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The Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Localisation in Aid: Insights from Qualitative Interviews with NGO Staff

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Master in International Studies

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SOCIOLOGIA
E POLÍTICAS PÚBLICAS

Department of History

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Resumo

Esta dissertação analisa como a pandemia da COVID-19 afetou o progresso da localização no desenvolvimento e na ajuda humanitária. Com base numa revisão da literatura e em entrevistas semiestruturadas com funcionários de ONGs, emprega uma análise temática para comparar e avaliar as mudanças na prática antes e depois da pandemia. Os resultados indicam que as restrições de viagem impostas ao pessoal internacional provocaram mudanças significativas na gestão organizacional e de projetos dos atores locais. Enquanto a digitalização dos fluxos de trabalho se acelerou, a autoridade operacional no terreno aumentou. No entanto, essas mudanças raramente se traduziram numa transferência estrutural de poder e num financiamento sustentável. As restrições contratuais, o controlo dos doadores e cortes orçamentais limitaram a delegação de tomadas de decisão substantivas e a transferências de recursos a longo prazo.

Nos casos em que as equipas locais dispunham de capacidade suficiente e de estruturas organizacionais consolidadas antes da pandemia, a liderança e a autonomia locais foram reforçadas. No entanto, esses progressos foram irregulares e altamente dependente da estabilidade e continuidade do financiamento. As ferramentas digitais eliminaram as barreiras logísticas e ampliaram as oportunidades de aprendizagem, mas não substituíram totalmente a interação presencial para tarefas que exigiam a construção de confiança, formação e comunicação subtil. Em conclusão, o progresso na localização depende da implementação simultânea de múltiplas reformas. Isto requer financiamento transparente e flexível, incluindo custos indiretos, conceção colaborativa de projetos, capacitação, diversificação das fontes de financiamento e estabelecimento de redes regionais para sustentar a defesa da causa. As limitações incluem o reduzido e restrito número de entrevistados e a falta de dados quantitativos. Pesquisas futuras devem adotar abordagens longitudinais e de métodos mistos para avaliar os impactos de médio a longo prazo.

Palavras-chave: localização, ONGs, COVID-19, ajuda ao desenvolvimento, ajuda humanitária

Abstract

This study examines how the COVID-19 pandemic impacted the progress of localisation in development and humanitarian aid. Based on a literature review and semi-structured interviews with NGO staff, it employs thematic analysis to compare and assess changes in practice before and after the pandemic. The findings indicate that travel restrictions on international staff led to significant changes in the organizational and project management of local actors. While the digitization of workflows accelerated, operational authority in the field increased. However, these changes rarely translated into structural power transition and sustained funding. Contractual constraints, donor control, and budget cuts limited the delegation of substantive decision-making and long-term resource transfers. In cases where local teams had sufficient capacity and established organizational structures, before the pandemic, local leadership and autonomy were strengthened. However, such progress was uneven and highly dependent on the stability and continuity of funding. Digital tools eliminated logistical barriers and expanded learning opportunities, but they did not fully substitute for face-to-face interaction for tasks requiring trust-building, training, and nuanced communication. In conclusion, progress in localisation depends on the simultaneous implementation of multiple reforms. This requires transparent and flexible funding, including indirect costs, collaborative project design, capacity building, diversification of funding sources, and the establishment of regional networks to sustain advocacy. Limitations include a small and limited sample size of interviewees and the lack of quantitative data. Future research should adopt longitudinal and mixed-method approaches to evaluate medium to long-term impacts.

Keywords: localisation, NGOs, COVID-19, development aid, humanitarian aid

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Introduction

Development and humanitarian aid have operated within a dichotomous framework dividing the 'rich North' and the 'poor South' over an extended period. However, the advancement of globalization and the emergence of global challenges, such as climate change, have blurred these boundaries since the beginning of the 21st century. In this paradigm shift, the role of states and international organizations, which were traditionally central actors in providing aid, has been increasingly complemented by NGOs that can engage more closely with local communities and directly address critical issues. However, this shift has not fundamentally altered the aid structure in which funding and resources flow from international organizations (North) to local NGOs (South). As a result, aid that should be implemented based on local needs often remains subject to the policies of the international donor organizations.

The concept of localisation has attracted increasing attention in the aid context. Localisation is based on the fundamental idea that aid should be locally led and has been proposed to correct the structural imbalances that characterize traditional aid. At the 2016 World Humanitarian Summit, the Grand Bargain highlighted initiatives to promote localisation, including direct funding provision, capacity building for local actors, and establishing equitable partnerships. However, directly allocating funds and delegating authority to local organizations remain limited, and utilizing local resources, including human resources, remains insufficient.

In 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic had a significant impact worldwide, and the development and humanitarian aid sectors were no exception. Travel restrictions and lockdown measures made it difficult for international staff to work on the ground, causing existing aid systems to become dysfunctional. Consequently, local organizations were compelled to respond on the front lines, which drew attention to the pandemic as a factor accelerating the localisation process.

This study discusses how the COVID-19 pandemic has influenced the advancement of localisation in development and humanitarian aid. It has been more than two years since the World Health Organization (WHO) declared a Public Health Emergency of International Concern (PHEIC) on May 6, 2023 (WHO, n.d.), and the impacts of the pandemic on the aid sector have gradually become apparent. However, previous research has primarily focused on the health and medical sectors due to the nature of the pandemic, and relatively few studies have considered aid NGOs operating in other fields. Therefore, the objective of this study is to

contribute to existing knowledge by addressing localisation and examining its relationship with the COVID-19 pandemic. The study employed semi-structured interviews with staff who were involved in NGO activities before and after the COVID-19 pandemic and conducted thematic analysis on the interview data.

This study is structured as follows. Chapter 1 reviews existing research and clarifies the conceptual background of localisation and the role of NGOs in international aid, including development and humanitarian assistance. Chapter 2 discusses the comprehensive impact of COVID-19 on the aid sector and on NGOs operating in the field. Chapter 3 explains the qualitative research methods employed in this study, particularly the design of semi-structured interviews and the use of thematic analysis for data interpretation. Chapter 4 presents the analysis of the interview data, drawing on existing literature to support the discussion. Finally, Chapter 5 summarizes the study findings and examines prospects for the advancement of localisation.

CHAPTER 1

Literature Review

1.1. Aid and NGOs

International development is a comprehensive concept in development research and practice that has traditionally been associated with the division between a wealthy North and a poor South (Horner & Hulme, 2017, p. 347; Horner, 2020, p. 415). This transforming framework has been considered misaligned in its definition and scope due to factors such as interconnected globalized capitalism, sustainable development, such as addressing climate change, and the blurring of North–South boundaries (Horner, 2019, p. 416). Building on the classical concern in international development research and policy, namely how the South might become a developed entity by imitating the North (Escobar, 1995, p. vii), differentiated areas and fields that lie beyond its scope have emerged.

Global development encompasses a horizontal scope, framing development as relevant worldwide, and a vertical scale, focusing on global actors and processes (Horner & Hulme, 2017, pp. 371-372). The issues concerning global public goods, such as poverty, inequality, climate change, pandemics, and financial stability, are not confined to specific countries or regions but are recognized as challenges shared by all nations in the context of global development. The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) adopted in 2015 embody this concept. In contrast to the earlier Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), which were predominantly set by developed countries and almost exclusively targeted developing countries, the 17 global SDGs are defined as challenges that all countries must address (Horner, 2019, pp. 419-420). In addition, while aid initially flowed from North to South, involving diverse actors, including new donors, the private sector, and civil society, has made multidirectional cooperation possible (Janus et al., 2014, pp. 158-159).

Development and humanitarian aid are the means of achieving the objectives encompassed by the concept of development. Development aid adopts a long-term perspective, aiming to address the root causes of poverty while promoting improvements in living conditions and sustainable development. Its activities extend to economic growth, education, insurance, infrastructure development, governance strengthening, and nation-building. Although it emphasizes participatory approaches and the recipient countries' ownership, it cannot entirely exclude political aspects; the donor countries' political intentions can influence local social

structures and policies, potentially causing aid to deviate from its original purpose (Lie, 2020, p. 5).

Humanitarian aid aims to save lives and alleviate suffering by addressing urgent needs. Its guiding principles, neutrality, impartiality, and independence, are considered essential for creating the conceptual and physical humanitarian space in which aid activities are conducted. While humanitarian aid is ideally non-political, in practice, political intentions and the actors involved increasingly shape its implementation (Lie, 2020, p. 2).

