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Promoting gender equality through localized development strategies: leveraging identification

Gaélane Wolff¹

Abstract

The humanitarian discourse has recently shifted towards bolstering the intervention capacities of affected countries and communities through “localization.” However, the implementation of this approach has encountered challenges and disappointments, partly due to conventional short-term interventions driven by external organizations rather than beneficiaries. Empowering women in developing nations is vital for gender equality and women’s rights, given the barriers they face such as unequal access to resources and underrepresentation in governance. Malawi’s context, marked by poverty, limited access to education and healthcare, and cultural norms posing barriers to gender equity, complicates efforts to address inequalities against women. This article explores how localization, particularly through local NGOs, can advance women’s rights in Malawi by challenging gender norms. While recognizing its potential, caution is advised to avoid reinforcing past exclusions. This research investigates how aid localization, leveraging identification, affects gender equality and women’s rights in disaster management and humanitarian efforts. Through field research in Malawi, including 33 interviews with NGO members and beneficiaries, it underscores the role of localization in promoting gender equality and women’s rights, advocating for a more equitable and locally responsive approach to humanitarian action.

Keywords Gender equality, Development aid, Localization, Identification, Food security, Malawi

Introduction

In recent years, the discourse surrounding humanitarian action has been significantly influenced by the emergence of the concept of “localization,” which advocates for strengthening the intervention capacities of affected countries and communities (Van Brabant and Patel 2018). A systemic shift in localization policies and practices has become an established principle (Metcalf-Hough 2020; Toukan 2023). However, despite enthusiasm for localization, its implementation within the realm of humanitarian action has been marked by high hopes, disappointments, and limited progress (Metcalf-Hough

et al. 2021). There is a delay in the development of local actors’ empowerment, particularly in the allocation of resources and decision-making power. (CARE 2021; Toukan 2023). This can be attributed to the dominant approach to aid, which focuses mainly on short-term interventions with decisions concerning aid activities mainly taken by donors and external organizations, rather than by beneficiaries and target groups themselves (Hilhorst 2013). Localization, as suggested by Basu (2000), holds the potential to empower local actors, including women, enabling them to take control of their own development initiatives and enhance their capacity to drive change. Njeri and Daigle (2022) highlight that, despite the recognition of the importance of women’s participation in humanitarian aid, it is still not widely acknowledged that they play a central role in promoting the resilience of local communities, particularly when

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they, or their organizations, are in leadership positions. Indeed “Feminists and gender justice advocates have long argued for women’s rights groups to be recognised for their humanitarian work, but they have lacked evidence to make that case to donors and major players in international humanitarian response” (Njeri and Daigle 2022: 1).

The empowerment of women in developing nations stands as a concern in the pursuit of gender equality and the preservation of women’s rights. Women frequently contend with an unequal distribution of economic resources in comparison to men, a discrepancy that impedes their full participation in their country’s economic and social landscape (Baliamoune-Lutz 2015). Furthermore, women’s educational opportunities often fall short of those available to men, substantially limiting their involvement in the economic, political, and social dimensions of society (Ryckmans & Maquestiau 2008). Consequently, women are frequently underrepresented within the governance structures of developing nations (Gervais 2008). In this context, it becomes imperative that humanitarian and development assistance directed towards women in these countries assumes a central role in advancing gender equality and affirming the rights of women. Development and humanitarian aid policies should actively seek to improve women’s access to economic resources, combat domestic violence, facilitate women’s access to education, enhance their participation in the political arena, and promote their economic empowerment. Research on gender equality is indispensable for the promotion of gender equity and the protection of women’s rights (Belingheri et al. 2021). In this light, various strategies can be contemplated, among which the adoption of a localized development aid approach emerges as particularly noteworthy.

Malawi is a country in Southern Africa that holds importance for research on inequalities against women, owing to several socio-economic, cultural, and political factors. First, poverty, lack of access to education and healthcare services, as well as a reliance on subsistence agriculture, are all factors that contribute to the vulnerability of Malawian women (Terry 2004; True 2012; Frankenthal & Dutta 2021). Second, Malawi boasts a rich cultural diversity, with numerous ethnic and linguistic communities. Cultural norms and traditional practices play a role in perpetuating gender-based inequalities (Rimjhim & Dandapat 2022; Lomazzi 2023). Third, on the political front, Malawi has made significant strides in enacting legislation aimed at safeguarding women’s rights, including the adoption of laws against domestic

violence¹ and female genital mutilation.² Nonetheless, the effective enforcement of these laws and the task of fostering awareness among the populace continue to pose significant challenges. Ultimately, Malawi presents a compelling context for the examination of initiatives geared toward addressing the issue of violence against women.³ Local and international organizations are actively working to raise awareness among the population and provide support to victims.⁴

This article delves into the concept of localization as an instrument of development and humanitarian aid, aimed at promoting the advancement of women’s rights. To carry out this analysis, the article commences by providing conceptual clarifications on localization and establishes the connection between development aid, measures for safeguarding women’s rights, and localization, based on a review of existing literature (“[The localization of aid for gender equality](#)” section). The underlying question guiding this inquiry is as follows: How does the approach of aid localization, by leveraging the phenomenon of identification, impact gender equality and women’s rights in disaster management and development and humanitarian aid efforts? In the “[Operationalizing the concepts and analysis method](#)” section, we will deepen the theoretical foundations of our research by elaborating on the concepts of localization and identification to explain the scope of actions undertaken by local actors in the development of women’s rights. Subsequently, we will present the methodology and the case study that will enable us to address our question. Furthermore, this section will examine the initiatives undertaken by a local non-governmental organization that have facilitated peer-to-peer knowledge transfer, thereby improving the living conditions of women in Malawi (“Case study of a Malawian local NGO: School of Agriculture for Family Independence (SAFI)” section). Finally, this article highlights that when development and humanitarian aid involves the participation of local actors, beneficiary-driven identification leads to a more effective enhancement of women’s rights in the recipient country but also contributes to the overall development of resilience and security within the country (“The localization of aid as a means to promote gender equality,” “Identification for women’s empowerment,” and “[Women’s resilience and its role in security development](#)” sections). This study

¹ <https://www.ungeneva.org/en/news-media/meeting-summary/2023/10/examen-du-malawi-devant-le-cedaw-les-experts-relevant-des>

² <https://press.un.org/en/2020/ga12275.doc.htm>

³ <https://www.ohchr.org/fr/news/2023/10/experts-committee-elimination-discrimination-against-women-commend-malawis-commitment>

⁴ <https://lentraidmissionnaire.org/droits-des-femmes-au-malawi-le-projet-borgen>

aims to rigorously assess the extent to which aid localization by a gender equality-focused NGO can substantially contribute to achieving sustainable development goals related to gender equality.

The localization of aid for gender equality

Gender equality is a central concern globally, especially in the realms of human rights and sustainable development. Women are increasingly playing pivotal roles in disaster risk reduction and emergency response efforts (Toukan 2023), despite their underrepresentation in leadership positions. They constitute over 40% of the humanitarian workforce (UNOCHA 2019); Anderson (1994) highlights gender analysis as crucial for understanding women's diverse vulnerabilities during disasters. Aid localization with a gender focus directs development funds to grassroots initiatives, recognizing the diverse socio-cultural and economic contexts women in developing countries face. This approach aims to boost women's autonomy, access to economic and educational opportunities, participation in decision-making, and efforts to combat gender-based violence. It acknowledges the diversity among women and stresses the need for tailored strategies to meet their varied needs. The upcoming literature review will explore how development aid and humanitarian assistance contribute to addressing inequalities and promoting gender equality. Understanding the role of non-state actors in advocating for women's rights and the specific context of gender equality in Malawi is essential.

