STATE OF THE DEBATE PAPER

Faith Actors' Experiences of and Perspectives on 'Localization' and 'Decolonization' in Development, Humanitarian Action and Peacebuilding.

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Abstract

This report captures the experiences and perspectives of how faith actors uniquely define, enact, approach, and validate localization and decolonization objectives. Amid growing calls to shift power and agency to local communities, the study investigates the conceptualization of localization and decolonization, explores opportunities and challenges, and offers actionable recommendations for faith actors in navigating these transformative processes. The research begins by identifying the need to examine how faith actors, uniquely positioned at the intersection of global systems and local realities, engage with localization and decolonization. Using a qualitative methodology, including literature reviews, an online survey and interviews, the study highlights faith actors' diverse experiences and perspectives globally.

Key findings reveal that the conceptualization of localization and decolonization remains complex, often shaped by historical legacies, cultural contexts, and varying interpretations. For faith actors, these concepts align with their core values of justice, equity, and empowerment but require practical translation into action. The study also identifies significant opportunities for faith actors, including their ability to foster community-led solutions, leverage spiritual and cultural capital, and bridge gaps between global and local actors. However, the study underscores several challenges to faith actors' involvement. These include navigating religious diversity and historical legacies of colonization, managing mistrust between faith-based and secular actors, and addressing systemic power imbalances.

Furthermore, concerns about tokenism, cultural representation, and resource constraints complicate their efforts. To address these challenges, the study provides actionable recommendations, emphasizing the need for faith actors to adopt culturally sensitive, context-specific approaches, avoid superficial engagement, and prioritize collaboration and inclusivity. Faith actors must actively challenge power imbalances, foster mutual accountability, and focus on global and local involvement dimensions. A stronger emphasis on research and policy rooted in local knowledge and diverse perspectives is essential for sustainable progress. In conclusion, the study highlights the critical role of faith actors in advancing localization and decolonization. While challenges persist, faith actors have the potential to drive meaningful change by embracing humility, inclusivity, and a commitment to dismantling inequities. Their unique contributions can shape a more just, equitable, and community-driven future for development and humanitarian work.

Executive Summary

The ongoing discourse on localization and decolonization in development and humanitarian work has gained significant traction as stakeholders seek to challenge entrenched power dynamics and promote equitable, community-led approaches. Faith actors are uniquely positioned to contribute to these conversations with their deep-rooted presence in local communities and moral authority. However, their experiences and perspectives remain underexplored in mainstream debates that are often dominated by secular frameworks. This paper, State of the Debate: Faith Actors' Experiences of and Perspectives on Localization and Decolonization, provides a critical analysis of how faith actors engage with these concepts, the opportunities they bring, the challenges they face, and the recommendations for strengthening their role in advancing these transformative processes.

Research Problem and Methodology

The study addresses the gap in literature and policy discussions regarding the conceptualization and involvement of faith actors in localization and decolonization. While these concepts emphasize shifting power and decision-making to local actors, their operationalization within faith-based initiatives remains complex. The research employs a mixed methods approach including literature reviews, an online survey and interviews, to examine the varied experiences and perspectives of faith actors across different contexts.

Key Findings

- **Conceptualization of Localization and Decolonization**

One of the central findings is that localization and decolonization are interpreted in diverse ways across different faith traditions and humanitarian contexts. While both concepts aim to promote local ownership and dismantle external dominance, their application within faith-based initiatives often intersects with theological, cultural, and ethical considerations. Some faith actors perceive localization as an extension of their mission to empower communities, while others view decolonization as a necessary process of addressing historical injustices perpetuated through missionary activities and faith-linked development models. However, debates remain over whether these terms sufficiently capture the structural shifts needed for meaningful transformation.

- **Opportunities for Faith Actors**

Faith actors offer several strategic advantages in advancing localization and decolonization. This paper finds that their grassroots presence allows them to engage deeply with local communities, fostering trust and long-term sustainability in development initiatives. Their moral and ethical frameworks provide a unique lens through which power dynamics can be challenged, and their ability to mobilize resources enhances their capacity to drive change. Additionally, interfaith collaboration presents an opportunity to bridge divides between different actors and promote inclusive, locally driven solutions.

Key Challenges

- **Religious Diversity and Tensions –** Faith actors often operate within religiously pluralistic societies where theological differences can complicate collaboration and create tensions between groups.
- **Historical Legacies of Colonization** – The involvement of religious institutions in colonial histories makes faith actors susceptible to localization regarding their motives in decolonization and proselytization efforts.
- **Mistrust Between Faith and Secular Actors** – Many secular organizations remain wary of faith-based actors due to concerns over organizations, exclusivity, and ideological biases, limiting opportunities for collaboration.
- **Power Struggles and Resistance to Change** – Structural power imbalances between international faith-based organizations, local religious actors, and secular institutions often impede the effective implementation of decolonization and localization strategies.
- **Perceptions of Hierarchical Structures** – Some FBOs mirror traditional, top-down skepticism structures that contradict the principles of localization and decolonization, leading to criticisms of reinforcing rather than dismantling power inequalities.
- **Systemic Challenges –** Limited funding, lack of technical capacity, and restrictive legal and policy environments hinder faith actors from fully participating in decolonization and localization debates.

