



ACBAR

Agency Coordinating Body for
Afghan Relief & Development

Afghanistan – Localisation Factsheet

Advancing locally led humanitarian
action in Afghanistan

By: ACBAR LTWG

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1 Introduction

Long before global frameworks like the *Grand Bargain* (2016) and the *Charter for Change* (2015) brought localisation to the centre of aid reform, the principle was already embedded in Afghanistan's post-2001 state building and development agenda. As UN Special Representative Lakhdar Brahimi emphasised in 2002, Afghans must be “in the driver’s seat” of their own recovery an early call for ownership, agency, and leadership that remains urgent today.¹

Despite this strong rhetoric, progress has been limited. As of 2023, only 4.5% of global humanitarian funding reached local actors far below the 25% target set under the Grand Bargain.² Furthermore, like many of their counterparts across the Global South, Afghan organisations continue to face exclusion from global policy and decision-making spaces, limited influence over the design and implementation of localisation efforts, and a lack of meaningful ownership in processes that directly affect them. These systematic barriers—combined with shrinking aid flows and rising operational restrictions—challenges undermine efforts to create equitable partnerships and shift power in a sustained and principled way. This has deepened frustrations and intensified demands for more meaningful localisation by local actors and communities in Afghanistan and across the world.

Afghanistan is perhaps even a cautionary tale when it comes to localisation, exemplifying how rhetoric often outpaced action, with some Afghan actors noting that real decision-making power remained with international partners. This despite the fact that local actors bring deep contextual knowledge, trusted relationships, and sustained presence making them indispensable to effective and accountable aid. This disconnect undermines sustainability, excludes Afghan voices from strategy, and risks reinforcing dependency rather than resilience.

This factsheet, developed by the Localisation Technical Working Group (LTWG)³with the support of the Agency Coordinating Body for Afghan Relief & Development (ACBAR) and the Afghanistan Context Support Mechanism (ACSM)⁴, provides an overview of localisation in Afghanistan. It highlights key actors, trends, and challenges while linking Afghan-led efforts to the broader global movement for more equitable, locally led aid systems.

2 What is Localisation, and Who Counts as Local?

Localisation the shift of power, resources, and leadership to local and national actors has become a central pillar of international aid reform, including in Afghanistan. Yet, as in many other contexts, there is no universally agreed definition of localisation or consensus on who qualifies as “local”. Interpretations vary across sectors such as humanitarian response, development, and peacebuilding. The *Grand Bargain* offers a widely cited starting point, defining localisation as the effort to make aid “as local as possible and as

¹ <https://reliefweb.int/report/afghanistan/transcript-press-conference-srsg-afghanistan-lakhdar-brahimi>

² https://knowledge4policy.ec.europa.eu/publication/global-humanitarian-assistance-report-2024_en, no figures are available for Afghanistan.

³ The Localisation Technical Working Group (LTWG) was established in July 2023. It is a multi-stakeholder group comprising donors, UN agencies, clusters, INGOs, and NNGOs and is coordinated by ACBAR.

⁴ The UK Aid funded Afghanistan Context Sensitivity Mechanism (ACSM) is a collaboration between Saferworld and swisspeace and has supported the LTWG for the past two years.

international as necessary.”⁵ Others, such as NEAR and Peace Direct, promote more transformative approaches that seek to rebalance structural inequalities and centre grassroots actors in the design and delivery of aid.

Despite definitional differences some core localisation principles exist:

Core Localisation Principle	Contributes To
Local leadership and knowledge	Empowerment
Equitable partnerships	Equality
Alignment with the needs of affected communities	Accountability
Transfer of resources to local/national actors	Financial independence
Co-creation and shared decision-making	Ownership
Recognition of diverse local actors	Inclusion
Long-term, flexible support	Sustainability
Respect for contextual and cultural knowledge	Relevance
Transparent risk-sharing and trust-building	Mutual accountability
Adaptation of compliance systems to local realities	Accessibility
Strengthening local systems and institutions	Resilience
Protection of civic space and enabling environment	Local agency
Support for local innovation and adaptation	Effectiveness

