

## Case Study

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# Integrating Localization into Educational Policy Implementation in Humanitarian Settings: A Case Study of South Sudan

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**Abstract:** This article examines how localization can be integrated into the implementation of educational policy in humanitarian settings. The article asks three key questions: i) How is localization currently practiced in the implementation of educational policy in South Sudan's humanitarian settings? ii) What mechanisms enable or constrain the systematic integration of localization into formal educational policy implementation in South Sudan? and iii) what opportunities exist for integrating localization in educational policy implementation in South Sudan's humanitarian settings? It draws on 104 completed questionnaires and 18 key informant interviews (KIIs), and secondary data. The article identifies three mechanisms that successfully link policy to localized practice: (1) flexible funding streams that prioritize multi-year local grants; (2) institutionalized local representation in coordination and planning bodies; and (3) community-driven monitoring systems that align local priorities with national targets. However, financial dependency, political centralization, capacity gaps, and trust deficits hinder systematic integration. In addition, the article identifies three opportunities for integrating localization in educational policy implementation in South Sudan's humanitarian settings. These included partnership and coalition-building, recognition of the role of local actors, and international policy frameworks. The study concludes that advancing localization requires structural reforms that redistribute power toward local actors. Doing so would move localization in South Sudan's education sector from aspiration to transformative practice. The study concludes with recommendations for donors, ministries, and NGOs to rebalance power in decision-making and to invest in long-term systems strengthening that centers local ownership.

**Keywords:** Localization; Education in Emergencies (EiE); Humanitarian setting; South Sudan

## Introduction

The principle of localization as an avenue to more relevant and contextually grounded responses is gaining traction in humanitarian discourse. Localization is broadly understood as the

process of shifting resources, leadership, and decision-making authority toward local actors and communities (Roepstorff, 2020). In parallel, the World Health Organization (2010) defines humanitarian settings as contexts in which the provision and governance of essential services are severely disrupted and



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populations' coping capacities are overwhelmed, thereby necessitating external aid for survival. Such contexts are often shaped by armed conflict, forced displacement, natural disasters, or prolonged state fragility (OCHA, 2017). Exposure to the factors presents unique challenges for service provision. Among the basic services affected in humanitarian crises, education remains particularly fragile and often sidelined in localization debates. Yet, there is limited scholarship on how localization is operationalized within the specific domain of educational policy implementation in humanitarian settings. Consequently, this article addresses this gap by examining how localization could be integrated into education policy processes in one of the world's most challenging humanitarian environments: South Sudan.

## **1. Background**

Education has emerged as a central concern in humanitarian settings. Approximately 234 million crisis-affected children and adolescents worldwide are in need of educational support (Education Cannot Wait, 2025). Conflict, displacement, natural disasters, and fragile governance structures often result in disrupted schooling, teacher shortages, inadequate infrastructure, and a lack of continuity in learning. Unlike food or shelter, education in crises was historically considered a secondary need. UNICEF (n.d.) pointed out that education is the first service to be disrupted and the last to be restored in humanitarian settings. Mounting evidence in education in emergencies (EiE) scholarship highlights education as both a life-saving and life-sustaining intervention, especially its protective role in fostering resilience, psychosocial well-being, and long-term recovery (Burde, Lahmann, & Thompson, 2019). Despite this recognition, implementing educational policies in humanitarian settings remains a challenge. Funding for EiE consistently lags behind other sectors, and it rarely reaches the UN target of 4% of humanitarian aid allocations (Inter-Agency Network for Education in Emergencies, 2020). Furthermore, top-down EiE policy frameworks often fail to engage effectively with local actors, leaving a gap between policy intent and on-the-ground realities (Reddick & Dryden-Peterson, 2021). These shortfalls have spurred debates on the role of local actors in EiE implementation.

