



## **Localization at a Crossroads: Turning Rhetoric into Reality**

For the past five years, I have had the privilege of serving as Project Director for USAID's Partnerships Incubator, where I witnessed firsthand the push for localization—a concept that has garnered increasing attention and action across the development landscape. While localization promises to shift power, resources, and decision-making to local actors, the reality for many local organizations, especially those in the Global South, remains starkly different.

Localization is at a true crossroads but is caught between rhetoric and reality. Theoretical frameworks abound, but local leaders' voices—the ones who stand to make or break this agenda—are too often drowned out in the flurry of ideas. Even with persistent political and economic challenges that may never be fully resolved, there remains an opportunity to make considerable progress.

As someone deeply invested in this agenda and grateful to be in a position where I have been tasked to examine all the facets of the localization diamond, I believe it is time to shift the focus toward real solutions that position local organizations as true development partners.

### **The Promise of Localization**

The localization agenda is clear: local actors must be trusted with more than just project implementation; they must be involved in strategic planning and decision-making at every

level. This means moving from rhetoric to action, from top-down directives to shared leadership. As a local leadership champion, I have seen that this vision is not just aspirational but necessary for achieving sustainable development outcomes. But to get there, we need to address the gaps between the theory of localization and the realities on the ground.

### **What's Missing in the Localization Discourse?**

The current localization discourse often fails to address local leaders' key challenges. Localization cannot simply mean handing over project tasks. It must mean sharing real power in decision-making processes. Local organizations need a seat at the table in project design and shaping the broader development agenda.

Most of the funding is still project-based and tied to strict donor-imposed criteria. Local organizations need core funding that allows them to develop their capacities on their own terms, build sustainable systems, and focus on long-term impact rather than meeting short-term project goals.

Many local organizations are overburdened by the complex compliance requirements imposed by donors. This stifles innovation and creates an environment where international partners are better positioned to manage funds. Adjustments to streamline compliance processes, making it easier for local organizations to access funds and focus on development impact would be a welcomed change for local organizations.

Localization efforts can be turbocharged by leveraging technology. From blockchain for financial transparency to AI-driven tools for monitoring and evaluation, local organizations should have access to innovative solutions that allow them to leapfrog traditional development models and improve efficiency.

### **Actionable Steps for USAID and Donors**

Technical assistance should no longer be something imposed on local organizations. Local leaders to define their own capacity-building priorities and creating peer-learning networks where local actors share their knowledge and strategies so that they are technically and structurally prepared to implement USAID-funded projects effectively.

Local actors must be included in the strategic planning processes that shape national and regional development agendas. Establishing local advisory boards for USAID projects is one way to ensure that local voices are embedded in every stage of project planning and implementation.

Stepped-up efforts should be made to foster context-specific new ideas and solutions, encourage cross-sector collaboration, and allow local organizations to innovate without the restrictions of traditional grant mechanisms.

It's also time to implement real metrics that track power shifts. How many local organizations are involved in strategic decisions? What percentage of funding goes to unrestricted, core funding? How often are local-led evaluations being conducted? These metrics will provide transparency and accountability in the localization process.

Simplify donor compliance and reporting requirements for smaller local organizations, reducing bureaucratic overhead. Use technology solutions like mobile reporting platforms to minimize the burden and enable organizations to focus more on impact rather than administration.

### **A Message to Donors: How to Strengthen Localization**

I believe there is a tremendous opportunity to advance the localization agenda. We can collectively achieve better, more sustainable development outcomes by fostering more authentic partnerships with local organizations that possess deep-rooted knowledge and expertise about the communities they serve. By trusting them with greater decision-making authority, we can ensure that development solutions are more relevant and impactful. Donors can create structures that allow local actors to take the lead, not only in project execution but in shaping the strategic direction of a project.

Long-term, flexible funding is essential for building resilient local organizations. Donors can help local organizations invest in capacity, innovation, and sustainability by supporting core operations—not just project-specific grants. This shift will allow local organizations to grow and adapt to changing needs, ensuring that development efforts have a lasting impact.

Rather than viewing local leadership through the lens of risk, let's reframe it as an opportunity to drive innovation, sustainability, and growth. Donors can support local organizations by encouraging learning, experimentation, and adaptation, with a focus on building trust and mutual accountability.

Localization is our way forward. It requires bold decisions, real partnership, and trust. It's time to move beyond the ivory tower localization theories and debates on the definition of localization and listen to those on the ground. Let's make localization more than just a policy—let's make it a standard practice.

How can development organizations like USAID ensure that local leaders are heard and empowered to drive decision-making and shape development outcomes? What challenges and opportunities do you see in this shift toward true localization?

#Localization #Development #LocalLeadership #Innovation #USAID #DevelopmentImpact #Sustainability

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