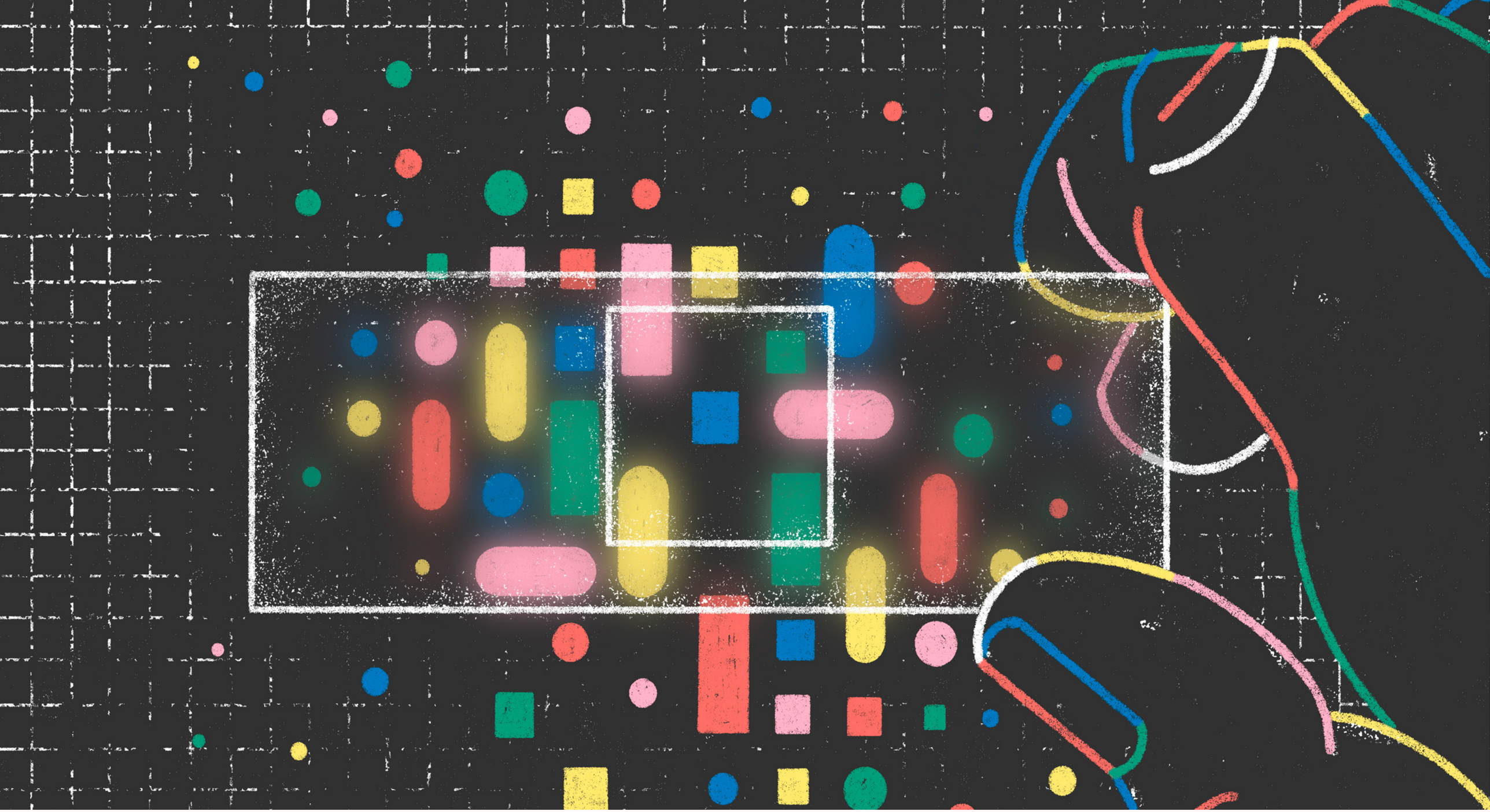

Localizing Humanitarian Action

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Executive Summary

Around 2015, the humanitarian aid sector set two important goals in motion — the 2030 Agenda and localization. The circumstances surrounding them are distinct; the 2030 Agenda brought gravitas and momentum to the Sustainable Development Goals, and localization embedded within The Grand Bargain helped humanize it and elevate its propensity for systems change. The two goals are important, yet they seem to require an almost opposed approach to their pursuit. The overarching approach conceived towards the 2030 Agenda is acceleration, which capitalizes on the enduring/durable institutional structures within which it was conceived. On the other hand, localization cannot move quickly, nor should it, as it lacks a similar institutional pedigree — from various indications, localization is still an aspirational way of working among humanitarian institutions. Are these competing priorities, or could both be achieved without sacrificing aspects of their essence? In doing both at the same time, some things will have to give.

This research brief focuses on localization in the context of humanitarian aid.[1] The brief opens by surfacing the contrast between localization and the 2030 Agenda, compares and synthesizes several definitions of localization in use, and then analyzes the progress made with localization across different spheres since 2015. Lastly, it closes off with recommendations for continuing the pursuit of localization that could lead to desired change across a broader spectrum.

1 This brief does not express details around the 2030 Agenda as it assumes that the reader is familiar with the Agenda.

List of Acronyms

DDR	Disaster risk reduction
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
GTS	Ground Truth Solutions
ICVA	International Council of Voluntary Agencies
INGO	International Non-Governmental Organization
NGO	Non-Governmental Organization
UNDP	United Nations Development Program
SDGs	Sustainable Development Goals
IASC	Inter-Agency Standing Committee
IFRC	International Federation of Red Cross
ILO	International Labour Organization
UNOCHA	United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs
R-ISCG	Regional Inter-Sector Coordination Group

Localization and the 2030 Agenda

"*Only by focusing the world's attention on the rapidly growing numbers of people in desperate need will we be able to achieve the SDGs."*

High-Level Panel on Humanitarian Financing, 2016.

The context of the above statement was in coming to terms with the financing gap[2] in humanitarian action and the impending dire consequences of this with no significant sign and collective shift in strategy across the humanitarian sector. If the statement quoted above was true when it was made five years ago, it is even more so today after the world has seen the COVID-19 global pandemic. For some aspects, the humanitarian sector's response to these distinct events – the financing gap and the global pandemic – are similar and seem to highlight the urgent need for system-wide change and transformation (Metcalfe-Hough et al., 2020).

