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Regular Research Article

Going local without localization: Power and humanitarian response in the Syrian war

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ABSTRACT

International aid organizations and donors have committed to localize aid by empowering local actors to deliver and lead in humanitarian response. While international actors do often rely on local actors for aid delivery, their progress on shifting authority falls short. Scholars suggest that while localizing aid may be desirable, the organizational imperatives of international actors and aid's colonial past and present make it difficult at best. Can localization efforts produce locally led humanitarian response? Adopting a power framework, we argue that localization reinforces and reproduces international power; through institutional processes, localization efforts by international actors allocate capacity to, and constitute local actors as, humanitarians that are more or less capable, funded, and involved in responding to crises in the latter's own countries. This article interprets aid efforts during the Syria War. In this crucial case, we might expect localization to be "easy" due to the dependence of international actors on local actors because of security concerns and constraints on international access. We draw on fine-grained qualitative data collected through immersive observation and 250 interviews with Syrian and international aid workers in Jordan, Lebanon, and Turkey, as well as descriptive analysis of quantitative data. We reveal the ways Syrians were constituted as frontline responders, recipients of funds or trainings, risk-takers, gateways to access, and tokenistic representatives of the crisis. Our research shows that while the response seemed to "go local" by relying on the labor and risk-taking of Syrians to implement relief, it did not transfer authority to Syrian actors. Findings contribute to current debates in global development and humanitarian scholarship about who holds power within the global aid architecture.

1. Introduction

As "a matter of fiscal risk management," explained a humanitarian affairs officer at a Western embassy in Amman Jordan, "we wouldn't contract directly with Syria partners" who lack "capacity."[1] His government's wariness about local organizations echoed concerns about accountability and risk management in humanitarian aid. Yet it contrasted with two other matters: commitments made by actors in the humanitarian system to "localization," that is, to empowering local responders to lead and deliver humanitarian aid;[2] and the ground truth about the responsibility of Syrian organizations in implementing nearly *all* humanitarian relief in rebel-held territory during the war in Syria in the 2010s. Describing the meetings that his government held with local organizations to discuss these issues, the humanitarian affairs officer reflected: "Syrian partners sense they are used by us and are not equals."

We contend with this puzzle in localization and humanitarian response: the frequent reliance of international aid actors on local organizations for delivery and implementation of relief, and the shortcomings of international actors in their own attempts to devolve power to local actors in response. We ask: is local aid delivery a meaningful indicator of localization? And, can localization efforts produce locally-led humanitarian response?

Donor governments, intergovernmental organizations (IOs), and international non-governmental organizations (INGOs) have for years

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[1] Interview 64, 2016, Jordan. We maintain the anonymity of all interviewees by using non-identifying numbers. See appendix for details on qualitative data collection and ethics.

[2] The European Commission's Civil Protection and Humanitarian Aid Operations defines localization as "empowering local responders in affected countries to lead and deliver humanitarian aid" (European Commission, n.d.).

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sought to increase the participation of local actors in humanitarian response. Their pledges culminated at the 2016 World Humanitarian Summit where aid actors signed on to the "Grand Bargain" that aimed to make humanitarianism "as local as possible, as international as necessary." These commitments align with scholarship that argues that local involvement improves outcomes of international action in conflict and post-conflict settings (Autesserre, 2014; Baines & Paddon, 2012; Campbell, 2018; Firchow, 2018). On the other hand, researchers note that complex accountability structures that characterize international aid make localization difficult at best (Ebrahim, 2003; Hielscher et al., 2017; Hilhorst et al., 2021; Winters, 2010). Other scholars contend that paternalism and other forms of moral, racial, or rational superiority are baked into the humanitarian system (Autesserre, 2010; Barnett, 2016; de Waal, 1997; Duffield, 2001b; Hor, 2022; Pincock et al., 2020); some suggest that the system as structured cannot right power asymmetries (Baaz, 2005; Pallister-Wilkins, 2021).

This article draws direct connections between the institutional actions being taken within and encouraged of the humanitarian system, and concerns about the feasibility and even impossibility of balancing power within it. To thread this needle, we apply a power framework (i.e., Barnett and Duvall 2005) to the institutional processes adopted to localize aid. Our theoretical framework reveals a key disjuncture between processes and power. Localization efforts such as funding, capacity building, partnerships, and coordination, can indeed support local humanitarian action; that is, international processes can generate local aid delivery, or "go local." Critically, aid can go local without altering the power relationships between international and local actors; that is, without generating locally led response, or "localization." How? We argue that the very institutions assuming the tasks of localization reproduce, rather than neutralize, power asymmetries by *constituting* local actors as deliverers of aid and *allocating* them the capacities to act as such.

We advance this argument by examining the Syrian civil war, a critical and relatively "easy" case where international humanitarian organizations might have devolved authority to local responders. A combination of government restraints, insecurity, and attacks against aid workers, led IOs and INGOs to remotely manage cross-border operations from neighboring countries. Syrian organizations in border regions were tasked with delivering and implementing nearly all humanitarian aid inside rebel-held territory. We interpret how this potential opportunity to localize unfolded through institutional processes on the ground, paying particular attention to the presence or absence of the key mechanisms in our framework: the allocation of capacities to and constitution of local aid responders. To do so we draw on a combined twenty months of fieldwork in Jordan, Turkey, Lebanon, and international headquarters, in which we conducted immersive observation and about 250 interviews with international and Syrian aid workers and activists. We also analyze original and publicly available datasets to identify descriptive trends in the international response that implicated local actors.

We find that international humanitarians allocated bounded capacities and resources to local actors to deliver aid and constituted Syrians as local aid responders, not leaders. First, we establish that Syrian organizations grew substantially to participate in aid delivery and implementation. We then find that limited funds were transferred, mostly indirectly, to local organizations to carry out projects, even as core organizational support was withheld; the capacities that international actors promoted and built among local actors mirrored those already enjoyed by international actors; international-local partnerships were allocated instrumentally; and local actors were offered limited representation, and even less voice, in international coordinating structures. Overall, Syrians were tasked with acting as laborers, risk-takers, and gateways to access to the crisis. Humanitarianism "went local" by benefitting from the labor of Syrians but it did not—and, as practiced, could not—localize the response. Instead, it reproduced international power over response.

We advance scholarly debates by bridging the seemingly disconnected understandings of localization as a desirable, (in)feasible, or (im)possible task by grappling directly with localization processes as they are practiced by humanitarians. Our theoretical framework captures the underlying power structures that reproduce international superiority through those very processes. We also advance understandings of a critical case in a manner that gives voice to the local responders who delivered and implemented life-saving aid to millions of Syrians during one of the most brutal wars in recent history. Our findings have implications for key questions in global humanitarianism and aid, such as why and how offers of care are so inextricably linked to control over affected populations, and whether a local turn in humanitarianism can make the decolonization of aid more feasible.

In the next section, we consider existing ideas about local participation, organizational imperatives, and power asymmetries in the international humanitarian system. Then, we describe the institutional processes undertaken by aid organizations to enact localization and explain the need for a power-informed theoretical framework to interpret the significance of these processes. By reconceptualizing localization, we explain why we expect it to produce local aid delivery but not leadership, based in the ways localization processes reproduce international power through allocative and constitutive mechanisms. The research design section describes our qualitative and quantitative data, interpretive method of analysis, and case selection strategy. We then present evidence of impressive local aid delivery in the Syrian case but also the operation of mechanisms that relegate Syrians to useful but subordinated roles in the international response to the crisis. In other words, we find that aid "went local" in Syria, but localization of power and authority was far from manifest. We conclude with considerations of what these findings mean for practice and theory in humanitarianism.

