, build strong partnerships, and form dynamic teams to transform ideas into impactful projects.

Impact Lebanon has implemented robust measures to monitor donations and track their impact, particularly through its Beirut Disaster Relief Fundraiser. To ensure accountability, the organization established a framework requiring NGOs to report back on the use of funds. They partnered with external assurance providers—either 3QA or ECK Audit, depending on the NGO—to perform verification measures.⁹¹ These measures included analyzing expenses to ensure alignment with agreed proposals, reviewing supporting documentation, and conducting site visits to confirm the existence of funded projects. Detailed reports highlighted any inconsistencies or missing documentation, which Impact Lebanon's point of contact reviewed collaboratively with the NGO to resolve issues before disbursing additional funds. While these measures provided significant oversight, they were not designed to serve as formal financial audits.

As of February 2022, Impact Lebanon successfully completed projects with eight local NGOs: Al Ghina, Alfanar, Anti Racism Movement, Basmeh & Zeitooneh, Bebw Shebbek, Beit el Baraka, Catalytic Action, and Nusaned.⁹² Four additional NGO projects—Al Majmoua, Arcenciel, Baytna Baytak, and Rise Up—are either nearing completion or undergoing final financial checks. The organization continues to monitor projects with five more NGOs: Embrace, House of Christmas, Lebanon Needs, Live Love, and Rotary Club de Beyrouth (focused on Karantina and Rosaire hospitals). These NGOs address six priority areas identified in the Beirut Disaster Relief

⁹¹ Impact Lebanon. (n.d.). *How we work*. Retrieved January 21, 2025, from <https://www.impactlebanon.org/how-we-work>

⁹² Ibid

strategy: residential rehabilitation, heritage preservation, micro and small business support, livelihoods, medical and hospital aid, and mental health and community support.

While all projects were initially scheduled for completion by the end of 2021, the volatile and unstable situation in Lebanon necessitated flexibility. Challenges such as power outages, fuel shortages, currency fluctuations, and banking sector instability have delayed timelines. Despite these hurdles, Impact Lebanon continues to work diligently with local partners, exemplifying how diaspora organizations can foster accountability and localization in aid efforts, even in the most challenging circumstances.

BasmeH and Zeitooneh: Promoting Localization Initiatives for Syrian Refugees in Lebanon

Lebanon's significant refugee population, primarily consisting of Palestinians and Syrians, faces numerous challenges, particularly in accessing public institutions such as healthcare. Lebanon is known for its regressive citizenship laws and the denial of later generations of refugees mainly Palestinians from applying for citizenship or residency making them live as undocumented individuals prohibited from receiving public services. This has made the nearly 2 million refugees and stateless individuals residing within Lebanon dependent on international humanitarian aid as in addition to services from the NGO sector. BasmeH and Zeitooneh established in 2012 aims to assess the needs of Syrian refugees within Lebanon that often are missed by aid agencies largely in community development and empowerment. Officially registered in Lebanon in February 2014, BasmeH & Zeitooneh now serves over 17,000 Syrian refugees and employs more than 200 staff and volunteers.⁹³ The organization has expanded its reach by opening community centers in Burj Al

⁹³ BasmeH & Zeitooneh. (2024). *Strengthening social protection systems in Lebanon: Challenges and responses to the 2024 crisis*. Retrieved January 21, 2025, from <https://www.basmeH-zeitooneh.org/trenghening-social-protection-systems-in-lebanon-challenges-and-responses-to-the-2024#pdf-viewer/>

Barajneh, Tripoli, Nabaa, and the Bekaa Valley, with plans for further expansion in Gaziantep, Turkey.

One of Basmeh & Zeitooneh's key achievements is the establishment of its Peace Building Unit in 2015. This unit developed a Peace Education curriculum addressing intra- and inter-community conflicts, with sessions targeting children, youth, and parents. The program promotes peaceful conflict resolution, tolerance across divides of nationality, religion, and politics, and awareness of sensitive issues like child labor and early marriage. By 2018, the Peace Building Unit had expanded to encompass youth leadership, community initiatives, and conflict analysis, fostering social cohesion in contentious communities through a conflict-sensitive approach.

To further promote localization, Basmeh & Zeitooneh launched its Civil Society Enablement Unit in 2018. This initiative focuses on building the capacities of grassroots and community-based organizations (CBOs) through training, coaching, and sub-granting. The program has supported 23 CBOs, enabling them to implement 16 community-based projects that benefit over 1,900 individuals.⁹⁴ These projects address critical issues, such as women's rights, democratic engagement, and gender-based violence, while empowering CBOs to manage and execute initiatives tailored to their communities. The program also includes an online platform for training and collaboration, which has been particularly effective during COVID-19 lockdowns.

Basmeh & Zeitooneh has prioritized food security and livelihoods since its early days, supporting micro, small, and medium enterprises (MSMEs) through vocational and technical training. Notable projects include a Hydroponic Farming pilot in Tripoli, which introduces innovative farming techniques to increase food production and income opportunities for refugees,

⁹⁴ Basmeh & Zeitooneh. (2024). *Strengthening social protection systems in Lebanon: Challenges and responses to the 2024 crisis*. Retrieved January 21, 2025, from <https://www.basmeh-zeitooneh.org/trenghening-social-protection-systems-in-lebanon-challenges-and-responses-to-the-2024#pdf-viewer/>

and cash-for-work initiatives in Bourj Hammoud and the Bekaa Valley to rehabilitate public infrastructure and irrigation systems. These programs not only provide short-term income to host and refugee communities but also contribute to long-term economic stabilization. Additionally, the organization has introduced digital livelihoods programs, helping participants adapt to market shifts through digital platforms for training and sales.

Through these initiatives, Basmeh & Zeitooneh continues to demonstrate its commitment to localization by empowering communities, fostering resilience, and building partnerships with local organizations. Its comprehensive approach ensures that aid efforts are both impactful and sustainable, addressing the immediate and long-term needs of refugees and vulnerable populations in Lebanon.

Localization and Community Empowerment in Lebanon: The Role of Ruwwad Al-Tanmeya

A Middle East based NGO, originally founded as a community-based organization in Jordan in 2005, expanded its operations to Lebanon in 2012 to address the social and economic challenges facing marginalized communities. With a focus on empowering youth, women, and families, particularly in underserved areas such as Tripoli, Bab Al Tabbaneh, and Jabal Mohsen, it has made a significant impact through a model rooted in education, economic empowerment, and community engagement.

The organization's localization approach is central to its success in Lebanon, emphasizing the importance of building community capacity, fostering partnerships, and enabling self-sustaining solutions to local challenges. Despite the country's complex political and economic environment, the local Lebanese NGOs strategies for community-driven change have proved resilient, demonstrating the effectiveness of localized interventions in even the most volatile regions.

Youth Education and Empowerment: Building Future Leaders

The local Lebanese NGOs Youth Organizing Program stands at the heart of its mission to promote education and social engagement. This program includes a scholarship fund and a broad enrichment curriculum aimed at cultivating a new generation of leaders committed to community service. Since its launch in 2012, the scholarship program has supported 191 youth from Bab Al Tabbaneh and Jabal Mohsen, offering educational and vocational opportunities while requiring recipients to contribute to local initiatives.⁹⁵ With 81 graduates to date, the program plays a crucial role in developing a skilled workforce and active citizens in some of Lebanon's most deprived areas..

Additionally, the Enrichment Program provides youth with vital workshops on business, communication, and leadership. With 153 workshops held since 2012, these sessions focus on building key skills in active listening, dialogue, and debate, helping young people become better equipped to navigate Lebanon's complex social landscape. Cultural activities, such as monthly "Dardashat" sessions featuring regional speakers, broaden their perspectives on pressing local and regional issues, further enhancing their role as agents of change.⁹⁶

Women's Empowerment and Literacy: Strengthening Economic Resilience

The local Lebanese NGOs women-focused initiatives are critical in addressing gender disparities and promoting economic and personal empowerment. Over 200 women participate annually in literacy classes, income-generating programs, and awareness campaigns. One of the standout projects is the 'Atayeb Tarablos (Tripoli) community kitchen initiative, which provides vocational training and employment opportunities for women while serving meals to vulnerable families. In 2024, the kitchen expanded its capacity to provide 3,000 meals daily, serving displaced families from Lebanon's

⁹⁵ Daleel Madani. (n.d.). *Ruwwad Al-Tanmeya Lebanon*. Retrieved January 21, 2025, from <https://daleel-madani.org/civil-society-directory/ruwwad-al-tanmeya-lebanon>

⁹⁶ Ibid

southern regions and Beirut.⁹⁷ This initiative not only meets immediate humanitarian needs but also exemplifies the NGO's ability to combine economic empowerment with essential support for the community's most vulnerable members.

Child Development: Nurturing the Next Generation

The local Lebanese NGO recognizes the long-term importance of early education and developmental support for children. Through its Child Development Program, over 1,000 children annually engage in creative arts, sports, literature, and academic support. Central to the program is the NGO's Child Library, which houses over 3,500 books and acts as a hub for inquiry-based learning. Established with the participation of local youth and children, the library promotes community ownership and pride, reinforcing the idea of education as a shared responsibility.⁹⁸

In addition to the library, the program also includes summer reading clubs and literacy camps under the IQRAA initiative, which partners with local public schools to improve literacy skills.

Collaborations with NGOs like Injaz further enrich the program by introducing entrepreneurship and business skills to adolescents, impacting 300 students from grades 7 and 8. This dual approach of fostering literacy and vocational skills ensures that Lebanon's youngest and most vulnerable populations are equipped for both academic success and future employment opportunities.

Community Support: Strengthening Social Fabric

The local Lebanese NGOs Community Support Program exemplifies its commitment to grassroots engagement and localization. By empowering local communities to lead social change, the NGO addresses Lebanon's urgent humanitarian needs while fostering long-term resilience. Scholars in the

⁹⁷ Daleel Madani. (n.d.). *Ruwwad Al-Tanmeya Lebanon*. Retrieved January 21, 2025, from <https://daleel-madani.org/civil-society-directory/ruwwad-al-tanmeya-lebanon>

⁹⁸ Ibid

program contribute to initiatives like the “Seha w Hana” Iftar campaign and the “Salam w Takwa” project, which have mobilized over 1,200 volunteers in Tripoli to promote social cohesion following periods of sectarian violence. These community-led initiatives help bridge divides and strengthen Lebanon’s fragile social fabric.

The NGO’s Community Helpdesk also supports job seekers by offering job market orientation and professional training, while its women’s advancement programs focus on literacy and economic opportunities. By providing vocational training and creating local job opportunities, the organization not only supports the local economy but also empowers communities to drive sustainable development and resilience in a challenging environment.

Sustaining Localization Amidst Lebanon’s Crisis

While the local Lebanese NGOs localization model has been effective, the ongoing economic crisis in Lebanon presents significant challenges. The 2024 Lebanon Humanitarian Response Plan, which calls for \$519 million to meet the country’s critical needs, highlights the funding shortfalls that organizations like the NGO face. The economic downturn has strained both international and local resources, forcing organizations to increasingly rely on community partnerships and local assets. While this approach enhances sustainability, it requires continuous adaptation to the evolving crisis and a strong commitment to resilience and community-driven development.

Conclusion

Lebanon's humanitarian landscape reflects the intersection of enduring crises, economic instability, and significant political changes, with NGOs playing a pivotal role in addressing these challenges. The efforts of organizations like Impact Lebanon, Basmeh & Zeitooneh, and the local Lebanese NGO demonstrate the vital importance of localization, community engagement, and donor

collaboration in fostering resilience and promoting sustainable development. While their innovative approaches have yielded meaningful results, persistent issues, including competition for funding, governance challenges, and operational barriers, underscore the need for a more integrated strategy.

