

OVERVIEW

The Grand Bargain, launched at the 2016 World Humanitarian Summit, represents a “unique agreement between some of the largest donors and humanitarian organisations who have committed to get more means into the hands of people” (IFRC 02/2021). The principle of localisation is central to this agreement, advocating respect for local expertise and the empowerment of local responders – including local and national NGOs – in humanitarian response and decision-making (HPG/ODI 13/06/2023). In humanitarian contexts, localisation is generally understood to refer to deeper respect for and engagement with community and national-level responders in every phase of humanitarian activities, recognising their role in effective and accountable aid delivery (PI 15/02/2021; IFRC accessed 02/07/2024). Strengthening the role and capacities of local responders should improve the efficiency, effectiveness, accountability, and reach of humanitarian action globally (PI 15/02/2021; IFRC accessed 02/07/2024; EC accessed 14/05/2024).

Localisation has long been part of the aid agenda in Afghanistan. In 2002, the National Solidarity Programme (later renamed the Citizen Charter) was launched, based on community-driven development through Community Development Councils (CDCs) (ISE 2018; WB 20/10/2020; CCNPP accessed 15/05/2024). Since returning to power, the Interim Taliban Authority (ITA) has abolished the Citizen Charter and CDCs, instructing government bodies to coordinate with ulema councils (ITA-appointed councils of religious scholars) instead (AAN 27/06/2024). Other regulations governing aid delivery in the country have also created challenges for the localisation agenda, such as bans on women and girl’s mobility and women working in NGOs (ACAPS 21/04/2023). Localisation cannot be achieved without women’s participation, as they are necessary to reach women and girls in need of assistance and monitor the impact of aid (UN Women 12/01/2023; ACAPS 07/02/2023; ICVA 16/01/2023).

In line with global humanitarian commitments to ensure that humanitarian and development responses are led by local responders and strengthen local systems, a multi-stakeholder Localisation Technical Working Group (LTWG) was established in Afghanistan in July 2023 to promote localisation practices through internal reforms, policies, behaviour change, and the empowerment of local responders. The LTWG includes donor, UN, international NGO (INGO), and national NGO (NNGO) representatives (LTWG 25/04/2024). Minutes from the Afghanistan Context Support Mechanism (ACSM) and Agency Coordinating Body for Afghan Relief and

Development (ACBAR) Conflict-Sensitivity Working Group (CSWG) meetings show that there is no uniform understanding of localisation in Afghanistan (CSWG minutes 12/06/2024). As a first step to understanding localisation efforts and challenges in Afghanistan, it is important to understand how different humanitarian responders understand the term. In 2024, the LTWG approached ACAPS to unpack different understandings of localisation in Afghanistan. As such, this report explores what localisation means to a range of humanitarian responders in Afghanistan and what successful localisation would look like to them.

Key findings

- There is no agreed definition of ‘localisation’ and ‘local’ in Afghanistan, reflecting the global challenge in defining what constitutes ‘local’ and who qualifies as ‘local’. Some frameworks refer to national or subnational responders as ‘local’, while others note that ‘local’ can refer to geographic areas, networks, relationships, or shared affinities. Either way, nuanced differences in power and knowledge dynamics between and within communities are often missed.
- For international humanitarian responders (donors, UN agencies, and INGOs), localisation generally means deeper engagement with local and national responders, increased local ownership, and valuing local knowledge. The term remains debated, however, and continues to evolve as different stakeholders contribute to its meaning.
- Generally, international definitions of localisation focus on capacity strengthening, funding, and partnerships, with some international responders also focused on increased ‘local’ responsibility and bottom-up approaches.
- For Afghan humanitarian responders (working in both international and national organisations), localisation means both capacity strengthening, funding, and partnerships (like their international counterparts) and increased ‘local’ responsibility, decentralisation, and contextually appropriate programming.
- The ITA’s approach to localisation is seen as driven by national pride, economic incentives, and control over aid delivery, bolstered by the high cost of internationally driven programmes and legislation favouring local responders. The ITA requires partnership with local governance structures, such as ulema councils.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Understandings of localisation in humanitarian action, development, and peacebuilding ...	2
Who is 'local'	2
Localisation	2
Stakeholders involved in localisation in Afghanistan and their diverse definitions	4
International stakeholders	4
National stakeholders.....	7
Differences that potentially challenge a common understanding of 'localisation'	9
The technical vs transformative approach	9
Funding	10
The ITA's role in localisation	10
Challenges, actors, and paths forward.....	10

ABOUT THIS REPORT

Aim

This report aims to support the LTWG and broader humanitarian response in Afghanistan by providing insight into the many definitions of localisation and how it is understood by different humanitarian responders. The report also explores what an ideal localised response looks like to a small sample of Afghan humanitarian responders.

Methodology

This report is based on a review of over 50 reports and internal documents, a review of donor, UN, and INGO websites, and 12 semi-structured interviews conducted between 23 June and 7 July 2024 with 13 humanitarian staff at UN agencies (2), INGOs (1), and NNGOs (9). This report also draws on minutes from ACSM/ACBAR CSWG meetings focused on localisation between January–June 2024 and the presentation notes of an ACSM/ACBAR localisation scoping survey of 56 humanitarian responders, 34 of whom were Afghan.

