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Navigating the Localization Dilemma: Institutional and Capacity Constraints within South Sudanese Non-Governmental Organizations and Private Enterprises

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Abstract *The debate over localization who leads humanitarian work, and on whose terms has grown more contentious even as its rhetoric has grown more consensual. In South Sudan, where decades of armed conflict have left the state unable to deliver basic services and where international agencies control the bulk of humanitarian funding, the localization agenda collides daily with hard institutional realities. This paper examines those collisions directly, treating localization not as a settled good whose implementation merely requires political will, but as a contested process shaped by funding asymmetries, governance gaps, and the legitimate yet often competing interests of local organizations, international NGOs, and the communities they both claim to serve. The study draws on case evidence from Juba, Wau, Bor, Pibor, Malakal, and Bentiu to trace how localization actually unfolds on the ground where it works, where it stalls, and why. The central argument is straightforward: localization in South Sudan will not advance through declarations or Grand Bargain commitments alone. It demands structural changes in the funding architecture, a reduction in the compliance burdens that keep local organizations dependent on international intermediaries, and deliberate investment in local institutional capacity measured in years, not project cycles.*

Keywords *Institutional and Capacity Constraints, Localization Dilemma, Non-Governmental Organizations, Private Enterprises, South Sudanese.*

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Introduction

Localization, stripped of its jargon, refers to a rebalancing of power within humanitarian systems, a deliberate shift of resources, authority, and decision-making toward the communities and organizations closest to a given crisis. The principle is not new. It appears, in various guises, in the Paris Declaration on Aid Effectiveness, 2005, the Busan Partnership, 2011, and most prominently in recent years in the 2016 Grand Bargain, which committed major donors and UN agencies to channeling at least 25 percent of humanitarian funding directly to local actors by 2020 [9-11]. That target was missed. By most estimates, direct funding to local organizations still hovers around 2 percent of the global total. South Sudan illustrates why. The country has been in various states of war since its independence in 2011. By 2024, roughly 9 million people, over two-thirds of the population, will require some form of humanitarian assistance. The aid architecture that has emerged to meet this need is heavily international: UNMISS, OCHA, WFP, UNICEF, and a constellation of large international NGOs manage the vast majority of programming and control access to donor funding. Local organizations operate largely as subcontractors. They deliver services; they rarely design them.

This matters because the gap between what international frameworks prescribe and what South Sudanese communities actually need can be substantial. The South Sudanese conflict is not one conflict but many intercommunal disputes over land and cattle in Jonglei, factional fighting along ethnic lines in Upper Nile, and governance contestation in Central Equatoria. No single programmatic template fits all of these contexts. Local organizations, embedded in specific communities and accountable to specific constituencies, are often better positioned to identify what is needed and what will be accepted. The question the localization agenda raises is whether the current system is structured to allow them to act on that knowledge.

The early evidence from South Sudan is mixed. Where local organizations have been given genuine operational authority in Pibor, where the South Sudanese Development Organization used customary elders in dispute mediation, and where the Women Solidarity Group built financial management skills among women entrepreneurs, the results have been durable and contextually appropriate. Where localization has meant little more than subcontracting local NGOs to implement externally designed projects, the results have been modest. The difference between these two cases is not effort. It is the distribution of institutional power [4] has documented how women-led groups across South Sudan have played decisive roles in peacebuilding and environmental management roles that international frameworks often fail to recognize or resource adequately. The Overseas Development Institute has made a similar argument at the systemic level: genuine localization is not a logistical adjustment. It is a political one, requiring international actors to cede decision-making authority they have accumulated over decades. In South Sudan, where international presence is deep and local institutional capacity is thin, that cession is neither simple nor risk-free. But the evidence suggests it is necessary.

In Juba, several NGOs including the South Sudan Red Cross have worked to localise their operations by training local staff in disaster response and first aid. In Bentiu, CARE International has supported women-led farming cooperatives, helping local women rebuild livelihoods disrupted by conflict. In Wau, the Relief and Rehabilitation Commission has partnered with international organizations to streamline aid delivery, though capacity gaps and competing political interests continue to constrain progress. The Overseas Development Institute reports that only about 2 percent of international humanitarian assistance reaches

local actors directly, despite their central role in frontline crisis response. That imbalance is the single most important structural barrier the localization agenda must address.

Overview of Localization in the Context of South Sudan's Development Challenges

Localization in South Sudan is a response to real, documented failures of externally led humanitarian programming, not a theoretical ideal. It centres local actors' community leaders, grassroots organizations, and the people themselves in the design and implementation of development initiatives tailored to the country's unique socio-political context. South Sudan's considerable agricultural potential stands in stark contrast to the food insecurity affecting the majority of its population, a gap that reflects how far development priorities have drifted from local realities toward externally determined frameworks. Adaptive approaches that genuinely integrate local knowledge into program design rather than treating it as supplementary to externally developed models consistently produce more relevant and durable outcomes than those designed from outside the affected context. International actors often operate within rigid frameworks that do not account for the fluid and dynamic nature of local challenges. Successful localization depends on forging stronger connections between external interventions and indigenous practices rather than treating the two as separate or competing. The principle of shifting power toward local actors, transferring not only resources but real decision-making authority, has become a rallying point in contemporary localization discourse for good reason: the evidence from South Sudan and comparable post-conflict settings consistently shows that when it actually happens, rather than being merely declared, the results are better.