To navigate Lebanon's complex humanitarian ecosystem, NGOs must continue to build on the strengths of community-driven initiatives and diaspora support while addressing gaps in localization and accountability frameworks. International donors and local stakeholders should prioritize long-term investments in Lebanon's public sector and grassroots capacity-building efforts to foster stability and self-reliance. Despite the challenges, the resilience demonstrated by Lebanese NGOs offers a blueprint for leveraging local and international resources to create sustainable solutions, ensuring that aid efforts effectively address the immediate and long-term needs of Lebanon's diverse and vulnerable populations. The Lebanon case study highlights how localization models prove to be successful and sustainable amidst restrictive donor conditions created as a result of a weak public sector and unstable economic conditions. Moving forward, Lebanese NGOs will place a strong emphasis on localization engaging with Lebanese diaspora and private sector for support and empowering segments of the Lebanese population who are traditionally left out from community aid efforts.

Yemen

The humanitarian crisis in Yemen is among the most severe in the Middle East, ongoing since the outbreak of the Yemeni Civil War in 2015. For nearly nine years, fierce clashes between Yemeni government forces and Houthi rebels have taken a devastating toll on civilians, displacing millions and leaving large segments of the population in dire need. The war-driven economic collapse has deepened Yemen's hardship, compounding challenges in what is already the region's

poorest nation.⁹⁹ Much of Yemen remains under siege by Saudi-led coalition forces, while Houthi attacks on Red Sea shipping routes have further disrupted regional trade, limiting access to essential resources. According to the UNHCR, roughly 20 million people—more than half the population—require humanitarian aid, with famine and cholera posing acute threats to nearly 6 million people, predominantly women and children, who are on the brink of starvation¹⁰⁰.

NGOs operating in Yemen encounter immense obstacles, including severe insecurity, restricted access to remote areas, complex political tensions among warring factions, limited funding, restrictions on female staff, and frequent threats to personnel and facilities—all of which hamper the delivery of crucial aid. The 2024 Yemen Humanitarian Response Plan, which requires \$2.71 billion, is only 28% funded. As funding decreases and fewer people receive aid per cluster, LNGOs and international partners are increasingly critical in addressing the urgent needs of millions of Yemenis.¹⁰¹

The case of Yemen is critical because it exemplifies how prolonged conflict and external interventions can devastate a nation while testing the limits of humanitarian localization. The humanitarian crisis, exacerbated by ongoing conflict since 2015, has prompted a global re-evaluation of aid strategies, with localization emerging as a critical focus to empower Yemeni actors and integrate their knowledge into responses. First, this case explores Yemen's descent into crisis since 2015, marked by war, famine, and infrastructure collapse. Second, it examines the rise of LNGOs as frontline responders amid restricted access and dwindling international aid, while highlighting successful localization efforts in funding, capacity building and community-driven initiatives. Third, it analyzes transformative localization models, such as YDN's grassroots networks and the Civil Society Initiative's advocacy efforts. Lastly, it confronts enduring challenges -including

⁹⁹UNHCR. (2024, January 20). *Yemen crisis explained*. UN Refugee Agency.

<https://www.unrefugees.org/news/yemen-crisis-explained/>

¹⁰⁰ UNHCR. (2024, January 20). *Yemen crisis explained*. UN Refugee Agency.

<https://www.unrefugees.org/news/yemen-crisis-explained/>

¹⁰¹ ReliefWeb. (2024, November). *Yemen humanitarian update, issue 8*.

<https://reliefweb.int/report/yemen/yemen-humanitarian-update-issue-8-november-2024-enar>

funding disparities, and operational risks that hinder full localization, urging a reimagined approach to empower Yemeni-led solutions.

Obstacles to Humanitarian Access and the Role of LNGOs

International and intergovernmental aid to Yemen as with many conflict-stricken zones has been insufficient and on a downward trend. Yemen's Humanitarian Response Plan for 2023 only received \$1.71 billion USD out of the 4.34 billion USD required, a 60.6% deficit.¹⁰² With the outbreak of hostilities in the Red Sea in 2024, international aid has increased yet still remains insufficient with USAID giving an additional \$200 million in aid.¹⁰³ Nonetheless, the human situation remains even more dire as Yemen's fragile infrastructure has been further damaged with the bombing of the Houthi controlled Hudaydah Port which facilitated over 80% of humanitarian aid to northern Yemen.¹⁰⁴

Despite the constraints facing international aid in Yemen, one notable development in the localization agenda has been a relative increase in funding directed toward national NGOs (NNGOs). According to the Yemen Humanitarian Fund (YHF), funding for local organizations peaked at \$51.4 million in 2017, which accounted for 40.8% of the total fund that year.¹⁰⁵ This increase aligns with the commitments made during the Grand Bargain at the 2016 World Humanitarian Summit, which aimed to allocate at least 25% of humanitarian funding to local actors. This increase in funding has allowed LNGOs to enhance their operational capacities, respond more swiftly to local needs, and implement projects that are more contextually relevant. Although funding

¹⁰² ReliefWeb. (2024, November). *Yemen humanitarian update, issue 8*.

<https://reliefweb.int/report/yemen/yemen-humanitarian-update-issue-8-november-2024-enar>

¹⁰³ USAID. (2024, April 26). Yemen complex emergency fact sheet #9. U.S. Agency for International Development.

<https://www.usaid.gov/fact-sheet/yemen-complex-emergency-fact-sheet-9>

¹⁰⁴ Ibid

¹⁰⁵ ODIPHN. (2024). *Localisation of Yemen's humanitarian response*. Humanitarian Practice Network.

<https://odihpn.org/publication/localisation-of-yemens-humanitarian-response/>

decreased in subsequent years, with \$26.7 million allocated to NNGOs in 2021, this trend demonstrates progress in recognizing the importance of local organizations in humanitarian responses.¹⁰⁶

Building Local Capacity for Long-Term Response

Capacity building initiatives have been a pivotal aspect of humanitarian localization in Yemen. LINGOs have reported advancements in training, resource transfers, and overall strengthening of their abilities to respond effectively to humanitarian needs. A baseline report by the Humanitarian Advisory Group employed a mixed-methods approach to assess localization across seven key pillars: partnerships, funding, capacity strengthening, coordination, policy influence, leadership, and participation.¹⁰⁷ This comprehensive framework highlights the necessity of not only providing financial support but also investing in the skills and infrastructure of local organizations, which is vital for sustained humanitarian efforts and serves as a valuable model for other regions.

The 2024 Humanitarian Response Plan for Yemen emphasizes an integrated, multi-sectoral approach to humanitarian aid, designed to address various needs simultaneously and strengthen local prioritization.¹⁰⁸ This holistic strategy aims to enhance the effectiveness and accountability of local actors, ensuring that humanitarian responses are not only reactive but also proactive in addressing the underlying vulnerabilities faced by communities. By aligning humanitarian efforts with local priorities, these integrated responses promote greater ownership and participation in the recovery process.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid

¹⁰⁷ ALNAP. (2022, November). *Measuring humanitarian localisation in Yemen: Baseline report*. ALNAP. <https://alnapp.org/help-library/resources/measuring-humanitarian-localisation-in-yemen-baseline-report/>

¹⁰⁸ ODIPHN. (2024). *Localisation of Yemen's humanitarian response*. Humanitarian Practice Network. <https://odihpn.org/publication/localisation-of-yemens-humanitarian-response/>

Sustainability has been a critical component of humanitarian localization. Efforts have been made to foster community resilience through various programs aimed at improving water and sanitation systems, providing agricultural support, and implementing initiatives that strengthen local capacities. These efforts focus on long-term solutions that can help combat food insecurity and enhance the livelihoods of affected populations. Sustainable programming illustrates a shift in humanitarian thinking toward fostering local resilience rather than solely providing emergency relief.¹⁰⁹

The Yemeni Civil Society Organizations' Initiative: Coordinated Advocacy for Localization

The Yemeni Civil Society Organizations' Initiative for Localization and Optimization of Response Mechanisms is a significant example of localization efforts in Yemen, successfully bringing together 45 member organizations to advocate for the localization of humanitarian responses.¹¹⁰ This initiative has fostered collaboration between local and international organizations to improve the effectiveness of these responses, aiming to empower local actors and strengthen their influence over humanitarian and development policies. Through training, resource transfers, and the establishment of a communication platform for coordination, the initiative focuses on enhancing local capacities and encouraging local participation in the broader localization agenda.

The initiative was launched in August 2021 by nine civil society NGOs, with Tamdeen Youth Foundation leading the effort. It was endorsed by 80 national and local CSOs across various sectors. Currently, 40 active members are involved, guided by a steering committee and an advocacy task team.¹¹¹ In 2022, the initiative received financial and technical support from Tamdeen Youth

¹⁰⁹ "Sustainable Development: An Inevitable Trend in Humanitarian Programming," *World Vision International*, accessed April 23, 2025, <https://www.wvi.org/stories/sustainable-development-inevitable-trend-humanitarian-programming>.

¹¹⁰ IASC. (2023, March). *Yemeni civil society organisations' initiative for localisation and optimisation of response mechanisms in Yemen – Initiative members annual meeting*. Inter-Agency Standing Committee.

¹¹¹ Ibid

Foundation, the Danish Refugee Council (DRC), the International Council of Voluntary Agencies (ICVA), and the Humanitarian Advisory Group (HAG). The initiative's 2022 program was centered around promoting the localization of humanitarian commitments and strengthening the enabling environment for local CSOs to participate effectively in humanitarian action. Its goals included building a common understanding of localization, developing an operational strategy, and advocating for local actors' voices in humanitarian and development action.

The initiative achieved significant milestones in 2022. Awareness and networking activities were conducted to promote the concept of localization and align it with global commitments such as the Grand Bargain and the OECD recommendations. Performance measurement tools were developed in collaboration with local actors and international networks, leading to a baseline study on localization in Yemen. The initiative also co-designed localization proposals with international organizations like SCI, Oxfam, and DRC, although full proposals were not accepted. Despite these setbacks, small grants were approved, and consultations with local actors resulted in the creation of a localization strategy. Furthermore, the initiative expanded its international network by joining organizations such as ICVA, NEAR, and VENRO, which led to greater involvement of local members in international events on localization. Advocacy efforts were also a key achievement, with the initiative raising the voice of local actors through campaigns, statements, and the creation of platforms for sharing updates and advocacy materials.

Looking ahead, the initiative plans to finalize its localization strategies, strengthen governance, and expand its network of local and international actors. It also intends to train its advocacy team and create collective campaigns to further promote localization efforts. However, the initiative faces several challenges, including a lack of resources, politicization, and the duplication of efforts by international actors. There are also legal and policy barriers hindering its governance and

formal registration. To overcome these challenges, the initiative recommends securing adequate resources, improving coordination among members, expanding participation, and enhancing governance to better integrate local actors into decision-making processes. Ultimately, the initiative aims to build more confidence among local actors, promote their leadership in response efforts, and ensure their inclusion in national and international coordination mechanisms.

YDN: A Model for Locally Led Humanitarian Response

The Yemeni Development Network for NGOs (YDN) stands as a powerful example of the effectiveness of localized humanitarian aid in Yemen. Operating for over 17 years, YDN has grown into a leading NGO dedicated to addressing the immense humanitarian needs in Yemen. By focusing on capacity building, maintaining a substantial presence throughout the country, and fostering collaboration with both local and international stakeholders, YDN has achieved widespread impact across Yemen's conflict-affected regions. YDN's efforts underscore the advantages of locally driven humanitarian initiatives, particularly in a complex and volatile context like Yemen.

From its inception, YDN prioritized capacity building, aiming to empower community-based social organizations to respond more effectively to Yemen's humanitarian crisis. This commitment has involved training and supporting local organizations to better manage crises, provide essential services, and operate independently. As a result, YDN has strengthened the local humanitarian infrastructure, making it more resilient to crises and more responsive to the needs of Yemen's population. YDN's extensive reach, with 10 active offices and operational staff across 9 governorates, has also played a crucial role in its success.¹¹² With coordination offices throughout

¹¹² YDN. (2024). *Yemen Development Network*. Yemen Development Network. <https://en.ydnorg.org/>

Yemen, YDN can respond rapidly to emerging crises, offering much-needed support in remote and high-risk areas where access for other organizations may be limited.