Limitations:

The small number of interviews and overrepresentation of Afghan humanitarians (10 of 12) and NNGOs (9 of 12) means primary data findings cannot be generalised to the entire humanitarian response in Afghanistan. As ACAPS spoke primarily with Afghan humanitarians, ACAPS was unable to determine the extent to which international humanitarian responders felt organisational definitions of localisation resonated with their work (or if they were even aware of these definitions). ACAPS did not speak directly with community-based organisations, civil society organisations, or the ITA, all of whom may have different understandings and expectations of localisation. Primary data provides context for the literature review. Together, interviews and the literature review help highlight differences in understandings of localisation in the Afghan context.

UNDERSTANDINGS OF LOCALISATION IN HUMANITARIAN ACTION, DEVELOPMENT, AND PEACEBUILDING

The localisation debate is not unique to the humanitarian sector; localisation is also actively discussed and debated in development and peacebuilding (Barakat and Milton 19/05/2020). In all three sectors, there is a lack of consensus around how localisation is defined and who is considered 'local'. In fact, discussions on shifting power from the international to the local continue to throw around similarly used, loosely defined terms, such as 'localisation', 'locally led', 'community ownership', and 'decolonisation', among others (GGF 13/04/2022). Peace Direct suggests viewing **local ownership (or localisation) on a spectrum: locally led, locally managed, and locally implemented** (Peace Direct 23/11/2020).

Who is 'local'

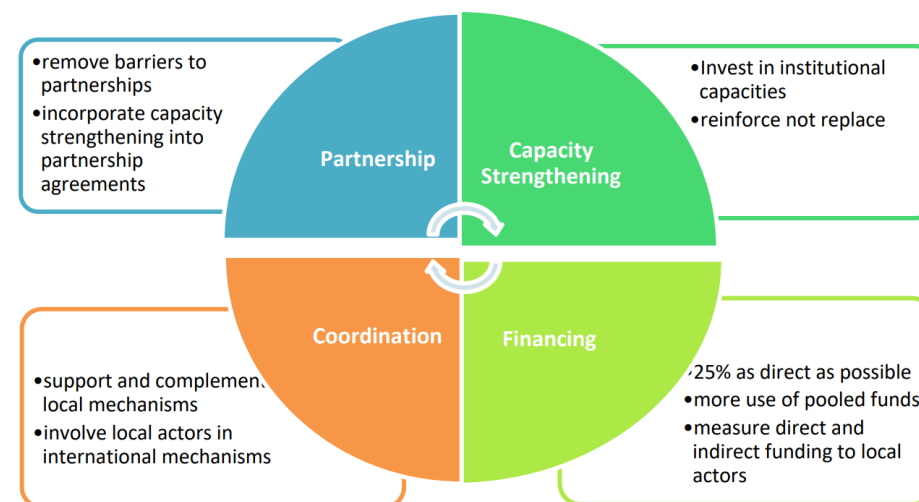
There is no consensus around who is 'local' in humanitarian contexts, including who counts as 'local' or how the difference between 'local' and 'national' NGOs and national staff in INGOs are delineated (HPG 11/2018 and 05/2020; Barakat and Milton 19/05/2020).¹ The Grand Bargain refers to national and local responders as "comprising governments, communities, Red Cross and Red Crescent National Societies and local civil society", and the Inter-Agency Standing Committee Localisation Workstream Guidance Note on Capacity Strengthening for Localisation refers to local responders as "local responders with national or subnational scope" (IASC 23/05/2016; IFRC 21/03/2022; IASC 05/2020). The 'local' "may be about geography, networks, relationships, or affinities, but these categories hide multiple complexities and do not provide neat distinctions" (HPG 05/2020). For example, such categories fail to address the many nuances that exist within population groups (e.g. elite vs broader population, rural vs urban). This lack of global consensus on what constitutes 'local' has trickled down to the operational level (ACSM/ACBAR survey 2023). **Without an understanding of what constitutes 'local', the question remains: who is the 'local' in 'localisation'?**

Localisation

While there is no singular definition of localisation in the humanitarian sector, the term is generally understood to refer to deeper respect for and engagement with local and national responders in every phase of humanitarian activities, recognising the role they play in effective and accountable aid delivery (PI 15/02/2021; IFRC accessed 02/07/2024). Although the

World Humanitarian Summit strongly promotes localisation, similar concepts predate its emphasis and have dominated humanitarian and development action for decades in various forms, such as efforts aimed at 'strengthening local capacities', 'working in solidarity', and 'partnerships with local organisations' (GMI 10/07/2017; Elkahlout et al. 13/04/2022). Localisation commitments, as laid out in the Grand Bargain, focus on the four areas highlighted below: partnership, capacity strengthening, coordination, and financing.

Figure 1. The four areas of localisation



Source: IFRC (01/05/2018)

International humanitarian responders tend to understand localisation as the effort to increase local ownership through strengthening the involvement of local actors within wider humanitarian response frameworks, the reduction of power asymmetries, increased direct funding to local responders, valuing local knowledge and access, and investing in local capacities. This understanding should also include local actors' meaningful participation in decision-making and local leadership (Schindler 27/03/2024; DRC 16/11/2023; Koch and Rooden 25/01/2024; ICVA 10/2019; HAG 05/2023; IFRC 21/03/2022; HPG 11/2018 and 05/2020). It is assumed that, by empowering local actors, humanitarian interventions will be more relevant, efficient, impactful, and sustainable because local actors remain in communities "before, during and

¹ ACAPS previously followed the Inter-Agency Standing Committee's definitions: "[n]ational NGOs/CSOs operating in the aid recipient country in which they are headquartered, working in multiple subnational regions, and not affiliated to an international NGO" and "[l]ocal NGOs/CSOs operating in a specific, geographically defined, subnational area of an aid recipient country, without affiliation to an international NGO/CSO" (IASC 24/01/2018).

after emergencies” (EC accessed 03/07/2024). According to the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC), localisation is about complementarity: the balance of national and international knowledge, experience, and capacity to “increase effectiveness of the humanitarian response” (IFRC 01/05/2018). An ACSM/ACBAR localisation scoping survey conducted at the end of 2023 found that respondents understood localisation in Afghanistan to mean increased funding for national responders, capacity strengthening, partnerships between national and international responders, and mentoring. There was also a lot of emphasis on the importance of locally led decision-making and programme development in effective localisation (ACSM/ACBAR survey 2023).