Fostering humanitarian aid and development assistance for inequality reduction

The body of literature on assessing the effectiveness of development aid and its allocation mechanisms is of substantial breadth and depth (Baliamoune-Lutz & Mavrotas 2009; Winters & Wright 2010). Numerous studies have demonstrated that the fight against inequalities, especially those arising from gender, socioeconomic status, ethnicity, or nationality, has taken on a prominent position in both domestic and global policy agendas. Deep-rooted and enduring inequalities hinder the achievement of equal rights and opportunities for everyone, posing a threat to social cohesion and sustainable development (Muller 2003; Durand 2012; Jessop 2012; Guivarch & Taconet 2020). Furthermore, economically disadvantaged individuals are inherently the most susceptible to disasters and their consequences (Guivarch & Taconet 2020). When disasters strike, they exacerbate development disparities, thereby exposing populations in less affluent nations to particularly devastating repercussions (Laurent 2009). Empowering populations in disaster-prone or affected areas with greater agency significantly enhances the prospects of effective prevention and

mitigation. Specifically, when women are granted agency within these communities, the likelihood of hazards escalating into disasters diminishes (Andrabi 2022).

A study over four decades and spanning seventy countries revealed that women's organizations or movements significantly influence the reduction of women's experiences of violence (UN Women 2015). Therefore, that community-based women's organizations have the knowledge and capacity to effectively address gender-based violence as a public health concern (Toukan 2023). With their understanding of community dynamics, these organizations can bridge humanitarian assistance and development efforts, fostering transformative social change. Additionally, women's active participation at all levels is crucial for enhancing operational effectiveness (United Nations Security Council 2000). Whether acting individually or through women-led groups, women humanitarians play vital roles in both immediate crisis response and long-term development endeavors (Lindley Jones & Pattni 2018). Positioned at the grassroots level, women's organizations swiftly provide aid, rescue services, and support for risk communication, leveraging their deep community insights (Toukan 2023). However, despite their invaluable contributions, these organizations face ongoing structural challenges that limit their potential impact (Toukan 2023).

Nevertheless, it is noteworthy that despite the incorporation of a gender perspective into humanitarian aid approaches and crisis intervention, the theoretical foundations and practices of humanitarian efforts remain multifaceted, at times even conflicting, in their interpretation of gender. This complexity often hinges on the specific context and the involved stakeholders (Olivius 2016).

Promoting gender equality through humanitarian and development assistance

The pivotal role of gender equality in development processes, economic growth, and poverty reduction has been established through extensive academic research (Paxton & Hughes 2007; Klasen 2002; Esteve-Volart 2004; Baliamoune-Lutz 2015). However, it is imperative to acknowledge that local women's organizations may at times exhibit divergent orientations, which can complicate the task of promoting women's rights, as underscored by Franc de Ferrière (2017).

Promoting gender equality and women's rights is a crucial issue in the field of development aid.⁵ It is worth emphasizing that traditionally assigned roles for women

⁵ <https://www.oecd.org/development/gender-development/Aid-Focussed-on-Gender-Equality-and-Women-s-Empowerment-2020.pdf>

are undergoing transformation, and these changes exert an influence on economic development and growth (Herman 2016b). As highlighted by Mikkola (2005), these transformations can result from technological advancements, reduced procreative pressures, as well as the process of industrialization. Various factors contribute to the perpetuation of discrimination and segregation against women, including values, religious practices, cultural constraints, laws, inheritance practices, resource allocation within marriage, access to the labor market, education, fertility, gender-related inequalities in financial markets, and power distribution in decision-making processes, as argued by Mikkola (2005) and Grown et al. (2016). Social protection programs can contribute to reducing gender inequalities and enhancing the well-being of women and girls. Non-governmental organizations (NGOs) continue in their efforts to show women their rights (Al Hakim Bastian Ng & Wood 2022).

The process of ‘NGO-ization’ of international aid leads to a shared authority between state and non-state actors (Duffield 2007; Querton 2022), with NGOs integrated into strategic frameworks developed within large international organizations (Slim 2004; Revet 2009). The role of non-state actors in human rights protection is a crucial area of study that impacts human rights, as these actors can both act as protectors and be responsible for violence against women (Wijninga et al. 2014). Although non-state actors play a significant role in social protection, few of them exhibit sufficient transparency (Querton 2022; Cookson, Ebner, Amron & Kukreja 2023). This lack of transparency can make it challenging to hold non-state actors accountable for their actions.

Promotion of aid localization

To combat the lack of transparency among aid actors, Daud (2021) emphasizes the necessity of strengthening the capabilities of local organizations, enabling them to assume a more substantial role in delivering development assistance in Africa. The localization of aid involves empowering local actors to lead and provide assistance, aiming to enhance their capacity and promote sustainability. By empowering local actors, localization aims to enhance the relevance, efficiency, and impact of humanitarian interventions (Dijkzeul 2021; Gibbons & Otioku-Boadu 2021). It is also seen as a means to make aid more effective by strengthening the capacities of local organizations so that they can play a more significant role in the delivery of development assistance (Bonis-Charancle & Vielajus Martin 2019; Mulder 2023).

According to Paczyńska (2023), emerging donors tend to adopt a more localized approach to development aid by collaborating with local partners and supporting countries’ development and peacebuilding priorities. Dijkzeul

(2021) suggests that the localization of humanitarian aid can be characterized by high hopes, disappointments, and limited progress. He highlights challenges in humanitarian aid localization, such as the nature of humanitarian finance and the limited duration of projects (Dijkzeul 2021); Boateng (2021) reveals the negative effects of localization on local humanitarian initiatives and advocates for a capacity-building approach for local actors. While the localization of humanitarian aid remains a crucial objective, it has not been fully implemented in Africa, primarily due to persistent challenges. These challenges encompass issues related to capacity limitations, bureaucratic and regulatory obstacles, as well as geopolitical factors. Numerous studies underscore these challenges, emphasizing the need for a more inclusive approach that prioritizes the voices of African stakeholders in the decision-making processes of humanitarian aid initiatives. Nevertheless, humanitarian aid localization is crucial for improving the quality, sustainability, and effectiveness of humanitarian response (Barbelet, Davies, Flint & Davey 2021).

In conclusion, promoting localized aid in Africa is a significant endeavor to enhance the capabilities of local actors and improve the quality, sustainability, and effectiveness of humanitarian response.

Gender (in)equality in Malawi

The gender regime in Malawi can be characterized as a ‘hybrid model,’ encompassing features of both patriarchal and egalitarian systems (Chikapa 2017). The status, rights, and roles of women in Malawi have undergone continual evolution since at least the mid-nineteenth century. During the precolonial era, matrilineal principles structured social dynamics in numerous Malawian communities, affording women rights to land, property, and a voice in collective decision-making. Nevertheless, alterations in key institutions have impacted women’s access to land and their influence in governance (Wilson & Kachipande 2020).