The Role of NGOs and Local Actors

Several international and local organizations have taken important steps to advance localization in South Sudan, amplifying local voices and transferring greater authority to local actors. Tearfund has implemented projects in Torit and Kapoeta that prioritize water, sanitation, and hygiene (WASH) services. By training local communities to manage water resources and maintain facilities, Tearfund enables them to take charge of critical infrastructure. CARE International has partnered with local women's groups in Malakal to establish small-scale agricultural cooperatives, positioning women as agents of change rather than aid recipients.

Power imbalances between international NGOs and local organizations are structural, not incidental, and they are replicated at every level of the system. The South Sudan Joint Response (SSJR), a coalition of NGOs funded by the Dutch Relief Alliance in Juba, has been a significant vehicle for localization. By incorporating the expertise of local NGOs such as the Coalition for Humanity, the SSJR ensures that humanitarian aid aligns with the cultural and social realities of South Sudanese communities. However, local NGOs often lack the financial resources, infrastructure, and political leverage to take genuine charge of development projects. As a result, localization can become tokenistic, with international organizations retaining decision-making power while local partners bear the responsibility for implementation. The Overseas Development Institute has stressed that effective localization cannot rest on rhetorical commitments; it demands a verifiable transfer of power, resources, and accountability to local actors, not a nominal shift in branding. In Juba, Help a Child and Save the Children have integrated local languages and cultural practices into education programs, increasing enrolment rates and improving learning outcomes. In Malakal, Norwegian Church Aid has leveraged the trust

and influence of local faith institutions to deliver psychosocial support that achieves higher levels of community engagement than comparable programs delivered through unfamiliar channels. The evidence from Wau, Malakal, and Bentiu points consistently in the same direction: programs genuinely rooted in local knowledge and led by community members generate stronger accountability, greater cultural relevance, and more durable outcomes than those designed externally.

The Concept of Localization

Localization is sometimes described as though its meaning were self-evident. It is not. In practice, the term covers at least three distinct things: a funding shift (directing money to local actors rather than international intermediaries), a governance shift (giving local actors real authority over program design and implementation), and a cultural shift (treating local knowledge as analytically significant rather than decoratively included). These three dimensions do not always move together. A donor can increase the percentage of funding that nominally reaches local organizations while simultaneously requiring those organizations to comply with reporting frameworks, procurement rules, and project logics designed by and for international agencies. In such cases, the funding shifts; the governance does not. This distinction matters enormously for South Sudan. The Intergovernmental Authority on Development has sought to bring local actors into peace processes, and organizations such as the South Sudan Council of Churches have used interfaith dialogue and elder-led reconciliation to reduce intercommunal tensions in ways that external mediators could not replicate. Yet the SSCC operates on a fraction of the budget available to international peace organizations working on the same issues. The asymmetry is not incidental. It reflects a structural preference among donors, UN agencies, and large INGOs alike for partners whose accountability systems and reporting capacities they already understand.

In Boma National Park, ecotourism initiatives have created local employment and reduced dependence on subsistence farming, linking economic incentives to conservation goals that external models rarely achieve. In Bor and Pibor, traditional chiefs who have been incorporated into peacebuilding dialogues have produced measurable reductions in cattle-raiding tensions. These are not isolated successes. They are evidence that local knowledge, when given institutional space, produces outcomes that generic international programming cannot. But the same cases also expose localization's limits: ecotourism in Boma depends on tourist flows that are interrupted by conflicts, and community-led water projects have stalled when spare parts became unavailable, and no supply chain existed to provide them. Localization does not eliminate these problems. What it can do if structured seriously is build the local institutional capacity to address them over time, rather than cycling through internationally managed crises indefinitely.

Women's and Youth Groups

Women's groups and youth organizations are not peripheral to localization in South Sudan. They are often its most effective practitioners. In Bentiu, youth-led initiatives have taken the lead in promoting education and vocational training among displaced populations providing practical skills while giving young people a stake in rebuilding their communities. These are not peripheral programs; they address the social fractures that conflict leaves behind. UN Women has consistently documented that women play decisive roles in conflict prevention, peacebuilding, and post-conflict recovery, yet their voices remain systematically marginalised within formal peace processes. In cities like Juba, local women's organizations have independently established healthcare, education, and support services for displaced

populations. Their involvement in the humanitarian response has produced programs more accurately calibrated to the needs of women and children than those designed without their input. The Humanitarian Accountability Partnership has documented that localization improves aid quality by making programs more culturally appropriate, contextually grounded, and genuinely responsive to the priorities and outcomes of affected communities, which is particularly important in South Sudan, where mistrust of international organizations runs deep, and community acceptance cannot be assumed.

