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Northern NGO-centrism in localisation processes: reproducing power inequities in the aid field

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the process of discussing and designing actions to tackle power inequities by Northern and Southern NGOs. Drawing on 53 interviews with Northern and Southern NGOs, and NNGO networks, we argue that current localisation processes produce a form of cultural capital leveraged by competing Northern NGOs rooted in signalling solidarity with SNGOs and/or communities to donors through rhetorical and symbolic practices, reinforcing their access to and authority over social and economic capital as intermediaries. For Southern NGOs, leveraging their cultural capital, rooted in community affiliation, local knowledge and astuteness, places too great a demand on the scarce economic resources necessary for organisational survival. This study thus finds it improbable that current Northern-led localisation processes will go beyond extending the shelf life of power inequities. To disrupt these dynamics, we propose reorienting localisation towards the investigation and facilitation of locally-led competition for authority.

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1. Introduction

Terminologies and buzzwords aside, notions of localisation have been part and parcel of the rise of non-governmental organisations (NGOs) since the 1980s (Chambers 1983; Edwards and Hulme 1996). The loud calls from Southern NGOs (SNGOs)¹ to tackle power inequities in the aid industry that emerged at the first World Humanitarian Summit (WHS) in 2016, then, were likely not only the result of profound revelations but of increased competition between Southern and Northern aid actors over authority in the aid industry (Pardy, Kelly, and McGlasson 2025).

Since the 2016 WHS, academic research on localisation has grown rapidly. The terms locally-led development, ShiftthePower, and decolonisation have also entered the lexicon to refer to tackling power inequities, highlighting important differences in terms of where power lies, where it should be held and how it should be distributed (Banks et al. 2024). However, in

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practice, NGOs use these terms interchangeably with localisation, obscuring nuances (Banks et al. 2024). Localisation is thus best understood as a buzzword – a word that evokes, and carries, the cultural and political values of the time (Cornwall and Brock 2005, 1047) – that has become almost synonymous with aid reform. NGOs, donors, and academics now predominantly appear to support localisation. Many also agree that progress so far has been minimal (Banks et al. 2024; Khoury and Scott 2024).

However, apart from intentions and consequences, what continues to be overlooked is how the very process of localisation – i.e. the process of discussing and designing actions under the banner of localisation – functions within competition among NNGOs, and between NNGOs and SNGOs in the aid industry. As Lister (2000) noted, NGO discourse of equality is firmly embedded in relations of inequity resulting in what Elbers, Knippenberg, and Schulpen (2014) called “organisational schizophrenia” – where practices contradict propagated ideals.

Concentrating on development-focused NGOs, this paper asks: *how do localisation processes reflect and reproduce power relations between NNGOs and SNGOs in the aid field?* Its contribution to the debate is grounded in the application of Bourdieu’s theory of practice to unpack and understand localisation processes. Bourdieu provides a fruitful point of departure for examining the dialectic between the enforcement of governance and the agency of NGOs in the aid industry (Goddard 2021). Additionally, Bourdieu encouraged the adoption of a relational mode of thinking that goes beyond the analysis of individual practices to include the mutual constitution of social ordering within a field – here, the aid industry (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992; Grenfell 2014). The analysis draws on 53 interviews with 40 development-focused NNGOs and SNGOs, and their networks with a prominent role in and/or knowledge about localisation processes.

The application of Bourdieu to discussions and the designing of actions aimed to tackle power inequities in the aid field reveals that they produce a form of cultural capital leveraged by competing NNGOs to signal their alignment with values of solidarity and equity, reinforcing their access to and authority over economic and social capital as intermediaries. These findings show that the dominance of NNGOs in localisation is not just the result of their resources or uptake of felt responsibility. For SNGOs, leveraging the increased recognition of their social and cultural capital, rooted in community affiliation and local knowledge and astuteness, places too great an opportunity cost on their scarce economic capital, necessary for organisational survival.

This paper concludes by complementing van Wessel, Kontinen, and Bawole’s (2023) argument that Southern imaginaries should be recognised as the legitimate basis for efforts to tackle power inequities – but adds that SNGOs must be the authority over these reform processes for any reasonable change in power inequities between Northern and Southern NGOs to materialise.