Localization has become a dominant theme in humanitarian reform, particularly since the 2016 World Humanitarian Summit and the launch of the "Grand Bargain." At its core, localization calls for shifting power, resources, and decision-making from international actors to local organizations and communities (Barbelet, 2018). Proponents like Roepstorff (2020) argue that local actors are best positioned to respond rapidly, sustainably, and in culturally relevant ways. In the education sector, localization is particularly significant. Schools, teachers, community groups, and ministries of education are the front-line actors in sustaining learning opportunities amid crisis. Domain 1 of the Inter-Agency Network for Education in Emergencies (INEE) Minimum Standards stresses the importance of community participation and local leadership in educational provision in humanitarian settings (INEE, 2020). However, international agencies often dominate funding flows, technical standards, and implementation modalities, limiting the scope of genuine local ownership (De Geoffroy, Grunewald, & Chéilleachair, 2017). Thus, this article's focus on embedding local actors in EiE policy implementation processes is warranted.

South Sudan represents one of the most complex humanitarian crises globally. Since its independence in 2011, the country has faced recurrent conflict, political instability, economic collapse, and mass displacement. South Sudan was ranked last (at the 193<sup>rd</sup> position globally) in terms of Human Development Index (HDI), with a score of 0.388 (UNDP, 2025). The HDI measures long-term advancement in fundamental aspects of human development: the standard of living, knowledge, and health. Further, South Sudan ranks 5<sup>th</sup> in the International Rescue Committee's humanitarian crisis ranking in 2025 (International Rescue Committee, 2025). The report further noted that approximately 2.4 million people are internally displaced, and 9.3 million people are in need of humanitarian assistance in South Sudan.

The education dimension of South Sudan's crisis is particularly alarming. Approximately 59% of South Sudan's population (2.55 million) aged 6-17 are out-of-school children. (MoGEI, 2023). These figures make South Sudan one of the countries with the highest rates of educational exclusion globally. Further, the nation's

education sector is characterized by poor infrastructure, limited government capacity, and overwhelming reliance on humanitarian aid and international NGOs (Homonchuk et al., 2025). The Government of South Sudan has articulated ambitious goals for education through its General Education Strategic Plans (GESPs) for the 2023-2027 period (MoGEI, 2023). However, MoGEI (2023) noted that the implementation of the GESP will substantially rely on financial assistance from international actors.

Local civil society and community-based organizations play a vital role in sustaining access to education, particularly in rural and conflict-affected areas where state presence is minimal. According to Homonchuk et al. (2025), families and communities demonstrate the strongest commitment to education among all stakeholders. Yet, this deep community commitment stands in stark contrast to the priorities of the humanitarian sector, which allocated only 1.5% of available funding to education in 2023. The mismatch between community priorities and humanitarian funding structures underscores the need to localize the implementation of educational policies in South Sudan.

However, empirical studies on how localization could be integrated into education policy implementation in fragile states or humanitarian settings remain scarce. Specifically, to the best of my knowledge, no study has thus far focused on interrogating this subject area in South Sudan's humanitarian setting. This article asks three key questions: i) How is localization currently practiced in the implementation of educational policy in South Sudan's humanitarian settings? ii) What mechanisms enable or constrain the systematic integration of localization into formal educational policy implementation in South Sudan? and iii) what opportunities exist for integrating localization in educational policy implementation in South Sudan's humanitarian settings?

The article makes two key contributions. Academically, it advances scholarship on localization by moving beyond broad humanitarian discourse to examine its operationalization in the underexplored domain of education policy within crisis-affected states. This article offers insights for governments, donors, and humanitarian actors by identifying mechanisms that could strengthen localization and build a more context-responsive educational system. These findings

inform both national education strategies and global humanitarian commitments, and provide pathways to transform localization from rhetoric into practice.

## 2. Theoretical Basis

This study is anchored in Power Dependence Theory (PDT). The theory was first articulated by Emerson (2019). PDT posits that power in social relations derives from the extent to which one actor depends on another for valued resources. According to Emerson (2019), dependence becomes a source of asymmetrical power when one actor controls critical resources with few alternatives, thereby shaping the dynamics of cooperation, negotiation, and control. PDT is especially relevant in humanitarian governance, where international and local actors are bound together in relationships characterized by interdependence but marked by significant inequalities.

