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CONTESTING PRACTICES OF AID LOCALIZATION IN JORDAN AND LEBANON

Civil society organizations' mobilization of local knowledge[1]

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Introduction

This chapter explores the unfulfilled promises of the Northern-led 'aid localization' that has been initiated in the fields of humanitarian aid and development, as well as the opportunities this shift has nonetheless created for local actors from the South[2] to reclaim the lead in decision making in cooperation with donors.[3] The idea of localizing aid dates back to the 1980s (Ettlinger, 1994), and practices and discourses around this idea have evolved and developed in varied ways ever since. In the last couple of decades, these practices and discourses have merged with wider frames of development aid and humanitarian assistance. Analysis of this evolution has concluded that it is constitutive of a new paradigm of 'self-reliance' (Joseph, 2013, 2014; Juncos, 2017). Seen as the ability of individuals and communities to meet their own needs, self-reliance is meant to empower local actors so they can shape their own fortunes through 'aid localization', 'a collective process by [which] the different stakeholders' of the humanitarian and development systems aim to put local actors at the centre and give them a greater role (de Geoffroy & Grunewald, 2017, p. 1).

Aid localization approaches based on self-reliance are also meant to transfer power and to level the asymmetry between Northern donors and Southern recipient states and communities. However, the literature points to the persistence of unequal power relations (Eriksson Baaz, 2007; Sander, 2021; Schöneberg, 2017). While agreeing that the alleged transfer of power mostly equates to a re-adjustment of Norths–Souths power relations in subtler forms of governmentality, this chapter explores how local actors, especially civil society organizations (CSOs), find leverage and resources in the discourse that precisely frames localization and power transfer for the purpose of reclaiming, if not leadership, at least an enhanced agency. The chapter argues that, using, notably, the resource of

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contextual knowledge, local actors try to assert themselves as necessary and full-fledged partners rather than passive implementers. In doing so, they project significant agency and provide genuine 'starting from the South' approaches as they strategically navigate the web of power relations pervading the world of international development and humanitarian aid, as well as local political settings.

The argument builds on two case studies, both based on extensive fieldwork. Grounded in the development field, the first case study explores the cooperation between Jordanian women's non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and their Northern-based donors around women's rights in Jordan. Located at the core of the 'humanitarian–development nexus', the second case study examines the relationship between local actors involved in Syrian refugee education in Lebanon and their European donors. The field research in Jordan took place in 2017 (one month) and 2018 (three months) through semi-directed face-to-face interviews and online in 2021 with representatives of Jordanian women's organizations and donor agencies. In addition to 63 interviews, three months of participant observation with one organization was conducted. The field research in Lebanon took place in 2019 (one month) and 2021 (two months). A total of 56 semi-structured interviews (face-to-face or online depending on COVID-related restrictions) were conducted with representatives of local organizations, Lebanese officials, and donor representatives working in the field of Syrian refugee education. All participants provided informed consent for the use of their anonymized data.

These two cases seem to share very little. Yet, their very differences provide much ground to examine how local actors try to seize the opportunities provided by aid localization to gain more say in spite of the power relations in which they are entangled.

Unfolding its argument in three sections, the chapter starts by retracing the shifts in the wider paradigms in which the discourse and practice of localization are embedded. Building on critical approaches to Western-led development and humanitarian aid, this first section below not only highlights the ongoing limitations to localization and the persistence of power relations throughout the shifts but also the new opportunities created for Southern-led agency with these changes. Following Batliwala (2019), we focus on how knowledge, as a significant tool for Southern actors, along with intangible resources, is used to reclaim a greater role. After presenting a brief overview of donors' localization discourses in both settings, the second section explores the power relations within which CSOs in Jordan and Lebanon are entangled – whether these are with their donors or with the state. The third section focuses on how Jordanian and Lebanese CSOs push for more symmetrical relationships to alter persisting power relations through the day-to-day assertion of their contextual knowledge, contestation of their side-lining, and claims for a more genuine localization. The conclusion offers some recommendations on the basis of Southern CSOs' perceptions of what is lacking that would be required for a real localization of development and crisis responses to make good on pledges to start from the South.