Malawi continues to grapple with one of the most severe HIV/AIDS pandemics in sub-Saharan Africa, ranking among the countries worldwide with the highest HIV prevalence (Chipasula-Banda et al. 2005). This elevated rate of HIV infection among women, along with various other adverse consequences for their sexual and reproductive health, is significantly linked to gender inequality within the society. In the context of Malawi, this prevalence can primarily be attributed to the subordinate social status of women. The imbalanced power dynamics between men and women in Malawi restrict women’s access to resources such as land, income, education, credit, and capital, thereby making them economically dependent on their male partners (Chipasula-Banda

et al. 2005). The active participation of women in the workforce is instrumental in realizing gender equality in Malawi (Chikapa 2017). Violence against women embodies the power and dominance of men (Gupta 2000), reflecting the persistent social, cultural, and economic disparities between men and women (Gordon and Crehan 2003).

In summary, the literature on women's rights in Malawi underscores the advancements in acknowledging women's rights within the country, yet it also underscores the persisting challenges. Gender-based continue to be substantial issues in Malawi. Although some progress has been achieved in the pursuit of gender equality in the nation, a need for continuing efforts remains to ensure the comprehensive recognition and protection of women's rights.

Operationalizing the concepts and analysis method

The approach of aid localization has become a critical dimension in the field of humanitarian and development assistance, offering a significant opportunity to enhance the effectiveness and impact of humanitarian and development initiatives. This concept is grounded in a fundamental principle: the implementation of aid programs in partnership with local actors allows for a better understanding of on-the-ground needs and realities. A particularly noteworthy aspect of aid localization is its potential to promote gender equality and women's rights through a phenomenon: identification. This research will explore how aid localization can substantially contribute to the improvement of gender equality and the promotion of women's rights by shedding light on the underlying mechanisms that facilitate this progress. It will also underscore the importance of this approach in the broader context of efforts to achieve greater gender equity.

To address the research question of this study, I propose following the idea that a localized approach of aid localization, by leveraging the phenomenon of identification, promotes gender equality and women's rights.

The concept of localization

The definition of the localization concept remains somewhat ambiguous. A portion of the international humanitarian community shares the perspective that responses to disasters and humanitarian crises should be rooted in the values and requirements of the individuals directly affected. In response to this concern, the notion of localization of humanitarian action has emerged within the international community.

The processes of localization can be seen as inherently connected to the concepts of deglobalization already

addressed in the literature (Bishop & Payne 2021; Novy 2020). In many cases, localization is presented as a way to challenge current power structures and empower local communities by bridging the gap between their actions and outcomes (Herbert & Powells 2023). The localization of humanitarian action encompasses several crucial elements, such as recruiting local staff, respecting local norms and values, strengthening local resilience, increasing funding for local stakeholders, as well as promoting coordination and leadership by local organizations (Barbelet 2018). Localization strives to recalibrate the humanitarian system by empowering local actors (Robillard et al. 2020; Gingerich and Cohen 2015). The concept of aid localization, as argued by Kent (2011), represents a shift towards adapting humanitarian efforts to post-Western contexts. This approach advocates transferring responsibility for aid program conception and execution from international organizations to local actors, such as local non-governmental organizations (NGOs) or the communities themselves. It operates on the premise that these local actors, with their proximity and familiarity with the community, possess a nuanced understanding of local needs and dynamics. This grassroots presence allows for more tailored interventions, potentially addressing the unique challenges faced by vulnerable groups, including women. However, while local actors offer advantages in terms of proximity and cultural understanding, it's important to acknowledge that they are not immune to perpetuating gender inequalities. Local organizations can also be influenced by patriarchal norms and power structures ingrained within the community. In some cases, they may lack the resources, capacity, or inclination to challenge existing gender dynamics or prioritize the needs of women. Achieving effective and sustainable societal adaptation requires integrating the experiences of all stakeholders into policy and practice, with a strong commitment to implementing gender-specific aid actions (Andrabi 2022). Therefore, while promoting localized responses is crucial for effective and community-centered aid delivery, it's equally essential to critically assess the gender responsiveness of local actors. Responses guided by local leadership, which involve meaningful participation of women and gender-diverse individuals, yield more inclusive, effective, and contextually appropriate outcomes during crises (Holloway et al. 2019; Daigle 2022).

The localization approach to aid is vital for tailoring programs to local contexts, particularly in addressing gender-related issues. This approach often leads to more effective initiatives aimed at promoting gender equality, enhancing women's access to education, healthcare, employment, and political participation. It also empowers women by involving them in decision-making processes

and strengthening their role as agents of change within their communities. Localization recognizes that African communities have local structures and knowledge to foster growth and development. Partnerships in localization offer promising perspectives for enhancing local capacities, promoting sustainability, and fostering community ownership. However, they may present challenges such as power imbalances and coordination difficulties. Regarding the withdrawal of foreign NGOs in favor of local organizations, a nuanced approach is needed. Strengthening the capacities of local actors is crucial, but a sudden transition could result in resource gaps. A gradual transition is preferable, where local organizations increasingly take on a central role while benefiting from the support of international partners. Ultimately, the goal is to build strong, mutually beneficial partnerships that maximize the impact of interventions while strengthening the resilience and autonomy of local communities.

The concept of identification

The concept of identification is multifaceted, with its interpretation varying depending on the context in which it is applied. In the realm of development and humanitarian aid and women's rights studies, identification typically involves discerning the specific needs, challenges, and issues faced by individuals or groups within a given environment. This practical aspect of identification entails recognizing and understanding the unique requirements of individuals or communities, allowing interventions to be tailored more effectively to address these needs. When discussing identification in the context of discerning needs or challenges faced by individuals or groups, we are delving into the practical aspects of needs assessment and aid targeting. This form of identification involves acknowledging and comprehending the specific requirements of individuals or communities, facilitating better adaptation of interventions to address these needs effectively and precisely. On the other hand, identification in terms of social identity encompasses the sense of belonging to a particular group, culture, society, or category. This aspect of identification shapes individuals' perceptions of themselves and how they are perceived by others, influencing their attitudes, behaviors, and social interactions (Chen et al. 2016; Forehand et al. 2021). While social identification can foster solidarity, cooperation, and collective mobilization, it can also give rise to complex group dynamics, particularly concerning issues of power, exclusion, and discrimination. Although these two forms of identification may seem distinct, they are often intricately linked in how individuals and groups interact with their environment and position themselves in the world. Understanding both dimensions of identification is crucial in the context of humanitarian aid and

disaster management for designing effective and inclusive interventions that genuinely meet the needs of those affected.

Identity is a concept that extends beyond mere individual or group perception; it encompasses the uniqueness, difference, and value that individuals or groups attribute to themselves (Renault 2001). This notion of identity is central to understanding various struggles, particularly concerning the values inherent in identity (Renault 2001; Fischer 2020). Identity is shaped by various factors such as culture, society, personal experiences, interactions, and choices, evolving and developing throughout one's life. Identification, along with the capacity to identify, are psychological processes that contribute to individual development (Breuillot 2009). When individuals define themselves within a social group, they emphasize common characteristics that distinguish them from other groups. This categorization accentuates similarities within the group while highlighting differences between groups (Lazzeri 2013). Identification occurs between various entities, ranging from family members to citizens with their nation, or individuals with specific social groups (Coleman 1990). This involves recognizing the individual within a specific category and the self-identification of that individual with this category (Wagner 1994). The process of identification within a group is influenced by categorization and self-perception (Forehand et al. 2021). Furthermore, identification and cohesion within a group are essential concerning conformity pressures. Indeed, the desire for social approval diminishes when the individual feels independent of the group (Muchnik et al. 2013).

