

Sørensen, Karen Wulff

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The struggle of localisation: Can the Grand Bargain 2.0 redeem the failure of its precursor?

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The struggle of localisation:

Can the Grand Bargain 2.0 redeem the failure of its precursor?

Karen Wulff Sørensen

SECO WORKING PAPER 2022: 7

SECO  Socio-Economic Research Centre

Department of Social Sciences and Business, Roskilde University

Universitetsvej 1, 4000 Roskilde, Denmark

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ABSTRACT

This working paper discusses the topic of localisation, which is an integral part of the Grand Bargain agenda. To understand what barriers have prevented the success of localisation, this paper explores how international Danish-based NGOs relate to the policy intentions defined in the localisation workstream emanating from the 2016 Grand Bargain. The paper argues that the lack of consensus regarding the meaning of localisation – as a concept, policy and in practice – fosters a gap between policy intentions and practice, which enables the interests of international organisations to be privileged. Through a thematic analysis of interviews with five international Danish-based NGOs, the paper argues that three prevailing problem areas prevent localisation from creating transformational change on the ground in the humanitarian and development sector: 1) The intertwinedness of the localisation discourse with desirable organisational images and narratives of ‘appropriate aid practices’, which maintains localisation at a global political level with lack of practical implementation on local levels; 2) organisational structures can serve as a loophole to live up to localisation commitments without creating change within the organisation’s approaches and practices; and 3) the decision-making power to determine the prospects of localisation lies with the resourceful and structurally privileged actors within the development and humanitarian field. A common issue identified in this threefold analysis is the accentuation of localisation as global policy discourse in which locally led practice is pushed to the background. Lastly, the paper asks whether the Grand Bargain 2.0, with its updated framework from 2021, can redeem the failure of its precursor.

AUTHOR

Karen Wulff Sørensen has a master’s degree in Global Studies & Cultural Encounters from Roskilde University.

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The struggle of localisation: Can the Grand Bargain 2.0 redeem the failure of its precursor?

Karen Wulff Sørensen

1. Introduction

In 2016, some of the world's largest humanitarian agencies and donors signed the so-called Grand Bargain, committing themselves “[...] to get more means into the hands of people in need and to improve the effectiveness and efficiency of the humanitarian action.” (IASC, 2020). The Grand Bargain represents fifty-one separate commitments, which is divided into ten workstreams. Localisation, emerging from the second workstream, was most notably recognised for its ambitious target of channelling at least 25 per cent of humanitarian funding as “directly as possible” to local and national responders by the year 2020. Even though the Grand Bargain was regarded as potentially pivotal in paving the way for transformational change within the sector, the fact is that donors and organisations are far from meeting their commitments. The year 2021 marks the fifth-year anniversary of the Grand Bargain, and signatories have endorsed a renewed and condensed framework of the Grand Bargain, called the Grand Bargain 2.0. A key alteration, in the new framework of the Grand Bargain 2.0, is the reduction of the original fifty-one commitments into only two priority areas. These are often summarised as *quality funding* and *localisation*, which can be seen to represent a reconfirmation of the perceived importance of localisation within the international humanitarian community (GB 2.0, 2021).

This working paper seeks to reflect upon what barriers prevented the success of localisation within the original Grand Bargain. In this crucial time, this working paper ultimately asks if the Grand Bargain 2.0 is able to alter these barriers in order to leave a “*system-wide transformative impact on the humanitarian ecosystem*”, as it intended (GB 2.0, 2021).

A key factor in understanding localisation, its hindrances and prospects, is understanding the highly ambivalent nature of the concept itself. Localisation is a contested concept, and its meaning has practical implications for practitioners' ways of working within their organisational setting, both on global and local levels. Localisation is thus infused with interests, which gives rise to a multitude of definitions and understandings of localisation. This working paper aims to show how such interests play a fundamental role in keeping historically entrenched power dynamics in place, which sustains the continuing marginalisation of Global South voices in decision-making processes regarding localisation, as conceived within the Grand Bargain framework. In this context, the ideals of localisation are caught up in a policy-driven discourse (see Hall, 2018, p. 89 for definition of discourse applied in this paper) and become entangled with the formation of a positive organisational identity and image, that primarily serves international NGOs in their pursuit of funding and international recognition. Put differently, the present approach to humanitarian assistance and development efforts fosters limited change on local levels, because of an accountability deficit, whereby international NGOs are not forced to ‘walk the talk’, as it is

commonly phrased within the humanitarian and development sector. Thus, this paper argues for a need to reconsider the approach to localisation, where the top-down framework of a Grand Bargain in its different versions represents the main global initiative.

Building on a large volume of grey literature written by professionals in the sector, this paper situates the topic of localisation within an academic discourse (for definition, see Hyland, 2009, p.1) to deepen the understanding of the structural and systemic barriers, that hinder the transformative potential of localisation. The approach teases out three main barriers identified through interviews with five Danish-based international NGOs: 1) The intertwinedness of the localisation discourse with desirable organisational images and narratives of ‘appropriate aid practices’, which maintains the conception of localisation at a global political level with lack of practical implementation on local levels¹; 2) organisational structures can serve as a loophole to live up to localisation commitments without creating change within the organisation’s approaches and practices; and 3) the decision-making power to determine the prospects of localisation lies with the resourceful and structurally privileged international actors within the development and humanitarian field. Drawing on an interdisciplinary theoretical framework based on organisational theory (Pugh et al., 1963; Clarke and Ramalingam, 2008; Hein and Lasch, 2021), network theory (Ansell, 2008; Ohanyan, 2015), postcolonial/decolonial theory (Hall, 2018; Mignolo, 2000/2011/2021; Quijano, 2000; Kothari et al., 2019; Bhambra, 2014; Barnett, 2013; Esteva et al., 2013), and audit culture theory (Power, 2021), I aim to disentangle often contradicting utterances and processes within international NGOs, that support a discourse of localisation, but have little to do with practices related to transferring more resources, leadership, and decision-making power to local actors.

The paper is structured as follows. Section two situates localisation within its historicity and academic approaches. Section three maps out different understandings of localisation as well as their consequences for how localisation is conceived and realised within the organisational setting of an international NGO. Section four delineates three main barriers that prevent localisation from creating the intended change within the humanitarian and development sector. Lastly, section five questions the prospects of localisation as conceived and conceptualised within the framework of a “Grand Bargain” and considers the potential of the new initiative, Pledge for Change, in furthering the ideals of localisation.

2. Theory and practice

In terms of mainstream development theory and practice, localisation can be said to be as old as the notion of development itself (Barakat and Milton, 2020). Localisation refers to the understanding and explaining of the interaction between international norms and local practices, which has not only been a long-lasting interest of traditional development theory, but prior to that,

¹ This should not be misunderstood, as there is no local-led humanitarian action. International Humanitarian Assistance only constitute 1-2% of what people in crisis contexts receive (Willitts-King et al., 2019). What I point to here is rather how the discourse on localisation lacks practical implementation and fails to acknowledge and give recognition to the importance of locally led aid.

also essential knowledge for colonial officers (ibid.). However, both academic literature and humanitarian practice often frame the topic of localisation within the context of the 2016 World Humanitarian Summit (WHS)². The WHS is prominent for its call for the international humanitarian system to commit to becoming more inclusive of national and local actors (ICVA, 2018). A main highlight of the WHS was the launch of the *Grand Bargain: A Shared Commitment to Better Serve People in Need* (GB, 2016), which has been described as:

'a unique agreement between some of the largest donors and humanitarian organisations who have committed to get more means into the hands of people in need and to improve the effectiveness and efficiency of the humanitarian action' (IASC, 2020).

This agreement is representative of a shared commitment between 63 signatories from the humanitarian sector broadly and is especially notable for being the only mechanism that connects donors, UN agencies, NGOs, as well as the Red Cross and Red Crescent Society. It is constitutive of a package of reforms – 51 commitments categorised within ten workstreams – with concrete actions for donors and aid agencies to implement. Localisation, as it came to be known, emerged from the second workstream calling for *'more support and funding tools for local and national responders'*, and represents a commitment to make humanitarian action *'as local as possible and as international as necessary'* (GB, 2016). In humanitarian policy, the importance of local actors and the need to focus on their inclusion has been acknowledged at least since 1991,³ but has nevertheless lacked practical inclusion (Roepstorff, 2019). The Global Humanitarian Assistance Report from 2015, for example, drew attention to this fact by revealing a disproportionate allocation of financial resources, of only 0.2 per cent of humanitarian funds, directly allocated to local actors (Gómez, 2021; Roepstorff, 2019). This undeniable fact triggered much attention and led to calls for local inclusion within the international humanitarian system, which gained momentum in the wake of the WHS. However, the origin and concept of a “Grand Bargain” stem from a report written as preparation for the WHS by the High-Level Panel on Humanitarian Financing. The report sought solutions to close the humanitarian financing gap and suggested *“a Grand Bargain between the big donors and humanitarian organisations in humanitarian aid”* (HLP, 2016).