YDN's collaborative approach has also been essential to its success. By coordinating with government bodies, NGOs, and local communities, YDN fosters a cohesive and efficient system of humanitarian response. This collaboration allows for a unified strategy in tackling Yemen's crisis, enhancing the effectiveness of aid delivery, and avoiding duplication of efforts. In addition, YDN's sole focus on Yemen has allowed it to gain a deep understanding of the region's complex humanitarian landscape, making it particularly well-equipped to respond to the unique challenges posed by the ongoing conflict.

The impact of YDN's efforts is particularly notable in the quantitative outcomes of its various programs. In 2021 alone, YDN provided critical healthcare services to over 36,801 individuals in conflict-affected areas, delivering a range of medical care, including vaccinations, reproductive health services, and pediatric care. The organization's reach extends to shelter support, where approximately 39,464 people received aid through emergency kits, cash assistance, and rental subsidies in key governorates like Ma'rib and Ibb.¹¹³ Education initiatives by YDN also made a substantial difference, with over 144 students in Ma'rib benefiting from school supplies, hygiene kits, and educational materials, helping them to continue their studies despite the disruptions caused by the conflict.

YDN's protection programs further highlight the organization's dedication to vulnerable populations. In 2021, YDN distributed 250 wheelchairs to individuals with disabilities in Marib and Taiz, significantly improving their mobility and quality of life. The organization's commitment to WASH programs also made a tangible difference, with nearly 14,000 individuals benefiting from

¹¹³ YDN. (2024). *Yemen Development Network*. Yemen Development Network. <https://en.ydnorg.org/>

water system repairs and sanitation improvements, while an additional 3,500 people participated in hygiene awareness campaigns.¹¹⁴ In a context where access to clean water and sanitation remains a critical issue, YDN's WASH interventions are vital in reducing disease transmission and supporting overall health.

One of YDN's most impactful areas of work has been its food security and livelihood (FSL) programs. In response to Yemen's deepening food insecurity, YDN's FSL initiatives reached over 669,679 beneficiaries in 2021.¹¹⁵ Through emergency food distributions, cash assistance, and agricultural support, YDN has helped to alleviate food shortages, enhance local resilience, and support Yemeni communities in their struggle against hunger and economic hardship.

Overall, YDN's work highlights the value of localized humanitarian responses in Yemen, where local organizations like YDN play a central role in capacity building, effective aid delivery, and sustainable development. By working closely with communities and integrating local insights into their efforts, YDN has fostered resilience and created a more responsive and sustainable humanitarian infrastructure. As Yemen's crisis persists, the success of organizations like YDN emphasizes the importance of localization in humanitarian aid, illustrating how locally embedded organizations can meet urgent needs effectively while building a foundation for long-term recovery and resilience.

Challenges to Localization

Despite notable advancements, challenges to effective localization in Yemen remain. A 2023 study emphasizes that, after eight years of conflict, there is still limited evidence of a significant shift

¹¹⁴ YDN. (2024). *Yemen Development Network*. Yemen Development Network. <https://en.ydnorg.org/>

¹¹⁵ YDN. (2024). *Yemen Development Network*. Yemen Development Network. <https://en.ydnorg.org/>

toward genuine localization.¹¹⁶ The study calls for local, regional, and international actors to reconsider their approaches and recommit to empowering local organizations. Additionally, the dynamics between international organizations and LNGOs can often be complex, with power imbalances and insufficient collaboration hindering effective localization. The ongoing conflict, coupled with bureaucratic obstacles and funding constraints, continues to pose challenges to fully realizing the localization agenda in Yemen.

Conclusion

Humanitarian localization efforts in Yemen demonstrate both progress and persistent challenges. Increases in funding to LNGOs, capacity-building initiatives, and integrated response strategies signify a move toward a more localized humanitarian response. The Yemeni Civil Society Organizations' initiative exemplifies a successful model for promoting localization, emphasizing collaboration, advocacy, and community empowerment. However, for these efforts to be sustainable and impactful, there remains a critical need for ongoing commitment from all stakeholders to address power imbalances and invest in local capacities. Future research and policy initiatives should prioritize these areas to enhance the effectiveness of humanitarian responses in Yemen and support the broader localization agenda.

Yemen's humanitarian crisis driven by a decade of war and famine highlights the critical importance of localization in addressing the shortcoming in international humanitarian aid. This case study reveals key findings in how while funding for local NGOs has increased, progress remains uneven due to shortfalls in required funding for budgets plans, bureaucratic actors and the limiting

¹¹⁶ ODI HPN, "Localisation of Yemen's Humanitarian Response," *ODI HPN*, accessed April 3, 2025, <https://odihpn.org/publication/localisation-of-yemens-humanitarian-response/#~:text=However%2C%20despite%20eight%20years%20of%20conflict%20and,significant%20shift%20towards%20genuine%20localisation%20in%20Yemen.>

of humanitarian access by various actors. NGO initiatives such as the Yemeni Development Network (YDN) demonstrate the effectiveness of localized responses, with YDN reaching hundreds of thousands of beneficiaries through community led programs in food security, healthcare, and education. Nonetheless, there exists systemic issues that limit the effectiveness of localized initiatives of NGOs mainly politicization of funding, resource gaps and lack of security between areas. Moving forward, sustainable localization requires greater funding transparency, capacity-building investments, and equitable partnerships to ensure Yemeni communities lead their own recovery.

Europe

Ukraine

The humanitarian crisis in Ukraine, triggered by the Russian invasion in 2022, has escalated into one of the most severe humanitarian emergencies on the European continent, with profound social, economic, and human costs. Over 6.8 million Ukrainians have fled the country as refugees, primarily to Europe, while 6.2 million remain internally displaced.¹¹⁷ Civilians face mounting challenges as widespread destruction of critical infrastructure disrupts essential services like electricity, water, and heating, particularly in eastern, southern, and northeastern regions such as Donetsk, Kharkivska, and Zaporiz'ka oblasts. This devastation, compounded by frequent attacks, has resulted in nearly 40,000 civilian casualties, including over 12,000 deaths, and widespread psychological trauma, especially among children and internally displaced people.¹¹⁸

¹¹⁷ UNHCR. (2025, January 21). *Ukraine emergency*. UNHCR. <https://www.unrefugees.org/emergencies/ukraine/>

¹¹⁸ Ibid

As of late 2024, approximately 14.6 million people require humanitarian aid, with millions enduring harsh winters in homes lacking basic utilities or living in collective shelters. Vulnerable groups—such as older adults, individuals with disabilities, and those in Russian-occupied territories—experience acute hardship, exacerbated by limited access to healthcare, education, and livelihoods. The destruction of energy systems has intensified these challenges, leaving millions without reliable heating or power during sub-zero temperatures.

This crisis has also profoundly affected Ukraine's economy, with war-related damages exceeding \$152 billion and economic losses surpassing \$499 billion by late 2023. Livelihood opportunities are scarce, particularly in front-line areas, and poverty rates have surged, leaving over 9 million people living in poverty.¹¹⁹ The educational system is similarly imperiled, with thousands of schools damaged or destroyed, disrupting the education of millions of children. Ukraine's economic capabilities, especially the export of grain, has been inhibited by Russia's maritime offensive. Furthermore, Russia's refusal to renew the Black Sea Grain Initiative in July of 2023 led to a permanent disruption of the export of Ukrainian grain, foodstuffs, and fertilizers via the Black Sea.¹²⁰

While international aid from the United States and European Union has played a vital role in supporting Ukraine, the country faces mounting challenges amid shifting political attitudes, particularly with the potential change in U.S. leadership and budgetary reductions in Europe. A glaring disparity persists in aid allocations, with military assistance far outpacing humanitarian and reconstruction funding. In July 2024, military aid accounted for approximately \$6.05 billion, whereas humanitarian aid was limited to just \$220 million. Similarly, in August, while \$8.69 billion was

¹¹⁹ United Nations. (2024, February). *Ukraine: Third Rapid Damage and Needs Assessment (RDNA3)*. United Nations. <https://ukraine.un.org/sites/default/files/2024-02/UA%20RDNA3%20report%20EN.pdf>

¹²⁰ United Nations. (2024, February). *Ukraine: Third Rapid Damage and Needs Assessment (RDNA3)*. United Nations. <https://ukraine.un.org/sites/default/files/2024-02/UA%20RDNA3%20report%20EN.pdf>

allocated toward economic stabilization—driven by \$4.73 billion from the EU's Ukraine Facility and \$3.85 billion from the U.S. via the World Bank—humanitarian aid fell below \$110 million.¹²¹ This imbalance leaves critical needs for civilian protection, infrastructure repair, and basic services inadequately addressed.

LNGOs and community organizations have emerged as key players in bridging these gaps, leveraging their proximity and cultural understanding to deliver targeted, efficient relief. However, the sustainability of these localized efforts is at risk due to persistent funding shortfalls and logistical hurdles. As winter nears, the urgent need for equitable support—particularly in humanitarian aid and reconstruction—has become increasingly evident. Strengthening local actors and ensuring consistent, long-term commitments from international donors are essential to safeguarding Ukraine's vulnerable populations and enabling recovery amidst ongoing conflict. The ongoing conflict in Ukraine underscores the critical need for coordinated international support to address the immediate humanitarian needs and lay the foundation for Ukraine's recovery and long-term resilience.

The case of Ukraine is important because it seeks to provide an understanding of how LNGOs have become indispensable actors in the delivery of aid, especially in hard-to-reach and conflict-affected areas. It is clear in the case of Ukraine how LNGOs are key to providing relief, especially at the onset of the war when they received little help from international actors.¹²² This demonstrates that localization is not merely a theoretical framework, but a practical, on-the-ground necessity for effective humanitarian aid. First, the case highlights the leadership role LNGOs assumed during the war in the absence of timely international responses, while also acknowledging

¹²¹ Ibid

¹²² Stoddard, A., Harvey, P., Timmins, N., Pakhomenko, V., Breckenridge, M.-J., & Czwarno, M. (2022, June 10). *Enabling the local response: Emerging humanitarian priorities in Ukraine March–May 2022*. Humanitarian Outcomes. Retrieved from https://www.humanitarianoutcomes.org/sites/default/files/publications/ukraine_review_2022.pdf

the essential complementary support international actors can provide. Then, it presents a detailed account of an LNGO that distributed aid near front lines and in areas lacking functioning local authorities. Lastly, it examines another LNGO whose gender-sensitive, localized approach effectively supports war-affected communities, while also emphasizing the need to reform international aid systems to be more inclusive and context-specific.

