



Localization – An Example From a Short Testing Project

Conceptualizing Localization

Localization, a shift in power and decision-making authority to those directly affected by challenges, has been widely discussed in development. Decolonizing aid and relinquishing authority to local actors is a complex endeavour, requiring structural and systems-level changes. Local partners in the Global South would take the lead rather than acting as implementation partners and/or be directly funded (Wessel et al., 2023). The foundations of localization principles in international or global development can be traced back to humanitarian ideals. It hinges on a conscious and intentional shift that underscores the importance of recognizing, empowering, recalibrating, and sharing authority with local and national entities (Barbelet, 2018). The goal is to establish a balanced partnership that empowers local and national actors to have a meaningful say in decision-making processes.

Similarly, the Charter for Change initiative outlines eight fundamental principles to redress power imbalances and inequality while adhering to the overarching mantra of being *as local as possible and international as necessary*. Direct funding, partnership, transparency, recruitment, advocacy, equality, support, and promotion are the eight pillars that organizations can embed in creating more inclusive and appropriate humanitarian efforts. It is crucial to acknowledge that while the eight pillars may seem ideal, a valid criticism is that they may need to provide more attention to the critical contextual factors, including sociopolitical, historical, economic, and cultural elements.

The onset of the COVID-19 pandemic has acted as a transformative catalyst for international non-governmental organizations (INGOs), compelling them to acknowledge the inevitability of localization (Gibbons & Otieku-Boadu, 2021). This crisis highlighted the pivotal role of local and national actors in responding to emergencies and addressing community needs. The international travel and operations limitations also underscored the need for INGOs to rely more on local partners. As a result, INGOs have recognized the urgency of moving away from traditional, paternalistic, and imperialistic approaches and instead embracing localization as a more effective and sustainable path toward development. The pandemic was a catalyst for FIT-funded testing projects. SMOs being funded had to adapt their thinking immediately to meet tight testing timeframes of under 15 months.

Testing Innovation Solutions to Advance Gender Equality and Empower Women and Girls

The Partnership

The University of the Fraser Valley (UFV), a FIT-funded SMO, partnered with the Albinism Royal Foundation (ARF) to test an innovative solution(s) to advance gender quality: "Leaving No One Behind: Empowering Persons with Albinism, particularly Women and Adolescent Girls in Rural Regions of Sierra Leone" in 2021-2022.

UFV, a post-secondary institution, is in British Columbia, Canada. The team at UFV was comprised of Catherine Liao¹ and Dr. Geetanjali Gill². Albinism Royal Foundation (ARF), established in 2018, is a grassroots organization advocating for persons with albinism (PWA). Sarah N'gaiwa and Bernard N'gaiwa co-founded ARF. Sarah is a woman with albinism and a strong advocate/activist in her community. ARF's mission is to address discrimination, invisibility, stigmatization, and marginalization of PWA in Sierra Leone. ARF operates on an annual budget of USD 500 to USD 700 and relies on personal contributions, donations, and fundraising efforts. The organization's network of twelve district coordinators (gender champions in the FIT-Funded project), mostly PWAs and parents of children with albinism, facilitated community engagement across provinces, such as the advocacy march on International Albinism Awareness Day each year.

Project Focus & Scope

Empowering PWA, especially women and adolescent girls, can transform them into effective advocates for their needs, rights, and broader gender equality in Sierra Leone. The project incorporated a diverse group of participants, including 60 women and 40 men, comprising PWA and parents with children living with albinism. This initiative spanned across 11 rural districts. A significant aspect of the project involved the Training of Trainers (TOTs) approach, where 35 participants received training in weaving and sewing/tailoring, including comprehensive training in financial literacy and marketing.

Men traditionally dominate sewing and tailoring, and the project directed efforts towards revitalizing the weaving tradition, which is under threat due to the influx of cheap, imported materials (identified by ARF when conducting the Gender-based Analysis Plus). The project identified and empowered 12 Gender Equality Champions who underwent training with Dr. Geetanjali Gill (gender specialist). They actively contributed and coordinated initiatives in their respective communities across the 11 districts. Participants received training and opportunities for leadership and advocacy within their communities and with stakeholders. Various participatory methods created an empowering environment, including digital stories, theatre, public speaking, community meetings, and advocacy marches.