In the context of educational policy implementation in South Sudan, local actors (including government institutions, civil society organizations, community leaders, and faith-based groups) depend heavily on international donors and humanitarian agencies for financial resources, technical expertise, and logistical support. Conversely, international actors depend on local partners for access, legitimacy, and contextual knowledge. However, this interdependence is asymmetric: the overwhelming financial and institutional power of external actors positions them as dominant, while local actors occupy a structurally weaker role. By applying PDT, this study examines how this power asymmetry shapes the mechanisms, opportunities, and barriers to embedding localization in educational policy implementation in South Sudan. Thus, PDT frames localization not simply as a technical process of devolving authority, but as a negotiation of power within an unequal but interdependent humanitarian system.

## 3. Methodology

This study employed a mixed-methods research design. According to Leavy (2022), this research design enables the study to combine the depth of qualitative inquiry with the breadth of quantitative evidence. This triangulated approach enhanced validity and provided a comprehensive exploration of how localization could be integrated in South Sudan's educational policy

implementation. The article focused on South Sudan. Since independence, South Sudan has experienced protracted instability that has produced a fragmented education system and largely unmet learning needs. These dynamics made it a critical site for investigating both the potential and constraints of localization.

Primary data was gathered using questionnaires involving 120 respondents selected by simple random sampling; and 24 key informant interviews (KIIs) involving representatives from government ministries (particularly the MoGEI), local civil society organizations, international NGOs, community-based organizations, faith-based groups engaged in education delivery, teachers, parents, and community leaders, selected via purposive sampling strategy. Secondary data complemented field insights through a systematic review of existing literature, online sources, policy documents, donor frameworks, and evaluation reports. The gathered data were analyzed using content analysis. Qualitative narratives were used to explain quantitative patterns derived from the study.

## **4. Findings and Discussion**

This section presents the study's findings and discussion, organized around the two main research questions and related sub-questions. Data were drawn from both quantitative and qualitative sources, with a strong response rate of approximately 84.7% (104 completed questionnaires and 18 KIIs). The integration of questionnaire evidence with insights from 18 KIIs and secondary literature enabled a balanced perspective of the issue under investigation. This section is structured into three parts in line with the article's three research questions as outlined below.

### **4.1 Existing Practices of Localization in South Sudan's Education Sector**

This article found that while localization is widely promoted in rhetoric, its practice in South Sudan's educational policy implementation is uneven and often symbolic. Formal mechanisms for localization included government-led coordination platforms such as the MoGEI's policy consultations and donor roundtables, where CSOs are occasionally invited to present local perspectives. Survey data showed that 41% of respondents believed these mechanisms provide "some opportunity for input." However, only 16% of these respondents felt they had a "decisive influence" on

policy directions. This suggests that while entry points exist, local voices often remain consultative rather than decision-making.

54% of the study's respondents acknowledged that community participation was the most visible form of localization. This was mainly attributable to three activities: i) parent-teacher associations (PTAs), ii) faith-based organizations managing schools, and iii) local leaders mobilizing resources for school construction or teacher support. However, these contributions are largely confined to service delivery at the grassroots level rather than decision-making in policy frameworks. A parent in Juba pointed out that

We, the parents, are actively involved in school management through the PTAs. Yet we do not shape national or donor-level education policy decisions. (KII3, 2025).

Another respondent added that

For example, community teachers and Parent-Teacher Associations (PTAs) are critical to sustaining schooling in crisis-affected areas. Decision-making on curriculum and policies on school management is often centralized in international-led clusters (KII18, 2025).

The excerpts above reflect a tiered localization practice where local actors carry implementation burdens but lack authority in the strategic planning and decision-making table. From the perspective of PDT, this imbalance illustrates how international and national actors constrain local actors' autonomy by retaining control over critical resources such as funding, technical expertise, and policy frameworks. This reinforces asymmetric power relations, where local participation is visible but substantively limited in shaping strategic education policy directions.