Sections 2 and 3 present the literature review and the methodology. Section 4 illustrates how localisation reproduces NNGO-centrism in North–South NGO partnerships. Section 5 turns to the stark challenges SNGOs experience to participate in, let alone lead localisation processes. Section 6 concludes and recommends reorientating localisation processes to the investigation and facilitation of locally-led competition for authority.

2. Literature review

2.1. Localisation

Calls for localisation, albeit under different terms, go back four decades. Chambers (1983) critiques the effectiveness of top-down aid practices for their limited understanding of local realities, instead calling for recentring local knowledge and priorities through recognising communities as agents in their own development. The approach of Working and Thinking Politically since the early 2000s similarly called for an appreciation of the local political economy and the need for local ownership (McCulloch and Piron 2019). As critiques and scandals (see Clarke 2021) mounted, the legitimacy of NNGOs gradually eroded, while SNGOs increasingly contest the legitimacy of NNGOs by

arguing they are better positioned to meet international expectations of aid effectiveness, community representation and empowerment (Mitchell, Schmitz, and Vijfeijken 2020).

These debates have been key features of various global conferences. Notably, the 2005 Paris High-Level Forum called for the ownership of developing countries over their development strategies and aid responses. The 2008 Accra High-Level Forum additionally emphasised the need for inclusive partnerships between donors, INGOs, and local civil society organisations as well as the strengthening of national capacities for the provision of aid (Dabelstein and Patton 2013). Similar contestations culminated at the first World Humanitarian Summit in 2016. However, in comparison to previous aid reform campaigns, these were matched with an unprecedented participation of SNGOs that got to shape its agenda.² Pardy, Kelly, and McGlasson (2025) describe how localisation became “... a demand for reform, became a tool of activist resistance for Global South participants” during and leading up to the WHS. Kelly, Pardy, and McGlasson (2023, 2) argue that:

Localisation seemingly emerged as a breakthrough moment where the role of the Global South had to be examined and re-evaluated, and decisions made as to how or whether to address potential disruption. Localisation challenges the nature of the relationship between local, national, and international actors, highlighting issues of funding, power, and accountability, and directly confronting the humanitarian “oligarchy”.

While localisation gained momentum since the WHS, it quickly became a contested term that functions as a call to action for a whole *range* of reform motivations, from a justice perspective – redistributing resources and decision-making power to the level most proximate to communities – to efficiency – reducing costs through local delivery and management (Banks et al. 2024; Schmitz and Mitchell 2025; Slim 2021). The varying contexts across which the term is discussed – development, humanitarian, peacebuilding – further obscure the term (Barakat and Milton 2020).

A significant share of the ambiguity around localisation concerns defining “the local”. As Roth, Purkayastha, and Denskus (2024) find, the local is often considered monolithically as the national, neglecting subnational inequities and how they are sustained by state, non-state, and civil society actors. Melis and Apthorpe (2020) stress that the local is multi-dimensional and that localisation often focuses on those SNGOs that are already involved in aid governance, ignoring the vast number of regional and community-based SNGOs operating outside of direct NNGO partnerships. As Koch and Rooden (2024) highlighted, the localisation debate assumes the primacy of international aid in need of local participation rather than pre-existing local civil societies being outcompeted by international interventions.

Mac Ginty (2015, 851) defines the local as “... a system of beliefs and practices that loose communities and networks may adopt. There should be no expectation of consistency in these beliefs and practices: they change with time and circumstances.”. What follows from Mac Ginty is thus that localisation is a continuous and deeply political process as it requires choices to be made about who or what should be recognised as the “legitimate local”.

Although localisation can normatively be defined as “... an ambitious, broad-ranging policy agenda to increase the power and funding of local actors in humanitarian response” (ALNAP n.d., Para 4), the actions undertaken under the banner of localisation are not always “confronting the oligarchy” (Kelly, Pardy, and McGlasson 2023, 2). Schmitz and Mitchell (2025) highlight that as much as there is a case *for* localisation, there are critiques *against* it. Rather than the restoration of lost practices, localisation can be a further subjugation and exploitation of the local by external actors through subcontracting (Khoury and Scott 2024). Additionally, it can reinforce national hierarchies through elite capture (Craney 2020).

Besides, although the number of commitments to tackling power inequities within the industry has increased, progress towards these commitments has been marginal (Banks et al. 2024) – and are under threat by unprecedented aid cuts and shifting geopolitics. These disappointing outcomes can be explained by embedding localisation processes in the power dynamics of the aid industry.