In conclusion, leveraging the identification phenomenon within aid localization is a potent mechanism for advancing gender equality and women's rights. By involving local actors in aid initiatives, the identification of women's specific needs becomes more accurate and contextually relevant. This approach fosters a sense of ownership and empowerment among women, catalyzing enhanced participation, confidence, and agency. Recognizing and addressing the diverse aspects of women's lives paves the way for more effective and culturally sensitive interventions, tailored to unique circumstances and needs.

Operationalization

As a reminder, this work follows the idea that a localized approach of aid localization, by leveraging the phenomenon of identification, promotes gender equality and women's rights.

Based on the essential attributes of localization (the dependent variable in our hypothesis) and identification (the independent variable in our hypothesis) described in

Table 1 Operationalization of the concepts

	Dimensions	Indicators
Localization	<p>Consideration of Local Needs: Aid localization aims to align with the specific needs of local populations</p> <p>Local Ownership: This dimension highlights the crucial involvement of local communities and actors in decision-making and project management, ensuring their genuine control over relevant aid initiatives</p> <p>Local Capacities: Aid localization seeks to strengthen the abilities of local actors in project management, decision-making, and advocacy, empowering them to effectively oversee and impact aid programs</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➡ Community Engagement: The level of involvement of the local community in the project planning and decision-making processes ➡ Local Priorities: The degree to which the project aligns with the identified priorities and concerns of the local population ➡ Partnership with Local Organizations: The number and strength of partnerships with local NGO, community groups, or local authorities ➡ Resources Allocation: The extent to which resources, both financial and human, are managed and directed by local entities, ensuring a sense of control and ownership ➡ Decision-Making Authority: Local actors have decision-making authority in the implementation of aid programs ➡ Capacity Building: Identifying efforts to enhance the skills and knowledge of local actors through training, mentorship, or other capacity-building initiatives
Identification	<p>Identification of Humanitarian Needs: It involves acknowledging the distinct needs of populations impacted by a humanitarian crisis, including food, shelter, medical care, and protection</p> <p>Beneficiary Identification: It involves identifying eligible individuals and communities for humanitarian aid, typically through registration, eligibility verification, and beneficiary list creation. Furthermore, the beneficiaries feel a strong sense of identification with the project</p> <p>Beneficiary Capacity Identification: Recognizing beneficiaries' skills, resources, and knowledge facilitates greater participation, enabling those affected to actively engage in designing and implementing humanitarian projects</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➡ Needs Evaluation: Shelter and housing conditions, accessibility of medical services and supplies, assessment of access to clean water and sanitation facilities, etc ➡ Livelihood Conditions: Examination of livelihood and economic conditions for the affected population ➡ Inclusivity: Ensuring that vulnerable groups are appropriately identified ➡ Community Involvement: Beneficiaries and their communities are engaged in the identification process and have a voice in decision-making. They feel a sense of identification with the project ➡ Specific Skills: Highlight the skills of beneficiaries and expand opportunities for women in the economy and society ➡ Active Participation: Beneficiaries' engagement in project planning, implementation, and monitoring

Source: author's compilation

Table 1, we can identify multiple dimensions for each of these concepts. These dimensions, along with their corresponding indicators, are presented in Table 1:

Based on these indicators, the article proposes an answer to the research question, drawing from an analysis based on interviews with beneficiaries and employees of a local NGO in Malawi, as well as field observations conducted by the author. In addressing the research question, this analysis provides valuable insights into the significance of the aid localization approach and its impact on the promotion of women's rights.

Case study of a Malawian local NGO: School of Agriculture for Family Independence (SAFI)

To compile this article, a comprehensive field research methodology was employed, requiring an extended stay in Malawi to conduct firsthand observations of the

development initiatives carried out by the local non-governmental organization (NGO), the School of Agriculture for Family Independence (SAFI). Over the course of one month, I engaged in participatory observation, accompanying SAFI employees in their daily activities and working alongside them to gain insights into their operations. Simultaneously, a series of 33 interviews⁶ were conducted, involving both active members of the NGO and the beneficiaries of its assistance programs. These interviews were conducted with individuals at various stages of SAFI's aid program, allowing for a nuanced understanding of their experiences and perspectives. It's

⁶ I obtained the consent of all individuals interviewed to share their interviews and identities, as well as to observe them in their work and daily lives. This fieldwork adheres to the ethical guidelines of the University of Geneva.

worth noting that the individuals were aware of my role as a researcher, which introduced a potential bias due to their knowledge of my intentions. Throughout the fieldwork, it was essential to maintain transparency about my role as a researcher to mitigate potential biases stemming from participants' awareness of my objectives. Despite this challenge, the participatory nature of the observation process fostered trust and rapport, enabling candid conversations and rich data collection. By combining observations with interviews, I obtained a deep understanding of SAFI's localization strategies and their implications for gender equality and women's rights in Malawi. This immersive approach not only provided rich qualitative data but also allowed for the exploration of nuanced dynamics within the local context. It illuminated the complexities and nuances of aid localization in addressing gender disparities and highlighted the critical role of grassroots organizations like SAFI in driving meaningful change at the community level. Overall, the field research methodology served as a powerful tool for uncovering the multifaceted dimensions of humanitarian action and its impact on gender dynamics in disaster management. For SAFI, a local organization, localization is grounded in a deep understanding of the specific needs, resources, and dynamics within Malawi's communities. Unlike a centralized approach led by external actors, SAFI collaborates with local communities to identify solutions that best suit their unique contexts. The alternative to localization could involve a more traditional approach, where decisions and interventions are largely dictated by external actors without genuine consideration of local realities and community capacities. This often results in ill-suited, inefficient, and unsustainable programs that fail to address the genuine needs of beneficiary populations.

An appropriate contextualization of Malawi in this context is essential. In fact, it was in October 2001 that the first reports regarding a significant food crisis in Malawi came to light.⁷ In the rural areas of Malawi, an initial food crisis was officially declared in February 2002, and by 2005, it had escalated, impacting more than 4.7 million people who were grappling with severe food shortages.⁸ More recently, in 2019, the tropical cyclone Idai unleashed devastating floods in Malawi, leading to dramatic loss of human lives, severe injuries, and extensive material damage. Similarly, in 2020, countries in southern Africa grappled with an alarming situation as approximately 45 million people faced the looming threat of famine. This peril weighed heavily

on the region due to a combination of factors, including drought, flooding, and economic hardships, all of which posed formidable challenges for the inhabitants of these nations. These extreme weather events were further intensified by the well-documented climatic anomaly known as El Niño, thus serving as a catalyst for humanitarian crises in this southern part of the African continent. Malawi, considered among the world's most impoverished nations, confronts monumental challenges in its endeavor to break free from the inescapable cycle of poverty and vulnerability. The food crisis in Malawi is a recurring issue that has affected the country's population over the years. As a landlocked country in South-eastern Africa with a dominantly agrarian economy, Malawi relies heavily on rain-fed agriculture.