The study also found that International NGOs often subcontract education projects to local organizations. This creates opportunities for visibility but also reinforces dependency since contracts are short-term and funding streams are tightly controlled. Some positive practices emerged, such as donor-supported capacity-building workshops and the inclusion of CSOs in education cluster meetings, but these were often described by participants as consultative rather than collaborative (KII5, KII20, KII9, KII13, KII21, KII1, KII8, 2025). These findings suggest that localization practices in South Sudan are operationally present but structurally limited. This reflects

persistent asymmetries in power and resources between local actors and international humanitarian actors. Put differently, while mechanisms for participation exist, they are often limited in scope and impact. Viewed through PDT, local actors' reliance on external funding and institutional structures means their participation is structured more by dependency than by autonomy. This underscores the need for reforms that move participation from symbolic consultation toward shared governance.

#### 4.2 Mechanisms Linking Educational Policy Implementation to Localized Practice in South Sudan

The study identified three mechanisms that hold

particular promise in bridging the gap between education policy and localized practice in South Sudan's humanitarian context. These mechanisms included i) flexible funding streams, ii) institutionalized local representation in coordination and planning bodies, and iii) community-driven monitoring systems. These mechanisms demonstrate how structural reforms, if scaled and institutionalized, can enhance localization in educational policy implementation. **Table 1** below shows the distribution of the mechanisms as gathered from the study's respondents.

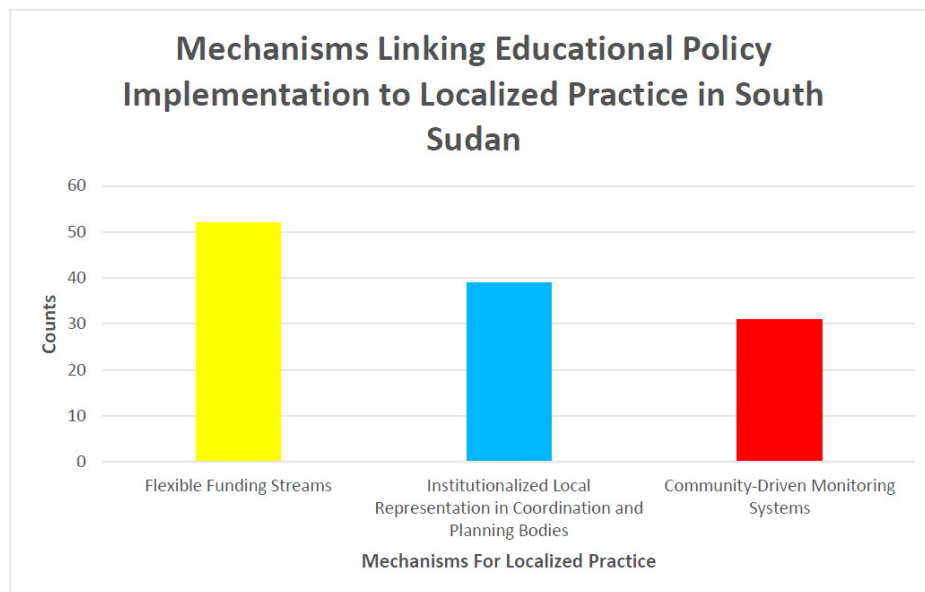
**Table 1:** Mechanisms Linking Educational Policy Implementation to Localized Practice in South Sudan

Mechanisms Linking Educational Policy Implementation to Localized Practice in South Sudan	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Flexible Funding Streams	52	42.6
Institutionalized Local Representation in Coordination and Planning Bodies	39	32.0
Community-Driven Monitoring Systems	31	25.4
<b>Total</b>	<b>122</b>	<b>100</b>

Source: Author (2025)

The distribution of responses in **Table 1** illustrates that flexible funding streams emerged as the most frequently identified mechanism facilitating the localization of educational policy implementation in South Sudan, representing 42.6% of mentions. Institutionalized local representation in coordination and planning bodies accounted for 32.0%, while

community-driven monitoring systems comprised 30.3%. This relatively balanced distribution suggests that localization, as depicted in **Figure 1** below, is not driven by a singular reform but rather by the interplay of financial, institutional, and accountability mechanisms.