2.2. Bourdieu's aid industry

Using Bourdieu's concept of field, we can think of the aid system as a dynamic social space that both shapes and is shaped by the habitus of its member institutions – a structuring structure (Grenfell 2014). The habitus then is the system of cultivated dispositions that functions as the perception of, and organising principle, for NGO practices (Bourdieu 1990). The relative position of NGOs within the field – i.e. its power relations – is then defined according to the capital *recognised* by other actors within the field (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992). Bourdieu understands power, manifested in the form of economic, social and cultural capital, to be a function of social relations where its exercise is not necessarily intentional. Rather, the exercise of power is inherent in everyday practices without actors' full awareness it (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992).

Bryant (2005) uses Bourdieu to argue that beyond the pursuit of economic capital, NGOs are simultaneously part of a non-economic economy where the pursuit of legitimacy cannot be decoupled from the pursuit of economic capital. He argues that NGOs compete over being perceived as a moral actor by articulating moral debates and performing altruistic action, even if at the cost of economic capital in the short-term, as a strategy to strengthen their position within the aid field for further accumulation of economic and social capital in the long term.

Goddard (2021) finds that accounting practices and mechanisms are highly valued cultural capital that generate legitimacy for NGOs. The types of accountability practices deemed legitimate are firmly controlled by the New Public Management agenda, emphasising performance management and Value for Money, espoused by authoritative international donors (see Goodwin and Ager 2021). He found that NNGOs employ economic capital in a manner that recognises those accountability practices that reproduce their own cultural capital. It was also a popular practice for SNGOs to signal the names of prominent funding partners to signal to other donors in the aid industry the broad recognition of their legitimacy.

Krause (2014) uses Bourdieu to explain how humanitarian NGOs compete for symbolic capital – i.e. authority. Symbolic capital aggregates other forms of capital, (re)producing social taxonomies that “conserve or transform social reality by shaping its representations” (Wacquant 2002, 553). Symbolic capital includes reputation, honour and prestige, which can be used to maintain and legitimise power within a social field (Burawoy 2019). In the humanitarian field, authority can be drawn from strict adherence to the humanitarian principles of independence and impartiality embodied in the ICRC and MSF, which themselves reproduce authority by making symbolic distinctions that determine who or what is considered legitimately “humanitarian”.

Krause thus also reminds us that distinctions between local and international, NNGO and SNGO – used in this article – are themselves discursive practices that reproduce a linear North–South relation obscuring, e.g. diaspora and South–South development assistance. Homogenisation is then produced by competition over the same capital legitimised by authoritative actors in the aid industry – by denoting what are “proper” practices.

3. Methodology

We draw upon 53 semi-structured interviews with 40 development organisations in Ghana, Uganda, and Western Europe (the United Kingdom, Netherlands, Belgium and Germany). These identified the actors involved in these processes, and explored the extent and nature of their engagement with discussions or actions, as well as what they saw as the key issues for changing power relations in the aid sector.

The organisations were chosen for their prominent role in and/or knowledge about localisation processes. In Ghana, the sample included two SNGO networks, 12 SNGOs, three NNGOs, and one academic. In Uganda, the sample comprised two SNGO networks, eight SNGOs, and four NNGOs. Interviews in Western Europe targeted six NNGO network organisations of both large and small NNGOs to gain a broader sector-wide perspective on these issues and two NNGOs. Participants in all locations

were senior managers or program leaders. This diverse sample ensured we explored these issues from different perspectives.

A limitation is that no NGOs operating without North–South partnerships were included. We acknowledge that their practices in, and experiences with, localisation processes might differ substantially (e.g. see Kilby 2008). The sample also does not cover humanitarian NGOs that often operate in a crisis context and different institutional landscape (Barakat and Milton 2020). Lastly, it is important to emphasise that the sample is by no means exhaustive of the heterogeneity of NGOs (and other associations) across the globe.³

Interviewees were chosen through purposive sampling based on their knowledge, expertise and experience with localisation. Access to the participants was gained through the authors' networks, the Sounding Board⁴ involved with our research project, and the assistance of the NGOs involved. Interviews were conducted online and face-to-face. Each interview lasted about one hour, with recordings made with informed consent and transcribed for analysis. The transcripts were examined using NVivo, following an abductive process. After inductive analysis following Braun and Clarke's (2022) thematic analysis, it became clear that the application of a deductive Bourdieuan analysis could be fruitful. Hence a deductive second round of coding was done using a Bourdieuan lens.