2. Promises and problems of localization

Existing scholarship suggests that local participation can improve humanitarian outcomes for affected populations. Building on findings from the "partnership era" or "participatory turn" (Impey & Overton, 2014; Whitfield, 2009), research has focused on the benefits of incorporating local expertise or "indigenous technical knowledge" (Firchow, 2018). In conflict and post-conflict settings where circumstances can change quickly, meaningful local participation, accountability, and leadership is expected to be crucial in creating more effective, adaptive, global responses (Campbell, 2018; Honig, 2018; Kochanski et al., Forthcoming). Involving local actors in project design and evaluation has been found to improve local community and citizen participation (Fischer, 2021; Fox, 2020). Research also points to the inverse of these findings: international response is less effective when it does not incorporate local strategies, networks, and knowledge (Autesserre, 2014; Baines & Paddon, 2012; Daly et al., 2017; Piquard & Delft, 2018).

Despite the potential promise of localization, scholars have identified organizational barriers to achieving localization and, more specifically, to shifting power to local or national actors. Multiple levels and kinds of stakeholders between donors and affected populations (Hielscher et al., 2017; Winters, 2010) can diminish accountability to beneficiaries—ostensibly the primary stakeholders in effective humanitarian response (Hilhorst et al., 2021; Wanjiku Kihato & Landau, 2016). Studies show that when large global funders demand "upward" and "external" accountability from organizations they fund, they draw the attention of those organizations away from affected populations (Ebrahim, 2003; Hielscher et al., 2017; Honig, 2018; Hyden, 2008). These organizational dilemmas are exacerbated by international aid worker risk aversion and isolation (Autesserre, 2014; Duffield, 2012; Hilhorst et al., 2021; Smirl, 2015). Risk avoidance strategies such as remote management, by which international actors direct implementers from a safe distance, seem only to exacerbate distrust of local actors as internationals worry about sacrificing quality, monitoring, and humanitarian principles (Howe & Stites, 2019; Scott, 2022a,b).

Additionally, a humanitarian system based on paternalism and other moral, rational, or racial superiorities may make localization infeasible. Contemporary humanitarianism seeks to resolve, or at least govern, global problems (Barnett, 2013; Fassin, 2012). In the post-Cold War era, donor governments instrumentalized aid to preserve liberal peace and global stability (de Waal, 1997; Duffield, 2001a; Fearon, 2008; Fearon & Laitin, 2004). Most recently, aid has served to regulate and control international migration into the global North (Betts, 2009; FitzGerald, 2019). These ambitions are promoted subtly (Ferguson, 1990) and not often acknowledged by practitioners themselves. Instead, aid technocrats promote principles of neutrality and rational expertise, efforts that are enhanced by being able to look expertly and "impartially" from the outside in (Hanchey, 2020; Kothari, 2006; Mundy, 2015). Humanitarians, in this view, see their work as most needed when local capacities and judgement are overwhelmed by conflict or crisis (Khan et al., 2023; Pallister-Wilkins, 2021; Pincock et al., 2020; Barnett, 2016; Baaz, 2005). These associations have placed mostly White, large, and global North organizations in positions to determine the fates of racialized local actors (LaLonde & Gassimu, 2023; Sou, 2022).

Taken together, the academic literature promotes localization, questions its feasibility, and underlines the deep power asymmetries that characterize the humanitarian system. We seek to bridge these insights and illuminate their disconnects with a reconceptualization of localization that grapples with both the practices and power involved in localization efforts. We suggest it is possible for aid delivery to "go local" through a set of institutional processes, without producing commensurate shifts in power or authority to local actors, or "localization." We advance this agenda by applying a power framework to the institutional processes that characterize localization efforts.

3. Localization processes as power

Like the scholars above, international humanitarians are broadly aware of the power imbalances that characterize the aid system. The impetus to localize indicates that they strive to even the scales. Moreover, they expect doing so will improve humanitarian outcomes, in line with literature that heralds the benefits of local action in international response. For instance, a prominent INGO's official position on localization is that: "Shifting greater capacity, resources, and ownership to national and local actors, will result in more timely, appropriate, and effective outcomes" (Save the Children, 2023). These humanitarian organizations pursue localization through a set of institutional processes. Following the localization framework of a consortium of INGOs supported by the European Union's humanitarian agency (ECHO), these processes are enacted by international actors and generally include (Schmalenbach et al., 2019):[3]

1) Funding: increasing direct funding of local and national actors
2) Capacity building: transferring knowledge and skills about response to local actors
3) Partnership: working with local organizations on bases of equality, respect, and complementarity
4) Coordination: including local organizations in coordination mechanisms

We consider what these processes do, and do not, tell us about localization, in order to build a power framework for understanding them.

First, we note that internationally driven institutional processes often fall short on their own terms. This assessment is possible because the processes are designed as "measurable," in line with donor demands for data, indicators, evidence, and evaluation (Heiss & Kelley, 2017). For example, the Grand Bargain in 2016 set a target of directing 25% of funds toward national actors by 2020.[4] Yet, as of 2021, just 1.2% of all international funding reported through the United Nations Financial Tracking Service went directly to local and national actors (ALNAP, 2022, p. 230). Progress on the other three processes—capacity building, partnership, and coordination—is generally measured through counting exercises. These include counting capacity building activities (e.g., workshops, certifications, or short-term mentorship),[5] the number and quality of partnerships, and the presence of local actors in coordination meetings.

Yet both the measurability of these processes and their success in localizing is wanting. Assessments of capacity building, for example, suggest that activities are often short-term in nature (e.g. Mercy Corps, n.d.) and focused on proposal writing, monitoring and evaluation, and financial management rather than operational issues such as security and implementation (Howe & Stites, 2019; Schmalenbach et al., 2019). For partnership, observers note there is often a lack of formal local NGO registration, and international organizations muddy classification by counting as partners: local CSOs or NGOs, sub-national or national governments, or even their own in-country offices and national staff. Assessing the quality of partnerships is harder still. Finally, local or national presence in relevant forums and leadership positions does not reveal whether local and national actors co-lead alongside international authorities in these fora, nor who speaks, directs discussions, or makes decisions.

In sum, we know that localization processes are being enacted and measured, even as they fall short of approaching the targets of the international humanitarian system. Is localization underway through these processes? We contend that an alternative conceptualization and operationalization of localization is needed to interpret what these processes signify.

Fundamentally, international aid actors are pursuing localization through institutions they have designed and which they control. Thus, localization outcomes are likely to be inconsistent and often wanting because *the institutions through which they practice power are not built to reshape power relations.* In fact, international humanitarians seek to address imbalances in power and authority through the very institutions that "mediate between" themselves and local actors (Barnett and Duvall 2005, 51). That is, approaches to localization-as-process imply that the power imbalance between international and local aid actors is embedded in "institutional power." In an institutional power relationship, Barnett and Duvall explain, the more powerful actor works indirectly "through the rules and procedures that define those institutions, [and] guides, steers, and constrains the actions (or nonactions) and conditions of existence of" the less powerful actor (2005, p. 51).

We expect that by approaching localization through these institutional power relations, international humanitarian actors are likely to produce more local aid delivery—more local humanitarian actors on the ground taking risks and offering services. But power is unlikely to be delegated or to shift to local actors. This is because *international aid actors reinforce their power through institutions by which they allocate capacity to, and constitute local actors as, humanitarians that are more or less capable, funded, and involved in responding to crises in the latter's own countries.* Localization-as-power is exercised by international actors with

[3] Signatories to the Grand Bargain committed to six principles: capacity-building; partnership; inclusion in international coordination mechanisms; direct funding; measurement of funding; and mechanisms for funding. We combine the final three, all related to funding, into one process.

[4] Additional indicators of funding include the numbers and types of mechanisms through which funds flow, year-on-year increases in the proportion of direct funding, indirect funding through international organizations that dedicate budget lines to local organizations, and the number of projects funded (Schmalenbach et al. 2019).