There are two important takeaways for understanding what implications the origin of the Grand Bargain has for localisation. Firstly, the Grand Bargain was conceptualised within a humanitarian framework. To reduce humanitarian funding gaps and shrink humanitarian needs, the Grand Bargain encourages an enhanced collaboration and engagement between humanitarian actors/programmes and development actors/programmes. As such, even though the aim of the Grand bargain was located within the humanitarian sector, the means to get there was defined

² <https://agendaforhumanity.org/summit>.

³ UN Resolution 46/182 (1991), the Code of Conduct of the Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement and NGOs in Disaster Relief (1994), as well as in the Principles of Good Humanitarian Donorship (2003) and the Principles of Partnership (2007).

across the humanitarian and development nexus. As consequence, localisation was conceptualised as broad and cross cutting both sectors, without considering the particularities in their engagement⁴. Secondly, maybe because of its roots in humanitarian financing, the Grand Bargain initially only sought to connect the largest donors and humanitarian organisations in the international humanitarian system. This is also crystal clear when revisiting the quote above, where no local, national, or regional actors are included, which reveals how a lack of understanding of power relations was embedded in the Grand Bargain from the beginning.

Significant for recent academic literature on localisation, is the increasing attention given to the role and conceptualisation of ‘the local’ with Mac Ginty (2015), Paffenholz (2015), Roepstorff (2019) and Melis and Apthorpe (2020) exploring the underlying assumptions regarding ‘the local’ in the localisation rhetoric and argue there is a lack of critical discussion of the definition of the local itself. Gómez (2021) similarly argues that localisation presents a biased understanding of the local and its agency in transforming humanitarianism, suggesting that instead of a process of localisation it is a process of deglobalisation taking shape. Barakat and Milton (2020) analyse how localisation, especially the concern and engagement with the local, is understood and practised differently across the humanitarian-development-peace nexus. Elkahlout and Elgibali (2020) argue that localisation has inherent strengths due to the social advantages of local staff but lacks sufficient institutional support from the international humanitarian system and claim that there are ethical and legal problems with transferring risk and security considerations for local NGOs. Finally, Anderl (2016) argues that ‘the local’ is actually just a myth because even though local values and needs are proclaimed to be the centre of concern in localising efforts, it is merely a rhetoric, where global norms are made to appear local. These perspectives can be seen as a reaction to the central position of ‘the local’ within the localisation debate, but they also point towards an uncertainty regarding the concept’s definition as well as the consequences it has for humanitarian and development practice. The term ‘local’ is often used in a broad understanding to distinguish between actors within the recipient country from the ‘outside world’ (Roepstorff, 2019). In this regard, scholarly literature has especially been attentive to the tendency to conceptualise the local or national in opposition to the international. Understanding these as binaries is regarded as reductive, leading to an overemphasis on Western internationals and a romanticisation of the local, resulting in analytical blind spots towards the dominant role of local elites and non-Western international actors (Paffenholz 2015). Furthermore, this also represents the relationship, in dichotomous terms, based on problematic assumptions, where the international becomes associated with the Global North and perceived as ‘*the international, universal, modern and technocratic*’ in contrast to the Global South portrayed as ‘*the local, particular, traditional and parochial*’ (Roepstorff, 2019). This dichotomy also maintains the local and the international in static and fixed categories. To counter this problematic imaginary of the local, scholars propose different solutions. Two examples are, a *critical localism* as suggested by Roepstorff (2019) inspired by Roger Mac Ginty (2015), and a *multi-local lens* as proposed by Melis and Apthorpe

⁴ See Barakat and Milton (2020) for further engagement on how localisation is defined across the humanitarian-development-peace nexus.

(2020)⁵. Common for these are their emphasis on the need to critically address the underlying assumptions and rationales of the localisation debate in which the local is construed. Both rejecting the singularity and static perception of the local, advocating for the local to be understood as *'multiple, comprising a range of locals, each of which tends to be a code for different, if interrelated, meanings and references'* (Melis and Apthorpe, 2020) and *'as an activity that occurs within webs of power and politics in which different people operate and interact'* (Roepstorff, 2019). Following these, I argue 'the local' is constitutive of a power struggle in which definitions matter. As such, the struggle to define 'the local' is therefore perceived as symptomatic for a power imbalance within the sector. The local can thus be understood as a tool, which can be employed strategically by powerful actors in the humanitarian and development system to support their interests and legitimise their actions.

3. Intersections of localisation definitions and organisational approaches

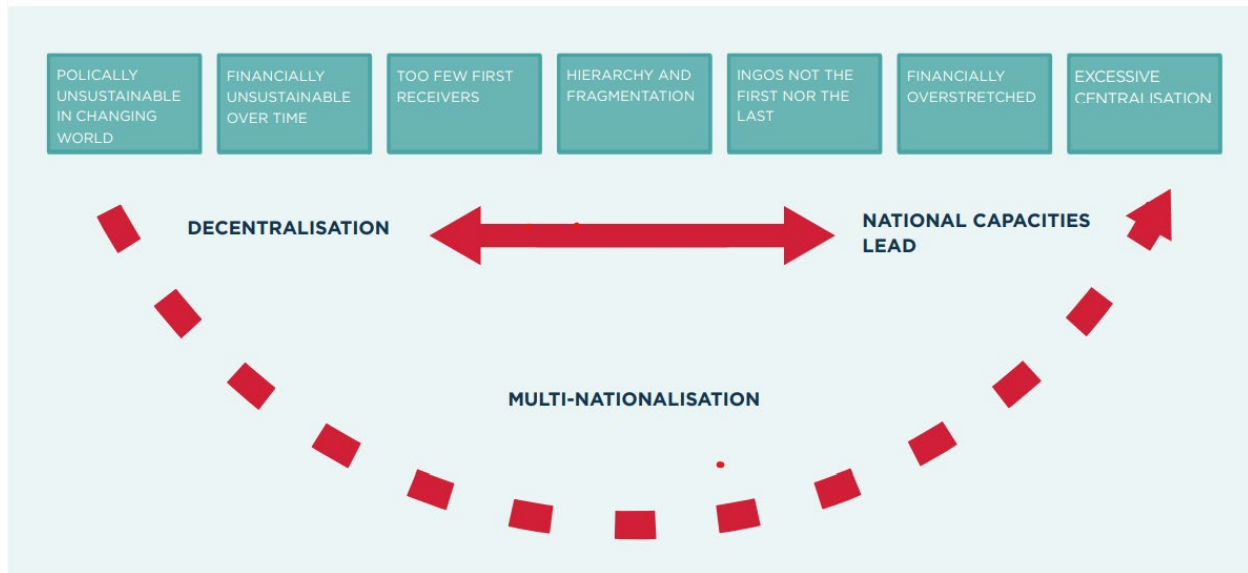
The instrumentalisation of the term 'the local' becomes apparent in discussions related to the 25 per cent that receive direct funding. Put differently, international NGOs can have an interest in perceiving national offices and affiliates as 'local actors' to live up to their localisation commitment of channelling 25 per cent of funding as directly as possible (A4EP, 2019). This controversy can be illustrated by the definition of 'local' and 'national' as suggested by the Localisation Marker Working Group (LMWG)⁶ (A4EP, 2019) and the definition endorsed by signatories and thus adopted by IASC (The Inter-Agency Standing Committee). Upon a study done by the LMWG with 380 individuals from 71 different countries, 81 per cent of the respondents agreed to defining the local/national as NGOs/CSOs *'that are not affiliated with an international NGO'* (Ibid). However, this definition was significantly altered by IASC to include a note stating that *'A local actor is not considered to be affiliated merely because it is part of a network, confederation or alliance wherein it maintains independent fundraising and governance systems'* (Ibid). Proponents of localisation meant that this created a loophole for international organisations to compete for support with local non-affiliated organisations. According to this definition, national member organisations in the Global South, who are part of an alliance or similar, qualify for the 25 per cent direct funding. The definition was adopted despite a democratic pattern showing support for affiliated organisations not counting as local actors. Despite the importance of this matter, it is not addressed in much literature on localisation. This illustrates how the definition of the local is constitutive of a power struggle as the definition has significant implications for where money is transferred to, as well as how well international NGOs are living up to their localisation commitments in the Grand Bargain.

Because a localisation definition was not included in the Grand Bargain agreement from 2016, practitioners in the field sought to understand and define it in the following years. The absence of a clear definition and the lack of consensus within the humanitarian community fostered confusion

⁵ Another example is the *political sociology approach* as proposed by Daho et al. 2019.