An integral part of these efforts to change and transform the systems for humanitarian action has been localization (Derzsi-Horvath et al., 2017). **Localization is the recognition of the need to shift the dial to invest more in local capacity, reduce dependence on international organizations and promote and facilitate increased community engagement and accountability in the design and implementation of humanitarian programs** (British Red Cross, 2019). Increasingly unable to conduct business as usual across several dimensions and for various reasons, the humanitarian sector is seizing chances to explore and strengthen localization. While combating the financial gap in 2015, the humanitarian sectors' move towards localization was more or less a choice, but with the global pandemic, and its impact on the sector's operations, the sector was forced to innovate towards localization (ICVA, 2020) as a tool for pursuing the 2030 Agenda.

On the one hand, considering the financing gap, it made sense to opt for localization because it is cost-effective and local actors bring the comparative advantage of a better understanding of context (IFRC, 2018). On the other hand, considering the global pandemic, it was the only option because the equalizing effect of the pandemic meant everyone was dealing with a similar emergency back at home. The infection prevention control measures of partial to strict global travel restrictions and lockdown for about four to six months in 2020 (depending on where one lived) further negated any considerations to do otherwise (Meer et al., 2020).

The financial gap

The finance gap is the result of a widening between the available resources previously anticipated to be sufficient and the universe of humanitarian needs – meaning that a growing number of people would live and die without dignity if the financing gap is not closed. According to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948), all humans are of value and worthy of respect – what we refer to as dignity, but for several people, their life experiences are marred by numerous shocks and stresses. The combined shocks and stresses from armed conflict, extremism, natural hazards, diseases, displacement, and climate-related

2 As of late 2015, an estimated 125.3 million people would need $15 billion more in assistance by 2016. This fact necessitated the need to develop and act on ambitious short and long-term reforms that ensure that none of the 125.3 million people is left behind (HLP, 2016).

events exacerbate humanitarian needs and accentuate shortfalls in the financial resources available for aid (R-ISCG, 2020).

The consensus of the High-Level Panel on Humanitarian Financing was that raising more aid money without an overhaul of the global approach to aid would entrench some of the dysfunctions that led to a growing number of vulnerable people being left behind. In 2014, the daily estimated rate at which the most vulnerable were falling behind included 42,500 people being displaced by violence and conflict and 53,000 people being forced from their homes by natural disasters (High-Level Panel, 2016).

The global pandemic

A recent report by the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) shows that the global pandemic builds on the accumulated and complex effects of man-made and natural hazards to impose further setbacks on the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and even risks reversing the 2030 Agenda. Due to the multidimensional effects of the pandemic – disruption of global economies, markets, politics, relations, and services; the world's education, health, and living standards could decline in 2020 for the first time in a generation (Conceição et al., 2020). Hence, the pandemic by its urgent nature became a forcing mechanism that drew attention to the need for systems change and transformation. In the face of the global pandemic, humanitarian action again seeks an overhaul to stay on track and meet the 2030 Agenda and SDGs goal to 'Leave No One Behind' (UNDP, 2020).

The 2030 Agenda: Interrelation and Effects on Localization

Localization represents an opportunity for a clear departure from business as usual because twice in the space of 5 years, the status quo on humanitarian services seems to have been challenged and disrupted. Both times, the sector was instinctively prompted towards localization. The sector had opportunities to change and transform: to what extent did it, as organizations or as a sector, do that? How has localization played out or driven systems change and transformation? Is there a chance that the transformative actions and ambition triggered by the pandemic will be lasting? By how much do overarching narratives, like the 2030 Agenda, affect localization agendas?

For both the financing gap and global pandemic, humanitarian actors called for a change in the business processes, priorities, and principles within the humanitarian sector (Barbelet et al., 2020; ILO, 2020). One aim of the change sought is to overcome the COVID-19 setbacks and deliver on the 2030 Agenda in record time (ILO, 2021). The notion of being a *setback,* as indicated by the International Labour Organization (ILO), implies that the humanitarian sector had chosen to use a specific pathway towards its goals, but inevitable events delayed that progress.

Now, the sector is holding the 2030 Agenda as a fixed goal and all other factors (including humans) as variables that must change in ways necessary to achieve that goal. As such, an underlying characterization of the work towards change is mostly being conceived as acceleration, amplification, doubling down, and multiplying the same kinds of past

humanitarian efforts and programming to reach the Agenda. Innovation within this sector is often captured and refined until it fits into and serves the purpose of the 2030 Agenda and the goals established around it.

This outlook of acceleration, amplification, and multiplying required for reaching the 2030 Agenda is counterintuitive for localization. Yet, it makes sense to contain any change to a pathway that is understood and trusted. Arguably, the 2030 Agenda is beyond a mere commitment and represents such a pathway. It speaks to mission-critical priorities for human and planetary health and dignity. The commitment has been powerful enough to inspire a convergence in previously divergent stakeholders, and its pursuit has yielded concrete and expected improvements in the measures for human and planetary health and dignity. It has been and remains a powerful rallying call (OCHA, 2017). Sustaining the direction of travel towards the 2030 Agenda means that previous efforts are further concerted and uncertainties are minimized (Oosterhof, 2018), offering a sense of stability and coordination for one of the most significant investments made in humanity and the planet.

In such turbulent times as this and on a global scale, it seems unwise to entertain a drastic change like moving away from the 2030 Agenda. At the same time, we have seen up close that there is so much beyond our locus of control. And holding on to 'only' this notion of an understood and trusted pathway (fixed outcomes) is the type of rigidity that is unhelpful for navigating systems-level complexity in the face of increasing uncertainty. Such rigid scope narrows our preparedness and limits its adequacy to uncertainties that have already occurred, and which are of lesser concern (Bollyky & Patrick, 2020). This outlook isn't only worthwhile but also one that is relevant for investing in localization.

