

Synthesis

KOFF Roundtable: Localization Approaches in the Shadow of Persistent Power Asymmetries: Experiences of and Challenges for Swiss Organizations



In September 2025, the Swiss Platform for Peacebuilding KOFF hosted the Roundtable “*Localization Approaches in the Shadow of Persistent Power Asymmetries: Experiences of and Challenges for Swiss Organizations*”. While there is considerable agreement in international cooperation that localization is both effective and normatively desirable, the concrete implementation on an institutional and programmatic level remains challenging with limited progress and persisting power asymmetries. Therefore, this KOFF Roundtable provided a space for a practice-based peer-to-peer exchange on the operationalization of localization agendas, including persisting challenges and promising practices, to learn from each other with the goal of rendering our collective peacebuilding practice more effective and inclusive, as well as to contribute to its decolonization.

Speaker:

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Moderation & Organization:

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Summary

While the debate and calls for increased localization of international aid have been around for decades, they have gained a certain momentum over the last few years. A mapping of the localization efforts of Swiss organizations has provided insights into the approaches adopted and challenges faced by the diverse organizations in Switzerland working in international cooperation with their different modes of operations and thematic focuses. Organizations have tried in their own spaces and processes to advance localization on project, program or institutional levels, some have recently elaborated a

localization policy at the organizational level, containing concrete indicators. To move beyond the recognition of the importance of localization, significant resources and commitment are required though. Localization offers an opportunity to decolonize the international cooperation sector but for this, the critical assessment and shift of power dynamics need to be prioritized and at the center of any localization approaches. This is especially important as it is often easier to talk about technical elements instead of concretely looking at how localization transforms and/or reduces one's own role in international cooperation architecture. Hence, clear articulation between localization and decolonization efforts is necessary. Likewise, the exchange among peers is very useful to share promising practices, navigate challenges jointly, overcome fatigue, and regain ownership necessary for an authentic and effective transformation. While there are different spaces for exchanges among diverse actors, these spaces mustn't become echo chambers of the Global North, but conversations need to be widened to include and/or center around other actors, first and foremost from intervention countries.

Key Points

Participants shared a broad range of challenges that Swiss organizations face in implementing localization on the institutional level. While the way they can be addressed depends on the organization, some promising practices and efforts to overcome these challenges were discussed during the roundtable participants and might inspire others.

Funding & Compliance Challenges

Donor constraints, rigid funding frameworks, monitoring and evaluation, and compliance requirements make it difficult to transform power relations, foster co-creation and generally transform the current status quo of the modalities and outputs in international cooperation. They often prioritize short-term tangible results over long-term processes which would be necessary to advance sustainable localization and effective decolonization. Adapting donor requirements is even more important as efforts put into localizing and decolonizing institutional approaches (for instance co-creation) require a high level of resources and patience. Decisions of and implementation by local staff might differ from the way Swiss organizations have been doing and reporting on it. Too rigid donor frameworks would hinder this transformation. However, convincing donors to fund time-intensive co-creation processes has not been easy.

Practices shared to overcome these challenges:

- Engage with donors, including private foundations and churches, to raise awareness on decolonial approaches and work together on adapting reporting and compliance requirements to allow for more flexibility.
- Adapt monitoring and evaluation frameworks to enable capturing complex social change including meaningful localization that goes beyond merely measuring localization through specific activities such as whether or not a local partner can independently build a well.
- Use flexible funds of Swiss-based organizations to provide emergency funding to local partners who are particularly exposed to large-scale international funding cuts.
- To overcome rigid funding structures and lack of (financial) decision-making power of local organizations, a participant shared how they allocate funding to their local partners to dispose of themselves with the only condition to document their process of going about it. The results being regularly different than expected, giving financial decision-making power to local partners challenges our own preconceptions, attitudes and structural racisms.

Operational & Logistical Challenges

When implementing institutional localization efforts, many operational and logistical challenges can be faced and need to be addressed. These include challenges ranging from navigating different legal

regimes, over safety risks, language barriers, time zones, to infrastructure related obstacles such as banking restrictions, IT barriers or connectivity issues.

Internal & Cultural Challenges

Institutional culture and mindset need to be transformed to enable localization, which includes redefining the role, functions, and relevance of INGOs. The future role of INGOs and/or Swiss-based organizations might vary considerably, with some expecting their role to change to mostly a fundraising one, to a advocator and influencer towards Swiss and international politics, to a technical support role offering services to local partners who choose whether to make use of them or not, to some expecting the gradual reduction of their intermediary role leading to the closing of the office in Switzerland or their organization altogether. These profound transformations may create significant uncertainty about the future of an organization and one's job and thus can spark resistance to change.

Practices shared to overcome these challenges:

- To counter the disparity and decolonialize the assumption that expertise roles need to sit in headquarters, thematic advisor positions can be localized. Learning does not need to happen through a training from Switzerland, but peer-learning is often more effective. Those implementing projects locally have more relevant and suitable peacebuilding expertise and insights for training each other. Headquarter-based roles can still support learning platforms without imposing their own expertise.
- The term “decolonization” may still evoke some hesitation at the institutional level. Building trust and fostering equitable partnerships can serve as an entry point for addressing underlying power imbalances.
- Rethink and redefine the role of INGOs based on what they seek to achieve. Subsequently work on implementing these objectives and vision for the different roles and relationships and adapt own fundraising and communications approaches. This also includes redefining job descriptions of Swiss and local staff.