⁶ Localisation Marker Working Group: An informal sub-working group under the IASC humanitarian financing task team co-convened by CAFOD, OCHA and Development Initiatives.

as to what problem localisation was supposed to mitigate (Patel and Van Brabant, 2017b). To address this issue, Patel and Van Brabant (2017a; 2017b) reviewed literature and debates concerning localisation, which revealed seven ‘problems areas’ that localisation was supposed to address.



Source: Patel and Van Brabant (2017a)

The above-shown problem statements delineate a picture of the humanitarian sector as a system, where power over resource flow, control and decisions-making is located at donor-level and at international agencies, creating a structural dominance over national and local actors. Resulting in a system that down-prioritises investment in local capacity strengthening and restricts the space for national and local leadership in humanitarian response. In a context where needs are rising faster than funds, localisation is also meant to contribute to a more cost-effective system by capitalising on generally cheaper local resources. Localisation, thus, becomes the solution to a multitude of problems that can be seen as drawing on aspects fundamental to how the humanitarian system operates. Patel and Van Brabant (2017a) argue that the lack of a clear definition of the concept allows different interpretations of the ‘problem’ to emerge. Returning to the illustration above, these seven problem statements can be seen as a spectrum, and depending on where focus is located, different interpretations of the problem are revealed. Based on the interpretation, different actions are called for as part of the solution. Patel and Van Brabant (2017a) identify two main interpretations, which they call *the decentralisation interpretation* and *the transformation interpretation*. *The decentralisation interpretation* sees localisation as a solution to a problem primarily caused by centralisation in the sector. Thus, perceiving the solution to be a matter of transferring as many strategic, operational, and financial decisions as close to the affected area. In practice this might look like more direct funding to regionally or nationally registered offices. By contrast, *the transformation interpretation* sees the problem as an issue of unequal power distribution between international actors and national/local actors in the south. Therefore,

transferring decision-making to regionally or nationally registered offices of international agencies is not seen as part of the solution as this does not address the power imbalance in the humanitarian system. Strategic, operational, and financial decisions should instead be transferred to national and local actors as a means to achieve much stronger national capacities and to foster local leadership. Whereas the latter perceives the problem to be a matter of an unequal power distribution between the Global North and Global South, the preceding solely acknowledges localisation as a means to create a more cost-effective system. This illustrates how the absence of a definition creates a multitude of interpretations of what localisation means, what it seeks to address and how it materialises in practice.

To this day, still no single definition of localisation has been agreed upon (Pincock et al., 2020) but, instead, many similar broad definitions co-exist in the humanitarian sector (ICVA, 2019; IFRC, 2018; Trócaire and Groupe URD, 2017; Ayobi et al., 2017; CHS Alliance, 2017). A general characteristic is the attempt to be broad and inclusive of many viewpoints, however these definitions still do not give a clear indication of what localisation really involves (ICVA, 2019). It can be argued that having no single set definition of localisation, enable different actors within the humanitarian ecosystem to apply an understanding of the concept that is appropriate and relevant for their specific context. However, now, five years after the adoption of the Grand Bargain, it continues to present itself as a barrier in creating the intended systematic change in the international development and humanitarian system. By this, I argue that the concept of localisation is vague and fluctuates in meaning depending on its perceived purpose, despite an almost universal agreement on its importance.

4. Barriers to localisation

By 2020, only 13 out of the 63 signatories met the target for allocating 25 per cent of annual funds to national and local responders as directly as possible (Metcalf-Hough et al., 2021). The fallacy of the commitment can further be confirmed by the fact that the absolute volumes sent directly to local and national actors dropped 30 per cent in 2019 from 2016, when the Grand Bargain target was set (Thomas and Urquhart, 2020). Because of the lack of progress on the area and the continuing marginalisation of local organisations, some Global South voices have claimed the Grand Bargain should be understood as a Grand Betrayal (Ncube, 2020). This can be seen as representative of a critical wave among Global South actors criticising the power imbalance in the Grand Bargain initiative.

To further the understanding of why international NGOs struggle to localise their efforts, this paper has sought to explore how the concept of localisation is perceived and realised within the humanitarian and development sector as well as what consequences this has for the prospects of localisation. In doing so, this paper draws on interviews with five staff members from five different Danish-based international NGOs that are all, to some extent, familiar with localisation. Due to ethical considerations and by wish of several interview partners, the interviewees, along with the organisations they are employed at, will remain anonymous. The anonymity provided the opportunity for interviewees to speak freely without the fear of being identified and thus exposed

negatively. Furthermore, anonymity provides an exclusive focus on the topic of localisation, where attention remains on *what* is being said rather than *who* said it. As this paper does not seek to evaluate the interviewed international NGOs, this avoids the risk of being interpreted as such. Below, I have created a table with an overview of the interviewed organisations along with a brief description of their focus areas. This also represents how the organisations will be referred to throughout this paper.

Organisation	Interview date	Description	Quotes*
Organisation 01	13.07.21	Org. 01 is in the humanitarian field and provides a range of services including disaster relief, health, and social programmes.	Translated
Organisation 02	14.07.21	Org. 02 is a child-focused humanitarian response and provides access to health, education, protection, and disaster relief.	Original
Organisation 03	14.07.21	Org. 03 has both humanitarian and development programmes, with broad focus areas on women, politics and economics, land and climate, and emergencies.	Original
Organisation 04	03.07.21	Org. 04 has both humanitarian aid and development projects with a broad focus on gender inequality, poor governance and unequal power relations, and humanitarian crises and climate change.	Translated
Organisation 05	03.08.21	Org. 05 has a focus on poverty reduction, religious dialogue, and church development.	Translated

*This refers to the quotes being translated by the author or appearing as originally phrased by the interviewee. The quotes were translated from Danish to English.

Through a critical thematic inductive analysis of the interview material, I found three recurrent problem areas that manifest themselves as barriers to localisation. These will be presented in the following. A continuous issue identified in all problem areas was the accentuation of localisation as a global policy discourse in which locally led practice is pushed to the background.

4.1 Walking the talk or talking the walk: ideological barriers to localisation

This section draws attention to the ideological underpinnings of the discourse on localisation and shows that two contradicting narratives on localisation co-exist, albeit only one ideology might dominate.

One narrative is familiar with the rhetoric of localisation and supports a more critical approach to aid. This perspective is prevalent within the interview material. Within this approach, interviewees talked into an already established premise, which perceives the underlying structures of aid as problematic because of its ties to colonialism, leading to an inherent power imbalance between the Global North and the Global South in the international aid system. As such, localisation is understood as needed and long-awaited in the sense that it uncovers the long-hidden dark side of humanitarian aid. Localisation, thus, represents a new paradigm that challenges a “traditional idea” of aid and development by criticising a hegemonic Euro-American-centric approach exclusive of non-Western ideological perspectives. Another approach identified within the interviews is more critical towards the idea of localisation. It represents a scepticism towards its hype within the sector as well as its practical implications in which a sense of global solidarity is neglected. This perspective understands localisation as a current trend dictated by state donors, which changes every fourth year with the releasing of a new national development strategy. This perspective regards localisation as merely a trend dictated by donors and conditioned by donor interests, echoed by international NGOs in order to be positioned better to receive funding. Its standpoint also raises awareness about the consequences this will have for aid and, ultimately, the ones in need. I call these two narratives the ‘anti-localisation’ and the ‘pro-localisation’.

4.1.1 Anti-localisation narrative

‘If you want to be part of the club then parrot [mimicking] because those who sit on the money now mean this, and then we change our strategy to align.’ (Staff member at org. 05)

The quote illustrates how the interviewee perceives the interest in and rhetoric of localisation as being essential to be ‘part of the club’. A club that mimics the development strategy of Danish Foreign Affairs in order to receive funding. Thus, indicating that there is no substance behind the localisation rhetoric and that the imperative to support localisation does not go beyond adhering to donor wishes. This can further be illustrated by how the interviewee addresses localisation as *‘this thing with transferring control, power, and all of that...’* which is understood as *‘a bit naive and a simplistic conception of what would be something like “now it is them who have full control, all the power”’*. Referring to localisation as a matter of political correctness dominated by a naive and simplistic imagination seems to not only invalidate the rhetoric, but also delegitimise the intent of the content of the discourse. Interestingly, where the interviewee implicitly denotes localisation

to be a matter of donors' power to dictate international NGOs' organisational direction, the motivation behind localisation can be said to be the opposite.