**Figure 1:** Mechanisms Linking Educational Policy Implementation to Localized Practice in South Sudan

\*Source: Author (2025)



42.6% of the study's respondents recognized that these funding streams should prioritize multi-year local grants as a critical enabler of localization. Key informants stressed that short-term, project-based donor funding often undermines local planning and limits investment in institutional capacity (KII7, KII16, 2025). By contrast, multi-year grants provide predictability, enabling local organizations to retain skilled staff, plan beyond immediate crises, and align interventions with long-term education policy goals. This reduces dependency on external actors while enhancing ownership and accountability.

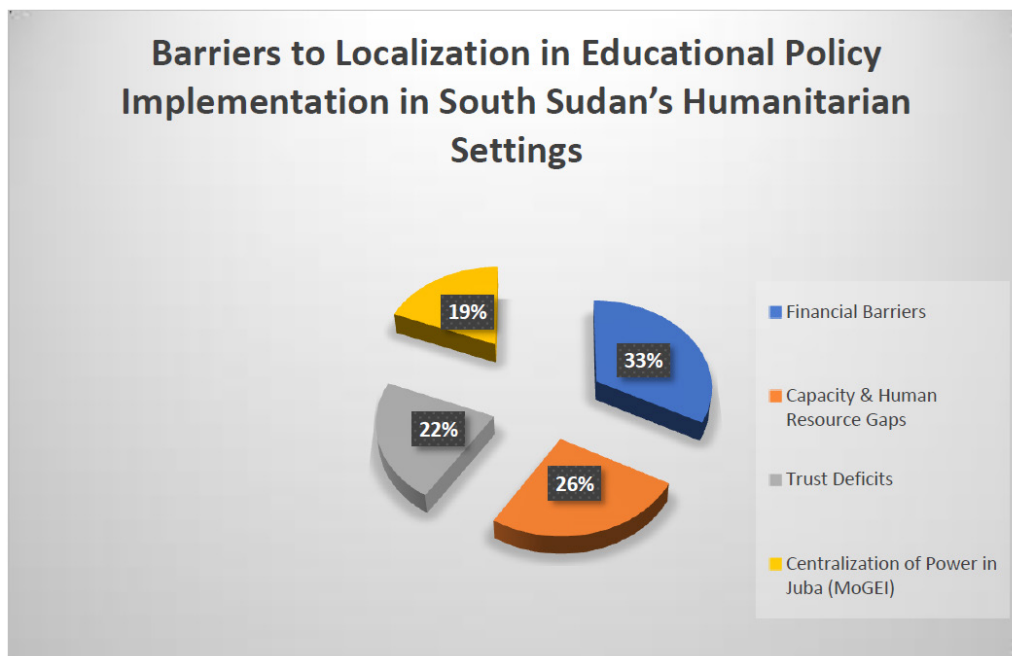
32.0% recognized that institutionalized local representation in coordination and planning bodies was a mechanism to bridge the divide between national education frameworks and community realities. A key informant noted that although coordination forums exist, they are frequently dominated by international NGOs and government elites, with local actors relegated to peripheral roles (KII7, 2025). Where representation has been more inclusive, policy priorities have been better aligned with community needs, including teacher

deployment, school safety, and curriculum relevance.

30.3% of the study's respondents acknowledged that community-driven monitoring systems offer an innovative means of embedding localization in practice. This was corroborated by a key informant who pointed out that "PTAs and faith-based education committees monitor resource utilization." By feeding locally generated data into national systems, such mechanisms ensure that community perspectives shape and foster accountability. Together, these mechanisms illustrate that localization is most effective when financial, institutional, and accountability structures are reconfigured to value local agency.