NGOs in Ukraine: Navigating Operations Amidst War

NGOs beyond the provision of immediate relief have come to play an important role in the imminent reconstruction of Ukraine which is estimated by the World Bank to cost around \$411 billion USD. While most aid to Ukraine comes from governmental and international commitments to the Ukrainian government, amounting to around \$165 billion as of May 2023, large segments of aid and reconstruction efforts have been tasked to Ukraine's many local NGOs (LNGOs). U.N OCHA has identified over 461 humanitarian partners for Ukraine including 236 International NGOs (INGO), 112 National NGOs (NNGOs) and over 1,700 LNGOs most of these being established since the war began.¹²³ In the context of humanitarian aid in Ukraine, International NGOs (INGOs) are large, foreign-based organizations that operate across multiple countries and typically receive significant institutional funding. National NGOs (NNGOs) are registered within Ukraine and tend to have a broader operational scope across regions, often serving as intermediaries between INGOs and local actors. LNGOs on the other hand receive approximately 0.003% of total humanitarian aid largely from private individuals and European companies. Despite this, many regions in Ukraine primarily depend on these NGOs with aid distribution such as Ukraine's largest maritime region Odessa where 50% of all humanitarian aid is distributed by NGOs demonstrating

¹²³ Bierman, B., & Runde, D. F. (2023, July). *Ensuring NGO accountability for reconstruction and humanitarian relief in Ukraine*. Center for Strategic and International Studies. https://csis-website-prod.s3.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/2023-07/230718_Bierman_NGO_Accountability_0.pdf?VersionId=PBZtzdEPOhYWQ9keKsqvlZoyxWgQ4EHM

their important role on the ground.¹²⁴ Despite the importance of Ukrainian NGOs in implementing aid distribution, they still face many challenges in funding and transparency. Only \$50 million of U.S government assistance was allocated to Ukrainian partners with some aid agencies citing a lack of organizational transparency within the country. Ukraine ranks 116th out of 180 countries in Transparency International's 2022 Corruption Perceptions Index, with findings highlighting issues such as inflated military food contracts and fraudulent fundraisers in recent years.¹²⁵

Ukraine ranks 116th out of 180 countries on Transparency International's 2022 Corruption Perceptions Index, and issues such as inflated military food contracts and fraudulent fundraising have further undermined public trust in the aid process. Additionally, logistical challenges, such as the delivery of unnecessary or expired goods, as well as the exploitation of humanitarian goodwill through scams, have hindered effective aid distribution. The physical and operational distance between international decision-makers and local implementation has created significant accountability gaps. Fraudulent charities have exploited these gaps to siphon funds from well-intentioned donors, while corrupt officials have diverted aid through weak oversight mechanisms. Some organizations have even reported "ghost beneficiaries" to justify continued funding. These issues are compounded when multiple agencies work in parallel without proper coordination, leading to duplication of efforts in some areas while leaving others underserved. The lack of transparent tracking systems further exacerbates these problems, making it difficult to monitor aid distribution effectively.

A shift toward localized aid distribution could address many of these systemic challenges. Community-based procurement would allow Ukrainian organizations with better understanding of local markets to lead purchasing decisions. Decentralized decision-making through regional hubs

¹²⁴ Ibid

¹²⁵ Ibid

staffed by Ukrainians could improve responsiveness to changing needs on the ground.

Implementing blockchain-based tracking systems could enhance transparency in aid shipments and fund allocation. Most importantly, investing in the capacity of Ukrainian civil society organizations would create a more sustainable foundation for long-term recovery efforts.

These challenges underscore the importance of strengthening the localization of aid by empowering LNGOs with the resources, tools, and systems needed to overcome these obstacles. Adopting Third-Party Monitoring (TPM) is one essential step to enhance accountability. TPM has already shown success in other regions, such as Afghanistan, and should be integrated into Ukraine's aid infrastructure. LNGOs, by embracing TPM, can boost their credibility and ensure transparency, making it easier to attract funding from government and corporate donors. Furthermore, LNGOs must adopt best practices in transparency and governance by publicly disclosing board members, donors, and financial transactions. Platforms like PrivatBank offer cost-free, transparent financial tracking tools that can facilitate this process.¹²⁶

The establishment of a centralized clearinghouse system has also been crucial in addressing coordination issues. This system would enable real-time tracking of humanitarian needs, helping local organizations avoid duplicating efforts and ensuring aid aligns with the actual needs on the ground. LNGOs should play a central role in such a system, fostering better communication between stakeholders and ensuring aid is delivered efficiently and appropriately.

Ultimately, for Ukraine's reconstruction to succeed, the vital role of LNGOs in implementing aid must be supported with enhanced transparency, better coordination, and

¹²⁶ Bierman, B., & Runde, D. F. (2023, July). *Ensuring NGO accountability for reconstruction and humanitarian relief in Ukraine*. Center for Strategic and International Studies. https://csis-website-prod.s3.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/2023-07/230718_Bierman_NGO_Accountability_0.pdf?VersionId=PBZtzdEPOhYWQ9keKsqvlZoyxWgQ4EHM

anti-corruption measures. Localization of aid—empowering local organizations with greater oversight, resources, and decision-making power—will ensure that aid is delivered where it's most needed and make reconstruction efforts more effective. By strengthening the capacity of LNGOs, Ukraine's recovery can be more sustainable, with a strong foundation built on trust, accountability, and community engagement.

Resource Distribution in the Midst of Conflict

A LNGO supporting Ukrainians is demonstrating the power of localization in humanitarian aid by ensuring resources reach those most in need, especially in the war-torn regions of Ukraine. Situated just 30 meters from the Ukrainian border, this LNGO has been integral in coordinating the distribution of humanitarian aid to local communities across Ukraine, especially those near the front lines. Their approach focuses on working directly with community leaders—elected individuals who have a better understanding of the local needs and can ensure that aid is distributed in a transparent and accountable manner. This local leadership is crucial, as it mitigates the risks of corruption and inefficiency that can often occur when aid is managed by regional or military authorities.

The organization's commitment to localization has allowed it to serve more than 120 local communities, providing essential supplies such as food, medicine, and shelter materials. By maintaining close relationships with these communities, Help Ukraine Romania ensures that the aid is both relevant and timely. A significant challenge faced by the organization in the early stages of the war was the reluctance of truck drivers to enter Ukraine due to the dangers posed by the conflict. To overcome this, they began collecting resources in Romania and transporting them across the border in smaller vehicles, ensuring that aid reached the most vulnerable communities despite logistical challenges.

This LNGO also collaborates with other LNGOs to reach territories that may be difficult to access. One challenge they faced was due to their distribution model, which involves working with local community leaders, particularly the absence of these leaders in some areas. In the northeast of Ukraine, particularly in the liberated areas, local authorities had been collaborating with Russia, and when they fled to Russia, the people were left without any authorities or assistance to help with requests for aid. In response, the NGO partnered with around 10-15 LNGOs who assist in distributing aid in these areas, where there is no local authority to support the process. The ability of this LNGO to collaborate with other LNGOs to distribute aid during war-time in regions where local authorities have collapsed or are cooperating with foreign forces highlights the flexibility and adaptability of LNGOs that INGO lacks. LNGOs can adapt to rapidly changing conditions on the ground such as shifting frontlines or the sudden absence of local authorities, without needing to navigate complex international bureaucratic processes that INGO do. Additionally, being on the ground allows LNGOs to leverage their networks and contacts to access areas that international organizations may find too risky, whether due to safety concerns or political sensitivities related to donor funding. By collaborating with a network of LNGOs, these organizations share resources, knowledge, and coordinate efforts to ensure aid reaches vulnerable populations. This level of coordination is something INGO often struggles to replicate, as they tend to operate in more siloed or top-down ways due to their bureaucratic structure.

However, the collaboration of this LNGO with other international organizations has shown a great example of how collaboration is vital but works efficiently when LNGOs are at the forefront in deciding resource allocation. For instance, this LNGO received substantial funding from U.S.-based organizations, who requested local needs assessments to provide direct relief in the form of medicine. In response, the LNGO interviewed and assessed the needs of communities through its network of local clinics. Within five days, they identified the specific medicines each clinic required

and worked directly with U.S. organizations to ensure the medicine reached the right places. They partnered with international organizations such as Direct Relief, AmeriCares, and Save the Children, enabling them to distribute the aid these organizations provide while also supplying them with accurate needs assessments in return. These partnerships have significantly enhanced the LNGOs ability to assess local needs and distribute aid efficiently. Through these collaborations, the LNGO has been able to provide comprehensive support, from medical supplies to food, based on localized needs assessments. Their success lies in their ability to prioritize aid to areas with the greatest need, using a rating system that ranks communities by proximity to the front line and the severity of displacement. This system ensures that the most vulnerable populations—such as those in liberated or frontline areas—receive aid promptly. Thus, the collaboration has been successful because the LNGO understands where to direct resources, ensuring they reach the areas with the greatest need, while INGO supplies the necessary resources.

In addition to their work in Ukraine, this LNGO has also been active in supporting refugees in neighboring Romania, with 175,331 refugees receiving temporary protection in the country by the end of October 2024. The organization collaborates with local and international partners to provide refugees with cash assistance, livelihood services, and psychosocial support, especially for women and children. In 2024, for instance, 17,453 refugees were enrolled in cash assistance programs, and 9,286 refugees were supported with employment services (Help Ukraine Romania, 2024). These figures highlight the scale of their efforts and the impact of their localized approach. Despite challenges with larger, more bureaucratic organizations, Help Ukraine Romania continues to be a vital force in providing effective, accountable aid to both Ukrainian communities and refugees in Romania.

Gender-Responsive Localization in Humanitarian Efforts

This LNGO, which works to address gender-specific needs within humanitarian crises, is another exemplary organization that showcases the importance of localization. The organization adapted its mission at the onset of the war, focusing on providing financial, humanitarian, and psychological support to war victims and internally displaced persons (IDPs). Their localized approach is integral to their success, as it allows them to cater to the specific needs of these vulnerable groups, especially in terms of gender-sensitive aid and support services.

The organization, at the onset of the war, was among the first to evacuate people, find settlements, and offer psychological support before the deployment of international missions. They faced the unequal distribution of resources between international and Ukrainian humanitarian actors, as well as the real risks faced by Ukrainian field workers lacking protective gear, equipment, vehicles, and more. The organization underscores the critical role of LNGOs as first responders in humanitarian crises, emphasizing the urgent need for greater support and resources to strengthen these essential organizations in their life-saving work.

The organization collaborates closely with LNGOs and grassroots organizations, ensuring that their aid reaches the individuals and communities who need it most. They have successfully delivered educational materials, provided psychological support, and conducted social rehabilitation programs for women and children affected by the war. In 2022 alone, the organization reached over 300,000 people across the country, demonstrating their extensive network and the breadth of their impact.¹²⁷ Their programs include educational lectures, psychosocial support, and financial assistance, all of which are tailored to the specific needs of the community and delivered through trusted local partners.

¹²⁷ Divchata. (n.d.). *Divchata: NGO working with girls and women in Ukraine*. Divchata. <https://www.divchata.org/en/>

One of the key areas where this LNGO has demonstrated the effectiveness of localization is in its gender-responsive approach. LONGOS unlike INGOS specifically work to empower women and have them lead aid efforts. The organization has worked tirelessly to ensure that the needs of women and children are met, providing not only immediate relief but also long-term support to help them rebuild their lives. By collaborating with other LNGOs and community leaders, NGO Girls has maintained high standards of accountability and interacts greatly with local communities, addressing their complaints and consulting them on current initiatives. They provide transparent documentation and ensure that aid is distributed fairly and efficiently, particularly to those in the most precarious situations.

NGO Girls' focus on local engagement has also extended to international advocacy. The organization participated in an advocacy trip to Brussels in 2023, highlighting the gender aspect of Ukraine's recovery and the humanitarian crisis. Their advocacy efforts emphasize the importance of including local voices in the decision-making processes, ensuring that aid reaches those who are most impacted by the conflict.

Through their work, NGO Girls has reached over 120,000 children and parents with educational services, and they have supported over 10,000 hours of psychological counseling for war victims.¹²⁸ Their success is a testament to the importance of localized, gender-sensitive approaches in ensuring that aid is not only effective but also equitable and inclusive. By working directly with local communities, NGO Girls has been able to provide targeted, meaningful support to those who need it most, reinforcing the power of localized efforts in humanitarian work.

¹²⁸ Divchata. (n.d.). *Divchata: NGO working with girls and women in Ukraine*. Divchata. <https://www.divchata.org/en/>

Challenges faced by this LINGO in effectively delivering humanitarian aid highlight the shortcomings of the current model, in which INGOs predominantly lead aid efforts. For instance, the NGO's founder stated the lack of context-specific assistance as a significant challenge. They explained they constantly face aid standards that are developed for African countries and so much of the context that is specific to Ukraine is ignored. For example, these standards do not consider that Ukraine lacks internally displaced persons (IDP) camps for every 10,000 people and requires blankets for warmth, firewood, and fuel rather than cooling blankets. Furthermore, Ukraine has an operational government, which plays a crucial role in coordinating aid efforts and requires a contextually appropriate approach to humanitarian assistance—one that differs from strategies designed for countries without a functioning government. Ukraine's functional government necessitates a more integrated approach, where humanitarian efforts complement state-led initiatives rather than substitute, strengthen existing institutions, and adapt to decentralized aid distribution. Secondly, the lack of inclusivity in training or decision-making meetings due to language barriers remains another challenge. The interviewee explained that a large number of trainings hosted by international actors, alongside coordination meetings and working groups were conducted solely in English. This language barrier not only excludes Ukrainian organizations from critical discussions but also reinforces the dominance of international actors in shaping aid responses, ultimately hindering the development of a strong, self-sustaining civil society network.