As the humanitarian crisis in Afghanistan becomes **increasingly protracted and the humanitarian-development-peace nexus** (or ‘triple nexus’) becomes more critical, it is important that humanitarian responders in Afghanistan understand how development and peacebuilding stakeholders see localisation. In 2015, the UN Development Group held a series of dialogue sessions (none of which were in Afghanistan) to understand localisation processes and their impact. In these sessions, localisation was described as “the process of defining, implementing and monitoring strategies at the local level for achieving global, national and subnational sustainable development goals and targets” (UNDG 22/03/2016). The notion of **localisation as a more comprehensive effort to “shift power from actors in the Global North to the actors in the Global South”** has gained traction, emphasising the central role of national actors (Decentralization & Localization 03/11/2023).

Peacebuilding has also increasingly been turning to ‘the local’, recognising the importance of local participation, ownership, and agency (PRIF 03/2022; Funk and Said 05/2010; Lee 25/04/2020; Peace Agency 12/05/2023). A study on peacebuilding in Liberia suggests that successful localisation in peacebuilding requires focus and activities to move from the national to the subnational level (Ojendal et al. 27/04/2017). Akin to some localisation criticisms in the humanitarian sector, critics of the ‘local turn’ argue that donor-driven priorities and agendas continue to sometimes trump local ownership, placing ‘localisation’ closer to the ‘locally implemented’ side of the spectrum (Lee 25/04/2020; Peace Agency 12/05/2023).

Across the humanitarian-development-peacebuilding nexus, tension remains between a more technical approach to localisation (viewed through the lens of indicators and local implementation) and a more transformative approach. Many localisation definitions and efforts sit comfortably in the realm of a ‘technical approach’ (Inclusive Peace accessed 10/07/2024; ACAPS 07/02/2023). What localisation entails – and who is considered local – remains a subject of debate across the nexus, and ‘localisation’ continues to be defined and redefined by its many stakeholders, including governments, academics, and affected populations.

STAKEHOLDERS INVOLVED IN LOCALISATION IN AFGHANISTAN AND THEIR DIVERSE DEFINITIONS

The key stakeholders involved in localisation in Afghanistan discussed in this section include international and national responders. In terms of international responders, this report looks at donors, UN agencies, and INGOs, exploring: 1) the specific roles they play in localisation dynamics in humanitarian response; 2) how they understand localisation; and 3) similarities and differences in their definitions of localisation. This discussion and definitions of localisation are heavily reliant on secondary data, and it is unclear to what extent these global definitions resonate with INGO staff in Afghanistan. For national responders, the report explores the views of both NNGOs and the ITA. These discussion sections are based primarily on interviews, supported by literature where available.

International stakeholders

Donors

Donors play a significant role in localisation, implementing policy changes to follow the Grand Bargain objectives, insisting that INGOs partner with local responders, and ensuring funding reaches NNGOs (Bond 18/07/2023; KII 24/06/2024 b; KII 25/06/2024 a). As one humanitarian responder said, “the main actors are donors... and the donors have added into their policy to take local NGOs with them 100%” (KII 24/06/2024 b). This means, however, that localisation continues to be top-down and partially driven by funders who, in Afghanistan, tend to have low appetite for risk (KII 30/06/2024 b). In practice, this frequently means that donors encourage local humanitarian responders’ increased involvement in aid delivery, often making this a condition of UN or INGO funding applications. Donors, however, still require international responders manage key issues around financial risk and safeguarding (CHA 17/01/2024).

The donors whose definitions are included in the table below were selected because of their contributions to both humanitarian aid in Afghanistan and the Afghanistan Humanitarian Fund, a pooled fund via which some funding is allocated to NNGOs (OCHA accessed 17/07/2024 a; OCHA 02/05/2024; OCHA accessed 17/07/2024 b; OCHA accessed 17/07/2024 c). In 2023, less than one-third (19%) of all pooled funding went to national responders (OCHA 02/05/2024).

Table 1. Global definitions of localisation by selected donors, from websites and strategic documents

NAME	DEFINITION
USAID Bureau for Humanitarian Assistance	Strengthening local systems, responding to local communities, and putting local actors in the lead because local leadership is critical to greater equity, effectiveness, and sustainability. This means enabling local actors to set their own agendas and develop solutions, shifting power to them, and promoting space for them to influence and exercise leadership over priority setting, activity design and implementation, and monitoring and evaluation results. This also means channelling more funding directly to local responders while ensuring accountability for the appropriate use of funds and achievement of development and humanitarian results.
Asian Development Bank	Uses the Sustainable Development Goals' definition of localisation: a process of defining, implementing, and monitoring strategies at the local level to achieve global, national, and subnational sustainable development goals.
European Commission	Empowering local responders in affected countries to lead and deliver humanitarian aid by strengthening their capacity and resources to respond to crises and promote long-term sustainability, and by recognising the importance of local knowledge and cultural understanding in providing effective and culturally appropriate aid.
UK Foreign and Commonwealth Development Office	Supporting local leadership and government to work at the national and local level to mitigate future crises; support and strengthen delivery, leadership, and decision-making by local and national responders wherever possible and appropriate; and promote the participation of local responders and women-led organisations in the design and delivery of responses.
German Federal Foreign Office	Focuses on capacity strengthening, access to funding, local innovation, and collaboration, and recognises the roles local actors play in humanitarian response and their ability to access hard-to-reach areas.
Dutch Relief Alliance	A process in which local actors are given prominence and stronger leadership in humanitarian assistance, focusing on localised leadership and equitable partnerships.