#### 4.3 Barriers to Localization in Educational Policy Implementation in South Sudan's Humanitarian Settings

This study identified four main barriers that hinder localization in educational policy implementation in South Sudan. These barriers include financial barriers (33%), capacity and human resource gaps (26%), trust deficits (22%), and centralization of power in Juba via the MoGEI (19%), as shown in **Figure 2** below.



The majority of the study's respondents (33%) noted that financing educational policy implementation was a concern for localization efforts in South Sudan. This concern was aptly raised by a key informant from a local organization who reported that;

Funding modalities (for example, short-term project grants, complex reporting requirements, and donor-driven priorities) systematically marginalize community-led initiatives. While international NGOs

sometimes subcontract local CSOs, these partnerships rarely include equitable cost-sharing or capacity transfers. (KII2, 2025)  
The findings above are consistent with existing

literature on South Sudan's substantial reliance on foreign financial assistance. According to MoGEI (2023), South Sudan's implementation of GESP remains heavily donor-dependent, as shown in **Table 2** below.

**Table 2:** Estimated Resources Available for GESP Implementation (in millions)

Year	2023/24	2024/25	2025/26	2026/27	2027/28	Total
External	69,521	125,274	74,569	63,008	54,990	387,363
Domestic	31,280	41,662	53,695	67,412	83,061	277,110
Toal	100,801	166,937	128,264	130,420	138,051	664,473

Source: Adapted from MoGEI (2023)

**Table 2** shows that of the GESP's total expected resources (664,473 million SSP), external funding accounts for 387,363 million SSP (about 58.3%) while domestic resources total 277,110 million SSP (approximately 41.7%). This heavy dependence on external financing signals a structural vulnerability for GESP implementation. A key informant noted that the financial asymmetry depicted above narrows policy space for local priorities and incentivizes short-term, donor-driven project cycles that frustrate sustained capacity development, thus entrenching dependence and external control over policy direction (KII12, 2025). For localization, reliance on external flows makes it difficult to institutionalize community-led systems or shift power toward national and subnational actors. The findings above are consistent with Emmens and Clayton (2017) demonstrated that indirect funding pipelines systematically gatekeep resources and relegate local NGOs to subcontractor roles. In addition, Atputharajah and Wanga (2020) showed how UNHCR-controlled funding and limited direct transfers erode local agency in Kenya. In essence, financial barriers to localization are not just about scarcity but also about how the funds are governed.

26% of the study's respondents noted that capacity and human resource gaps impeded localization efforts. Many local organizations, community-based groups, and even government institutions in South Sudan lack the technical expertise, trained personnel, and organizational systems to fully participate in policy implementation. Similarly, Emmens and Clayton (2017) and INEE (2020) acknowledge genuine capacity gaps in areas such as data systems, monitoring and evaluation, and technical planning that hinder local participation. However, INEE (2020) further noted that international actors sometimes foreground these

capacity gaps to justify continued control of resources and technical decisions. In South Sudan, this could create a self-reinforcing cycle where local actors remain excluded from strategic forums, without which they have limited opportunities to build policy-relevant skills for educational policy implementation.

Trust deficits emerged as a significant barrier, according to 22% of the study's respondents. Deep trust gaps exist between international agencies, government authorities, and local communities. A key informant noted that "many local actors in South Sudan perceive international organizations as imposing external agendas, while donors often view local groups as lacking accountability or neutrality (KII3, 2025). Such trust deficits are consistent with Atputharajah and Wanga's (2020) observation that limited trust in local NGOs had curtailed localization efforts in Kenya.

19% of the study's respondents recognized that political centralization and elite capture constrain meaningful decentralization. The centralization of power in Juba means that decisions about resource allocation and policy priorities are often politically contested, leaving little space for grassroots actors. Consequently, South Sudan's political economy (characterised by highly centralised decision-making in Juba and recurrent elite contestation) renders subnational actors politically vulnerable and reduces opportunities for community-led planning. This dynamic is also evident in broader analyses of South Sudanese governance and the documented difficulties of popular participation in national processes as depicted by Pospisil (2025).