In Afghanistan, these global frameworks and principles still shape much of the localisation understanding of many international organisations in Afghanistan. While some international stakeholders have begun to articulate their own localisation strategies, most continue to prioritise partnership-based approaches. A rapid exploratory survey by the LTWG found that, among 21 INGOs surveyed, only about half (11) had developed formal partnership strategies, with only five having a dedicated localisation strategy. This snapshot reflects a broader trend: **localisation is often interpreted through the lens of partnership**, rather than as a structural shift in power, resources, and decision-making. Thus, it is important to highlight **key misconceptions about localisation** and what is or perhaps is not:

Misconception	Clarification
Just sub-contracting	Localisation requires shared power and decision-making, not just using local organisations for service delivery.
Just about funding	Localisation also involves voice, leadership, and strategic influence in how aid is planned, prioritised, and governed.
A donor compliance task	Localisation must be embedded in practice and relationships, not just in proposal language or reporting metrics.
A one-size-fits-all solution	Localisation must reflect specific local realities cultural, political, gendered, and geographic.
A replacement of INGOs	Localisation is about rebalancing roles, not excluding internationals; INGOs have an evolving support role.
Local means national only	Local actors also include community-based organisations, informal networks, women’s groups, and traditional authorities not just national NGOs based in urban centres.
Only applies to humanitarian aid	Localisation is equally relevant across the humanitarian–development–peace nexus, including education, health, livelihoods, and governance.

⁵ <https://interagencystandingcommittee.org/grand-bargain-hosted>

Misconception	Clarification
Can be achieved quickly	Localisation is a long-term process requiring investment in systems, relationships, and local institutional sustainability.
Capacity must match donor systems	Rather than expecting local actors to conform to external systems, localisation should also involve adapting donor practices to better support and enable local strengths.

Consultations with local Afghan actors suggest they operate without a clearly defined or commonly shared understanding of localisation perhaps because, for many, it is simply embedded in their everyday practice. Afghan-led initiatives such as the **Afghanistan Localisation Lab** are beginning to fill this gap, offering more grounded definitions that emphasise placing communities at the heart of decision-making and empowering Afghan actors to lead humanitarian responses and shape the future of aid in the country.⁶

In light of the above, key to defining ‘localisation’ and ‘local’ overall requires critical reflection on both proximity and power who holds decision-making authority, whose voices are heard, and who ultimately benefits. **The Localisation Technical Working Group (LTWG) proposes the following working definition** for localisation in Afghanistan, borrowing from its own history:

Localisation in Afghanistan refers to the **purposeful and meaningful transition of power, leadership, decision-making, and resources to Afghan organisations and communities**, enabling them to shape and deliver aid in ways that are contextually relevant, inclusive, and sustainable while navigating a complex and often restrictive operational environment.

At its essence, localisation involves empowering **Afghan actors to take the lead in humanitarian aid and development initiatives**, while international actors serve as accountable partners, providing support, such as resources and expertise, to sustain efforts rather than directing.

This approach underscores **the need for Afghan leadership and ownership in both strategy and implementation**, backed by flexible, long-term support that strengthens local capacity and fosters more equitable partnerships.

2.1 Understanding “local” in the Afghanistan context

In Afghanistan, “local” encompasses a diverse range of actors embedded in communities and directly affected by aid. While localisation, especially in the context of humanitarian assistance, is often associated with shifting power to national and local NGOs, a truly inclusive approach must also recognise the roles of community-based organisations, informal networks, traditional leaders, women’s groups, and grassroots movements. This glossary offers illustrative examples of who may be considered “local” in different contexts across Afghanistan. Though not exhaustive, it highlights the diversity of actors whose leadership and knowledge are vital for principled, effective, and context-driven localisation. Recognising this diversity is key to advancing localisation in Afghanistan.

Category	Description
Coordination Bodies and Networks	Bodies like ACBAR, AWN, ANCBC, and SWABAC that facilitate dialogue, advocate for NNGOs, civil society, share information, and support capacity building.

⁶ <https://coar.org.af/en/index.php/component/content/article/11-news/79-afghanistan-localization-lab-officially-launched-a-new-era-for-locally-led-humanitarian-efforts?Itemid=101>

Category	Description
National NGOs	Locally founded, staffed, and managed NGOs with formal structures, operating at national and/or subnational levels. Some operate province-wide or across several provinces, while others are more localized.
Local Government Entities	Decentralised entities such as provincial, district, or municipal offices involved in service delivery and coordination.
Community-Based Organisations (CBOs)	Grassroots groups formed around shared needs or identities. Operate informally and are directly accountable to their communities.
Foundations / <i>Buniads</i>	Community-linked charitable foundations, often engaged in local welfare and development, including infrastructure efforts in rural areas.
Agricultural Associations	Formal or informal cooperatives of farmers and producers aimed at boosting productivity, market access, and resource sharing.
Community Volunteers	Locally embedded actors connecting aid providers and populations. Include water user associations and traditional <i>mirab</i> systems.
Local Communities	Unregistered yet influential actors like shuras and former CDCs, key to communication, advocacy, and service delivery. Widely seen as the most 'local' by Afghan NGOs.