The interviewee further argues that localisation, in fact, can be harmful for the operationalisation of aid, because it rejects the thought of a global responsibility that exceeds national borders. The interviewee states,

'We may be a Danish organisation, and the border is in southern Jutland but that does not stop us because we mean that our responsibility goes beyond, so a kind of globalised approach or what you would call it' (Staff member at org. 05)

This argument is interesting because it draws on a traditional perception of aid, that speaks of a 'responsibility' to act, which indicates a moral duty that transcends the state system. With reference to modernity, this understanding of a moral duty can be seen to have roots in modern thinking where we (the developed, advanced, educated) are obliged to help them (the under-/less developed, rural, uneducated). It draws on an imagination of a 'universal solidarity', which arguably has roots in the Enlightenment thinking in which all humans have equal worth but not all civilisations have developed equally and therefore in need of 'help' (Barnett, 2013). Especially noteworthy in this regard is how the 'globalised approach' is characterised with an emphasis on the organisation in Denmark crossing borders, which represents a unidirectional perception of aid – from the Global North to the Global South. Following this perception, the local is not existing beyond being the recipient. According to Mignolo (2002), globalisation is seen as a global design to manage the world. Global designs are an expression of the different stages since the inception of the modern/colonial world. A commonality of global designs is that they are driven by the will to control and homogenise the planet – economically, politically, and culturally (Mignolo 2000). Driven by universalistic ideals applied to the whole world, this approach can be seen to elevate Western prescriptions by applying a top-down approach to the operationalisation of aid. The traditional universalistic (read Western) approach to aid, which has dominated aid approaches, has historically prevailed over the particularity of local contexts and perspectives. The ideals of localisation, thus, challenges historically grown structures as well as the systems in place.

Even though the interviewee is strongly opposed to the idea of localisation, the aid recipient context is still perceived to be important because local information is regarded as valuable in a successful operationalisation of aid. However, only valuable for those with the decision-making power and within this framework the local is not part of such decision-making process. The interviewee argues,

'If we have a local presence in Tanzania, then we have the opportunity to get both our partners and employees to prepare us to be able to make the right decisions. Because they are there on a day-to-day basis, they know the context. Yea, they know how it works and they know what does not work. But if you just think you can send

checks down there then there is only 10 per cent of the money that ends up to the right places' (Staff member at org. 05)

Indicating a Eurocentric bias, this quote demonstrates an underlying belief that local actors cannot administer the money correctly if sent directly. Furthermore, it retrains a constructed binary of us (the international from the Global North) and them (the locals from the Global South). This can be related to the concept of othering, that can be defined as a discursive process by which a dominant group (us or the self) constructs a dominated group by stigmatising a difference. As such, power asymmetry is central to this concept as only the dominant group is able to impose the value of its particularity onto others. Othering also refers to how the dominant group's self-imagination is established through a mirroring process in which the other is constructed as less. In this case, local actors are constructed as less capable, less accountable, and less reliable in contrast to the international organisation represented by the interviewee (for further engagement on unequal perception of local actors and international actors in partnerships, see Jayawickrama, 2018; Kuipers and Meershoek, 2013). Following the interviewee, the local presence of expatriates from the Global North should therefore not decrease worldwide but should in fact, on the contrary, increase. In that way, more effective and efficient aid is provided because the decision-makers will then understand the context better. This line of explanation can also be seen as a self-justification of the ground premise of the organisation's way of working. This production of self-justification can be seen as endogenous to an anti-localisation approach, which can be said to draw on similar rhetoric as originated in modernity by which Western interventions were legitimised by the 'incapability' of the other.

Having in mind how the interviewee perceives locals, it is interesting how such rhetoric disappears in the approach to partnerships. When asked about how the organisation ensures equal share of power in their partnerships, the interviewee answered:

'Many of our partnerships are extremely old, we have partners who we have been with for seventy-five years. We also have some, which we have only been partners with for ten years. We also have a few that are only some years. So... in that way you can't say that the power... if we say the power, for instance, that it is 100 per cent with the partner or 100 per cent with us... It is there and we take it together' (Staff member at org. 05)

Here, a power balance in partnerships is assumed or, rather, the possibility of a power asymmetry is not considered. This implicates some sort of historical ignorance, which creates a blindness towards the legacy of colonialism present in the aid system. It upholds an innocent notion of aid in which it is purely seen as benevolent. An underlying assumption, which resembles a belief-system conceived in modernity. This narrative can also be said to represent Gloria Wekker's notion of 'white innocence', which is associated with *'being a small, but just, ethical nation; colour-blind, thus free of racism; as being inherently on the moral and ethical high ground, thus a guiding*

light to other folks and nations' (Wekker, 2016). According to Wekker, white innocence represents a cultural paradox, where the colonial legacy of race and racism, along with the role of race in shaping a self-understanding, is undermined by a dominant narrative of innocence and benevolence.

4.1.2 Pro-localisation narrative

Localisation, since it gained momentum in 2016, has increasingly become mainstream. With the Grand Bargain, the largest actors within the aid sector were forced, through their commitment, to position themselves in relation to the topic of localisation. Furthermore, with the reporting demands embedded in the Grand Bargain commitments, monitoring and evaluation of localisation performance became an institutionalised part of international NGOs. A pitfall of auditing performance is the increased focus on processes of performance instead of the goal. Taking this into account, the emphasis on performance throughout the interviews thus makes sense. The experience can be described through what Sara Ahmed (2007) calls 'image management', which is about generating the 'right image'. In this case, the image management is expressed through interviewees referring to reports, case studies and other forms of documentations that contribute to the construction of the organisation being 'good at localisation'. This tendency can be illustrated by the following quote:

'I was just trying to see if I could find... I just received something written, which had a list of case studies, where we feel we have succeeded. And among those there is... I will just quickly try to find it because there was something quite good in there...' (Staff member at org. 01)

Documents become evidence of good performance and contribute to the management of the organisational image. In that sense, the interview itself could be perceived as an audit of the organisation's performance on localisation commitments, which explains the sometimes constructed feeling of the dialogues. According to Power, organisational actors are — despite the reduction of complexities — drawn to the '*externalisation of their performance*' (Power, 2021) as it brings forth opportunities to establish social authority and possibilities of comparability. Even organisational actors, critical of audit culture, have little choice but to reproduce such representations and to pay attention to them. Within the interviews, the understanding of localisation was often framed within organisational documents, such as policies and frameworks. When asked if localisation has changed how the organisation practices aid, one interviewee answered:

'So you have this thing about, we need to start thinking and harmonising and ensuring that localisation becomes a key issue within the organisation. So it took us more or less two years, I think, for this small team of 3-4 people within the

organisation and different members to really have this task team that came up with this localisation policy, which was adopted last year. (Staff member at org. 02)

This illustrates an elevation of organisational documents in the practice of localisation. In this case mentioned in the quote, it took two years to develop and implement a localisation policy. The centrality of documents can further question the reality of localisation. Particularly, if localisation is a matter of documenting performance, rather than performing the practice. It implies an organisational tendency to address localisation as a global policy discourse, as opposed to locally led practice, which creates an emphasis on the performativity of international actors in the localisation discourse.

The performativity of localisation can further be illustrated by how existing positions change titles to incorporate the word 'localisation'. Two interviewees told me that the current title had been changed to entail the word 'localisation' within recent years. This illustrates the importance for organisations to proclaim the internalisation of the localisation discourse in their organisational setting. However, while it might illustrate an emphasis on localisation within the organisation, it does not necessarily implicate a real structural impact on the organisation. As such, it can be understood within the category of 'image management', which serves external appearance purposes.

Because localisation is often framed within the context of the Grand Bargain, localisation becomes a sign of accountability, efficiency, and effectiveness. Organisations who are guided by the ideals of localisation, or are seen to do so, thus become more accountable, efficient, and effective organisations. A commitment to localisation can be seen as a commitment to do better, and the annual self-reporting can be seen as an opportunity to show progress. As already mentioned, it is also an opportunity to measure one's performances to other organisations, which serves as a way to establish legitimacy of an organisation within the sector. As such, localisation becomes intertwined with organisational interests in which documentation showing good practice has become a great priority. Ironically, following Power (2021) audits are meant to contribute to increased efficiency but do in fact, instead, decrease efficiency through increased bureaucracy.