Currently, development and humanitarian aid are not provided within the traditional North–South binary structure but through the involvement of various stakeholders fulfilling their respective roles. The following section clarifies the role of NGOs within this aid framework. In the 1970s, governments played the primary role in providing aid, based on the idea that they were largely responsible for growth and development in nation-building. Consequently, relationships between governments were most highly valued. Conversely, NGOs were considered peripheral actors in the official system and received little attention. Moreover, especially in the Global South, very few NGOs were involved in development activities (Fowler, 2000, p. 2).

The signs of change strengthening the presence of NGOs came from the North. The influx of Northern NGOs appeared in former colonies as exemplary actors. Additionally, in regions governed by military or authoritarian regimes, particularly in Latin American countries, intellectuals and leftist political movements used NGOs as internal refuges. The rise of NGOs and their influx from the North did not significantly advance the North–South relationship, and both actors maintained their independence within their respective domains (Nishimuko, 2011, p. 42).

Simultaneously, developing countries implemented structural adjustment policies aiming to promote economic liberalization and minimal state intervention, promoting privatization and market-based economies to improve macroeconomic policy. As a result, as safety nets based on market principles weakened, the role of NGOs in supporting basic human needs increased significantly. Following this trend, the idea that the fundamental goal of development was to expand people's choices emphasized human development approaches and participatory development. Consequently, by the late 1980s, the value of NGOs' roles was strengthened (Nishimuko, 2011, p. 41).

While the presence of Southern NGOs was being reinforced within the aid structure, their role shifted to implementing development projects. Until the 1980s, Northern international NGOs independently carried out development aid projects in developing countries. However,

NGOs in the Southern regions gradually assumed the central role in implementing projects on the ground, receiving funding and technical support from Northern NGOs. This shift in the role of Southern NGOs caused a fluctuation in their original position, which had been close to the communities they served (Hudock, 1999, pp. 14-17). Furthermore, NGOs providing resources and technology began to emphasize evaluation based on quantitative data, resulting in a focus on ensuring that the impacts of activities were measurable and visually represented (Hayashi, 2024, p. 79).

In the 1990s, NGOs in the Global South increasingly gained recognition for implementing development aid, raising questions about their relationships with Northern actors. During this period, many NGOs from Northern countries considered partnerships with Southern NGOs essential for development (Lewis, 1998, p. 504). After the end of the Cold War, Western governments focused on supporting democratization through Official Development Assistance (ODA) and advanced these measures through NGOs. Consequently, the importance of participatory development was again widely accentuated, and the roles of development actors and their relationships were critically reassessed (Nishimuko, 2011, p. 42).

Northern organizations began to reflect on their interventions and placed greater emphasis on partnerships that strengthened the capacities of local organizations through resources and technology to achieve common goals. Furthermore, in the context of aid reforms after 1990, it was recognized that proactive actions by local organizations were indispensable for sustainable development. Similarly, the importance of ownership, which draws upon the capacities of local people and respects their decisions, was underscored in the comprehensive development process (Nishimuko, 2011, p. 42).

While the role of NGOs in development aid has been highlighted, concerns regarding existing aid structures and project management have been continually debated. The structure in which Northern NGOs provided funding and resources while Southern NGOs implemented projects locally has led to the creation of subordinate relationships. This power imbalance has frequently been addressed in discussions on “localisation” and the transfer of power between North and South (Baguios, A., King, M., Martins, A., and Pinnington, R, 2021). Additionally, the need for community-led development and strengthening Southern NGOs has been considered a crucial factor in their relationships with donors, including international organizations and Northern NGOs (Schulpen et al., 2024, p. 75).

1.2. Localisation

The central idea of localisation that international humanitarian assistance should be locally led existed in the 1990s, and various international initiatives and efforts have since been undertaken. In 1994, the Code of Conduct for the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement and NGOs in Disaster Relief, drafted by the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC) together with international NGOs, expressly underscored the significance of local resources and organizations in disaster response (Dijkzeul, 2021, p. 2).

In 2003, 16 government agencies and the European Commission signed the Good Humanitarian Donorship (GHD), emphasizing the participation of beneficiaries in aid activities (Principle 6) and the significance of strengthening the crisis response capacity of recipient country governments and communities (Principle 7; GHD, 2003; Shiohata, 2021, p. 3). In 2004, in response to the Sumatra earthquake and the Indian Ocean tsunami, numerous reports advocated locally led humanitarian action. These reports emphasized that local people were primarily responsible for saving lives and that their capabilities were decisive, immediately following a disaster. They also highlighted that international agencies could utilize their capabilities and those of local organizations effectively through collaboration. However, at the same time, other reports indicated that while international agencies attributed accountability to local organizations and governments, their efforts to build local capacities and strengthen collaboration were sometimes insufficient, and in several cases, overlooked existing local capabilities (Shiohata, 2021, p. 11; Telford, Cosgrave, & Houghton, 2006, p. 7).

The Paris Declaration on Aid Effectiveness (2005) included the ownership of aid-receiving countries as one of its principles. In addition, the Global Humanitarian Platform (2007), established by the United Nations and NGOs, introduced the principles of partnership, presenting five key principles aiming to promote collaboration between international and local organizations: equality, transparency, a result-oriented approach, responsibility, and complementarity. At the Fourth High Level Forum on Aid Effectiveness held in Busan in 2011, the principles emphasizing the ownership of aid-receiving countries and the importance of partnerships were endorsed (Shiohata, 2021, p. 3).

Although the term ‘localisation’ did not appear explicitly, it had long been discussed within the context of humanitarian and development aid. However, mechanisms for its promotion and implementation were not yet established (Shiohata, 2021, p. 2). What emerged from these discussions was that localisation could be perceived as a top-down approach to cost reduction (Shiohata, 2021, p. 10). Moreover, directly allocating funding aid to local partners remained extremely limited, highlighting the problem that support for local actors often remained superficial (Telford et al., 2006, p. 2).

This is generally attributable to the aid structure, where aid recipients do not provide funding, making them more susceptible to international donor agencies. As a result, aid tends to be influenced more by donor policies than local needs (Telford et al., 2006, p. 3). Discussions on localisation reflect distortions in existing aid structures and imbalances in power, encompassing fundamental challenges for the entire aid system regarding how to restructure existing institutional practices and power relationships.

The Grand Bargain, adopted at the 2016 World Humanitarian Summit, represents a specific initiative towards the reform and efficiency of international humanitarian assistance (Humanitarian Summit, 2016). It was signed by 18 governments, 16 international organizations, networks of international NGOs, and the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement. The fundamental principle of localisation is to enhance the cost-effectiveness of aid activities and promote sustainability by making use of local resources and reducing the influence of intermediaries (Agenda for Humanity, 2016; cited in Nikidehaghani & Hui-Truscott, 2024, p. 4). To achieve this, it is necessary to ensure financial transparency, provide support for activities aligned with local needs and expectations, and invest in outcomes focused on individual beneficiaries. As a result, localized humanitarian assistance becomes rooted in the cultural, social, and economic foundations of the target region (Van Brabant & Patel, 2017; cited in Nikidehaghani & Hui-Truscott, 2024, p. 4). Localisation was one of the nine themes addressed in the summit to establish various measures to encourage investment in aid recipients and enhance their capabilities. For example, a localisation marker was introduced to measure direct and indirect funding for recipients, with a target to increase direct investment in local actors by 25% by 2021 (World Humanitarian Summit, 2016).

Baguios et al. (2021) divided localisation into three fundamental dimensions: agency, way of being, and funding. The concept of agency is rooted in the basic principles of collective agency, through national sovereignty, and universal individual agency, through the right to self-determination.

The right to self-determination refers to the capacity to decide one's political position and to freely pursue social, economic, and cultural development (Slim, 2021, p. 2). In other words, if national sovereignty and individual self-determination are respected, the primary responsibility for promoting development lies with the government and civil society. Applied to the practice of foreign aid, development falls under the jurisdiction of local actors, while international stakeholders exert influence from the outside (Obrecht, 2014, as cited in Nikidehaghani & Hui-Truscott, 2024, p. 7). For example, this occurs when donor funding priorities diverge from the interests of local participants. Intentionally applying donor policy

clauses can reduce local actor agency. In this context, agency refers to the ability of local actors to follow their own policy directions, resist donor priorities, and still secure funding (Fraser and Whitfield, 2008 as cited in Nikidehaghani & Hui-Truscott, 2024, p. 8).

Way of being brings a decolonial perspective to the process of localisation. In the context of development aid, in particular, imposing Western or Weberian concepts of modernity has led to biases against certain actors and their actions. For example, it can result in a preference for formal NGOs over indigenous organizations with their own structures, or a preference for contractual relationships over informal ones. When local actors do not adhere to the standards deemed 'correct' or 'appropriate' by the North, their dignity can be compromised (Nikidehaghani & Hui-Truscott, 2024, p. 8).