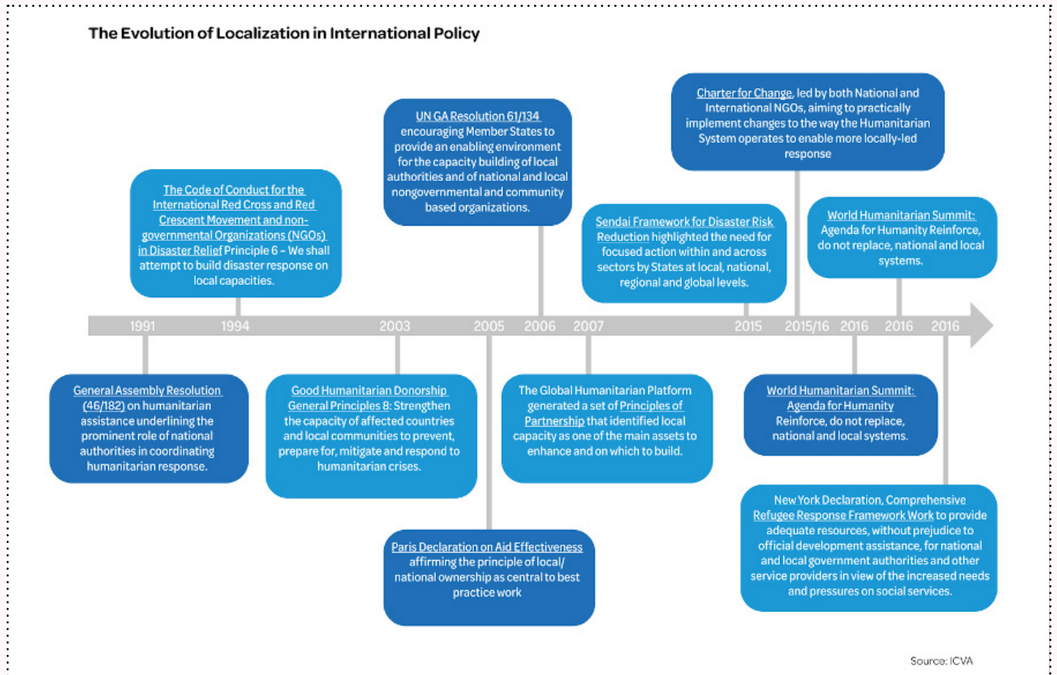
"We signed up to change the world, but we didn't think we had to change ourselves in the process," says Krishnan in a 2020 article about how the state of the world resulted in the breakdown of our social and institutional structures as the pandemic ravaged us all (Krishnan, 2020). Could Krishnan's reference to 'ourselves' also imply our agendas, commitments, and goals? What does it look like to unfix the 2030 Agenda or throw it in the mix of things that vary? This could mean a search to understand the new meanings of the 2030 Agenda in our *new world* — a world that has seen the most generosity towards people affected by conflicts and disasters and the most insufficiency of generosity at the same time. The same world is witnessing a global pandemic accelerating these underlying inequalities.

These considerations raise pertinent questions: Does system-wide change and transformation exclude the agendas, commitments, and goals of the humanitarian sector from what needs to change? In what way does it make sense to question or change established pathways — like the 2030 Agenda, towards change? Can the framing, meaning, and timing of mission-critical agendas, commitments, and goals be different, revised, or updated in the face of changed realities? Is now a good time to attend to these seemingly drastic considerations? Are these not self-imposed restrictions on what is possible?

This research brief summarizes the tenets of localization as it has been done so far and investigates whether there are alternatives that should be considered. It argues that the extent to which the 2030 Agenda is held constant as a vision will determine how much systems change and what kind of transformation is possible through localization.

Defining Localization

In 2015, the term 'localization' resurfaced in the humanitarian sector and has been recurring intermittently since then, but it is not a new term in the sector. Between 2015 and 2016, it surfaced in multiple international policy conversations such as the Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction and the Charter for Change. In 2018, The International Council of Voluntary Agencies (ICVA), an organization with the mission to make humanitarian action more principled and effective by influencing policy and practice, placed the earliest use of the term localization in international policy at the 1991 United Nations General Assembly Resolution. In the diagram below, ICVA presents the different times the term localization has surfaced and how it has been used.



As of 2016, the humanitarian sector was spending US$25 billion to provide life-saving assistance to 125 million people devastated by wars and natural hazards and needed an estimated US$15 billion more for humanitarian action to meet the needs of fast-growing numbers of people affected by years of crises (IASC, 2016). However, the funding mechanism was not a sustainable one. The World Humanitarian Summit 2016 was the landmark event that launched a renewed thrust on localization. Preceding the Summit, the High-Level Panel on Humanitarian Financing Report had set localization as a corner piece of three innovative goals, and in order to close the imminent finance gap in the humanitarian sector.

The three interdependent goals were (High-Level Panel, 2016):

- To reduce the need for humanitarian assistance by preventing and resolving conflicts, and also, to increase investment in disaster risk reduction (DRR), especially in the most vulnerable communities and countries;
- To deepen and broaden the resource base for humanitarian action by mobilizing additional funds through either traditional or innovative mechanisms and;
- To improve the efficiency of humanitarian aid delivery through increased flexibility, greater transparency, and cost-consciousness – providing more cash-based assistance where appropriate, and recognizing the comparative advantages of local, national, and international implementing organizations for delivery of services.

The concept of localization of aid has been present in the humanitarian sector for decades in the form of "building on local capacities" (Van Brabant & Patel 2018) because "strong national civil societies, built with support from international actors didn't start yesterday" (Vielajus & Charancle, 2020). It quickly stands out to a reviewer that there are many ways localization has been described (IFRC, 2018). Therefore, it might be helpful to examine the triggers for different definitions, such as who created or used them; if this has implications for the results achieved in localizing humanitarian action; or if the ways localization has been described are indeed a reflection of what localization means – adaptive and tailored to context and actors. The remainder of this section examines different definitions of localization and determines three categories of how localization has been described.

Localization as incremental change

Localization has been described as a "more global way of thinking about the transformation in development finance, and in the spirit of thinking and acting on emergencies and development starting with actors who are "closest to the scene." (Vielajus &Charancle, 2020) and of;

"...making principled humanitarian action as local as possible and as international as necessary," while continuing to recognize the vital role of international actors, particularly in situations of armed conflict. (IASC, 2016)

The definition of localization as 'incremental change' suggests that the role of international actors will continue to be a necessity for the foreseeable future. The definitions embody the essence of localization, such as tailoring core humanitarian principles and clarifying what situations to prioritize for humanitarian action but with the goal of making humanitarian and development finance more sustainable. This set of definitions respond to the question of what to do with the credible and trusted international infrastructure and experience that has supported humanitarian needs for these many years. They seem to point towards a gradual unfolding of the vision to place leadership on actors closer to the field, but do not contemplate a possible end to the role of international humanitarian actors as we know it today.