4. Reproducing NNGO-centrism

This first findings section focuses on the discussion and design of actions by NNGOs and their networks. While "localisation" in principle shifts funds and decision-making to organisations working closely with communities, in practice, localisation has become subjected to the same "rules of the game" that concentrate power within Northern NGOs. This section explores the two mechanisms identified that reproduce NNGO-centrism in localisation processes: (1) how pursuing localisation has become part of competition over cultural capital in a market for legitimacy, and (2) how NNGOs have been able to out-compete SNGOs and come to dominate authority over the processes of localisation.

4.1. Localisation as cultural capital

NNGOs interviewed noted that it has become a necessity to at least discuss the themes of power in the aid industry. As a NNGO interviewee stated, "I do not think that any organisation today can really shut their ear and say we are not decolonising, or we are not having these discussions" (NNGO Network, 10-11-22). Our previous research highlighted that NNGOs are the ones taking the lead in discussing and designing actions to tackle power inequities (Banks et al. 2024). This is no surprise, given that institutional donors now demand that localisation is considered in funding applications. While this push by donors has been welcomed by many NGOs, it also makes addressing localisation part and parcel of the competition for project funding. One SNGO interviewee explains how NNGOs are incentivised to position themselves as ideal partners for localisation:

The [N]NGOs know very well that once the donors are talking about [localisation], it is something they are looking forward to and to keep themselves in business, and to ensure that they do not totally lose out, they also have to position themselves in a way to be able to support those donors. (SNGO, 14-10-22)

Due to the institutional donors' authority over the aid field, grounded in economic capital, localisation becomes a form of cultural capital, rooted in signalling to donors solidarity with SNGOs and/or communities, through rhetorical and symbolic practices pursued by NNGOs and SNGOs alike to (re)produce social and economic capital.

Applying Bourdieu, we see that the localisation practices performed follow the dominant managerial and competitive habitus of the aid field. As Wallace, Bornstein, and Chapman (2006, 109) argued, all too often new approaches are "... tamed and institutionalised to fit into the current bureaucratic forms of thinking and procedures". In discussing Northern initiatives to tackle power inequities, an SNGO interviewee noted, "... in our sector, people are projectivized. If they do not

do activities, it means they are not working” (SNGO, 03-10-22). Filtering localisation through the habitus, “... what ends up happening is that you get an atomised set of initiatives that do not actually lead to much, there is no collective impact” (NNGO, 11-11-22).

An SNGO interviewee (03-10-22) argued that if NNGOs would move beyond programmatic reform efforts it would ultimately be met with resistance as it would be perceived as too radical. While localisation processes have generated some cultural capital for NGOs, the prevailing legitimacy of managerial procedures over localisation processes means that the latter’s practices are subpar and will be met with negative sanctions when they threaten established field norms – i.e. the loss of recognised capital (Bourdieu 1984). This reflects what Bourdieu (1990) calls hysteresis: where the dispositions of NGOs no longer correspond to the dominant norms of the aid field, leaving them “out of sync”. This means that local knowledge and legitimacy – though valuable – remain unrecognised as capital in a NNGO-dominated field.

Thus, participation in localisation processes has become a cultural commodity that is part and parcel of the market competition for legitimacy between NGOs in the eyes of donors. In the following section, we examine how NNGOs have been able to outcompete SNGOs in localisation processes.

4.2. NNGO-centrism

NNGOs outcompete SNGOs by reproducing their position in the social aid field as intermediaries. We coin this “NNGO-centrism”, which is cultivated on the practical level of knowledge production by NNGOs. Northern donors trade funding for localisation for project proposals coming almost exclusively from NNGOs rather than SNGOs, due to the former’s social capital. As an SNGO interviewee explains:

Most local organisations do not have direct relationships with donors because it has always been the NNGOs dealing with them. [...] I do not have any contact there you know so again the NNGOs knowing very well that once the donors are talking about this it is something they are looking forward to and to keep themselves in business. To ensure that they do not totally lose out they also have to position themselves in a way to be able to support those donors. So, it happens that obviously that they have the existing relationship so they will also lead the processes in all these things. (14-10-22)

When it comes to localisation, this favouring of NNGO operationalisations is problematic. An NNGO interviewee noted, “the global north partners and the global south partners, they just desire different things, they call it the same, they use the same concept, but what everyone is desiring is just very different.” (NNGO 21-11-22) Consequently, NNGOs are reproduced as the agents of localisation and SNGOs are framed as the recipients of localisation rather than agents in their own rights (c.f. van Wessel, Kontinen, and Bawole 2023).

