

EXPLAIN: ESSENTIAL BRIEFINGS FOR HUMANITARIAN DECISION-MAKERS

LOCALISATION AND LOCALLY-LED ACTION

Localisation is now [central](#) to humanitarian [reform](#), with many agencies naming it a priority and local actors continuing to demand it—yet confusion persists, as there is no [shared definition](#) and the term is often conflated with locally led action. While [localisation](#) aims to reform international aid structures by shifting power and fostering equitable partnerships, [locally led action](#) focuses on resourcing initiatives driven by local and national actors (L/NAs), often outside the aid system—requiring distinct strategies and offering different pathways for change.

Despite years of global commitments, progress on localisation [has been limited](#), with bold pledges rarely translating into meaningful change on the ground. Most efforts remain small-scale and fragmented, lacking the scale, coordination, and incentives needed to shift risk-sharing, funding flows, or accountability structures.

Unlike technical reforms, localisation requires systemic change to the humanitarian business model—demanding sustained resources, political will, and aligned action at country level. Meaningful progress depends on each stakeholder: international agencies must address internal power dynamics, donors must rethink risk and funding mechanisms, and local actors must lead in designing scalable, people-centred alternatives.

Change is difficult but possible, as shown by emerging [localisation practices](#)

in responses like Ukraine, growing prominence of locally led models in contexts such as Sudan and Myanmar, and lessons from recent reform efforts.

Evidence on localisation is expanding but remains too fragmented to drive systemic change, with [most studies](#) focusing narrowly on funding, capacity, and partnerships within individual organisations. Broader impacts—particularly on affected communities—are rarely assessed, and concrete data on effectiveness is limited. [Debates](#) persist over whether calls for more evidence support or stall progress, exposing deeper questions about who defines success and whose evidence is prioritised. A more balanced approach is needed—one that values community priorities like civic participation and resilience alongside traditional humanitarian outcomes. Strengthening the [evidence base](#) will require locally led research, a shift in the burden of proof, and greater scrutiny of the status quo.

Direct funding to local and national organisations remains the primary localisation metric but continues to fall short of targets.

- Donors and agencies committed to directing 25% of funding to local actors; [monitoring frameworks](#) launched in 2023 track this commitment.
- Direct funding fell to [1.2% in 2022](#) from [3.1% in 2016](#), but critics stress that funding quality

matters as much as volume.

- In 2023, direct funding rose [71%](#) to US\$1.7 billion but still accounted for just [4.5%](#) of trackable aid. The impact of 2025's funding disruptions on localisation progress remains unclear.

Donors cannot directly fund hundreds of local actors in every crisis, making alternative models—such as pooled funds and local intermediaries—essential but still underutilised.

- In 2023, OCHA's pooled funds gave [31% to local actors](#) but made up only 11% of total aid and declined in [2024](#).
- Some [international intermediaries](#) are shifting power through overhead pass-throughs, multi-year grants, and exit strategies.
- [Local intermediaries](#) have proven more [cost-efficient](#) and contextually effective, as seen in Myanmar, Sudan, and [India](#).

Donor risk aversion and strict compliance often block flexible funding for local actors and reinforce international models.

- In [Myanmar](#) and [Ukraine](#), rigid risk frameworks have hindered rapid delivery, increased harm, and forced unethical workarounds.
- New models like the Grand Bargain's risk-sharing principles offer promise, with a 2024 [simulation](#) testing their real-world application.
- Due diligence remains a key barrier, though passporting and [tiered systems](#) are being piloted to ease the burden on L/NAs.
- Due diligence passporting has reduced administrative burdens in Ukraine but depends on strong donor engagement.

- Local actors are adapting, as seen in the [Philippines](#) where simplified USAID compliance, such as video proposals, enabled more accessible grant-making.
- [Risk discourse](#) still centres on donor concerns, often ignoring the daily risks borne by local organisations.

Localisation requires not just more funding, but better funding—flexible, multi-year, and unearmarked, with fair coverage of indirect costs.

- DG ECHO's [2023 guidance](#) promotes equitable partnerships through shared decision-making, inclusive coordination, and support for locally-led financing.
- Most donors still lack clear policies on overheads, leaving L/NAs with just [4–12%](#) while intermediaries retain the majority.
- [Over 80%](#) of humanitarian funding is still earmarked, limiting L/NAs' ability to adapt to changing needs or plan long term.
- Despite commitments, L/NAs receive less than [20% of their funding](#) on a multi-year basis, far below the [Grand Bargain's 30% target](#), with protracted crises largely served with short-term grants

Capacity is often cited as a barrier to funding local actors, but traditional, top-down approaches are poorly aligned with local needs.

- Most efforts focus on compliance and administrative tasks, [overlooking the capacities](#) local actors need to serve crisis-affected communities.
- International [capacity-building](#) can undermine local systems by poaching staff and devaluing local knowledge.

- [Capacity sharing](#) offers a more reciprocal model that values local expertise and supports mutual learning.
- Promising examples, like [Trócaire in Guatemala](#) and the [Philippines Localisation Lab](#), show how this approach can strengthen both local and international responses.

Local actors are increasingly included in coordination structures, but decision-making remains dominated by international actors, often rendering their role tokenistic.

- A [2021 IASC mapping](#) showed local actors in 80% of HCTs but holding just 9% of leadership roles, with long-term responses like Yemen excluding them from key decisions.
- In Ukraine, [few local actors](#) are part of international coordination bodies, prompting many to form parallel systems to gain influence.
- OCHA's flagship initiative is testing [decentralised](#) coordination in five countries, offering insights into more locally led models.
- International systems still overshadow local mechanisms, often sidelining community-driven approaches and excluding L/NAs from [HDP nexus discussions](#).

Despite uneven progress, the localisation debate is evolving, raising unresolved questions about power, partnership, and the future of aid.

- **Is localisation a box ticking exercise?** Many agencies select partners based on compliance, reinforcing sub-contracting rather than enabling true, equitable partnerships.
- **Who is 'local?'** The definition of

"local" remains contested; broad definitions offer flexibility, but clearer criteria are needed to avoid crowding out smaller or less internationally connected independent actors.

- **Equity or effectiveness?** Localisation is framed as both an equity and effectiveness agenda—but without solid evidence, there is a risk it becomes a cost-cutting measure that dilutes its transformative potential.
- **Scalability of locally-led work?** Scaling mutual aid remains challenging, as growth risks undermining the flexibility and relevance that make it effective.
- **Government's role in localisation?** Government roles in localisation are underexamined, especially in restricted civic spaces where state-led models are re-emerging.
- **Is localisation and locally-led action at odds with neutrality?** Localisation can clash with neutrality, as seen in Ukraine and Gaza, exposing tensions between principle, justice, and decolonisation.
- **Is localisation a distraction from decolonising aid?** Without tackling deeper power structures, localisation risks becoming a superficial fix that stalls meaningful decolonisation.
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This quick read delivers the essentials from ALNAP's full briefing on localisation and locally-led action.

ALNAP's Explain series offers straightforward communication to help humanitarian decision-makers make sense of, and exchange on, current evidence and discourse. Key learning and links all in one place: sourced, checked and curated by ALNAP's highly-respected global research team and subject experts from across the sector.

For more information or expert comment please contact ALNAP's Communications Team: comms@alnap.org