Conclusion

The ongoing humanitarian crisis in Ukraine highlights the dire need for a coordinated and localized response to alleviate the suffering of millions affected by the war. While international aid has been crucial, the disproportionate allocation of funds favoring military over humanitarian efforts, has hindered essential support for Ukraine's civilian population. LINGOs have emerged as

indispensable actors in this context, bridging gaps in aid distribution and addressing the unique needs of communities most impacted by the conflict. Despite facing challenges such as limited funding, transparency issues, and logistical hurdles, organizations like the ones reviewed above demonstrate the power of localized, community-based approaches in delivering targeted, effective, and accountable aid.

Strengthening the capacity of LNGOs is vital for Ukraine's recovery and long-term resilience. Empowering these organizations with adequate resources, transparent systems, and better coordination can ensure that aid reaches those who need it most, particularly in the most vulnerable and war-torn regions. Moreover, the success of gender-responsive, community-focused initiatives reinforces the importance of inclusivity in aid delivery, ensuring that all groups, especially women and children, receive the support necessary to rebuild their lives.

Ultimately, Ukraine's path to recovery and reconstruction will depend on the sustained, transparent, and accountable efforts of LNGOs, backed by international support that is properly balanced and directed. By strengthening these grassroots organizations, ensuring transparent governance, and fostering collaboration among all stakeholders, Ukraine can lay a foundation for a more sustainable and equitable recovery in the face of ongoing adversity.

Latin America & the Caribbean

Haiti

Haiti has long faced a complex humanitarian crisis driven by political instability, economic hardship, natural disasters, and gang violence. The most impoverished nation in the Western Hemisphere, Haiti is the highest recipient of international humanitarian aid in the Latin America/

Caribbean region.¹²⁹ The last decade has seen the highest amount of aid enter Haiti due to the devastating 2010 earthquake and the public health crisis that ensued. Catastrophic events—including the 2010 and 2021 earthquakes and Hurricane Matthew in 2016 have compounded the country’s challenges, along with recurring cholera outbreaks, most recently in 2022. From 2011-2021, Haiti has received over \$13 billion USD in humanitarian aid, most of which came from the United States.¹³⁰ Nonetheless, Haiti has had little improvement due to unstable governance and poor public health, exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic. The assassination of President Jovenel Moïse in 2021 worsened political unrest and violence, while COVID-19 further strained the economy and healthcare system.¹³¹ Gang violence is one of the largest challenges to humanitarian access in Haiti. Since 2021, gangs have consolidated control of large parts of the capital and prevented free and safe movement making humanitarian efforts difficult to sustain.

By 2025, Haiti’s humanitarian crisis has deepened, with an estimated 6 million people, including 3.5 million children, in urgent need of assistance. Armed gangs now control nearly 90% of Port-au-Prince, up from 80% in 2024, forcing over 800,000 people to flee their homes and exacerbating a catastrophic food crisis that affects half the population.¹³²

Access to healthcare remains critically limited, with 5.2 million Haitians lacking essential medical services. Clean water shortages and collapsing sanitation systems have fueled disease outbreaks, including a resurgent cholera epidemic with cases doubling since 2024.

¹²⁹ World Bank. (2024). *Haiti overview*. World Bank. <https://www.worldbank.org/>

¹³⁰ Congressional Research Service. (2023). *Haiti: Background and U.S. policy*. Congressional Research Service. <https://crsreports.congress.gov/>

¹³¹ Amnesty International. (2024). *Haiti 2024: Human rights report*. Amnesty International. <https://www.amnesty.org/>

¹³² United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs. (2025). *Haiti: Humanitarian needs overview 2025*. UN OCHA.

Gender-based violence has reached alarming levels, with reported rape cases rising by another 30% in 2025, compounding the trauma faced by women and girls. Over 65% of displaced women have experienced sexual or physical violence, as gang-controlled areas operate with impunity.¹³³ International aid efforts are strained due to escalating insecurity, leaving millions without protection or basic survival resources. Without urgent intervention, Haiti risks further destabilization, with 80% of the population projected to live below the poverty line by 2026.¹³⁴

The country's ongoing political vacuum has severely constrained the capabilities of intergovernmental aid and collaboration in Haiti. Port-au-Prince, the capital, remains engulfed in gang violence. In March 2024, gangs seized control of Haiti's two largest prisons, releasing over 3,000 prisoners.¹³⁵ This prompted the government to declare a state of emergency, which could not be effectively enforced as Prime Minister Ariel Henry subsequently resigned. In response, the international community unanimously adopted a Kenyan-led security intervention in 2024, authorizing the deployment of a Multinational Security Support Mission to Haiti for 12 months.¹³⁶ Several interviewees advocated for transforming this mission into a United Nations peacekeeping operation to enhance its capabilities and secure more stable funding. While this initiative has since been renewed, the absence of a stable government continues to hinder efforts to facilitate greater humanitarian aid and development in the country.

The case of Haiti is rich because its long history of foreign intervention and large NGO presence reveals the structural failures of the current humanitarian system in constraining local agency, while also showcasing the possibilities and challenges of locally-led alternatives through our

¹³³ Amnesty International. (2025). *Haiti 2025: Human rights situation*. Amnesty International.

¹³⁴ World Bank. (2025). *Haiti economic update 2025*. World Bank.

¹³⁵ Associated Press. (2024). *Hundreds of inmates flee after armed gangs storm Haiti's main prison*. Associated Press News. <https://apnews.com/article/haiti-prison-break-2788f145b0d26efc2aa199e923724e0f>

¹³⁶ Mérancourt, W., & Coletta, A. (2024, June 25). *Kenyan-led police force arrives in Haiti to beat back the gangs*. *The Washington Post*. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2024/06/25/kenya-haiti-security-force/>

interviews. The case study is as follows. First, it examines the historical role of international NGOs in Haiti, focusing on how they have often bypassed local institutions, leading to fragmented interventions, weak accountability, and misalignment with Haitian priorities. Second, it explores how local NGOs have successfully implemented community-led rural development projects, drawing on their deep understanding of the local context, cultural ties, and community trust. Lastly, it analyzes Haitian-led NGOs that prioritize supporting and strengthening existing community structures to provide accessible healthcare and other essential services.

The Large Role of NGOs in Haiti

NGOs have played a pivotal role in Haiti's development amidst ongoing political instability, stepping in to provide large portions of the country's social services and healthcare infrastructure. A 2012 UN audit revealed systemic gaps in accountability, finding that fewer than 10% of NGOs operating post-earthquake had registered with the Haitian government, leaving no trace of their spending or impact.¹³⁷ A decade later, the 2021 earthquake exposed persistent flaws in the aid system: despite pledges to prioritize local leadership after 2010, a 2023 UN report noted that only 1.2% of humanitarian funding went directly to Haitian organizations.¹³⁸ This repeated failure to localize resources even as crises compounded underscores how little the sector has learned from past mistakes. NGOs have gained more leverage in recent years becoming a more attractive recipient of foreign aid rather than the Haitian government. This has created varying outcomes in the country as while NGOs have proven to function more effectively than government institutions, they are ultimately not beholden to Haitian citizens and may not actively align with the country's priorities.

¹³⁷ United Nations Office of the Special Envoy for Haiti, *Has Aid Changed?* (New York: UN, 2012), 12.

¹³⁸ UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), *Haiti: Funding Analysis 2010-2023* (Geneva: OCHA, 2023), 7.

International aid to Haiti continues to bypass government channels due to persistent concerns over corruption and inefficiency. A 2023 World Bank report found that over 70% of humanitarian and development funding is directed through NGOs and private contractors, a sharp increase from pre-2020 levels. In comparison only 20-40% of all aid in low to middle income countries is directed through NGOs and the private sector making Haiti a notable outlier.¹³⁹ While NGOs deliver an estimated 85% of essential services—including healthcare, food aid, and education—the Haitian government’s capacity to coordinate these efforts remains critically weak.¹⁴⁰

Limited progress has been made in formalizing partnerships between the state and non-state actors. For example, the 2022 Cadre de Coopération Transitoire (CCT), a provisional framework for NGO-government collaboration, failed to enforce accountability measures or standardize reporting. Meanwhile, the 2023 dissolution of Haiti’s interim governance structures further fragmented oversight, leaving NGOs to operate with minimal alignment to national priorities.¹⁴¹¹⁴² Experts warn that without structural reforms, this ad hoc system risks perpetuating inefficiencies and undermining long-term recovery.

Localization policy for NGOs in Haiti has demonstrated effectiveness in ensuring sustainable development as the international community still organizes government plans for the nation. NGOs that have collaborated with national ministries and municipalities have proven quite effective in meeting the long-term needs of local communities and have made long-term plans intended to develop certain regions within Haiti that have limited access to the capital Port-au-Prince. By collaborating with local actors, NGOs can effectively prioritize Haitian communities and create sustainable plans focused on long-term development.

¹³⁹ Apodaca, C. (2017, April 26). *Foreign Aid as Foreign Policy Tool*. *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Politics*. Retrieved April 23, 2025

¹⁴⁰ World Bank. (2023). *Haiti: Aid Effectiveness in Fragile States*.

¹⁴¹ UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA). (2024). *Haiti Humanitarian Response Plan*.

¹⁴² International Crisis Group (ICG). (2025). *Breaking Haiti’s Cycle of Crisis*.

Improving Healthcare and Infrastructure in Rural Haiti

A Haitian based organization is addressing the humanitarian crisis in Haiti by promoting sustainable development in rural Haiti. Founded over 30 years ago, the organization focused on supporting the local community by providing funding, training, and resources for community-led projects. The organization decided to focus on supporting rural Haiti since many NGO efforts were focused on the capital. Unlike previous aid efforts that relied on handouts, this organization employs a bottom-up approach where local communities approach them with project proposals.

The humanitarian aid worker interviewed from this organization emphasized the importance of supporting rural communities in Haiti, as the country's economy is largely driven by small business owners, merchants, and local farmers who plant, harvest, and sell their crops. In their organization's approach, the goal is to empower these local actors to better understand the economy, budgeting, and finance, helping them recognize their role within the broader economy. For the organization, success is when these rural actors can identify their economic potential and sustain their businesses independently after external support ends.¹⁴³

One example of their work is a project proposal initiated by community members who approached the LNNGO with a proposal to cultivate potatoes in a land they had, since it was a crop that was fruitful in their local economy. The organization conducted research to test the land, analyze the soil, and assess the overall feasibility of the agricultural effort.¹⁴⁴ With this knowledge, the organization then provided funding, training, and implementation support. From the inception to the project's completion, the organization typically supports these initiatives for two years, with the ultimate goal of ensuring that, once their involvement ends, community members are capable of continuing the work on their own. This model highlights the effectiveness of LNNGOs in

¹⁴³ Anonymous Interviewee IL27. (2024, April 23). Personal interview [Personal interview]. Conducted by J. Rascon; notes by A. Ashhab.

¹⁴⁴ Anonymous Interviewee IL27. (2024, April 23). Personal interview [Personal interview]. Conducted by J. Rascon; notes by A. Ashhab.

implementing sustainable solutions within their communities, in contrast to INGO that often focus on short-term handouts, which are neither sustainable nor cost-effective in the long run.

The success of the model employed by this LINGO can be attributed to the trust established between the organization and the community. Since the project model relies on community members or organizations approaching the NGO with project proposals, trust was essential for local members to feel comfortable engaging with them. The humanitarian aid worker highlighted that this trust existed because the organization wasn't seen as an outsider. Capracare's status as a Haitian-led organization, with staff who speak the language and possess a deep political, social, and cultural understanding of the area, played a key role in building trust. Additionally, the aid worker noted that many local members and community-based organizations learned about the NGO through word of mouth, further emphasizing the level of trust that had been built.

