



EVIDENCE TO INFLUENCE MORE EFFECTIVE, EFFICIENT AND EQUITABLE ACTION — THE MISSING LINK IN LOCALISATION

Literature review

Prepared for Start Network

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HUMANITARIAN
ADVISORY GROUP



START
NETWORK

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About the Partners

Humanitarian Advisory Group was founded in 2012 to elevate the profile of humanitarian action in Asia and the Pacific. Set up as a social enterprise, HAG provides a unique space for thinking, research, technical advice and training that contributes to excellence in humanitarian practice.

Start Network is made up of 98 non-governmental organisations across five continents, ranging from large international organisations to local and national NGOs. Their mission is to create a new era of humanitarian action that will save even more lives by tackling the biggest systemic problems in the humanitarian sector as it stands, including centralised power and decision making, slow and reactive funding, and an aversion to change.



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ABBREVIATIONS

A4EP	Alliance for Empowering Partnership
C4C	Charter4Change
CHS	Core Humanitarian Standard on Quality and Accountability
CLIP	Community-Led Innovation Partnership
DG ECHO	Directorate-General for European Civil Protection and Humanitarian Aid Operations
IFRC	International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies
INGO	International non-governmental organisation
MEL	monitoring evaluation and learning
NEAR	Network for Empowered Aid Response
NGO	non-governmental organisation
PIANGO	Pacific Islands Association of NGOs
TC	Tropical Cyclone
UK	United Kingdom
UN	United Nations
VfM	value for money
WHS	World Humanitarian Summit

SECTION 1: INTRODUCTION

Localisation of humanitarian action has been the subject of humanitarian policy and practice discussions for more than a decade. Locally led action is commonly held to mean more effective and efficient delivery of aid, and many humanitarian actors have committed to it, yet sound evidence about its progress and impact remains scarce.

■ ■ The overall objective of localisation is improved humanitarian response, ensuring access for all in need to fast, quality, impactful and sustainable humanitarian assistance that is efficient, effective and fit for purpose.¹

Leading humanitarians have called for more equitable localised approaches involving local and national actors to decolonise aid and shift stakeholder power in the sector.² Equity ranks with effectiveness and efficiency as a motivation for a more localised humanitarian system, but faces the same challenge of scant evidence of progress.

■ ■ “making principled humanitarian action as local as possible and as international as necessary”³

The lack of evidence of localisation’s impact is widely acknowledged in the literature.⁴ Over recent years, researchers and institutions have sought to measure progress against localisation targets, mostly via self-reporting, anecdotal case studies, and programme evaluations. This has produced some promising data around shifts in practice, but rarely illuminated their impacts. To translate localisation discourse into action, this gap must be filled. Moreover, a more localised humanitarian system requires linking evidence about its impacts to a collective, sector-wide narrative around its rationale and motivation. Behavioural insights highlight the need for clear, consistent messages underpinned by strong evidence to enable motivation and change behaviours.⁵ Humanitarian actors must collect evidence to justify claims of increased effectiveness, efficiency and equity, and communicate it clearly to maximise impact.

This report explores the existing evidence base and rationale for localisation to better understand how arguments for effectiveness, efficiency and equity in the localisation discourse are understood, evidenced and communicated. It identifies evidence of localisation impact as the missing link in the process of realising more effective advocacy and action on localisation ambitions. It takes stock of existing evidence and presents opportunities and ways for the sector to collect and communicate data to create change.

Scope

The Start Network commissioned this literature review to contribute to the evidence base on the impact and rationale for locally led humanitarian action. The review intends to inform not only the Start Network’s position and approach on localisation issues, but present the latest evidence about localisation to the humanitarian sector in order to strengthen communication and drive good practice.

The review focused on literature that mentions effectiveness, efficiency and equity, and synonymous terms and concepts. It sought to understand to what extent and in what ways these terms are used in the localisation discourse, how they are measured and evidenced, how they interrelate, and how stakeholders communicate and perceive them. Key terminology is defined in Box 1 below.

Box 1: Terminology

'Localisation': A process of recognising, respecting, and strengthening the independence of leadership and decision-making by national actors in humanitarian action to meet the needs of affected populations.⁶

Local leadership: This term, along with 'locally led' and 'community-led,' as they relate to humanitarian action, are used in this study to emphasise the importance of recognising (and respecting) local humanitarian action and that humanitarian action needs to be owned and led from the ground up. The term 'localisation' refers to respecting, recognising, and strengthening local leadership.⁷

Effectiveness: The extent to which an intervention achieves its objectives.⁸

Efficiency: The extent to which the intervention delivers results in an economical and timely way.⁹

Equity: The absence of unfair, avoidable or remediable differences between groups of people defined socially, economically, demographically, geographically or by other dimensions of inequality (e.g. sex, gender, ethnicity, disability, or sexual orientation).¹⁰

Report structure

Section 1 (this section) introduces the report.

Section 2 provides a brief overview of the three key arguments, how they are framed in the global discourse, and the core claims that underpin each in the literature.

Section 3 shows how the core arguments around localisation are articulated and communicated. This section interrogates key terms and themes and the narratives behind them in the localisation discourse.

Section 4 presents the existing measurement approaches and the extent to which the humanitarian sector qualifies assumptions.

Section 5 concludes the report, summarising the key themes and presenting recommendations for the Start Network and broader humanitarian sector on how to progress in measuring and communicating effectively on localisation.

Methodology

This study was conducted between November 2023 and February 2024. It consisted of an online systematic search and a review of core literature identified through previous research. The search included:

- Academic literature (sourced primarily through Google Scholar)
- Grey literature (sourced primarily through Relief Web) – organisational case studies, reviews, reports
- Documentation specific to Start Network operations – including internal organisational resources, external evaluations, advocacy resources, case studies and blogs.

The research team identified and prioritised over 350 documents, which were then prioritised based on the relevance and prevalence of key terms. This led to the inclusion of over 100 priority documents,

including a range of internal and external Start Network documents. This included academic research (15%), grey literature (30%), research reports (35%) and other materials (20%).

Saeed Ullah Khan (GLOW Consultants, Pakistan) and Dr Puji Pujiono (Pujiono Centre, Indonesia) used their intimate knowledge of the localisation discourse, experience in localisation issues at national and international levels, and familiarity with research processes to review the final report and contextualised its recommendations.

Figure 1 provides an overview of the methodology.

Figure 1: Methodology



Limitations

Time and resource limitations: This review was conducted between November 2023 and January 2024. In this short time, the research team selected and prioritised literature based on their relevance and prevalence of key terms, rather than comprehensively reviewing all relevant literature.

Evidence of impact: The research team found little published data and evidence of the impact of localised practices on equity, efficiency and effectiveness at the community level.

Language limitation: Due to time, resource and language constraints, only documents in English were reviewed. Consequently, the review may have omitted some documents written by local and national actors in other languages, thus potentially affecting its results.

SECTION 2: THE ARGUMENTS IN A NUTSHELL

The literature highlights three core arguments as to *why* the humanitarian sector must shift to more locally led humanitarian system:

- Localised approaches deliver a more *effective* response.
- Localised approaches deliver aid more *efficiently*.
- Localised approaches support the shift to a more *equitable* humanitarian sector.

Global frameworks and platforms have influenced these arguments. The Grand Bargain, initiated by Global North actors and launched at the World Humanitarian Summit (WHS) in 2016, is widely acknowledged as the catalyst for increased focus on localisation; it seeks to ‘improve the effectiveness and efficiency of humanitarian response.’¹¹ The literature confirms the centrality of these concepts to the argument for localisation, and as core criteria for measuring and evaluating localisation progress.

Other global commitments and frameworks call for greater equity in the sector, typically focusing on equitable partnerships rather than the sector-wide transformation of power that is increasingly prominent in the equity narrative.¹² Table 1 provides a snapshot of key global commitments and how they frame the three core arguments for localisation.

Photo: Crespo Mubbalya AWYAD



Table 1: Localisation framing in key global frameworks and commitments

Global framework or commitment	Reference to effectiveness, efficiency, and equity
Grand Bargain ¹³	<p>The Grand Bargain places the greatest emphasis on efficiency and effectiveness.</p> <p>“The Grand Bargain is a unique agreement between some of the largest donors and humanitarian organisations who have committed to get more means into the hands of people in need and to improve the effectiveness and efficiency of humanitarian action.”</p>
Charter4Change (C4C) ¹⁴	<p>The C4C places the greatest emphasis on equity. A key focus is addressing inequitable partnership practices through committing to shifting subcontracting approaches. Equality, whilst differing to equity, is one of its eight core commitments, in particular around decision making between international and local partners. Equity and equality are not synonymous, though have common goals in addressing injustice.</p> <p>“The Charter for Change includes 8 Commitments that INGOs agree to implement, to address imbalances and inequality in the global humanitarian system.”</p>
Core Humanitarian Standard on Quality and Accountability (CHS) ¹⁵	<p>The CHS places the greatest emphasis on improving effectiveness. The standards are not specific to localisation, but highlight the importance of strengthening and supporting local capacities as critical to effective response.</p> <p>“The Core Humanitarian Standard on Quality and Accountability (CHS) sets out Nine Commitments that organisations and individuals involved in humanitarian response can use to improve the quality and effectiveness of the assistance they provide.”</p>
Principles of Partnership ¹⁶	<p>These principles place the greatest emphasis on effectiveness and equity, through equitable partnerships.</p> <p>“The Principles of Partnership strive to enhance the effectiveness of humanitarian action, based on an ethical obligation and accountability to the populations we serve; acknowledge diversity as an asset of the humanitarian community and recognise the interdependence among humanitarian organizations; and commit to building and nurturing effective partnership.”</p>

Well-developed arguments for effectiveness, efficiency and equity exist in the localisation discourse. These arguments are supported by the literature and are generally agreed to underwrite the perceived benefits of localisation. Table 2 summarises the three core arguments and the most common claims or themes that support each in the literature (discussed further in section 3 below).

Table 2: Summary of the core arguments and claims

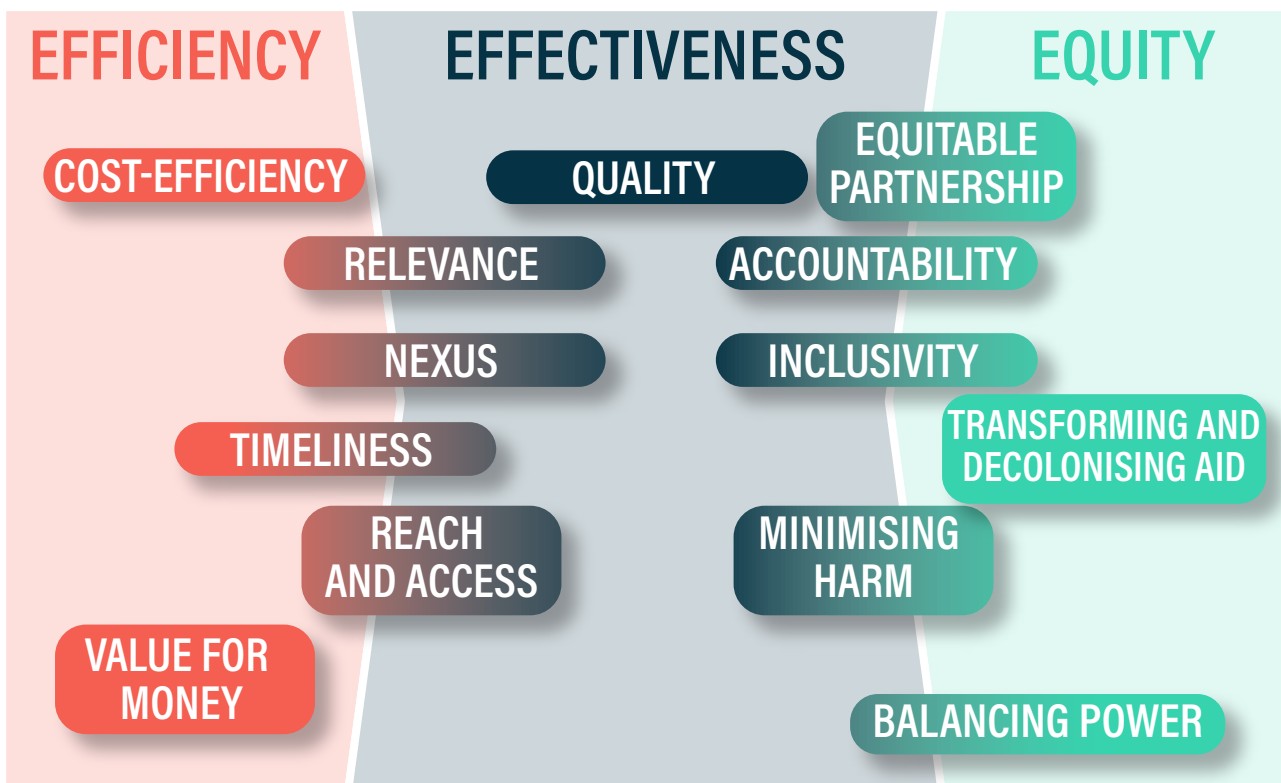
Argument	What does it mean?	Core claims
 <p>Localisation supports greater effectiveness of humanitarian aid</p>	<p>Effectiveness in humanitarian action is understood as ‘the extent to which the intervention achieved, or is expected to achieve, its objectives, and its results, including any differential results across groups.’¹⁷</p>	<p>Localisation of humanitarian response:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Improves overall quality of response ■ Strengthens accountability to affected populations ■ Supplies more relevant and contextually appropriate aid ■ Provides a more inclusive response ■ Expands access to hard-to-reach communities ■ Supports a nexus approach, linking humanitarian action with ongoing development interventions ■ Minimises harm from humanitarian response ■ Can be more cost effective
 <p>Localisation strengthens the efficiency of humanitarian operations</p>	<p>Efficiency in aid delivery is understood as ‘the extent to which the intervention delivers, or is likely to deliver, results in an economic and timely way.’¹⁸</p>	<p>Localisation of humanitarian response:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Supports a timely response ■ Produces cost efficiencies, including sourcing locally available products ■ Delivers better value for money
 <p>Localisation creates a more equitable humanitarian system</p>	<p>Equity in aid delivery is understood as ‘the absence of unfair, avoidable, or remediable differences among groups of people, whether those groups are defined socially, economically, demographically, or geographically, or by other dimensions of inequality (e.g. sex, gender, ethnicity, disability, or sexual orientation).’¹⁹</p>	<p>Localisation of humanitarian response:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Leads to equitable and fair partnerships and practices ■ Rebalances power in the system to support local actors ■ Contributes to transforming and decolonising aid²⁰

Box 2: Overlap and opposition

The core claims align with the three core arguments, but many overlaps exist. This demonstrates that the three arguments can work together, and highlights effectiveness as a central link between arguments for both efficiency and equity. Alternatively, it highlights the minimal overlap between arguments for increased efficiency and greater equity.²¹ Acknowledging how the three arguments work together and in opposition can help to shape effective communication of their ambitions.

Figure 2 below provides an overview of the key themes discussed above and how they can be attributed to the core arguments presented in this section.

Figure 2: Position, overlap and opposition of key themes



SECTION 3: INTERROGATING THE ARGUMENTS

Interrogating how arguments for localisation have drawn on concepts of effectiveness, efficiency and equity helps us understand how rationales are framed and why, and the claims that underpin them. This section articulates the arguments for localisation in the areas of effectiveness, efficiency and equity as presented in the literature. It outlines the components of the arguments, the basis of key claims, and their prevalence in the reviewed literature (i.e. how common they appear). It also explores the evidence about how these arguments resonate with stakeholders and opposing arguments.

Effectiveness

The argument: Localisation supports greater effectiveness of humanitarian aid.

Prevalence of argument in the literature:



The argument that localisation leads to greater effectiveness of humanitarian aid is the most common rationale for localised approaches. It features widely across various types of literature, including academic papers, policy research, NGO reports and evaluations, and is a cornerstone of most localisation communications and advocacy approaches.²² Claims of effectiveness often encompass a wide range of themes and assumptions, with little supporting evidence (discussed further in section 4 below).

The effectiveness argument posits that localisation enables and leads to more effective humanitarian response, and better outcomes. It is founded on the premise that investing in the leadership, capacity, and resources of local actors rather than systems and responses led by international actors, leads to greater effectiveness.²³ This argument maintains that national actors are better placed to make strategic and operational decisions, due to a better understanding of the context and closer connection to affected communities. Proponents of the effectiveness argument claim that dominant international leadership of responses and limited existing approaches to complementarity are obstacles to building sustained national capacities and leadership that will support a more effective response.

The claims that underpin the effectiveness argument relate to improved quality, relevance, accountability, inclusivity, and reach of humanitarian response that supports better outcomes for affected communities.²⁴ For example, during the Tropical Cyclone (TC) Harold response in Vanuatu, which occurred in a context of COVID-19 restrictions, local actors sourced local food that was more diverse and nutritious than relief items typically distributed by internationally led responses.²⁵ Start Fund recipients in Vanuatu also reported that partnering with local and national actors during TC Harold enabled a comprehensive response package to be delivered to communities, that would not have been possible without local leadership.²⁶ Another common position is that local actors understand the local

context and community needs, are trusted, accountable, and well placed to prioritise and contextualise types of assistance, including for marginalised or vulnerable groups.²⁷ Some evidence – notably, case studies from the Start Network in Pakistan and Guatemala and the Red Cross Red Crescent Movement²⁸ – demonstrates that local processes are key to effective community feedback mechanisms to influence and inform program adaptations.

■ ■ Considering the financing gap, it made sense to opt for localization because it is cost-effective and local actors bring the comparative advantage of a better understanding of context.²⁹

A prevalent argument in the localisation literature is that localised approaches foster greater inclusion. Due to their proximity and trust within communities, local actors often have deep understandings of community dynamics, and can identify hidden or vulnerable groups. For example, women’s rights organisations or organisations of persons with disabilities are often able to identify and understand the needs of the groups they serve, contributing to a more effective and inclusive response.³⁰

■ ■ Local actors are considered to have a key role to play in humanitarian response. They are often credited with having better access and ability to engage in immediate operations, superior understanding of needs and the situation on the ground, aiding prioritisation, as well as improved agility, sustainability, resilience, and cost-effectiveness.³¹

Arguments for increased effectiveness also include local actors’ better access to remote communities, especially where security concerns prevent international response.³² Localised approaches are also presumed to support a nexus approach, because local actors are more likely to stay in context and work across the spectrum of preparedness, response and recovery. In many contexts, local organisations leading in responses are advocacy or development actors, and do not consider themselves as traditional ‘humanitarian’ actors, therefore also facilitating synergies with development or peacebuilding interventions.³³ Some literature suggests that localised approaches minimise harm and unintended consequences of humanitarian response, for example, by reducing inappropriate assistance, minimising waste, and mitigating environmental harm and degradation.³⁴

Effectiveness arguments place the dominant focus on benefits for affected communities. Whilst evidence on messaging impact is scarce, some arguments for effectiveness of humanitarian response resonate with donors seeking to overcome blockages, overlap, and other systemic problems.³⁵ Greater effectiveness via capacity strengthening is said to resonate with donors seeking to reduce the amount of aid required in contexts with strong national response systems.³⁶

Arguments that localisation does not support greater effectiveness also exist. For example, Ground Truth Solutions’ data from Ukraine found that communities preferred receiving aid from international agencies, perceiving it to be of higher quality. However, it has been noted that the complex environment and supply chains mean that affected communities do not always have visibility of the sources of assistance.³⁷

■ ■ For members of the international humanitarian community, there may be very little political incentive, and insufficient appetite, to give up power to more local actors. As a result, they focus on other aspects of the localisation agenda such as cost effectiveness and funding mechanisms.³⁸

The argument: Localisation strengthens the *efficiency* of humanitarian response.

Prevalence of argument in the literature:



Arguments based on the efficiency of localised approaches are common, although less so than those based on effectiveness. However, efficiency and effectiveness arguments are often intertwined, with localisation argued to improve the effectiveness and efficiency of humanitarian aid, in many global commitments and reports.³⁹

The efficiency premise is most commonly linked to financial arguments – cost-efficiency and value for money (VfM) – and, to a lesser extent, timeliness of response.⁴⁰ It holds that localised response is more cost-efficient, because resources and funds are provided more directly to local actors and communities, thereby avoiding the overheads and transaction costs associated with maintaining international agencies and systems.⁴¹

▮▮ In many contexts, humanitarian action is more timely, cost-effective, and efficient when locally driven. This is because local actors have the knowledge, networks, and political and cultural awareness to deliver results on the ground.⁴²

Claims underpinning the efficiency argument include that localised responses have lower costs of implementation, staffing, and transaction and response management, due partially to lower wage and salary costs for national and local actors.⁴³ This highlights a tension between efficiency and equity arguments (explored further below). Both academic and grey literature highlight that local actors are close to affected communities and therefore can reach people faster than international responders – particularly evident when COVID-related travel restrictions were in force.⁴⁴ It is also maintained that funding local actors and crisis-affected people directly minimises time and resource investment in transporting international staff and supplies.⁴⁵

▮▮ With the humanitarian system facing increasing funding shortfalls every year, the efficiency argument for localization remains central to its broader acceptance. Localization can help reduce costs related to implementation, staffing, transaction, and management through all stages of humanitarian preparedness, response and recovery.⁴⁶

Some additional arguments for efficiency overlap with effectiveness. For example, some literature highlights increased relevance as a way to provide more targeted aid with less waste and duplication, enabling efficiency gains.⁴⁷ There are some examples whereby localised approaches have mitigated environmental harm and supported increased community resilience.⁴⁸ The increased reach and access of local actors is also cited as means of reducing time and resource investments to reach remote areas.⁴⁹ Timeliness is also an aspect of arguments for effectiveness – that a more timely response is more effective.⁵⁰ Claims that localised processes support a nexus approach are also linked to efficiency in building resilience and reducing the need for aid in the future, therefore, providing greater VfM.⁵¹

Efficiency arguments place the focus more on benefits to donors and implementers rather than affected communities, though communities may also benefit from efficiency gains. It is assumed that VfM arguments have more salience with donors and decision-makers; however, the research team was unable to find a comprehensive VfM analysis of localisation approaches in specific contexts.⁵²

Academic research provides some evidence for the salience of cost-efficiency messages. This evidence suggests public perceptions around humanitarian assistance and cost-effectiveness influence donors, who are accountable to the public in their own countries. For example, Goodwin and Ager highlight how arguments for localisation were driven by VfM and cost-effectiveness arguments in the discourse on public spending in the United Kingdom (UK). They found that in the climate of contested public spending, capacity building support for local actors was not as favourable to the public as life-saving humanitarian actions.⁵³

The efficiency argument has been critiqued for reducing the debate on localisation to economics.⁵⁴ Exclusively focussing on such metrics risks comprising the quality of, and accountability to affected populations. There are also conflicting arguments, with some examples of localised processes being found to be less efficient than standard delivery through the international system (e.g., in relation to medical supplies), and local actors struggling to deliver at scale.⁵⁵ Inconsistent approaches to localisation measurement (see Section 4 below) make these claims hard to substantiate.

Approaching localisation through a lens of cost efficiency has been criticised. While there is a growing literature supporting localisation for effective humanitarian response, there is a lack of robust evidence showing localisation as cost-effective.⁵⁶

Photo: CADENA A.C



The argument: Localisation creates a more equitable humanitarian system.

Prevalence of argument in the literature:



The systemic inequalities and power imbalances in the humanitarian sector are attracting increasing attention and research. Movements to decolonise humanitarianism and shift power within the sector are underway and calls for a more equitable system are gathering momentum. However, arguments that correlate a more localised system with a more equitable system are less prevalent in the literature than those focussed on effectiveness and efficiency.

The equity argument maintains that the humanitarian sector should rebalance power and strive for an equitable system. Equity-based arguments have two main themes: equitable partnerships, and a transformational interpretation of localisation as the basis of a moral or principle-based rationale. Calls for equitable partnerships are common in the localisation literature, and can be linked to arguments for both increased effectiveness and efficiency by translating Grand Bargain commitments into practice. The literature presents equitable partnerships as including equitable risk sharing, resourcing, and decision-making influence,⁵⁷ which in turn is assumed to support more effective and efficient action.⁵⁸ Equitable partnerships are described in more detail in Box 3.

Box 3: Equitable partnerships

In localisation literature, *equitable partnerships* are considered the foundation upon which assumptions of increased effectiveness and efficiency can be built. For example, the presumed benefit that local actors can deliver a high quality, relevant, inclusive response cannot be realised unless they have the power and resources to make decisions and influence program design. This requires sharing power through equitable partnership practices, risk sharing and resourcing,⁵⁹ which is now supported by initiatives and guidance.⁶⁰ *The Principles of Partnership* provide a framework through which to strengthen the *effectiveness* of humanitarian action through acknowledging the diversity within the humanitarian community. Further, the principles put forward a commitment to building and nurturing effective partnerships. In doing so, articulate five key principles, being: *equality; transparency; results-oriented approach; responsibility and complementarity*. The principle of equality details that an equal partnership:

“requires mutual respect between the members of the partnership irrespective of size and power. The participants must respect each other’s mandates, obligations and independence and recognise each other’s constraints and commitments. Mutual respect must not preclude organisations from engaging in constructive dissent”⁶¹

For example, in an evaluation of the Start Fund activation in Pakistan in January 2022, local organisation Bright Star Development Society commended its international partners for an equitable sharing of resources and collective decision making. The organisation’s CEO maintained that each partner was able to effectively participate and leverage their strengths in the response, and it contributed to a strengthened partnerships moving forward.⁶²

The transformational interpretation of the equity argument calls for a seismic rebalancing of power within the humanitarian system. These arguments typically centre around creating a more equitable system as an ethical and moral imperative, and are often linked with calls for transforming and decolonising aid. Approaches to decolonisation are inherently linked to, but simultaneously distinct from, the localisation agenda (see Box 4).

Box 4: Linking agendas – decolonising aid and localisation as contributions to an equitable system

Arguments for a more transformative approach to localisation focus on the inequities and power dynamics built into the humanitarian system. These equity-based arguments also overlap with conversations and writing on decolonisation. The Feinstein Center noted that this has helped to amplify and advance localisation, particularly over the last five years.⁶³ This has prompted some organisations to examine their role in the humanitarian system, acknowledging the colonial legacies and issues of racism and neo-colonialism that still exist. For example, the Start Network has developed an anti-racist decolonial framework, and are putting specific actions into place to move towards more ethical practices such as re-evaluating current risk models, that are of Western origin, building more ethical communications and advocacy, and working towards decolonising evidence and learning practices. Other agencies that have developed decolonial approaches include Oxfam, that has a Decolonial Partnership Strategy.⁶⁴

“To some, a more radical approach, one that tackles the colonial roots of aid is needed. The localisation discourse is primarily being had among international actors, further entrenching the power imbalance.”⁶⁵

Whilst international actors have used arguments based on equity, shifting power in practice requires international humanitarian actors, intermediaries and donors to relinquish decision-making power and control over resources. This requires equity-based arguments to resonate on multiple levels to enact change, because significant organisational buy-in and political will are required to drive transformative change.⁶⁶

One of the more prominent critiques of the localisation agenda is that it does not do enough to transform power in the humanitarian system.⁶⁷ Critics maintain that the localisation discourse continues to be driven by international actors and used as a smokescreen to avoid legitimate and meaningful transfer of power.⁶⁸ It is widely acknowledged in the literature that localisation has largely been defined and debated at the top levels by international actors, with limited opportunities for local actors to contribute or shape these discussions.⁶⁹ This calls into question the legitimacy of the current discourse. Placing greater focus on equity in the existing localisation discourse presents a pathway to both strengthen the rationale and overcome opposition.

There are some positive examples of local organisations and networks collectively advocating for localisation on their terms and achieving a growing level of influence. For example, the Network for Empowered Aid Response (NEAR) and the Alliance for Empowering Partnership (A4EP) are two locally led networks that have been invited to participate in the Grand Bargain Facilitation Group as the Global South Signatory.⁷⁰ However, the inclusion of one voice to represent all of the Global South on this platform does little to demonstrate an equitable influence. There is opportunity for arguments for greater equity in the system to also place greater emphasis on who is setting the agenda.

There has also been some criticism of calls for greater equity in the system, suggesting that giving local actors increased or equal power and leadership will create tension with core humanitarian principles of neutrality and impartiality.⁷¹ It is argued that because local actors are embedded in local contexts and have close ties to local communities and groups, it is difficult for them to deliver impartial and independent humanitarian response.⁷² Others have argued that there is little evidence to support claims that local actors are generally less principled than international ones, and that this argument is used as a 'wedge issue' or a way of gatekeeping to prevent local actors from competing with internationals.⁷³

Other arguments explore the incredible nuance of humanitarian principles, including in the context of local leadership. For example, in some situations of conflict local actors may not be able to provide relief that is impartial or neutral due to threats for their own safety from conflicting parties. However, there are numerous examples whereby international actors' ability to provide truly principled assistance is also constrained.⁷⁴ There are also emerging arguments that the principle of neutrality may not be fit for purpose in the evolving world of humanitarianism. The neutral humanitarian model is largely derived from Western influence, in efforts to shift power to local leaders, some scholars argue that these actors should not have to prove neutrality to be considered effective.⁷⁵

“ In terms of questioning of the commitment of local humanitarian actors to humanitarian principles, much of this critique is based on allegations rather than evidence; for the most part, the questions are raised, but not thoroughly explored or adequately supported.⁷⁶

Photo: Consorcio Start El Salvador



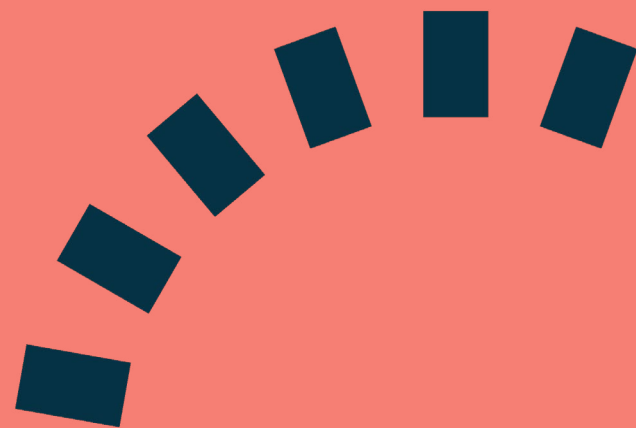
THE MISSING LINK: EVIDENCE OF IMPACT

Despite the prevalence of the three core arguments in the literature, and the many themes and concepts linked to each, there continues to be a lack of evidence about the extent to which localised practices are contributing towards more efficient, effective, or equitable humanitarian action.

Most existing resources on localisation focus on defining the problem and tracking progress against high-level commitments, and offer little evidence on the extent to which localisation leads to better – more effective, efficient, and/or equitable – humanitarian action and outcomes.⁷⁷ The data that does exist is primarily anecdotal, or limited to a specific intervention in a specific context, hindering progression of the localisation agenda in both policy and practice. Without robust evidence, the arguments discussed above will continue to be based on claims rather than facts.

- There is still little generalisable and empirical evidence pointing to how to shift the system to be more locally led. What is certain is that it requires strong political will from donors and humanitarian actors. Importantly, the humanitarian sector is still unclear, and has yet to develop consistent analysis⁷⁸ and understanding about the intended outcomes and the ultimate impacts of localisation.⁷⁹
- The majority of the literature refers to the quality of partnerships with local actors, with very little evidence of the quality, effectiveness, efficiency and impact of localisation for affected populations and humanitarian responses.⁸⁰

A stronger evidence base will allow humanitarian actors to improve localised practices and strengthen communication around localisation, in turn driving more significant shifts in the sector. The following section outlines the extent to which the sector is developing a stronger evidence base in order to support localisation claims and ultimately improve practice.



SECTION 4: MEASUREMENT APPROACHES BEHIND THE ARGUMENTS

The localisation discourse is complex and nuanced. The plethora of claims about locally led humanitarian action, and the extent to which localisation arguments are contributing to shifts in practice, are backed by little data. Over recent years, efforts to track and measure localisation progress against targets and indicators have increased. This has generated new evidence about practice shifting incrementally to provide better support for local actors, but little evidence about if and how this is contributing to more effective, efficient, or equitable delivery of humanitarian aid. This section describes what evidence exists, and critically, explores the gaps.

Measurement of progress

Most evidence about localisation produced to date involves the measurement of progress, using approaches tested or piloted at the country, organisation, partnership, or program level.⁸¹ Most measurement approaches or frameworks reference effectiveness and/or efficiency through several of their key thematic areas and impact indicators. This generally includes in the articulation of the purpose, or desired outcome that is centred on increasing the effectiveness or efficiency of humanitarian action, though framework indicators do not align to these high level intentions.⁸² For example, NEAR's Localisation Performance Measurement Framework states that the framework can be used to assess "to what extent and in what ways has localisation contributed to changes (positive or negative) in the effectiveness of our humanitarian response?"⁸³ It claims that measuring progress against each impact indicator will provide clarity to this question; however, key performance indicators and means of verification predominantly measure progress, not impact. Equity is commonly addressed in terms of 'equitable partnerships,' a core focus of many localisation and partnership approaches (see Box 3 above).⁸⁴

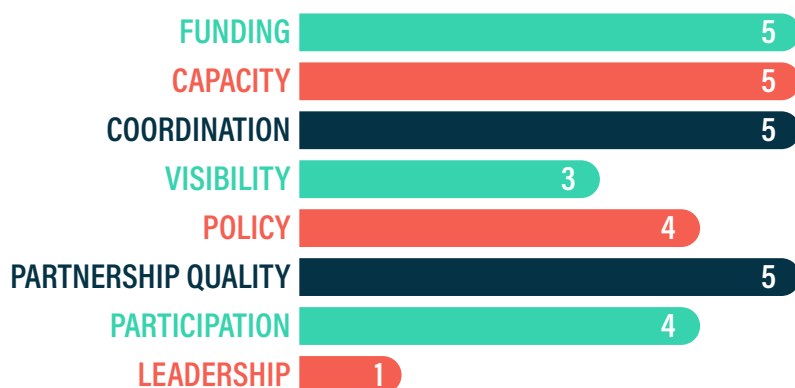
Challenges in measuring progress

Some literature criticises these frameworks and approaches for setting targets and collecting data at a superficial level and failing to investigate the broader impacts of localisation actions. For example, several approaches set targets for the inclusion and participation of local actors, without measuring how their participation influences how a program or response is delivered.⁸⁵ Measuring progress – change over time – can also be resource intensive.⁸⁶ Measuring progress is important to hold actors accountable for commitments and to create and track quantifiable data on localisation; however, in the absence of greater focus on the measurement of impact, arguments for increased effectiveness, efficiency and equity are difficult to verify. There have also been critiques around the definition of localisation, and what constitutes a local and national actor, which have been barriers to progress.⁸⁷

Good practice in measuring progress

Intentions to measure the progress of localisation have gained significant traction. Despite the challenges in measuring progress and determining the extent to which indicators represent meaningful change, utilising existing measurement frameworks is a step in the right direction in tracking change towards a more localised humanitarian system. The most prevalent metrics of localisation progress in commonly used frameworks are shown in Figure 3.

Figure 3: Localisation priorities mentioned across key measurement frameworks⁸⁸



Localisation measurement frameworks are largely based on priority areas in the Grand Bargain, C4C and CHS.⁸⁹ Effectiveness is commonly referenced in capacity, partnership, participation, coordination and to a lesser extent policy influence indicators.⁹⁰ Efficiency is commonly referenced in funding, and capacity strengthening indicators, and to a lesser extent in coordination outcomes.⁹¹ Equity is commonly conflated with equitable partnerships, which is a key feature of each framework. However, aspects of equity, while not stated explicitly, can be linked to indicators of visibility, policy influence, and participation in efforts to put more power and decision-making influence in the hands of local actors and affected communities.

While the terms are widely referenced, there is less clarity around how notions of effectiveness, efficiency, or equitable practice can be quantified. Indicators focus mainly on measuring change processes rather than outcomes. However, positive change is evident in the evolution of localisation measurement approaches. The initial focus on global frameworks and initiatives has been replaced with more focus on contextualising approaches at the country level.⁹² This allows local actors to have a greater say in their own priorities and how they are reflected appropriately in context. There are positive examples of local and national actors leading country-level measurement processes to quantify localisation commitments linked to effectiveness, efficiency, and equity (see Box 5). While impact assessment has not been incorporated in these approaches to date, these processes represent a critical first step in measuring change.

Box 5: Measuring localisation progress in Jordan

The Jordan Strategic Humanitarian Committee mobilised a localisation task team, co-chaired by the Jordan National NGO Forum, the Jordan INGO Forum and UN Women, to develop a monitoring evaluation and learning (MEL) framework for localisation in Jordan. This framework draws on the Start Network's *Seven Dimensions of Localisation*, contextualised to reflect priorities in Jordan. The baseline report details findings across seven progress areas: partnership quality, participation, funding, capacity, coordination, perceptions of national and local actors, and the enabling environment. It shows some evidence of progress and identifies key areas for further improvement. The report concludes that 'overall, by addressing the identified areas for improvement, enhancing partnership dynamics, and promoting inclusive practices, the international and local actor collaboration can become more *equitable, effective*, and locally led, ultimately leading to more *efficient, effective* and better quality humanitarian action in Jordan.'⁹³ It is interesting to note that this identified goal is the only mention of the term *efficient* throughout this framework, while *effective and/or effectiveness* and *equitable* occur frequently.

Measurement of impact

Measuring impact is notoriously difficult, and especially in the complex and diverse delivery of humanitarian aid.⁹⁴ Although the localisation discussion long predates this study, tangible and measurable shifts in practice have occurred only recently, and efforts to measure their impact are scarce and piecemeal.

The literature demonstrates that many actors agree with the ethical imperative of localisation; however, without an evidence-based rationale, it is unlikely that some actors will be able or willing to make necessary changes.⁹⁵ This raises questions around how impact is defined and measured and how effectiveness, efficiency and equity can be quantified.

Challenges in measuring impact




Several factors have inhibited the sector's ability to consistently define and measure the impact of localised practices. Critically, there is no shared, sector-wide understanding of the potential community-level impact of localisation. As discussed in section 3 above, claims about the relationship between localised approaches and outcomes abound, including at the community level, but are generally not underpinned by any data.

Consistent measurement of localisation impact is contingent on the intended impact being defined at the start of a program or initiative. This is not happening consistently, due to a lack of agreement on the nature of impact at the community level. Definition of intended impact, and subsequent measurement is also not something that donors are requiring from funded partners. The impact of donor leadership in shifting practice is well-evidenced in the sector. If donors incentivise funded partners to define the intended impact of their practices, a shift in practice and stronger evidence base would likely emerge⁹⁶

Good practice in measuring impact

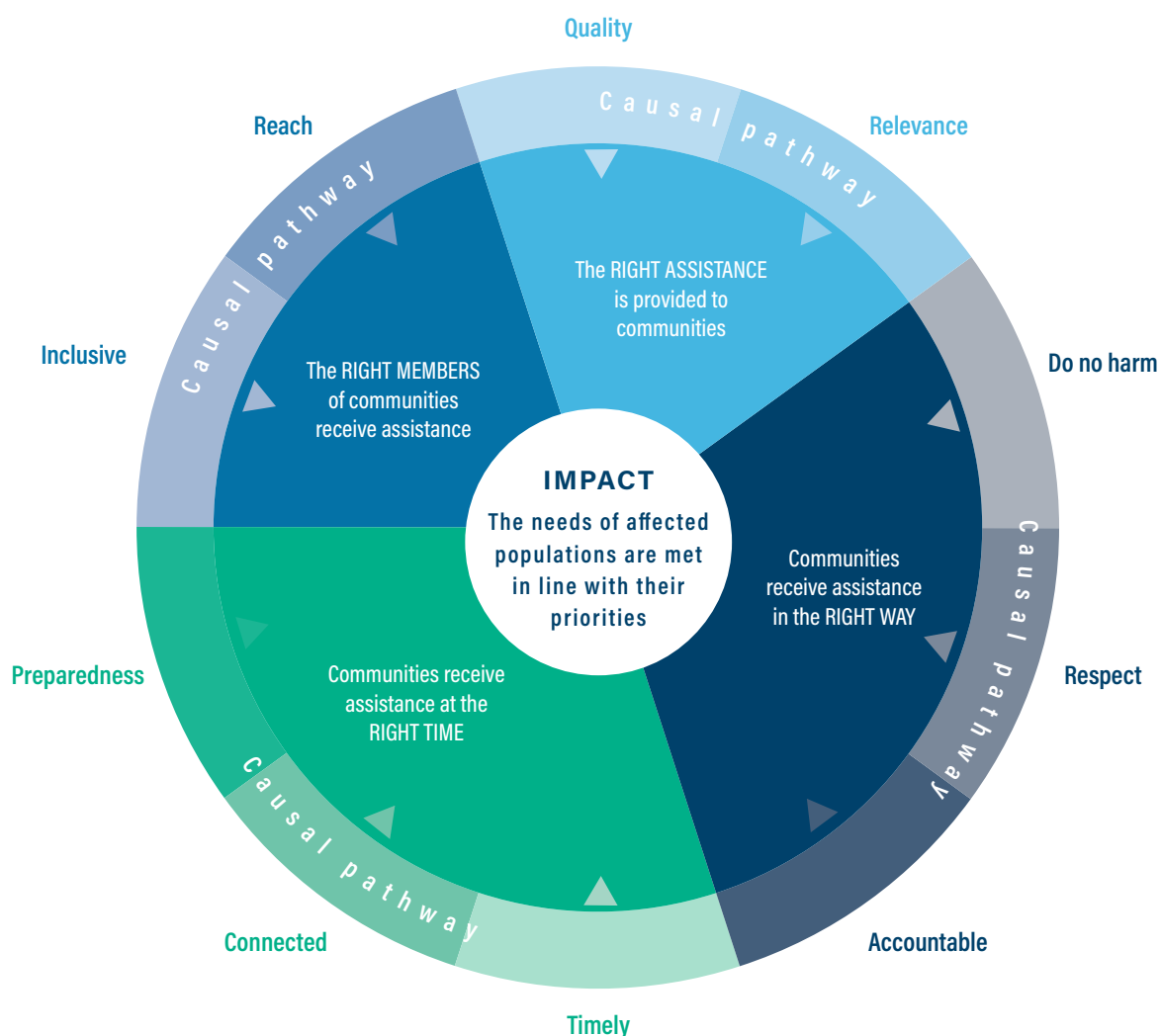
There are some emerging examples of organisations and researchers embarking on measuring the impact of localised approaches. They are mostly in the form of anecdotal examples or case studies but help to build the evidence base behind the rationale for localisation. Some emerging insights are provided in Table 3 below.

Table 3: Emerging insights of impact

Argument	Impact insights
 <p>Effectiveness</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ A case study of the Indonesian Red Cross (Palang Merah Indonesia – PMI) highlights the impact of a number of capacity strengthening initiatives, and how this has contributed to quality and reach of responses.⁹⁷ ■ ActionAid has undertaken research to provide an evidence base for the organisation’s localisation efforts which focus on supporting women-led organisations in humanitarian responses. The research highlighted how WLOs were able to respond quickly following the Central Sulawesi tsunami in 2018, addressing the needs of the community, in particular women and girls.⁹⁸
 <p>Efficiency</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Learnings drawn from localisation efforts during the Typhoon Rai response in Palawan, the Philippines, show how technical support and resourcing provided to local organisations supported coordination efforts for a more efficient response, which also took into consideration connectedness with recovery and environmental considerations.⁹⁹ ■ A case study of the Kenyan Red Cross Society (KRCS) demonstrates how the KRCS invested in strengthening local community-led response capacities which improved both the cost-effectiveness and timeliness of responses.¹⁰⁰
 <p>Equity</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ There have been a number of initiatives to build and strengthen equitable partnerships.¹⁰¹ A learning review of the Shifting the Power (STP) initiative provides some examples of L/NNGOs leading and managing response efforts, and acknowledges this as the first step (according to the theory of change) in contributing to more effective, relevant and accountable responses. However, it also notes the difficulty in tracking and attributing the impact of these types of initiatives to improvement in the effectiveness and efficiency of humanitarian action.¹⁰²

These insights demonstrate valuable progress in measuring localisation impact, but without a unified approach. Humanitarian Advisory Group, in partnership with GLOW Consultants and CoLAB, has recently embarked on a new research initiative to develop a model for measuring localisation impact. It is based on existing data about the potential benefits of localisation specific to core domains of change, and uses possible causal relationships to determine attribution.¹⁰³ Figure 4 below gives a high-level overview of the model.

Figure 4: Potential domains of change as a result of localised practices



This approach is current in its early phases of testing. It will enable quantification of aspects linked with effectiveness and efficiency in aid delivery (see Table 2) and has produced important lessons from pilot phases in Pakistan and Bangladesh that can inform a sector-wide approach to impact measurement.

Creating the link: The impact of the evidence

■ ■ In the absence of stronger evidence of consistent and visible benefits, many in the sector will remain unmotivated to change approaches; more evidence is needed to energise a broader group of stakeholders.¹⁰⁴

A lack of motivation, and international actors' attitudes and perceptions about obstacles, are preventing progress towards a more localised humanitarian system.¹⁰⁵ Motivation to shift practices is a critical component of behaviour change, influenced by clear and consistent messaging that is underpinned by strong evidence.¹⁰⁶ For example, motivation to shift behaviours at the intermediary level (where an organisation, network or mechanism acts as an intermediary between donors and national or local implementing organisations through provision of funding or other support)¹⁰⁷ has been found to be higher in organisations with stronger metrics to evidence the impacts of their practices.¹⁰⁸

Challenges in communicating the evidence

This review found no examples of messaging on localisation being tested and measured. Therefore, there is no evidence about the extent to which arguments about effectiveness, efficiency and equity resonate with different audiences. This is a critical gap.

There are several documented challenges in communicating effectively around localisation. Heavy reliance on anecdotes and case studies rather than strong evidence weakens the key messages.¹⁰⁹ The localisation discourse and humanitarian knowledge production are dominated by Global North actors, and if this continues, humanitarian practice may continue to be shaped by and reflect existing power dynamics and inequalities.¹¹⁰

Towards good practice in communicating the evidence

■ ■ In organisations that documented evidence as to how localised approaches can support better delivery and appropriate aid, alongside the complementary role of the intermediary, stronger motivation for further change was apparent.¹¹¹

Although there is little evidence about the impact of localisation messaging strategies, there are emerging examples of promising practices. For example, in response to an identified gap in the evidence base, the Start Network has developed a locally led resource pack designed to share stories and examples of the ways in which local organisations add value and do things differently.¹¹² Another example is the Measuring Localisation Framework developed by the Pacific Islands Association of NGOs (PIANGO) and Humanitarian Advisory Group, which PIANGO and its National Liaison Units have used to advocate for localisation at a country level. The framework and country-level baseline reports have been used as the evidence base for advocacy and have coalesced interest and support for localisation in the Pacific region.¹¹³ The Pacific baselines were also foundational for PIANGO in the design and set up of the Start Pacific Hub (FALE Pacifica).

Some insights have identified what conditions are required to shift behaviours towards a more localised humanitarian system.¹¹⁴ Behavioural science principles and research provide evidence that localisation actors can use to influence target groups, and demonstrate that knowledge and beliefs are important precursors to behaviour change.¹¹⁵ Other agendas, including the cash and climate change agendas, include evidence-based strategies to guide effective communication and advocacy for change.¹¹⁶ Figure 5 provides an overview of some of the key considerations to guide evidence-based communications and advocacy approaches on efficiency, effectiveness and equity to influence a more localised humanitarian system.

Figure 5: Creating effective, evidence-based communications and advocacy on localisation



SECTION 5: THE WAY FORWARD – ENHANCING THE ARGUMENTS

Humanitarian actors and researchers continue to develop the rationale for a more localised humanitarian system. There are multiple arguments for localisation, including that locally led humanitarian action leads to more *effective* aid, a more *efficient* response, and a more *equitable* humanitarian system. There is nuance within these arguments, with specific themes that correlate shifts towards a more localised humanitarian system with improved practice. There is also significant variance in how the terms are used individually or together in the literature.

This paper describes how the terms effectiveness, efficiency and equity are presented in the discourse around locally led humanitarian action. It unpacks the underpinning arguments, the evidence for the claims, and the sector's progress towards a more robust evidence base. It contributes towards the discourse by emphasising the need for evidence to support a more effective approach to localisation communications. In sum, this report puts forward that:

1. Arguments for a more localised humanitarian system based on effectiveness, efficiency and equity are prevalent in the literature to varying degrees
2. There is little evidence underpinning arguments for the effectiveness, efficiency and equity of localisation, or the various themes and concepts involved
3. Effective communication on effectiveness, efficiency and equity is hindered by lack of evidence on impact, and proof of what messages work to drive change in behaviour, and therefore practice

Key recommendations

This report has identified several emerging areas, gaps and opportunities. This section puts forward a series of recommendations, both for the Start Network and the broader humanitarian sector, to progress towards stronger localisation impact measurement and communications. These recommendations fall under two main areas: understanding impact, and effectively communicating and advocating for change.



Recommendation area 1: Understanding impact

Work collectively to design and test rigorous processes to define and measure the intended impact of localisation, including how effectiveness, efficiency and equity can be quantified.

Start Network:

- *Define intended impact:* Implement specific processes to define the intended impact of localised practices in program proposal and design, detailing which areas in which impact is being sought (for example, effective, efficient or equitable humanitarian action, or other intended impacts). The Humanitarian Advisory Group, GLOW, CoLab (2023) ongoing work on [localisation impact](#) provides a strong starting point for contextualisation into programs.

- *Design and test measures and metrics:* Develop and test metrics to measure effectiveness, efficiency and equity within programs and partnerships, or other areas of intended impact. Providing members with example impact statements and indicators will remove barriers that stem from the difficult nature of defining impact. Share learning across Start initiative contexts and agencies.
- *Invest in understanding equity:* There is a unique opportunity to invest in understanding the evidence base around equity in particular as this is the least evidenced area. This includes understanding how localisation objectives for a more equitable system link with other agendas and frameworks, such as the Start Network's Anti-Racist and Decolonial Framework.
- *Link MEL frameworks:* Develop corresponding MEL frameworks to capture data against localisation impact statements developed in program proposal/design phases. Ensure that localisation impact is a core focus area in all whole of program/response evaluations.
- *Resource and support partners:* Support local and national actors to strengthen the evidence base on localisation impact through resources, technical support on MEL and support with communicating and disseminating evidence.
- *Shift the balance of evidence:* Prioritise supporting Global South research organisations to increase the evidence base on localisation impact.

Humanitarian Sector:

- *Shift the dial:* Recognise the need and opportunity to shift towards understanding, evidencing and sharing impact in relation to localised practices. Look for individual and collective opportunities to develop shared approaches to defining and measuring impact across different contexts and programs.
- *Build the base:* Invest in building the evidence base across different contexts and emergencies. Understand how different localisation approaches can support greater effectiveness, efficiency and equity based on contextual factors, and consistently share this evidence. Commit to piloting different approaches, including sharing what doesn't work.
- *Incentivise the shift:* Funding agencies can support a greater shift by discussing and incentivising approaches that define and measure the impact of localised approaches.
- *Invest in local and national leadership:* Increase visibility of, and support for the leadership of local and national actors in strengthening the evidence base on localisation impact, through resources, technical support on MEL and support with communicating and disseminating evidence.



Recommendation area 2: Effectively communicating and advocating for change.

Coordinate, implement and measure the effectiveness of visible, evidence-based advocacy on localisation.

Start Network:

- ***Communicate widely:*** Share the Start Network's journey with, and emerging evidence of localisation impact, using behavioural science strategies underpinned by evidence (refer to figure 5 on page 22).
- ***Measure messaging:*** Ensure that communications and advocacy messages on localisation impact are consistently analysed to determine the effectiveness of different approaches. A feedback loop should be established to ensure that data informs revised communication and advocacy strategies.
- ***Support partners to communicate strategically:*** Support local and national actors to strategically communicate evidence on localisation impact, and support ongoing dissemination of evidence, including at the global level. Support local and national actors to put in place approaches to measure the impact of their communications, including a feedback loop to ensure that data informs revised communication and advocacy strategies.
- ***Advocate to shift practice:***
 - To funding agencies to incentivise funded partners to define and measure the intended impact of localised practices.
 - To other operational actors to include localisation impact as key focus area for response/program evaluations
 - To funding agencies and other humanitarian actors to support to Global South research organisations to increase the evidence-base on localisation impact
 - To funding agencies and other humanitarian actors to communicate widely their emerging evidence on localisation impact, strengthening the evidence base and creating a sense of momentum to drive further change

Humanitarian Sector:

- ***Support collective advocacy:*** Work across agencies, networks and forums to promote shared messaging and advocacy on evidence of localisation impact. Invest in developing and articulating core messages that can be used with, and resonate with different stakeholder groups such as national actors, donors, international actors and the broader public.
- ***Share learning:*** Share what works and what doesn't in communicating the emerging evidence of localisation impact across stakeholder groups. Look for opportunities to compare messaging about evidence of effective approaches, and how this supports behaviour change.
- ***Increase visibility of local and national actors:*** Support local and national actors to strategically communicate evidence on localisation impact, and support ongoing dissemination of evidence, including at the global level.

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