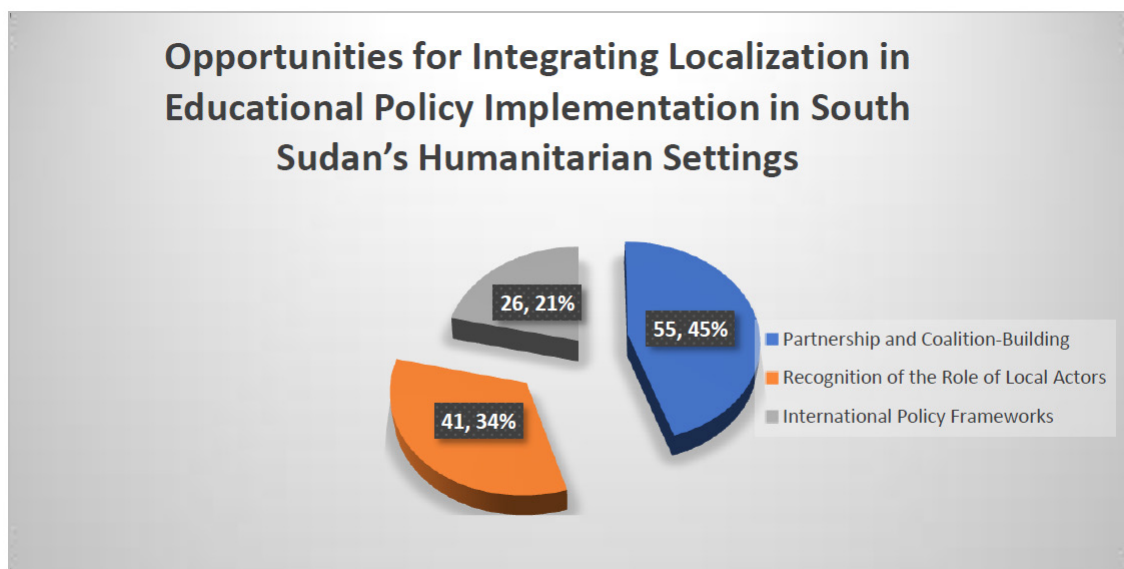
The four barriers discussed above reveal that localization in South Sudan is less an issue of willingness than of structural and relational constraints. Applying PDT, it becomes clear that local actors' dependence on external funding, technical expertise,

and institutional frameworks reinforces unequal power dynamics that make genuine localization difficult to achieve. Without addressing these systemic barriers, localization in educational policy implementation risks remaining rhetorical rather than transformative.

#### 4.4 Opportunities for Integrating Localization in Educational Policy Implementation in South Sudan's Humanitarian Settings

This study identified mechanisms linking policy to localized practice (Section 4.2) and highlighted

persistent barriers (Section 4.3). Section 4.4 reveals emerging opportunities that could be leveraged to strengthen localization in South Sudan's education policy implementation. The study identified three opportunities: partnership and coalition-building, recognition of the role of local actors, and international policy frameworks, as shown in **Figure 3** below. These opportunities reflect both internal shifts within South Sudan and evolving global humanitarian norms.



**Figure 3:** Opportunities for Integrating Localization in Educational Policy Implementation in South Sudan's Humanitarian Settings

\*Source: Author (2025)

45% partnership and coalition-building between government, civil society, and community actors present a practical pathway toward gradual integration and creation of multi-stakeholder education forums. The predominance of partnership and coalition-building in respondents' accounts aligns with recent global analyses that treat partnership as a strategic reorientation in EiE. For example, Menashy, Zakharia, and Shuayb's (2021) study identified five intersecting principles (reevaluation of power dynamics, shared knowledge, organic communication, trust and respect, and care) that together explain when partnerships translate into localization. Menashy et al.'s five principles provide an evidence-based roadmap for converting the widely supported idea of partnership into practice in South Sudan.

