Daira Sabz
CONSULTING & ENGINEERING GROUP
Development & Sustainability

WHITE PAPER

Localisation in the Humanitarian–Development–Peace Nexus in Post-2021 Afghanistan

A Human-Centred Policy Analysis and Strategic Roadmap

Executive Summary

Since August 2021, Afghanistan has entered a period of profound transformation. International actors have faced unprecedented operational constraints, while Afghan communities, civil society organisations, and informal institutions have become the backbone of humanitarian response and social stability. This white paper argues that localisation is no longer a reform agenda — it is the operational reality of Afghanistan's aid ecosystem. Drawing on published literature and human-centred insights, this paper analyses localisation within the Humanitarian–Development–Peace (HDP) Nexus and proposes a strategic roadmap for donors, UN agencies, INGOs, and Afghan institutions.

1 Introduction

The concept of the Humanitarian–Development–Peace (HDP) Nexus, also called Triple Nexus, developed in response to 21st-century realities of climate change, displacement, and the challenge of sustainable development in conflict-affected settings. The HDP Nexus indicates a shift in how international assistance is planned and funded, highlighting the need to simultaneously address humanitarian assistance, development, and peace-promoting activities, rather than treating them separately or in an iterative manner. Localisation is a technical shift in the global aid system to redistribute the power, resources, and leadership to local actors(Joireman & Haddad, 2023). But in countries like Afghanistan, which are highly vulnerable to the impacts of climate change, and as categorised as a less developed country, localisation is not a policy debate; it has to be a lived experience.

When international staff withdrew in 2021, Afghan organisations did not wait for new frameworks or donor guidance. They acted. They negotiated access, delivered aid, mediated conflicts, and kept essential services alive. Their work was not guided by the HDP Nexus; it was driven by necessity, dignity, and survival.

As Roepstorff (2020) argues, localisation is fundamentally about power. In Afghanistan, that power has shifted by force of circumstance, not by design. This white paper examines localisation through a human lens, grounded in published research and the lived realities of Afghan responders.

2 The Human Reality of Localisation in Afghanistan

Behind every policy document are real people whose lives shape — and are shaped by — localisation:

- A teacher in Ghazni running informal classes for girls in her home.
- A local NGO worker in Kandahar negotiating safe passage for aid trucks.
- A youth volunteer in Kabul distributing food parcels at night.
- A community elder in Badakhshan mediating disputes to prevent violence.

These individuals are not "local actors" in the abstract sense. They are the backbone of Afghanistan's survival. As Jackson and Amiri (2022) note, Afghan responders became the first and last responders after the political transition, long before international agencies regained operational capacity.

Localisation in Afghanistan is not about shifting power; it is about recognising the power that already exists.

3 The HDP Nexus in Afghanistan: A System Under Stress

The HDP Nexus — humanitarian response, development continuity, and peacebuilding — has collapsed into a humanitarian-dominated system. Development funding has evaporated, peacebuilding has become politically sensitive, and humanitarian needs have skyrocketed (SIGAR, 2022).

Key stress points:

- Humanitarian needs affecting over two-thirds of the population
- Collapse of national development systems
- Restrictions on women's participation
- Sanctions and banking barriers
- Fragmented coordination
- Limited international presence

Howe et al. (2019) argue that the Nexus often fails in fragile contexts because it assumes institutional stability. Afghanistan's post-2021 landscape demonstrates this clearly.

4 Structural Barriers to Localisation

4.1 Donor Risk Aversion

Donors fear sanctions, non-compliance, and reputational risk. As a result, they impose heavy reporting and auditing requirements that local organisations struggle to meet (Metcalfe-Hough et al., 2021).

4.2 Funding Bottlenecks

Globally, only 1.2% of humanitarian funding reaches local actors directly (Metcalfe-Hough et al., 2021). In Afghanistan, the percentage is even lower.

4.3 Gender Restrictions

Restrictions on female staff undermine humanitarian principles and disproportionately affect women-led organisations (Humanitarian Policy Group, 2023).

4.4 Political Sensitivities

Local organisations must navigate complex political landscapes, often at personal risk (Petersen & Fast, 2021).