However, NGOs like this one face a number of challenges in Haiti. First, due to Haiti's poor infrastructure it can be difficult to access rural areas. However, this emphasizes the role of LINGOs in supporting the on the ground capacity efforts in rural areas so they are prepared when a disaster strikes. Meanwhile, INGO may ignore these rural areas due to either lack of awareness or because logistically it is easier to distribute aid in cities that are hub areas.

Secondly, the large number of NGOs operating in the region is not providing sustainable solutions, as they can sometimes lead to a fragmented approach where efforts overlap or they are competing for resources. Consequently, this can weaken the impact of NGOs and prevent long-term solutions from being developed. This is especially the case in Haiti where much of its humanitarian aid has been focused on emergency relief and short-term aid. Additionally, when there are too many NGOs it can create a dependency on external aid, rather than fostering a strong civil society and self-sufficiency. For example, a report by the United States Institute of Peace reveals concerns about how dependence on NGOs has weakened government institutions in Haiti and has created a cycle

of reliance on external aid. It highlights that Haitians rely on NGOs rather than their government for basic public services.¹⁴⁵ A study from 2015 found that while 51 percent of NGOs operating in Haiti are headquartered in the United States, only one-fifth of the listed organizations are based in Haiti.¹⁴⁶ Given that Haiti has faced a humanitarian crisis for over two decades, with the situation worsening in recent years, it is clear that the current model is not working. This crisis highlights the need to shift from the large international presence of NGOs to a more localized approach. A localized model can lead to sustainable solutions and a stronger civil society. Implementing a bottom-up approach, where local communities bring project proposals to organizations—like the LINGO interviewed—is an example of how to prevent corruption in NGOs that register as nonprofits without having a genuine impact. Additionally, as part of the localized approach LINGOs can coordinate and collaborate to avoid duplication of efforts and ensure resources are used effectively for sustainable development.

Furthermore, international NGOs in Haiti have often failed to respond to the actual needs of local communities. For example, after the 2010 Earthquake came an influx of foreign food aid into Haiti. While this aid was intended to provide immediate relief, it crippled the Haitian economy. Local rice farmers were unable to compete with the free or subsidized rice provided by foreign aid, which ultimately crippled the country's rice market and overall economy.¹⁴⁷ In this case, international organizations inadvertently became part of the problem. This emphasizes the need for foreign organizations who wish to make a positive positive impact, should prioritize partnering with local grassroots groups and directly supporting the farmers who are cultivating these essential crops. This approach not only strengthens the agricultural sector but also bolsters the Haitian economy as a

¹⁴⁵ U.S. Institute of Peace. (n.d.). *Haiti: A republic of NGOs* (Peace Brief No. 23). January 21, 2025, <https://www.usip.org/sites/default/files/PB%2023%20Haiti%20a%20Republic%20of%20NGOs.pdf>

¹⁴⁶ Ramachandran, Vijaya, and Julie Walz. "Haiti: Where Has All the Money Gone?" *Journal of Haitian Studies* 21, no. 1 (2015): 26–65.

¹⁴⁷ Davidson, Adam. "Haiti - The Aid Dilemma | Frontline." *PBS*, Public Broadcasting Service, 2010, www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline//haiti-aid/.

whole. Overall, this issue highlights an important lesson: short-term aid solutions must be carefully considered to avoid creating long-term economic problems. It stresses the importance of INGO taking the time to understand local needs before intervening. Local organizations, with their deep knowledge of the community and its challenges, are in a much better position to deliver effective and contextually appropriate support.

Haiti's Health Crisis: Gaps and Solutions through LNGOs

A Haitian-led health organization focusing on community-driven, sustainable interventions that empower local populations and address their specific needs is exemplifying efforts of localization.

This Haitian-led NGO operates on a mission to provide comprehensive healthcare access in Haiti, focusing on five core areas: health services, prevention, mental health, education, and disaster response. This holistic approach addresses various community needs, demonstrating the organization's commitment to localization and sustainable development. A senior leader in this group emphasized the importance of allowing local communities to control their environments, asserting that "people who are in their respective country and city should be able to control their own environment." This perspective highlights an important aspect of localization: empowering communities to develop solutions that align with their unique circumstances.

Since its founding over 15 years ago, the organization has delivered extensive healthcare, education, and disaster relief services to communities in Haiti, becoming one of the country's most trusted Haitian-led nonprofits. The NGO has delivered essential services across healthcare, professional development, mental health, and emergency relief, reaching hundreds of thousands of people. Its medical programs have provided critical home care for bedridden patients, thousands of

cancer screenings, and mobile clinics serving remote communities. Recognizing the growing need for psychosocial support, the organization has also conducted over a thousand trauma counseling sessions, aiding survivors of violence and displacement.

In disaster response, the NGO's efforts include sheltering 13,481 individuals, repairing damaged homes, and distributing emergency kits. Beyond relief, the NGO supports education and skill-building, offering after-school programs to over 4,000 youth, English and computer classes to 202 students, and entrepreneurship training. The organization's comprehensive approach not only addresses immediate needs but also fosters long-term resilience in Haiti's southern communities.

This NGO's approach to humanitarian efforts is defined by its focus on local leadership, sustainability, and complementary aid, which together create a model rooted in community empowerment. As a Haitian-led organization, it prioritizes local control, fostering trust and ensuring that its interventions are culturally relevant and responsive to community needs. Its motto, "work by the people for the people," reflects its commitment to sustainability by equipping communities with the skills and resources needed to maintain operations independently of external aid. Rather than replacing local resources, the NGO emphasizes supporting and strengthening existing community structures, an approach designed to avoid the pitfalls of foreign interventions that have historically undermined local industries. For example, the detrimental impact of U.S. rice imports on Haiti's rice industry highlights the risks of poorly executed external aid, which the NGO seeks to avoid.

The NGO's successful localization strategies underscore the benefits of community-driven interventions. By investing in local leadership and resources, the organization builds the capacity of communities to sustain themselves, fostering resilience and self-reliance—essential qualities for navigating Haiti's complex humanitarian challenges. Its commitment to avoiding duplicitous aid, such as refraining from providing items that communities already possess, helps preserve local

industries and prevent dependency. Furthermore, the NGO tailors its interventions to the unique needs and cultural contexts of each community, ensuring that its programs are both relevant and effective.

However, the NGO faces several challenges that shape its approach to localization. Funding constraints often force the organization to balance its mission with the need to secure critical resources, such as health equipment, which are essential to the success of its initiatives. The ongoing "brain drain," or the migration of skilled professionals from Haiti, presents another significant hurdle, as it limits the development of local capacity and leadership.¹⁴⁸ Additionally, barriers to education restrict opportunities for community growth and hinder the implementation of effective localization strategies. Addressing these challenges is critical to empowering communities and fostering sustainable development in Haiti.

Localization in humanitarian responses offers significant long-term benefits that contribute to the empowerment and resilience of communities. One key benefit is the promotion of sovereignty, since empowering communities to manage their resources and development fosters a sense of autonomy and ownership. This empowerment not only strengthens local decision-making but also ensures that growth aligns with the community's unique needs and priorities.

Another critical advantage of localization is its role in sustainable development. By emphasizing practices that directly benefit local populations, organizations like this NGO create pathways for growth and resilience tailored to the specific contexts of the communities they serve. This approach helps establish a foundation for long-term stability, reducing dependency on external aid while promoting practices that align with cultural, economic, and environmental realities.

¹⁴⁸ NGO Interviews

Through localization, communities are better equipped to address challenges and thrive independently.

Partners in Health's Massive Impact

Zanmi Lasante, the Haitian-based affiliate for Partners in Health has become Haiti's largest non-governmental healthcare provider and the largest provider of healthcare in Haiti's Central Plateau Region. Initially established in the 1980s to work independently of municipal initiatives, it has collaborated with the Ministry of Health and Population (MSSP) to meet the healthcare needs of local communities and train Haitian healthcare professionals. Partners in Health now serves a population of more than 3.3 million people.¹⁴⁹ In Haiti, PIH employs more than 6,300 staff, including 2,500 community health workers, to provide primary care, maternal and child health care, HIV and tuberculosis services, and more advanced secondary and tertiary care.¹⁵⁰ Partners in Health has recently led numerous local initiatives aimed at rehabilitating public health centers including building Haiti's largest teaching hospital. Localization has proven to be an essential model for Partners in Health, enabling effective collaboration with MSSP personnel and the integration of PIH-trained staff. This approach serves as a model for sustainable public-private collaboration.

Partners in Health's localized approach in Haiti demonstrates the power of community-driven healthcare systems. By embedding its programs within Haitian institutions and training local professionals, PIH ensures that medical expertise remains in the country long after external support diminishes. This model contrasts sharply with traditional aid structures, where foreign-led initiatives often withdraw once funding ends, leaving behind little sustainable capacity. Instead, PIH's investment in Haitian doctors, nurses, and community health workers creates a

¹⁴⁹ Partners in Health. (n.d.). *Haiti*. Retrieved January 21, 2025, from <https://www.pih.org/country/haiti>

¹⁵⁰ Partners in Health. (n.d.). *Haiti*. Retrieved January 21, 2025, from <https://www.pih.org/country/haiti>

self-reinforcing cycle: as more local providers are trained, healthcare access expands, and public trust in the system grows. The result is a resilient network of care that can adapt to Haiti's unique challenges—from infectious disease outbreaks to natural disasters—because it is built and managed by those who know the context best.

The success of Zanmi Lasante also highlights how localization fosters stronger partnerships between NGOs and governments. Rather than operating independently, PIH collaborates closely with Haiti's Ministry of Health, ensuring that its efforts complement—rather than undermine—national healthcare strategies. This alignment prevents duplication of services, strengthens public institutions, and ensures that resources are directed where they are most needed. Moreover, by prioritizing Haitian leadership at every level, from community health workers to hospital administrators, PIH challenges the outdated notion that low-income countries must rely on foreign expertise to solve their health crises. The organization's work proves that sustainable change comes not from outside intervention alone, but from empowering local actors to lead the way. This principle should guide global health initiatives everywhere, as localization isn't just ethical—it's the most effective path to lasting impact.

Conclusion

Haiti's ongoing humanitarian crisis underscores the need for a shift towards localized humanitarian responses, as exemplified by the organizations listed above. The country's complex challenges—ranging from political instability and gang violence to the devastating impacts of natural disasters—highlight the importance of empowering local communities to manage their own resources and development. The health-based Haitian-led organization interviewed provides a model for effective localization, through its community-driven, sustainable interventions, offering healthcare, mental health services, and educational programs tailored to the unique needs of the Haitian population. By focusing on local leadership, sustainability, and complementary aid, this NGO ensures that its interventions are culturally relevant and aligned with the long-term goals of the communities it serves.