Paradigmatic shifts around localization

Development and humanitarian assistance have traditionally been interwoven with power relations. Both fields still are, though they have absorbed the discourse on localization and despite paradigmatic shifts in international approaches spurred by a mix of regular critiques and political, social, and economic developments.

Meant to include local communities in the processes aimed at bolstering their development and/or assisting them in facing humanitarian challenges, 'localization' can be understood as a dominant discourse that has evolved in development and humanitarian action over the past several decades. Today, 'localization' is found within the paradigm of self-reliance, which is itself embedded in transnational neo-liberal discourses of colonial continuities (i.e. the dynamics of colonial power that are based on racism and culturalism and that continue to shape present-day ideas and practices in development and humanitarian action (Ziai et al., 2020).

As argued by Escobar (1995/2012) and Kothari (2005), since the beginning of the so-called development era, Western development and humanitarian efforts have been accompanied by the conviction that 'expert knowledge' is possessed only by a privileged group – the former colonizers – and is necessary to achieve development for the formerly colonized. This discursively constructed superiority of Western knowledge became one of the main arguments for top-down development programmes and humanitarian action financed and led by the West – and so it remains, particularly because local actors have had hardly any say in the emergence of the wider paradigm within which donors approach them today. Therefore, localization remains structurally embedded in a paradigm that somehow negates it; consequently, power relations persist when the discourse translates into practice.

Discourse about localization is not new. It emerged from the early critiques of Western-led development interventions. Often influenced by feminist, post-colonial, and post-development thought, these critiques highlighted the failure of Western interventions to value and include Southern knowledges and experiences, calling for a 'local turn' (Mac Ginty & Williams, 2009). By the late 1980s, this turn had been achieved, mostly bearing the hallmark of the social, economic, and political developments of the decade. Indeed, neo-liberal capitalism, belief in the power of the free market, and the failure of liberal state building through the instruments of the Washington Consensus led to a general 'state fatigue'. This new idea, also referred to as 'state phobia' (Villadsen & Dean, 2012), was also based on the assumption that Southern states were not stable or efficient enough to effectively respond to development and humanitarian challenges like poverty, hunger, and conflict. In this context, 'localization' mostly meant that some money trickled down to local NGOs so they could implement in the Souths what was often conceived in the Norths.

Paradigmatic developments took place in the mid-1990s, with the shift from 'state security' to 'human security' (UNDP, 1994). This more liberal conception of security put the individual at the centre of international security policy discourses (Chandler, 2012, p. 214). By discursively relocating the roots of crises in socioeconomic disparities, this discourse directly linked security to both humanitarian and development issues. In addition to establishing a triple nexus among all three terms, this paradigm added a new dimension to localization, as ordinary people in poverty- and disaster-prone societies were increasingly seen as the targets of international efforts aimed at 'empowering' them so they could become 'resilient' (Hilhorst, 2018).

Faced with persistent critiques and significant developments at the international level nurturing fears of state failure and showing the limitations of humanitarian and development interventions, the paradigm shifted again. The initially 'broad' and 'emancipatory' vision of 'human security' was progressively replaced by a 'narrow' and institutional conception promoting 'the creation of liberal institutions to protect security', thus bringing back the Southern state (Richmond, 2007, p. 460). Moreover, the paradigm discursively moved away from the assumption that Western intervention is needed to secure the Souths, shifting 'towards a concern with facilitating or developing' self-reliance of all local actors, including the state, civil society, local communities, and the individual (Chandler, 2012, p. 213).

At first glance, through this multidimensional recentring on Southern actors, the self-reliance approach enhances localization, providing a fair way of including local needs, experiences, and knowledge at various levels, flattening out persisting power imbalances between aid-givers and aid-receivers. However, research into recent international responses to humanitarian/development challenges suggests that this neo-liberal approach consists only of a transfer of 'responsibility' at the level of implementation 'onto local actors' (Joseph, 2014, p. 290). The approach thereby invites target populations in the Souths 'to take responsibility for their welfare and economic and social well-being', without giving them power (Joseph, 2013, p. 44). Indeed, as Northern donors turned from 'builders' into 'facilitators' (Haldrup & Rosén, 2013, p. 131), they kept the power to influence 'who gets what, who does what, who decides what, and who sets the agenda' (Batliwala, 2019, p. 13), maintaining control over most resources in Batliwala's extended notion of social power.