Localisation becoming a sign of organisational accountability, efficiency and effectiveness thus makes one wonder: Accountability to whom, and efficiency and effectiveness of what? In regard to accountability, one interviewee stated that in the current system, accountability is upwards to donors. Critical of the current system, the interviewee claimed this was essential to change for localisation to have a real impact on the ground. The interviewee stated:

'When the accountability becomes to people and the people are the ones to say, "I want this, I want that", it will really change. It will not so much be about all the reporting thing because we are on television, it will be about what difference do you make for people on the ground and, so yea, when we will be there... Maybe it will be in the long distant future but yea we might see differences' (Staff member at org. 02)

With cautious optimism, the interviewee seems sure that accountability, with time, goes towards the people on the ground. Interesting to point out in this context, is how the transformative change the interviewee seeks to see, was actually the purpose of the Grand Bargain agreement – to centre local actors in the aid system - which it did not manage. One can question if such dramatic change can happen within the current structures. In the current structures, localisation was, from the start, conceived with an emphasis on global actors and as an object of performativity, which plays out in a policy-oriented global discourse. As such, it can be argued that localisation is maintained in a conceiving stage buried in documents regarding its implementation. To quote Sara Ahmed, *'you end up doing the document rather than doing the doing'* (2007). One could argue, the *doing is still being done*, but by local Global South, who manage maybe despite of, rather than because of the localisation agenda. The performative existence of localisation might change perceptions about how to appropriately practice aid, rather than actually changing the practice of aid and shifting the power the Global South. The latter entails structural changes within the aid system, which seem unlikely in a power structure dominated by the Global North. One interviewee also pointed to this fact by stating:

'(...) we are part of a colonial structure, which has survived. I have difficulties imagining a solution, and that is also why when we become very idealistic and talk about transferring the power and control to the Global South, then I just do not believe it. I don't believe it is possible in the current structure. I mean something else has to happen.' (Staff member at org. 04)

So, following this perspective, the conversation remains idealistic, which implies no real change is happening. However, understanding localisation as idealistic and currently impossible also legitimises the lack of practical results. In other words, this dualistic perspective on localisation, as idealistic and impossible, can ironically also be perceived to prevent the conception of real change. Arguably, this approach to localisation also contributes to additional production of organisational documents as it emphasises the uncertain stage of localisation, which begs for further explanations. As a result, localisation is maintained in the process of understanding, defining, and relating to other documents. As such, localisation documents create lines of communication or cross-referencing between documents, which can legitimise a specific direction where the meaning of localisation is adjusted to the institutional circumstances of international NGOs. This narrative can thus be said to talk of change but supporting the status quo.

4.1.3 Roots in modern thinking

Albeit having portrayed the two narratives as oppositions within the localisation discourse, they can both be said to have roots in modern thinking, which limits the prospects of localisation. The anti-localisation perspective draws on cultural imaginations of 'the other', which is expressed in the conceptualisation of aid. The pro-localisation approach, while rejecting a degrading cultural

imaginary of the Global South, conceptualises localisation in relation to processes of performance measurements. The emphasis on audits is, according to Power (2021), grounded in modernity demonstrated with how *'we have trouble imagining other forms of coordination and discipline or other means of creating transparency and accountability'* (ibid.). I argue an ideology of modernity is dominating the discourse of localisation, however, expressed in different ways. This further underlines an understanding of localisation as dictated by powerful actors located in the Global North, which ultimately hinders its practical implementation. It is important to state that the conceptualisation and implementation of localisation might very well look differently if analysed through the perception of people in the field. However, the perspectives analysed here could be said to have big implications for the opportunities embedded in localisation as the analysed international NGOs arguably have great structural power within the system.

4.2 International NGOs and their organisational structure: a loophole to live up to localisation commitments

In this section, I focus on the diverse structures of international NGOs and the significance of these in relation to how localisation is perceived and realised within an organisation. The analysis of structures focuses on the aspects of centralisation and configuration with attention given to the coordination between different entities within an organisation. Ultimately, these aspects are compared to how well organisations are living up to the commitment of 25 per cent funding to local actors to understand if some organisational structures serve the ideals of localisation better than others.

Through an analysis of 10 international NGOs in Germany, Hein and Lasch (2021) found that not two organisational architectural designs were identical. However, the authors found that, despite their differences, some components of the structures were recurrent. They identified four general features of the architecture of international NGOs. These are: 1) Partner organisations, which can both be local or other international NGOs, 2) Country offices, which can be both staffed with local and international staff with a varying degree of how independently these both are structured and act, 3) Associated organisations within the same organisation's network, such as affiliates or subsidiaries of the original organisation in different countries, 4) Umbrella organisation, which refers to an alliance, confederation or federation (ibid.). I have used this differentiation of organisational features as a measurement of comparison of the five international NGOs central to this paper. The table below outlines the organisational features of each international NGO as well as the per cent self-reported direct funding.

Description of the organisational structure and the per centage of direct funding in 2020-2021		
Organisation	Description of organisational structure	Self-reported per cent of direct funding (2020-2021) ⁷
01	It is an umbrella organisation with independent national members, both in the Global North and Global South. Partnerships are between Global North members and Global South members.	60%
02	It is an umbrella organisation with national members both in the Global North and Global South. It has regional offices. Members have varying degrees of autonomy in terms of fundraising and management. All partnerships are managed by the umbrella organisation.	13%
03	It is an umbrella organisation with national members and affiliates both in the Global North and Global South. It also has regional hubs. All national members have autonomous fundraising and governance systems.	39%
04	It is an umbrella organisation with national members, country offices and one affiliate. The operation of country offices is under the operation of a member.	36%
05	It is headquartered in Denmark with regional and country offices in the Global South, which have local partners.	Not a Grand Bargain signatory

Source: Author's own compilation

From this overview, it appears that there is no direct coherence between organisational structure and per centage funding transferred (as directly as possible) to local actors. However, org. 1 stands out by channelling the largest per centage (60 per cent) of funding directly to national and local actors. The question is, however, what allows this per centage to be so high compared to other organisations – structure, size, budget, other? To answer this, we must return to the definition of local and national actors to raise the question of whom the 25 per cent applies to. Here it is important to notice how the per centage captured in this org. Org. 01's reporting is the funding directly transferred from Global North members to Global South members within the same umbrella organisation. The per centages going further to local and national partners is not monitored and is therefore unknown. This stands in contrast to Org. 03, which has reported a much smaller per centage, but is however only accounting for what is directly transferred to national partners outside of the organisation. It can thus be argued that instead of a certain architectural

⁷ [Grand Bargain Self-Reporting Exercise 2020 - 2021 | IASC \(interagencystandingcommittee.org\)](https://www.interagencystandingcommittee.org/)

design supporting the principles of localisation better than others, it is an expression of disparate reporting approaches on the 25 per cent direct funding commitment. Importantly, this leads to the fact that the Grand Bargain reporting is based on self-reporting, which may question the reliability of the reported data. One can thus consider if the per centages of direct transfer of funds only represent cosmetic changes with lack of structural impact on international NGOs' structures or ways of working. When asking an interviewee from org. 01 about the organisational impact of localisation, the response was:

'Ehmm, maybe as I said, I have felt an appreciation of the way we work, and also enhanced attention to the topic internally. An incentive to do more, I mean, we have always worked towards making ourselves unnecessary in our interaction with local partners, so yea, an incentive to work more with that.' (Staff member at org. 01)

The quote underlines how the localisation commitments have had no structural effect on the organisation. Instead, the interviewee experienced how the organisational structures were already compatible with the way localisation was conceived in the Grand Bargain and its reporting areas. This is in some way thought provoking, when considering that this organisation has no track of the percentage funding reaches non-member organisations. Some ways of organising can, thus, be perceived to already have structures suitable for the localisation reporting system. This is also recognised by the same interviewee, who states:

'I will put it this way that after the Grand Bargain and that priority focus, I mean it was... I felt like "oh, that was really welcomed". It was like thinking "oh man, it really suits the way we are organised"' (Staff member at org. 01)

This quote poses the question of why localisation is perceived to suit the way the organisation is organised. Firstly, the organisational architecture configured by an umbrella organisation and national members can be seen as an effective structure for directly channelling funding to local contexts. Transferring funds between national members must be assumed to facilitate a smoother transaction in comparison with a non-affiliated local organisation because member organisations are required to already comply with rules and standards set by the umbrella organisation. Therefore, these already have a credible track record of management and compliance mechanisms, which can be seen to suit donor structures. However, this way of applying the localisation commitment can be criticised for resulting in an unequal competition for funds between member organisations, and non-affiliated national and local organisations in the Global South. Secondly, umbrella organisations are also generating the largest income among international NGOs, which is why they maybe have greater influence on how reporting system was set up within the Grand Bargain. Thirdly, keeping the money within the umbrella organisation might also contribute to a greater control over the money from a donor perspective, which echoes donors' tendency towards

risk aversion. In sum, recognising member organisations as qualifying for the 25 per cent direct funding clearly determines what story is being told through the reporting on localisation. Overall, the heterogeneity of organisational structures in the field allows for different interpretations of how localisation looks like in practice, but it also gives different opportunities for how to report on the 25 per cent direct funding commitment. The different applications of the commitment also illustrate the power dynamics embedded in the definition of the local, which is intertwined with to whom the 25 per cent applies. Another important point is the apparent confusion regarding the way the per centage is calculated, either only from humanitarian funding, only development funding, or a combination of both. This can arguably change the per centage quite a bit, as it is more challenging to channel direct funding to local/national actors in a humanitarian context. However, it is difficult to distinguish what organisations report on in the self-reporting as it is not always mentioned. This further leads to the aspect of transparency in the localisation reporting. The Grand Bargain reporting is based on organisations' self-reported achievements on the localisation commitments. This means no external accountability mechanism is ensuring the trustworthiness of this reporting. Nevertheless, it seems like it is not necessarily the structure but, instead, the approach to localisation within the organisation that determines the reality of the Grand Bargain commitments. This can further be related to the aspect of how localisation is accentuated as a global policy discourse, which is rooted in an organisational desire to showcase good performance to gain legitimacy within the field. This can also be seen from the perspective of the previous topic by pointing to the performative nature of localisation emphasised as a global discourse with little practical orientation. Here, the real effect of the localisation commitments can be questioned by looking at the lack of structural changes in how organisations operate since the Grand Bargain was signed in 2016.