Source: ACAPS using data from USAID (accessed 12/07/2024); ADB (2018); EC (accessed 12/07/2024); FCDO (accessed 12/07/2024); GFFO (06/2019); DRA (accessed 17/07/2024).

It is important to note that although the above donors have not all included every theme in their definitions, they may still adhere to these principles in practice, incorporating such principles into other strategies and programme evaluations.

Germany, Japan, Sweden, and Switzerland all encourage localisation, discuss it to some extent in their strategies, and evaluate their humanitarian assistance in relation to Grand Bargain commitments, but do not provide a specific definition in their strategy documents (Bond 18/07/2023; CHA 24/10/2023; GFFO 06/2019; SIDA 10/12/2020; MOFA 07/2011; SDC 16/02/2023). This is likely because all four donors use the Grand Bargain definition of localisation. ACAPS was unable to find the World Bank definition.

Despite the lack of consensus on the definition, donors included in this analysis almost all consider localisation to mean promoting local participation and leadership, sustainability, capacity building, and funding, with each donor tailoring its approach to fit its broader foreign policy goals. **From these definitions, five key themes emerge:** local leadership and capacity development, sustainability, funding and resources, participation and inclusion, and accountability to affected populations.

Given that donor definitions of localisation tend to be quite general (although some targets are specific), implementing organisations may struggle to understand what level of localisation is expected. This is especially true if there is a lack of coherence between donors, resulting in organisations – especially those funded by more than one donor – being required to understand what localisation means to each donor.

UN agencies

The UN plays a significant role in localisation in Afghanistan in terms of funding, implementation, partnerships, and capacity development (KII 23/06/2024; KII 24/06/2024 b; KII 24/04/2024 c; 25/06/2024 a; KII 26/06/2024 b). According to the UN's 2023–2025 Strategic Plan for Afghanistan, the UN approach is “*human-rights centred, gender-responsive, community-based, neutral, accountable, cross-pillar, data-driven, localised, and reflective of the core values and principles of the United Nations*” (UN 02/07/2023). That said, there is also no agreed definition of localisation across UN agencies, and where an agency's localisation approach sits on the spectrum may depend on its mandate – especially who it considers 'local'. The table below outlines the different definitions of a diverse array of UN agencies active in Afghanistan, which were selected to include focus on humanitarian response, development, and gender.

Table 2. Global definitions of localisation as stated by selected UN agencies, from websites and strategic documents

NAME	DEFINITION
UNHCR	Meaningful engagement and inclusion of local organisations and organisations led by forcibly displaced, stateless, or other specific groups in UNHCR-led coordination structures, response plans, and planning cycles.
UN Women	A bottom-up approach that focuses on strengthening the leadership and capacity of local actors in humanitarian response to increase the reach, effectiveness, and accountability of humanitarian action. Additional emphasis is placed on gender-responsive localisation, which entails prioritising women-led and women-run organisations in processes to support local responders' access to financing, coordination and decision-making forums, and partnerships.
IOM	Humanitarian response that strengthens the leadership, response, and institutional capacities of local and national responders, with the ultimate goal of facilitating locally led responses and increasing the participation of affected communities. This is achieved via expanded partnerships with local and national responders, funding (including multiyear funding), capacity strengthening, engagement, and involvement in coordination mechanisms.
WFP	Investing in local responders' long-term institutional capacity, promoting more equal partnerships, and ensuring better integration with local coordination mechanisms.
UNICEF	Recognising, respecting, and strengthening the leadership and capacity of local actors in humanitarian action, including through direct funding and investing in local actors' institutional capacity and empowerment.
UNDP	The process of defining, implementing, and monitoring strategies at the local level to achieve global, national, and subnational sustainable development goals and targets. This involves concrete mechanisms, tools, innovations, platforms, and processes to effectively translate the development agenda into results at the local level. The concept of localisation should be understood holistically, beyond the institutions of local governments, to include all local actors, such as civil society, traditional leaders, religious organisations, academia, the private sector, and others.

Source: ACAPS using data from UNHCR (22/02/2023); UN Women (17/08/2023 and 05/05/2020); IOM (22/01/2024); WFP (12/11/2021); UNICEF (13/12/2023); UNDP (22/03/2016).

It is important to note that, although the above UN agencies have not all included every theme in their definitions, they likely still prioritise these themes in practice, incorporating them into other strategies and programme evaluations. For example, although funding is not an identified theme in the UNHCR and UNDP definitions, both agencies fund and/or contract local responders.

The UNHCR definition of localisation comes from its brief on localisation in UNHCR-led coordination structures. No other complete definition is readily available (UNHCR 22/02/2023). ACAPS was unable to find an OCHA or UNFPA definition for localisation; in fact, there was only one reference to localisation in UNFPA's 2022–2025 strategic plan (UNFPA 19/07/2021). This is likely because both organisations follow the Grand Bargain definition, as both partake in the Grand Bargain's self-reporting exercise, including on localisation (IASC 18/04/2023).