Many programs promoting localisation often measure their outcomes using financial indicators (Grand Bargain, 2016), including the numerical increase and the nature of the funding. It necessitates providing funding directly to local actors while minimizing intermediaries. The funding should be flexible enough to cover essential costs and implemented over the long term (IASC, 2016; Peace Direct, 2020, as cited in Nikidehaghani & Hui-Truscott, 2024, p. 9). Additionally, the process for accessing funds is also an essential element. Eligibility criteria and contractual obligations for obtaining funding should not become an excessive burden on local actors who lack the infrastructure or human resources needed to meet international standards (Roborgh, 2023, pp. 519-520).

Baguios et al. (2021, pp. 13-14) proposed five levers, as part of a framework, to understand how localisation functions and the extent to which local actors can exercise authority. The first lever is decision-making and refers to the ability of local or national actors to identify their own challenges and priorities and design and implement strategies to address them. It is considered essential that local communities have the authority to make decisions most suited to their needs without being influenced by external actors (Baguios et al., 2021, p. 14).

The second lever, priorities, represents the ability of local actors to determine their objectives and operations. This lever ensures that support is provided for initiatives that align with local needs and expectations. The purpose is not merely to address transactional costs but to ensure that funding is directed towards tangible outcomes for the people in need (Baguios et al., 2021, p. 14).

The third lever is knowledge. This lever emphasizes the importance of incorporating a deep understanding of the local context and needs into aid activities. It is essential to use local knowledge and integrate it into the design and delivery of aid to achieve effective and

sustainable outcomes with the premise that local actors possess the most extensive and detailed understanding of their communities (Baguios et al., 2021, p. 14).

The fourth lever, relationship, relates to the quality of partnerships between international and local actors. It is imperative that international organizations do not treat local organizations merely as subcontractors but engage in equitable and fair arrangements based on trust. To achieve this, both parties must recognize each other's positions and roles and be conscious of what defines and influences their relationship.

The fifth lever is delivery. This lever indicates how activities are implemented. It focuses on the transfer and management of resources, such as the allocation of and access to funds, to assess the authority of local actors. It also highlights the need to pay attention to aspects such as the contractual arrangements for implementing aid, the selection of activities to be conducted, and which party is responsible for monitoring and evaluating the aid from its initiation to completion.

CHAPTER 2

Context

2.1. The Global Impact of COVID-19 to Development and Humanitarian Aid

The COVID-19 pandemic had the most profound and severe impact on the global economy and became the most significant health crisis of the 21st century. Governments in the Global North responded to minimize the effects on their populations, resulting in unprecedented fiscal deficits. In contrast, governments in the Global South faced resource constraints, and the pandemic had a more acute impact on the livelihoods and well-being of people living in low- and middle-income countries. Moreover, governments in the Global South were not only impacted by a sharp decline in domestic revenue but also by a sudden reduction in development funding sources, including capital outflows and decreased remittances due to stagnation in international trade (Brown, 2021, p. 42).

Although COVID-19 was initially recognized as a health crisis, in early 2020, it quickly transformed into a development crisis. A notable change in international assistance was the rapid and substantial increase in funding to the health sector for vaccine development. For more than a decade before the pandemic, the focus had been on long-term economic growth as a means of poverty reduction, with increased spending on infrastructure. In contrast, donors decided to respond immediately to a broad range of needs not limited to the humanitarian framework, placing a strong focus on social protection (Brown, 2021, p. 45).

However, this rapid shift raised two concerns without increasing the overall aid budget. First, reallocating funds to the health sector implied a reduction in programs being implemented in other areas. As a result, other development sectors lagged or were deprioritized. Second, even within the health sector, where budgets increased, non-COVID-19-related services stalled and were not delivered to existing beneficiaries (Brown, 2021, p. 46).

Simultaneously, outside the health sector, the pandemic led to concentrated development efforts in three areas: short-term humanitarian assistance, debt relief, and global public goods. Regarding short-term humanitarian assistance, immediate strategies were required for individuals directly or indirectly affected by COVID-19. For example, key recommended measures for infection prevention, such as handwashing, social distancing, and home confinement, were not easily implementable among the world's poorest populations. Before the

pandemic, access to health services for impoverished communities was limited, and the spread of the infection made it even more difficult. Routine childhood vaccinations and medical care for existing patients with HIV/AIDS and tuberculosis became challenging. Preventive confinement measures particularly threatened the livelihoods of the poor. Many low-income individuals could not work remotely, and wage losses among those employed in the informal sector were directly linked to insufficient food for their families. Consequently, donors decided to urgently allocate additional resources to this sector (Brown, 2021, p. 44).

The next issue was debt relief, which already existed in the late 2010s, before the pandemic, as concerns over a new debt crisis grew. Debt-to-GDP ratios increased not only due to traditional sources of financing but also because of loans from China. As a result, the need for debt relief became apparent as many developing countries were unable to repay their debts due to revenue declines in 2020. In April 2020, the G20 countries (Argentina, Australia, Brazil, Canada, China, France, Germany, India, Indonesia, Italy, Japan, South Korea, Mexico, Russia, Saudi Arabia, South Africa, Turkey, the United Kingdom, the United States, and the European Union) announced a temporary suspension of debt repayments for low-income countries. This debt relief amounted to approximately 20 billion USD, with the suspension extended until mid-2021. The International Monetary Fund (IMF) implemented similar measures, and around 20 countries partially restructured their debt repayment schedules (Brown, 2021, p. 46).

Finally, there was a growing focus on global public goods. During the pandemic, vaccines were prioritized. Vaccine provision considerably altered the North–South aid framework. Even before COVID-19, various forms of South–South cooperation existed among China, India, Brazil, and South Africa. However, the pandemic measures made it clear that aid no longer flowed exclusively from the Global North to the Global South. The most notable assistance came from China. After controlling the outbreak in Wuhan, the epicentre of the pandemic, in Hubei Province, China, it provided support to 120 countries and four international organizations by the end of March 2020. This aid included surgical masks, N95 masks, protective suits, nucleic acid test kits, ventilators, and other forms of assistance and loans. The support was offered not only to countries in the Global South but also to Northern countries. Cuba similarly provided medical aid to Northern and Southern countries, extending beyond the traditional donor-–recipient framework (Brown, 2021, p. 48).

2.2. The Impact of COVID-19 on the Field of Development and Humanitarian Aid

While few academic studies discuss the impact of COVID-19 on NGOs in the context of international cooperation, reports produced by NGOs within a few months of the pandemic highlight its effects on Southern NGOs (Schulpen et al., 2024, p. 78). EPIC-Africa & @AfricanNGOs (2020, p. 110) reported that approximately 60% of Southern NGOs were affected in the areas of operations and programming. In particular, Schulpen et al. (2024, p. 78) highlighted three significant aspects of the impact of COVID-19 on these areas.

The first impact was the disruption of ongoing programs. Many organizations were forced to either scale down their activities or terminate them altogether (Arntz & Alexeeva, 2020; EPIC-Africa & @AfricanNGOs, 2020; Wood & Majumdar, 2020).

Secondly, the pandemic dramatically changed how existing activities were carried out, including how NGOs structured themselves to continue their work, communicated with beneficiaries and communities, and fulfilled their missions and objectives (WACSI, 2021, p. 4). To address this situation, remote work was introduced either fully or partially, becoming a new reality for many NGOs. Specifically, video conferencing, live streaming, social media, and WhatsApp groups were used to maintain contact with target groups and continue regular activities (Schulpen et al., 2024, p. 79).

Finally, many NGOs initiated new activities that did not overlap with their usual operations but contributed to improving the situation created by COVID-19. For example, NGOs that had primarily engaged in lobbying and advocacy became service providers in response to the pandemic (Aflatoun International, 2020; Arntz & Alexeeva, 2020; CSPPS, 2020). As service providers, NGOs contributed by raising health awareness, distributing food, and producing and supplying hygiene products such as masks and soap. In addition, several NGOs began to implement measures to protect children and women from violence, which had increased due to heightened domestic tensions (Aflatoun International, 2020; NNNGO, 2020; Partos, 2020).

A study by Schulpen et al. (2024, p. 81), along with other reports (Aflatoun International, 2020; Arntz & Alexeeva, 2020; CIVICUS, 2020; EPIC-Africa & @AfricanNGOs, 2020; Phuong Linh & Van Anh, 2020; Yayasan Hasanah, 2020), highlights that many NGOs experienced significant budget cuts. Schulpen et al.'s study (2024, p. 81) focuses on Southern NGOs partnering with Northern NGOs in the Netherlands. It details the financial situation based on survey data from 136 organizations across 28 countries and focus group discussions with 16 organizations in three countries.