3 Key Localisation Trends in Afghanistan

Afghanistan is at a critical juncture in its localisation journey. According to global benchmarks, the country is transitioning from an “emerging” phase marked by nascent coordination and growing recognition of local actors to a stage of “early institutionalisation.” This phase is characterised by increasing momentum, coordination efforts, and initial steps toward system-building, though structural barriers and limited funding reform remain (see Section 4 for more details).

While these developments do not yet reflect full structural transformation, they mark important and practical steps forward. Recognising and building on these efforts is essential to advancing principled, context-driven localisation in Afghanistan’s complex operational environment.

- **Self-organisation by Afghan actors** through networks and platforms reflecting growing Afghan leadership in shaping coordination, strategy, and delivery. Two are gaining momentum:
 - **Afghanistan Localisation Lab:** This initiative founded in early 2024 and lead by one of Afghanistan’s oldest NGOs - the Citizens Organization for Advocacy and Resilience (COAR), and supported by the NEAR network, advocates placing Afghan communities at the centre of decision-making and empowering local leadership.
 - **Localisation Technical Working Group (LTWG):** This initiative founded in late 2023 and coordinated by the Agency Coordinating Body for Afghan Relief & Development (ACBAR) brings together international and Afghan NGOs as well as UN actors to define localisation priorities, strengthen local leadership in coordination.
- **Local leadership in coordination forums**, such as NNGOs assuming co-chair roles in key working groups, including the MHPSS Technical Working Group and the Gender in Humanitarian Action (GiHA) Working Group in western Afghanistan.

- **Increased Afghan representation** in strategic discussions, including deep-dive sessions and selected global platforms, creating space to raise critical concerns and contribute meaningfully.
- **Shifting partner selection norms**, with NGOs increasingly prioritised over international organisations in UN partner retention processes.
- **International actors are beginning to step back** from direct implementation to play more supportive roles such as technical advice, monitoring, and financial oversight enabling Afghan partners to lead on delivery.
- **More inclusion in funding governance**, with NGO representatives now part of the Afghanistan Humanitarian Fund (AHF) Advisory Board, strengthening local perspectives in funding decisions.
- **Sustained capacity-building initiatives supporting local actors**, including long-standing programmes led by INGOs, networks (e.g., ACBAR's longstanding Humanitarian Twinning Programme⁷) and targeted efforts by UN agencies (UN Women Support to Women-Led organisations⁸, UNDP's NGO/CSO support programme⁹).

3.1 Enablers, Opportunities, and Risks Shaping Localisation in Afghanistan

Afghanistan's aid landscape presents a complex mix of enablers, opportunities, and risks. Understanding these dynamics is essential for humanitarian actors and donors working to advance principled localisation. These factors have created both openings and tensions in the localisation trajectory. The challenge is to support inclusive, Afghan-led partnerships without reinforcing top-down control or compromising humanitarian principles.

Enablers

Resilient communities and a vibrant civil society form the backbone of Afghanistan's local response capacity. Decades of community-driven responses and grassroots organising through *shuras*, *jirgas*, women's groups, and village-level organising have fostered deep contextual knowledge and provide a foundation of social trust, legitimacy, and local adaptive responses that localisation efforts can build on.

Legacy of Locally Led Governance: Past programmes, such as the National Solidarity Programme and Citizen Charter, offer tangible models for inclusive, bottom-up development. These initiatives demonstrated the potential of community-driven approaches to deliver services, strengthen local governance, and build social cohesion.

Expanding Local Capacity and Institutional Maturity: Years of engagement in aid delivery, often under difficult conditions, have strengthened the technical, organisational, and contextual capacities of many Afghan NGOs. Local actors are not starting from scratch—they bring deep community relationships, programmatic expertise, and an increasing ability to manage funds, comply with donor requirements, and lead coordination.