[5] Additional indicators include the number of budget lines and contracts dedicated to capacity building, and the mechanisms in place to evaluate capacity building progress (Schmalenbach et al. 2019).

more resources and a preferred position within an institutional arrangement (Barnett and Duvall 2005; Abbott and Snidal 1998). They shape relationships, opportunities, and biases facing them and less institutionally powerful local actors (Bachrach & Baratz, 1963).

Localization is not only an exercise of diffuse institutional power relations between international and local actors. It also works through direct control over finance and the allocation of capacities, and indirectly by defining the causes, consequences, and significance of humanitarian response (Anheier & Themudo, 2005). Through localization, international actors produce the "very social capacities of subject positions, in direct relation to one another, and the associated interests that underlie and dispose action" (Barnett & Duvall, 2005, p. 53). They define what social beings—in this case, humanitarian beings—are, and what they deserve.

We operationalize connections between localization processes and their associated allocative and constitutive mechanisms in Table 1.

As the table indicates, power is implicit in each of these localization processes through the transfer and apportionment of capacities, identities, and interests. Each process draws on power to constitute locals as humanitarian responders and allocate them capacities to act as such.

First, the funding process produces and reproduces understandings of international actors as givers and local actors as recipients. Financial capital is controlled by donor governments and large aid organizations; it is a finite, even zero-sum, resource. Traditionally, IOs and INGOs consume significant funding as it trickles down, through subcontracts, to local actors (Cooley & Ron, 2002; Hawkins 2006); donors have assumed that international actors are capable of managing large funds, or those organizations have demonstrated so over long histories (Autesserre, 2016; Scott, 2022a,b). The localization agenda aims to shift more funds more directly to local actors, thus increasing efficiency and reducing the potential for international organizations to control local activities through contract conditions. Those local actors, however, must prove their worthiness to manage funds (i.e., to reduce risk), a task that is challenged by their reliance on short-term funds and lack of overhead support which make long-term planning, preparedness, and growth difficult (Eade, 2007; Willitts-King et al., 2019). The funding process does not address the concern that international recipients of donor funds may be disincentivized from changing the status quo. Instead, it constitutes the local as recipient. We expect ongoing consumption of significant funding by international actors that deem their oversight and related costs necessary, even as we also expect to see additional mechanisms in place to fund local actors, especially through small direct projects, and continued indirect support to deliver aid.

Table 1
Localization processes as power.

Localization Process	Operationalization	Mechanism
Funding	Transfer of resources to local actors	Allocation of capacity through funds
		Constitution of local actors as recipients who need international help
Capacity building	Transfer of skills to local actors	Allocation of expert and organization-based capacities
		Constitution of local actors as skilled sub-contractors
Partnership	Apportionment of organizational roles	Allocation of partnership agreements
		Constitution of local actors instrumentally, as gap-fills
Coordination	Apportionment of seats in decision-making structures	Allocation of roles and opportunities
		Constitution of local actor as representatives of crisis identities

Second, capacity building processes value skills and structures held by international actors. The authority of expertise, rationality, and professionalism are heralded within the bureaucratic organizations that characterize the humanitarian system (Barnett & Finnemore, 2004). Technical expertise is prioritized over local, 'unscientific' knowledge that is seen as biased, specific, and even antithetical to humanitarian principles of impartiality and neutrality (Autesserre, 2010; Ferguson, 1990; Honig, 2018; Mundy, 2015). Abilities to evaluate wider thematic, national, and even regional programming needs and to design projects, for example, will be commonly identified as keys to humanitarian leadership (Anderson & Olson, 2003; Apthorpe, 2011; Autesserre, 2016; Sending, 2009; Swaine, 2016). At the same time, international actors will often depend on certain, context-specific knowledge of local actors, including their networks, languages, and, critically, their access to communities in need (Khoury, 2017). They will, not, however, seek out training from local actors on local context, language, or access issues (Autesserre, 2016; Eade, 2007). This exercise of power sees international actors constituting the social power of subjects "through systems of knowledge and discursive practices" (Barnett and Duvall 2005, 55). Capacity building measures define what counts as skill, knowledge, and legitimate discourse in international terms, and allocates those skills accordingly. We expect this localization process will reproduce existing power structures when capacity building activities enhance local organizations' abilities in areas in which international actors are already expert, even while utilizing local abilities in delivering aid.

Third, partnership processes constitute local actors instrumentally, allocating agreements to those actors who can fill context-specific gaps in international abilities, particularly where short response time limits international learning (Hor, 2022; Campbell, 2008). We expect partnership agreements will be offered to those with local networks, context-specific knowledge, as well as language capabilities. Preference for known local actors that can integrate quickly into existing organizational hierarchies, and use English and French, is also likely (Humanitarian Advisory Group, 2019; Robillard et al., 2020; Wall & Hedlund, 2016). Moreover, in conflict affected settings, we anticipate that local actors will be constituted as risk-takers and gateways for accessing hard to reach places, particularly where risk tolerance among international actors is low or waning (Fast, 2014; Scott, 2022a,b; Smirl, 2015). We do not, however, expect, local actors to be delegated much decisional authority over risk-taking, mitigation strategies, or global and local burden-sharing, or related operational decisions. Local actors will remain supervised, sub-contracted labor, and not equal partners, because the skills they use to fill gaps in the global response are not taken as qualifications for humanitarian leadership.

Finally, there is an expectation that when power is moved closer to affected communities, local actors will be present, have influence, and become leaders in coordination structures. On the one hand, these process-based ideas are seemingly straightforward to apply. An Overseas Development Institute report found that over half of coordination clusters examined had national or local leaders (Fast & Bennett, 2020). But mere representation does not necessarily translate to decision-making authority over programming, budgeting, and strategic planning. What is more, these efforts insert local organizations into international humanitarian response regimes; meanwhile, national, and sub-national mechanisms and systems may not be identified, funded, or utilized (Shibli, 2014). As well, those deemed "locals" have voiced frustration at the "reductionist" and "tokenistic" gesture of being present in a room because of "identity politics" rather than because of the expertise and experience they bring (Shuayb, 2022).

Our power framework offers a means of assessing the feasibility of localization processes to alter global–local relations and of identifying the mechanisms that reproduce international power through the very processes that are intended to devolve it. It also helps resolve the puzzle produced by localization efforts: more local actors can participate in delivering aid, without increasing their authority or leadership in

humanitarian response.

4. Research design

Our analysis is an empirically driven reconceptualization and interpretation of localization. We seek to adjust the analytical lens through which scholars and practitioners understand what localization *is*. We do so by leveraging multiple sources and kinds of data to show that Syrians were, in fact, involved in the humanitarian response to an impressive degree. But we also ask of our data: was this involvement evidence of localization? Did these organizations assume authority over the response? Identifying a gap between reliance on locals for aid delivery ("going local") and shifting power to locals ("localization") is made possible by this investigation, through which we trace connections between pieces of evidence and the explanations they signify.

We rely foremost on immersive and interview-based field research which is critical to inferring meaning-making among actors involved in political phenomena. The authors conducted a combined twenty months of immersive fieldwork and about 250 interviews between 2015 and 2018 with Syrian and international aid workers in Jordan, Lebanon, and Turkey as well as at international headquarters. The analytical value of immersion is in "highlighting insiders' views, performances, and understandings of membership, it privileges interlocutors' experiences of the organizational worlds that they inhabit rather than relying on external categorizations" (Parkinson, 2021, p. 66). One of the authors shadowed and lived with Americans and Syrians engaged in elements of the response in Turkey and Jordan. The other conducted political ethnography (Schatz, 2013) amongst international organizations in Lebanon and Jordan that were working with Syrian refugees and on cross-border activities.