In the wake of the devastating famine of 2002, acts of solidarity blossomed within the Malawian community (Ndiwo, Nyengere & Chinkhata 2017). Factors contributing to continued dependence on family food and income among graduate farmers of School of Agriculture for Family Independence (SAFI).⁹ Napoleon Dzombé, a local entrepreneur, spearheaded an initiative aimed at redistributing his goods to the most underprivileged members of his countrymen and women.¹⁰ Nu Skin,¹¹ an American company, has made a dedicated commitment to deepen its understanding of acts of solidarity and to provide financial support for Dzombé's initiatives. The pivotal year in this partnership was 2005, which marked the birth of SAFI as a collaborative effort between Dzombé and Nu Skin.¹² They jointly acknowledge the pressing need for training Malawian farmers to confront the challenges posed by extended drought-induced famines. Located at the heart of Lilongwe¹³ in central Malawi, SAFI, offers a range of assistance programs, with the initial emphasis on equipping Malawian farmers with the skills to improve their agricultural practices. It is worth underscoring that agriculture constitutes the bedrock of the country's economy, contributing to nearly 90% of its economic activity.¹⁴ The second dimension of their intervention revolves around prevention, entailing active community involvement. This initiative encompasses

⁷ <http://hdr.undp.org/en/content/famine-malawi-causes-and-consequences>

⁸ In 2015, the Malawi Vulnerability Assessment Committee (MVAC) estimated that over 2.8 million people would experience hunger during the upcoming lean period from October to March 2015–2016, as a result of severe floods and drought that devastated the harvest this year.

⁹ *Journal of Agricultural Extension and Rural Development*. 9. 202–206. <https://doi.org/10.5897/JAERD2017.0880>

¹⁰ Interview Goodwell Banda, SAFI's director.

All information about SAFI comes from field interviews conducted with members of the NGO as well as beneficiaries. Therefore, it is important to consider this bias when understanding the situation.

¹¹ Nu Skin website: <https://www.nuskin.com/us/en/>

¹² During our investigation, we learned that the company Nu Skin, through its humanitarian aid program, is currently the main sponsor of SAFI. The NGO is currently collaborating with other donors, but Nu Skin remains its primary funder. This is why Nu Skin is mentioned in this work.

¹³ The capital of the country.

¹⁴ Interview Thoko, project manager, SAFI.

the establishment of essential healthcare infrastructure, the distribution of agricultural seeds to foster self-sufficiency, and the construction of wells to ensure a dependable source of clean drinking water. A third crucial facet of their endeavors concerns malnourished children and the provision of food supplies, with a particular focus on schools and orphanages in the region. A fourth aspect of the NGO's actions is centered on women's empowerment through economic development initiatives, including entrepreneurial opportunities and the prevention of women's rights violations, such as combatting forced marriages, domestic violence, and gender-based violence. To actualize these initiatives, SAFI primarily relies on financial support from the private Force for Good Foundation. Furthermore, the organization has forged fruitful partnerships with other stakeholders, including the NGO Feed the Children and the Nu Skin Nourish the Children program.¹⁵

The localization of aid as a means to promote gender equality

Poverty exacerbates the vulnerability of populations to disasters (Guivarch & Taconet 2020). When hazards intersect with social vulnerabilities, disasters can ensue, propelled by two primary factors: the marginalization of nearly half the population, particularly women, due to limited access to basic amenities and survival skills, coupled with their exclusion from political and decision-making processes (Andrabi 2022). Fothergill (1996, p.48) underscores gender as "a significant and explanatory variable in disaster research". Studies have contested the notion of disasters as purely natural occurrences. O'Keefe et al. (1976) contend that socio-economic factors play a more pivotal role in disasters than natural ones. Enarson and Morrow (1998) characterize disasters as « social events » that accentuate systemic deficiencies that may otherwise remain unnoticed. To mitigate this vulnerability in Malawi, the SAFI NGO has implemented various initiatives since its establishment in 2005, aimed at lifting local populations out of poverty and reducing their vulnerability.

In Malawi, SAFI has implemented a localization¹⁶ of aid model aimed at amplifying the active participation of women in all phases of planning and implementing its development projects.¹⁷ This model is based on the principle of giving women a voice and decision-making

power within the organization. Several key elements characterize this approach, which has yielded significant results in favor of gender equality and women's empowerment. First and foremost, SAFI is committed to gender parity within its staff. The organization recognizes the importance of reflecting the diversity of the community it serves, including gender diversity. Gender parity is achieved through a balance between the number of women and men employed within the organization.¹⁸ This inclusive approach ensures that women's specific concerns are considered at all levels of project management. A key element of SAFI's strategy lies in the early and ongoing involvement of women beneficiaries from the initial stages of project design. Women are encouraged to voice their needs, priorities, and concerns, thus forming an active partnership with the NGO in shaping development initiatives.¹⁹ This meaningful participation goes beyond mere consultation; it ensures that projects are shaped according to the actual needs of women, whether it's improving their agricultural skills, promoting women's entrepreneurship, or enhancing their resilience to environmental and economic challenges. Our observations and interviews reach the same conclusions as those presented by Herbert and Powells (2023); that localization is a mean to challenge current power structures and empower local communities. Indeed, the participatory observation conducted, along with interviews with beneficiaries, highlighted that SAFI's approach directly resulted in boosting the engagement and motivation of female beneficiaries. This increased participation enhances the relevance of projects as they are designed to precisely address the needs and realities of women. In each of SAFI's programs and initiatives, gender criteria are systematically integrated to reduce gender inequalities and combat violence against women. SAFI closely collaborates with female beneficiaries to identify and mitigate the obstacles they face. Overall, SAFI's localized approach to aid has proven crucial in promoting gender equality and empowering women in the Lilongwe region of Malawi. Through its commitment to gender parity, meaningful women's participation, and tailored initiatives, SAFI is making significant strides in addressing the specific needs of women and promoting their rights and well-being.²⁰ The 2021 annual report from SAFI states that since its inception in 2007, the NGO has equitably trained around 200 women in agriculture and financial and food independence. Men are not allowed to participate in this training without their partners, with the aim

¹⁵ Interview Goodwell Banda, SAFI's director.

¹⁶ Our analysis of the NGO's funding highlights that, despite receiving financial resources from foreign sources, SAFI enjoys huge autonomy in the utilization of these funds and in the creation and implementation of projects.

¹⁷ Interview Thoko, project manager, SAFI.

¹⁸ Interviews & observations.

¹⁹ Interviews with beneficiaries.

