

The local experience and operationalisation of localisation

A Participatory Action Research with local partner organisations of Burundi & South Sudan in the consortium Just Future Alliance.



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A local understanding of localisation and how to bring it into practise in the Just Future Alliance

In the development sector, it is widely acknowledged that 'shifting the power' to the global South is the way forward (Paige, 2021). Despite this knowledge being out there for some decades, research shows that it remains difficult to put localisation into practice (Harris & Tuladhar, 2019). Most of the research on localisation is done by Western scholars, taking on the perspectives of international donors and INGOs (Baguios et al., 2021). This research contributes to a local perspective on localisation and how to further operationalise localisation in the Just Future Alliance and is conducted with local partner organisations from South Sudan and Burundi.

Keywords: localisation, shift the power, participatory action research, development consortium, South Sudan, Burundi.

Localisation is high on the international development agenda with movements such as #shiftthepower and concepts like decolonisation and Southern leadership, which aim to address the deep-rooted systemic issues of inequality (Paige, 2021). In this localised research, conducted with local partner organisations from the Just Future Alliance (JFA) in South Sudan and Burundi, we have looked into the way current practices of localisation are experienced and what is needed to further operationalise localisation. JFA is a consortium formed of Civil Society Organisations and research organisations from both the global North and South operating in six different countries: South Sudan, Burundi, Afghanistan, Mali, Niger, and the Democratic Republic of Congo. Localisation has been central to the founding of the JFA and becomes visible, among other things, through the program governance structure with National and International Steering Committees. The research team formulated a set of research questions that made it possible to define practical guidelines to further operationalise localisation in the JFA. It was important to identify a common understanding of localisation and the main problem that localisation tries to address according to the local partner organisations. What issues of inequality are currently experienced in development partnerships? What efforts of localisation do we see in our current work environment of the JFA, and how are they experienced? The team also looked into what the future should look like once localisation is reached. The reflections on these questions identified practical guidelines that can be applied in the JFA and used as insights by the broader development sector to continue the transformation process to an equitable system and collaborations.



The Just Future Alliance (JFA) is a consortium formed of Civil Society Organizations and research organisations both from the global North and South operating in six different countries, South Sudan, Burundi, Afghanistan, Mali, Niger and the Democratic Republic of Congo, and at the international level. Southern leadership has been central to the founding of the Just Future Alliance and is reflected in its governance with national and international steering committees. The objective of JFA's five-year program, which started in 2021, is to build inclusive and peaceful societies with responsive and people-centered security, equitable access to justice, and inclusive decision-making and peace processes. <https://justfuturealliance.org/>

A localised methodology

The added value of this study is that it offers a perspective on the operationalisation of localisation from local partner organisations. Therefore, the methodology used in this research had to be compatible with the philosophy of localisation. Participatory Action Research has been used as the central research method (Chevalier, 2019). The study took place in the first half of 2022 and was initiated and conducted through a collaborative process. It is co-owned by representatives of the local partner organisations in Burundi and South Sudan that are part of the Just Future Alliance. At the same time, this research is the product of the Master's thesis of Sabine Harmes (2022). Two separate teams, one team with six staff members from two local partner organisations from South Sudan, and another in Burundi with fifteen group members from both local partner organisations and Cordaid's country office, gathered during 10 online meetings to conduct this research. As part of this research, Sabine Harmes facilitated the process of making advocacy videos. This active participative environment, contributing simultaneously to JFA objectives, made it possible to create a reflexive environment to study localisation in practice and identify recommendations to further operationalise localisation.



Cordaid is an internationally operating value-based development and emergency relief organisation, working in and on fragility. They support local communities in their efforts to improve justice, healthcare, food security, education, and economic opportunities. Through a localised approach they offer international expertise and have decades of in-country experience in their areas of operating. Cordaid is the leading contract-holder in the Just Future Alliance. <https://www.cordaid.org/>

References

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Outcomes

1. What is localisation?

There are many different understandings of the term localisation (Harris & Tuladhar, 2019, p.43) and a wide variety of concepts used to address the inequalities in development partnerships between the global North and the global South, such as 'Shift the Power', decolonisation, and Southern leadership (Baguios et al., 2021). To be able to further operationalise localisation, it is important to have a shared understanding and identify the issues that matter. To local partner organisations in South Sudan and Burundi, a shift of power and direct access to resources is necessary. At the same time, they emphasised the need for community involvement, which requires capacity building of local communities and local partner organisations. They would like to see a mentality shift that values local knowledge over 'Western' procedures. Many concepts should co-exist next to each other to address the complexity of localisation. The concept they identified most with and identify as a practice of localisation is co-creation. Co-creation is their current *modus operandi*, also applied in the Just Future Alliance, to achieve community involvement and obtain a collaborative governance structure that includes all the different stakeholders in the decision-making processes.