Income sources for Southern NGOs included funding from partner international NGOs, revenues from entrepreneurial and other organizational activities, and individual donations, including membership fees. Approximately 60% of NGOs, to varying degrees, experienced a

decline in income. While revenues from internal organization activities and individual donations decreased, there was an upward trend in funding from bilateral and multilateral donors (Schulpen et al., 2024, p. 81).

In contrast, approximately 60% of NGOs faced increased expenditure, with one third of them simultaneously experiencing reduced income and increased expenses. Organizations suffering from such twofold financial difficulties tended to be small-scale organizations with budgets under 200,000 USD, service providers, and organizations involved in peacebuilding and reconciliation (Schulpen et al., 2024, p. 82). A significant consequence was the inability to pay staff salaries (CIVICUS, 2020; EPIC-Africa & @AfricanNGOs, 2020; Phuong Linh & Van Anh, 2020). More than 60% of organizations were forced to impose salary cuts, 30% resorted to temporary layoffs, and another 30% were compelled to dismiss paid staff. Several SNGOs appealed for donations from their staff, while others, due to funding shortages, had no choice but to request voluntary work from employees. A Syrian NGO that was forced to suspend its programs during the pandemic also had to cease paying staff salaries (Schulpen et al., 2024, p. 83).

Asogwa (2022, p. 2451) conducted interviews with 25 senior-level management staff in NGOs in Nigeria. The findings revealed that in addition to the deterioration in funding and difficulties in program implementation, a lack of capacity building resulting from the shift to virtual meetings was a notable impact. While the transition to virtual platforms ensured staff health and safety, maintaining the same quality of communication achieved through predominantly face-to-face interactions proved challenging. Moreover, staff expressed doubts over the effectiveness of training that was typically conducted in person but had been replaced by online alternatives. Significantly, a minimal number of NGOs had readily available stable internet access to adapt to the pandemic-driven shift to online operations (Asogwa, 2022, p. 2454). Some training aimed to build capacity for both NGO staff and program beneficiaries. While some training could not be conducted at all due to COVID-19, some was conducted in an online format. Several NGO staff members stated in interviews that their involvement in capacity-building activities had either completely ceased or significantly stagnated during the pandemic (Asogwa, 2022, p. 2452).

In interviews with staff in Southern NGOs, Schulpen et al. (2024, p. 84) discussed the impacts of the pandemic within the context of power transfer and localisation. The underlying assumption is that North-–South relations in development have typically been marked by power imbalances and biased decision-making. While international NGOs act as the primary decision-makers, Southern NGOs are largely responsible for implementing those decisions. At the core

of this discussion is how international NGOs and other stakeholders transfer their power and resources to their partners around the world (Partos, 2022, p. 7; Brown, 2021, p. 48).

2.3. COVID-19 and Localisation

The global pandemic caused by COVID-19 weakened the existing international system of development aid and humanitarian crises, making traditional aid mechanisms, often criticized from a localisation perspective, dysfunctional. Under urgent circumstances, the importance of the role and contribution of local actors became more focused; at the same time, expectations of the transformation to a locally led aid model targeted at localisation were also highlighted (Barbalet, 2021, p. 12). Barbalet's (2021) research employed a diary approach with 32 policymakers and practitioners in development and humanitarian aid worldwide and analyzed the pandemic's impact on locally led aid models.

In 2020, during the early stages of the pandemic, the focus shifted from 'how to progress localisation', which had been a key discussion point, to 'how to put localisation into practice'. The progress of localisation significantly depends on individual advocates in many international development and humanitarian aid systems. However, the agenda can lead to broader practices and become a driving force for comprehensive transformation by promoting institutionalization within the organizations and coordination mechanisms. The principle 'nothing about us without us' is central to international policy forums, and more attention is paid to the voices of local actors and their countries. The pandemic accelerated the shift to online meetings, making it easier for local and national actors to participate in international conferences such as Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC) meetings (Barbalet et al, 2021).

Outside international policy and coordination, consortia at the national level continued to operate independently to provide support for local actors and strengthen their capacity building. For example, research demonstrates that many successful funding cases for local NGOs came from outside the formal international aid system. In other words, local actors constructed the alternative system, which they led at the national and regional levels, and developed a new method of support (Barbalet et al., 2021, p. 8).

The overall trend regarding funding for local actors during the pandemic showed little change (with several cases backsliding), and most funding was still distributed through the UN system. Some donors provided higher-quality funding by including indirect costs in the budget, and pooled funds managed at local and national levels led to an immediate response to humanitarian needs in several cases. On the one hand, expanding direct funding to local actors

is a commitment in the Grand Bargain; on the other hand, however, these cases are rarely seen, and the progress of localisation remains constrained. While individual successful cases can be seen, it is hardly possible to radically change the existing funding system without drastically transforming the funding approach by major donors, such as the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), European Civil Protection and Humanitarian Aid Operations (ECHO), and the UK Foreign, Commonwealth, and Development Office (Barbalet et al., 2021, pp. 8-9).

In practice, responses to the pandemic differed across organizations. Several organizations proceeded with decentralization and a more local shift; other organizations reinforced the remote management approach. One of the interview respondents pointed out a lack of correlation between the corona measures, including remote monitoring, management, adaptive programming, and localisation. Many organizations focused less on valuing practices by local actors in the field, instead increasing their reliance on digital tools and remote management. Therefore, local actors, who continuously provided support, were recognized for their unique role as primary responders in the international system, although this role came with more significant reporting duties. The resources needed to proceed with these additional tasks were not always provided, and the division of responsibilities that strengthened existing power structures hindered localisation (Barbalet et al., 2021, p. 34).

Based on their research involving policymakers and practitioners, Barbalet et al. (2021) concluded with the following recommendations for each actor. The donors must establish a framework for fair and sustainable funding, partnership, and risk management, and clearly define their responsibilities as international partners. While international organizations and NGOs should boost funding transparency and partnerships with local actors, they must also enhance locally led coordination and response capacities, with the understanding that the ultimate goal is to act in the best interests of the locals. According to the Grand Bargain, it is crucial to create specific incentives for executing localisation and promote dialogue and strategies that reflect the intentions of local actors, while also reforming the practices of donors and UN agencies.

Since the Grand Bargain in 2016, the commitment to locally led development and humanitarian aid has gained support from many international actors annually. Nevertheless, it is unclear whether the policies and strategies to achieve them are employed in the field at the regional level and are leading to change. On the one hand, many international actors demonstrate an alignment with these policies and strategies; they are skeptical of large-scale operations retaining funding management and humanitarian principles. It does not explicitly

attribute the pandemic to the impacts and changes mentioned above, as reported by the respondents. However, it clearly states that many respondents observed that the international system and the donor countries came to recognize the unique role of local actors (Barbalet et al., 2021).

DA GLOBAL (2021, p. 9) discusses the relationship between localisation in humanitarian aid during the pandemic and systemic and institutional racism. The study, conducted from December 2020 to April 2021, utilized an online survey and interviews with members of the Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement, and NGOs.

The study reveals that the shock caused by the pandemic impacted the existing system and accelerated localisation quickly and effectively. The authors point out that the new practices and approaches brought by the pandemic included flexible funding from donors, mobilizing domestic resources, shifting insurance protection to local actors, leveraging existing capabilities and trust among actors, and expanding volunteer networks (DA GLOBAL, 2021, p. 12). The more the COVID-19 responses by local actors expanded, the more their support reached out to the communities quickly and directly (British Red Cross, 2021, p. 12). As a result, it was recognized that locally led actions were an adequate and appropriate approach to providing humanitarian responses. The response capacity of local actors, underscored by the pandemic, raises awareness that international emergency response capacity is not necessarily a standard (DA GLOBAL, 2021, pp. 10-11).

When each segment constituting localisation is examined, little change in the comprehensive power dynamics and engagement between local actors, their stakeholders, and international organizations and donors is evident. This finding indicates that local actors encounter enduring power asymmetry and colonial structures in terms of power dynamics and decision-making. In addition, local stakeholders have claimed that they have glimpsed colonial working practices and negative assumptions towards them through the conventional aid structure (DA GLOBAL, 2021, pp. 9-10).

A collective systemic transformation, such as practical actions and fair partnerships, is required to promote localisation and address the challenges concerning the humanitarian aid system on a border scale. Perpetuating transformation will be achieved by dismantling and reconstructing the existing power structure and power relationship (DA GLOBAL, 2021, p. 12). The research concludes with several recommendations.