One UN responder who spoke with ACAPS said their agency works as much as possible to ensure engagement with local responders, consistently reviews its number of national and international partners, and has been working with relevant ministries to develop a joint understanding of localisation. This interviewee also noted the need to build the capacities of specific government ministries on localisation (KII 23/06/2024). This description was in line with the agency's global definition. Another interviewee spoke of their own projects, focused on capacity strengthening of local NGOs and civil society organisations (KII 24/04/2024 c).

Among UN agencies, the same key themes emerged as among donors. Almost all UN agencies consider localisation to mean promoting local participation and leadership, sustainability, capacity building, and funding. More emphasis on accountability and the localisation-accountability to affected populations (AAP) nexus may be needed, along with more emphasis on localisation as a bottom-up approach (only explicitly stated by UN Women) and the inclusion of affected populations (only explicitly stated by UNHCR).

INGOs

INGOs act as both implementers and NNGO funding partners for NNGOs in humanitarian response, alongside supporting capacity strengthening and due diligence to meet donor requirements (KII 26/06/2024 a; KII 30/06/2024 b; ACAPS 07/02/2023; ICVA 02/2022). The table below highlights the different definitions of a diverse array of major INGOs active in Afghanistan, selected primarily because of their varied focus and geographic reach. ACAPS acknowledges, however, that the selected INGOs are only a fraction of those active in Afghanistan, with 86 alone participating in ACBAR (ACBAR 13/05/2024).



Table 3. Global definitions of localisation by selected INGOs, from websites and strategic documents

NAME	DEFINITION
Save The Children	Uses the International Committee of the Red Cross's definition of localisation, which describes localisation as a process to ensure local and national responders are better engaged in the planning, delivery, and accountability of humanitarian action, while ensuring humanitarian needs are met swiftly, effectively, and in a principled manner. This also includes increasing the level of authority, capacity, decision-making, funding, and accountability held by local actors in humanitarian response. The focus is on elevating and strengthening the role of local responders and children to drive sustainable impact by shifting power and embracing localised approaches. Save the Children engages in seven dimensions of localisation: funding, partnerships, capacity, participation revolution, coordination, visibility, and policy influence.
Care	A holistic approach to advance locally led and locally sustained development and humanitarian assistance by building local voices and leadership. This definition blends principles of locally led development with diversity, equity, inclusion, and accessibility, emphasising shifting power to the local level and centring women, girls, and marginalised communities. This approach has five pillars: 1) longstanding partnerships with local organisations; 2) shifting power, decision-making, and leadership within these partnerships; 3) bringing organisations together to harness the power of collective action; 4) leveraging CARE's global presence to connect local responders to global stakeholders, movements, and networks; and 5) adopting and scaling operational models and programmatic approaches that ensure people and communities shape their own social, economic, and development futures.
Norwegian refugee council	Focuses on partnerships with local responders, including by providing overhead to national, local, and subnational NGOs, civil society organisations, and national Red Cross or Red Crescent Societies; engaging with donors on their policies related to cascading overheads; removing barriers for local responders to provide assistance and services to displacement-affected populations; promoting the interests of frontline responders; promoting more inclusive coordination mechanisms; and improving community engagement and accountability.
International Rescue Committee	A shift in the distribution of power in humanitarian aid delivery, focusing on funding, more equitable distribution of power, and recognising that local actors are the main agents of response and recovery and should guide international responders as to how to add to existing capacities and systems. The emphasis here is on partnerships and centring people affected by crisis (especially women, girls, and other marginalised groups) in the design, implementation, monitoring, and evaluation of programmes.

NAME	DEFINITION
Acted	Uses the idea 'think local, act global', challenging existing approaches to localisation, focusing on local responses built on local knowledge and solutions, and engaging a wide range of local stakeholders. This definition focuses on strengthening organisational and technical capacities alongside financing to ensure local actors are identifying response priorities, implementing projects, and monitoring outcomes.
World Vision	Staff in South Asia and the Pacific identified localisation as encompassing partnership with and capacity strengthening of local and community-based organisations, and in World Vision's federated structure, where (in some countries) international branch offices have been replaced by national offices, governed and managed by national staff. This definition also notes that the extent of funding and support provided to local responders is influenced by donor and government requirements.

Source: ACAPS using data from STC (2020); STC (accessed 18/07/2024); CARE (30/04/2024); NRC (06/2023 and 16/08/2021); IRC (11/05/2021); ACTED (29/02/2024); WVI (29/02/2024).

It is important to note that, although some of the selected INGOs have not included every theme in their definitions, they likely still adhere to these principles in practice, incorporating them into other strategies and programming.

As with UN agencies and donors, there is no singular definition of localisation among INGOs. Some adhere to the IFRC definition while others focus on partnerships or local solutions. The IFRC defines localisation as increasing international investment in and respect for the role of local responders, with the aim of increasing the reach, effectiveness, and accountability of humanitarian action. This includes re-thinking humanitarian response from the ground up and recognising that most humanitarian assistance is already provided by local responders (IFRC accessed 22/07/2024).

International responders in Afghanistan identified localisation as capacity strengthening and partnerships, in line with institutional definitions (KII 23/06/2024; KII 30/06/2024 b). One international responder told ACAPS that localisation means close collaboration with those who are 'closest' to affected populations, such as NGOs or community-based organisations, and that proper localisation means bottom-up decision-making in humanitarian interventions (KII 23/06/2024). This was echoed by another international responder, who added that localisation includes strengthening local capacities, decision-making, and inclusion in all phases of the project cycle, "whether through local staff, local set up, or a local partner" (KII 30/06/2024 b). This responder also emphasised flexibility and decentralisation, as well as the need to understand that context in Afghanistan differs across and within provinces, and that humanitarian operations need to consider "local needs, acceptance, and decentralised planning" to localise effectively (KII 30/06/2024 b).