Localization as radical change

"Localization can be viewed as a way of re-conceiving the humanitarian sector from the bottom up. It recognizes that the overwhelming majority of humanitarian assistance is already provided by local actors." (Featherstone & Mowjee, 2020)

"Localization is a process of recognizing, respecting and strengthening the independence of leadership and decision making by national actors in humanitarian action, in order to better address the needs of affected populations." (IFRC, 2018)

These definitions focus on who the workforce for humanitarian action is. These definitions are not asking for a shift, but rather suggesting that the shift has long existed without intended acknowledgment. The emphasis and recognition have not been duly given to national and local actors for the significant work they already do. Another concern with these definitions is that in some cases they refer to national and local actors as implementers but they are less explicit about where the designs implemented come from. Perhaps the call within these definitions to reconceive the sector is an attempt to shift the design and leadership to national and local humanitarian actors. It argues that if national and local actors are given acknowledgment for their work and increased role in designing the humanitarian action, it will serve as a mechanism for unlocking new levels of potential needed to take the reins from international actors.

Localization as integrated change

"Localization can be seen as strengthening international investment and respect for the role of local actors, with the goal of reducing costs and increasing the reach of humanitarian action." (Featherstone & Mowjee, 2020)

"Localization simply is a way to ensure that special attention at supporting capacity at the local level is encouraged, which could include community-based organizations, local civil society groups, and local authorities." (Van Brabant & Patel, 2018)

The final set of definitions toe a midpoint between continued international involvement but frames that as investment and acknowledge that local capacity needs continued support. This set of definitions is elusive on who should provide support to local capacity but note what national and local capacities encompass – community-based organizations, local civil society groups, and authorities. It is somewhere between radical and incremental change by framing 'closing financial gap' as reducing the cost and increasing the reach of humanitarian action, yet not emphasizing the essential contribution of local actors.

Beyond the definitions

Localization is also the willingness of international humanitarian actors to recalibrate and redesign to *increasingly* and *intuitively* be more accepting of ceding leadership of humanitarian actions and responses to national and local actors. In moving forward, some useful steps could be taken with regards to reaching more meaningful but not necessarily shared definitions. For example, it might be helpful to unpack what is meant by 'international investments'. According to a 2017 report by the Australian Red Cross, an effective and powerful international humanitarian ecosystem would invest both in local and international capacities based on their areas of comparative advantage. However, there is very little investment in local capacity, coupled with inconsistent support for local leadership and coordination mechanisms, both of which are focus areas in The Grand Bargain. Implicit in this are considerations about new ways of thinking and the role of different actors in humanitarian action (Ophoff, 2018). It seems that international humanitarian actors harbor a blindspot on how they can engage national and local actors, based on assumptions made about the added value and potential of national and local actors to contribute and lead humanitarian action.

Global level concerns with localization

Ten workstreams make up the Grand Bargain, and to be more actionable and measurable, they were further split into 51 commitments. Six of these commitments relate to the goal of localization. In the Grand Bargain, localization is described as "more support and funding to national and local responders" (ICVA, 2016) – a perspective that is close to the definition of 'localization as incremental change,' given the strong emphasis on support and funding.
Analyses, criticisms, and evaluations of The Grand Bargain have been published since 2016 by different authors on diverse mediums. In 2017, 2018, and 2019, three independent evaluation[3] reports were published, analyzing the progress, successes, and challenges of The Grand Bargain, including workstream number two: Localization. The evaluation reports for each year were based on self-reporting of signatories to the Grand Bargain (63 donors and aid organizations), semi-structured interviews with signatories, workstream conveners, and other stakeholders. Additionally, there was a comprehensive review of relevant grey and published literature to estimate how much progress was made for the specific year on the 51 commitments of the Grand Bargain (UNOCHA, 2017).

The six commitments under localization focus on clarifying and strengthening funding, partnerships, coordination, capacity building, and definition of terms (Van Brabant & Patel, 2018). This section is a summary and analysis of the notes and findings on the evaluation of the six commitments specific to localization over the three years (2017 - 2019). By 2019, progress recorded by each commitment was between 7% to 27%, with the highest-scoring commitment reaching 82%. The scores indicate whether or not the signatories report that they had 'activities' around that commitment for that year. Below are some of the takeaways from the reports:

- The challenges highlighted by the independent evaluations include **disagreement on definitions used to characterize localization and low participation of national and local actors in the design and development of principles and practice of localization.** The reports also noted that diverse baselines exist among signatories getting onboard with the localization approach, making it hard to pinpoint a shared measurement of progress. In addition, there are constraints imposed on donors and aid organizations by domestic legislature

3 The most recent report, published June 2021, indicates an increased interest in adopting localization strategies, as more signatories attempt to provide humanitarian funds to national/local responders as directly as possible.

and politics. Lastly, the combined effect of capacity gaps in national and local actors to independently undertake the functions for humanitarian response, and the growing risk for them related to fiduciary, operations, and competitiveness in the landscape, while working with no margin on their budget to meet unforeseen costs and delays.