However, the challenges faced by LNGOs in Haiti—such as funding constraints, brain drain, and barriers to education—highlight the need for continued support from the international community to foster self-reliance and resilience. Despite these obstacles, the organizations listed above show successful strategies in building local capacity and avoiding harmful aid practices demonstrate the potential of localization to drive sustainable development and reduce dependency on external assistance. By prioritizing local empowerment, humanitarian organizations can help communities like those in Haiti to not only survive but thrive in the face of adversity. As the international community continues to seek solutions for Haiti's crisis, the approach of the health based Haitian-led NGO interviewed, offers valuable lessons on the importance of community-led development and the long-term benefits of localized humanitarian responses. NGOs have played a pivotal role in Haiti's development amidst ongoing political instability, stepping in to provide large portions of the country's social services and healthcare infrastructure

Colombia

Colombia faces various significant humanitarian challenges driven by internal conflicts, climate change, and rising influx of refugees and migrants. Internal conflicts include the armed conflict driven by non-state armed violence and drug trafficking. For 60 years, Colombia has endured the longest-running armed conflict in the Western Hemisphere, as guerrilla groups like the National Liberation Army (ELN) and the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) emerged from 1960s uprisings and expanded with the rise of the drug economy, fueling ongoing violence. The country faces a large displacement problem due to these humanitarian challenges with Colombia ranking either first or second in the number of IDPs for 10 years.¹⁵¹ Although in 2016 the Colombian government and the largest paramilitary group in Colombia, FARC, signed the peace agreement "Final Agreement to End the Armed Conflict and Build a Stable and Lasting Peace," the conflict continues to displace large numbers of people. Since the agreement, over 1.4 million new displacements were registered as of August 2024.¹⁵² The country by mid-2024 recorded nearly 7 million IDPs. The ongoing political and economic crisis in Venezuela, aggravated by the rigged 2024 presidential election, has forced nearly 7.8 million Venezuelans to flee the country, with approximately 3 million seeking refuge in Colombia.¹⁵³ The influx of refugees and migrants has strained local services and exacerbated food, health, livelihoods, nutrition, protection, shelter, and WASH needs among Venezuelan migrants and refugees, and host community members.¹⁵⁴

¹⁵¹ Shultz JM, Garfin DR, Espinel Z, Araya R, Oquendo MA, Wainberg ML, Chaskel R, Gaviria SL, Ordóñez AE, Espinola M, Wilson FE, Muñoz García N, Gómez Ceballos AM, Garcia-Barcena Y, Verdelli H, Neria Y. Internally displaced "victims of armed conflict" in Colombia: the trajectory and trauma signature of forced migration. *Curr Psychiatry Rep.* 2014 Oct;16(10):475. doi: 10.1007/s11920-014-0475-7. PMID: 25135775; PMCID: PMC4765495.

¹⁵² UNHCR. *Global Appeal 2025 Situation Overview - Colombia*.
<https://reporting.unhcr.org/operational/situations/colombia-situation>

¹⁵³ "Refugees and Migrants from Venezuela." *R4V*, 3 Dec. 2024, www.r4v.info/en/refugeeandmigrants.

¹⁵⁴ "USAID/BHA Colombia Assistance Overview, May 2024 - Colombia." *ReliefWeb*, 3 June 2024, reliefweb.int/report/colombia/usaidbha-colombia-assistance-overview-may-2024.

The climate crisis in Colombia is significantly impacting the humanitarian needs of the country. According to the World Bank, 85% of the Colombian population lives in areas exposed to two or more natural threats.¹⁵⁵ A major contributing factor is rapid population growth, combined with poor urban planning, densely populated coastal areas, and informal settlements built with inadequate materials and construction techniques. These issues, exacerbated by the climate crisis, are increasing the frequency of flooding and landslides in Colombia. Climate change is also contributing to rising sea levels, putting people in coastal areas at increased risk. Other disasters affecting Colombia include earthquakes, cyclones, and droughts. Natural disasters like these force people to leave their homes and become internally displaced persons (IDPs), further exacerbating the existing displacement crisis caused by armed conflict.

The case of Colombia offers critical insight into how localized approaches can address complex and overlapping humanitarian challenges. This case study first examines the impact of Colombia's armed conflict and displacement crisis, focusing on an LNGO supporting indigenous communities through trust-based, community-led initiatives. Then, it explores the role of another LNGO working in child protection and education, demonstrating how transparent financial practices and government partnerships enhance localization efforts. Together, these examples highlight the importance of direct funding, cultural understanding, and long-term community engagement in strengthening humanitarian response.

Education and Economic Empowerment in Guajira

An organization in Colombia is actively addressing the humanitarian crisis by focusing on the protection and rehabilitation of homeless children or those in challenging home situations. Their work aligns with the SDGs related to poverty reduction and the fight against inequalities, with an

¹⁵⁵ "Colombia: Future Disasters Will Mainly Affect Cities." *World Bank*, World Bank Group, 14 June 2013, www.worldbank.org/en/news/feature/2013/02/14/colombia-future-disasters-will-mainly-affect-cities.

emphasis on restoring the fundamental rights of children. Of their work of nearly four decades, the organization has helped 100,000 children. Their programs aim to reunite children with their families, but for those who cannot be reunited, they provide care with the goal of supporting their pursuit of higher education. The organization operates five boarding centers, with a total capacity of 309 beds, hosting approximately 1,510 children and adolescents annually.

In an interview with a humanitarian aid worker from the organization, they discussed how the organization has evolved in its financing, transitioning from relying primarily on international organizations to working more closely with the local government and private donors. The humanitarian worker also highlighted how the organization manages international aid transparently and effectively, emphasizing the importance of presenting detailed projects and clearly communicating the costs of its programs to potential donors.

When the organization was established in 1988, it primarily relied on donations from international sources and private donors. However, the humanitarian aid worker interviewed highlighted the challenges of working with international organizations, as they often lacked an understanding of the local cultural context and needs. She provided an example where an international organization wanted to donate funds specifically for educational initiatives for children in boarding programs. However, in Colombia, free public education and undergraduate university options are already available. The humanitarian worker suggested that these funds could have been better allocated to meet the children's basic needs—such as sheets, blankets, towels, and mattresses—ensuring they had the essentials to support their education. This example highlights the importance of partnerships between international and LNGOs to bridge the gap between donor priorities and actual community needs. More importantly, it highlights the necessity of direct funding to LNGOs. While international organizations have significant resources, they often lack on-the-ground knowledge and may impose rigid funding restrictions without fully understanding

local realities. This can lead to inefficiencies and reduce the overall impact of donor contributions. Direct funding to LNGOs ensures that resources are allocated where they are most needed, making humanitarian aid more cost-effective and impactful.

The Colombian government contracted the organization to work alongside them in protecting the fundamental rights of children, leading the organization to rely primarily on government funding rather than international sources. As a result, the organization is run by Colombians for Colombians. In 2023, 69% of their funding was from government assistance, 8% from international donations, 8% national donations, 5% from institutional campaigns, and 10% from others.

However, the humanitarian aid worker from this organization stresses the continuing importance of international support. They said how many of this support comes from private foundations and platforms, not government agencies. These international organisations provide funding but do not interfere in the management of programmes, although they sometimes specify how the money should be used. This partnership emphasizes the importance of maintaining a relationship of equality and mutual respect between local and international organisations, recognising local experience and knowledge in the implementation of social projects.

Transparency and a lack of trust between donors and LNGOs continue to be major challenges in increasing direct funding and promoting localization. However, this organization provides an example of how transparency can strengthen these relationships. They emphasize the importance of presenting detailed projects with clear objectives and itemized budgets to ensure that funds are used appropriately. The organization shares examples of how they have successfully managed funds and communicated the costs of their programs to potential donors. For instance, they highlight the cost of supporting each child, breaking down expenses such as accommodation, mattresses, bed covers, mirrors, and sheets. By outlining these costs and providing detailed budgets,

the organization builds donor confidence by clearly showing where the money is going and increasing accountability, ensuring that donations are allocated to cover specific, outlined expenses.

Armed Conflict and Localized Peacebuilding

Despite the 2016 peace agreement with the FARC, armed conflicts continue in Colombia. The International Committee of the Red Cross reported at least eight ongoing domestic conflicts in 2024, with these groups involved in various illicit activities, including drug production and trafficking, human and contraband trade, illegal mining, and extortion.¹⁵⁶ Most of these conflicts occur in marginalized and rural communities.

This LNCO founded in 2015 focuses on supporting indigenous communities affected by Colombia's historic armed conflict. The foundation aims to promote peace, justice, reconciliation, and collective well-being. Its key principles include working only by community invitation, supporting local leaders and existing community processes, avoiding traditional top-down development approaches, and building long-term relationships based on trust. Most connections are established through word of mouth and networks of indigenous leaders.

Trust is often a key barrier to building connections between the community and the NGO, as well as to providing direct funding to local organizations. However, trust is at the heart of this foundation, built through a philosophy of simplicity and deep community engagement. Rather than staying in hotels, team members immerse themselves in the communities they support, sleeping in hammocks or shared spaces when invited. By walking alongside local leaders they foster authentic relationships rooted in mutual respect. Sharing meals, living under the same conditions, and embracing discomfort help bridge divides between outsiders and the community, strengthening

¹⁵⁶ “The Human Cost of Armed Conflicts in Colombia.” *The International Committee of the Red Cross*, 4 Mar. 2024, www.icrc.org/es/document/costo-humano-conflictos-armados-colombia-2024.

social bonds and reconciliation efforts. This approach not only conserves resources but also reinforces trust, ensuring that the foundation's presence is grounded in humility and solidarity. A key advantage of LNGOs, like this one, is their ability to physically immerse themselves in the community and build social fabric due to their proximity, unlike many INGO that allocate significant funds to administration, travel, accommodations, and food—reinforcing their outsider status and diverting resources from direct community support. Additionally, LNGOs can access areas that INGO cannot due to the dangers of armed conflict. Their established local networks provide critical knowledge on which areas are safe to enter, allowing them to reach more people and provide support more effectively than international organizations with limited on-the-ground insight.

This NGO in 2023 allocated its budget into 78% project spending, 16% administration, and 6% for fundraising efforts. By operating on the ground, the organization—like other LNGOs—can minimize administrative costs related to travel. Transparency is also a key factor in building trust with donors. Through detailed reports on budget allocation, the NGO demonstrates the impact of its projects, such as the revenue generated through sustainable income initiatives or the number of adults who have gained literacy skills through its literacy program. This transparency in both financial management and project outcomes strengthens donor confidence and encourages more direct funding for LNGOs. Direct funding is crucial as it reduces reliance on intermediary organizations and ensures that more resources go directly to supporting communities, maximizing impact.

A key program of this organization is its literacy initiative, which operates in Guajira to support the Wayuu people. Guajira is a desert region where many NGOs typically focus on providing humanitarian aid such as water wells, food, and clothing—essential resources, but often determined by external perspectives on what the community needs. However, when the co-director of this NGO consulted with the Association of Wayuu Leaders, they emphasized a priority for

education and income generation projects. Although public education in Colombia is free, access remains a challenge in rural La Guajira, where students often walk more than three kilometers to reach school. The long journeys under the scorching sun frequently lead to absences or early dropouts, particularly among girls, who are often expected to help their families collect water for daily needs.¹⁵⁷

Founded in 2016, the literacy program has grown significantly, impacting several thousand people each year. The co-directors of the LNGO serve as national coordinators, working alongside a locally hired coordinator who receives a salary. Beneath this coordinator, seven supervisors travel to remote Wayuu communities, known as *rancherías*, to oversee literacy centers. Each *ranchería* typically has one or two centers offering literacy courses, primary and preschool education, and even secondary education. Literacy facilitators, many of whom are former program participants, receive payment for their work, demonstrating the program's long-term impact and sustainability. Many participants have advanced to high school certificates and technical studies, with success stories such as a young woman who obtained a nursing degree. In Colombia, having at least a primary education is essential for securing formal employment, as an elementary certificate is required to legally earn a paycheck. By focusing on adult education, this literacy program creates ripple effects throughout the community—for example, a mother who learns to read and write can support her children's education and help with their homework, fostering a cycle of learning and empowerment across generations.

Another key initiative of this LNGO is its income generation project, which supports Wayuu women in making and selling *mochilas*—woven crafted bags that hold deep cultural significance. For

¹⁵⁷ “Transforming Education and Community Resilience with UNICEF in Colombia.” *World Bicycle Relief*, 2025, worldbicyclerelief.org/unicef-in-colombia/.

the Wayuu, weaving is an ancestral form of storytelling, with traditional designs, or *kaanás*, representing their interpretations of the material world. The NGO helped the community establish international connections, enabling Wayuu women to sell their *mochilas* to startups in France, Germany, and New York, as well as in larger markets within Colombia. However, the COVID-19 pandemic disrupted the project, as lockdowns left the women isolated on their reservation and unable to access the wool needed for weaving. In response, they approached the NGO for support in starting an agricultural project with sheep to ensure a sustainable wool supply. The NGO successfully raised funds to purchase sheep, allowing each woman to own one. As the sheep reproduced, more women joined the cooperative, sharing wool, spinning yarn, and producing their own money for *mochilas*. Today, the women continue to lead and manage the cooperative independently. This project exemplifies how a humanitarian crisis led to a sustainable, community-driven solution—initially supported by the NGO but ultimately owned and expanded by the women themselves.