34% of the study's respondents noted that there

is growing recognition of the role of local actors in sustaining education during crises. This was aptly corroborated by a key informant who pointed out that community-based organizations and faith-based groups played a "critical stabilizing role" in keeping learning opportunities available during periods of conflict and displacement (KII10, 2025). This recognition provides an entry point for formalizing local participation in education policy processes. This observation resonates with research documenting how local actors often act as "first responders" in humanitarian settings, as depicted by Barbelet et al. (2020) and Kuipers et al. (2020). For South Sudan, the challenge lies in moving from ad hoc reliance on local actors to structured participation in national education planning.

21% of the study's respondents noted that international policy frameworks such as the Grand



Bargain and the Charter for Change create pressure on donors and INGOs to commit more funding and decision-making power to local actors. If effectively enforced, these frameworks could reconfigure funding relationships, ensuring longer-term, flexible support that builds local institutional capacity rather than perpetuating dependency. However, literature in this area points to mixed progress. While donor signatories to the Grand Bargain have pledged 25% of funding to local actors, the actual proportion has remained low; for example, 1.2% (US\$485 million) in 2022 (Development Initiatives, 2023). This gap between rhetoric and practice underscores the importance of national-level advocacy to ensure that South Sudan's education sector benefits from these international policy shifts. Nonetheless, aligning with such global frameworks represents a strategic opportunity for South Sudan to secure more sustainable support for localization.

## 5. Conclusion

This study examined the integration of localization in educational policy implementation within South Sudan's humanitarian context. Findings reveal that localization in educational policy implementation remains uneven and often symbolic in practice, with community-level engagement largely confined to service delivery rather than policy influence. Nonetheless, the study identified mechanisms that demonstrate the potential of localization if properly institutionalized. Flexible, multi-year local funding, inclusive representation in coordination platforms, and community-driven monitoring systems represent concrete avenues for bridging the gap between national policy and local realities. Yet, significant barriers persist. Financial dependency, political centralization, capacity deficits, and trust gaps systematically constrain meaningful localization. These challenges reinforce asymmetrical power relations consistent with PDT. At the same time, opportunities exist that could reconfigure these dynamics. Recognition of the stabilizing role of local actors, global policy frameworks such as the Grand Bargain, and multi-stakeholder coalitions creates leverage points for more inclusive education governance in humanitarian settings.

This article concludes that the integration of localization in South Sudan's educational policy

implementation is less a question of intent than of structural reform. Policymakers and practitioners could move localization from rhetoric toward meaningful practice by addressing barriers and seizing available opportunities. This move would ensure educational policy delivery that is more inclusive and responsive to the needs of children and communities in humanitarian contexts.

## 6. Recommendation

This article recommends the following;

1. Strengthen institutional capacity of local actors: Donors and international NGOs should invest in organizational development, policy literacy, and monitoring skills of local civil society and government institutions. Capacity-building must be long-term and embedded within partnerships rather than delivered as ad hoc training.

2. Reform financing modalities: Funding should be longer-term, flexible, and accessible to local actors. Donors must simplify reporting requirements and allocate a defined percentage of humanitarian and education budgets directly to community-based and national organizations.

3. Decentralize education policy processes: Greater decision-making authority should be devolved to state and county levels, where education needs are most immediate. Mechanisms for regular consultation with parents, teachers, and community leaders should be institutionalized to reduce elite capture and ensure grassroots priorities shape policy.

4. Foster trust and collaboration: International agencies and government actors should promote transparency, joint monitoring, and equitable partnerships with local organizations. Building trust requires recognizing local actors not merely as implementers but as co-owners of education policy.

5. Align with global commitments: South Sudan's education stakeholders should actively align their strategies with global localization commitments under the Grand Bargain and Charter for Change.

## 7. Areas for Future Research

Future research should focus on conducting i) comparative case analyses across different humanitarian settings to examine whether the challenges and opportunities identified in South Sudan are unique or broadly

applicable, ii) longitudinal studies tracking the impact of localization on education outcomes over time would also provide critical evidence for policy reform, and iii) quantitative research to measure the cost-effectiveness and sustainability of localized education interventions relative to international-led approaches.

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