Interviews in Belgium, Germany, the Netherlands, and the United Kingdom revealed that in formulating these “localisation projects”, NNGOs are oriented towards other Northern “agents” to formulate reform policy, rather than towards SNGOs and/or Southern contexts. Bourdieu argues that field actors are oriented towards each other to compete over symbolic differences – what is classified as localisation – to optimise their position within the field (Burawoy 2019). When Northern interviewees were asked whether they knew any promising examples of localisation, almost all responses referred to initiatives of *other* Northern donors, networks or NNGOs, without mentioning their effects on the agency of SNGOs or the initiatives launched by SNGOs and SNGO networks (NNGO, 19-10-22; NNGO network, 10-11-22; NNGO network 28-10-22; NNGO, 11-11-22). Interviewees often referred to the same actors or other interviewees. An interviewee at small NNGOs network noted that “you are in an echo chamber in a way” (Small NNGO Network, 14-10-22). They explained that the echo chamber is also very exclusive. For small NNGOs, often operating on less than one FTE, “... it is quite an ask for them to try and continue to support what they are doing in-country whilst also using their energies to see how they can shift power.” (small NNGO network, 14-10-22). Consequently, most of its members resorted to large NNGOs as early adopters to follow.

Where SNGOs are frequently engaged, it is most often in the form of consultations. Actions taken are often our (NNGOs') actions for them (SNGOs'), reserving a leadership position for the NNGOs themselves. As one NNGO network interviewee stated:

We try to co-create with them and we really involve them in everything that we are doing and at the end of the day we also feel like this whole decolonisation trajectory, it is for them, we are doing it for them and it is about them and not about us, so in that way we try to involve them as much as possible. (NNGO Network, 10-11-22, emphasis by authors)

NNGO-network organisations play a key role in perpetuating the idea of NNGOs as agents and SNGOs as recipients through their mandate. Their primary function is to advocate for the interests of its members, to facilitate collaboration between members, and to be a platform for sharing and producing knowledge relevant to members. NNGO networks are thus NNGO-centric by design. It is often at these organisations that localisation discourse takes place. An NNGO interviewee critically noted that:

The conversation is hugely imbalanced between Global North and Global South, so the majority of people who are talking about either shifting the power or decolonising are actually Global North entities and in a sense that is okay because they are the ones who hold the power, so they have to relinquish power, they have to decolonise, but slightly ironic, Global North organisations are in danger of colonising the conversation about decolonising. (NNGO, 11-11-22)

In interviews, NNGOs referred to NNGO networks, and networks pointed back to their members or other NNGO networks for examples of localisation projects (NNGO network 13-10-22; NNGO network, 10-11-22; NNGO network, 18-11-22; NNGO network, 25-11-22; NNGO 11-11-22; NNGO 19-10-22). While NNGO networks are prime advocates for localisation, as member-focused organisations, the knowledge that is produced around localisation often revolves around reimagining the role of the NNGO, i.e. reaffirming its continuing legitimacy. An NNGO network interviewee shared:

If I look at some of the trajectories that some organisations are going towards, it is again a reimplementation of that power relationship that we are actually trying to combat. So, you see that in everything that we are doing, even when we have good intentions, there is a [...] reproduction of our structural systems and structural power relationships that we just cannot seem to get rid of. (NNGO Network, 10-11-22)

In a Bourdieuan sense, these networks retrench legitimacy with NNGOs by assisting their members to further accumulate social and cultural capital, connecting with and amplifying each other's signalling of solidarity with SNGOs and/or communities, through rhetorical and symbolic practices. Rather than reducing the power inequities between NNGOs and their SNGO partners, these field dynamics thus made localisation a vehicle that reproduces NNGO-centrism in, and NNGO *authority over*, knowledge of "proper" localisation. When a group of actors accumulates symbolic capital in the aid industry, they can thus be understood as having the authority to legitimise their own centrality in localisation processes. Bourdieu (1984) ultimately calls this *symbolic violence* – "the agency which possesses the power of legitimate naming, i.e. the power enabling official imposition of the legitimate view of the social world" (118) – where the unequal distribution of capital is considered common sense or taken for granted.