Nevertheless, development and humanitarian action today are much more than a Western-dominated knowledge regime. Instead, these fields are a battlefield that has been turned upside down, especially by the discourse of localization, which puts greater emphasis not only on local responsibility but also on local knowledge. This creates new opportunities for Southern actors to reclaim the importance of local social power (Batliwala, 2019) and to incrementally contribute to a redefinition of Norths–Souths relationships (Mosse, 2014). As resources of power are not only economic and material but also include 'the various human

and social resources which serve to enhance' social power, defined as 'the ability to exercise choice' (Kabeer, 1999, p. 437), knowledge, along with other intangible resources, has become a resource for Southern actors (Kabeer & Sulaiman, 2015). Resources of this type include 'relational' and 'invisible' resources of power such as 'who you know, social support networks, membership of social movements or unions' (Batliwala, 2019, p. 39).

CSOs' power entanglements in Lebanon and Jordan

Both in the field of women's rights in Jordan and in that of Syrian refugee education in Lebanon, Northern-based donors' discourse largely echoes localization objectives. In Jordan, donors who work with Jordanian women's organizations may be diverse in their approaches and intervene in different areas of women's rights. However, they all put a particular focus on the promotion of women's political and economic participation and leadership, aiming at empowering women to become self-reliant. Illustratively, USAID claims that it 'aims in all its programming in Jordan to reduce gender disparities and empower women and girls to realize their rights, determine their own life goals, and help Jordan build an economically stable, self-reliant future' (USAID, 2020, p. 1).

Additionally, donors claim to perceive – and treat – Jordanian CSOs as their partners. Partnership, according to several donor representatives, is based on mutual respect and trust. Even if it mostly plays out as a discourse and less as actual practice, partnership further associates local actors with the overall development objectives pursued by donors through support for women's rights projects, as it purports to aim for equal responsibility sharing between donors and the women's NGOs.

In Lebanon, the international discourse is even more explicit on both self-reliance and localization. Building 'resilience for all' is showcased as the paramount objective of the United Nations (UN)-led Regional Refugee Resilience Plan addressing the Syrian refugee crisis. The major instrument of the European Union (EU) in the country, the MADAD Fund, echoes this objective, aiming at addressing 'early recovery, as well as resilience and self-reliance needs of refugees and IDPs [internally displaced persons] […] in a manner that also benefits local communities' (European Commission, 2021). Beyond this focus on the individuals and communities at the receiving end of international and EU efforts, local civil society actors are regarded as key partners. For instance, the UN's 2021–2022 regional strategic overview for the Regional Refugee Resilience Plan (UNHCR, 2020, p. 13) states the aim of fostering 'local service delivery through greater partnership with local actors, including NGOs' while 'enhancing local and national capacities'. Likewise, the EU insists on the need to '[step] up cooperation with local partners', considering that local and national NGOs are 'often the first to respond when a disaster strikes, […] a part of the local communities, and […] more perceptive of the local cultural and political dynamics in which they operate' (European Commission, 2021).

Despite the efforts described above, the experiences of local actors in the two settings examined here do not indicate a search for genuine partnerships. Rather, CSOs that implement donor-funded projects in Lebanon and Jordan remain deeply entangled in several layers of power relations. These are similar in both settings, with CSOs depending completely on donors and being heavily influenced by the context where they operate, which is framed by the state. These similarities notwithstanding, the shape power relations assume differs slightly between Lebanon and Jordan. These differences have an impact on how localization plays out in each context and on how organizations mobilize local knowledge to reclaim localization.