4.3 International NGO networks and a field of many interests: the constraining effects of powerful actors to the prospects of localisation

This section emphasises the importance of relationships that form a network in which international NGOs are ontologically embedded. Following this perspective, international NGOs cannot be reduced to their singularity but should, instead, be understood through their associative capacities and because of their bridging practices with other actors in the humanitarian and development sector. Anna Ohanyan argues:

'Their [NGOs] tenacious bridging with other actors in world politics generates profound implications for understanding both agency and structure as institutionalised in transnational networks. NGOs exercise agency by bridging; and at the same time their bridging creates structural effects on NGOs themselves and other actors in the network.' (Ohanyan, 2015)

The concept of bridging, which refers to NGOs linkages created to other actors, is thus crucial for understanding the agency and structures of NGOs as embedded in, but also limited to, their

networks. The Grand Bargain, connecting the world's largest humanitarian agencies and donors, can be seen as an example of the bridged relationships of international NGOs, which is constitutive of a network. The NGO network can be said to be *'(...) driven by both conflict and cooperation between actors with varied interests, while also carrying, shaping, and framing ideas and identities in world politics.'* (Ohanyan, 2015). Localisation, seen as a bridging practice within the NGO network, encompasses varied interests that can be said to contribute to shaping and framing of both the idea of localisation but also organisational identities. As such, networks must be seen as mutually constitutive relationships. The bridging practices in networks contribute to the broader institutionalisation of organising modes and authority patterns around the NGOs. Institutionalisation is, as defined by Phillip Salznick (in Ohanyan, 2015),

'(...) something that happens to an organisation over time, reflecting the organisation's own distinctive history, the people who have been in it, the groups it embodies and the vested interests they have created, and the way it has adapted to its environment ... In what is perhaps its most significant meaning, "to institutionalise" is to infuse with value beyond the technical requirements of the task at hand.' (ibid.)

The institutionalisation of localisation can, thus, not only be limited to the technical requirements related to the localisation commitments but should also be understood in the realm of value-making and identity formation. The appreciation of the values associated with localisation is also enhanced concurrently with localisation entering the mainstream with a consensus about representing the 'right' way to practice aid.

I will now turn to an analysis of localisation as a bridging practice in the international NGO network to understand whether the international NGO network constitutes a resource or constraint in furthering localisation. Chris Ansell argues that networks can both function as *resources* but also *constraints* on behaviour; *'as resources, they [networks] are channels of information and aid mobilized in the pursuit of certain gains; as constraints, they [networks] are structures of social influence and control that limit action.'* (Ansell, 2008).

It can be argued that localisation, as a bridging practice, can be seen as a way for international NGOs to exert agency through mobilisation on the global scene regarding the importance of local/national actors in the aid eco-system. The bridged relationship, materialised in the localisation workstream, can thus be seen as a collective pursuit of a common goal, localisation, in which the network constitutes a resource to achieve that. However, alternatively the same network can also be seen as being the source of constraining structures that seek to control and influence how localisation is perceived and practiced.

To fully grasp how networks can either serve as a resource or as a constraint in relation to localisation, it is crucial to consider the initial thoughts behind a Grand Bargain. The Grand Bargain was initially thought as a deal between the five biggest donors and the six largest UN Agencies with the aim to find solutions to close the humanitarian financing gap. The network

formed by the Grand Bargain was, hence, formed by and reserved for key resourceful actors within the international humanitarian system. This demonstrates who – within the international humanitarian system – were perceived as important to include in the solution-making. The initial emphasis on some of the largest donors and humanitarian organisations can be argued to constitute a conflict of interest within the network and, therefore, playing a constraining role in furthering localisation. This was also mentioned by several interviewees who specifically highlighted the constraining effects to the network of national donors and the national interests they inhabit. Governments constitute the biggest donor of the analysed international NGOs and as one interviewee pointed out; *‘the money comes from taxpayers in the global north, and then you want to preserve an element of control over that money’* (Staff member at org. 04). Continuing to say that this desire of control leads to donors only wanting to do partnerships with international NGOs as intermediaries. Down the same lane, another interviewee stated *‘(...) if you are a French donor, you also want your French international NGOs to be doing well because they are also employing your people’* (Staff member at org. 03). This points to an economic reasoning behind donors preventing localisation. A third interviewee claimed that the percentage funding received from governmental donors could be equalised with giving up the same percentage of organisational independence. This refers to how funding from government donors implies factoring in national political interests in operationalisations (Staff member at org. 05). The interviews thus indicate the perception of governments constraining the practical implementation of localisation due to a wish to preserve a level of control over funds, as well as strategic directions of aid. Following this perspective, international NGOs are part of advancing national political interests globally in which aid can be seen as a foreign policy tool. This is, however, not a controversial claim, and has been studied and stated by several (Apodaca, 2017; Pankaj, 2005).

In a Danish context, Anne Mette Kjær argues that Denmark has historically used foreign aid to put themselves on the world map and has thus followed international tendencies and guidelines (Kjær, 2020). However, since the late 1990s Danish foreign aid has developed towards more bilateral aid (equals less multilateral aid), but less money allocated to foreign aid, and guided by Danish national political interests (as opposed to international) (ibid.). Resulting in a tendency to focus more on immediate short-term crises by prioritising foreign policy goals, such as security and migration issues, opposed to long-term development goals. Kjær calls this a paradigm shift characterised by a politicisation of Danish aid (ibid., 128). This tendency can also be discovered in the framework of the new Strategic Partnership Agreement (SPA) from Danida (Danish International Development Agency). Danida is the department within the Danish Ministry of Foreign Affairs responsible for the planning, implementation, and quality assurance of Denmark’s development cooperation. As the submission date for the application was November 11, 2021, it is yet unknown who will be accepted as strategic partners for the next four years (2022-2025). However, as far as I know all interviewed organisations have applied for the SPA, and if qualified this means that the organisations have to meet Danida’s requirements. In the SPA, it is possible to see the emphasis on the immediate crisis areas that are perceived as of national political concern – like mentioned by Kjær (2020). In the SPA it is stated:

'In line with "The World We Share"⁸, there is a wish to support more people where the needs are greatest. The Strategic Partnerships therefore introduce an increased geographic focus on fragile countries and contexts, especially in Africa, Afghanistan or Syria and neighbouring countries related to the crises in Afghanistan and Syria.' (MFA, 2021)

The increased geographic focus on Africa, Afghanistan and Syria is aligning with the populations, which constitute the largest groups of asylum seekers in Denmark⁹, which arguably can be the reasoning behind such emphasis. In practice, this implies a requirement of minimum 50 per cent of the programme and project related activities to be implemented in the aforementioned areas (MFA, 2021). Depending on the partnership agreement¹⁰ that organisations apply for, this percentage can amount up to a minimum of 80 per cent. As such, it can be said that this donor-recipient relation binds the possibilities of action to some extent, at least geographically. It can thus constrain international NGOs' behaviour and present itself as a barrier for the prospects of localisation as mentioned by several interviewees. However, while this relation prevents some actions, one could also argue it encourages and facilitates others. Strategic partners are 'expected' to include a 'partnership and local leadership approach' in their engagements (MFA, 2021). An interesting side note in this regard is the decision not to employ the localisation terminology but instead a rhetoric of "local leadership". The argument behind this decision is that the terminology of localisation can reinforce the impression of change being imposed on the Global South by the Global North. The symbolic value behind this decision is an interesting point for further reflection. Back to the point – to include a 'partnership and local leadership approach' entails doing partnerships with '*locally rooted and representative civil society actors in the global South*' and '*strengthening local leadership including transfer of funds, ownership and decision-making power to local partners*' (MFA, 2021). Interestingly, Danida has a special remark about local actors where it states the definition in the context of an international alliance or similar. Here, it is stated that South-based members '*must be able to demonstrate that it is rooted in local civil society to be defined as a local partner.*' which '*includes local leadership (board and management), local fundraising and an overall autonomy*' (MFA, 2021). While the intent behind this differentiation may be to ensure that local actors – not alliances – are strengthened, it might also put extra workload on national independent members to prove that they in fact are a local actor. In regard to reporting on the partnership and local leadership approach, Danida requires that strategic partners report on the level of transfers to local partners in the Global South. This is in line with the Grand Bargain agreement and might add extra emphasis on the percentage of direct funding to local partners. As

⁸ The World We Share is the name of Denmark's strategy of development cooperation.