The Benefits of Localization

The empirical case for localization is strongest where it has been most honestly tested, where local actors have been given real authority rather than nominal inclusion. Three benefits stand out in the evidence from South Sudan. The first is contextual accuracy. International organizations designing programs from Nairobi or Geneva routinely miss important local variables, such as the significance of specific ethnic affiliations in a particular county, the seasonal patterns that determine when communities are accessible, and the informal authority structures that determine whether a message will be trusted or rejected. Local organizations know these things not because they are inherently more virtuous than their international counterparts but because they live in the contexts in which they work. CARE International's women's savings groups in Wau succeeded partly because CARE invested in understanding local financial norms before designing the program. The local knowledge was not supplementary. It was the design. The second benefit is accountability. When communities have a genuine relationship with the organizations delivering services to them, when they can attend meetings, raise grievances, and expect responses, aid is more likely to reach its intended beneficiaries and less likely to be captured by gatekeepers. Norwegian Church Aid's psychosocial support work in Malakal, conducted through local faith institutions that communities already trusted, achieved higher participation rates than comparable programs delivered through unfamiliar channels. Trust is not a soft variable. In conflict-affected settings, it determines whether people engage with a program at all.

The third benefit is institutional continuity. International organizations leave. Local organizations stay. The ECD centres established by Help a Child in Pibor and Tonj North continued operating after the initial project funding ended because local caregivers had been trained and local communities had taken ownership of the infrastructure. This is what the localization literature means by sustainability, not a rhetorical commitment to lasting impact, but a concrete transfer of skills, assets, and institutional memory to actors who will still be present in five years. When local actors are genuinely given authority rather than merely included nominally, the outcomes are more contextually appropriate, more efficiently delivered, and significantly more durable over time.

Challenges and Lessons Learned in Localization

While localization offers significant advantages, it also presents real obstacles. Limited resources, gaps in technical expertise among local actors, and resistance from external practitioners accustomed to top-down approaches are among the most commonly cited barriers. These challenges are interconnected: overcoming them requires not only financial investment but a genuine shift in institutional culture. The scarcity of resources is the most immediate constraint. Local organizations often operate on shoestring budgets, making long-term planning nearly impossible.

Financial limitation translates directly into gaps in infrastructure, technology, and access to training. Without adequate resources, even the

most promising local initiatives risk stagnating before they can demonstrate impact. The EU and ECHO have supported local organizations in South Sudan by funding projects to enhance technical skills and infrastructure. In Aweil, EU-backed agricultural cooperatives have helped local farmers adopt more productive techniques, an example of technical capacity transfer that leaves lasting capabilities rather than project-specific outputs. Resistance from external actors accustomed to centralized decision-making is equally structural. Traditional aid systems often prioritize institutional control in ways that marginalize community voices, a problem that is not solved by goodwill declarations but only by changing the funding and accountability structures that make centralized control the path of least resistance. ECHO's disaster preparedness programs have demonstrated that giving communities genuine ownership of planning and response tools produces more effective outcomes than managing those tools from outside. The lessons from South Sudan are consistent: localization works best when it is adaptive rather than templated, collaborative rather than subcontracted, and committed to the long-term rather than bounded by project cycles. Building local capacity and institutional trust takes time, but the evidence from Pibor, Wau, and Tonj North demonstrates that the investment pays dividends that externally managed programming consistently fails to produce.

The Complexity of Localization and Examples in Practice

The implementation of localization in South Sudan faces significant challenges despite its recognized benefits. Internal and external factors, such as power imbalances, resource disparities, and governance fragility, often impede effective collaboration between local organizations and international actors. As [7] has argued, without structural reforms, localization risks becoming mere rhetoric rather than a genuinely transformative approach. Traditional governance structures, such as community chiefs, play vital roles in mediating disputes; external programs that ignore these customs risk undermining the very local authority on which lasting peace depends.

The Grand Bargain commits to 25 percent local funding. Actual delivery remains well below that target. Programs supported by the EU, DRA, ECW, and ECHO have taken steps in the right direction, with community-led flood response and education initiatives providing concrete examples of what local leadership can achieve. Yet, persistent barriers limited access to direct funding, bureaucratic requirements calibrated for large organizations, and under-representation in global policy forums continue to obstruct progress. The South Sudan Council of Churches has used traditional conflict-resolution community dialogues, led by elders, to build peace and restore trust in contexts where formal mediation had failed. Women-led groups in Bor and Rumbek have taken the lead on environmental practices that address food security at the local level. ECW has prioritized community input in rebuilding schools and training teachers, ensuring that curricula reflect the specific realities of displaced children. These are not isolated examples. They are evidence of a consistent pattern: when local actors are given real authority and real resources, they produce outcomes that externally designed programming cannot match. The gap between what the Grand Bargain promises and what is actually delivered in South Sudan is primarily a political problem, not a technical one. Addressing it requires donors to make deliberate choices about where authority sits, not to commission reports about it.