5. The challenge of leveraging SNGOs' cultural capital

NNGOs and SNGOs alike agreed that the processes of localisation are exclusionary. Minimal participation in the processes of localisation – like attending consultations, participating in sounding boards, conferences and fora – often already comes with significant barriers for SNGOs. Social and cultural capital cultivated through community affiliation, local knowledge and astuteness continue to have little transposability, i.e. the degree to which capital in one field (e.g. community) is recognised in another (Grenfell 2014). An SNGO interviewee explained:

The communities in which we work or the local actors that we work with may not have the kind of resources that we call vital, but they come into partnership with some other form of resources that are not recognised. They come with the local knowledge that cannot be quantified, they know the communities, and they know the

problems they have much better. They know and have relationships with the actors. All these make our actors and communities much more legitimate, but we do not quantify that. (SNGO, 02-11-22)

While legitimating SNGOs as implementing partners, it does not translate into authority over who should design development interventions in the first place. This redirects us to hysteresis where “the environment they encounter is too different from the one to which they are objectively adjusted.” Through external aid interventions, a rupture between the SNGO habitus and the field is prompted where local dispositions no longer align with the changing field they inhabit (Bourdieu 1990, 62; Pérez 2022).

Using Bourdieu’s understanding of the aid industry as a social field, NNGOs can be conceptualised as a class of actors high in cultural capital and economic capital. While NNGOs compete for authority, SNGOs lacking the economic, social and cultural capital recognised within the field are forced to be governed by organisational survival and adopting standards and practices deemed legitimate by NNGOs (Burawoy 2019).

Applying this Bourdieuan lens to our data highlights how SNGOs struggle to engage in localisation processes as legitimate agents rather than recipients. Most SNGO interviewees indicated that there is a significant risk of participating in localisation processes while being governed by organisational survival. Many SNGO interviewees noted a feeling of walking on eggshells due to their donor dependency. One SNGO interviewee elaborated: “When your hand is in somebody’s mouth all the time, you are careful to make the person angry because you could be bitten.” (SNGO, 24-10-22) Another SNGO interviewee noted that they are forced to “... follow [...] the money, unfortunately, that is where many organisations are.” (SNGO, 07-10-22) Where SNGOs do engage in localisation processes, they struggle to gain authority due to the stark opportunity costs. Within the project-based environment of the aid industry, SNGOs have little time or incentive to formulate and advocate for locally-led imaginaries. One SNGO interviewee noted:

The conversations have happened but not in a coherent and coordinated way. The reason is that we are so narrowly focused on our thematic work and our day-to-day projects because it is a matter of survival. It is about self-preservation. The projects keep us busy. [...] I do not think they see it as a priority. It is the projectized nature of our work. People are drawn into their projects unfortunately because of the demands and the report, you can be drawn in a whole year and will not have time for reflection on any other thing. (SNGO, 03-10-22)

The stark reality is that “... so many organisations have collapsed just because they cannot pay rent” one SNGO interviewee explained (SNGO, 11-10-22). “Some of them are so small that they cannot even afford transportation to come for meetings. Some do not have phones and cannot access social media as well.” (SNGO, 01-11-22) One NNGO interviewee in Uganda elaborates:

These [S]NGOs are fighting every day. Even the shift of power is not an issue to them because it is beyond their basic survival. [...] They are also thinking like that, how can we waste such potential? Yes because these people may be struggling to survive. (NNGO, 21-10-22)

Moreover, practices under the banner of localisation have actively reaffirmed the competitive position of NNGOs relative to SNGOs in the latter’s national context. Practices like moving offices from the Global North to the Global South or hiring local staff save NNGOs economic capital while generating cultural capital by signalling “localness” – maintaining their access and control over economic and social capital accumulated in the Global North. An NNGO interviewee in Uganda noted “... they are able to draw from their foreign basis, they are able to put in place systems that enable them to deliver better outcomes and so on. [...] We should not be having international organisations taking away most of the money and choking the local organisations” (NNGO, 26-10-22). “We are still dominated by international NGOs, because of the power they have and local organisations cannot compete with them because of the policy they have, the capacity they have, the connections and networks that they have”; “there are other civil society that are organised but they cannot get access to resources ... [SNGOs] have the structures, the processes, but even when that has happened, they are kind of shadowed by international organisations.” (SNGO, 10-11-22).