We conducted semi-structured and open-ended interviews with activists and aid workers engaged in various sectors of the responses to the Syrian crisis, including cross-border operations into rebel-held territory from Turkey and Jordan. Interviews reveal individuals' trajectories and interpretations of their own position and those of others in the crisis response (Fujii, 2018; Soss, 2014). They also generate data for identifying recurrent themes or the empirical footprints of causal mechanisms, as well as for information about how events unfold and who was involved (Lynch, 2013).

We reached our research participants through snowball sampling, wherein interviewees connected us with their peers. Snowball sampling relies on trustful relations between potential participants (Cohen & Arieli, 2011; Tansey, 2007) and is thus apt given the insecurity associated with cross-border operations, delicacy of refugee host state politics, and the precarity of displaced Syrians. We received informed and voluntary verbal consent that could be withdrawn at any time. We followed additional protocols for data protection and security and the maintenance of participants' confidentiality, as approved by our respective universities' Institutional Review and Research Ethics Boards. Interviews with Syrians were generally conducted in colloquial Levantine Arabic. The appendix expounds on the interview research.

To explore the observable implications of our power framework, we also draw on two original datasets and two others obtained from UN data hubs. First is a dataset on cross-border operations from Jordan and Turkey coordinated by the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), which we created from OCHA's monthly published reports on its operations. Second is a dataset on the meetings of the Health Sector Working Group in Lebanon, which we created from the meeting minutes published by the UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR). Finally, we analyze two datasets on allocations and projects of the cross-border country-based pooled fund that assisted Syrian organizations from Turkey, which were published on OCHA's pooled funds datahub. Additional information on quantitative data is in the appendix.

Case Selection

If international humanitarians could fruitfully devolve authority to local actors, we might expect this in the Syrian crisis—a relatively "easy" case for localization. Conditions were conducive for localization in a case characterized by restrictions on international access and a population of local organizations eager to participate in humanitarian response. Yet, we observe that while local actors were primarily delivering humanitarian assistance, they did not gain significant decisional authority or leadership over humanitarian policy, programming, or how funds were spent. We select the Syria case for analysis because it is a critical case for exploring relationships between local actor delivery of humanitarian assistance and the purported potential of localization efforts to shift power to local actors. We provide pertinent background information to support this case selection strategy.

The Syrian conflict grew from a 2011 protest movement that, when met with repression, escalated into a brutal civil war. In each year that followed to 2018, humanitarian responses to civilian needs inside the country and to the needs of millions of refugees in neighboring countries reached historic highs for international funding (Development Initiatives, 2019). But access was limited. While aid was delivered, with interference, through Damascus to populations under government control, the Syrian regime blocked access to populations under its sieges or in rebel-held territory. Security conditions compounded the issue of access, as aid workers were subject to targeted violence and generalized insecurity. International actors saw Syria as a new security environment where the nature of risks was less tolerable and access and security would not be guaranteed by conflict actors, priming them for remote and cross-border work (Scott, 2022a,b). In 2014, UN Security Council Resolution 2165 formally authorized UN agencies to coordinate aid into Syria with notification, but not permission, of the government in Damascus through border crossings in Turkey and Jordan (S/Res/2165 2014). The UN's Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Assistance (OCHA) joined the many INGOs already operating cross-border.

Syrians were actively engaging in their own humanitarianism at the borders. Syrian civil society prior to the conflict was severely restricted, but some charitable associations had been engaged in welfare provision (Ruiz de Elvira & Zintl, 2014). After the 2011 uprising, at least some of these "older (in)formal networks" were able to "remobilize and reconstitute themselves" in a new context of crisis (Ruiz de Elvira, 2019). Preexisting diasporic networks did the same, both by traveling to the border regions and by sending material support from abroad (Dickinson, 2015; Moss, 2021). Participants in the 2011 uprising were also adapting to a new crisis context. One woman in rural Damascus explained: "The networks and techniques that activists had honed to stage demonstrations … were soon put to use in delivering a wide range of humanitarian and social support" and would later "become broader humanitarian networks" (Abdelwahid, 2013, p. 15). This energetic population of old and new, diasporic, and on-the-ground networks was situated in rebel-held territories and in refuge in neighboring countries (Khoury, 2020), ready to connect with international actors entering onto the cross-border scene and the refugee response.

5. Localization in Syria: process or power?

Under relatively conducive conditions for localization in Syria, we explore whether the response was characterized by local aid delivery, local authority, or both. We find that the counting exercises by which one might measure localization are complicated by inequalities that make local organizations less legible and more vulnerable than their international counterparts; the mere (im)measurability of localization processes reflects the contradictions of international efforts to devolve power through the very institutions that reinforce it. Nevertheless, we identify significant local aid delivery. The next sections of the empirical analysis explain how four specific processes constituted Syrians as deliverers of aid and allocated them the capacity to act as such, while simultaneously undermining their potential leadership or even their equality as partners in the response.

There are numerous challenges to a proper auditing of Syrian organizations engaged in crisis response. In rebel-held territory, many were

not formally registered, or they adopted low profiles to protect themselves from attacks. This was reinforced by international humanitarian practices to protect local organizations, especially the anonymization of funding recipients so that hundreds of millions of dollars appear in public data to be directed at "National NGOs" or even just "NGOs." Downstream recipients of funds may not be (publicly) recorded at all. Neighboring countries, Turkey, Jordan, and Lebanon, all had regulations that prevented, to lesser or greater extents, the formal registration of Syrian organizations and Syrians' individual employment, resulting in landscapes of refugee-led organizations operating informally, under the names of host country nationals, or otherwise difficult to count auspices (Badran, 2020; Carpi & Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, 2020; Khoury, 2017).

There are, nevertheless, alternative indicators of local participation in aid delivery, and particularly growth in local organizations over the years of the conflict, particularly in Turkey—a state sympathetic to the cause of the Syrian opposition—and across its borders into rebel-held northwest Syria. Telling evidence comes from monthly reports of cross-border operations coordinated by OCHA that we have compiled manually. Partner organizations for cross-border operations from Turkey, which included organizations across the border in northwest Syria, increased from 49 in April 2014 when formal operations began, to more than 400 in December 2017. The left-hand panel of Fig. 1 visualizes this impressive organizational growth, which contrasted with the handful of partners engaged in cross-border operations from a more circumspect Jordan into rebel-held southern Syria. There is also correspondence between the number of partners and the relief items delivered through cross-border operations (right-hand panel). This evidence indicates that under conducive circumstances (i.e., international humanitarian operations, local actor availability, and host state permissiveness), local aid delivery can be expected.

The identity of these hundreds of organizations is anonymous in public reports. Yet as our fieldwork indicated and as an OCHA representative in Turkey confirmed, they are "primarily Syrian organizations."[6] He explained: "literally all humanitarian work between non-state armed territory is run by Syrians. In the northwest, there are only Syrians on the ground providing assistance." The hundreds of humanitarian organizations delivering aid through the institutional channels of the OCHA-led response from Turkey were local, Syrian, groups. Many more certainly operated outside this one channel. Aid was going local. Was it localizing?

5.1. Power through funding

A cornerstone of localization processes is direct funding to local and national actors. In a power framework, this can be understood as the allocation of capacities through funds by actors that hold financial resources alongside the constitution of local actors as recipients of international help. Funding to Syrian organizations was based primarily on projects, indirectly (sub)contracted by international organizations that received direct donor funding. Even when local organizations received direct funding, they did not receive commensurate support for core overhead costs. These allocative practices maintained local actor dependence on global funds; they also constituted Syrians as in need of international help.

Syrian organizations received funds via projects contracted by IOs, INGOs, and for-profit development actors. They were scarcely contracted by donors directly. As the head of a coalition of Syrian humanitarian organizations noted sardonically, the number of Syrian organizations receiving direct funding "can be counted on fingers."[7] Instead, sub-contracted projects were the fiscal lifeline of Syrian organizations. While Syrians delivered three quarters of all aid inside Syria in 2014, for instance, they received less than one percent of funding directly that year (Els et al., 2016). Later in the conflict, when Syrian organizations constituted 55 percent of all "partner organizations" in the 2018 UN Humanitarian Response Plan, they still received less than 2 percent of the plan's direct funding (Building Markets, 2018).