Challenges of Localization in South Sudan

The obstacles confronting localization in South Sudan are structural. They will not be resolved by goodwill statements or minor

adjustments to existing funding models. Donor funding flows predominantly through large international NGOs and UN agencies. The compliance requirements attached to that funding include audit trails, procurement standards, reporting formats, and financial management systems, which are designed for organizations with significant administrative infrastructure. Most South Sudanese NGOs lack that infrastructure. They are not disorganised; they are under-resourced relative to the compliance burden placed on them. The result is predictable: donors trust international organizations they know, local organizations remain in a subcontracting position, and the rhetoric of localization proceeds independently of the funding reality. As [3] has documented, project-based funding cycles also make long-term institutional development nearly impossible. An organisation cannot build financial management capacity if its funding horizon is twelve months. Political instability compounds these structural barriers. Since the civil war resumed in 2013, many South Sudanese professionals have left the country. The skilled workforce available to staff local NGOs has contracted sharply. Those who remain operate in an environment where insecurity periodically closes field sites, where government officials sometimes extract resources from aid programs, and where ethnic affiliation can compromise an organization's access to specific communities. These are not conditions under which local capacity building proceeds smoothly.

Ref. [3] makes the argument directly: localization risks becoming rhetorical unless the structural conditions that marginalize local actors are changed rather than merely criticized. The same dynamics that produce aid dependency at the community level, with international actors controlling resources, setting agendas, and defining success criteria, reproduce themselves at the organizational level, with local NGOs dependent on international NGOs. Breaking this chain requires deliberate choices by donors: flexible funding, longer grant periods, reduced compliance overhead, and willingness to accept that local organizations will sometimes make decisions that international partners would not have made. Cultural and linguistic diversity adds another layer of complexity. The country has over 60 distinct ethnic groups. Peacebuilding approaches that work in Dinka-speaking communities in Jonglei may be inappropriate among Nuer communities in Upper Nile. Local organizations, in principle, possess the knowledge to navigate these distinctions but only if they are given the authority to apply it.

Political Instability and its Impact on Local Capacity Building

Political instability in South Sudan has severely undermined local capacity-building efforts, obstructing development and reinforcing dependence on external assistance. The ongoing conflict disrupts governance, erodes institutions, and eliminates the stable platforms that local participation requires. IGAD has attempted to mediate and support peace processes, but those efforts are frequently hampered by unrest and deep-seated divisions within the country. Since the civil war resumed in 2013, humanitarian aid has focused primarily on immediate relief rather than long-term skill development, a pattern that leaves communities chronically ill-equipped to achieve lasting progress. The instability has curtailed local actors' contributions to peacebuilding and development initiatives, shrinking the space for community-driven projects. Communities most affected by violence lose access to the resources and decision-making platforms necessary to rebuild. The absence of local input exacerbates marginalization and undermines the legitimacy of externally driven solutions. Political instability has also hindered cross-border collaboration and technology exchange, both of which are important for local innovation and economic development. Regional economic

studies confirm that unstable governance restricts effective partnerships, leaving South Sudan isolated from broader developmental networks [1].

South Sudan's brain drain is not metaphorical. The professionals who might staff local NGOs have left, and the pipeline to replace them has not been built. Without investment in education and vocational training, communities lack the expertise to lead their own development, and local organizations remain dependent on international actors to fill technical and managerial roles, perpetuating the cycle. The concentration of resources within political elites has produced inequitable resource distribution that directly disadvantages grassroots organizations. Local NGOs struggle to compete with international actors for donor funding, which is often allocated according to criteria that favor established international organizations, thereby widening the institutional gap rather than closing it [7].

Donors, including the EU, DRA, ECW, and ECHO, have recognized the importance of political stability to progress in localization. ECW's investments in education have given local youth opportunities to develop leadership skills. DRA's funding mechanisms have sought to build local organisational capacity by prioritising collaboration over subcontracting. However, these efforts remain constrained by the broader political environment. Governance accountability gaps undermine donor confidence and limit the scale at which successful localization models can be replicated [3]. Without enduring peace, localization will continue to be thwarted by the realities of conflict and instability. Addressing this requires a dual focus: investing in political stability alongside investing in local capacity building. Neither alone is sufficient.

Best Practices and Strategies for Effective Localization

What distinguishes localization that works from localization that merely looks good on paper is not ideology. It is designed. Across the South Sudan cases reviewed in this study, the programs that produced durable results shared a small number of concrete features: communities were involved in identifying priorities before program design began; local knowledge shaped implementation rather than decorating it; and accountability ran toward communities, not only toward donors. These are not abstract principles. They are observable design choices, and their presence or absence is often what separates programs that outlast their funding from those that collapse when the grant ends. IGAD mediators have at times struggled to craft strategies that genuinely reflect local dynamics precisely because mediation frameworks were designed externally and applied uniformly.