Local Innovation and Adaptation: Afghan organisations have demonstrated creative, low-cost adaptations to restrictive environments (e.g. home-based education, mobile health outreach). Supporting these innovations can make aid more responsive and resilient.

⁷ <https://www.acbar.org/site-page/7?=Humanitarian%20Twinning%20Program>

⁸ <https://www.unwomen.org/en/news-stories/feature-story/2024/05/rebuilding-the-womens-movement-in-afghanistan#:~:text=According%20to%20UN%20Women%20Special,in%20women's%20organizations%2C%20not%20only>

⁹ <https://www.undp.org/afghanistan/projects/afghanistan-ngo/cso-capacity-support>

Opportunities	<p>Global Policy Momentum: International commitments, such as the <i>Grand Bargain, Pledge for Change</i>¹⁰, and OECD DAC <i>Recommendation on Enabling Civil Society</i>¹¹, create normative and funding pressure on donors and UN agencies to localise even in challenging contexts like Afghanistan.</p>
	<p>Reduced international aid: Shrinking donor budgets and fewer international actors operating at scale has prompted a critical rethinking of the current humanitarian architecture. Localisation is increasingly seen as both a necessity and an opportunity to reorient aid delivery.</p>
	<p>Reversal of the Brain Drain and Talent Return: The shrinking international footprint is prompting skilled Afghan professionals previously employed by INGOs or UN agencies to return to national NGOs and local initiatives. This is bolstering the technical and strategic capacity of local organisations, enabling them to take on additional leadership roles and deliver high-quality programming with reduced external dependency.</p>
	<p>Support by Taliban government: A shift toward national self-reliance and economic pragmatism has opened spaces for Afghan NGOs and local organisations to expand their role in aid delivery particularly those seen as culturally grounded and cost-effective.</p>
Risks	<p>Politicisation of aid: Preferences for certain NGOs by political actors may distort neutrality and reduce equitable access especially in contested or politically sensitive areas.</p>
	<p>Regulatory Constraints and shrinking civic space: Local NGOs particularly women-led organisations face increasing restrictions such as limitations on women's participation, areas of programming, or reporting undermining their autonomy, operational space, and grassroots mobilisation.</p>
	<p>Unequal Risk Transfer: Local actors are often expected to take on high-risk roles (e.g. last-mile delivery, negotiations, access) without equivalent decision-making power, resources, or risk-sharing from international partners.</p>

4 Challenges, Dilemmas & Solutions of Localisation

Despite growing momentum, localisation in Afghanistan faces a range of complex and interconnected challenges. Beyond differing interpretations of who qualifies as “local” or what a localisation process should entail, progress is hindered by political, institutional, financial, and operational constraints many of which are shaped by the country’s volatile and restrictive environment.

During consultations led by the LTWG and ACSM, Afghan and international actors emphasised that the transition to local leadership is not a matter of *if*, but *when*. Advancing localisation is not only a strategic and ethical imperative it also offers a value-for-money approach in today’s shrinking aid landscape, with local actors often delivering more relevant, adaptive, and cost-effective responses.

However, for this transition to be meaningful and sustainable, it must be grounded in a realistic understanding of existing barriers such as limited access to flexible funding, capacity constraints, and regulatory restrictions. The table below identifies key localisation challenges and potential next steps, organised around three interlinked areas: **power and inclusion**, **funding and access**, and **trust and capacity**. These categories reflect both structural dilemmas and practical considerations raised during the consultation process and offer a foundation for coordinated and principled action.

¹⁰ <https://pledgeforchange2030.org/>

¹¹ 2021; <https://legalinstruments.oecd.org/api/print?ids=666&lang=en>; 2025 Update; [https://one.oecd.org/document/DCD/DAC\(2025\)9/en/pdf](https://one.oecd.org/document/DCD/DAC(2025)9/en/pdf)