One effect of the competitive (sub-)contracting market is that organizational time horizons shorten to match project and other donor timelines rather than long-term strategic plans (Cooley & Ron, 2002). A staff member of a Syrian emergency medical care organization with fieldworkers in northern Syria and a managerial office in Turkey described: "It's always a race. Projects last three to six months, at most one year. So by the time you set up the work, you need to *scramble* for funding again."[8] The head of a Syrian organization supporting internally displaced children in southern Syria, with a managerial office in Turkey, identified his organization's biggest challenges as, first, security, and second, the inconsistency of support. He explained: in between projects they can lose employees who need to make a living.[9] In the absence of bridge funding, institutional capacity is lost (or not allocated) between projects, increasing project start-up costs and perpetuating views of local organizations as having too little capacity to act independently. Local actors indicated their awareness of this dynamic. The head of a Syrian relief organization with a managerial office in Jordan and operations in southern Syria expressed that even while Syrian organizations were central to "closing the gap" between international actors and beneficiaries, those Syrian organizations remained in a state of needing international help: "Most of the international partners," he explained, "try to impose their power over local NGOs because they are small and they can't achieve their needs."[10] Local organizations are also less likely to have the capacity to respond to donor agency calls for contractors during these unfunded, lower-capacity periods.

In 2014, a dedicated mechanism was established for Syria with the explicit objective of combating some of these dynamics and supporting Syrian organizations and local responses. According to the UN, the Syria Cross-Border Humanitarian Fund, a multi-donor country-based pooled fund, was established in 2014 to "enable humanitarian partners, particularly Syrian organizations, to expand and support the delivery of humanitarian assistance across border and conflict lines" (OCHA, 2015). This fund amounted to a small fraction of official humanitarian aid to Syria but, as per Fig. 2, its allocations to national NGOs increased substantially over the course of the conflict.

The number of projects allocated to local organizations also increased in this period. Yet these projects had far smaller budgets, on average, than those allocated to UN agencies and INGOs through the same pooled fund, as comparisons of the left- and right-hand panels in Fig. 3 show.

It is not too surprising that novice organizations were allocated smaller project budgets. Yet, Syrians often did not know that they could request core costs in their grant proposals or think that they even had the "right" to ask for them; many international organizations failed to inform their local "partners" that they could make these requests (Els et al., 2016; Howe et al., 2015a). Such stances are suggestive of international humanitarians' "reductive narratives" about local actors (Hor, 2022), perhaps related to "war economies" or "local efficiency," and in line with our theory, as recipients who need international help. They also contrasted with international actors' own professional practices. Within the pooled fund, Syrian organizations received far less support costs per project, on average, than did UN agencies and INGOs, as per Fig. 4.

Limited direct funding was exacerbated by donor risk aversion. Risk aversion could reflect mundane accounting concerns. As an OCHA representative in Jordan acknowledged, even though Syrian organizations "carry the burden" of aid delivery, donors "worry about the risk of

[6] 116, 2019, via Skype.

[7] 88a, 2017, Turkey.

[8] 95, 2017, Turkey, emphasis added.

[9] 79, 2017, Turkey.

[10] 49, 2016, Jordan.

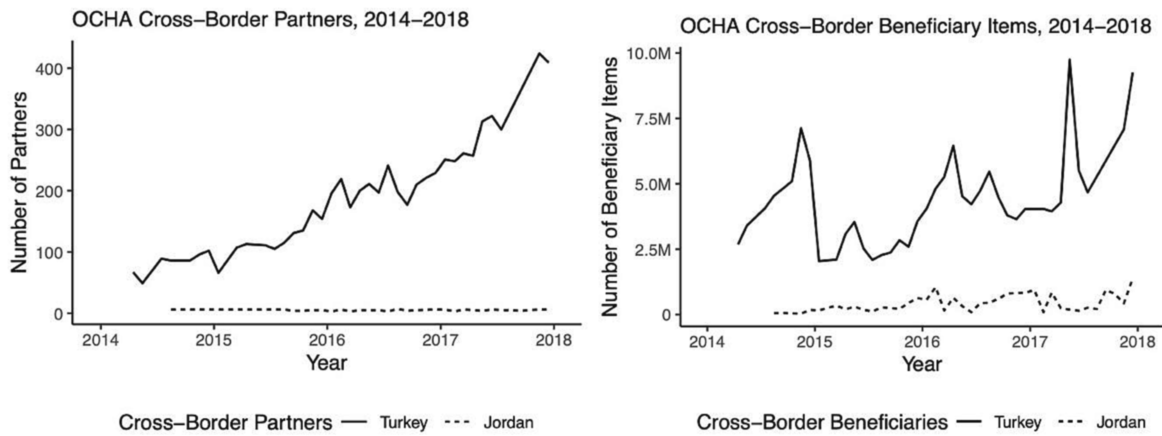

Fig. 1. OCHA Cross-Border Partners (left) and Beneficiary Items (right) from Turkey (solid) and Jordan (dotted) 2014–2018.

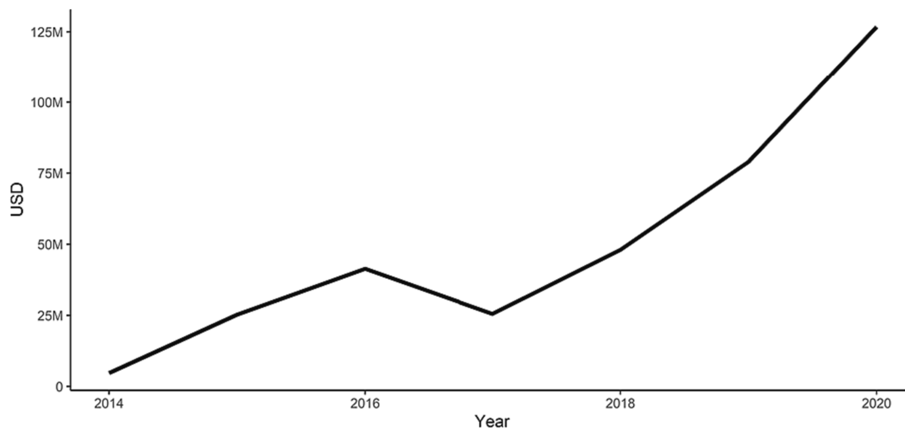

Fig. 2. Annual allocations to "National NGOs" from OCHA's Syria Cross-Border Humanitarian Fund.