Ref. [6] draws a useful parallel to multinational corporations managing the tension between standardized global operations and locally responsive practices. The analogy holds for humanitarian organizations: programs calibrated to a specific county in Upper Nile will not perform the same way in Central Equatoria, and organizations that acknowledge this consistently produce better outcomes. CARE's community-led workshops in Wau, which identified local agricultural priorities before any program was designed, are a case in point. FCA's work integrating peace education into school curricula in Aweil succeeded because FCA first sat down with teachers, parents, and community leaders. Help a Child's psychosocial programs in Pibor trained local people to deliver care in their own language to their own communities. The cultural accuracy was built in from the start, not retrofitted. In each case, the approach required more time at the design stage and more willingness to adapt to what communities said they needed. The

payoff was programs that communities accepted and, in some cases, continued running independently after external funding ceased.

Monitoring and evaluation mechanisms that include genuine community feedback are not bureaucratic formalities. They are the mechanism by which programs earn, or lose, community trust. War Child's programs in Wau incorporated feedback loops that directly informed mid-implementation adjustments. Dorcas' microfinance program in Pibor outlasted its project cycle because the people running it had genuine ownership of both the model and the decision-making. That ownership was not incidental. It was the intended outcome of the program's design. The IRC has incorporated local knowledge into health interventions in Pibor by training community health workers rather than rotating external staff through. The evidence is consistent and replicable: when local actors are given real authority and real accountability, they produce better outcomes than internationally managed alternatives operating in the same contexts.

Research Methodology

This study examined the systemic factors shaping localization in South Sudan through a qualitative design combining case study analysis, semi-structured interviews, and document review. A qualitative approach was selected because the central questions of how power is distributed between international and local actors, how cultural context shapes program outcomes, and why localization succeeds in some settings and fails in others are not well served by quantitative measurement. They require interpretive analysis of how people understand and act within complex social and institutional arrangements [2]. Case studies were drawn from Wau, Bor, Pibor, and Malakal to capture variation in context, organizational type, and program model. By examining how localization has played out differently across these settings, the study identified patterns that hold across contexts, as well as dynamics specific to particular communities or conflict histories.

This cross-case comparative approach is consistent with [5]'s recommendations for case study research aimed at generating theoretical insight rather than simply describing individual instances. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with representatives from local NGOs, international agencies, government officials at the county and state levels, community leaders, and donors. The semi-structured format allowed interviewees to raise issues beyond the predetermined questions and the most analytically significant material often emerged in precisely this way. Interview data were triangulated with policy documents, project evaluations, donor reports, and academic literature, which provided a broader institutional and political context for interpreting interview participants' on-the-ground accounts. Thematic analysis was used to organize and interpret the qualitative data, with codes developed inductively from the data rather than imposed from a predetermined framework. Ethical standards were observed throughout: participation was voluntary, identities were protected, and data were handled in accordance with the principles outlined by [2].

Successful Case Studies and Lessons Learned from Local Organizations in South Sudan

Case studies from South Sudan demonstrate the significant potential for advancing localization in humanitarian work while challenging conventional aid models. Local organizations, deeply embedded within their communities, have consistently demonstrated the capacity to address immediate needs while building longer-term recovery precisely because they use culturally appropriate, context-specific methods that external actors cannot readily replicate.

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The South Sudanese Development Organization offers the clearest example of what happens when customary authority is taken seriously rather than bypassed. By integrating traditional conflict resolution into its programming using community elders and customary mediation techniques, SSDO has resolved local disputes, reduced violence, and strengthened social cohesion in areas where internationally designed peace processes made little headway. This approach has not only generated tangible outcomes but also built trust among communities that have historically been skeptical of external interventions. The community initiative to establish Early Childhood Development centres in Pibor and Tonj North provides an equally instructive case.

Help a Child provided the initial support, trained caregivers in child-centered learning approaches, and equipped the centers. But what made the initiative durable was that communities took ownership: in Pibor, community members repurposed an abandoned structure, with local women volunteering as caregivers and teachers. The program prepared children for formal schooling while providing stability amid ongoing conflict. The ECD center also became a hub for community engagement, hosting parenting workshops, nutrition sessions, and child health activities that extended the program's reach well beyond the classroom. In Tonj North, the ECD center was built using locally sourced materials, with ongoing mentorship from Help a Child, ensuring that teaching methods remained effective over time. When project funding eventually ended, the centres continued operating. That outcome is not routine in South Sudan. It happened because local ownership was built into the program's design from the start, rather than added as an afterthought once international implementation was complete. The lesson is simple: localization works when external support amplifies local efforts without displacing local leadership.

The Role of Donors in Supporting Localization Efforts

Donors, including the European Union (EU), the Dutch Relief Alliance (DRA), Education Cannot Wait (ECW), and ECHO, have played important roles in advancing localization in South Sudan. Their contributions have varied in approach and depth, but each has demonstrated that direct investment in local partnerships can produce more contextually grounded outcomes than funding channeled primarily through large international intermediaries.

1. **EU:** EU-funded projects in Wau and Aweil have supported agricultural cooperatives, raising productivity and improving food security in ways that outlast individual project cycles. The EU has also invested in strengthening local governance, giving communities greater control over their own development priorities.
2. **DRA:** In Pibor, DRA funding enabled local organizations to provide emergency relief and build infrastructure for sustainable water access, combining immediate need and long-term utility in a single investment rather than treating them as sequential phases.
3. **ECW:** ECW has collaborated with South Sudanese organizations to rebuild schools and train teachers in conflict-affected areas. By engaging local communities throughout, not just at the implementation stage, these initiatives have produced education programs contextually relevant enough to continue after external funding ends.
4. **ECHO:** ECHO's support in Aweil has helped community-based organizations develop early warning systems that reduce vulnerability to floods. This is capacity being built, not bypassed, and it is the model that creates durable local competence rather than durable dependence.

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Bridging Humanitarian Aid and Development

The humanitarian-development divide is a familiar problem in fragile states, and South Sudan illustrates it acutely. Emergency relief responses are funded on short cycles, staffed by rotating personnel, and evaluated on whether acute needs were met, not on whether communities became less vulnerable over time. Development programming requires longer time horizons, local institutional investment, and tolerance for slow, non-linear progress. The two rarely coexist comfortably within the same funding architecture.

But they can coexist. The evidence from South Sudan is clear about what makes it possible. War Child's psychosocial and vocational programs in Juba worked because they did not treat trauma support and economic skills development as separate activities; they were designed together, delivered together, and evaluated together. Dorcas's microfinance schemes in Wau worked because they built on existing community savings structures rather than introducing parallel systems that communities would need to learn from scratch and that would disappear when the project did. WFP's food-for-assets program created physical infrastructure while meeting immediate food needs, with communities engaged as builders rather than passive recipients, a design that converts short-term relief into long-term assets.

Help a Child's early childhood development work in Pibor and Tonj North did not begin as a crisis response, and later added development elements. It was designed from the outset as a long-term community institution, built with local materials, staffed by locally trained people, and sustained by community ownership. When project funding ended, the centres continued. [5] argue that moving beyond the humanitarian-development divide requires treating the two not as sequential phases but as simultaneous design goals. In South Sudan, this means emergency food distributions organized through local associations where they exist; health clinics built during crisis responses staffed by locally trained health workers; and the institutional relationships formed in emergency contexts invested in as development assets. This reorientation does not require new funding. It requires different priorities for how existing funding is allocated and for whom to trust to manage it.

Key Lessons from Local Organizations

Several consistent lessons emerge from the record of local organizations in South Sudan:

1. Community ownership makes the difference between programs that last and programs that do not. CARE's community-led savings groups in Wau have shown consistent results because participants helped design the model and have a direct stake in sustaining it, not because CARE told them to participate.
2. Cultural relevance is not a soft criterion. Incorporating traditional conflict resolution mechanisms and indigenous knowledge builds the kind of trust that determines whether communities engage with a program at all. Aid delivery that bypasses these structures may meet targets on paper while failing to reach people in practice.
3. Capacity investment must be sustained long enough to actually transfer. FCA's leadership training for women in Pibor produced durable outcomes because the investment continued past a single project cycle not because a capacity-building component was appended as a compliance requirement to satisfy a donor report.
4. Collaboration that respects local context outperforms subcontracting. The IRC's community health worker model in Pibor produces better health outcomes than equivalent programs staffed by rotating external personnel, because the workers delivering care share the language, history, and social context of the people they serve.

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Sustainability and Resilience

Programs that prioritize local leadership and capacity are more likely to outlast external funding, not because local actors are inherently more committed, but because they have nowhere else to go. ECW's teacher training has kept schools in remote areas running through periods of insecurity when international staff withdrew. DRA's support for community-based disaster risk reduction has given local actors the tools and institutional legitimacy to manage crises without waiting for external authorization. The record from South Sudan makes a clear, practical case: anchor programs in community ownership, ensure cultural relevance through genuine co-design, invest in local organizational capacity as a program goal rather than as an overhead cost, and build collaboration that respects, rather than circumvents, local authority. Donors the EU, DRA, ECW, and ECHO have demonstrated through their South Sudan portfolios that supporting local actors is the most effective way to achieve durable outcomes in a context where international capacity will always be temporary. The only resource that will remain after the next funding cycle ends is community capacity. That is where investment needs to go, not as a supplementary activity, and not at the scale of a percentage point of a global budget, but as the deliberate, multi-year, institutionally serious commitment that the South Sudan evidence shows it needs to be.

Summary of Key Points and the Future of Localization Practices in South Sudan

The evidence reviewed in this paper consistently points in one direction: localization in South Sudan yields better, more durable outcomes when local actors have real authority, when programs are built around community knowledge, and when funding relationships are structured for long-term institutional development.

Where these conditions have been present in Pibor, in Wau, in Tonj North, the record is encouraging. The women's groups organizing savings in Wau, the elders mediating disputes in Pibor, the caregivers running ECD centers in Tonj North, these are not success stories manufactured by international organizations. They are evidence of what local actors can do when the structures around them support rather than obstruct local leadership. South Sudan's agricultural landscape is diverse and context-specific in ways that generic food security programming routinely misreads. Development priorities anchored in local knowledge, rather than imported from external frameworks, are more likely to reflect what communities actually need and to produce outcomes that last. The gap between international aid strategies and what communities report as their actual priorities is not an accident. It reflects a system in which communities have limited formal power over the design of the programs that serve them. Closing that gap requires institutional changes in who designs programs, who holds decision-making authority, and who is accountable for results. These changes are achievable. What they require is a political decision to prioritize them over the institutional convenience of the status quo.

Bridging Gaps between International Aid and Local Realities

International organizations too often operate within frameworks calibrated for standardized reporting rather than adaptive programming. The compliance structures attached to international funding effectively penalize the kind of responsive, community-led adaptation that localization requires. An organisation cannot simultaneously meet tight reporting deadlines, maintain a paper trail calibrated to international audit standards, and genuinely adapt its programming to what communities tell it in real time. Something gives, and it is usually the responsiveness. Genuine partnerships require local organizations to be in the room when decisions about program design, budget allocation, and evaluation criteria are made.

South Sudan's experience demonstrates that this kind of shared decision-making produces programs that are more trusted by communities, more accurately targeted, and more likely to continue after project funding ends. The challenge is building funding and governance structures that make it the default rather than the exception.

Investing in Local Capacity

Capacity investment is not a program component. It is a multi-year commitment that requires funders to accept that the returns will arrive slowly. The organizations in South Sudan that have made real differences, SSDO in Pibor, Help a Child in Tonj North, and Dorcas in Wau, did so because someone made the decision to invest in local institutional capacity and then stayed long enough to see it mature. Short grant cycles, heavy compliance burdens, and a preference for measurable short-term outputs are the structural enemies of that kind of investment. Where capacity has been systematically built through leadership training, financial management skills, governance development, and long-term mentoring, local organizations have repeatedly demonstrated an ability to address the structural roots of both poverty and conflict that internationally managed programming cannot match.

Inclusive Governance

Decisions about aid programs should involve the people those programs affect. That principle is straightforward but consistently violated in practice. In South Sudan, women, youth, and ethnic minorities are frequently excluded from the formal decision-making processes that shape humanitarian responses to their own communities. The participatory governance literature is unambiguous on what this costs: programs designed without the input of affected populations are less accurate, less trusted, and less durable. South Sudan's deep ethnic and political divisions make this even more consequential; governance processes that exclude significant groups do not just produce worse programs; they actively reinforce the divisions that localization is supposed to help address.

Building for the Long Term

What the future of localization in South Sudan requires, above all else, is that the institutions involved accept that sustainable change does not happen on project timelines. Flexible funding structures, honest accountability upward and downward, the willingness to adapt when communities report that something is not working, and a genuine transfer of authority to local actors: these are the preconditions. They are achievable. What they require is a political decision to prioritize them over the institutional convenience of the status quo.

Conclusions

The localization agenda in South Sudan is real, but it is also unfinished and in some respects contradictory. Donors and international agencies have committed, in principle, to shifting power and resources to local actors. In practice, the compliance requirements attached to international funding, the short-term nature of project cycles, and the institutional inertia of large organizations continue to reproduce the very dependency they claim to be dismantling. The gap between localization's promise and its delivery is not a technical problem. It is a political one.

Closing it requires that international actors' donors, UN agencies, and large INGOs make deliberate choices to reduce institutional barriers for local organizations, extend funding time horizons, and accept a reallocation of authority that will, in the short term, produce uncertainty. The cases reviewed in this paper, Pibor, Wau, Tonj North, Bor, Malakal, show that effective localization is achievable. The SSDO's use of customary mediation reduced inter-group violence in areas where

international peacebuilding had made little headway. Help a Child's ECD centres outlasted their project funding. CARE's savings groups in Wau strengthened financial resilience among women excluded from formal economic institutions. These are not isolated anecdotes. They reflect a consistent pattern: when local actors are given genuine authority and adequate resources, they produce outcomes that externally driven programs do not.

The Overseas Development Institute has documented that local actors typically have deeper community access, greater trust, and stronger contextual knowledge than international agencies. Dorothea Hilhorst has argued that localization must involve a genuine structural shift in power, not nominal inclusion, if it is to produce meaningful change. The evidence from South Sudan supports both conclusions. The question is not whether to localize. It is whether the institutions that control humanitarian resources are prepared to make the structural changes that localization actually requires. South Sudan remains one of the world's most challenging humanitarian contexts. The localization debate there is not academic. It shapes whether communities receive aid relevant to their actual situation, whether local organizations develop into durable institutions, and whether the country's long-term recovery is built on local foundations or on internationally managed dependency. The answer depends less on declarations than on concrete shifts in funding, authority, and institutional trust.

Recommendations

Based on the analysis above, the following recommendations are directed to the distinct actors who bear the most responsibility for the state of localization in South Sudan.

For International Donors

Restructure funding mechanisms to reduce the compliance gap. The administrative requirements currently attached to direct local funding are calibrated for organizations with substantial administrative capacity. Donors should develop a tiered compliance framework that adjusts reporting requirements to organizational size and risk level, making direct local funding genuinely accessible rather than nominally available. Extend grant periods: a twelve-month funding cycle is incompatible with institutional capacity development. Three- to five-year core funding agreements, where feasible, would represent a significant structural shift. Track actual, not nominal, localization by requiring transparent reporting on real decision-making authority, not just financial flows.

For International NGOs and UN Agencies

Distinguish between subcontracting and partnership. Engaging a local organization to implement an externally designed program is not localization. Genuine partnership requires including local organizations in needs assessment, program design, and evaluation, not only in service delivery. Invest in local organizational development as a program goal rather than an afterthought. Reduce staff rotation: frequent rotation of international staff destroys institutional knowledge and community relationships. Where possible, agencies should extend assignment lengths and prioritize retention of local national staff.

For Local NGOs and Community-based Organizations

Build coalitions. Individual local organizations competing separately for limited direct funding are at a structural disadvantage relative to large international NGOs. Coalitions and consortia, such as the South Sudan Joint Response model, increase negotiating leverage and allow smaller organizations to share administrative costs. Document outcomes systematically: the capacity to produce credible evidence of program impact is one of the key barriers preventing local organizations from securing direct donor funding. Engage

traditional and community institutions deliberately rather than working around them.

For the Government of South Sudan

Create an enabling environment for local civil society: do not extract resources from aid programs, do not obstruct local NGO registration and operations, and do not selectively target civil society organizations based on ethnic or political affiliations. Political stability and rule of law are not peripheral conditions for localization. They are prerequisites.

For All Actors Collectively

Treat localization as a governance question, not a logistical one. The persistent mismatch between localization rhetoric and localization practice in South Sudan reflects a failure of institutional will, not a failure of technical capacity. The path forward requires political decisions by donors to shift resources, by international agencies to share authority, and by all parties to accept that a genuinely locally-led humanitarian system will look different from the internationally managed system currently in place.

Suggestions for Further Research

1. Evaluating the Impact of Capacity Building Initiatives. To understand which approaches most effectively strengthen the operational sustainability of local NGOs and private enterprises over time.
2. Exploring Community Perspectives on Localization. To gain in-depth insight into how local populations perceive localization efforts in practice, and identify gaps between program intent and lived experience.
3. Assessing the Role of Traditional Conflict Resolution Mechanisms. To determine how indigenous practices can be integrated into formal peacebuilding frameworks in ways that enhance, rather than displace, community authority.
4. Analyzing Partnership Effectiveness Between Local and International Actors. To identify specific institutional arrangements and power-sharing mechanisms that produce equitable and productive collaborations.
5. Investigating Political and Institutional Barriers. To examine how governance instability specifically impedes local organizational development and which institutional reforms have the highest marginal effect on localization outcomes.
6. Longitudinal Studies on Localization Outcomes. To monitor the long-term effects of localization investments over five-to-ten-year periods, providing evidence for policy reform and demonstrating whether short-term outcomes translate into durable institutional change.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that there are no financial or personal relationships with other people or organizations that could inappropriately influence or bias the content of this manuscript.

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Ethical Approval

This study was conducted in adherence to institutional ethical guidelines. Where applicable, informed consent was obtained from all participants involved in the case studies and from stakeholders whose perspectives are discussed in the journal. The research prioritizes the dignity and agency of

the local populations affected by humanitarian and development agendas.

Data Availability

The qualitative data and case study analyses supporting the findings of this journal are included within the article. Additional information regarding policy frameworks and stakeholder perspectives can be made available by the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

Author Contributions

- **Angelo Lubang Paterno Jada:** Conceptualization, methodology, formal analysis, investigation, and writing original draft preparation. The author was responsible for critically examining the practical realities of localization and offering practical recommendations for equitable solutions in South Sudan.
- **Prof. Kadian Wanyonyi Wanyama:** Supervision, conceptualization, writing review and editing, and validation. The co-author provided academic oversight and critical revisions to ensure the study meets the necessary standards for publication and practical application within the South Sudanese context.

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