The same key themes emerged in INGO definitions of localisation as donor and UN agency definitions. INGOs, however, tend to have more comprehensive definitions of localisation, which heavily emphasise AAP. The ACSM/ACBAR localisation scoping survey conducted at the end of 2023 confirmed this finding, noting that for many INGOs, localisation consists of – among others – transitioning to an all-Afghan staff, prioritising local NGO voices, and ensuring core funding to NNGOs (CSWG minutes 19/01/2024). CSWG participants also noted that partnerships remain unequal and tend to be top-down, with projects implemented according to the design and guidance of INGO partners – a perspective echoed in the literature (CSWG minutes 12/06/2024; COAR 12/2019).

It is also important to note that, for some INGOs, localisation is not a new effort; it is an aim they have been working toward for some time, as the following quote illustrates.

“Localisation has been tested and proved organic in Afghanistan long ago. It is not new. We need to recognise that localisation worked in Afghanistan before, it has been working, and it will work. It is not new. What is new is the approach... Localisation is not contract management. Localisation is for people to stay longer, stay with communities, and engage with them for longer. We need to differentiate between contract management and localisation” (KII 30/06/2024 b).

National stakeholders

ACAPS only found two clear NNGO localisation strategy documents, one of which included a definition and the other framed around how-to steps. Given that there are over 1,400 NNGOs and civil society organisations active in Afghanistan, the interviews on which this section is based provide a glimpse of NNGO perspectives (UNDP accessed 09/08/2024). ACBAR counts 117 NNGOs among its members (ACBAR 13/05/2024).

NNGOs

A 2019 survey by the Citizens Organization for Advocacy and Resilience, one of Afghanistan’s largest NNGOs, found that localisation is not entirely understood in Afghanistan (COAR 12/2019). Between 23–30 June 2024, ACAPS asked 11 Afghan humanitarian responders in Afghanistan, “according to your professional experience, how would you define localisation?”

Some Afghan responders said ‘localisation’ translates as ‘*mahali sazi*’ (‘*making it local*’) or ‘*bomi sazi*’ (‘*making it indigenous*’), explaining, “*when I hear the word localisation, I think it means that an activity is performed by local and indigenous people of the region, without the involvement of international staff*” (KII 25/06/2024 a; KII 26/06/2024 a; KII 30/06/2024 a).

Another said: “*The real meaning of localisation is to be local. To strengthen internal enterprises. That is, the power from international institutions will come directly to local enterprises who can solve their own problems with their own capacities... Everyone has defined localisation based on their interests... this problem is not only in Afghanistan, but also in other countries*” (KII 26/06/2024 c).

When asked “in your opinion, what would successful localisation look like in Afghanistan?”, **Afghan humanitarians said that a localised response is a locally led response.** This sentiment was also echoed by respondents to the ACSM/ACBAR scoping survey on localisation – primarily Afghan staff in national and international organisations, as well as some INGO international staff – who said a localised response includes local decision-making and locally developed programming (ACSM/ACBAR survey 2023). Afghan responders who spoke with ACAPS said localisation means strengthening NNGOs to lead their own projects and develop their own policies and standards, ensuring service delivery is convenient for affected populations and their voices are applied to programming, capacity strengthening, and greater responsibility and decision-making power (KII 24/06/2024 a; KII 25/06/2024 a; KII 26/06/2024 a; KII 26/06/2024 b; KII 26/06/2024 c). Most ACSM/ACBAR survey respondents said ‘localisation’ means programming is developed locally and decisions are made locally. Fewer agreed on whether all staff or all leadership need to be local for effective ‘localisation’ (ACSM/ACBAR survey 2023).

Afghan responders suggested that **collaboration with the Government, agreeing on localisation criteria, and transparent monitoring of the localisation agenda** are all key to successful localisation in Afghanistan (KII 24/06/2024 a; 24/06/2024 b; 25/06/2024 a; 26/06/2024 a; 26/06/2024 b). In this case, NNGOs would design and implement programmes and be monitored and observed by their donor (KII 24/06/2024 b). Afghan responders also noted **the need for earmarked multiyear funding for NNGOs, along with multiyear accompaniment by international responders and capacity strengthening to ensure sustainability** (KII 24/06/2024 b; 26/06/2024 b). INGO flexibility toward NNGOs was also raised (KII 26/06/2024 a). Two Afghan responders working at a UN agency emphasised that a localised response should **build on existing mechanisms or infrastructure**, including relationships (KII 24/06/2024 c). **Effective localisation requires strong local knowledge and community input** (KII 24/06/2024 c; 30/06/2024 a). With regard to reaching women, for example, this could include home-based trainings conducted and implemented by women from the communities themselves (KII 24/06/2024 c). One responder also noted that a localised response is a relevant response, raising the issue that, in some communities, people have questioned why they are receiving training on different subjects when they are still unable to meet basic food needs (KII 25/06/2024 b). Another emphasised the need for **local involvement in decision-making** (KII 26/06/2024 b).