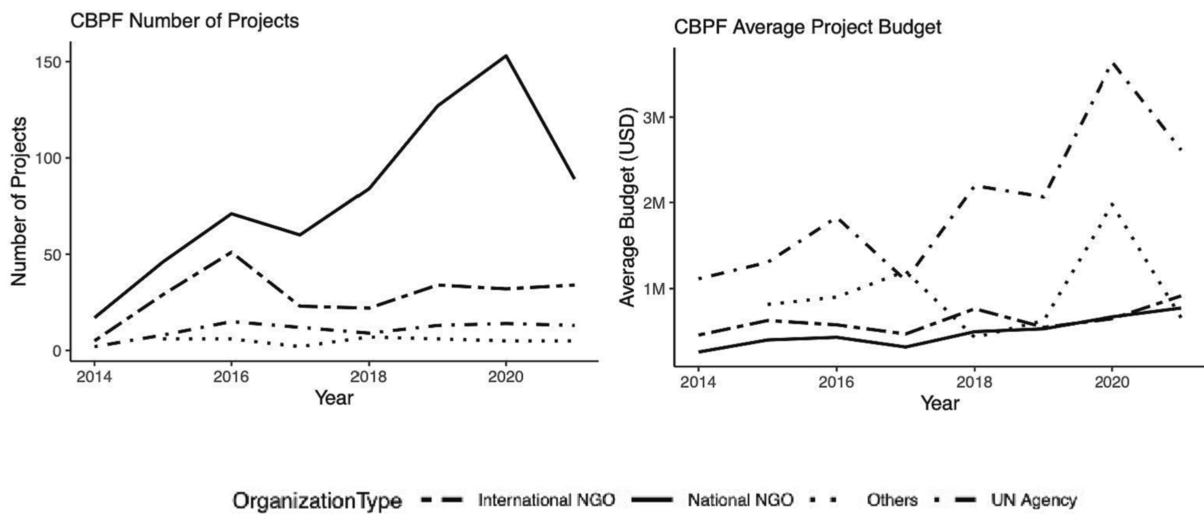

Fig. 3. Projects per year (left) and average project budgets (right), by allocated organization type, OCHA Syria Cross-Border Pooled Fund.

funding Syrian NGOs directly" because of concerns about corruption, noting: "the economy behind this is huge."[11] As well, and perhaps especially in the context of the Middle East, local NGOs are perceived by donor agencies as "particularly vulnerable" to manipulation by "terrorist financiers" (Daher & Moret, 2020, p. 14), producing what scholars have described as "criminalization of aid" associated with counterterrorism norms and laws (Roepstorff et al., 2020). Global financial and banking laws, anti-money laundering legislation, and anti-terror laws restricted funding of local actors working in areas of Syria

[11] 55, 2016, Jordan.

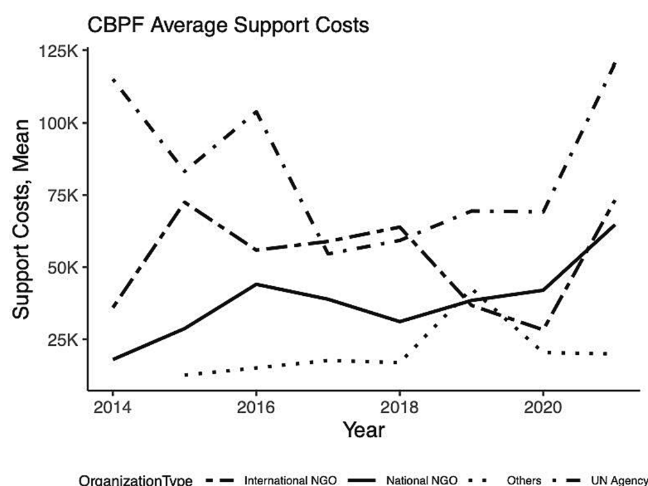

Fig. 4. Average Project Support Costs by Allocated Organization Type, OCHA Syria Cross-Border Pooled Fund.

that were controlled by non-state armed groups. Local actors working in these areas were also perceived as potentially compromised by these groups; despite the imperative for them to secure access, they risk being painted as direct or indirect supporters of these groups. In a report, the ICRC stated:

> Among the various counterterrorism measures developed by States and international organizations, some are of particular concern: penal laws criminalizing any form of support to individuals or groups designated as "terrorists"; sanctions regimes aimed at ensuring that no resources benefit such individuals and groups; and ever stricter and more cumbersome counterterrorism clauses in funding agreements between donors and humanitarian organizations. (ICRC, 2019).

Organizations have been found to restrict their activities and what they ask of international actors in contracts for fear of violating anti-terror restrictions, creating a "chilling effect" in the sector (Roepstorff et al., 2020). Contracts contain "flow-down clauses" which donor agencies use to transfer liability and risks to international NGOs, who then pass these on to local implementing actors, or "beneficiaries" and their local staff (*ibid.*).

In these ways, localization processes that focus on funding severely restrict allocations of resources and capacities to local actors while expressing international actor power; local actors are constituted as recipients in need of international help.

5.2. *Power through capacity-building*

In the Syria response, international actors enacted capacity-building programs, especially trainings and workshops, to allocate capacities and constitute local actors as implementers capable of meeting the demands of international actors. Because of their focus on transferring internationally valued and held skillsets to local actors, localization efforts ultimately reinforce global power, constitute local actors as skilled subcontractors, and devalue local capacities.

From the start of the crisis, international actors viewed capacity building as an urgent imperative. Evaluators of the early humanitarian response noted that "the struggle to find experienced and diverse humanitarian partners with high levels of humanitarian capacity has been a particular feature of the Syrian crisis" (Slim & Trombetta, 2014). Practitioners advocated for donors to "immediately support programs that will enhance the capacity of emergent NGOs," (Grisgraber & Hanson, 2013). Eventually, trainings of Syrian civil activists became so common that a U.S. government official referred to them as "duplicative," "triplicative" and "countless" in the course of interviews.[12] Typical reports of international organizations boast that they have trained hundreds or even thousands of Syrians and offered tens of courses and certifications.

Local actors excelled in areas like program management and safety and security, that is, in the skills necessary to implementation (Building Markets, 2018). Local advantages in knowledge of, needs in, and access to the context, were critical to implementation. Yet as Howe and her coauthors have found, international efforts tended to be on building organizational capacity in areas like governance and management, rather than operational capacity for the delivery and implementation in which Syrians were primarily engaged (Howe et al., 2015; Howe & Stites, 2019). An emphasis on organizational capacity reflects the values and authority structures of international organizations, which are based in rational, bureaucratic across-context knowledge and expertise.

What is more, the allocation of capacities traveled in one direction. The head of a coalition of Syrian humanitarian organizations in Turkey acknowledged that international actors bring experience from all over the world, which was especially useful in the early years of the Syrian crisis; after all, "in 2012, we didn't exist." Years in however, "we have a lot of experience in *this* crisis":

> "We have access. We know how to work with the parties. How to speak the language. All of this should give us the ability to speak about the people on the ground more than the international. But they don't try to listen."[13]

The one-way constitution of capable aid responders entailed training in, among other things, M&E or MEAL: protocols for monitoring, evaluation, accountability, and learning. In remote management settings, MEAL is perceived as critical for internationals worried about controlling aid from a distance. Yet as Howe and her coauthors have shown, MEAL practices often "consumed more time and resources" than Syrians had, were occasionally "prohibitive," and posed security risks (Howe et al., 2015). Those risks were related to the conflict conditions under which Syrians were operating, causing them to bend backwards to meet international organizations' requirements: communicating daily despite risks, costs, and lack of internet; provisioning the names of individual beneficiaries despite security risks; hand delivering invoices despite armed group checkpoints; quoting local vendor estimates with official stamps despite the informality of their business models; and so forth (ibid).

In turn, we find that this dynamic produced tensions between internationals and locals. An American development contractor remarked, with a mix of contempt and sympathy: "we have a really high accounting standard, a 100% receipt requirement, which drives [Syrians] all crazy."[14] Similarly, a third-party monitor tasked with ensuring accountability in contracted funds reflected that while many Syrian organizations wished to perform well, they are often beset by their "*inshallah* orientation"—that is, a 'God willing' orientation—when it comes to meeting deadlines.[15]

Syrians had their grievances, as well. Nayla Mansour, a Syrian educator and activist, penned a devastating reflection on the requirements and standards of international organizations. Declaring that her town in rebel-held Idlib did not need training in needs assessment, she wrote:

> The organizational structures, processes, advance planning, strict contractual items, high-quality standards (often not adapted to the local context and the unstable security situation), all of these things give the impression that war and conflict are inevitable human

[12] 115a-c, 2019, via Skype.
[13] 88a, 2017, Turkey.
[14] 69, 2017, Turkey.
[15] 93, 2017, Turkey.