⁹ Numbers from [Danmarks Statistik \(dst.dk\)](https://dst.dk).

¹⁰ There are two types of partnership agreements: Cross-cutting partnership and thematic partnership.

already mentioned previously, this is a rather simplistic quantitative reporting strategy, which lacks transparency and accountability. However, strategic partners also need to have an annual stock-take with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs to assess how well organisations are living up to their objectives regarding strengthening of local leadership as described in the SPA. Additionally, strategic partners have to be assessed by their local partners during the partnership period. In particular, the incorporation of the assessment is an important contribution as it brings forth the reality of localisation at local levels. However, it is doubtful how critical local partners can be in these assessments, as they also depend on the funding provided. Furthermore, it is not noted if the extra workload of such an assessment must be taken into account in international NGO partnerships, so it does not present a burden for local partners. The SPA also introduces a maximum ceiling of 20 per cent for expenditure at headquarter level in Denmark, which all strategic partners are required to comply with from 2023 and onwards. Regarding this requirement, it could be interesting to compare this per centage with how much strategic partners currently spend at headquarter level in Denmark. That information is, however, not available publicly. Furthermore, one could speculate if the different organisational structures give opportunity to different ways of counting this per centage, for example in structures with an umbrella organisation.

The reporting framework for the SPA can be said to have implications for what is monitored within organisations, which drives an institutional change that prioritises localisation. As such, the donor-international NGO relation restricts international NGOs by forcing several reporting requirements down on international NGOs, but it does, also, support a monitoring tendency that serves the advancement of localisation. One could argue that international NGOs could in fact just have monitored these areas themselves in line with their outspoken support of localisation. However, following the theory of audit culture, only what is being audited is being done. By this, the motivation to audit obscures the subject being audited. This is the consequence of audit culture and its appreciation of documented and measurable performance indicators. As such, the incorporation of localisation in Danida's donor demands therefore constitute an important element in furthering the practicality of localisation. One interviewee also mentioned the significance of donor demands for the practical implementation of localisation, which was experienced with a different donor. The interviewee stated,

'In the beginning we were not as policy oriented but, rather, focused on the practical implementation [of localisation]. And there was a demand on CISU projects to implement more than 50 per cent through local partners. Not just country offices, but half went to civil society organisations so there we were forced into the practical implementation of localisation, right' (Staff member at org. 04)

So, the structural power expressed by donor requirements within the international NGO network play an important role in how aid is managed and practiced within an organisational setting. As said by the interviewee, it 'forces' a particular focus onto international NGOs, which has to be

complied with in order to receive the funding. In the context of the SPA one can argue that donors can actually foster positive change in regard to localisation. This framework used in the SPA to define the core dimensions in the partnership and local leadership approach is, however, developed on the basis of work done by START Network, Charter for Change (C4C), The Pacific Islands Association of Non-Government Organisations (PIANGO) (MFA, 2021). START Network, C4C and PIANGO are initiatives or networks that connect international NGOs and national/local NGOs with a common aim to shift power and decision-making to local levels. As such, the special focus on localisation in the SPA 2022-2025 can be attributed to the pressure created by other bridged relationships in the international NGO network instead of as a result of the relation between international NGOs and donors. Whereas the relation between international NGOs and donors are co-opted, international NGOs bridged relations with initiatives – such as the ones mentioned above – are cultivated. As said by Ohanyan (2015) and Ansell (2008), bridging is a way for international NGOs to exercise agency but can, nevertheless, both be a source of constraint or empowerment on international NGO behaviour. On the one hand, donors have the power to dominate international NGO choices and set the limits of the possible, which leaves international NGOs with little bargaining power. This provides a constraining relation due to structures of dependency and upward accountability. On the other hand, international NGOs' bridging with national/local initiatives is constitutive of agency, and this network can, according to Ohanyan, be utilised as a tool to promote social and institutional change in world politics (ibid.). As such, this bridged relationship enables international NGOs to pursue its assumed primary goal, which is to serve the people in need and promote their well-being. Networks can thus be important mobilisers for change in global policy by contributing to the shaping and formation of ideas.

It is possible to argue that international NGOs' bridging capabilities are crucial in furthering localisation, albeit it is essential that the network is inclusive of local initiatives and organisations in the Global South. Regarding this matter, a distinction between “the humanitarian eco-system” and “the international humanitarian system” is exactly pointing to the different networks within the sectors. Whereas the first is considerate of all actors in the humanitarian system as well as their interdependencies, the latter seems to have a limited focus on international NGOs, Global North donors, and UN institutions.

Having outlined the enabling and disabling factors of international NGOs' network in furthering localisation, it is also important to look at the role of international NGOs regarding this matter. Here, it is possible to argue that international NGOs' imperative to survive and strive as an organisation, play a key role in determining the prospect of localisation and its opportunity to materialise long-lasting change within the humanitarian and development system. The practical implications of localisation will have huge consequences for how international NGOs work and, ultimately, also for employees working at international NGOs. One interviewee stated:

In some cases and in most cases it will mean that we have to narrow down our staff because some of the roles we have been playing, if we are talking about true partnership, should be led by our partners. And so I think the question we all have,

those of us who have maybe been in international organisations, are we ready to grant work in national organisations to take forward this agenda and this is really a question of money and power, given enough funding to national organisations so that they can also sustain quality staff. The reality that if local organisations got the same funding like us, they would run us out of work' (Staff member at org. 03)

So, the interests of international NGOs are arguably preventing localisation from unfolding practically. The structural position of international NGOs, compared to local organisations, within the network, result in power asymmetry between the two. International NGOs' privileged access to resources and decision-making processes, position them as enablers in furthering locally led practice. Understanding international NGOs' role in their networks, in either empowering or constraining the behaviour of others, is, therefore, crucial. Here, it can be argued that the role of international NGOs as intermediaries constrains the behaviour of local organisations. Despite international NGOs finding donor demands restrictive in terms of furthering localisation, they perpetuate the same logic downwards to their local partners. Commonly, international NGOs make their demands for local partners even stricter than what back donors require. This can be seen in terms of compliance demands but also regarding lengths of partnerships. Whereas the Strategic Partnership with Danida runs for four years, international NGOs partnerships with local organisations are typically based on a one-year contract (staff member at org. 02). This results in a network structure, where the agency and the space of opportunities decreases with each link away from the donor. As such, bridged relationships between international NGOs and local actors might mobilise pressure to highlight the importance of localisation, but it won't be able to alter the hierarchical power structure within the system that prevents real, locally led practice from taking place. Another aspect that supports this argument is how working towards localisation also means that international NGO employees have to work towards making their own jobs unneeded. This might result in a conflict of interests and poses a dilemma in regard to the future of localisation. In this context, an interviewee pointed to how the prospect of localisation essentially relates to the question of *'am I ready today to work actively towards making my own job disappear.'* (Staff member at org. 02). As such, localisation becomes embedded with not only the interests of organisations but, also, personal interests of its staff. One can thus argue that the people in charge of the necessary transformation for localisation to result in locally led practice might not have an interest in its implicit consequences. This advances the understanding of why the discourse on localisation is one that talks of change but supports the maintenance of a North-dominated aid structure. As such, localisation is being accentuated as a global policy discourse with a lack of a practical outcome.

5. The endogenous contradictions in the conceptualisation and practice of localisation

Through the example of five Danish-based international NGOs, this paper has investigated factors which explain organisations' struggle to live up their localisation commitments in the Grand Bargain and which factors explain why limited progress has been made in the area the last five

years. I found a discrepancy between what organisations say they do and what they *really* do, proving the accentuation of localisation as a global discourse in which, it becomes an object of performance measurement and organisational image management, and source of comparison to other Grand Bargain signatories, in which its reality beyond its performativity can be questioned. The performativity of localisation is further underlined with its lack of impact on organisational structures and approaches to aid, and it was argued that the 25 per cent direct funding commitment merely mirrors the absence of a reporting consensus, which gives opportunity to safeguard organisational interest by applying different interpretations of who is local, and to whom the 25 per cent applies. Within the global community, localisation has become a symbol of the internalisation of appropriate practice of aid, and organisations supporting localisation become associated with organisational good practice. However, actors inhabiting powerful structural positions within the global network are not interested in the implicit consequences of localisation, which results in a displacement between localisation as enacted in the network, and its practical implementation providing transformational change on the ground.