Practical Lessons and Insights on Localization

UFV/ARF did not adopt a rigid, one-size-fits-all approach to operationalize localization. Instead, they embraced a relational approach, fostering an environment that nurtured the growth of localization. The following insights shed light on the strategies employed at the individual level to achieve this goal.

Personal Relationships & Mentorships: Local Partners are more than just implementation partners

ARF took the lead, and UFV supported the short-testing project. ARF made financial decisions, directed the project, and facilitated and planned the baseline, midline, and endline activities. UFV guided ARF on programmatic requirements, ensuring that accountability structures were in place/followed to meet the needs of funders. Local ownership and leadership were central to the project's success.

In the journey towards localization, mentorship emerged as a pivotal catalyst for ARF. Mentorship transcended the conventional capacity-building model, evolving into a substantive bond rooted in relationship-building. This dynamic cultivation of connections fostered an environment of trust, reciprocal growth, and authentic respect. UFV team provided mentorship to ARF that fell outside project activities, ensuring that ARF suggested capacity building/strengthening needs. Establishing trust requires building personal relationships, especially when partnering with grassroots organizations.

A mentoring endeavour demands patience because both sides embarked on this journey with limited prior experience. For the UFV team, guiding a grassroots organization was uncharted territory, and all involved faced a steep learning curve. Similarly, this marked ARF's first venture into implementing a project of this scale independently on the ground. A hands-off approach by the UFV team empowered ARF to take the lead. The mentorship process underscored the importance of patience, relationality, and acknowledging that substantial growth is evolving. UFV gleaned invaluable insights throughout this process that added depth to the partnership.

Sometimes, the line between mentorship and personal relationships can become blurred, leading to certain expectations. For instance, numerous collaborative interactions occurred outside regular office hours, creating an "always on" scenario. Nonetheless, the substantial advantages stemming from a strong mentorship dynamic far surpass any minor obstacles that may arise. The mentorship journey extends beyond mere professional development; it thrives on the foundation of camaraderie and mutual understanding. In essence, mentorship is a cornerstone of the localization journey, highlighting the potency of collaboration, patience, and shared advancement.

Exploring Professional Communication: Bridging Across Cultures

Communication styles vary across different regions; what is considered professional and acceptable in one country may not hold true in others. In the global North, employing WhatsApp for professional communication might be seen as less formal. WhatsApp was a valuable resource in the collaborative context of ARF and UFV. It facilitated group discussions and prompted the resolution of issues in real-time. WhatsApp proved particularly advantageous for data collection and coordinating community events and workshops. The platform enables swift responses to inquiries, fostering productive teamwork between ARF and UFV, thus bolstering UFV's endeavours in localization.

Zoom, another pivotal communication tool, played a notable role in facilitating workshops. It enabled UFV to host gender equality workshops virtually, engaging over 30 participants in Freetown, Sierra Leone. Virtual sessions represented a novel approach for ARF, and after several Zoom workshops, ARF became proficient in organizing virtual workshops, extending beyond UFV to involve their community across various provinces. Zoom also had a distinct impact on team meetings. While turning off cameras during meetings might seem like disengagement, it serves a purpose, especially in regions like Sierra Leone, where internet connectivity is a concern. Turning off cameras can improve bandwidth, making meetings more efficient and preventing technical disruptions, highlighting the significance of adapting our understanding of professional communication behaviours to the specific context. Professional communication is a dynamic concept that varies across cultures and situations. The experiences of ARF and UFV illustrate how adapting communication tools to fit the context can lead to successful collaboration and meaningful engagement, transcending geographical boundaries.

The Impact of Words: How Language Shapes Our Connections

Our words hold significant power as they shape how we interact with others. Language is socially constructed and can influence our thoughts, feelings, and behaviour. The UFV team used specific words promoting empowerment and agency in their project. Instead of referring to people as "beneficiaries," they opted for terms like "community members" or "project participants." For instance, when the local partner shared photos of project participants for reports or promotions, these images often depicted "beneficiaries" receiving gifts or in situations where something was being done "for" them. This portrayal seemed to align with a narrative of Western expectations, possibly influenced by the concept of white saviourism. Their local partner noticed this deliberate shift in language use and understood UFV's rationale for not using photos as such. These exchanges sparked meaningful conversations between UFV, ARF, and the project participants.

The UFV team's deliberate choice of language catalyzed engaging and substantive conversations. Through these discussions, they delved into the profound connotations of language and imagery. By eschewing the term "beneficiaries," they intended to emphasize the active engagement and empowerment of those participating. This shift underscored their dedication to fostering a partnership characterized by equity and mutual respect. Language goes beyond mere words; it shapes perceptions, triggers conversations, and challenges established narratives. SMOs can make thoughtful language choices, thus reflecting dedication to building a genuine partnership based on respect, fairness, and mutual empowerment.

Unveiling Assumptions: Acknowledging Positionality and Examining Biases

UFV, as a team from Global North, was acutely aware of how development work is entrenched in colonial mentality and racism. The UFV team used a decolonial and anti-racist approach by centering local perspectives, context, and knowledge. They were keenly conscious of how their beliefs, values, and interests might impact the course of their project. Acknowledging this potential bias proved pivotal in establishing an equitable and impartial partnership. During the testing phase, the UFV team meticulously documented their emotions, motivations, and the scenarios they encountered. This practice provided insights into how their viewpoints were moulding their collaborative efforts. The UFV team also created a space for reflection that extended to their colleagues at ARF. Members of ARF carefully documented daily interactions and experiences involving their team. This dual perspective provided a valuable view of the collaboration from both sides. Regular discussions between UFV and ARF added depth to this

exchange, allowing them to openly explore their experiences and brainstorm ways to improve their working relationship. Over time, a foundation of trust began to take hold and grow.

ARF shared their appreciation for the UFV team, emphasizing that they were treated as "equal partners" who were consistently involved in decision-making. One notable example was the effectiveness of "brainstorming" sessions, where ARF learned and actively participated in generating ideas from inception to implementation. Being integral to the ideation process significantly boosted their "confidence," which, in turn, heightened their "motivation" and improved "collaboration" with UFV. Regular "check-in" sessions were pivotal in fostering an environment where the ARF team felt comfortable providing candid feedback and constructive insights to enhance collaboration. This transformative journey underscored the profound impact of open communication and shared self-reflection in cultivating a partnership rooted in trust and mutual progress.

Partnerships between the global North and South are not immune to biases stemming from historical colonialism and white supremacist thoughts. These biases can lead to misconceptions or unjust perceptions. Biases can manifest in various directions. For instance, ARF expressed a sense of pride in collaborating with "Western" organizations like UFV and noted that their community members bestowed "additional" recognition upon them for their association with "Canadian professors." Rather than avoiding these complex conversations, it is crucial to seize the opportunity to delve into the origins of these ideologies when they arise. Such discussions foster mutual learning for both partners and enhance our ability to identify biases as they surface.

Biases occasionally gave rise to doubts and unfair assessments of situations, impeding trust, mainly regarding financial matters. For instance, ARF and UFV employed different financial reporting methods, leading to occasional misunderstandings and suspicions of fund misappropriation, with ARF unfairly bearing the brunt of these assumptions. However, upon closer examination, it became evident that the UFV team had not adequately familiarized ARF with the required financial reporting procedures. UFV adhered to specific standards and presumed that others would do the same. Once this mutual understanding was achieved, ARF operated with less interference, and any perception of UFV being excessively critical diminished. This shift not only bolstered confidence but also contributed to capacity building simultaneously. Engaging in deliberate self-reflection is a valuable approach to tackling this challenge. We can dismantle barriers and foster an equitable partnership by examining our thoughts and biases.

Moving Beyond How Identities Intersect: Using Intersectionality for Transformative Change

Intersectionality has gained significant prominence in global development research and initiatives, moving beyond mere terminology to become a robust framework. As an analytical tool, intersectionality provides a valuable perspective for unravelling the complex web of structural inequalities/inequities based on various factors such as gender, race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, and gender identity. However, the significance of intersectionality goes beyond just examining where different identities intersect; it encompasses a transformative approach, a critical theory aimed at dismantling deeply rooted inequitable systems rather than offering superficial solutions (Collins, 2019). At its core, intersectionality seeks to challenge the prevailing norms. Its objective is not limited to addressing disparities but to bring about profound social change that aligns with the principles of social justice. Intersectionality encompasses social inequality, power dynamics, relationships, contextual complexities, and the broader pursuit of social justice (Collins & Bilge, 2020).

Incorporating the concepts of intersectionality proposed by Collins and Bilge (2020) provided the UFV team with a valuable framework. This framework allowed for three essential understandings of intersectionality: firstly, as an analytical tool to comprehend the intricate interplay of gender, class, race, sexuality, and citizenship within the global context; secondly, as a critical approach to examine the complex connections between individuals, society, and institutions, thereby facilitating practical application; and thirdly, the significance of analyzing identity politics through the lens of intersectionality. An intersectional approach to the project allowed the UFV team to focus on how matrices of power and interlocking structures of oppression shape and influence social identities on multiple levels, resulting in unique experiences, opportunities, and barriers for each participant.

This perspective became particularly relevant when engaging with project participants and their interactions within the ARF and the UFV team. The application of the intersectionality lens enabled the UFV team to avoid treating project participants – persons living with albinism (women, girls, men, boys) as a homogeneous group. This perspective guided the UFV and ARF teams away from employing a generic, one-size-fits-all approach. Instead, it prompted the UFV and ARF teams to center everyone’s lived experience and guide the development of tailored program designs and interventions that are contextually informed, especially during gender equality education, economic empowerment initiatives, and financial literacy workshops. Creating the baseline, midline, and endline questionnaires became a joint effort with ARF. The challenge was crafting open-ended questions that could effectively explore the complex connections between societal structures like power, privilege, and oppression. This was made more challenging because their primary focus was on assessing whether the specific goals and indicators set for the project were met. Nonetheless, UFV/ARF made concerted efforts to document these discussions and observations.

To tackle the issue of power dynamics, the UFV team made deliberate efforts during their interactions with participants. For example, during focus group discussions, they actively acknowledged and addressed power imbalances by rearranging participants in a circular seating arrangement, which differed from the usual single-row, one-way seating style commonly used at similar events in Sierra Leone. This change encouraged a more inclusive and dynamic exchange of ideas among participants. ARF has since incorporated this seating arrangement style into their "palaver hut" discussions. In focus group discussions, the ARF team discovered that having separate groups for men and women proved more beneficial when discussing gender equality. Women felt more comfortable expressing themselves candidly and openly, sharing their experiences of various forms of oppression and violence they encountered as individuals and as women with albinism. Hence, when incorporating Intersectionality into a project, it is essential to delve into the underlying structural manifestations of oppression. A limitation UFV faced when implementing the intersectionality framework was the influence of religion on gender equality work in Sierra Leone. Several participants voiced the belief that "God created women to serve the men," and the subservience of women was considered a virtue rather than a fault because of various religious beliefs.

Intersectionality transcends theoretical discourse and is a potent agent of transformative impact. Its potency lies in its capacity to unveil obscured layers, deconstruct oppressive frameworks, and facilitate a shift in the prevailing paradigm toward fairness and societal equity. Furthermore, a practical intersectional analysis must surpass the surface-level intersection of identities, delving deeper into the interconnected complexities.

Summary of lessons and insights

- **Structural and system-level changes** are required to truly operationalize localization.
- **Individual commitment to localization** can create a collective response to change.
- **Local Partners** are more than just implementation partners.
- **Local ownership and leadership** were central to the project's success.
- **Building trust** is critical to a relational partnership.
- **Adapting professional communication** that bridges across cultures and contexts fosters successful cross-culture collaboration.
- **The impact of language** in shaping connections is a profound tool for empowerment.
- **Using a decolonial and anti-racist approach** by centering local perspectives, context, and knowledge helps address power imbalances and dismantle colonial mentality.
- **Acknowledging positionality** creates opportunities for critical self-reflexivity.
- **Addressing intersectionality** requires us to go beyond the rhetoric of multiple identities and instead use intersectionality theory as a tool for transformation.
- **Finally, there is no cookbook approach to localization**, but building authentic relationships is an essential first step.



About FIT

The Fund for Innovation and Transformation (FIT) is a 5-year, \$16.5 M initiative of the Inter-Council Network of Provincial Regional Councils, funded by Global Affairs Canada and administered by the Manitoba Council for International Cooperation (MCIC). FIT is designed to support Canadian small and medium-sized organizations (SMOs) testing innovative solutions that advance gender equality in the Global South. The program is open to civil society organizations, social enterprises, post-secondary institutions, and the private sector.

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