- The parts of the Localization definition within The Grand Bargain that posed the most challenge among signatories were ‘direct as possible’ and ‘national and local responders’ (see the previous section on defining localization). After extensive and tense negotiations between signatories, which were mostly resolved, there are multiple references on how these phrases affected the course of action and slowed down progress. Both phrases were used to articulate important shifts in approach for addressing humanitarian crises going forward. However, due to variations in the existing ways of working of donors and aid organizations, they had different meanings. If taken literally, these statements would exclude international actors who worked at a level removed from local and national actors or had not established direct country-level operations and offices. The resolution reached was to track the flow of funds and their ultimate destination and not the method and instance of disbursement (Poole, 2017).
- The implication of donors and aid organizations starting localization from different baselines is that it is difficult to report collective progress and sector-wide shift in approach. Some organizations have always worked through and with national and local partners, while for others, this was a first attempt to do so. This disparity makes it challenging to ascertain how much progress the sector has made as a whole and seems to detract from the momentum built from the sense of collective and shared action by the signatories of the Grand Bargain.
- The seeming late blooming of some donors and aid organizations on localization is not entirely due to a lack of consideration to work differently, rather, it is also due to the need to conform to the constraints imposed by their domestic legislature and politics. Such non-friendly-to-localization legislation and politics limit the funding transferable by these organizations to national and local actors, thereby making it practically impossible to reach the 25% target, which is the second goal set within the Grand Bargain (Metcalfe-Hough et al., 2018). To measure up, organizations are taking and seeking more pragmatic ways to approach localization. That includes, for example, investments in systems strengthening or pooling funds, to ensure that national and local actors receive the support they need (Yermo, 2017).
- Defining quality funding and effective humanitarian action in terms of investment and capacity strengthening for local and national actors serves as a good metric for measuring progress. But there are concerns that the resources to bridge the capacity gaps for national and local actors to enable them to do key humanitarian response functions may not be available as planned. While there is a record of some level of progress in partnering directly with local responders and countries putting in efforts to strengthen the coordination capacity, preparedness, and response of local partners, the inconsistency in making multi-year investments diminish the returns.
- Attention was also drawn to the growing risk undertaken by national and local NGOs as the localization shift becomes more normative. International actors work to improve the efficiency of humanitarian response in a community, but local actors take on the economic risk of lowering their operational and human resource costs to remain competitive and win in a limited number of contracts. The margin of operations and security is lower for national actors who bear more brunt than the international actors. There is also minimal direct administrative support and funding received to combat these risks. This, in turn, poses a massive risk for national actors in terms of capacity strengthening and overall preparedness for humanitarian actions, which can lead to questioning how achievable and sustainable localization can be.
- The absence of national and local actors in conversations developing and establishing localization did not go unnoticed by the reviewers. The quick response had been to extend an invitation to national and local responders to join key planning and strategy meetings and workshops. The invitations were applauded in the reports as demonstrating a gradual shift towards national and local actors participating and hopefully leading humanitarian action (Metcalfe-Hough et al., 2019). However, a shift in leadership seems challenging and farfetched as the sector is built on years of design and decisions made on international platforms, without input from national and local actors and whenever they are involved, it happens away from their context.

National and local level concerns with localization

This section discusses three reports on localization, written in different years and from three different stakeholders with national and local level perspectives. They focus on the perspectives and progress on localization in the following countries: Australia, Bangladesh, Burkina Faso, Ethiopia and the Philippines.

Written between 2017 and 2020, a shared takeaway from all three reports is that **tokenistic measures such as inviting national and local actors into key meetings are not enough to translate into a shift in leadership**. Considering the invitations extended to national and local actors to participate in key meetings; though they often pass off as good intentions, these meetings are often not designed with the participation experience of national and local actors in mind. Other times, the meetings can get too patronizing, sometimes merely amplifying the visibility that benefits international NGOs (Vielajus & Charancle, 2020). Often, national and local actors still lack the agency to contribute substantially to those meetings, much less the chances to lead localization through them.

The localization commitments in The Grand Bargain emphasize the action to be taken by international humanitarian actors, which is making project financing directly available to national and local actors. Yet it does not provide clear indicators of what localization means in practice, how it should be planned for, and how to determine if it is happening. Some have described it as “the self-criticism of a small number of humanitarian actors, large in size, and somewhat late in their partnership practices” with national and local actors (Vielajus & Charancle, 2020). This is one of the most crucial aspects pointing to what needs to change about the current practice of localization. The localization commitments do not speak of what needs to change from the perspective of national and local actors, but it rather is and remains a narrative being told and written by international actors.

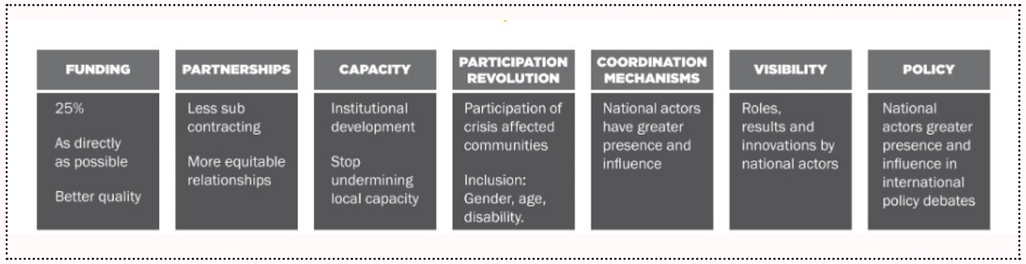
In the report *Localization in Practice*, the authors suggest that a basis for tailoring localization to include the perspectives and subsequently the leadership of national and local actors would be to articulate specific and detailed indicators. Afterward, these indicators could be used to plan, assess and monitor the progress made by programs, organizations, and countries (Van Brabant & Patel, 2018). Van Brabant and Patel suggest that the general commitments articulated by both the Grand Bargain and the Charter for Change (which was referenced earlier) can be used for developing such indicators. In 2017, Patel & Koenraad and ICVA in 2018, developed seven dimensions of localization: interpretations derived from unpacking the process of "funding national and local actors as directly as possible."

Seven different interpretations of the process of localisation:

- *providing more direct funding to existing national and local actors;*
- *empowering affected people as humanitarian actors themselves;*
- *increasing decision-making power at operational levels;*
- *better linking international action to national and local realities;*
- *investing in partner capacities;*
- *opening up space for participation in coordination mechanisms;*
- *reducing administrative barriers to accessing international funds*

(Localisation examined: An ICVA Briefing Paper. 2018)

The dimensions include funding, partnerships, capacity, participation revolution, coordination mechanisms, visibility, and policy and are shown in the framework below.



Source: Van Brabant & Patel, 2018

These dimensions feature in the international debates on localization. Still, they have different implications and relative prioritization from the point of view of national and local actors. For example, international debates address capacity from the point of view of the lack of capacity and upskilling for national and local actors, whereas national and local actors are frustrated with the multiple, short-termed, and fragmented efforts (of international actors) made to strengthen their capacities.