As a conclusion note, this paper will reflect upon the prospects of the Grand Bargain 2.0 and its potential to redeem the failure of its precursor. The Grand Bargain 2.0 has, as mentioned in the introduction, shrunk its original fifty-one commitments into only two enabling priority areas often summarised as “quality funding” and “localisation” (GB 2.0, 2021). In the Grand Bargain 2.0, it is stated that it

[...] reframes the overall objective to achieving “Better humanitarian outcomes for affected populations through enhanced efficiency, effectiveness, and greater accountability, in the spirit of Quid pro Quo as relevant to all”.’ (GB 2.0, 2021)

The reframing is supposed to represent an attempt to bring the Grand Bargain closer and more centred around the people that the humanitarian development sector is committed to serve. This demonstrates a wide acknowledgement among the signatories regarding the under-delivering of the original Grand Bargain in its attempt to do the same. In contrast to the development of the original Grand Bargain, actors from the Global South played a bigger role in the design and had more influence in the renewed framework of the Grand Bargain 2.0. The Grand Bargain 2.0 has two key elements in its renewed framework, and these represent an effort to include local organisations in both its formal and informal structures. Firstly, the development of so-called ‘political caucuses’ (GB 2.0, 2021). The ‘caucus’ approach is supposed to address ‘*one of the key weaknesses of the Grand Bargain workstream approach*’ in which ‘*it has treated all problems equally, creating very large groups that struggle to reach agreement on specific points.*’ (ibid.). The caucuses can be described as small informal groups with a variety of representation but with shared interests coming together to work towards a common goal. These can further be described as ‘*the “coalitions of the willing” – that agree to monitor, drive and encourage progress on specific commitments.*’ (GB 2.0, 2021). It is possible to argue that the inclusion of local organisations in such processes represents a step forward, but it is, however, a continuation of a

global political discourse in which the practical outcome on the ground is maintained uncertain. The second element of the Grand Bargain 2.0, represents efforts *‘[...] to strengthen local actor representation and inclusion in strategic decision-making in the Grand Bargain going forward.’* (ibid.). On a global level, this means the inclusion of one local actor representative to be a part of the Facilitation Group of the Grand Bargain 2.0., while the Grand Bargain 2.0 encourages local actors to engage with the Grand Bargain at the technical level. This effort seems rather performative, and the inclusion of one local actor representative to be a part of the Facilitation Group does not appear to be a far-reaching commitment but rather the opposite. At country-level the formation of so-called National Reference Groups is proposed. The intention of these is to enable *‘[...] local actors to engage with the Grand Bargain and challenge humanitarian and development actors that have traditionally held power in the sector.’* (ibid.). However, it is doubtful if the National Reference Groups are able to create the political pressure necessary to alter the power asymmetry within the Grand Bargain, which echoes the arguments from the analysis on the international NGO network.

However, from its framework it is possible to say that localisation has not lost momentum in the Grand Bargain 2.0. In fact, localisation and local actors have been given a central position compared to its precursor. It is nonetheless dubious whether the renewed framework has greater success with moving the Grand Bargain from *‘Geneva to the Front line’* (ibid.). The discourse on localisation, as conceived within the Grand Bargain, can be argued to have an embedded power default in which its possibilities and limitations are set by the most resourceful and powerful actors in the humanitarian and development sector.

As previously stated, this paper is built on my master’s thesis that I wrote and defended in 2021. However, much of what I have criticised about the Grand Bargain and its conceptualisation of localisation is addressed in the Pledge for Change, which was formally launched October 27th, 2022. The Pledge for Change is a new set of commitments signed by leaders of international NGOs who pledge to work *‘(...) with national and local organizations worldwide for a fairer future in which all people’s needs are met and their rights upheld, governments fulfil their responsibilities and civil society flourishes.’* (P4C, 2022). As a final addition to this paper, I will reflect upon the potential impact of the Pledge for Change for the future prospect of principles of localisation in the humanitarian and development sector.

A major difference between the Pledge for Change (hereafter referred to as P4C) and previous initiatives, such as the Grand Bargain and the Charter4Change (C4C), is that the P4C originated in the Global South and is a locally led process. The P4C was convened by Degan Ali, CEO of Adeso, a humanitarian and development organisation in Somalia, and Mary Ana McGlasson, Director of the Centre for Humanitarian Leadership, who supported Adeso in making P4C a reality. In contrast to the Grand Bargain, this means Global South representation in all initial processes.

The question is, however, if the P4C has the potential to create the system-wide change that moves the localisation agenda beyond its current performativity and is actually able to challenge the

power imbalances in the sector. In comparison to past processes for change, such as the Grand Bargain and C4C, the P4C states

'While those initiatives [the Grand Bargain and the C4C] focus on the role of INGOs, the pledge emphasises the part to be played by local organisations and the rights, needs and priorities of local communities.' (P4C, 2022)

Because the process is driven and led by the Global South, the P4C does indeed represent a shift in focus. This is further underlined by the fact that the P4C refuses to use the terminology of localisation. The word itself, localisation, implies a top-down process of having to adapt something to a local context – a one-way transaction. Such approach has an embedded unequal power balance, which implies the Global North knows best, and fails to acknowledge the importance of work, knowledge and capacities existing at local levels in the Global South. This argument can be further supported by the critique of the unspoken assumptions embedded in the idea of “capacity building” (Littles, 2022). Instead, the initiative is based on the belief and terminology of “locally led and globally connected”. This shift in emphasis represents an important change in perspective from a top-down approach to an approach centred around local agendas, leadership, and resources. It is, however, possible to argue that it does not manage to transform completely the ideological foundation upon which the idea of aid is built.

The P4C focuses on three pledges: 1) Equitable partnerships, 2) Authentic storytelling, and 3) Influencing wider change. Albeit I acknowledge the effort and importance of each pledge, I still wish to address some problematic continuations of key areas I have criticised about the Grand Bargain for throughout this working paper.

One aspect I wish to point to is the problematic continuation of a rhetoric of othering, which can be detected in the pledge about equitable partnerships. Phrasings such as *'We [INGOs] will help them [L/NNGOs] take control'* or *'We'll [INGOs] work in partnership with them [L/NNGOs] to make sure they benefit from our presence.'* seem to merely rearticulate the power imbalance that the pledge seeks to challenge. The first sentence is built on an assumption that international NGOs need to ‘help’ local NGOs in the Global South, which points to a relational power dynamic that locates international NGOs in a superior position. The latter sentence implies that local NGOs will always benefit from the presence of international NGOs and takes for granted the possibility of local NGOs benefitting more from their absence.

Another problematic continuation is the focus on superficial fixes that does not demand structural changes in how international organisations operate. I fully agree and acknowledge the importance of the pledge about authentic storytelling. It is important to create a space for accurate representation and for the rightful recognition of local actors’ role in the humanitarian and development eco-system. However, one could argue it brings about little structural change to merely change the portrayal of the Global South in internal and external communications. These are expressions of problematic organisational structures that require a bigger change in who has

the power to choose what stories that are being told and how it is told – the decision-making power still seems to be located at international NGOs.

The last pledge, influencing wider change, refers roughly to the matter of disseminating the P4C, urging and encouraging support, and tracking progress on the pledges. Especially the latter, which refers to the reporting on the pledges, is basically what it all comes down to. Is the P4C able to implement mechanisms of monitoring and evaluation that ensure accountability and learning? In this working paper, I have addressed how the self-reporting on the localisation commitment in the Grand Bargain is characterised by a lack consensus on key terms, which leads little transparency on what basis international NGOs are actually reporting on. As a result, instead of having reliable data on the area of localisation, data collection becomes an expression of pseudo work. In comparison to the Grand Bargain's reporting system, the P4C adds another layer of accountability. However, in addition to self-reported measures from international NGO signatories, the P4C's will include measures that show the perspectives of local partners on the degree to which INGO signatories are living up to the pledges. Even though key terms, as well as measures for transparency and accountability are still to be defined within the P4C reporting system, it is maybe exactly here where the P4C has the potential to be pivotal in accelerating change within the sectors. Nevertheless, for monitoring and evaluation to truly evolve into accountability and learning, it is crucial that the P4C continues to be a bottom-up process driven by the Global South. By doing so, the challenge is to balance the needed universality to ensure reliable and comparable data to keep INGOs accountable, but also to enable the process to be dictated by the diversity of specific contexts, circumstances, and people. Only by representing the sum of a variety of approaches to locally led practices can the power truly be shifted to the Global South.

6. References

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SOCIO-ECONOMIC RESEARCH CENTRE

ROSKILDE UNIVERSITY
UNIVERSITETSVEJ 1, POSTBOX 260
4000 ROSKILDE, DENMARK

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