²⁰ Ibid.

of including women in family and financial decisions. Additionally, the report specifies that SAFI provides an exclusive training program for women to help them achieve independence. Finally, the report mentions that half of the NGO's employees are women.²¹ However, it is important to note that SAFI's primary objective is not solely focused on gender equality but rather on achieving food independence for Malawians in the face of climate change. The initiatives targeting women are driven by the needs identified by the NGO in the field, and the inclusion of women in leadership positions also mirrors the social and political landscape of the country, which is striving to address equity issues on a national scale,²² although there is still much work to be done to achieve equality within the country.²³

Another significant dimension of this approach is the economic empowerment of women. By enhancing women's skills and assisting them in establishing their own businesses, SAFI provides them with an independent source of income. To support this argument, I think of a beneficiary who tells me, "Since SAFI came to the village, I have more vegetables that I can now sell at the market in exchange for fish. I no longer have to worry about finding food all year round when there is a drought."²⁴ The NGO strives to implement an aid localization approach that has a meaningful impact on promoting gender equality. One of the key strategies employed by SAFI is offering training and services specifically designed to strengthen women's skills in critical areas such as agriculture, entrepreneurship, and financial management. This targeted approach constitutes a pillar of women's empowerment as it equips them with the tools necessary to enhance their quality of life and social status. When we analyze this approach in the context of aid localization as a means of promoting gender equality, several essential elements emerge. Firstly, the specific training for women's skills is a tangible example of how SAFI adapts its programs to address the specific needs of female beneficiaries. This adaptation, stemming directly from the aid localization process, takes into account local and cultural realities as well as the challenges faced by women in the region. Moreover, SAFI goes beyond mere service delivery by actively involving women in all its programs, even

when it entails overcoming occasional resistance from men, including the husbands of beneficiary women, like Fabrice, who explains, "My husband did not want me to attend school without him, but SAFI did not accept this because it was a program specifically for women. I am happy because now I have learned to be independent, even though I have to share the money I earn with him, I have fewer arguments and problems."²⁵ This approach aligns perfectly with the logic of aid localization, which aims to enhance women's participation at all levels of project planning and implementation. A particularly interesting aspect of SAFI's strategy is the requirement that men who wish to participate in a project must include their wives. Indeed, James explains, "We went to the SAFI Campus as a family with our 5 children, so my wife Margaret could come too. We couldn't leave the children alone in the village. Now both of us know how to take care of our plantations, and the children were able to continue schooling."²⁶ This condition ensures that women are not excluded from economic development opportunities and are fully integrated into the programs.

By earmarking a specific branch of the project for women and offering joint management opportunities alongside their husbands, SAFI enhances their economic autonomy and role in decision-making. As a whole, SAFI embodies the spirit of aid localization as a tool of working collaboratively to promote gender equality. By adapting its programs, actively including women, and providing them with tangible development opportunities, SAFI demonstrates how aid localization can become a powerful tool for empowering women and fostering their financial independence, thereby contributing to gender equality and economic security in the region. This economic independence is crucial as it enables women to meet their own and their family's needs. Indeed, gender equality plays a pivotal role in development processes, economic growth, and poverty reduction (Paxton & Hughes 2007; Klasen 2002; Esteve-Volart 2004; Balamoune-Lutz 2015). It also gives them a stronger voice within the domestic sphere, which can facilitate better access to education for their daughters. Families with greater financial resources have a greater capacity to send their children to school.²⁷ As explained by Amireti, a former SAFI Campus student and beneficiary of the NGO, "Since I started earning money from selling vegetables, I can afford to pay for my daughters' school. My husband passed away, so I'm on my own and I used

²¹ Unfortunately, the figures are not more detailed in this report, and I did not have access to the other annual reports from the NGO.

²² UN Article from October 19, 2023, on Malawi: <https://www.ohchr.org/en/news/2023/10/experts-committee-elimination-discrimination-against-women-commend-malawis-commitment>

²³ Country Profile, Malawi by Amnesty International: <https://www.amnesty.org/en/location/africa/southern-africa/malawi/report-malawi/>

²⁴ Interview with Lucia, a beneficiary from Yeliyamu village located west of Lilongwe near the Zambia border. All beneficiary quotes have been translated from Chichewa to English.

²⁵ Interview with Fabrice, a beneficiary from Kasungou district located north of Lilongwe.

²⁶ Interview with Margaret and James, beneficiaries from Kasungou district north of Lilongwe.

²⁷ Interviews with beneficiaries.

to lack means before. Now I can buy books and uniforms for school".²⁸ This reality is particularly important for girls' education, as they are often the most likely to drop out of school due to economic constraints. Thus, thanks to the economic empowerment of women promoted by SAFI, girls have better chances of accessing education, even within low-income families. Aid localization, coupled with a commitment to direct responsibility towards female beneficiaries, reinforces confidence, economic autonomy, and girls' education. It proves to be a powerful lever for promoting gender equality and women's autonomy, contributing to the sustainable development of beneficiary communities (Table 1).

Localization is evident here through various elements, such as the recruitment of local staff (Barbelet 2018), the community engagement, and the decision-making authority granted to local actors in the implementation of aid programs (Table 1). It assesses whether local entities have the autonomy to make critical decisions. In summary, SAFI in Malawi demonstrates how aid localization can effectively promote gender equality, women's empowerment, and economic security. This is achieved through increased women's participation, assuming greater responsibility towards them, tailoring projects to their specific needs, and fostering peer identification. Localization of aid can serve as a potent means to promote gender equality by placing women at the center of the development process. By empowering local actors, localization strives to enhance the relevance, effectiveness, and impact of humanitarian interventions (Dijkzeul 2021; Gibbons & Otieku-Boadu 2021). It is also viewed as a means to increase the efficiency of aid by bolstering the capabilities of local organizations, enabling them to take on a more substantial role in the delivery of development assistance (Bonis-Charancle & Vielajus Martin 2019; Mulder 2023). This approach is not only about shifting decision-making power to the local level but also about recognizing the unique knowledge, perspectives, and needs that local actors bring to the table. By doing so, it fosters a more inclusive and contextually informed approach to humanitarian and development efforts, ultimately contributing to more sustainable outcomes. Within SAFI, this approach is manifested through the establishment of transparent monitoring and evaluation mechanisms. These mechanisms allow the measurement of project impacts on women and ensure that expected outcomes are achieved. Female beneficiaries are actively involved in project evaluations, thereby enhancing their capacity to influence decisions made concerning them.

This mutual trust between beneficiaries and aid actors contributes to the creation of an environment conducive to collaboration and women's empowerment. Nonetheless, it is worth highlighting that task allocation often retains gender-based patterns even after SAFI's training. This typically involves men primarily engaging in farming activities, while women tend to assume organizational and financial roles. Our observations concur with existing literature findings (Chikapa 2017). Localization also presents limitations for gender justice. Firstly, there are institutional and systemic barriers that often hinder meaningful participation of women in decision-making processes and development initiatives at the local level. These barriers may include discriminatory cultural norms, inequalities in access to resources and opportunities, as well as patriarchal power structures. Additionally, localization may pose challenges in terms of capacities, funding, and coordination for local organizations, especially in contexts where governance systems are weak or unstable.

Identification for women's empowerment

One of the most significant strengths of aid localization lies in its ability to facilitate a peer-to-peer transmission within communities, using local NGOs as intermediaries.

The initial observation of the presence of identification occurs here through the NGO's assessment of local needs and the active involvement of beneficiaries in various stages of aid projects, including planning, implementation, and monitoring. It emphasizes the importance of beneficiary-driven initiatives. In Malawi, the SAFI promotes this approach by encouraging local women leaders to play an active role in raising awareness and empowering other women in their community. These local leaders possess an intimate understanding of the realities and specific needs of local women, making them particularly effective advocates for women's rights and the promotion of their economic empowerment. This peer-to-peer dynamic is essential for the identification and development of women's empowerment within the community. Indeed, identification within a group is influenced by the categorization process and the perception of self-concept (Forehand et al. 2021). Beneficiary women are more inclined to identify with their peers, which encourages them to actively engage in development initiatives and seek solutions to their own challenges.²⁹ Furthermore, SAFI promotes farmer empowerment and actively combats vulnerability and poverty by encouraging knowledge transfer. SAFI employs a peer-to-peer development

²⁸ Interview with Amineti, a beneficiary from Dedza village located south of Lilongwe near the Mozambican border.