One Afghan humanitarian responder suggested that the many understandings of localisation may confuse or complicate the process, noting that **an agreed definition is necessary for local and national responders to understand what is meant by 'localisation'** (KII 26/06/2024 c). It is worth noting that the definitions explored in this report have been developed outside the context and likely not by members of affected populations. The question remains, then, **how localised can humanitarian responses be if localisation itself is not defined by affected populations?**

The ITA

Government engagement is central to localisation (ICVA 09/2018). The ITA's international isolation, sanctions, and donors' risk-averse policies, however, have resulted in an internationally driven localisation effort that does not fully engage with the country's governing authorities.

In the absence of interviews with the ITA, ACAPS relied on the literature and NNGO perceptions of the ITA's approach to localisation, which was **interpreted both critically and positively**. As noted above, Afghan responders suggested that **collaboration with the government is key**.

One humanitarian responder perceived the ITA vision of localisation as driven by national pride, economic incentives, and a desire to streamline aid operations more than strict adherence to international localisation agendas (KII 07/07/2024). Responders who spoke with ACAPS between December 2022 and July 2023 noted that the ITA tends to favour the trend toward localisation, highlighting its support for the establishment of new NNGOs (ACAPS 31/07/2023). The ITA uses the language of 'localisation' to justify its regulations, transferring programmes from INGOs to NNGOs. Since returning to power, the ITA has expressed a preference for working with Afghan humanitarians over international responders, in part because Afghan responders are seen as closer to the culture (ACAPS 31/07/2023). This was reaffirmed by one humanitarian responder who spoke with ACAPS for this report, who added that the ITA views INGOs and other international responders as disconnected from local contexts and needs and is seeking to reduce the number of international responders and prioritise local responders in humanitarian operations (KII 07/07/2024).

One Afghan humanitarian responder noted that the ITA has played a "very positive role in localisation", citing the transfer of community-based education programmes from INGOs to NNGOs as an example (KII 26/06/2024 b). This was affirmed by another interviewee, who stated that the government plays "an important and constructive role" in localisation (KII 30/06/2024 a). The ITA also encourages the participation of the ulema in various stages of humanitarian aid implementation, having established official ulema councils in all provinces (KII 25/06/2024 b; TOLONews 25/09/2023). This is unsurprising given the ITA's deeply religious background and the fact that the ulema have been called to advise the ITA (RUSI 26/01/2023).

Some INGOs are sceptical of the ITA's approach to localisation, which they see as narrowly applied via a framework of organisations implementing government programmes (CSWG minutes 12/06/2024). The ITA has actively sought to reign in and control international humanitarian response in Afghanistan, regulating both INGOs and NNGOs. A study by the Humanitarian Advisory Group found that the breadth of ITA restrictions on humanitarian operations has created an environment not always conducive to effective NNGO (or INGO) operations (HAG 05/2023). Although the ITA's views of and approaches to humanitarian aid are not homogeneous and differ according to location, NNGOs and INGOs have reported increasing government interference in humanitarian aid (HAG 05/2023).

As part of its approach to localisation, the ITA cancelled CDCs and disempowered traditional governance mechanisms, such as village shuras (councils). A study by the Afghanistan Analysts Network (AAN) found that, by 2024, nearly all those interviewed described shuras in their localities as being "stripped of their powers and duties", primarily because of lack of financial support, but also sometimes because staff were replaced by the ITA (AAN 27/06/2024). This was echoed by one humanitarian responder who spoke with ACAPS, noting that "the Taliban does not like to involve the local community in localisation" and "there is a thought in the government that whatever it orders, local NGOs should implement" (KII 25/06/2024 b). This same responder, however, also said that some shuras still play a role; a sentiment echoed by some participants in the AAN study, who described the role of shuras in liaising and negotiating between villages and the government (KII 26/06/2024 b; AAN 27/06/2024). Playing a role in humanitarian response does not, however, indicate decision-making power. As the ITA continues to slowly centralise power, moving away from subnational and community structures, it can be assumed that the role of shuras may be reduced further.

The ITA abolished the CDCs established by the previous government's National Solidarity Programme (succeeded by the Citizen's Charter) on 23 May 2024 (AAN 27/06/2024; CPI 30/03/2016). An example of localisation and devolved decision-making, CDCs previously played a role in community development across Afghanistan (WB 24/02/2021; ISE 2018; Bhatia et al. 01/01/2018). Funded by the World Bank, led by the State, and implemented by INGOs and NNGOs, CDCs received generally positive reviews of their programmes and approach from international responders, although 'localisation' via CDCs presented the same slew of challenges as localisation efforts generally do and CDCs were not without criticism (CMI 2022; WB 20/10/2020; CCNPP accessed 11/07/2024; ICVA 02/2022; ISE 11/10/2019; Bhatia et al. 01/01/2018; Akbari and Rahmani 01/2020; USIP 24/04/2017).

DIFFERENCES THAT POTENTIALLY CHALLENGE A COMMON UNDERSTANDING OF 'LOCALISATION'

The technical vs transformative approach

All stakeholders agree that local ownership is imperative for effective and sustainable responses, with communities involved in programme design, planning, implementation, and monitoring. Respondents to the ACSM/ACBAR scoping survey outlined the top three factors considered “very important” when developing a localisation strategy: 1) having a voice in humanitarian decision-making (76%); 2) increased participation in coordination mechanisms (76%); and 3) sufficient funding for local/national actors (65.5%) (ACSM/ACBAR survey 2023). Discussions with national responders and minutes from the CSWG suggest, however, that this does not translate in practice. While all humanitarian stakeholders consulted for this report said they were committed to localisation, including the emphasis on more locally led initiatives and capacity strengthening for local and national responders, these stakeholders sit along different point of the localisation spectrum.