First, it is necessary to redefine ‘localisation’ in terms of securing equity and decolonization. In other words, it is necessary to be aware of biases, reevaluate localisation as part of decolonization, and emphasize the essentialness of more equitable partnerships. Next, funding

strategies must also be reformed; for example, they are expected to exclude factors hindering direct funding from donors to local actors. Long-term strategies supported by flexible funding, including adequate indirect costs, must also be employed to ensure urgent response measures, such as urgent preventive actions and preparations. Furthermore, it should acknowledge unveiled local capacity as part of equitable partnerships and effectively reflect the voices and actions of the communities in the refined indicators. Progress must be measured annually based on the standards set by locally led support and practices. For example, when calculating the proportion of emergency responses, the focus should be on actions executed by local actors rather than international representatives. Lastly, in terms of promoting localisation, international actors who demonstrate specific fulfilments and commitments should be rewarded. When localisation is effectively implemented, it is crucial to evaluate its achievements diligently, since they could become less noticeable (DA GLOBAL, 2021, p. 12).

CHAPTER 3

Methodology

3.1 Research Overview

Qualitative research is a multifaceted and flexible approach that focuses on the complexity of individual cases and seeks to provide rich insights and new theoretical foundations for understanding social phenomena by deeply exploring the life-worlds of participants (Flick et al., 2005, p. 3). It is particularly recommended when the aim is to shed light on aspects of reality that have not yet been sufficiently investigated (Flick et al., 2005, p. 8). Since this study addresses the relatively new phenomenon of the COVID-19 pandemic and examines the advancement of localisation in the field of humanitarian and development aid, a theme that cannot be easily quantified, qualitative research was employed for data collection in this study.

Among the data collection methods included in qualitative research is gathering linguistic data through semi-structured interviews (Flick et al., 2005, p. 8). Semi-structured interviews, also referred to as semi-standardized or open interviews, are a widely used form of qualitative interviewing in social research (Flick et al., 2005, p. 203). Unlike interviews that strictly follow a fully prepared list of questions, semi-structured interviews are conducted in a more open-ended manner (Flick et al., 2005, p. 253). In this study, open-ended questions were designed with a focus on participants' knowledge and experiences, while situating the COVID-19 pandemic along a temporal axis and incorporating the elements of localisation discussed in the previous chapters. The interviews were conducted entirely online, considering the participants' places of residence, work arrangements, and the quality of the data collection. At the beginning of each session, oral informed consent was obtained, and the subsequent video calls were recorded for documentation purposes.

In total, four participants were interviewed, each with more than several years' experience in the field of humanitarian and development assistance. Some had been involved in project management, and others were responsible for direct implementation before, during, and after the COVID-19 pandemic. The interviews with Participants A, B, and D were conducted in English, while the interview with Participant C was conducted in Portuguese. The author translated Participant C's statements from Portuguese into English for the subsequent analysis of the interview content discussed in the next chapter.

Participant A had been active in the humanitarian aid sector since the mid-1990s and had worked with several international organizations. They had served in roles such as field manager,

project coordinator, and executive director in global medical and humanitarian aid projects over the past decade. Participant B had professional experience in the field of education and had been engaged in educational inclusion and girls' education. This participant had worked in various countries in Asia and Africa and, most recently, implemented a project to support the education of young girls in an African country. Participant C had experience in the fields of community development and education. This participant had worked with several NGOs, engaging in global citizenship education, human rights education, intercultural understanding, environmental education, and initiatives addressing poverty and social inequality for approximately 15 years. Their responsibilities included project management, field activities, and organizing training. Participant D had experience in the field of international development and cooperation, being involved primarily in projects in Africa. This participant had previously served as a country representative and was currently responsible for program management and coordinating multiple projects.

3.2. Analytical Methods

The interview data were analyzed using Braun and Clarke's reflexive thematic analysis. Reflexive thematic analysis is a method of systematically identifying, organizing, and interpreting patterns of meaning (themes) across a dataset. It is considered suitable for addressing a wide range of research questions (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 86). Reflexive thematic analysis consists of six phases, and the following section explains each phase and how it is applied in this study.

The first phase, familiarization with the data, involves reading and rereading the dataset. The researcher becomes thoroughly acquainted with the content of the data, reviewing it with a focus on aspects that could be relevant to the research questions. This process not only requires considering the surface-level meaning of the words but also engaging with the data actively, analytically, and critically to interpret its significance (Braun & Clarke, 2012, pp. 60–61). This phase involves underlining or annotating sections of interest while reading the data. At the same time, sections that could later inform coding are marked (described in the following paragraph: Braun & Clarke, 2006, pp. 87–88).

In this study, the data consisted of video call recordings, and the analysis was conducted on the text data extracted using the automatic transcription feature provided with the recording function. The transcripts were cross-checked against the recordings to correct any discrepancies

between them. The revised transcripts were then reviewed for each participant, with potential words for coding labels marked and annotated throughout the text.

The second phase is generating initial codes. In this phase, concise labels (codes) are created for parts of the data that could be relevant for answering the research question, and the entire dataset is coded (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 88). Codes can be summaries of parts of the data, interpretations of the data, or short codes related to potential answers to the research question (Braun & Clarke, 2012, p. 61). There are no prescribed rules governing how the data should be segmented during coding; segments can be large or small, and some portions might not be coded at all (Braun & Clarke, 2012, p. 61). Initial codes are created, and the researcher continues to read the data to identify excerpts that could be relevant. The researcher determines whether an existing code can be applied, or a new code is needed to capture the data. This process is repeated for each and entire dataset. As coding progresses, the generated codes can be revised and new elements incorporated. Moreover, the codes can evolve during the coding process, necessitating revising the initial coding (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 88).

In this study, the interview data, initially in Word format, were transferred into Excel with a separate tab assigned to each participant while maintaining the original sequence of responses. The data were then restructured into coded segments. Codes were developed primarily from keywords that recurred in participants' responses, as well as topics that appeared consistently across different questions. Furthermore, particular attention was given to the temporal dimension, distinguishing between the pre- and post-COVID-19 periods.

In the third phase, searching for themes, the coded data are examined to identify broader patterns (potential themes), and all data relevant to each potential theme are gathered (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 89). This process involves reviewing the coded data and identifying similarities and overlaps between codes. Broader topics or issues around which codes cluster are then identified; however, many codes should not fall under multiple themes. For this reason, the research question must be kept in mind throughout the process. The researcher also begins to explore the relationships between themes and consider how each theme works together to provide an overall account of the dataset at this point (Braun & Clarke, 2012, pp. 63–65).

In this study, the codes within each participant's tab in the Excel sheets were first reviewed and, where appropriate, subdivided or integrated. Subsequently, coded segments labelled by the participants were compiled in a separate sheet, enabling a cross-case examination of the entire dataset and facilitating the identification of themes.

The fourth phase involves reviewing and developing themes and refining them against the overall dataset. The researcher examines whether each theme forms a coherent pattern with the

coded data segments and assesses whether it accurately reflects the meanings across the dataset. If a theme does not fit, it can be revised or reorganized, or a new theme can be generated (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 91).

During this phase, all the data recorded in the Excel sheets created during the third phase were comprehensively examined to refine the themes. The search and sort functions in Excel were employed to organize the interview statements by code and to compare the participants' responses, facilitating the identification of themes.

The fifth phase is defining and naming themes. Each theme is subjected to detailed analysis to clarify its scope, specific content, and position within the overall story conveyed by the analysis. The defining characteristics of the central themes are explicitly articulated, and appropriate names are assigned (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 92). In some cases, it may also be suitable to consider establishing sub-themes within a single theme (Braun & Clarke, 2012, pp. 66–67).

During this phase, the interview content was organized in Excel according to themes, and its validity was examined. Filters were then reapplied for each participant, and the statements were revisited within the chronological flow and context of the interviews, before being cross-checked against the themes again.

The sixth phase, producing the report, encompasses the final analysis of the developed themes and preparing a report supported by this analysis. This step involves weaving together the analytical story based on the principal themes in the data and presenting the findings to the research questions and existing literature (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 93). Details of this process are described in the following chapter, Findings and Discussion.

CHAPTER 4

Findings and Discussion

This chapter examines how development NGOs responded to the COVID-19 pandemic and its impact on the progress of localisation, drawing on the results of the interviews. Parenthetical words and years inserted into the interview quotations were added by the author for clarification.

4.1. COVID-19 Pandemic: Impact and Adaptation

As clarified in the Context chapter (Arntz & Alexeeva, 2020; EPIC-Africa & @AfricanNGOs, 2020; Wood & Majumdar, 2020), many development NGOs were forced to suspend, modify, or adapt their projects due to the pandemic, and the interview participants similarly spoke about the impacts brought about by COVID-19.

> So at the beginning when we arrive, OK, we were leasing these issues about COVID, but we are OK in November, December (2019) till January (2020). (...) But then in January, February, they ask us to be more at home. (...) I still continue to meet my teachers, but then in April, they realized that we need to get out. So, November to April, the things were normal we implement (the project) as it was. (...) So after April, we come home. (Participant B, personal communication, June 18, 2025)

> Most of the activities are with the collectivity you know are with the communities and that of a sudden they stop having that possibility. So there was a difficulty to readapt it because you know, in most of the places you can't shift to online stuff, (...) These operational know how to react if we all of a sudden have to finish with the physical contact with people. (Participant A, personal communication, June 13, 2025)

At this time, Participant B was involved in an education project and reflected on their stay in the project country as described above. From the end of 2019 to April 2020, they were present in the field while implementing the project, but as the situation worsened, they had to leave the country and return home in April 2020. Conversely, Participant A was responsible for a specific country and engaged in multiple projects. Although they were not physically present in the project country, they described the difficulties caused by the sudden loss of physical contact as

they shifted their work online in response to the pandemic. Participant A also noted, as a key insight, that during the onset of COVID-19, the existing contractual frameworks for projects and their implementation were not equipped to respond to emergencies such as the pandemic.

> (...) one of the hampering factors, it's actually the way contracts are done and this separation between humanitarian and development. So they were doing something on development that, all of a sudden, comes the pandemic. And there was a difficulty for the local partners to pursue and to readapt to other activities because of the type of contract that they had. (...) this is one bureaucratic obstacle that I've seen on the ground. (Participant A, personal communication, June 13, 2025)

> So but we try after the April (2020) and and we stay one year doing this class through online, but it was not the same, and we feeling that the teachers were not as real support. (...) We managed to do all the activities was in our plan after that during when here April 2020, and May June 2021 was online. So the activities were just support online trying to do some work online. But it was not the same because there was activities that required face to face, and they need to do some materials. And even if I do it online, it was not the same. (Participant B, personal communication, June 18, 2025)

As noted in the previous section, Participant B was forced to withdraw from the project country. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, subsequent project activities were conducted remotely for over a year, from April 2020 until June 2021. In the relevant teacher education project, Participant B engaged with students in their capacity as a teacher. Students had previously had direct, face-to-face access to their instructors for guidance and consultation; however, these interactions shifted to a remote format. The difficulty in maintaining the same quality of communication in a remote setting, compared to face-to-face interactions, has been similarly highlighted by Asogwa (2022, p. 2454), indicating a degree of commonality in the challenges experienced in the field.

> (...) the local team handles everything on the ground, including communication and coordination remotely with the team in Country B (country office). They lead, plan, and manage activities, set priorities, and coordinate with Country A (Headquarter). However, the core of the action, planning, and management is also based locally, especially when unforeseen events occur, such as COVID. (...) We also have Local worker A, who serves as

> our liaison manager, along with the rest of the team, which is excellent—a truly outstanding local team—so nothing is left undone. (Participant C, personal communication, July 8, 2025)

Among the projects Participant C was involved in during the COVID-19 pandemic was operating a preschool within the local community. In this case, online tools and remote project management had already been implemented before the pandemic. While the prohibition of physical contact inevitably affected on-site activities—such as suspending NGO staff visits to schools and class interruptions—no significant change in executing tasks between the headquarters and the country office was observed. Although regular trips by headquarters staff were cancelled, operations continued as the country office staff adopted a leading role. Moreover, the operational structure included staff at both the headquarters and the country office performing the same roles, which prevented major disruptions due to COVID-19. One of the challenges faced by local NGOs during the COVID-19 pandemic was the disruption of resources, including human and material resources. The case of Participant C illustrates that the extent of this impact depended on the organization's regular operational structure and the methods used for project implementation.

4.2. Reflections on COVID-19

The previous section illustrates that the COVID-19 pandemic imposed restrictions on NGO activities, forcing adaptations tailored to the characteristics of each project. The following section reflects on the pandemic and highlights participants' perspectives in their responses.

> (...) because they (students) don't understand English (...) I use more images, I use more things that we do together. (...) It's so the COVID don't allow me to do this because online I should do in English. But I try not to put so much many things in English and try to take some draw something (...) So the COVID was terrible in these issues. (Participant B, personal communication, June 18, 2025)

Participant B reflected on the shift to fully online communication with students, noting that it made activities more difficult and could not replicate the ease of face-to-face interaction. Although their common language was English, both parties' proficiency was limited, and Participant B recalled the relative ease of in-person communication during their pre-pandemic stay. In this context, Participant B stated, When I went to assist the class, I cannot understand

the language (students' native language) but I could see all the dynamic' (Participant B, personal communication, June 18, 2025). This quote highlights the importance of visual and spatial cues when participants interact in a foreign language, which cannot be fully conveyed through communication solely via a computer screen.

Schulpen et al. (2024, p. 79) identified the use of video conferencing, social media, and WhatsApp groups as measures to maintain project activities in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. Asogwa (2022, p. 2454) notes that such transitions to online modalities typically presuppose stable internet access. However, only a minimal number of NGOs were able to meet this condition. In the case of Participant B, the project had stable internet connectivity as a resource, and the activities could feasibly transition from face-to-face to online. Nevertheless, when the element of communication in a foreign language is introduced, the apparent fulfilment of online implementation requirements entails significant challenges. The 'dynamic' referred to by Participant B represents aspects that could not be realized solely through a computer screen. Conversely, the shift to online modalities due to COVID-19 expanded learning opportunities, regardless of the participants' places of residence.

> So that's what I notice about the work, the local people. I think they improve the skills and one positive things about COVID was that because they need to work online, they starting to research more. They starting to attending attend, "Oh, this I could learn French". (...) they could be in class in class in a university in Country A or in Country B online. So, COVID was good for that, for open and improve the skills, improved learning of the locals. (Participant B, personal communication, June 18, 2025)

Previously, the use of personal computers had been limited primarily to simple searches, research, and report writing. However, these opportunities expanded significantly (Participant B, personal communication; June 18, 2025), and the provision and variety of online learning services also developed dramatically (OECD, 2020, p. 2). Changes in the workplace environment were also observed as a result of avoiding physical interventions and implementing comprehensive online operations.

> Now we use more our laptop, now we with more sending e-mail send I send you I send you, come on, don't send me, show me, I'm here next to you. So, I don't know if it's good or bad, I think it's bad for relationships because the people are just looking down. (Participant B, personal communication, June 18, 2025)

People have become accustomed to communicating through online tools, resulting in a decline in direct, in-person conversations. The phrase ‘looking down’ in the interview quotation reflects Participant B’s experience of not engaging in face-to-face communication, even when in the same room. In addition, Participant B noted a relative increase in work-related emails and WhatsApp messages before and after the pandemic, which created ‘more work’ to check, often arriving on weekends (Participant B, personal communication; June 18, 2025).

4.3. Localisation in Development and Humanitarian Aid

Reflecting on localisation in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, Participant A stated that the pandemic did not contribute to its progress. Instead, the local organization’s advocacy activities had been proceeding independently of COVID-19, and the pandemic occurred suddenly within the course of these continuous efforts.

> I don't see that the pandemic actually made such a difference in the localisation process. What I see is that you have big networks of local organizations that are getting united and doing a big lobby to go ahead with the localisation independently of the COVID. (...) So I would say that the problems are the same. The fight is the same to get this localisation, but COVID just come. You know I'm not seeing that COVID was a determinant to go faster. It's more a question of the fight is going on. (Participant A, personal communication, June 13, 2025)

The 2016 Grand Bargain catalysed the development of localisation (Barbalet et al., 2021, p. 12). However, localisation did not continuously accelerate thereafter, nor did COVID-19 serve as a renewed catalyst (Participant A, personal communication; June 13, 2025). What becomes clear is the necessity for sustained advocacy efforts and the importance of strong regional network connections. Participant C reflected on their NGO’s activities during the COVID-19 pandemic and stated the following:

> I think I don’t think so, in my experience, I think not. For example, we did not delegate, that is, we did not localize more. Because the projects were being managed by Headquarter NGO, right? They were still being managed by Headquarter NGO. It was we who had a budget, it was we who had the indicators that had to be fulfilled. Therefore, we did the same, but

digitally, that is what we had to do, we adapted to the digital (Participant C, personal communication, July 8, 2025).

As noted in the previous section, Participant C's NGO had already been operating projects before the COVID-19 pandemic, primarily through its local office. Therefore, they stated that no changes promoting localisation could be considered, and in the same context, they noted that the operations became 'not localised but more digitalized' (Participant C, personal communication; July 8, 2025), emphasizing the increased digitalization of workflows. However, it would be inaccurate to claim that there were no aspects of localisation at all, as the following statements regarding on-the-ground activities during the pandemic demonstrate:

(...) the work reduced, but whenever there was work on the ground, the autonomy and the leadership of the local team were reinforced. Yes, but it was not that significant because this autonomy, this leadership already existed. Therefore, then there is like this, probably it was reinforced, the perception that I have. This autonomy, this leadership was reinforced. (Participant C, personal communication, July 8, 2025)

Participant C reflected that, within the altered operational environment during the pandemic, elements of localisation, such as autonomy and leadership, became stronger. Participant C also suggested that, in some instances, there could have been some progress in localisation.

I think it (COVID pandemic) may have boosted (localisation) in some cases, given the necessity, right, since one could not travel. Then, it was necessary to delegate, and I think more and more, right, responsibilities and competences and leadership have to be transferred. To the local leaderships, therefore, it boosted, the perception that I have is that it boosted in some cases. (...) But, I also think that with the cut that there must have been in funding or with the difficulty in managing funding. I also believe that in others it may not have caused a great effect, because then if there was no possibility of implementation. (Participant C, personal communication, July 8, 2025)

According to Schulpen et al. (2024, p. 81), many NGOs faced budget cuts at the onset of the pandemic. Participant C's statements further illustrate that even when local offices were given responsibility, leadership, or capacity-building reactively, such measures could not be

effectively implemented without an adequate budget to support the activities. Although travel restrictions and lockdowns naturally increased the authority of local offices (or compelled them to take on greater authority), if the funding underpinning these activities was reduced or suspended amid the pandemic's disruptions, the activities became jeopardized, creating a net adverse effect.

In the previous section, Participant C highlighted the rapid advancement of digitalization in operations during the COVID-19 pandemic. However, Participant B offered a different perspective based on their own experience of this digital transition.

> (...) if you see other organization, there's more local people and less, less international because the COVID show that you don't need to be there, for some to be a manager or something, you just go there one week and that's OK. So I feel less and less international, well, some project depending on the project and depending on the goal, but less and less and less foreign international workers because they can do online. And they realized that they no need to pay a house, they no need to pay health expenses and is more cheaper. See, because you can do this online and COVID show this, that's what I feel. (Participant B, personal communication, June 18, 2025)

With the shift to online operations, the working practices of international staff, which had previously assumed long-term stays at local offices, were reconsidered. Although this digitalization of work practices was primarily a measure taken in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, it ultimately led to significant reductions in personnel-related costs. It promoted the utilization of local resources, as advocated in the 2016 Grand Bargain. Participant A also focused on reducing international staff, but offered a different perspective from Participant B, elaborating on international intentions and considerations.

> Sometimes you see the international NGO's give more power to the locals, not because they think that the locals do better, but because they are more averse to the risk. They don't want to send international there, so they give the floor to the locals to go ahead to more and safe areas so it's more or less the same with COVID. Not now for the conflict, but for the disease, so they give more power. Yes, I see that because they are risk adverse, they sent the locals. So it's an opportunistic, relationship or decision, you know, it's not a moral decision or it's not a commitment decision with localisation. (...) For localisation to happen, a lot of

international jobs will be lost. We had to face it. (Participant A, personal communication, June 13, 2025)

The reduction in international staff could directly lead to employing more local resources, including local staff. However, it was a calculated strategy for risk mitigation. Participant A concluded by noting that advancing the use of local resources – a component of localisation initiatives – could eventually result in reduced international employment opportunities. Policy recommendations and strategies for promoting localisation are primarily initiated and implemented by international organizations. As a result, the potential effectiveness and scope of such measures, especially those that, in the long term, could lead to a reduction in employment, remain uncertain. Participant A subsequently discussed funding and control in the context of promoting localisation.

(...) there's a competition also here, right? So if the money starts going to the locals, and this so you're we can't be naive. Humanitarians and developers do a great a great job on the ground. But it's also true that is a business somehow. It's a kind of a market. We have to face it even if we are in love with these markets, but we have to face it that this is somehow a bit of a market, meaning that if you give power to locals, the international ones will have to reduce their headquarters. (...) So it's about jobs and do not forget that the money that goes to development and for humanitarian aid, it's money that is part of a policy of the states that funds that humanitarians and development and these policies are full of pragmatic reasons. (Participant A, personal communication, June 13, 2025)

Participant A framed the world of development and humanitarian aid as a type of market, as in other industries, where competition exists. In this context, funding and control have an inverse relationship. Participant A provided a concrete example, referencing specific countries, to illustrate the bilateral aid system, emphasizing that a power relationship mediated by funding typically exists between the two parties.

Funding serves as a key marker for promoting localisation (Baguios et al., 2021; Grand Bargain, 2016). However, reconciling funding and control remains difficult, which continues to challenge the existing humanitarian and development aid system in its efforts to advance localisation. At the same time, ensuring transparency in funding is a fundamental prerequisite for project implementation and one of the primary concerns for funders. In other words, one of

the critical elements for developing localisation is exploring how to balance the power dynamics between both parties while maintaining funding transparency and accountability.

4.4. Prospects for Localisation

The previous section examined the progression of localisation by reflecting on activities before, during, and after the COVID-19 pandemic. The following section draws on the insights and experiences of the interview participants, adopting a multifaceted approach to examining the elements necessary for developing localisation in the post-pandemic context.

> So, you have internal factors that are about corruption are about some know how that somehow give reasons for international to be resistant but internationals they know also that they could you know find ways to give more power to local NGO's and still having good accountability from the project (Participant A, personal communication, June 13, 2025).

Participant A raised concerns about corruption, arguing that there were ways to transfer power to the local level while ensuring accountability. For this to happen, Participant A emphasized the need to establish context-specific strategies tailored to each country.

> (...) we should have a national strategy for each country because each country is its own world and the civil societies are not, you know, developing themselves in the same way as I told you, you cannot compare Central America with other countries in Kenya, for instance, you cannot compare Kenya with other countries.

Participant A referred to several African countries they had previously visited as examples, pointing out that the maturity of civil society and the capacity of domestic organizations varied significantly from country to country. Participant A emphasized that a uniform policy would make it challenging to implement initiatives that were feasible and effective. Instead, it is essential to first assess the structure and current state of civil society in each country and then build partnerships with capable local organizations to carry out initiatives. Participant A then drew on past experiences and shared concrete examples from actual field activities.

> I'll tell you one example that works. (...) I've worked with them (International organization A) and their system was for one delegate, these delegates, as always, to have a counterpart

in the country. So when I was delegate for International organization A, I had a delegate that was from that country that was he had the same power as me. I was there to do the same job, we had the same job description, but my role was to capacity building him while we were working together. So of course this could be sometimes more expensive, but it's much more sustainable at medium term. (Participant A, personal communication, June 13, 2025)

Assigning two people to the same position aligns with Participant C's operational approach and can be regarded as a viable model for effective project management. As Participant A noted, while it could be costly, if the objective is medium- to long-term capacity building and power transfer, including decision-making authority, such an approach could be expected to yield positive results. Participant A then discussed another concrete example.

International organization B has a lot of global south leaders in leadership, that's beautiful. With International organization B, you have a big number of people that are regional directors, etc etc. So they made it on purpose, but they've also settled offices in countries that are offices that do fundraising and do the same as the headquarters. So decentralization somehow is interesting as a way of empowering the offices in the country to grow.

Granting local offices authority and functions equivalent to those of the headquarters enables them to operate with greater autonomy and independence. As a result, the initiative in project management and the flow of funding are no longer unidirectional but have become part of a more reciprocal and flexible operational structure. This approach facilitates project design that reflects local needs and priorities, thereby empowering stakeholders on the ground and promoting the overall sustainability of the initiatives. Participant A highlighted not only the transformation of staffing structures but also the need for reform in the current allocation of project budgets, explicitly highlighting the issue of overhead funding.

So the budget has a family called overheads and these overheads normally are 7% of the total of the budget or 10%. And this is extremely important money because this is the money that allows you to have fixed staff and do whatever you want with this money for the project or to put people transversal to write other projects and proposals etc. And these many is still going a lot to international NGOs. So one of the good things of a good practice is to start giving this money to national actors. (...) Well, you have to of course, to be accountable with that. But you can have so and normally this money goes to the international.

Based on the premise that financial accountability must be ensured, Participant A argued that granting local actors unrestricted access to a particular portion of funds would confer genuine authority and expand the scope of their activities. For example, Participant A mentioned donor agency A, which stipulates that overhead costs must be shared at a minimum ratio of 50:50. Additionally, Participant A emphasized that striving for a balanced allocation should not be limited to funding but also extend to project design.