²⁹ Interviews with beneficiaries.

model, wherein “lead farmers” undergo training by the NGO and subsequently share their agricultural expertise with a minimum of 10 fellow farmers within their community. This system was explained to us by Agnes and Mayenda, a couple of lead farmers who “love being lead farmers because it helps the entire village by training other people. Thanks to this, we all have three meals a day in the village”.³⁰ This cascade of training allows for a rapid and effective spread of sustainable farming practices promoted by SAFI.³¹ The link between aid localization, peer-to-peer dynamics, and identification is clear in this approach. Local women leaders, as peers, play a crucial role in identifying the needs and opportunities within their own community. Their proximity to the beneficiaries facilitates an understanding of local realities and the creation of tailored solutions. Like Lucia, a follow farmer, who believes that “working with people from the village makes things easier because we trust them, we know them,” even though “it’s still easier for lead farmers than for follow farmers because they receive seeds to start with”.³² Moreover, this approach promotes a natural identification between beneficiary women and their peer leaders, thereby reinforcing the process of women’s empowerment and emancipation. Ultimately, aid localization through local NGOs like SAFI becomes a catalyst for women’s empowerment in Malawi. Here again, identification is evident through the presence of community involvement. Indeed, beneficiaries and their communities are actively engaged in the identification process and have a significant voice in decision-making regarding aid initiatives (Table 1).

Entrepreneurship plays a central role in SAFI’s strategy for women’s empowerment in Malawi.³³ By equipping women with entrepreneurial skills and supporting them in establishing their own businesses, SAFI provides more than just an economic opportunity. This approach serves as a potent catalyst for women’s empowerment and aligns perfectly with the context of peer-to-peer identification. Peer-to-peer identification is a vital process within SAFI’s approach. Women beneficiaries witness other women from their community succeeding in their businesses, which inspires and motivates them to pursue their own entrepreneurial aspirations. Identification functions here as a motivation engine, as women see that others like them can achieve financial independence and break free from socially limiting gender norms. Women who thrive in their businesses become tangible role models for

others. This argument is supported by Philipinna, who says, “Seeing a woman from the village having her own business makes me want to do the same”.³⁴ As women observe their peers prospering, it encourages them to overcome their own inhibitions and take steps to improve their financial situation. This dynamic creates a cycle of emulation and mutual support within the community. However, identification extends beyond just financial success. Local women leaders who have benefited from SAFI’s program play a key role in raising awareness and empowering other women. They become advocates and activists for women’s rights within the community. Their peer status enhances the impact of their actions because they intimately understand the challenges faced by local women and can address them contextually. Entrepreneurship offers women a genuine economic dependence. Trifonia, while showing her plantations, asserts, “Before, I had to walk 2 km to find good soil for maize, and most of the time it didn’t last long. Today, I know how to make good fertilizer, so I don’t need to travel as much, and on top of that, I have enough vegetables to start my own business and sell. Since then, I earn a good living, have enough food for my children, and can sell my soybeans to buy things for the children and school. It’s sometimes hard to be a woman, but I am respected because I have shown my skills. I even have 16 follow farmers whom I am currently training”.³⁵ Becoming entrepreneurs empowers women by providing them with an independent source of income, reducing their financial vulnerability. The example of SAFI demonstrates the significance of local associations in combating gender inequalities, as emphasized by Herman (2016b). Moreover, economic independence boosts women’s self-confidence, as they realize their ability to sustain themselves and their families through their entrepreneurial endeavors.

In short, entrepreneurship within SAFI’s approach in Malawi goes further than providing an economic alternative for women. It also serves as a catalyst for women’s empowerment through peer identification. The entrepreneurial successes of women become inspiring examples, while local women leaders play a significant role in raising awareness and advocacy. This comprehensive approach contributes to empowering women and freeing them from traditional constraints, all the while enhancing their resilience in the face of economic dependency. By offering women the opportunity to attain financial independence, the NGO aims to address economic disparities between genders (Gordon & Crehan, 2003) and thereby seeks to reduce inequalities against women,

³⁰ Interview with Agnes and Mayenda, beneficiaries from Yeliyamu village located west of Lilongwe near the Zambia border.

³¹ Interviews with SAFI’s staff and beneficiaries.

³² Interview with Lucia, a beneficiary from Yeliyamu village located west of Lilongwe near the Zambia border.

³³ Observations in Malawi.

³⁴ Interview with Philipinna, a beneficiary from Kasungou district located north of Lilongwe.

³⁵ Interview with Trifonia, a beneficiary from north district of Lilongwe.

which is often an expression of male dominance (Gupta 2000). This approach not only empowers women economically but also challenges traditional gender roles and the power dynamics that perpetuate gender-based inequalities. However, it is worth noting that these dynamics are not without challenges. Indeed, they can also reinforce the existing economic system and societal standards of success. In some cases, financial success may be perceived as the sole means of fulfillment, which can create additional pressures on women to achieve financial success. Localization, in the context of humanitarian aid and development, is often touted as a more effective and sustainable approach because it involves empowering local actors to address the needs of their own community. However, restrictive funding often poses a major obstacle to fully realizing this potential. Local organizations face restrictive funding models that hinder innovation and flexibility, leading to challenges in long-term planning and sustainable program implementation. Complex reporting requirements and exclusion from major funding mechanisms further exacerbate these limitations. This lack of trust from international funders can result in underrepresentation in decision-making processes. SAFI, as a local organization, grapples with significant financial hurdles, notably limited access to financial resources and reliance on external donors. While SAFI claims financial independence, particularly from the private foundation Force for Good, it acknowledges a dearth of alternative funding streams.³⁶ This constraint inevitably encroaches upon the NGO's autonomy, sparking crucial inquiries into the self-sufficiency and endurance of aid localization endeavors. Despite localization's heralded role in empowering local stakeholders and fostering more inclusive and contextually fitting development, financial impediments can thwart these aspirations. Local entities such as SAFI might find themselves compelled to adhere to the agendas and prerequisites of external funders, thus compromising their independence and efficacy in addressing the exigencies of local communities.

Women's resilience and its role in security development

The significance of women's resilience³⁷ in the context of security development in Malawi cannot be overstated. Resilience possesses a dual nature, encompassing both the ability to withstand destruction and the ability to construct a meaningful and fulfilling existence (Manciaux

2001). Women who achieve economic independence through initiatives such as entrepreneurship are better equipped to withstand the economic and environmental shocks that may impact their community.