Interviewees in both settings confirmed that their relationships with donors were far from equal and that aid localization, which is meant to acknowledge and enhance their agency, has been realized to a very limited extent. Several reasons for this were emphasized: donors refuse to hand over financial responsibility to local CSOs, retain agenda-setting and decision-making power, and, finally, often decide unilaterally which projects by which CSOs will be funded, frequently in ways that remain opaque for the CSOs themselves. Moreover, the respondents asserted that donors continue to exercise power in terms of capacity building, although such activities are at the core of the objectives of resilience and self-reliance for local individuals and communities.

Thus, viewing aid localization more as rhetoric than actual practice, representatives of CSOs in both settings expressed disappointment. In Lebanon, one respondent spoke about a 'missed opportunity' for effectively localizing funding to local civil society:

> After almost ten years now, […] this should have shifted; international donors, the EU, and other donors could have directly donated to the local organizations, and a lot of money could have been saved and spent on the refugees or the local community […]. But this didn't happen.
>
> *[Lebanese CSO representative, 4 February 2021]*

In Jordan, a CSO director echoed this perception, stating, 'Donors are not implementing localization; it's just semantic and lip service and how they are playing along, against the values they claim. They are not truly investing in [us]. It's just an industry' [Jordanian CSO representative, 5 May 2021]. For CSOs, this often meant that they were expected to 'abide [by] donors' expectations' [Lebanese CSO representative, 29 January 2021]; consequently, they perceived their relationships with donors as 'patriarchal' [Lebanese CSO representative, 10 November 2021] or 'colonial' [Jordanian CSO representative, 23 April 2021].

As both cases examined here show, the reality of humanitarian and development aid has little to do with partnership, as CSOs rarely feel respected or trusted. CSO representatives claimed that donors often unilaterally decide what 'respect' and 'trust' mean – and expect their local partners to earn these Northern-defined forms of respect and trust. In addition, the CSO representatives believed

that donors do not fully trust local organizations. Among other reasons for thinking this, respondents mentioned that donors usually maintain financial control over project budgets and monitor CSOs' work closely through extensive reporting, evaluation, and audit procedures. While donors expect CSOs to fully open their books and justify every dinar or lira spent, the donors themselves usually remain completely opaque in how they disburse project funding. In Jordan, donors often approach women's organizations with pre-designed projects, pushing the CSOs into the role of service providers or project implementers. This practice sharply contrasts with donors' discourse on partnership and with the objective of self-reliance they pursue through projects meant to empower women to become leaders. In Lebanon, although local actors seem to enjoy more negotiation space on project design and implementation, they take issue with donors' 'paperwork' expectations and pressure relating to CSOs' 'accountability' [Lebanese CSO representative, 29 January 2021].

While CSO representatives in both settings perceived their relationships with donors as unequal, there nevertheless seems to be a difference: whereas the women's organizations in Jordan resisted all active interventions from donors in the field of women's rights, the CSOs in Lebanon seemed to accept a certain involvement of donors in the field of emergency education. This can be understood in relation to the differing characteristics of these issues. Women's rights in Jordan are perceived as a local matter in which the active involvement of the West might harm the cause of women's organizations because women's rights are often dismissed as a Western import in Jordanian public discourse. Jordanian women's organizations therefore try to keep donors out of their decision making as much as possible and are primarily interested in accessing their funding; hence, these CSOs make an absolute claim to aid localization. Emergency education in Lebanon, however, is not perceived as just a local matter. On the contrary, responsibility for Syrian refugees is considered something that must be shared by the international community, where the North plays a leading role. This does not mean that Lebanese organizations are unaware of power relations; rather, it indicates that they may strategically call for significant donor involvement in decision making because they are aware of the stakes of burden sharing in the international refugee regime.

Regarding their relationships with the state, the representatives of CSOs in both settings agreed that the state also engulfs them in a web of power relations and is the primary factor influencing the context in which they operate, as well as how localization takes place. In Jordan, the state's role was mostly perceived as restricting, and the state was often viewed as an opponent invested in 'shrinking civic spaces', co-opting civil society, and promoting patriarchal values in society. Although Jordanian organizations must obtain approval from national ministries before they start implementing projects and prior to being allowed to access foreign funding, the women's organizations in Jordan, like other CSOs in the country, are free to engage in direct cooperation with foreign funders. The situation is completely different in Lebanon, where the Lebanese Ministry of