Relational Challenges

Major challenges identified refer to how to create decolonial relationships and equitable partnerships with local organizations. This includes a wide variety of related challenges such as how to localize decision-making powers and processes, how to balance responsibilities and share risks especially in a context of shrinking civic space and rising authoritarian tendencies and repression, how trust in intercultural partnerships is built, and how to manage differing expectations and ideas.

Practices shared to overcome these challenges:

- There's a variety of toolkits to promote organizational self-awareness on surrounding power dynamics and responsible power use, some mentioned include the [Power Cube framework](#) and the [Oxfam Language Toolkit](#). Ensuring awareness of power structures and systems of power and their manifestation in respective contexts is the first step in overcoming them. It is useful to not only follow guides and complete power analyses among Swiss-based staff but also integrate the perspectives of local staff or partners.
- A participant shared how they are working on including people from the Global South in their board and individuals from local partners in their project admission committee to rebalance decision-making powers.
- Engage in an ongoing process of adapting and redefining partnerships: While partnerships may begin with a traditional funding dynamic, one can start discussion and engagement early on to jointly reshape partnerships, have an open conversation on for instance how power asymmetries are perceived, what needs to change, and how to design decision-making processes. These open conversations and spaces for active listening foster trust which is key

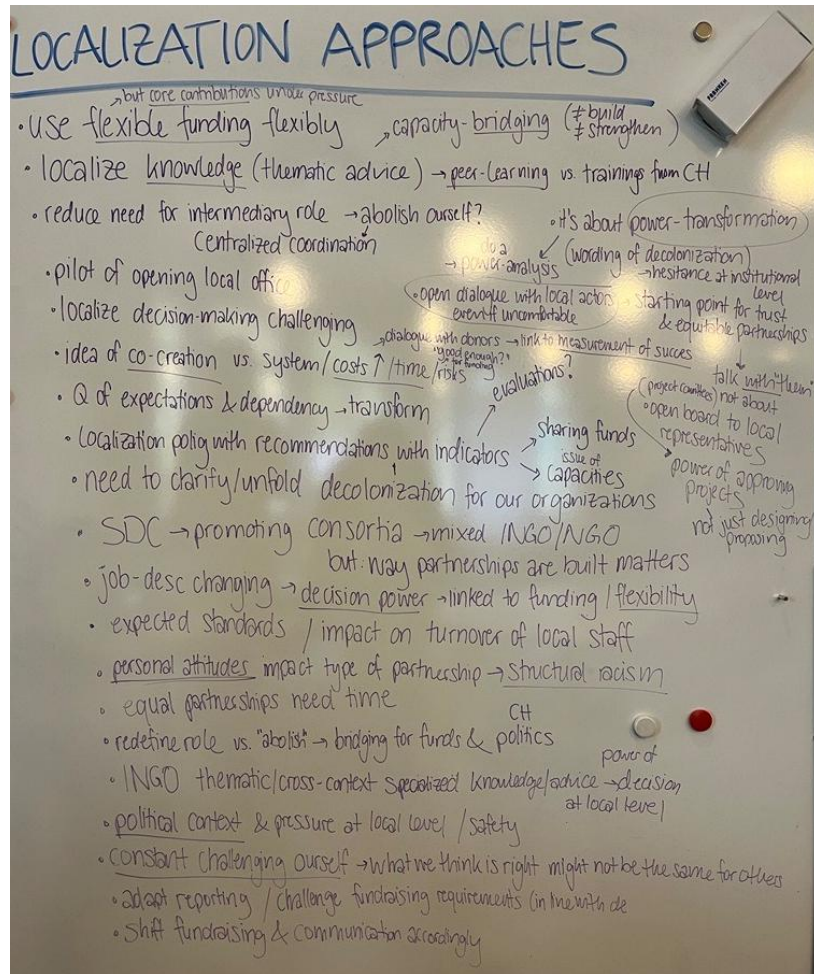
for equitable partnerships. Elements of Mental Health and Psychosocial Support (MHPSS) approaches can enable open dialogue on power asymmetries.

- Mixed consortias of INGOs and local NGOs can be effective collaboration models, but what matters even more is the way these partnerships are built and managed.

Recommendations

Participants identified some factors of success that seemed key for the promising practices shared and hence are central in moving the localization agenda forward:

- Unpacking and clarifying terminology together with counterparts: being clear what we mean with localization and/or decolonization as well as what everyone wants to talk about and work towards. Be aware that depending on backgrounds, including geographical, decolonization resonates differently to people and one needs to adapt wording accordingly.
- Involve boards in joint regular discussions for sustainable progress and commitment to the institutional localization effort.
- Involve local staff in oversight and diversify board members.
- Ensure transparency in both directions of relationships, including in costs and wages, to overcome the double standard of transparency only being required in one direction.
- Even if Swiss-based organizations are often the ones convening these conversations, awareness of power dynamics between the conveners and convened ones is key to create a dialogue among equals and cultivate a culture of listening to each other.
- Avoid creating echo chambers of the North and centring discussions on our interests and perceptions of what the objectives of localization are.
- Understand power relations at different levels and identify champions to lead on the topic in different contexts and levels to overcome the power inequalities.
- Be careful with quick fixes to localization as they might reproduce power imbalances.
- Don't fear discomfort and uncomfortable conversations and decisions.
- Be aware that it is a continuous process and not a ticking the box exercise.
- This includes also questioning ourselves and our own positionalities and roles, including the one of the KOFF platform.
- Continue adapting approaches to and structures of funding, including adapting how we can sell softer, longer-term efforts such as co-creation of projects with local partners or explore funding opportunities in intervention countries to avoid creating power dynamics induced by who receives the funding.



Overview of the experience sharing round.