4.5 Narrative Dominance

International actors still control the language, frameworks, and definitions of "capacity," "risk," and "legitimacy" (Roepstorff, 2020).

5 Local Strengths: The Untold Story

Despite barriers, Afghan actors demonstrate extraordinary strengths.

5.1 Deep Community Trust

Local organisations have long-standing relationships with communities, elders, and informal institutions (Pain & Kantor, 2018).

5.2 Contextual Intelligence

They understand cultural norms, conflict dynamics, and local power structures.

5.3 Access in Hard-to-Reach Areas

Local responders can operate where international actors cannot (Jackson & Amiri, 2022).

5.4 Adaptive Capacity

Afghan organisations have adapted rapidly to post-2021 realities, often more effectively than international agencies.

5.5 Women-Led Resilience

Women's groups continue to operate discreetly, supporting education, livelihoods, and protection.

6 Case Studies

6.1 Community Development Councils (CDCs)

CDCs remain one of Afghanistan's most successful local governance structures, demonstrating legitimacy and community trust (Pain & Kantor, 2018).

6.2 Local Humanitarian Responders

Local NGOs were the first to respond after the 2021 transition and remain the primary implementers today (Jackson & Amiri, 2022).

6.3 Women-Led Organisations

Despite restrictions, women-led groups continue to provide essential services, often at great personal risk.

7 Policy Analysis: Why Localisation Has Stalled

Localisation has stalled not because Afghan actors lack capacity, but because the international system has not adapted. The HDP Nexus remains fragmented, and donors continue to rely on international intermediaries.

Key reasons:

- Compliance frameworks designed for stable environments
- Overemphasis on financial risk, underemphasis on human impact
- Limited donor flexibility
- Political constraints on engagement
- Lack of trust in local institutions

As Mac Ginty and Richmond (2020) argue, peacebuilding and development often fail when they ignore local legitimacy and agency.

8 Strategic Roadmap for Meaningful Localisation

8.1 For Donors

- Provide multi-year, flexible funding
- Create Afghanistan-specific risk-sharing mechanisms
- Support women-led organisations
- Simplify compliance requirements

8.2 For UN Agencies and INGOs

- Shift from implementers to facilitators
- Strengthen local leadership in coordination platforms
- Ensure equitable partnerships
- Share overheads fairly

8.3 For Afghan NGOs

- Strengthen governance and financial systems
- Build coalitions and networks
- Advocate collectively for localisation

8.4 For Community Institutions

- Expand inclusive decision-making
- Strengthen local accountability
- Integrate women and youth voices

9 Conclusion

Localisation in Afghanistan is not optional — it is the only viable path forward. Afghan actors have shown resilience, courage, and leadership in the face of extraordinary challenges. The international system must now match that courage with trust, resources, and equitable partnerships. A localisation agenda that is human-centred, principled, and inclusive is not only possible — it is essential for Afghanistan's future.

10 References

Howe, K., Stites, E., & Chudacoff, D. (2019). Breaking the humanitarian-development-peace nexus. *Disasters, 43*(S2), S300–S317.

Humanitarian Policy Group. (2023). *Gender and humanitarian access in Afghanistan*. ODI.

Jackson, A., & Amiri, R. (2022). *Local humanitarian action in Afghanistan after August 2021*. Humanitarian Outcomes.

Mac Ginty, R., & Richmond, O. (2020). The local turn in peacebuilding. *Third World Quarterly, 41*(1), 1–16.

Metcalfe-Hough, V., Fenton, W., Willitts-King, B., & Spencer, A. (2021). *The Grand Bargain at five years*. ODI.

Pain, A., & Kantor, P. (2018). *Understanding and addressing conflict and fragility in Afghanistan*. *World Development, 112*, 1–12.

Petersen, K., & Fast, L. (2021). Risk transfer in humanitarian action. *Journal of International Humanitarian Action, 6*(1), 1–14.

Roepstorff, K. (2020). A call for critical reflection on the localisation agenda. *Third World Quarterly, 41*(3), 405–421.

SIGAR. (2022). *Collapse of the Afghan government and security forces*. Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction.