

The 'conflict paradox': humanitarian access, localisation, and (dis)empowerment in Myanmar, Somalia, and Somaliland

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Since the World Humanitarian Summit in 2016, debates about the localisation of humanitarian aid have intensified. Dominant discourse focuses on reform, although calls for the broader decolonisation of aid are mounting. This paper examines the impact of neoliberal-inspired competition that incentivises institutional expansion and clashes with localisation. It introduces the concept of the 'conflict paradox' to illustrate how armed conflict and restricted humanitarian access for international actors can both empower and disempower local and national humanitarian actors (LNHAs). These themes are then demonstrated using case studies of Myanmar, Somalia, and Somaliland, revealing the potential for LNHA to demand humanitarian system change, as well as the challenges to doing so. The paper concludes that for localisation to progress towards decolonisation, fundamental ideological shifts away from the neoliberal competitive mindset are essential. Notably, there is a need to move from low-quality localisation (subcontracting) to high-quality localisation grounded in solidarity and an emancipatory agenda.

Keywords: Burma, civil society, decolonisation, Grand Bargain, localisation, Myanmar, neoliberalism, Somalia, Somaliland

Introduction

Analysis and debates regarding the localisation of humanitarian aid have intensified since the World Humanitarian Summit in May 2016 and subsequent Grand Bargain commitments. Practitioner positions range from those who argue it is about 'bringing justice to an unjust system' (Ali, 2016) to the more dominant view that localisation is a technical process of reform, as reflected in the Grand Bargain between major donors and humanitarian organisations. It has also been argued that we should drop the term 'localisation' and instead focus on 'the elephant in the room, which is power, race and colonialism' and the deeper need for decolonising aid beyond localisation (Ali, 2021). Myriad reports highlight the miniscule flow of funding to local and national humanitarian actors (LNHAs) and the uneven progress in implementation of the Grand Bargain (Willitts-King et al., 2018). A growing body of academic scholarship on localisation has emphasised the importance of trust (Roepstorff, 2021), the benefit of an anthropological research agenda to address localisation challenges (Apthorpe and Borton, 2019), and the need for

a critical localism to understand the contextual and relational nature of 'local' as a concept (Roepstorff, 2020). This paper seeks to build upon, but also diverges from, these debates, as it explores the impact of armed conflict and resulting humanitarian access restrictions on localisation.

First it examines ideological conflicts in relation to localisation, before assessing how this translates into practice. This involves looking at contestations regarding the definition of localisation, which while having merit, have also become a means, we suggest, by which international humanitarian actors (IHAs) are able to resist change. The paper then outlines the dominant localisation agenda before analysing the ideological conflict between the neoliberal incentive for institutional expansion and the reality that localisation necessitates a shift in resources and power from IHAs to LNHAAs. The paper also introduces the concepts and underlines the importance of differentiating between high-quality localisation, grounded in solidarity, and low-quality localisation that is born of necessity and is often perceived as subcontracting. Quantity of localisation remains important, but we believe quality is arguably even more critical, particularly if pursuing the decolonisation of aid. Foregrounding these and other tensions related to localisation, the paper then presents the concept of the 'conflict paradox'.¹ This refers to how armed conflict and the resulting humanitarian access restrictions can be leveraged by LNHAAs to advance the localisation agenda. At the same time, it can be a source of LNHA disempowerment, as these actors are frequently relegated to operating disproportionately in the most challenging contexts, whereas IHAs work in comparatively secure settings. These themes are illustrated using case studies of Myanmar, Somalia, and Somaliland, which show the potential for deepening localisation, and the significant challenges due to IHAs' reluctance to change. The paper concludes that the influence of neoliberal ideology within the humanitarian sector must be addressed to ensure higher-quality localisation and as a prerequisite to the broader decolonisation of aid.

Methodology and data collection

This paper is based on a mixed-methods approach. We have both worked in the humanitarian and broader aid sector for more than 10 years, including in Myanmar, Somalia, and Somaliland, with LNHAAs and IHAs, including in adviser, advocacy, management, and researcher roles. Consequently, the study synthesises insider, outsider, and interdisciplinary perspectives. The approach is informed by what Burawoy (2009) refers to as 'the extended case method' of data collection and analysis, which utilises ethnographic techniques over many years. This values embeddedness and reflexivity over detached, positivist scientific methods. Potential biases are mitigated through this reflexivity and critical review. The approach also encourages contextualisation. The extended case method was employed for all three case studies, beginning in 2015 in Myanmar and 2018 in Somalia and Somaliland, and continuing beyond the production of this paper. It includes embeddedness in LNHAAs and IHAs, observation, participation, and extensive informal discussions, especially in relation to localisation advocacy and negotiation.

Engaged LNHAAs included small and large non-government organisations (NGOs), plus grassroots networks and individual activists, whereas engaged IHAs included bilateral donors, international NGOs (INGOs), and United Nations (UN) agencies.

For Myanmar, a total of 34 semi-structured interviews were also conducted throughout 2021, including with 18 LNHAAs and 16 IHAs, 15 women and 19 men. Topics included contextual issues, ideology, relationships, power dynamics, and other elements of localisation. Interviews were performed in either Jinghpaw (Kachin), Burmese, and/or English. Snowball sampling was utilised; trust and willingness to discuss matters openly benefited from existing relationships and/or referrals. Formal interviews were not carried out in Somalia and Somaliland, due to ongoing direct embeddedness, discussions, and engagement with LNHAAs and IHAs. This research centres on the delivery by civil society entities of humanitarian aid and related dynamics. Therefore, local and national government actors were not interviewed. The researchers recognise the significance of government actors, but their engagement was beyond the scope of this work. This study is part of a bigger research project, which was approved by the Ethics Review Committee at the University of Cambridge in 2020. Ultimately, the methodology and data collection are intended to capture and explore the inherent tensions pertaining to localisation and how ideology translates into practice.

Localisation: the definition debates

Before appraising localisation in practice, it is important to define the term, as it attracts significant debate that reflects different ideological inclinations. The International Council of Voluntary Agencies defines localisation as ‘the process through which a diverse range of humanitarian actors are attempting, each in their own way, to ensure local and national actors are better engaged in the planning, delivery and accountability of humanitarian action, while still ensuring humanitarian needs can be met swiftly, effectively and in a principled manner’ (Humanitarian Leadership Academy, 2019, p. 3). The UN’s Inter-Agency Standing Committee (2018, p. 2) similarly allows for the nationalised affiliates of INGOs to be considered ‘local’ if they maintain ‘independent fundraising and governance systems’. But such definitions are criticised for being too broad and thus allowing IHAs to consider funding to their nationalised affiliates as localisation (Alliance for Empowering Partnership, 2019). For example, an INGO can fund its nationalised affiliate in Kenya and see this as localisation, despite the local actor being international in origin and affiliation. Kenya-originating NGOs explained to one of the authors how this has even filtered down to the establishment of INGO-branded community-based organisations. The result is an entirely closed system that excludes endogenous LNHAAs, but is regarded as ‘localisation’ by the INGO. Kenyan-originating LNHAAs view this as contradictory to the spirit of localisation and reflective of international actors’ efforts to maintain control over resources and power.

This potential capture of localisation is a significant and growing point of tension in the humanitarian sector. There is a trend for many major INGOs, such as Oxfam, Save the

Children, and World Vision, to name a few, to establish an increasing number of Southern affiliates. This is justified as a response to criticisms of INGOs being too Northern-centric, which is certainly an issue and reflected in the prevalence of major offices and decision-making historically being based in the Global North. However, such shifts towards ‘Southernisation’² fail to address deeper power imbalances and inequities between INGOs and LNHAAs, such as in funding and decision-making. For Southern-originating civil society (humanitarian-focused and otherwise), this Southernisation of INGOs is commonly perceived as an adaptive effort that ultimately ends up competing with LNHAAs, without tackling or improving inequitable power dynamics. Arguably in response to this trend, the Alliance for Empowering Partnership (2019) advocates a definition of local and national that excludes affiliation with an international actor. Its definition concentrates on actors that originate in and are headquartered in their country of operation, excluding, therefore, local INGO affiliates. Broad definitions are often seen as an effort to dilute the meaning of localisation (Redvers, 2017).

There are many other aspects to defining localisation, all of which indicate various values and ideologies. The United Kingdom-funded Disasters and Emergencies Preparedness Programme has proposed that, in practice, localisation centres on seven dimensions, namely: relationship quality; participation revolution; funding and financing; capacity; coordination; visibility; and policy. The focus is heavily on efficiency and effectiveness, which is a central theme in discussions about the humanitarian system (Van Brabant and Patel, 2018, p. 3). Consideration of the broader impacts on and the potential to contribute towards a more emancipatory civil society are rarely addressed, despite the major influence of humanitarian responses on civil society. Like the critique that the Millennium Development Goals agenda ‘lacks a vision of transformation’ (Chang, 2011, p. 48), localisation definitions are often technical and compartmentalised from the political realities in which they are situated. **The Charter4Change (2019, p. 2) is one of the few commitments that arguably recognises the potential effects on broader civil society, such as by committing to ‘[s]top undermining local capacity’, although the spotlight is on humanitarian action, rather than civil society at-large.** The authors have also repeatedly witnessed INGOs suggesting that recruitment of national staff and reducing international personnel amounts to localisation. Such a view fails to realise that localisation is about the institutions and their power, not simply who is staffing them, even if there is merit in decreasing the proportion of international staff in INGOs.

Amongst most localisation debates, the focus remains predominantly on civil society, despite local and national authorities also being a significant component of localisation. A broader view of localisation then spurs further comparative debates about government and civil society-led humanitarian response and service delivery. The extent of such debates about defining localisation is beyond the scope of this paper. The point here is to highlight significant differences concerning even the basic definition, all of which reflect ideological inclinations that are examined throughout this study. Definitions are important, but, as we have witnessed in many workshops, the failure to reach a commonly agreed definition on localisation often appears to be an effort by IHAs to resist change, rather than being a necessary discussion at a practical level.

For the ensuing analysis, localisation is defined as the shifting of resources and power from IHAs to LNHAs that originate and are headquartered in the country or region of operations. LNHAs are considered broadly to include actors such as informal community-based structures, community (including religious) organisations, registered and unregistered NGOs, private sector entities, and authorities, including both internationally recognised and unrecognised governments, whereas IHAs are actors such as donors, UN agencies, and INGOs.

The humanitarian localisation agenda

The dominant localisation agenda is anchored in and heavily influenced by the Grand Bargain, which emerged from the World Humanitarian Summit of 2016. The Grand Bargain outlines 10 key areas for action as part of 'A Shared Commitment to Better Serve People in Need'. It goes beyond localisation, such as by also outlining targets for cash programming and humanitarian financing reforms (Inter-Agency Standing Committee, 2016). Area two of the Grand Bargain, titled '[m]ore support and funding tools for local and national responders', has since become central to localisation discussions and actions. It contains six related commitments that reflect various bottlenecks pertaining to localisation, such as donor rules or LNHAs' (insufficient) influence in the humanitarian system. A commitment to achieve 25 per cent of humanitarian funding to LNHAs 'as directly as possible' has attracted the most attention (Inter-Agency Standing Committee, 2016, p. 5). Workstreams were subsequently established to deliver on the Grand Bargain's commitments, with one centred on '[m]ore support and funding tools for local and national responders' (IFRC, 2018). Our participation in many localisation workshops and events since the Grand Bargain revealed that funding dominates discussions and related analysis (see, for example, Bennett, 2016). On the one hand, funding provides a basis for increasing the influence of LNHAs and is the most tangible evidence of localisation. However, on the other hand, the spotlight on funding can marginalise other systemic problems, such as the exclusion of LNHAs from decision-making and the need for a more emancipatory agenda for decolonising aid. Conversely, prioritising broader issues at the expense of the more tangible focus on funding can also alleviate pressure on IHAs to change.

Although the Grand Bargain has provided a framework for advancing localisation, it noticeably fails to concentrate on addressing deeper ideological issues, which this paper seeks to illuminate. It is understandable that to attract diverse signatories, the Grand Bargain avoided deeper ideological issues. By doing so, it proffers technical solutions to what are largely political problems, particularly the neo-colonial structures of the humanitarian system. These structures have evolved from Western dominance of the formal humanitarian system emerging out of colonial rule and outsized Western influence in shaping the system following the World Wars (Bennett, 2016).

The Grand Bargain has triggered renewed interest in localisation, but this must be embedded in a longer-term history of contestation and opposition to Western influence,

such as the Non-Aligned Movement, as well as a long history of Western INGOs undermining Southern humanitarian structures (Boateng, 2021). However, its continued emphasis on efficiency and effectiveness is indicative of oversimplification and the depoliticisation of aid. Such an emphasis is also used to justify the continued presence and dominance of IHAs within the humanitarian system, even if their role is reduced. This leads to discussions routinely overlooking the importance of localisation as a broader process of civil society (and local and national authority) strengthening and sustainability, and what should preferably be a process of decolonising the humanitarian system. What is more, domestic politics can place significant limitations on potentially more emancipatory approaches to localisation (Goodwin and Ager, 2021).

Ideological conflict: institutional growth versus localisation

The influence of neoliberal ideology within the aid sector has contributed to aid actors moving from previously emancipatory agendas to donor-driven, reformist programming (Al-Karib, 2018). This shift can be traced back to the end of the Cold War, when donors created the 'New Policy Agenda' (NPA), and reflects a trend away from high- to low-quality localisation. The NPA was a response to the World Bank and International Monetary Fund's structural adjustment programmes that pared back the state, de-unionised labour movements, and privatised public assets throughout the 1980s, leading to acute social crises across the globe (Ou and Sedara, 2013). The NPA positions NGOs as a more efficient service provider than the state and hence a 'preferred channel for social welfare' (Edwards and Hulme, 1996, p. 961). NGOs would replenish the social safety net ameliorated by neoliberal reforms, while the state would remain minimal. Another key NPA pillar is good governance, whereby civil society (largely conceived of as NGOs) would hold government to account and thus improve state functioning, but without expanding the role of the state.

The NPA has contributed to criticism of NGOs being Trojan Horses for neoliberal reforms (Wallace, 2004), shifting from 'shouting' (advocating for social justice) to 'counting' (ensuring accountability to donors) (Norman, 2014). The increasing discourse of self-reliance and economic 'empowerment' are just two examples, which help mask a broader process of depoliticisation in the aid sector. For example, funding for emancipatory feminist movements has moved to women's economic empowerment (Sciortino, 2018), amidst a broader process of 'NGO-isation' of social movements (Al-Karib, 2018). Although these critiques usually centre on the development sector, they remain pertinent to humanitarian action. Operational contexts are often deeply politicised, yet humanitarian actors can seek to depoliticise their responses (Desportes and Moyo-Nyoni, 2022). NGOs are also criticised for marginalising and ignoring the roles and responsibilities of the state (Harvey, 2013). Humanitarian response can thus end up reinforcing the NPA's scaling back of the state, while neoliberalism also shapes the modus operandi of many humanitarian actors.

Beyond the Grand Bargain, considerable efforts have been made to reform aid and the humanitarian sector, but none have effectively addressed the detrimental neoliberal

underpinnings. The Paris Declaration on Aid Effectiveness, adopted in 2005 and reaffirmed in 2008, promotes national ownership over aid and alignment with local systems. The New Deal for Engagement in Fragile States, endorsed in 2011, similarly emphasises the importance of country-led and -owned approaches, along with the need to strengthen national capacities. The World Bank Group (2020) has outlined commitments to partnership and integrated humanitarian–development–peace nexus programming. The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development is urging greater integration and complementarity with a nexus approach, including support for local and national authorities (OECD, 2022). As these actors indicate, localisation has become popular, but ‘newness of the concept should not be overstated’ (Barakat and Milton, 2020, p. 158). It is nearly two decades since the Paris Declaration, yet many issues it and subsequent efforts were intended to address persist, while the neoliberal ideology of competition endures largely unabated in the aid system.

The rise of humanitarian actors operating like businesses is one of the clearest examples of neoliberal influence in the sector and how it clashes with the localisation agenda. In the same way that neoliberalism valorises economic growth, humanitarian actors are incentivised to pursue organisational expansion. This view influences most levels of aid actors that are run according to a business logic (noting that a minority, often niche or technical entities, do not subscribe to this ideology). This is also reflected in UN and donor views of localisation as ‘a cost-effective means to scale up and extend humanitarian operations’ as they compete to lower costs (Stoddard, Czwarno, and Hamsik, 2019, p. 4). From our observations in the sector, for country directors and funding staff, expansion is central to their role, and the amount of funding is usually a key performance indicator. If a focus on expansion is not explicitly expected, staff are still encouraged to achieve growth. Overseeing an increased inflow of funds and the expansion of programming is viewed positively within the industry. Whether you are a programme director/manager, technical adviser, finance officer, or administration assistant, the larger the programme, typically the more prestige. As practitioners, we have repeatedly observed these dynamics, across countries and organisations. Programme quality remains important, not least because it is commonly linked to accessing further funding, but the financial figure maintains primacy. This business model is described as ‘top-down and internationally biased’, leading to ‘large transnational bureaucracies’ (Slim, 2021, p. 1).

Drawing on one of the authors’ involvement in the Rohingya refugee response in Cox’s Bazar, Bangladesh, illustrates the problems with the expansionist mindset of humanitarian actors. In the early stages of the response, vast amounts of funding poured into many agencies, as is often the case in the initial period of an internationally high-profile crisis. The USD 495 million secured in 2017 substantially exceeded the USD 434 million response plan (OCHA, 2022c). For many humanitarian actors, individuals, and organisations, this was a chance to secure and deliver large-scale work with the accompanying prestige. The local–international power imbalances were acute, as witnessed by one of the authors who was involved in a working group selection committee to allocate funding. During this process, he witnessed how a UN agency was eliminated from the selection process, due to submitting a low-quality proposal. The UN agency subsequently pressured

the selection committee to accept its proposal, amplified by the influence of its national and global offices. The panel stood by its decision, but the UN agency's actions reflected an expectation of entitlement to funding. Not receiving the funding would reflect negatively on many staff. The selection committee chair ultimately relented to the pressure and the readmittance of the UN agency directly led to a reduction in funding for a highly regarded LNHA. This was clearly a zero-sum outcome. In this neoliberal competition, the power asymmetry was pronounced: the LNHA did not have the same levers of influence. The penetration of neoliberal competition was also evident in IHAs poaching the best staff from LNHAs during the early stages of the Rohingya response. IHAs would then complain about the lack of LNHA capacity, failing to recognise their role in creating a 'brain drain' (Van Brabant and Patel, 2018, p. 63).

The growing trend for donors to stipulate localisation requirements (Saldinger, 2022) is achieving some success, but it still fails to address the ideological issues of competition and incentives for expansion. Donors increasingly require IHAs to partner with LNHAs, and in some instances, set specific benchmarks for the percentage of funding to go towards LNHAs. For instance, the various pooled funds run by the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) distribute high proportions of funding directly to LNHAs because of imposing localisation requirements—one should note that this is not explicitly direct funding because OCHA acts as a conduit for back donors. In Somalia, 53 per cent of OCHA's Somalia Humanitarian Fund (SHF) went to LNHAs in 2020 (OCHA, 2021a, p. 6). Although laudable, such achievements can have the perverse consequence that major bilateral donors refer to the OCHA-administered funds as proof of localisation progress. Furthermore, OCHA's country-level funds make up only a small amount of overall humanitarian funding—in Somalia, the proportion was only four per cent of funding in 2017 (Willitts-King et al., 2018). The competitive desire for expansion continues and broader humanitarian system change remains muted.

Donor efforts to adjust incentives is pragmatic and useful, but a deepening of localisation, let alone decolonisation of aid, also requires an ideological shift from low- to high-quality localisation. One result of donors' changing incentives is the increase in what we refer to as low-quality localisation (such as subcontracting), whereby IHAs partner with or move funding to LNHAs out of necessity rather than preference. This does little to address power imbalances, such as IHAs' dominance of decision-making or design of programmes, much less engage with more emancipatory localisation or decolonisation of aid. Low-quality localisation can also be debilitating for LNHAs because they are overloaded with programme implementation with minimal space to participate in humanitarian system reform. A common refrain is that IHAs are focused on saving lives and thus often blinkered to broader issues of equity (Dany, 2021). The alternative is high-quality localisation—which we argue is grounded in solidarity—a common desire for locally led humanitarian response and ultimately the decolonising of aid. High-quality localisation exists, but it is associated with ideological commitment rather than being primarily driven by incentives. The Charter4Change (2019) signatories are one example in that direction, committing, *inter alia*, to advocacy for localisation and equality. Individuals working with signatories still face incentivisation for expansion and growth, but it is

tempered by significant institutional value also placed on localisation. Staff at Charter4Change are often recognised for their localisation efforts, not just in terms of funding flowing to partners, but also advocacy efforts.

As our Myanmar and Somali case studies will illustrate, the clash between desired institutional growth and localisation is significant. This tension even occurs among IHAs ideologically committed to localisation. While it is recognised that such actors have been instrumental in advocating for the localisation of aid, the emphasis tends overwhelmingly to be on IHAs taking steps to improve localisation or making concessions. The ‘conflict paradox’, as outlined below, seeks to illuminate how LNHAAs can and do leverage their position as active agents to institute change within the humanitarian system, rather than being passive recipients of international benevolence. However, this agency faces distinct challenges owing not only to international, specifically ‘Western’, dominance of the humanitarian system, but also pervasive and persistent neoliberal values within the sector. The seeming stagnation of localisation progress following heightened attention immediately after the World Humanitarian Summit in 2016 (Goodwin and Ager, 2021) suggests the need for a deeper ideological shift within the sector, not simply altering incentives. We argue that this is also a prerequisite for efforts to decolonise aid, which we believe is incompatible with the current neoliberal underpinnings of the aid system.

The ‘conflict paradox’ and localisation implications

The conflict paradox has multiple, interconnected dimensions. It refers to instances where armed conflict constrains IHAs’ access to certain areas. Although the global picture of access and localisation is ‘idiosyncratic’ (Stoddard, Czwarno, and Hamsik, 2019, p. 16), such constraints provide a foundation for LNHAAs to leverage their access to advance broader localisation objectives. It has a paradoxical effect because operating in such settings can then become a basis for the disempowerment of LNHAAs.

The advancement of localisation is primarily achieved through two factors. First, the lack of international access affords LNHAAs the space to demonstrate their ‘capacities’ for humanitarian delivery and in the best-case scenarios, also highlight the redundancy of international oversight. Second, due to international actors’ reliance on LNHAAs, the latter can leverage this position to advocate for broader localisation objectives. For example, if only LNHAAs can access a conflict area, they tend to have the best understanding and evidence of the humanitarian situation. This information can simply be handed over to IHAs or effort can be made to wed information with advocacy. This is not to suggest that local actors’ enhanced access to information is or should be a bargaining chip for localisation. Rather, equipped with first-hand information, LNHAAs can use it to be more directly involved in humanitarian decision-making. This can provide additional impetus for reducing the mediating (and gatekeeping) role that UN agencies and INGOs often adopt.

The ‘paradox’ pertains to how conflict and restricted access can perpetuate and exacerbate inequity between LNHAAs and IHAs. This occurs through three interconnected dynamics. First, active conflict zones that are inaccessible to IHAs tend to be the most

difficult areas to which to deliver humanitarian assistance, whether it is Myanmar, Nigeria, Somalia, or Syria. This increases the likelihood of problems with delivery of assistance, while various compliance requirements, such as receipts, are also considerably more difficult to meet. Such contexts make for an immensely difficult operating environment and acute security risks to staff, all of which occurs without the broader support infrastructure that IHAs possess. For their part, IHAs prioritise investment to address the financial and operational risks facing LNHAAs rather than broader institutional strengthening (Haver and Carter, 2016). The second dynamic, which our case studies will illustrate, is where IHAs *use* the fact that they are funding LNHAAs to deliver assistance in internationally inaccessible areas as proof that the IHA is both committed to localisation and that a certain percentage of funding goes to LNHAAs. Having achieved their localisation requirements in inaccessible areas, IHAs can then directly deliver assistance in accessible (and easier) areas without LNHAAs. The perversity of this situation is that it can lead to the third dynamic, where LNHAAs are relegated to working in the most difficult locations, while IHAs operate in comparatively easier areas. If LNHAAs then struggle with contextual challenges in comparison to IHAs, this reinforces a narrative of insufficient capacity and unreliability. This is an all-too-common trope used to justify international dominance of the aid system, humanitarian and otherwise.

Somalia and Somaliland: the persistent paradox

The humanitarian system in Somalia and Somaliland offers a poignant example of the conflict paradox and the related inequities. None of the following is intended as commentary on territoriality or sovereignty between Somalia and Somaliland, but rather to illustrate differing (and contradictory) humanitarian realities. Since the collapse of Mohamed Siad Barre's regime in 1991, the Somali Peninsula has faced acute, persistent humanitarian crises that continue today. As of June 2022, nearly eight million people are in need of humanitarian assistance and almost three million are internally displaced, owing to a mixture of regular drought, floods, and armed conflict, compounded by locust plagues and COVID-19-related economic difficulties (OCHA, 2022d). Multidimensional humanitarian need is high across both Somalia and Somaliland, with famine occurring in 2011. Annual humanitarian response plans are consistently around USD one billion (OCHA, 2021a), with less than five per cent of the money going directly to local humanitarian actors (Willitts-King et al., 2018), just one indicator of the international dominance of the aid system. The violent insurgent organisation, Al-Shabaab, controls limited territory, which is concentrated in rural parts of what is termed South Central Somalia, but contributes to insecurity throughout Somali territory. IHAs have minimal to no access to Al-Shabaab-controlled areas, while insecurity and armed conflict makes South Central Somalia an acutely difficult operating environment. In contrast, Somaliland is relatively stable and secure, with IHAs able to access and work directly across the territory.

The operating context in South Central Somalia is fertile ground for the existence of the conflict paradox. Many of the foundations of the current humanitarian system are

legacies of the famine and response in 2011, which aside from reflecting a failure of the humanitarian system, also saw a (belated) major influx of international aid and reinforcement of a humanitarian architecture dominated by IHAs. However, given the extreme volatility and insecurity in 2011, IHAs relied heavily on LNHAAs to implement the famine response. For LNHAAs, this ensured a major injection of resources that although declining as the famine receded, remain significant, due to high, ongoing humanitarian need. The surge in funding in response to the 2011 famine also contributed to significant cases of financial misuse by LNHAAs, creating a legacy of fortification of LNHAAs' dominance of the humanitarian system (Stoddard and Jillani, 2016, p. 39). Nonetheless, the sheer scale of continued funding, even if insufficient considering humanitarian needs, has contributed to the organisational growth of LNHAAs. However, funding remains at the mercy of international donor trends and subject to competition with multiple large-scale, long-term crises globally.

LNHAAs in South Central Somalia have leveraged their humanitarian access to advance the localisation agenda via a combination of methods. Through the delivery of humanitarian assistance in Al-Shabaab-controlled and other highly insecure areas for more than a decade, LNHAAs have consistently proven their skills and abilities, with minimal or no direct international oversight. For instance, the LNHA Horn Relief (now Adeso) pioneered cash-based responses, including the successful Cash Consortium in 2006 with WASDA (Wajir South Development Association) and international partners (Majid, Hussein, and Shuria, 2007), well before the global shifts towards cash-based programming. Such achievements have, however, been undermined by various cases of LNHAAs misusing funds. IHAs have had similar problems, but with less lasting reputational damage. In one survey, 82 per cent of aid recipients in Somalia selected corruption as the 'biggest obstacle to aid' (Stoddard and Jillani, 2016, p. 30). Although the survey did not indicate the actors, corruption is both a cause of concern and a source of distrust among all aid actors. Faced with the highest risks, yet with constrained influence in humanitarian system decision-making, LNHAAs have increasingly demanded systemic changes. This is achieved not by threatening to cease operations, but by highlighting the inequity of IHAs outsourcing the response and associated risks in insecure areas to LNHAAs.

Advocacy tactics include direct lobbying of donors and UN agencies, occasional alliances with INGOs, output of research products, and publicly voicing opposition to the current system (Ali and Romain Murphy, 2020). The all-Somali, nine-member Nexus platform also emerged in 2018 to 'lead a locally-driven agenda for change' (Nexus, 2019, p. 1) and to provide an alternative to the many internationally led consortia in Somalia. Key results for LNHAAs include securing representation on the UN's Humanitarian Country Team, nationalisation of the previously international leadership of the Somali NGO Consortium's coordinating body, and prominence of Somali humanitarians in global debates about localisation and the decolonisation of aid. Somali humanitarians are also significant within NEAR (Network for Empowered Aid Response), a leading voice on localisation around the world. LNHAAs have consistently increased their share of the OCHA-run SHF, reaching 53 per cent in 2020, but of total response funding, LNHAAs receive less than five per cent directly from donors (Willitts-King et al., 2018). It is also

important to recognise that localised funding may reflect influence, but in the case of Somalia is also due to international dependence on LNHAAs.

Despite significant (but insufficient) localisation achievements, the paradox is that armed conflict and access dynamics are also key factors in the disempowerment of LNHAAs in Somalia. Relegated to operating in the most difficult locations, LNHAAs face the toughest conditions for implementation. Aside from the risks and challenges caused by armed conflict and insecurity, basic requirements like receipts can be difficult, such as for checkpoints run by armed actors. Ironically, Al-Shabaab taxes and receipts are seen as more reliable than those of state authorities (Hiraal Institute, 2020) and levied much more systematically for goods and services (van den Boogaard and Santoro, 2021). However, humanitarian actors run the risk of running afoul of international sanctions against Al-Shabaab, despite humanitarian safeguards that allow for such expenses. These challenges increase the likelihood of delays in implementation, problems with financial compliance, and other related issues, all of which perpetuates a sense of inferior implementation as compared to IHAs. The lack of IHAs directly monitoring activities in the most difficult areas further cultivates distrust; if IHAs are not willing to visit these locations, this makes it difficult for local actors to change the dynamic. In fact, IHAs will only operate in the comparatively stable parts of Somalia, where direct implementation is seemingly more common. The international staff of IHAs, as a proxy for presence, are heavily concentrated in Mogadishu, the capital of Somalia, and although declining, Nairobi, the capital of Kenya (Stoddard and Jillani, 2016, p. 38). Faced with fewer challenges (and backed by greater resources), they can generally deliver more reliably and with direct oversight. This reinforces the perception that IHAs are more dependable than LNHAAs, usually failing to account for their significantly different operational realities.

The comparatively stable Somaliland offers a significant contrast to Somalia, which then raises questions about international commitments to localisation. IHAs are generally able to access most areas of Somaliland, where direct international implementation is far more prevalent than in Somalia, despite the existence of capable LNHAAs. Somaliland's stability makes it primed for high-quality localisation, but this is largely eschewed by IHAs. The geographic allocation of SHF funding between Somalia and Somaliland provides a proxy for where localisation is concentrated; more than 50 per cent of the SHF goes towards LNHAAs. As of September 2021, the Fund allocated USD 39 million for the year, of which only USD 1.63 million (OCHA, 2021c), or slightly more than four per cent, has gone to Somaliland. This is despite Somaliland's population of 5.7 million (Republic of Somaliland, 2021) equating to 36 per cent of Somalia's overall population of 15.9 million (Worldometer, 2021). The higher level of humanitarian need in Somalia does not account for such a significant divergence, rather the allocations reflect that localisation is far more prevalent in Somalia than Somaliland. We suggest that this is out of necessity due to IHAs' access limitations rather than preference, namely low-quality localisation. More detailed information about IHAs' funding to LNHAAs in Somalia as compared to Somaliland is not readily accessible, or made easily available.

The more perverse impact of the divergence between contexts is that because Somaliland and Somalia are considered as a single response for donors, IHAs can leverage their

use of LNHA in Somalia as evidence that they are meeting localisation commitments. Indeed, the SHF is routinely held up as a positive example of localisation, with 69 per cent of 2021 allocations going to LNHA as of September that year (OCHA, 2021c), but as has been shown, this is concentrated in the most difficult areas in South Central Somalia. This indicates a lack of broader commitment to the localisation agenda, while also furthering the bifurcation of IHAs operating in more secure areas and LNHA working in the most insecure areas. This in turn feeds the cycle of disempowerment of LNHA, which find themselves consistently portrayed as less reliable and trustworthy (Aly, 2021). The relative stability of Somaliland means it is primed for what we have termed high-quality localisation, yet low-quality localisation in Somalia alleviates pressure for IHAs to do so because they can meet their quota for localisation in Somalia.

The persistence of the conflict paradox in Somalia and Somaliland stands in contrast to Myanmar, where LNHA have had greater success in turning it into a foundation for empowerment.

Myanmar: paradox to power?

Myanmar is an illuminating example of how LNHA have leveraged the conflict paradox to achieve significant advancement of the localisation agenda. Like Somalia and Somaliland, Myanmar faces acute long-term humanitarian crises with significant differences in subnational contexts. Armed conflict, climatic-related hazards, violent repression, and the attempted military coup in 2021 have combined to create vast humanitarian need across the country. Prior to the attempted coup, the most prominent humanitarian crises related to the military's persecution of and violence against ethnic minorities in border areas, with more than 20 ethnic armed organisations (EAOs) fighting for greater autonomy (particularly federalism) and equality for ethnic minorities. Since the attempted coup (which remains deeply contested and incomplete), the military has expanded violent suppression of resistance movements across the nation. This has contributed to an intensification of armed conflict, with a mounting number of EAOs and newly established people's defence forces. As of July 2022, an estimated 866,000 people have been newly displaced since February 2021, in addition to the 346,000 people who were already in protracted displacement prior to the attempted coup (OCHA, 2022b). It is estimated that the number of people in need of humanitarian assistance will climb from one million in the original Myanmar Humanitarian Response Plan of 2021 to 14.4 million in 2022, with the funding request increasing from USD 276 million to USD 826 million (OCHA, 2022a). Although the attempted coup has had profound impacts across Myanmar, this paper concentrates primarily on the preceding context, but with relevance to the current reality. The focus is also specifically on Kachin State, which best illustrates many issues related to the conflict paradox and localisation.

Located in northern Myanmar, Kachin State has grappled with civil war between the Kachin Independence Organisation/Army (KIO/A) and the military for more than 60 years, leading to a protracted and complex humanitarian crisis. Although a ceasefire was

secured in 1994, owing to a lack of political progress and increasing tensions for a variety of reasons, it collapsed and fighting resumed in 2011. The fighting displaced in excess of 120,000 people across more than 160 camps in Kachin and nearby Northern Shan State (Joint Strategy Team, 2017), most of whom remain displaced today. The first responders were LNHA delivering aid through informal and grassroots networks and NGOs, including substantial church-based networks prevalent throughout the predominantly Christian area. Such mobilisation of domestic resources and action was also a hallmark of the response to Cyclone Nargis in 2008, as civil society was described as ‘alive, and capable of doing great things against all odds’ (Hedlund and Su, 2008, p. 19). The initial grassroots Kachin response was soon followed by IHAs that sought to coordinate activities as they became the major channels for international funding flows. As the crisis persisted, a group of seven (later expanding to nine) LNHA came together to form in 2013 the Joint Strategy Team (JST), seeking to ensure ‘an efficient, impactful and quality humanitarian response by Local–National NGOs’ with the intention ‘to minimize donor-driven policy and maximize the use of international cooperation opportunities using locally owned common strategy’ (Joint Strategy Team, 2013, p. 6).

From its formation, there was significant, but not insurmountable, tension between the JST’s aims for localised leadership and IHAs desiring the typically internationally led response. IHAs established coordination clusters, working groups, and other internationally dominated humanitarian systems. This occurred despite the JST already having established (and evolving) coordination systems, which by operating in local languages were far more accessible for LNHA. Internationally led systems imposed English as the dominant lingua franca, which excluded many LNHA, while the broader international humanitarian apparatus was largely predicated on a top-down system of IHAs requiring LNHA to report upwards. Exclusion from UN coordination mechanisms was also reported during the 2008 response to Cyclone Nargis (South et al., 2011), indicating a distinct lack of progress. This reinforced the common power imbalances arising from IHAs being the conduit for international aid. There was also significant tension over the humanitarian principle of neutrality, considering the clearly oppressive and violent actions of the military as compared to the primarily defensive positioning of the KIO/A (Naw, 2019). LNHA were consistently perceived as biased by IHAs, despite exhaustive evidence of systematic military atrocities (Human Rights Council, 2018). These atrocities have only become more evident following the attempted coup in 2021—if the previous decades of similar abuses were insufficient evidence.

At a national level beyond Kachin, division was also notable, such as the Humanitarian Country Team being solely composed of IHAs for many years, despite the presence of capable LNHA that were much better informed about the context. The existence of an INGO Forum with exclusively international membership also contributed to a sense of division. This contrasts with Somalia, where advocacy by LNHA led to their admittance into the equivalent Somali NGO Consortium and eventually Somali leadership of the body. Despite challenges, there was also productive collaboration, as JST members sought to learn from various international humanitarian practices, and certain IHAs were committed to supporting local leadership through advocacy and technical support. This

reflected elements of high-quality localisation, which resulted from a fusion of LNHA advocacy and IHA commitment to change. In spite of the influx and influence of international aid and actors, the JST persisted with its efforts to ensure a locally led response. The dynamism of civil society responses to crises also has a significant history in Myanmar (South et al., 2011), while existing relationships and complementarity between some IHAs and LNHAs has strengthened collaboration (Barbelet, 2019).

Kachin's context of mixed territorial control epitomises the conflict paradox, which has been a significant factor in shaping the localisation of aid in Myanmar. Displaced people are dispersed in camps across either KIO/A-controlled areas (KCA) or what is typically referred to as government-controlled areas (GCA), which were under Myanmar government and military control (Durable Peace Programme, 2016). Following the attempted coup, the term GCA is now murkier because the military is not considered a government, nor is it entirely in control. For ease of analysis, we will use GCA, recognising that it is pre-attempted coup terminology, and it remains an area distinct from KCA. Although control over areas is in constant flux, they are practically demarcated for humanitarian actors by military checkpoints that control passage between the two. KCA is predominantly remote and rural along the border with China, whereas GCA tends to be more urbanised and readily accessible by IHAs. Preceding the attempted coup, international access to KCA was nearly non-existent, particularly since 2015, due to restrictions by both the elected civilian government and the military (Fortify Rights, 2018). The attempted coup has only heightened access restrictions. A central impact of them is that LNHAs are delivering essentially the entire humanitarian response in KCA and most of GCA. This has given rise to the conflict paradox.

The lack of international access to KCA has provided a substantive foundation for LNHAs to advocate for the localisation of aid. As multiple interviewees explained, LNHAs' exclusive access to KCA afforded space for LNHAs, particularly the JST, to prove their capacities to deliver an effective response with practically no international oversight, which they have done. This can be attributed to the commitment and coordination efforts of the JST, alongside significant attention to strategy. They have also drawn on specific international support, such as technical advice, while maintaining local leadership. The JST is not without criticism, as some LNHAs feel excluded and some IHAs (informally) liken the JST to a cartel, but this also appears reflective of internationally centric mindsets. The same could be said about the UN and INGOs operating as cartels, but they are referred to as consortia or described as coordination. Proving their ability in KCA, the JST challenged the common international perception that LNHAs require international oversight, providing a strong basis for advancing the localisation of aid. It is important to note that IHA trust in LNHAs is significantly stronger in Kachin State than the Somali Peninsula, with the latter being set back by significant cases of misused funds in years past.

The second critical dimension in Kachin is that LNHAs have near exclusive information about the context and humanitarian needs in KCA, along with a far more informed and nuanced understanding of GCA than IHAs. Although not specifically leveraged for influence, this exclusive access to information has increased IHAs' reliance on LNHAs and

thus has had an empowering effect for the latter. Rather than simply provide information then to be relayed by IHAs, the JST has regularly prepared its own updates, policy and strategy positions, statements, and briefings, utilising such information sharing also to advocate for the localisation of aid. The JST is commonly seen by IHAs as the most knowledgeable actor in terms of contextual realities and delivers briefings directly to donors. This latter point is crucial, as many IHAs covet such donor briefings to demonstrate their knowledge and to build relations, a reflection of the neoliberal competitive mindset. By delivering such briefings, the JST has increased trust with donors and bypassed some of IHAs' gatekeeping. When matched with the JST delivering the bulk of the humanitarian response in Kachin, IHAs search for relevance. Compared to LNHA in Somalia, the JST has been more effective at transforming information into effective localisation advocacy and a larger degree of high-quality localisation, suggesting that the conflict paradox hinges significantly on the actions and strategy of LNHA.

The JST's leveraging of access restrictions has resulted in significant localisation achievements. At the broadest level and despite the existence of IHA mechanisms, such as clusters and working groups, the JST is leading the humanitarian response in Kachin State, both in KCA and GCA. Most funding may still flow through international actors, but the JST leads and is influential in allocating funding. For example, JST members are on the selection panel for the OCHA-run Myanmar Humanitarian Fund, deciding on the allocation of funding in Kachin, which goes predominantly to LNHA. At the national level, the Fund only allocated 28 per cent of resources directly to LNHA in 2020 (OCHA, 2021b), but the proportion is significantly higher in Kachin. IHAs have been refused funding when they propose direct implementation rather than partnership with LNHA. At the national level, the JST's advocacy has led to representation of LNHA on the Humanitarian Country Team, while they have been able to establish and maintain direct donor engagement. The JST has also secured increasing amounts of direct funding, such as a USD 600,000 grant in 2021 to disperse to community-based humanitarian responders, entirely bypassing the UN and INGOs. Beyond Kachin, the JST has also been actively involved in establishing a similar locally led coordination mechanism for neighbouring Northern Shan State, the Humanitarian Strategy Team, and played a significant role in creating a nationwide locally led humanitarian coordination mechanism, the Myanmar Local Humanitarian Network.

The conflict paradox persists in Kachin because LNHA are disproportionately leading the response in the most difficult locations in KCA, while IHAs are far more active in the operationally easier GCA. Like Somalia and Somaliland, this can reinforce perceptions that LNHA are less capable than IHAs, when failing to take account of the context. The bifurcation of these actors and the potential for disempowerment are, however, not nearly as pronounced as in Somalia and Somaliland because the nature of conflict and access differ. In Somalia, access restrictions are relatively self-imposed by the direct threat posed by Al-Shabaab to humanitarian responders, whereas the KIO/A welcomes humanitarian responders in KCA; access restrictions are imposed by the military rather than being primarily about safety and security. Kachin civil society also does not suffer

from persistent international distrust that Somali civil society must navigate, much of which is due to high levels of financial compliance and accountability in the state.

Following the attempted coup in 2021 and with escalating humanitarian crises in Kachin and other parts of Myanmar, access restrictions are drastically increasing across the country, which has the potential to intensify aspects of the conflict paradox. On the one hand, this context is reinforcing the relevance and importance of LNHAAs, where beyond more formal structures like the JST, grassroots and formal networks have activated throughout the country and in neighbouring Thailand to provide humanitarian assistance. As IHAs were already abiding by stricter COVID-19 protocols than LNHAAs, which had diminished IHAs' delivery of aid, they are now even more acutely constrained by the military's access restrictions. As a result, LNHAAs are largely leading the humanitarian response in the country, whereas IHAs are searching for relevance beyond being a conduit for international funding and engagement. However, the potentially disempowering feature of the conflict paradox is acute, as LNHAAs find themselves delivering a vastly expanded response that must be more discrete than at any period in the past decade. Humanitarians are being detained, telephones are being confiscated, military violence is omnipresent, and the economy is collapsing, all of which makes delivering a humanitarian response more prone to failure and thus potentially reinforcing negative perceptions of LNHAAs. For the JST at least, but also for other LNHAAs, the previous years of trust building with IHAs can be an important foundation for radically furthering the localisation of aid across Myanmar. Such a direction will still need to overcome the inherent neoliberal competitive aspirations of IHAs. As internationals search for relevance, LNHAAs are well positioned to advocate for localisation as not just preferable, but increasingly the only realistic option in Myanmar.

Conclusion

This paper has examined the significant ideological dimensions of debates about the localisation of humanitarian aid and how restricted humanitarian access by IHAs can be a source of both empowerment and disempowerment of LNHAAs. Despite significant localisation progress in recent years, the influence of neoliberalism within the humanitarian system continues to pose a major challenge to a more emancipatory agenda. The Grand Bargain, although stimulating action for localisation, offers a predominantly technical solution to what is substantively a contested issue of power and politics. The quality rather than just the quantity of localisation is critical. The 'conflict paradox' highlights how LNHAAs can effectively advocate for a degree of humanitarian system change, but also how this can entrench the bifurcation of and the inequity between LNHAAs and IHAs. The case studies of Myanmar, Somalia, and Somaliland illustrate these dynamics at play. We believe similar dynamics are likely to exist in other locations where armed conflict is present and humanitarian access is heavily restricted, such as in Afghanistan, Syria, and Venezuela. If localisation is a precursor to deeper processes of decolonising humanitarian aid, which is increasingly being called for, the influences of neoliberalism within

the sector must be addressed. This means shifting away from the competitive, expansionist model that dominates the sector, and work instead towards an emancipatory agenda focused on high-quality localisation. Myanmar, Somalia, and Somaliland demonstrate the potential for improvement resulting from LNHA's advocacy and demonstrated capacity, but equally, they highlight persistent international resistance to systemic change. Further progress requires a broader cross-section of IHAs comprehensively and proactively addressing structural inequities within the humanitarian system. LNHA's are adept at pushing for change, but without sufficient international support, the advocacy burden can become another form of disempowerment.

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Data availability statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to privacy and ethical restrictions.³

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Endnotes

- ¹ We use the term 'conflict paradox' to refer to the outlined phenomena of armed conflict and related access restrictions both empowering and disempowering LNHA's. This is distinct and unrelated to Meyer's (2015) use of 'conflict paradox' in reference to specific dilemmas arising from conflict.
- ² Southernisation refers to the efforts of INGOs originating in the Global North to shift their resources and presence to the Global South, particularly by establishing new Southern-based affiliates.
- ³ All transcripts will be anonymised and any sensitive content redacted to ensure confidentiality.

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