> Another good practice is that Donor agency A is doing it, also Donor agency B (...) was doing. It's to call local partners to co-design the call for proposals. This is beautiful if they start doing it, it would be beautiful. So they call the local partners to write with them. OK, which projects, which areas of the country we should be supporting and how would we do the you know, (...) They will ask someone from the locals to co-write it. So it's also a good practice. (Participant A, personal communication, June 13, 2025)

The practical work of project design and financial management is often concentrated within international organizations, and even if either of these responsibilities are suddenly transferred to local organizations, the tangible benefits are limited. Instead, a multifaceted adjustment of the various elements that currently create imbalances in the relationship between international and local organizations is required. In this context, Participant C shared their experience regarding joint project design.

> Donor agency C carried out a very good initiative, which was that we submitted an application to Project A at Donor agency C. But we were still in the application stage. We passed the first phase, but then there was a second phase, and in that second phase, there was a workshop in which all the entities that had advanced to the second stage-around four organizations-had to participate. However, it could not be just Headquarter organizations, it had to include both the Headquarter organizations and their partners in Target country. (Participant C, personal communication, July 8, 2025)

Participant C stated that opportunities and funding for collaboration between headquarters and local staff were insufficient, and that this grant provided the first opportunity for local staff to visit headquarters. Moreover, Donor Agency C provided funding for headquarters staff to travel directly to the target country to conduct on-site assessments during the subsequent

selection process. Participant C emphasized that collaborating with local partners from the project design stage contributed to strengthening local leadership during the later project implementation. Participant D identified several measures to promote localisation based on their experience as a country coordinator collaborating with local organizations and communities.

> I think the main thing again is really work very closely with local partners, local actors. This is key to have really very well connected with the local partners. When I say local partners, I mean local organisations who we normally are partners to the leading organisation, but really build the capacity of local partners. It's important to work closely and build as much as possible the capacity of local, involving them in all activities and giving this coaching on for local partners to be more and having more and more a leading role in the implementation of activities. (Participant D, personal communication, July 11, 2025)

Participant D also emphasized the importance of close relationships with local partners, noting the need to engage in project work in the proximity while promoting local capacity building. This approach underscores a process of positioning local organizations not merely as collaborators but as autonomous actors. This idea aligns with the concept of agency in localisation (Baguios et al., 2021, pp. 11-12), highlighting the creation of an environment where local actors can take responsibility for their own growth, rather than aid being delivered unidirectionally. Additionally, the effective strengthening of relationships with local partners fundamentally relies on utilizing local resources, including human capital and knowledge.

> The other aspect is to really try as much as possible to have local staff in the teams, even if it's an international NGO. I think it's important to have local people. They exist, they are there, so it's important again to build capacity of local people to be involved in this, in these projects, so as much as possible use local resources because there are many people who have the skills and knowledge in university degrees, so to do as much as possible the involvement of local people in the teams and reduce expats. (Participant D, personal communication, July 11, 2025)

Participant D underscored ensuring the employment of local staff as a hard measure while highlighting, as in the previous section, the importance of capacity building as a soft approach. Utilizing local resources corresponds to the knowledge lever among the five levers for

understanding localisation (Baguios et al., 2021, p. 13), and it is necessary to position these resources not merely as supplementary to existing aid structures and project management, but as a foundation for autonomous and sustainable activities. Adequate and appropriate use of local resources strengthens the operational capacity and sustainability of practices, ultimately reducing dependence on expatriates. The decrease in expatriates, as noted in Participant A's comments, becomes inevitable alongside the enhanced management of local resources and the capacity building of organizations and personnel.

Finally, Participant D mentioned diversifying sources of funding as a measure local actors could adopt to respond effectively within existing aid and project management structures.

> And I think finally more to internal aspects, I think it's really important to try as much as possible to diversify sources of funding. So we it's not easy, but try as much as possible to have more than one donor so that if there is less than that you have, it's not easy for NGOs to have, this is not easy, but if we if we can not depend only on one donor, it's, of course, more we are more resilient than them. (Participant D, personal communication, July 11, 2025)

When funding is not limited to a single donor, local organizations become less vulnerable to external fluctuations and risks, enhancing the stability and sustainability of project operations. As a result, the overall resilience of the organization is strengthened, securing its autonomy and enabling a more stable organizational structure.

CHAPTER 5

Conclusion

This study has examined how the COVID-19 pandemic influenced development and humanitarian aid from the perspective of NGOs, particularly regarding the advancement of localisation. Based on a review of existing studies and qualitative research drawing on interviews with NGO aid staff, the analysis indicates that while the pandemic brought about significant changes in field practices, these changes did not necessarily translate directly into reforms of existing institutional structures or shifts in power dynamics.

The COVID-19 pandemic significantly expanded the role of local organizations, enhancing their authority and operational capacity in the field. Travel restrictions for international staff caused substantial changes to project implementation, and local NGOs increasingly took the initiative in responding to the challenges. However, financial and institutional support did not entirely keep pace with this increased responsibility. Consequently, even when local NGOs had strong operational capacity, difficulties arose in securing irregular funding under contractual arrangements, hindering their activities. Conversely, the pandemic had relatively little impact on field operations when organizational and project management structures in normal times allowed for the appropriate division of labour and collaboration between headquarters and local organizations. These findings indicate that for local organizations to realize their capabilities fully, capacity building and the institutional frameworks that support it are necessary.

One significant change to operations caused by the pandemic was the shift to online work. The interviews responses indicated that, for specific tasks, online communication functioned as an alternative to direct communication, which had been abruptly restricted due to travel limitations, and enhanced individual proficiency with online tools. Moreover, the remoteness of project sites was no longer a disadvantage for project implementation. Costs associated with stationing staff on site could be reduced, potentially catalyzing future project design transformation. At the same time, for some tasks, online tools could not serve as a complete substitute, highlighting the continued advantages of face-to-face communication. Particularly, situations requiring communication between project members in a non-native language or where visual and spatial information could not be fully conveyed through a flat-screen environment still demanded in-person interaction. Regardless, the shift to online work presupposes the availability of stable internet connections and individual access to personal

computers, in other words, an adequate information and communication technology (ICT) infrastructure. Considering the geographical distribution of aid projects, disparities exist not only in ICT infrastructure but also in basic infrastructure. Simultaneously, adjustments in operational systems and organizational arrangements are possible. However, it will likely take time before physical resources are sufficiently established.

The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the progress of localisation was temporary and limited. While the 2016 Grand Bargain provided a catalyst for promoting localisation, the pandemic was merely a single event within that trajectory when considering localisation as an ongoing concept within broader aid trends. Although notable changes occurred in field operations and organizational structures, actors in the field continued to be constrained by existing aid mechanisms and power dynamics. In this context, the significant potential for reducing personnel costs through the shift to online work could serve as a factor promoting structural transformation, enabling greater utilisation of local resources. However, because this shift is directly linked to a reduction in international staff, questions remain regarding the extent to which it will genuinely support the advancement of localisation.

However, this does not mean that promoting localisation is at a complete standstill. The study findings reveal several practical strategies employed by NGOs. Although these have not consistently been implemented as explicit measures to advance, several international organizations exhibit good practices in staff development and organizational structuring that could serve as models. In terms of funding, locally led initiatives could be promoted within existing budget frameworks by focusing on overhead budgets that offer greater flexibility for local use or by reviewing current allocations. Additionally, donors could establish frameworks enabling collaboration between headquarters and local actors from the project proposal stage, provide appropriate implementation budgets, and jointly engage in project design.

This study has explored the advancement of localisation during the COVID-19 pandemic based on the interviews with NGO staff. is not merely a slogan but a transformative process that fundamentally rethinks the way aid is delivered. Its promotion requires the reorganization of existing institutional practices and power structures, demanding changes from both international and local organizations. Ensuring transparency and flexibility in funding, revising decision-making processes, and establishing mutually accountable partnerships are measures that must be pursued simultaneously and interactively, rather than in isolation. In addition, since aid project design should fully account for the target community's social familiarity, economic conditions, and sectoral context, initiatives to advance localisation should reflect these local realities.

The limitations of this study are as follows. First, the research was limited to a small number of NGO staff, and their areas of activity varied. Since localisation is a concept relevant to the entire aid sector, future research should target a broader range of aid actors across diverse fields and examine the theme from multiple perspectives, considering their roles, operational areas, and sectors. The second limitation concerns funding, which is considered an indicator for advancing localisation (Grand Bargain, 2016). This study was unable to present specific figures or financial data. This limitation stems from the occupational backgrounds of the interviewees and the qualitative research methods employed. Future research could combine quantitative data collection and financial information with qualitative approaches to enable a more comprehensive analysis. Finally, this study is insufficient for assessing the medium- to long-term effects of due to its focus on the period before and after the pandemic. Future research should continue to monitor developments in the global context and trends within the aid sector to evaluate these dynamics over time.

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