SNGO interviewees also identified how the fierce competition among SNGOs over resources prevents them from building social capital into a collective struggle for authority. “Sometimes coming as individuals kills the opportunity to collectively influence the donors because of that competition for resources that exists.” (SNGO, 10-11-22) “[SNGOs] are not speaking with one voice and generally are weak and many of the organisations cannot afford to work with others [...]” (SNGO, 07-10-22).

Finally, while using Bourdieu reveals a pessimistic realism of localisation processes to date, interviewees also shared a conviction in the opportunity for a genuine reimagining of power inequities in the aid industry. Hence, we echo Wacquant (1992, xiv): “[...] an invitation to think with Bourdieu is of necessity an invitation to think beyond Bourdieu, and against him whenever required.” The conclusion presents some recommendations for future research in this direction.

6. Conclusion

Research on localisation thus far has critically emphasised continuing control by the NNGOs, without much exploration of wider competition between NNGOs as a key feature of the aid industry. By employing Bourdieu, we find that localisation processes produce a form of cultural capital leveraged by NNGOs rooted in signalling solidarity with SNGOs and/or communities to donors through rhetorical and symbolic practices. NNGOs then compete with each other over what counts as localisation, reproducing NNGO-centrism. This reinforces their access to and authority over social and economic capital as intermediaries. In turn, leveraging SNGOs’ cultural capital, rooted in community affiliation, local knowledge and astuteness, to gain authority over localisation processes comes at too great an opportunity cost for organisations lacking scarce economic and social capital necessary for organisational survival. Consequently, our analysis helps highlight how current Northern-led localisation processes perpetuate an epistemic injustice where what counts as localisation is under the authority of NNGOs while continuing to misrecognise the capital and authority of SNGOs. This study thus finds it improbable that Northern-led localisation processes will go beyond extending the shelf life of power inequities. This study thus agrees with van Wessel, Kontinen, and Bawole’s (2023) argument that Southern imaginaries should inform NNGO and SNGO reform efforts, recognising SNGOs in their agency to tackle power inequities. But this study provides an understanding of the structural nature of that need: SNGOs must be the agents of that reform for any reasonable change in power inequities between Northern and Southern NGOs to materialise given the dynamics analysed above.

We propose reorienting localisation towards the investigation and facilitation of locally-led competition for authority by SNGOs – and other civil actors. In systematically recognising and reinforcing their agency, development sector actors can facilitate SNGOs to further accumulate their legitimacy and authority and enable an environment wherein SNGOs compete on a more equitable footing with Northern NGOs. Future experimentation and research could facilitate and support locally-led initiatives and explore their influence on SNGO authority, displacing the locus from NNGOs and partnerships to SNGOs in their (trans)national context. Furthermore, research could investigate how SNGOs can legitimise and leverage alternative forms of capital that align with their contexts, rather than relying on capital legitimised by NNGOs.

To enable SNGO agency in practice, localisation must shift not just who participates, but who defines what counts as legitimate. This requires new structures, such as SNGO-led consortia, regional platforms, or South–South alliances, that allow SNGOs to set standards of effectiveness on their own terms. These mechanisms can help SNGOs accumulate symbolic capital and reconfigure the field itself, enabling more equitable authority in aid governance.

Notes

1. Recognising the grand generalisation, SNGOs are here defined as NGOs headquartered in the Global South. NNGOs are defined as NGOs headquartered in the Global North.

2. In 2014–2015, 23,000 civil society actors from 153 countries participated in eight regional consultations, of which seven were based in the Global South (World Humanitarian Summit Secretariat 2015).
3. For instance, Kilby (2025) notes the long and differential history of tackling power inequities in faith-based development – not included in our sample – going back as far as Christian churches after the Boxer rebellion in 1900 China.
4. The sounding board, consisting of 30 non-academic members representing a diverse range of organisations and Northern and Southern countries, provided advice and guidance for this research.

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