2. What issues of inequality are experienced in partnerships of development?

The local partner organisations of South Sudan and Burundi experience inequalities through the sub-granting mechanisms used in development, where, according to them, often most of the budget (sometimes up to 75%) stays in the hands of the INGOs while they are the ones working directly with the communities. The development of programs is often done through co-creation and is perceived as very inclusive. However, they experience that they are excluded in final decision-making, e.g., in the allocation of budgets, making previous co-creation efforts redundant. Currently, local partner organisations experience fear in addressing issues of inequality, afraid of the consequences this may have. In the past, local partner organisations have been assigned to other regions or removed from projects, making them feel dependent on INGOs for future contracts and collaborations.

3. What are the efforts of localisation in the Just Future Alliance and how are they experienced?

Localisation has been central to the founding of the Just Future Alliance and has been characterized by a co-creative process with potential partners from the global North and South. Together, they designed a governance structure with national steering committees, placing decision-making power in the hands of partners from the global South. Although there may be additional efforts toward localisation within the Just Future Alliance, this research solely focuses on the practice of co-creation and the national steering committee (NSC). Local partner organizations, in Burundi in particular, consider their current approach of co-creation as a means of operationalising localisation. The discussion that arises concerning co-creation is around the topic of 'sharing responsibilities'. Local representatives of Cordaid's country offices observe that local partner organisations are afraid to take on responsibility, while the local partner organisations themselves experience a lack of trust from Cordaid's country office managers to delegate responsibilities, such as making final decisions on budget allocation. The national steering committee is recognized by local partner organisations as a potential tool to transfer decision-making power to local organizations, but currently, it is not sufficiently active. The representatives in the NSC, primarily the directors of local partner organisations, do not commit themselves sufficiently to their NSC task as they have multiple interests at stake with other programs. This situation weakens the position of local partner organisations, and instead, decisions are often made by Cordaid's country offices.

4. What does it look like, once localisation is reached?

If we view localisation as a journey, what is the destination to be reached (Baguios et al., 2021)? Post-development theorist Arturo Escobar (2018) emphasizes the need to find alternatives to development and introduces the concept of autonomous design as an approach to address deep-rooted systemic issues in a traditional way, placing local communities and local knowledge at the center. Dialogue among local partner organisations in this research reveals that the goal of localisation is not to achieve autonomy but to share responsibilities, with INGOs taking on a more coaching role rather than a directive one.

5. How to operationalise localisation further in the Just Future Alliance?

There is still a significant gap between what is preached in the localisation debate and reality, and too often, the local perspective and voice are missing. As the Just Future Alliance aspires to further embody localisation in its approach, our challenge in this research was to define practical guidelines to operationalise localisation. Local partner organisations in South Sudan and Burundi shared the vision that it is important to continue the practice of co-creation. Within this practice, the National Steering Committee should be revitalised, either by giving staff members the mandate, activating directors, or splitting tasks to distribute the workload. Final decisions, such as on budget allocation, should be made in co-creation, sharing responsibilities. Local partner organisations invite Cordaid to take on the role of a coach in this process. There should be more direct access to resources and more flexibility in planning and accountability, with broader timeframes and long-term contracts. Above all, it is essential that the dialogue around localisation continues and happens in a safe environment without the risk of negative consequences. Localisation should be perceived as a shared journey that requires a different mindset, where Western procedures are subordinate to the local context.

Conclusion

Localisation is a complex and challenging process. This research aimed to contribute to the operationalisation of localisation from the viewpoint of local partner organisations in South Sudan and Burundi within the Just Future Alliance. Co-creation, which is already being practised in the JFA, is the way forward and should be applied in final decision-making processes, such as budget allocation, with direct access to resources, multi-annual contracts, and flexible procedures to make the local context the guiding force. It is crucial that governance structures with the potential to transfer more power to local organisations and local structures, such as JFA's National Steering Committee, are active and that responsibilities are shared. INGOs can take on a coaching role. In the same way this research has been a practice of localisation, it is crucial to continue the dialogue around localisation as a shared journey of reflexivity, including the voices of local communities and leaders who were not present in this study. A safe environment without fear of negative consequences will support this transformation process of overcoming power imbalances.

Research team

This co-owned research has been conducted by staffmembers of the local partner organisations in Burundi and South Sudan actively involved in achieving the Just Future program objectives.

South Sudan

EVE - Organisation for Woman Development
IPCA - Initiative for Peace Communication Association

Burundi

AFRABU - Association of Repatriated Women from Burundi
Burundi Bar Association
OAG - Observatory for Government Action

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Access to the full thesis

<https://edepot.wur.nl/588970>

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