Conclusion

Colombia's humanitarian crisis demonstrates the need for a holistic approach that combines conflict resolution, adaptation, targeted social programs, and local knowledge. Strengthening local leadership, expanding access to education, and promoting economic self-sufficiency are essential to breaking cycles of displacement and poverty. A key takeaway from Colombia's humanitarian response is the importance of transparency and accountability in financial management, which are crucial for fostering donor trust and encouraging more direct investment in local solutions. Additionally, supporting grassroots initiatives and ensuring equitable partnerships between LNGOs and communities will enable Colombia to move toward a more sustainable and community-driven humanitarian response.

Findings and Recommendations for Ensuring Successful Localization

After detailed analysis of the case studies, the following recommendations were developed to provide generalized recommendations. They include recommendations for LNGOs on strengthening accountability and transparency to build trust, and for INGOs on how to ethically engage with and support LNGOs. Additional recommendations are directed at all actors in the humanitarian aid ecosystem—including L/NAs, governments, the private sector, NGOs, community-based organizations, civil society, and individuals involved in humanitarian efforts. We hope these insights can also inform policymakers as they shape policies aimed at reorienting the humanitarian aid system toward localization.

Recommendations for Ensuring Successful Localization

1. Context-Specific Localization
2. Establishing Strong Accountability Process
3. Capacity Building Through Practical Engagement
4. Simplifying Funding and Knowledge Transfer
5. Complement Existing Efforts Rather than Compete
6. Measure Success

1. Context-Specific Localization

Localization efforts should be tailored to specific contexts, considering historical, cultural, political, and economic dynamics. What works in one context—such as a homogeneous country facing a political crisis—may not be effective in another, such as a multicultural nation grappling with climate issues. Addressing context-specific situations is also cost-effective. For example, humanitarian assistance may be ineffective if it does not align with the community's needs. Providing food that is

not culturally or religiously acceptable may result in waste, undermining the intended support. Tailoring aid to local preferences and requirements ensures resources are used efficiently and meaningfully. It is also crucial to account for the urban-rural divide when designing initiatives. NGOs must extend their efforts beyond capital cities, recognizing that the challenges faced in the capital do not necessarily reflect those of the entire country. To effectively address context-specific needs, organizations should engage in continuous dialogue with local communities to understand their vision of successful localization and adapt accordingly. Patience, commitment, investment, active listening, and trust are key components of sustainable localization efforts.

2. Establishing Strong Accountability Process

Anxieties about weak accountability processes are major barriers to direct funding for LNGOs, highlighting the need to strengthen accountability measures to advance localization. INGO must collaborate closely with LNGOs to develop a clear accountability framework that ensures transparency in funding and decision-making. This requires comprehensive training for LNGOs on financial management, including budgeting, risk assessment, and financial reporting, so donors can clearly understand where their money is going and what results it is achieving.

Effective accountability should be flexible, combining strong oversight with enough adaptability to match the limited capacity of local organizations. Instead of relying only on formal audits, NGOs can use practical tools—like reviewing expenses, checking documents, and making site visits—to ensure funds are used properly. These methods offer real oversight without creating extra administrative burdens. At the same time, providing training in areas like financial management helps local NGOs improve their reporting and build donor trust. By pairing solid accountability with support for local capacity, the humanitarian sector can better localize aid while ensuring resources are used responsibly and effectively.

3. Capacity Building Through Practical Engagement

Investing in capacity strengthening for local organizations enables them to become better skilled and more autonomous in responding effectively to humanitarian crises and accessing direct funding. Capacity building should go beyond theoretical or organizational training and emphasize hands-on learning. Rather than relying solely on classroom instruction, training should incorporate field-based learning opportunities, such as WASH response training in real environments. Another successful approach to localization involves INGOs initially subgranting to local organizations, then transitioning to co-implementation, and ultimately stepping back to allow local actors to take the lead. Keeping this transition process in mind is essential, as capacity building and ongoing support from larger organizations play a critical role in ensuring its success. Additionally, addressing brain drain is vital for capacity building. A lack of leadership in parts of the developing world such as brain drain takes away promising talent and makes a lack of entrepreneurs in the local communities to achieve growth and development that is essential for successful localization projects. Instead of INGOs recruiting local staff for their own organizations—thereby contributing to brain drain—they should focus on leadership development initiatives that help retain local talent and ensure long-term sustainability.

4. Simplifying Funding and Knowledge Transfer

Transferring power from INGOs to LNGOs is not just about INGOs scaling back their operations—it is, most critically, about ensuring the effective transfer of knowledge. A large barrier to LNGOs in their capacity efforts is the complexity of the bureaucracy in the humanitarian system. As it is set now it is highly bureaucratic and in its current form is set up to be internationally led and driven. This emphasizes the need to change the bureaucratic process in order to change the power

dynamics for local actors coming in. One of the most significant restrictions on localization is that many local organizations simply do not know how to navigate the grant application process. Grant applications are often lengthy, technical, and resource-intensive, requiring familiarity with donor-specific language, complex budgeting formats, and compliance frameworks. Thus, simplifying the grant application process requires the transfer of technical knowledge and capacity. Local organizations need operational support—not just financial resources. This includes hands-on training in proposal writing, budgeting, compliance, and reporting, as well as long-term mentorship and embedded technical advisors who understand the local context. These advisors should not be people coming in from the outside, rather, they should be individuals from the country or at least the region. This approach highlights the importance of outside support during the transitional phase of localization, while prioritizing the training and development of local advisors so that external support can eventually phase out, leaving sustainable local leadership in place. Making grants more accessible also means translating materials into local languages and reducing jargon. Ultimately, transforming both the grant application system and humanitarian aid space to fit localization is about transforming the power dynamics at the heart of the humanitarian space and reimagining systems.

5. Complement Existing Efforts Rather than Compete

Investing in existing local structures is critical to successful localization. Too often INGOs unintentionally undermine local organizations by duplicating efforts, competing for the same funding, recruiting skilled local staff or setting operational systems in the local area that draw away resources or attention from LNGOs. An effective approach is to recognize and map local actors and networks to better understand who is doing what on the ground. Once that identification is completed international organizations can provide targeted capacity building where needed to

strengthen existing structures. Another approach is for larger NNGOs to support smaller LNGOs by amplifying their voices, especially since NNGOs often have greater visibility and are more frequently invited to international conferences and decision-making forums. Furthermore, INGOs should collaborate with LNGOs through co-application and co-implementation of projects. Over time, this partnership should evolve, with INGOs gradually stepping back to allow local actors to lead. Ultimately, complementing existing efforts requires a fundamental shift in the humanitarian aid system—from a model of control to one rooted in genuine collaboration.

6. Measure Success

There are not enough strong commitments and indicators to track progress on localization which is a strong hindrance to its genuine implementation. There is a need for detailed indicators and frameworks to assess the quality, efficiency, and result of localized efforts. To have actual results clearly laid out will encourage international actors to further implement localization if they see the results and accountability. These indicators can include, for example, the number of people impacted by the project, such as those receiving food and water assistance, or the number of individuals taught to read. Other indicators might include the growth in the number of participants in a project, or, in the case of a local NGO focused on education, the number of children who went on to pursue higher education. If a project focused on training individuals to acquire skills for income-generating activities, tracking how many people used that training to continue selling or assessing how many participants went on to teach others could be valuable indicators. Although tracking may be difficult it is essential to show the impact and importance of localized efforts to ensure its growth. The role of international actors in this can also involve training local NGOs on how to use frameworks to measure and report results. Organizations like The Pacific Islands Association of Non-Government Organisations (PIANGO) and Humanitarian Advisory Group (HAG) have made efforts towards

creating a framework to measure localization. Together they created an approach, framework and tools to measure progress on activity and impact of localised humanitarian action intended to be used by local, national and international humanitarian actors to measure progress.¹⁵⁸ Working towards a standardized framework to measure localization should be a top priority for leading voices in the humanitarian aid field, such as the UN, OCHA, and Grand Bargain signatories, while simultaneously collaborating with local voices to ensure these frameworks are accessible and effective for them.. This will ensure that progress towards localization is being made and, if not, allow for the identification of specific areas where it is lacking.

Conclusion

The findings of this paper shows that LNGOs are effective at achieving humanitarian aid and lead to better outcomes for communities. Despite their deep presence and engagement at every stage within local contexts—unlike many international actors—LNGOs remain widely excluded from leadership roles in humanitarian efforts. Local organizations often face higher risks, limited resources, and overwhelming workloads, yet they lack access to the funding and decision-making power available to international counterparts. Localization is not just about shifting resources; it requires a systemic transformation of the humanitarian sector—one that challenges long-standing international dominance in decision-making. True localization means transferring control, increasing decision-making power, and directing more resources to local and national actors, enabling community members to lead programs that directly affect them.

Effective localization hinges on community-driven approaches. In Haiti, Colombia, and Ukraine, LNGOs demonstrated that waiting for communities to seek help and listening closely to

¹⁵⁸ *Measuring Localisation: Framework and Tools*, Dec. 2019, humanitarianadvisorygroup.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/Measuring-Localisation-Framework-and-Tools-Final_2019.pdf.

their needs led to more impactful, sustainable initiatives. These bottom-up strategies fostered trust and ensured that programs were tailored to address actual needs rather than externally imposed priorities. Similarly, during times of war, conflict, or natural disasters—as seen in the Philippines, Bangladesh, Ethiopia, Lebanon, Yemen, Ukraine, Haiti, and Colombia—LNGOs have consistently served as first responders, especially in hard-to-reach areas where INGOs often struggle to operate. Localization is also cost-effective, especially when it is context-specific. The Philippines case study highlights how, in ethnically diverse areas with Muslim-majority regions, international food kits that don't meet halal dietary requirements are wasteful. Context-specific localization also helps preserve and revitalize cultural practices. The Colombia and Philippines case studies demonstrate this, with a LNGO providing sheep to the Wayuu for weaving and another offering training to the Tagbanwa community to revitalize traditional bamboo weaving. The Colombia case study further challenged the persistent "capacity myth"—the belief that local actors lack the ability to manage direct funding. Two Colombian LNGOs successfully secured direct support by increasing transparency and accountability through detailed budgeting and regular reporting. While these LNGOs clearly demonstrated their capabilities, the Colombia case study also highlights the importance of providing support and training—particularly in financial management—during the transition to full autonomy.

The value of localization in contexts lacking a robust public sector is evident in the case of Lebanon. Ongoing economic and political crises in Lebanon have made the country's LNGO network essential for providing aid and services across the country. With the support of the Lebanese private sector and diaspora, LNGOs have successfully sustained community-run operations for Lebanon's most vulnerable populations without being constrained by donor restrictions typical of intergovernmental aid. However, as the Yemen case study illustrates, security concerns and funding constraints limit the efficacy of localized models. In order for LNGOs to successfully carry out aid distribution and community empowerment, LNGOs must receive

protection and support comparable to that of larger INGOs. This emphasizes the need to support LNGOs where INGOs can ethically support localization by providing resources for security and capacity-building assistance. It also highlights the vital importance of direct funding to LNGOs, which is especially valuable in times of crisis when governments are unable or unwilling to meet urgent needs. However, effective localization requires sustained support for the LNGO sector even before crises arise—whether political, economic, or environmental—to ensure they are equipped to respond when such moments occur.

Together, these findings show that localization, when done meaningfully and contextually, not only improves the effectiveness of humanitarian aid but also rebalances a system long dominated by international actors. By empowering local organizations and communities, we move toward a more just, resilient, and responsive humanitarian model. The future is local, and achieving meaningful localization requires not sidelining local actors, but recognizing them as central to driving change.

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