> destinies, not an emergency case calling for indignation, condemnation and spontaneous actions to stop the killing… Organization calls for working and monitoring mechanisms and non-stop data collection. But what is the meaning of such mechanisms in the face of explosive barrels and Scud missiles? (Mansour, 2013)

Mansour's reflection highlights a relation characterized by unequal power and tension, and one in which international actor rational, bureaucratic expertise and knowledge are prioritized over local realities, and local actor struggles.

We identify an additional contradiction between processes for capacity building and those for funding, described above. While Syrians were expected to develop their capacity to meet the accountability and monitoring standards of donors, they were infrequently provided the long-term overhead funds that can sustain such organizational capacity. A Syrian activist who was founding an advocacy organization in Turkey articulated the irony, as he considered whether he would ever accept international funding:

> An organization working with three employees, they then need a procurement manager and an admin manager and an M&E manager, and they expand. Their project was to last six months, then the funding ends. But now they need salaries for all these employees![16]

These contradictions reveal not only the inadequacy of institutional processes for shifting power to locals, but also their reinforcement of international power. Local actors are made more skilled sub-contractors through trainings that set them up to best serve international actor interests, to comply with powerful oversight, but not to become leaders in humanitarian response or even masters of their own organizations.

5.3. Power through partnerships

The allocation of partnership agreements in the Syria context reinforced international actor power in two ways. First, local actors were constituted instrumentally, as risk-takers, gateways to access, and laborers and allocated partnership agreements on this basis. Risk was arguably transferred due to international organizational perceptions of a new, and too dangerous, security environment. Yet a transfer of authority over operations, risk-taking, or funding did not follow, leaving international partners in both safety and command.

Increases in attacks against aid workers (Wille & Fast, 2013; Fast, 2010), and particularly a sense that attacks in Syria were becoming more brutal and humiliating in nature, altered the security calculus of global humanitarian organizations (Scott, 2022a,b). Between 2011 and 2014, four international aid workers were killed and sixteen were kidnapped in Syria (Humanitarian Outcomes, nd). Speaking with one of the authors in Jordan, international aid workers reflected on kidnapping of staff by the Islamic State. They denounced what they saw as a new weakness of security guarantees and a changed security environment: "Whatever is the party, it can be a state, it can be opposition group, it can be militia, all the guarantees we have are not reliable…"; "… I've seen the pieces of paper with the stamp and everything, saying we're allowed to work freely, but obviously those assurances were not kept so we made the difficult decision to withdraw from Islamic State-controlled areas."[17].

Against the backdrop to attacks on aid workers, traditional avenues to access conflict-affected populations closed and international organizations "reevaluated" how they were "able to work in that kind of environment."[18] The cross-border and remote management mechanisms that were adopted relied on implementing "partners," i.e. Syrians. They became risk-takers and gateways for humanitarian access. Some international aid workers denounced this transfer of risks to partners at the time: "It's a risk-transferring in the sense that we're not there… except underground";[19] "They [the international organizations] were more comfortable with a partner or an organization doing the work for them… Why are you okay with me having another organization take on the risk for you?"[20].

Data on aid worker fatalities and kidnappings shows local actors faced greater risks and suffered increasing violent incidents as the war progressed, and as a proportion of all aid workers. In Syria in 2012, international aid workers suffered 5% of all aid worker fatalities and kidnappings, including local Syrian NGOs and CSOs. Two years later, this number had reached 21% alongside increasing violence, but by 2018 had fallen to below 3% (Scott, 2022a,b, p. 3; Humanitarian Outcomes, nd). While local and national actors faced greater risks in Syria than their international counterparts, protection of international partners far exceeded protections offered to Syrian nationals working with international or local partner organizations (Scott, 2022a,b). To some, this might look like the product of local actor willingness to stay and face risks in their home country. However, local actors were not regularly consulted about risk mitigation or risk taking, nor were burdens shared equitably.

Local risk-taking even became quotidian—for Syrians. A Syrian civil society actor who traveled back and forth between northwest Syria and southern Turkey described his different daily routines in each. In Turkey, the daily work consisted of meeting with donors, going to the office, smoking argileh at night. In Syria, "it depends on the shelling": on days without shelling, they implement their projects and live normal lives; on days with shelling, they help the people fleeing from the town to surrounding farmland, "we help them organize… we've gotten used to this, thank God, we have a lot of experience with shelling."[21]

Local actors were also constituted as supervised labor: they were subcontractors whose presence in the field, contextual knowledge, connections to local networks, or key language capabilities were valuable in delivering aid. The heightened value of local actors in the Syria context is illustrated by research showing local actors received approximately 8.74% of funds globally (up from prior estimates) in 2018, but that more went to local partners in Syria where they were made more essential by conflict (Metcalfe-Hough et al., 2018).

Nonetheless, partnership processes did not shift power, leaving control over the agendas, decision-making, and most resources within partnerships in international hands. An interviewee in Beirut said of partnerships: "this is not participatory… the system is not built for that. Meaning, I have a very very good finance director here and very very good finance people. But they can only do, they do the brunt of the work, but the control goes somewhere else."[22] A Syrian working for an international organization in Jordan described organizational discomfort with being unable to "completely supervise" or be "directly in charge" in partnerships. That is, the organization was not comfortable with local actor leadership. Somewhat paradoxically, they reported having to "empower the [local] administration" to be "able to follow" international organization rules,[23] including donor rules surrounding "third-party monitoring" and "due diligence" during warfare. The paradox is that partnerships can increase a sense of risk for international actors. An INGO leader in Lebanon explained that partnership and a lack of oversight makes international actors fragile: "the chance that [the donor will] freeze your program is pretty high… because it's so volatile and you don't know who is actually running what right now."[24].

Humanitarian response in Syria required local actors fill gaps where international actors could not gain safe access. Through partnership

[16] 92b, 2017, Turkey.
[17] F226; B152 2016, Jordan.
[18] F210 2016, Jordan.
[19] F249 2016, Jordan.
[20] D212 2016, Jordan.
[21] 90, 2017, Turkey.
[22] E249 2016, Lebanon.
[23] F249 2016, Jordan.
[24] E249 2016, Lebanon.

processes international actors allocated partnerships to some local actors, constituting them in this light, as risk takers, access points, and laborers. But, by not sharing burdens or opportunities for leadership, international actors reinforced their own power through the very partnership processes meant to shift it.

5.4. Power through coordination

The coordination structures and mechanisms adopted by international humanitarians placed Syrians in "recipient" positions without voice or decisional authority, constituting them as followers or representatives. Often, Syrians were excluded from coordination mechanisms altogether. When they were allocated seats at the table, they were constituted in tokenistic roles in forums where plans for Syria were being made.

The allocation (or lack thereof) of representation unfolded at multiple levels and across sectors of the crisis response. This included national and even subnational level meetings of humanitarian sectors. One of the authors regularly attended UN coordination meetings in Lebanon in 2016 and observed the relative silence of the few local participants invited to attend. They observed that even those Syrian or Lebanese members allocated leadership roles spoke, and were listened to, infrequently. In response, we gathered data on the relative inclusion of local NGO and civil society groups in UN coordination meetings, looking at the case of health sector coordination in Lebanon during the Syria War. Fig. 5 draws on data we collected from health sector working group (HWG) meeting minutes in Lebanon from 2013 to 2015, available through the UN Refugee Agency Operational Data Portal. It shows that, over this period, local and Syrian civil society groups or NGOs never made up more than 15 percent of attendees. However, mere representation (already low) is not necessarily an indicator of participation, and certainly not leadership.

Our analysis reveals that the United Nations and World Health Organization chaired all UN health sector working group meetings in the period under study. Moreover, while local or Syrian actors were present at almost all HWG meetings, they scarcely commented on topics raised.[25] In available meeting records from 2014 and 2015, local organizations did not comment at all.