According to Inclusive Peace, “a technical approach to localisation centers around how aid can be directly delivered to local organisations without reducing accountability mechanisms” (Inclusive Peace accessed 10/07/2024). **For the most part, international responders’ reference to capacity strengthening sits on the technical side of localisation**, with a focus on project and financial management, monitoring and evaluation, and establishing and maintaining back-end systems that meet donor requirements. Donors, who tend to have narrower definitions of and approaches to localisation, are focused on funding recipients (UN agencies and INGOs), providing funding to local responders, and shouldering the burden of oversight and control.

The technical approach is at odds with the transformative approach, which emphasises going beyond merely locally led responses. A transformative approach requires new, equitable partnerships that embrace local knowledge of how to respond to challenges. A transformative approach also means flexible and long-term institutional funding “to mitigate the competition for financial support among local actors, curtail the prevalence of short-term, project-based funding and guarantee local actors planning security” (Inclusive Peace accessed 10/07/2024). Afghans have expressed a desire to not only be involved in humanitarian decision-making in their country, but also to lead humanitarian response. Some donors, UN agencies, and INGOs also emphasise shifting power to local actors; INGOs and NNGOs both place more emphasis on inclusive decision-making and accountability to affected populations, while UN agency mandates affect who is included. For example, UNHCR emphasises the inclusion of groups led by forcibly displaced or stateless individuals, UN

Women prioritises women-led organisations, and UNDP includes civil society actors and the private sector among localisation stakeholders.

Few actors speak explicitly of localisation as a bottom-up process, begging the question: is there a true commitment to shifting power? NNGOs are the biggest advocates of bottom-up localisation, followed by some INGOs and other responders. Among national responders, there is a discrepancy between those who view localisation as humanitarian activities performed solely by local organisations, with minimal involvement from international responders, and those who view it as a more equitable partnership in decision-making, funding, and implementation.

Funding

INGOs and NNGOs argue that more flexible, multiyear, transparent, and accountable funding, which allows for greater local control and adaptability to varied realities, is crucial to localisation. Such funding would allow national responders to focus on response rather than survival. **All stakeholders – donors, UN agencies, INGOs, and the ITA – agree on the need to fund national and local humanitarian responders. These stakeholders differ, however, in the degree of freedom/authority given to the organisations they fund.** Donors focus on funding mechanisms that ensure transparency, accountability, and alignment with their strategic interests, and UN agencies walk a fine line between donor requirements and the needs of downstream partners (who may not always be able to meet stringent donor requirements for a range of issues). The ITA appears to want greater control over funding and operations to ensure that humanitarian response occurs in line with its ideological approach.

The ITA’s role in localisation

There is no agreement around the ITA’s role in localisation or whether it should be involved at all. On the one hand, some Afghan responders feel the ITA plays a positive role in promoting localisation. On the other hand, other national and international responders have expressed concern about the ITA’s level of interference in and regulation of NGO operations, as well as whether the ITA sees localisation as shifting power to local responders or as state-controlled implementation by NNGOs.

Humanitarian stakeholders have different opinions on whether (or to what extent) localisation should involve the ITA. Some interviewees emphasised the need to strengthen the capacity of ITA actors, including the Ministry of Economy, while others were fearful that the ITA drive for localisation is based on its desire to control aid delivery, sever links between INGOs and

NNGOs, and politicise or divert humanitarian aid (CWSG 25/10/2023; SIGAR 30/07/2023; AAN 01/10/2023; NPR 23/06/2023; DRC 31/05/2023).² One responder countered, stating that even if such is the case, if the ITA are well established and able to do the work, why not work with whomever possible to deliver effective aid (KII 24/06/2024 c).

CHALLENGES, ACTORS, AND PATHS FORWARD

Localisation remains a hotly debated topic in Afghanistan, with continuous disagreement over who constitutes 'local', what localisation entails, and the different approaches to operationalising localisation. This lack of coherent vision, definition, and approach has led to confusion over and debate around the localisation agenda, suggesting the need for a process to facilitate mutual agreement around the criteria for successful localisation in Afghanistan, including monitoring indicators and transparent mechanisms for monitoring and evaluation of the localisation strategy. The LTWG has started this process and developed an ambitious action plan. It is important, however, to ensure that diverse local voices are heard in this process.

While few definitions of localisation in this study explicitly engage with the question of who is 'local', the ACSM/ACBAR scoping survey showed that affected communities are considered the most 'local', followed by community-based organisations and NNGOs. Local government authorities were not far behind but are considered less local than non-state actors (ACSM/ACBAR survey 2023). Other potential key local actors who play a role in the localisation agenda but are less frequently considered (and also not included in this analysis) include faith actors, grassroots organisations (such as women's cultural associations and weavers' associations), trade union-like associations, and the private sector (Samuel Hall 07/2024; CWSG 19/01/2024; ACSM/ACBAR survey 2023). For example, faith actors tend to enjoy a high level of trust among communities and "are often the first and last responders in crises, operating in parallel to humanitarian coordination mechanisms from which these actors had long been excluded" (Samuel Hall 07/2024). Respondents to the ACSM/ACBAR survey also spoke of the importance of including Kuchi nomads and local private sector organisations (ACSM/ACBAR survey 2023). Further exploration of the role of Kuchi nomads and private sector organisation is warranted, as they are also not included in this report.

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² Politicisation and diversion of humanitarian aid are not unique to Afghanistan, as instances of such have also been documented elsewhere (ICVA 05/2024).