Challenges / Dilemmas (Where we are)	Recommendations & Next Steps (What Needs to Happen)
Power & Inclusion	Shift Decision Making to Local Actors
<p>Power imbalances: NNGOs have limited influence over strategic decisions, reinforcing top-down structures.</p> <p>Exclusion from coordination and governance structures: Limited presence of NNGOs in clusters and advisory groups.</p>	<p>Support co-leadership and shared governance models: Fund and participate in initiatives like the Localisation Technical Working Group (LTWG) and Afghanistan Localisation Lab to institutionalise co-design and co-leadership in aid architecture.</p> <p>Enable local leadership in coordination systems</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Allocate dedicated funding for NNGO participation in cluster and working group leadership at national and sub-national levels. Provide targeted capacity development to prepare NNGOs to assume coordination leadership roles. Promote rotating leadership models and systematically include Afghan NGO networks (AWN, ANCB, SWABAC, ACBAR) in coordination structures.
Funding & Compliance	Reform Financial Systems to Enable Local Access
<p>Persistent funding inequities: Most resources go to international actors, marginalising local organisations.</p> <p>Barriers to direct and flexible funding: Complex compliance requirements limit direct access to funding.</p>	<p>Commit to direct funding targets</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Allocate at least 25% of humanitarian funding directly to local actors Expand the use of pooled funding mechanisms that are directly accessible to NNGOs. <p>Design Afghanistan-specific funding windows: Create tailored mechanisms with simplified due diligence processes and localised criteria for access, supported by intermediary platforms like ACBAR</p>
<p>Regulatory and compliance challenges: Excessive donor/INGO requirements overburden local NGOs.</p>	<p>Simplify and contextualise compliance</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Provide technical and financial support for local organisations to upgrade financial, administrative, and reporting systems. Advocate for flexible, context-adapted donor compliance frameworks that balance accountability with access. Work with donors and headquarters to adapt compliance frameworks to the operational realities and capacities in Afghanistan.
Trust & Capacity	Build Equitable and Sustainable Partnerships
<p>Trust deficits: Concerns about local actors' neutrality have led to reduced trust and opportunities. These concerns are compounded by real risks of aid diversion, fraud and the emergence of unvetted or politically aligned NNGO.</p>	<p>Invest in trust-building and legitimacy frameworks: Facilitate structured dialogue processes led by Afghan platforms (e.g. ACBAR LTWG, Localisation Lab) to define shared legitimacy, accountability, and partnership principles ensuring that support goes to credible local organisations rooted in communities and committed to principled humanitarian and development action.</p> <p>Establish transparent criteria for risk-sharing and support to local organisations</p> <p>Ensure principled partner selection: Prioritise organisations with strong community roots, transparent governance, and a demonstrated commitment to principled humanitarian and development work.</p>
<p>Talent drain & HR imbalances: INGOs attract skilled staff, weakening L/NNGO institutional capacity.</p>	<p>Strengthen local organisational sustainability</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Provide Long-Term, Flexible Support: Provide multi-year, core funding to NNGOs to build and retain institutional capacities. Address salary inequities by adjusting compensation models to more fairly reflect local expertise and promote staff retention.

Challenges / Dilemmas (Where we are)	Recommendations & Next Steps (What Needs to Happen)
Inadequate guidance on localisation: Local actors lack exposure and tools to implement localisation principles.	Expand Localisation Guidance and Training: Collaborate with LTWG and the Localisation Lab to develop and disseminate operational guidance, training tools, and learning events on localisation principles and practice.

Selected Resources

Afghanistan Specific

ACAPS

- 2024 / *Afghanistan: Different Understandings of Localisation*;
https://www.acaps.org/fileadmin/Data_Product/Main_media/20240816_ACAPS_Afghanistan_analys_is_hub_different_understandings_of_localisation.pdf
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Global

ALNAP / Active Learning Network for Accountability and Performance in humanitarian action

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- 2024 / Evidence to influence more effective, efficient and equitable action – The missing link in localisation’ with the Start Network; <https://startnetwork.org/sites/default/files/2024-07/The%20Missing%20Link%20in%20Localisation.pdf>
- 2023/ *A pathway to localisation impact: laying the foundations*; with CoLab & GLOW. <https://humanitarianadvisorygroup.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/04/HAG-HH2-PPLL-Pathway-to-Localisation.pdf>
- 2019 / *Measuring Localisation: Framework and Tools*; with PIANGO. https://humanitarianadvisorygroup.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/Measuring-Localisation-Framework-and-Tools-Final_2019.pdf

Humanitarian Impact Institute

- 2025. *Localisation Maturity Model*; <https://hi-institute.org/localisation-maturity-model>
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<https://pledgeforchange2030.org/>

Save the Children Resource Centre. Over 400 resources on localisation:
<https://resourcecentre.savethechildren.net/collection/localisation>

Other Readings

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