The primary goal of the SAFI in Malawi is to enhance the resilience of vulnerable populations by responding appropriately to local needs.³⁸ This approach is part of a sustainable development strategy that acknowledges the increasing vulnerability of communities to climate shocks, particularly the annual droughts that regularly affect the country. To combat the devastating impacts of extreme climatic events, SAFI is committed to implementing resilience-building techniques. This approach relies on close collaboration with local actors who possess in-depth knowledge of the terrain. An example can be taken from Mamily, a field officer at SAFI, who is intimately familiar with the southern region of central Malawi. She grew up in this area, understanding the land and the climatic barriers that hinder farming. She is the first point of contact for farmers within the NGO, providing initial training in the village and determining who could become a good lead farmer and undergo further training at the SAFI Campus. She emphasizes that "it's essential to have people who know the terrain because they understand the local challenges".³⁹ These local actors are best positioned to understand the specific needs of their community and to implement effective measures to address vulnerability to climate shocks. The key to the success of this approach lies in the transmission of resilience. SAFI, as an aid organization, plays a role in facilitating this transmission. Resilience-building techniques are first recorded and implemented locally by these local actors. Typically, these individuals are farmers who receive training to adopt resilient agricultural practices tailored to changing climate conditions. However, the process does not stop there. The trained farmers, in turn, become agents of change within their community. They share their knowledge and skills with their peers, thereby contributing to the spread of resilience on a larger scale. This peer-to-peer knowledge transfer approach promotes the exchange of experiences and allows resilience to propagate from one local entity to another. Like Sophrait, a lead farmer, who explains that since returning from training, "my family is wealthier but so is the village. I trained my neighbor who then trained her daughter. When you're a lead farmer, you have a responsibility, it's important that everyone can eat and afford to buy goats or chickens. I'm proud to be a part of that".⁴⁰ Ultimately, this chain of resilience transmission

³⁶ Interview Goodwell Banda, SAFI's director.

³⁷ Resilience is not a new concept and the term was already used in the 1960s in the field of physics. Resilience corresponds to "the inherent capacity of companies, organizations, and communities to regain a state of equilibrium" (Paquet, 1999).

³⁸ Interview Goodwell Banda, SAFI's director.

³⁹ Interview with Mamily, field officer SAFI.

⁴⁰ Interview with Sophrait, a beneficiary from the south of Lilongwe.

enhances the food, economic, and environmental security of vulnerable communities in Malawi. It reduces their reliance on external aid by equipping them with the skills necessary to address climate challenges. Enhancing resilience through government intervention is crucial for mitigating the impact of natural disasters (Gemenne et al. 2017, p. 8). Thus, the SAFI plays a role in contributing to the development of food security in the region by strengthening the resilience of women and men who are key actors in this process.

It is essential to recognize that women in Malawi often serve as the custodians of household food security.⁴¹ They play a central role in food production, natural resource management, and providing care for their family members. Therefore, when women are economically independent, they are better equipped to cope with economic disruptions, such as fluctuations in food prices or agricultural input costs. Their ability to diversify their sources of income through agricultural businesses or other entrepreneurial initiatives contributes to stabilizing their food security, which has positive implications for the entire community. Furthermore, the economic resilience of women extends beyond food security. By strengthening women's resilience through economic empowerment programs, SAFI not only enhances their own economic security but also contributes to the overall security of the region. Economically independent women are better prepared to withstand economic and environmental shocks, reducing their vulnerability to crises.

The NGO SAFI in Malawi illustrates how the localization of aid can be a powerful tool to promote gender equality, women's empowerment, and economic security. By strengthening women's participation, assuming increased responsibility towards them, tailoring projects to their specific needs, and fostering peer identification, SAFI contributes to sustainable development. By investing in women, humanitarian aid contributes to the economic and environmental stability of the region, which has lasting positive effects on food security and overall security in the Malawian community. Resilience serves as a conceptual framework that delineates the essential conditions for enduring and thriving amid catastrophic events (Grove & Chandler 2017). However, in recent years, resilience analysis has increasingly underscored the influence of neoliberalism on disaster management and broader social policy (Duffield 2013). Regrettably, the focus on resilience sometimes redirects attention and resources away from addressing the fundamental socioeconomic inequalities that initially breed vulnerability (Gaillard 2010). Hence, it becomes imperative to heed these critiques of resilience.

Conclusion

The approach of aid localization by non-governmental organizations (NGOs), leveraging the phenomenon of identification, contributes to the promotion of gender equality and women's rights. This approach is based on the principle of decentralizing humanitarian and development aid by actively involving local actors, including NGOs, in the planning, implementation, and management of programs and projects. By emphasizing the essential role of identification, this approach becomes a mechanism to promote gender equality and women's empowerment. First and foremost, aid localization allows for a deeper and more nuanced understanding of the specific needs of women within the community. Local NGOs are often better equipped to grasp local realities, cultural norms, and gender dynamics that shape women's lives. With this deep contextual understanding, programs and projects can be tailored to meet the unique needs of women, whether it concerns access to education, reproductive health, political participation, or economic empowerment. This idea must be tempered, especially since not all local NGOs have the willingness or capacity to advocate for women's rights. Therefore, our conclusions cannot be validated solely for NGOs with gender equality missions. Secondly, identification contributes to women's empowerment. By working closely with local NGOs led by women and/or focused on women's rights, this approach fosters the identification of women as change agents. Women working within these organizations serve as role models and inspiration for other women, demonstrating that empowerment is achievable. When women see themselves represented by others who share their experiences and aspirations, it strengthens their self-confidence and encourages them to actively engage in realizing their rights. Thirdly, this approach contributes to the transformation of social norms and gender roles within communities. By highlighting female role models in leadership positions and participating in local initiatives, it challenges gender stereotypes and fosters a shift toward more egalitarian norms. Women who are active within these local NGOs often become advocates and activists for women's rights, increasing community awareness and engagement in promoting gender equality. In summary, the approach of aid localization by NGOs advocating for women's rights, leveraging the phenomenon of identification, provides a pathway to promote gender equality and women's rights. It allows for the adaptation to women's needs, strengthens their empowerment, and contributes to the transformation of gender norms within local communities. This approach represents a lever for sustainable and inclusive development where women's rights are fully recognized and respected.

⁴¹ Interviews with beneficiaries.

According to the literature, it is important to exercise caution when utilizing localization. For successful localization, as demonstrated in our SAFI case study, it is necessary for local actors not to merely adapt international models. Instead, like SAFI, local actors should leverage their knowledge of local operations, populations, issues, and practices. Localization as a process, where international or local actors adapt international models to local contexts, is not new; it has occurred in the past. The term "localization" has often been used to address problems it helped create, without truly considering the harmful consequences of similar historical processes. This does not undermine the necessity and legitimacy of building humanitarian actions based on local norms and institutions, nor the role international actors can play in this process. On the contrary, the goal is to reorient the concept of localization so that it is more historically grounded and more viable in guiding the creation of local humanitarian structures. To achieve this, it is essential to recognize the corrosive effects of previous approaches and seek ways to build more equitable and responsive partnerships at the local level. The example of SAFI proves that aid localization, when local NGOs are empowered and work with local actors based on local needs, can lead to real improvements in the social and economic situation of the assisted region. Emphasis should be placed on cooperation, collaboration, and learning from past experiences. The objective is to create a more sustainable framework for developing local humanitarian structures, ensuring that local initiatives are not marginalized but play a central role in responding to humanitarian crises. Encouraging a blend of local and international approaches in developing knowledge and capacities is essential to maximize benefits for the entire society, especially women (Andrabi, 2022). The SAFI study highlighted that identification is one of the ways to enhance this localization approach.

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