In one of the reports covered in this section, the dimensions of the framework were referred to as 'thematic areas' and were used in research to ask participants about the required changes across these dimensions (Australian Red Cross, 2017). Interestingly, capacity development and partnerships were most mentioned of areas needing changes compared to funding and legal, which get greater attention in global debates. The participants called for less scrutiny on their ability to take on key functions in humanitarian response, especially after training and capacity-strengthening efforts have been made to improve their preparedness. Nevertheless,

more room is needed for them to use and apply their knowledge as the only way to ground their capacity and take responsibility.

"In good times they train us to be managers and then when disaster happens they turn up and take over the show – when can we learn? They have to give us the opportunity to practice." (Pacific Humanitarian Actor - Australian Red Cross, 2017)

In terms of partnerships, the report notes a significant power imbalance that gives "international actors authority and decision-making power, control over resources and key coordination mechanisms, and dominance at shared forums," another dimension requiring change. A Ground Truth Solutions (GTS) and Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) perception survey contradict this point, finding that most respondents "felt they were treated with respect by international organizations and that their concerns were listened to and responded to" (GTS and OECD, 2018). In a sense, the survey seems problematic when one tries to imagine the point in asking if partners felt treated with respect, as the relationship and power dynamics at play do not necessarily support that type of inquiry and could easily lead to socially desirable responses. These dynamics are likely to erode trust and confidence in the partnerships and make it unlikely for the leadership and knowledge of national and local partners to get recognized (Australian Red Cross, 2017).

"Localization needs to consider that people can't just fly in and make decisions, but if you have a relationship with a partner built on trust, you can make decisions together, using that shared knowledge." (Pacific Humanitarian Actor - Australian Red Cross, 2017)

Localization in Practice

What follows are actionable requirements culled from the reports that can further help deepen localization efforts in the immediate future.

- **Localization requires high-level system change, but should be demonstrated in the approach taken to immediate programs and operations:** According to Peter Walton, director of the Australian Red Cross, "the dominant approach to localization within organizations has been to tweak – in a programmatic sense – rather than re-think the systematic approach to local humanitarian action" (Australian Red Cross, 2017). Inline with this statement, the Australian Red Cross 2017 research was led by local researchers and organizations and they ensured that the chosen research methodology was culturally appropriate for the local researchers and organizations. This approach led to inconsistencies in the dataset as the teams from different local contexts had different levels of research experience, and used the tools in different ways. It meant that synthesizing the findings was a bit more strenuous, but potentially more representative of the voices of national and local actors.
- **Localization requires national and local actors to put pressure on their international counterparts:** This is based on an observation that programs dedicated to aid localization were found in countries where there is visible tension on this matter between international and national and local actors. The

study compared the instance between Bangladesh and Burkina Faso, and in Bangladesh, “the INGOs launched initiatives to draw up a road map towards localization” (Vielajus & Charancle, 2020), in response to the tension between national and local and international counterparts over program leadership and resources. Such initiatives were not found in Burkina Faso. It brings to mind a different note on the starting point for localization being a recognition and embrace of the current power dynamics in the humanitarian sector and a desire to see those dynamics changed. The implication here is that some bottom-up pressure is required and that national and local actors who are yet to challenge or stand up against the status quo will less likely make progress on localization.

- **Localization requires international actors to match their expectations of national and local actors to lead, with an equally high vote of confidence:** It is as though the shift towards localization is caught in a complex that undermines or decries the capacity of national and local actors and simultaneously applauds the idea that they should be leading humanitarian response. There have been many discussions about making the humanitarian system more effective and relevant, by ensuring that humanitarian preparedness and response capacity sits with those nearest to the crisis-affected populations as they are best placed to respond quickly and appropriately – and are able to stay on the ground for longer (Van Brabant & Patel, 2018). However, these are immediately accompanied by commentaries from international actors and communities, indicating low trust and unpreparedness in national and local actors. This seems to reinforce the same narrative romanticizing the idea of national and local actors leading humanitarian action, which has little to do with what we observe in practice. When combined with statements like “as local as possible and as international as necessary,” an indication of how roles should be split between international and local actors in the spirit of localization (ICVA, 2016), international actors find the affordance for high-handedness to pick and choose when they take or defer responsibility for activities, results, and outcomes (Van Brabant & Patel, 2018).

Conclusion: Saving Localization

Building on the progress, challenges, and examples of localization presented so far, this section highlights a few fundamental areas of concern that the author discusses to further the debate on how to implement localization to support systems change and a transformation agenda.

Normalize Financial Losses, Don’t Shift Accountability

As it stands and in the context of localization, the current global paradigms of localization are biased towards saving financial cost and more recently with the global pandemic, beating travel restrictions. Although these aspects are important and necessary, they are not the only drivers *of* localization and *for* localization to propel the sector towards transformation. The drivers matter, and it is not localization anyways if it stays narrowly on financial gains. This is because they distract from the deep work required at this stage of localization, where it is still being figured out and will inevitably result in financial losses if driven in that direction.

The point here is not about discontinuing or criticizing the localization attempts or projects being carried out by international actors, but rather taking a deeper look at the guiding assumptions of the localization agenda. It is about challenging the likelihood of a false narrative that saving cost is a prerequisite and motive for shifting leadership of humanitarian actions to local and national actors. Even if this does not guarantee changes in the outcomes of localization in the future, the scenario might be entirely different if the starting point was simply the recognition of the need to change the leadership of humanitarian action. Much of what has happened around localization to date seems to be more about shifting accountability rather than power.

In an attempt to be incremental with change, the practices of localization are leaning towards international humanitarian actors holding onto more power while distributing accountability to national and local actors (Barbelet et al, 2020) – an inference that can be drawn from the emphasis on saving cost. Part of the challenge is how power shifts are romanticized, imagined, and approached like well-facilitated processes and workshops that will ease the transition of power from international to national and local actors. Such perceptions do not cover the realities of decentralization. The debates are way too serene to suggest that any change is on the way. Without promoting recipes for chaos and tensions, national and local actors need to wield more power in ways that are visibly uncomfortable for international actors and communities if localization plans are to be perfected. It is also important to note that power is not homogenous, it is about competences and functions and should be disaggregated as such for meaningful shifts to happen.