Education functions as an intermediary between donors and CSOs in the field of emergency education and has been leading the response since 2014. This led to the consolidation of political authorities' control over the implementation of the response to the domestic refugee crisis, at the expense of Lebanese CSOs, despite the fact that CSOs provided a significant part of refugee education on the ground and continue to supply valuable information to both the state and donors. In practice, the localization process contributed to enhancing the 'resilience' of national institutions rather than CSOs' capacities. Because the Lebanese state plays such a vital role in the diffusion and management of aid in the field of emergency education, it also heavily influences and restricts the potential of aid localization at the level of civil society. In contrast, in Jordan, the potential to localize aid at the CSO level is relatively high, which is one of the reasons why Jordanian women's organizations are able to claim full localization.

Mobilizing local knowledge

Jordanian and Lebanese CSOs use different strategies to assert themselves in the face of power relations and to reclaim a more genuine localization. Knowledge resources related to project management and implementation, along with more intangible resources such as contextual knowledge, local coalition building, networking, and information sharing, are tools commonly used by local actors in both settings.

One way of using local knowledge is to challenge donors' expertise on local matters. By doing this, local actors reassert an expertise that their partners from the North cannot have. In Jordan, for example, research participants especially questioned donors' knowledge of women's situation in Jordan, which many donors use as a basis for pre-conceiving projects. Western-based 'Google experts', as one interviewee called them, who sit in their offices somewhere in the Norths, draw their expertise from the Internet [Jordanian CSO representative, 27 April 2021]. However, she continued, these 'experts' completely ignore the everyday challenges of women living in Jordan. Therefore, she asserted, many development projects fail to yield positive change for women in Jordan. Staff members of women's organizations in Jordan linked this failure first to the fact that projects are based on inaccurate knowledge regarding the context, as Western knowledge about Jordan is often prioritized over local knowledge. Second, they linked the failure to the fact that Jordanian women's organizations are not sufficiently included in decision making about programming and strategizing. The research participants also explained how they sometimes confront donors directly or correct them in meetings when they speak about women in Jordan, or about Jordan in general. By doing this, local actors mobilize their insider knowledge about broader topics of interest for donors, such as democratization and shrinking civic spaces in the country. Some research participants even described themselves as teachers who educate the donors, whereas others spoke about themselves as the ones who bring the 'truth' to the donors. Using donors' rhetoric about

partnership and localization, local actors, as described by the research participants, obviously argue for a shift of power based on the claim that local knowledge about 'the field' trumps Western knowledge. According to the research participants, they deserve a place at the table as full-fledged partners because they 'know the field' [Jordanian CSO representative, 23 April 2021], 'have eyes and ears on the ground' [Jordanian CSO representative, 5 October 2017], are 'trusted by the people' [Jordanian CSO representative, 5 May 2021], and 'know what [they]'re doing' [Jordanian CSO representative, 15 November 2021].

For CSOs involved in providing education to Syrian refugees in Lebanon, the recognition of and reliance on local expertise by Northern donors seem to flow more naturally. As one interviewee noted, donors often strictly fund programmes and

> don't tell us what to do […]; they fund it – this is how it goes, and in return we offer them papers, documents, how much money was spent. But as regards to the activities, it is up to us to say what we want to really do.
>
> *[Lebanese CSO representative, 21 January 2021]*

In this case, the very nature of the task supports local actors' claim to do the job without having donors telling them what to do. Indeed, refugee education is part of public policy, requiring local knowledge – notably, regarding the linguistic ability to teach Syrian children and/or the accreditation to provide the Lebanese curriculum. Moreover, local CSOs were the first to meet the educational needs of Syrian refugee children, making use of their contextual knowledge by leading the response through direct relationships with Syrian children well before donors or the state began to react to the crisis.

However, local actors in Lebanon also take issue with the fact that they are routinely excluded from Northern-led coordination and deprived of the possibility of having a wider view on the overall efforts in the field of refugee education. Our interviews revealed that, consequently, local actors rely on coordination and coalition building to enhance their position with donors and to avoid being side-lined and missing key information. One interesting example is an alliance of some well-established national CSOs, not only to claim ownership of knowledge as a resource but also to strategically build this knowledge to strive for more localization. In 2014, this initiative gave rise to the Lebanese Humanitarian and Development NGOs Forum, which has steadily grown, reaching up to 100 members. The goal of this forum '[…] is that everyone [among Lebanese NGOs] has access to the information and spread the information' but also to 'bridge the gap between the coordination [in] the field and the very formal coordination handled by the UN' [Lebanese forum representative, 21 January 2021]. The forum also issues a yearly briefing note in the framework of the Brussels Conference[4] and is particularly active in terms of advocacy.

Contextual knowledge, local coalition building, networking, and information sharing are not the only resources local actors mobilize to assert themselves as

key players. Knowledge resources related to project management and implementation, including budgeting and monitoring, are often emphasized. Especially in Jordan, research participants mobilized two interrelated strains of argumentation to claim strong project management skills. The first is related to the long experience that most of the organizations have in the field of project implementation. Indeed, some of the CSOs date back to well before the 2000s and have been implementing development projects for decades. This has given them and their staff members opportunities to acquire considerable experience. The second argument is related to the many trainings and workshops the CSO staff members have attended in the context of donor-funded capacity building on topics such as project management, finances, and budgeting. At least for the older Jordanian women's organizations, this has led to knowledge transfer in the field of project management to the extent that the CSOs have perfected the skill and are able to meet donors' standards and, accordingly, demand more horizontal relationships based on genuine partnership.

In Lebanon, local actors involved in the field of refugee education are relatively diverse: some already have a long history and strong experience in Northern-funded project implementation and voice claims regarding genuine partnerships with donors that are very similar to those observed among the Jordanian CSOs. Interestingly, on the other side of the spectrum, local actors with less exposure to cooperation with international donors and those that newly materialized in the wake of the Syrian refugee crisis highlight the lack of capacity building provided by the international community. Representatives of such CSOs see this lack as a clear disregard of localization objectives and proof that discourses about self-reliance are mostly void of real meaning. Against this backdrop, one respondent from a national NGO concluded that 'It is a shame to have an instrument such as [the] EU MADAD Fund that is used to enhance aid localization' when, in the end, only 'some local organizations indirectly benefit from it' [Lebanese CSO representative, 21 January 2021]. Other respondents from smaller CSOs further acknowledged that 'unfortunately, […] donors prefer to have international NGOs to be the umbrella [above] local NGOs to conduct auditing, all documentation' [Lebanese CSO representative, 27 January 2021], wondering 'why the aim is not to build local CSOs' capacities and why would we always need a "foreigner"?' [Lebanese CSO representative, 20 August 2020]. Consequently, local actors try to push for access to capacity building by bridging gaps among researchers, experts, practitioners, and activists through CSOs such as The Centre for Social Sciences Research and Action (Abi Yaghi & Troit, 2020).

Finally, local actors also use the power to decide whether they want to cooperate with international actors and take their money. Staff members of the Jordanian women's CSOs explained that, even though they depend on foreign funding, they do not necessarily accept any conditions that donors try to put on them, and, at times, they reject funding or even blacklist donors. One respondent claimed that 'donors have their conditions, and so do we. We often say "no" if

we don't agree with their terms. We have our own rules' [Jordanian CSO representative, 29 September 2017]. The founder of a small Lebanese educational CSO remembered rejecting requests from donors such as providing data on the identity of refugee recipients as a funding condition [Lebanese CSO representative, 20 August 2020]. Similarly, the artistic director of a CSO running a music school also mentioned strongly rejecting a German cultural institution's demand for quantitative indicators, considering that the musical progress of refugee children, who are often traumatized, could not be evaluated via any quantitative measurement tool. This refusal had consequences because the funding was not reallocated to the NGO [Lebanese CSO representative, 10 September 2020].

Such incidents reveal the extent to which local actors are aware of the discrepancy between donors' talk about localization and the reality of their practices, as well as their intentions to use diverse strategies to make their voices more audible. The CSO representatives often stressed the interdependency of their local knowledge and the donors' funding, and they emphasized that one cannot go without the other if development and humanitarian objectives are to be achieved. Accordingly, local organizations present themselves as indispensable sources of real expert knowledge for donors and as actors that need to be fully associated with plans aimed at achieving shared objectives, whether it is for advancing women's rights in Jordan or for providing refugee education in Lebanon.

Local actors' demands for a shift of power, notably through focusing on the importance of local knowledge – a resource they argue that they have more of, compared with donors – have been made possible through the dominant discourses. For many research participants, reclaiming the power of local knowledge is a way of holding donors accountable for their promises of localization, empowerment, and self-reliance. Thus, local actors do not just challenge those in power; they also redefine the contours and contents of Norths–Souths partnerships, which, according to the interviewees, has been dominated by donors' rules for too long.

Conclusion

Very active in the fields of development and humanitarian aid, local CSOs in the Souths are keen supporters of localization, which is purportedly meant to enable them to engage in horizontal partnerships with Northern-based donors and to provide them with the financial means and capacities to conceive and conduct the projects they deem useful and relevant, considering their intimate contextual knowledge of the target populations and the stakes involved. However, individuals working in the fields of refugee education in Lebanon and women's rights in Jordan expressed disappointment in how localization has played out, perceiving their cooperation with their Northern 'partners' as unequal. Many research participants felt that they are required to primarily be compliant service providers and implementers located at the far end of a process in which their input

is nowhere near the central position that would be implied by real localization. However, CSOs are confident in the worth of their actions regarding not only the target populations but also the donors' objectives. Their local knowledge and experience empower them to challenge the content and method of Northern donors' approaches, even if this is often done discreetly and 'behind the scenes'. In addition to the mobilization of contextual knowledge to assert themselves, CSOs are keen to build their capacities, make up for their marginalization by creating platforms to collectively build knowledge and know-how, share information, and come together to strengthen their voices and increase their weight when facing donors.

This everyday struggle demonstrates that localization is far from being a lived reality in the Souths and that actors from the Souths are currently striving to translate the localization discourse into practice in the field. Starting from our interactions with Southern CSOs, we offer a few recommendations.

Our first recommendation involves the need for context-specific definitions of localization through the inclusion of local civil society actors. This need is important because local settings may differ widely, notably in terms of power relations between national authorities and local civil society actors. To be effective, localization must not over-strengthen authoritarian and/or corrupt states at the expense of civil society.

Very pragmatically, Northern-based donors could also take the following steps:

- Adapt their funding requirements and expectations to facilitate diverse local CSOs to ask for funds.
- Move away from the idea of the superiority of quantitative tools for monitoring and evaluation over qualitative and intangible knowledge owned by local actors.
- Engage with local CSOs through strategic and coordination meetings where they have more than an observer status, and ensure that the same level of information is maintained and that CSOs' locally grounded ideas are taken on board through horizontal discussions.
- Increase the budgetary and strategic decision-making power of local actors while maintaining transparency standards.

These recommendations seem relatively easy to implement, as they are in line with the wider paradigm in which development aid and humanitarian assistance are embedded today. However, if localization someday comes to mean a shift in both responsibility and power, the broader neo-liberal paradigm, embedded in colonial continuities, may need to be questioned.

Notes

1 This chapter derives from a research programme funded by the UCLouvain, entitled 'ARC-SERTIS: resistance to international prescriptions and injunctions in Africa and the Middle East today'.

2 The terms 'Souths' and 'Norths' are used in their plural forms to reflect the heterogeneity and diversity of countries, cultures, and identities in both the Souths and the Norths.
3 The definition of 'donors' used here follows Southern CSOs' use of the term to describe the ensemble of Northern-based organizations that fund Southern-based organizations directly or channel funding to them. This ensemble includes bilateral and multilateral donors, private foundations, and international non-governmental organizations.
4 The Brussels Conference has taken place yearly since 2017. Its objectives are to continue supporting the Syrian people, to mobilize the international community to achieve a comprehensive and credible political solution to the Syrian conflict, and to provide a platform for dialogue with civil society organizations from Syria and the broader region.

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