Syrian exclusion from coordination began early in the response and was maintained years later, after hundreds of Syrian civil society organizations had emerged as humanitarian players. The Supporting Syria and the Region conference was held in 2016, co-hosted by the UK, Germany, Kuwait, Norway, and the United Nations. CEO and Founder of Sawa for Aid & Development, Dr. Rouba Mhaissen, was introduced by UN Secretary General Ban Ki-Moon and given two minutes to speak. In response, she said, "I am not sure I am going to stick to two minutes, because I am one of very few Syrians speaking in the name of Syrians who are going to speak today…" She went on,

> I am Syrian but I am also a professional, I am not a storyteller. I am here to give you consultation and to report on the eighty-plus Syrian civil society organizations who have met and have been backed by international organizations yesterday at the civil society conference… Thank you for inviting us. The invitation of Syrians has been last minute. A lot couldn't make it because of fortress Europe and the visa issues. Our presence here has been a token presence, at an ad hoc event, of which the priorities have already been pre-determined without our involvement. (Mhaissen, 2016)

A lack of inclusion of Syrians in global forums on peace and security, more broadly, severely limited Syrian influence over the high-level policies that were, ultimately, about them. The CEO of the Union of Medical Care and Relief Organisations in Syria recalled that, in 2014, fifty Syrian women gathered in Geneva as part of the newly launched Syrian Women's Initiative for Peace and Democracy, with a spokesperson saying: "We cannot remain silent regarding events in Syria, such as daily death, massive destruction, starvation, displacement of hundreds of thousands of families…" (quoted in Alzoubi, 2017). However, just over a week later, the UN-Arab League Joint Special Representative for Syria, "was unwilling to include any form of civil society presence in the talks" during the UN-backed Geneva II Conference on Syria (*ibid.*). Later, Syrian women and CSOs were included as part of peace talks during Geneva IV, in 2017. Gathering as the Women's Advisory Board, the Civil Society Support Room, or the Experts Room, CSOs engaged at various stages in track II diplomacy and reported feeding into the negotiation process, but from the sidelines.

Over the years of the conflict, Syrians moved from exclusion to invitation, as international actors allocated them roles and opportunities to be present in coordination meetings and mechanisms. But local seats did not constitute local actors as leaders. Institutional processes have been ill-suited to creating local leadership and ceding power to local actors throughout this time. Localization through these mechanisms is not occurring with any speed, despite the urgency and rapidity that characterize humanitarian emergencies.

6. Conclusion

International humanitarians have strived to enable local roles and even leadership in emergency response through institutional processes to "localize" aid. Local actors do assume roles in aid delivery. However, these are often overshadowed by the international organizations that assume dominance over resources, leadership, and coordination, and subsequently fall short in achieving localization's objective of shifting power to local actors. We have argued that the gap between international intentions and outcomes on localization are not the result of insufficient effort or dedication to these institutional processes, nor to the inability of local actors to heed the call. Instead, we reconceptualize localization as a practice of power: international actors allocate local actor capacities and constitute local actors through institutions of their own creation. These institutions, fundamentally, embody international power over local responders and are thus unable to reshape the power relations between them; instead, they reinforce existing power dynamics. We have advanced this argument in the Syrian case, where local actors were motivated participants in humanitarian action, frontline responders to a deadly crisis, risk-takers in insecure conditions, recipients of trainings that sidelined their strengths, and tokenistic representatives in decision-making processes. The response to the Syrian crisis "went local" by using Syrians to deliver aid, as laborers; it did not, however, localize or empower them to lead or share control over crisis response in their own country.

This study has implications for scholars interested in relationships between care or compassion in the face of suffering, and control *over* affected populations, a "local turn" in humanitarianism, and decolonization of the global aid architecture.

First, our findings may have implications for local leadership during ongoing and future humanitarian crises affected by global interference, from Yemen to Ethiopia to Ukraine. Our findings highlight that local actors are constituted *as* more or less humanitarian and allocated (or denied) capacities through localization; we show that localization processes reinforce international power over local humanitarian actors, rather than unseating it. In considering how far our findings might travel, we note that much ink has been spilt comparing responses to wars in Syria and Ukraine, and the comparably massive humanitarian crises that followed. And we agree with condemnations of the dehumanizing narratives used to depict Syrian migrants as security risks "spreading" or "flowing" across borders, like flood waters rather than people, and with calls for governments to employ the more compassionate policies offered to Ukrainian migrants when others seek asylum at their borders.

[25] National ministry representatives were more likely to comment during meetings than local organizational actors, but they remained far less likely to do so than international organization representatives.

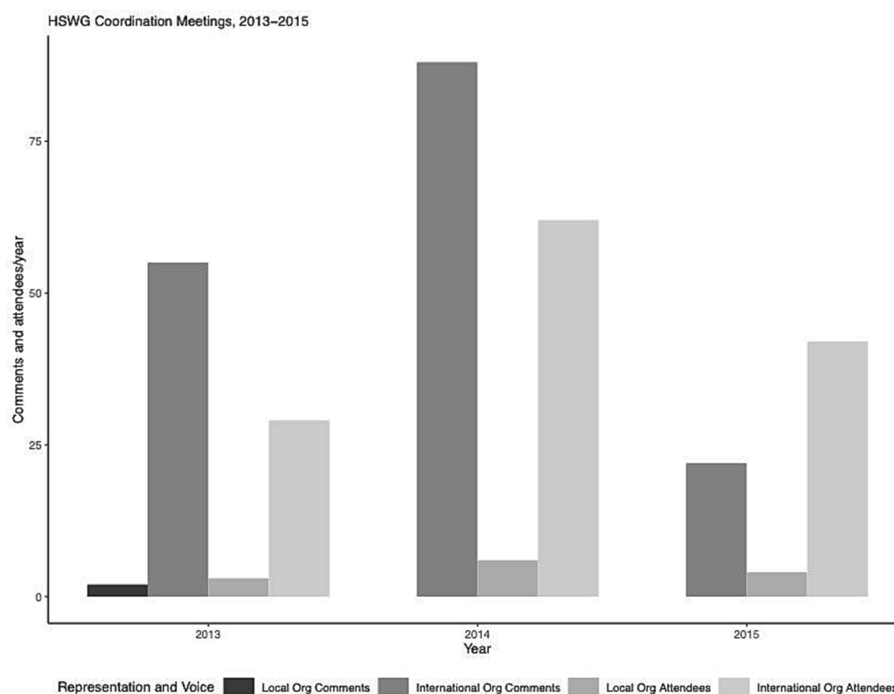

Fig. 5. Local and International Organizations' Attendance and Comments in aggregated UN Health Sector Working Group Meetings 2013 to 2015.

We therefore asked ourselves, as with refuge, would global actors be more likely to encourage local leadership in a place like Ukraine, that is more White and more Western? We expect not. Our findings are likely to travel to contexts where local actors might be deemed more capable or worthy at the start of a conflict, because the institutional processes set in motion during humanitarian response reproduce international power, even where the aim is to shift it.

This brings us to a second implication. To understand what might make a "local turn" in humanitarianism possible (Mac Ginty & Richmond, 2013), further study of select cases where local authority is recognized and local actors lead during humanitarian crises, and why, is required. Emerging studies have laid important foundations for the study of what works in peacebuilding, forced migration, and in civilian protection (Pincock et al., 2020; Campbell, 2018; Firchow, 2018; Kaplan, 2017); identification of those factors that make local leadership possible, across cases and areas of practice, would be a valuable next contribution. In particularly, analysis of those instances when local, national, or regional crisis response systems are not superseded by international ones, has the potential to provide a blueprint for explaining why we see cases of local preparedness and international restraint. If localization is reinforcing the power of international actors, understanding why local leadership is possible may be key to making aid decolonization and social and racial emancipation through the global aid architecture feasible.

Declaration of Competing Interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

Data availability

Data has been made available in Appendices.

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Appendix A

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