Change Leadership, Retire Regressive Terminologies

There has been a significant time sink in figuring out who are national and local actors (Robillard et al., 2020). This may be due to the fact that very often they are not the people in the room having the debate about it. National and local actors are usually not in the room where the concept of ‘who are national and local actors?’ is being debated. The point in seeking these clarifications is to target national and local actors with better engagements and to invite and include them more in the global localization activities.

The terms ‘invitation’ and ‘inclusion’ of national and local actors are used in the discourse of localization to measure progress made on localization and set new goals (Nolan and Dozin, 2019). They indicate that the shift towards localization needs to be midwifed by international actors and to think otherwise would suggest an impractical abruptness. Although this argument makes sense, it does not change the fact that those terms are antithetical to localization. The mere use of those terms assumes that national and local actors don’t possess the leadership to steer the new frontiers of humanitarianism. The continued use of terms like “invitation” and “inclusion” limits the chances that national and local actors will harness their own agency to lead and advance the collective outcomes of the humanitarian sector. Shifting leadership to national and local actors is conditional upon if and when we cease to think about the localization process in those terms and others like them. Switching over means that international actors sit in to learn from national and local actors’ work. This has to be approached with some delicacy because many times the efforts made in this direction can undermine the goal, as international actors go through the motions and miss the actual lessons. It can be a daunting task to pay attention and learn from a place where you traditionally held the position of a tutor, but this shift fits right in as a concrete demonstration of flipping the way of engaging national and local actors (Flint et al., 2018).

Embrace Plurality, Allow Time for Maturity

There are two schools of thought on how to approach localization — “the decentralization school of thought[4]” and “the transformation school of thought[5]” (Van Brabant & Patel, 2017), and they are both dipped in *scale thinking* — the notion that we build a working model and replicate or apply it across the board for many other use cases, to save cost and be efficient (Manis, 2018). The tilt towards *scale thinking* with localization shows up in the intent to make things universal, same, or within narrow predefined boundaries, and a quest for legibility and datafication of the shift. Proponents of transformation say that the focus on decentralization perpetuates international organizations through their national and local offices and is not intentional about incentivizing new actors to emerge (Bennett et al., 2016).

Perhaps a counterfact for decentralization is that a change in strategic and financial decision-making is readily feasible when compared to shifting capabilities and leadership. Either way, as the sector reinvents itself, there seems to be a tendency to use broad strokes that enable uniformity and perpetuate miniaturized statues of international humanitarian organizations. Aiming for uniformity doesn’t help to further localization, it should be as plural as possible and allowed to have the lag necessary to reach epistemological maturity. Localization ought to be different depending on location, potentially because of a blend between the approaches, ideas, and capabilities of national and local actors and international actors. Whether by decentralization – strategic and financial decision making – or transformation – capabilities, and leadership – localization should not get bogged down with establishing schools of thought, as it is still being figured out. Rather, it should steer away from creating mini versions of international organizations. Investing time to discuss and to predefine all aspects, policies, categories, and frameworks of localization is only part of the work. Localization theories also need to develop and evolve through practice.

4 The “decentralization school of thought” on localization argues that localization is shifting strategic and financial decisions towards national and local actors.
5 The “transformation school of thought” on localization says it is about shifting capabilities and leadership to national and local actors.

Fund Unfamiliarity, Focus on Learning

Within the global paradigm of localization, national and local actors have taken on or are set up for more responsibility. Yet, they are often considered and treated as financial and programmatic risks but in less obvious terms (Duclos et al., 2019). It is the managerial instincts of international humanitarian actors – fueled by being socialized with control and struggling to be weaned off – to gaze upon national and local actors as risk factors (ICVA, 2016). Such reactions are not in line with the spirit of localization. They set off a power dynamic that disarms national and local actors from stepping up to leadership.

Localization needs unsupervised time and space to experiment, fail and learn without the process being stifled, controlled, or constrained. An experimentation[6] space that allows local actors to ‘try stuff’ and is unshrouded by training and capability building, one in which failure is almost celebrated as we find one more thing that does not work. Where the goal is almost to not do anything that has been done by the international humanitarian sector. However, the fact remains that we fund models that we recognize, and that real localization may ask of us that we attempt to do the opposite – fund the things we do not yet recognize (Cornish, 2019). This may seem too idealistic for the times we are in, but we ought to make time for getting things done right. The risk estimation should move away from national and local actors towards what we could lose as a collective if we do not localize rightly, sooner.

Moving Forward

Given how travel restrictions and lockdowns have impacted our choices and how much longer they are lasting, it is safe to assume that the idea of localization is fully mainstream in how humanitarian action is conceived and done in the future (Metcalfe-Hough et al., 2019). At least in the sense that there will be sufficient, comparable, and recent data for how things were done differently and their consequent effects. Also, recent localization data might increase the likelihood that localization will come up in conversations about systems change and transformation and new ways to do humanitarian action.

A study done by UNDP and the Pardee Center for International Futures reflects that in the current form, localization might lead to national and local actors being asked to work thrice as hard with thrice fewer resources to help keep the 2030 Agenda on track. It will be a regressive top-down ‘space’ in which national and local actors are expected to accomplish tasks that they do not feel connected to or capable of doing. Consequently, the national and local actors will lack the agency to contribute to the change and transformation agenda.

As it stands now, localization will require national and local actors to work with tools they are not skilled and experienced with, on adopted goals and agendas. This paradigm of localization will leave insufficient room for national and local actors to be agile, innovate, try, fail, learn and develop and gain the necessary skills and experiences for their path. For the most part, it will be business as usual, except that accountability and burden of proof

6 This should be done responsibly but not the kind defined solely by financial accountability and cost-saving — both of which are important but get magnified and overshadow the relationship dynamics between international actors engaged with national and local actors.

will be heaped on national and local actors. They will become extensions of international humanitarian institutions, reaching where international actors could previously reach and access but no longer can, temporarily or permanently.

Whether we consider the 2030 Agenda to be a variable open to change or not has implications for localization. Localization should usher in a new way of working on humanitarianism and what that means is yet to be figured out. There have also been talks about building on what works and discarding what does not work. This perspective of building on what works is in line with sayings that there is no need to reinvent the wheel. However, we need to answer the question of whether localization is a wheel? If it is found to be a distinct artefact, then we have to do better and invest rightly in invention.

Although localization feels a lot like an easily implementable strategy, it has been five years and counting since The Grand Bargain was set in motion and the lofty goals for localization are still far fetched. Continuing to perceive localization as one of the tools that can help achieve other objectives and goals like closing financial gaps, beating global pandemic or reaching the 2030 Agenda in record time are counterproductive. Being subsumed within other system-wide goals and agendas that are already mainstream might mean that the proper considerations for achieving localization will remain a far-fetched ideal.

The question needs to be asked if these goals and agendas have captured localization. The implications are that we can have idealistic conversations about how important localization is and never take the necessary steps required to actualize it. If that is the case, perhaps localization needs its own independent agenda and dedicated resources to nurture and help it flourish.

Without confronting these drivers, we might tarry long at the edges where we continue appraising the importance of localization and never see it materialize in the humanitarian sector. These goals and agendas represent the thrust of our valued and core competencies and approach to doing humanitarian work. From the confines of this comfort zone, humanitarian actions are more likely to default to old ways of working. There is a need to surface and examine the tension between such overarching goals and agendas and the possible new and distinct goals and agendas that can help propel localization forward. It calls for a lot of brave action from international actors and national and local actors, who all need to step away from their comfort zones and trust each other in their new roles, which are yet to be figured out or fine-tuned.

There is an all-around change in roles that needs to happen, in which concerns like lack of capability, need for more training, and minimizing financial risks need to be de-emphasized as there is not much that can be done about them at the moment. At the same time, these concerns fall within the boundaries of broader geopolitical issues that should be confronted and addressed if the way humanitarian services are delivered are going to change.

Historical events created the existing conditions, and the plan of attack to dismantle them cannot sit within a silo. Humanitarian challenges are a subset of these bigger problems, which helped build the current infrastructure and organize the ecosystem around humanitarian action. Both the infrastructure and ecosystem needs to be rethought.

COVID 19 exposed several countries to full-scale national and local responses to the crisis. Where are these opportunities, and how might those be identified, nurtured and taken forward? There is an all round change in roles, as humanitarian actors gear up for extensive unlearning and relearning to do future humanitarian work differently. Things are changing anyway, humanitarian actors can invest in resistance or move with the tides and determine better and new ways of working.

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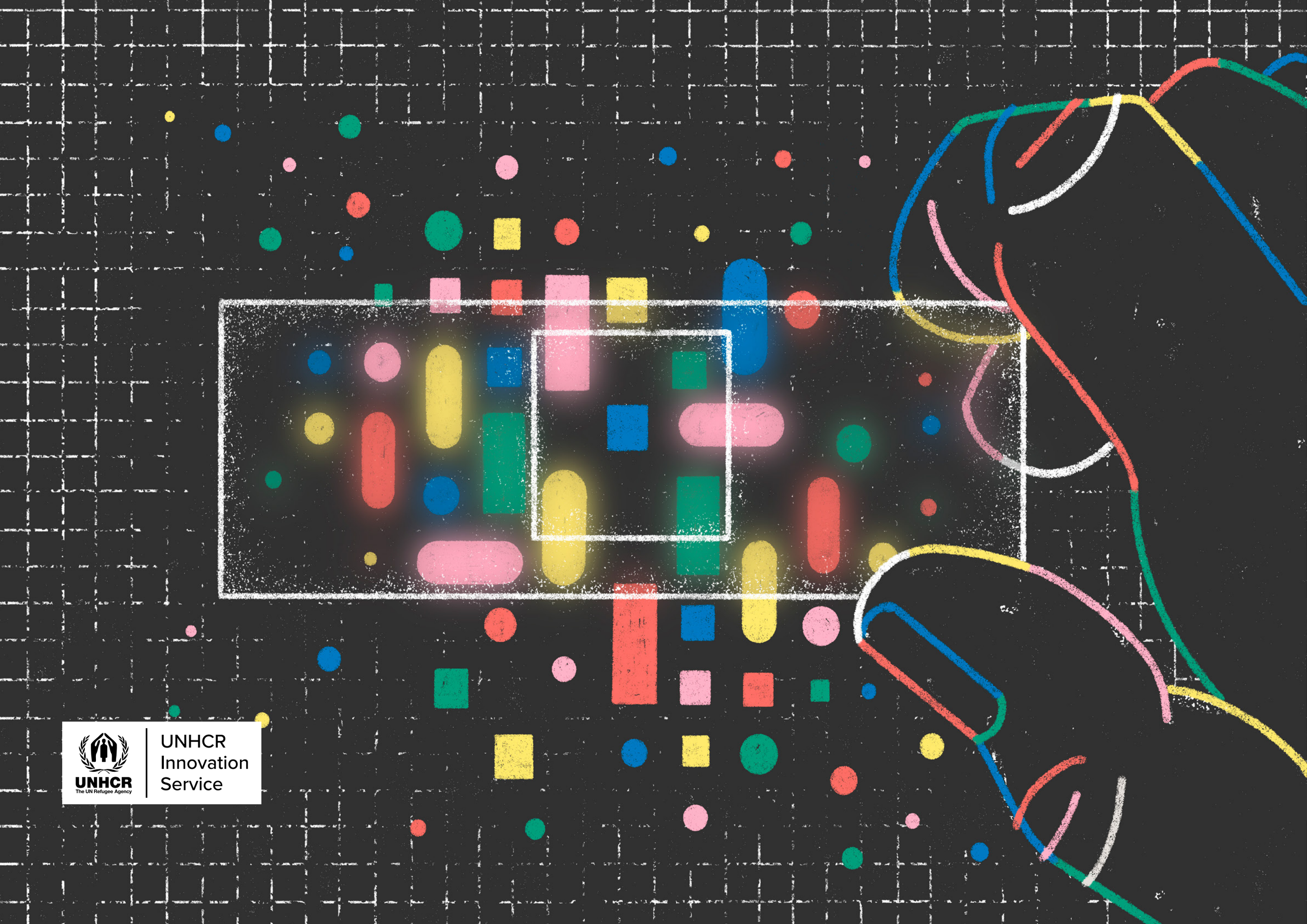

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