Recommendation for Strengthening Faith Actors' Role

To overcome these challenges and maximize the potential of faith actors in localization and decolonization efforts, this study presents key recommendations:

- **Conceptual Clarity and Nuanced Approaches** - Faith actors must move beyond guilt and blame narratives to focus on actionable, practical steps that align with their core values. Approaches should be culturally sensitive, context-specific, and balance global and local involvement.
- **Address Power Dynamics and Ensure Accountability** - To embody localization and decolonization, Faith actors must actively challenge existing power hierarchies within their institutions and among development actors. Mutual accountability mechanisms should be established to foster trust and transparency.
- **Adopt Practical Implementation Strategies** - Faith actors should emphasize community ownership of projects, adopt gradual capacity-building models rather than sudden power shifts, and ensure that faith principles are integrated in a way that aligns with broader social justice goals rather than imposing beliefs.
- **Enhance Inclusivity and Collaboration** - Faith actors should work towards ensuring that localization is not limited to elite religious leaders but extends to diverse community voices, including women, youth, and marginalized groups. There is also need for adoption of gender-diverse and intergenerational participation which are critical elements within localization and decolonization processes, fundamentally underpinning the commitment to power redistribution.
- **Avoid Misconceptions** - Localization and decolonization should not be misinterpreted as isolationist or anti-foreign approaches. Instead, they should be framed as efforts to promote equitable and ethical engagement. Faith actors must also move beyond rhetorical commitments and engage in substantive structural reforms.
- **Strengthen Research and Policy Focus** - Greater investment is needed in research that captures diverse, local perspectives on localization and decolonisation. Faith actors should actively contribute to shaping policy discussions, ensuring that faith-based insights inform broader development frameworks.

Conclusion

Debates on localization and decolonization represent a critical moment for the future of development and humanitarian action. Faith actors, with their unique positioning, have the potential to drive this transformation, but their involvement must be intentional, inclusive, and critically reflective. This paper highlights that while faith actors face significant challenges, they also hold unique opportunities to contribute meaningfully to these conversations. Moving forward, it is imperative for both faith-based and secular actors to work collaboratively, ensuring that localization and decolonization are not merely theoretical aspirations but practical realities that empower communities and foster lasting change.

1. Introduction

1.1. Background

Since the COVID-19 pandemic, the international aid system has renewed its emphasis on local leadership and decision-making. This shift highlights the need to understand the implications of localization for international organizations and has explored decolonization approaches. These discussions build on funding pledges and benchmarks established during the 2016 World Humanitarian Summit (WHS) and align with the heightened conversations about decolonization that intensified following the murder of George Floyd in the USA and the rise of the Black Lives Matter movement.

Given the increasing attention to localization and decolonization, a 'State of The Debate' Paper examining the experiences and perspectives of faith actors on these issues is essential. First, many International Faith-Based Organizations (IFBOs) were founding members and signatories of the Charter4Change, launched at the WHS in 2016, which committed organizations to more localized practices. Despite this commitment, there has been limited discussion regarding the role of faith in both the practical and academic literature on localization and decolonization. Specifically, the potential impact of a faith perspective on the conceptualization and operationalization of these terms remains largely unexplored. For instance, by 2019, most Charter4Change signatories, including numerous FBOs, some of which were founding members of the Joint Learning Initiative (JLI), reported they had met their financing targets for national and local NGOs. Second, the JLI has been committed to localization from its beginnings in 2012 through its emphasis on 'local faith actors' (LFAs) and the 2017 JLI Summit on Faith and Localization. More recently, it has consciously engaged in new approaches to decolonizing its work through the Fair and Equitable Initiative, established in 2021 (FEI). However, the JLI has not formally considered the relationships between localization and decolonization in its work. No JLI members have been officially canvassed on what their intersection means to them.

Third, both terms, "localization" and "decolonization", risk becoming jargon or buzzwords despite reflecting important values that drive the JLI's work. Their meanings are often unclear to JLI members and partners, especially when framed through Western-centric perspectives. There may not even be directly translatable terms for these concepts in some languages, which can lead to misunderstandings or lack of resonance. IFBOs have historical ties to grassroots faith partnerships, supported and led by members on the ground. However, discussions about localized and decolonized humanitarian and development practices still inconsistently involve marginalized voices from the Global South, which is central to IFBOs' mission.

The Global Humanitarian Assistance Report 2015 defines local NGOs as 'without affiliation to either a national or international NGO' (2015: 133; see table 1). However, within faith-based contexts, this categorization can be challenging, as faith-based organizations operate across networks of affiliation that do not fit neatly into this definition of "local." There is a need to understand better what "local" and "localization" means for faith actors working at local, national, and international levels. Since the COVID-19 pandemic, the focus on local leadership and decision-making in the international aid system has increased, underscoring the need to understand the implications of localization for nternational organizations and to explore decolonized approaches.

Table 1: Global Humanitarian Assistance Report: A classification of NGOs (2015)

- International NGOs – based in an OECD DAC member country and carrying out operations in one or more developing countries
- Southern international NGOs – not based in an OECD DAC member country and carrying out operations in one or more developing countries
- Affiliated national NGOs – nationally operating NGOs that are affiliated with international NGO
- National NGOs – those operating in the developing country where they are headquartered, working in multiple subnational regions, and not affiliated with international NGO
- Local NGOs – operating in a specific, geographically defined, sub-national area, without affiliation to either a national or international NGO; this grouping can also include community-based organizations (2015: 133).

1.2. The Research Problem

Before beginning the research, we consulted the JLI partners to determine whether and why they would support such a paper. One member said they would "*welcome a paper surfacing different perspectives, rather than seeking consensus.*" Others felt a paper on this topic would be particularly useful for organizations looking to further the localization conversation in their work, especially where they hold political influence, such as with the Grand Bargain. Another pointed out that localization can be challenging for some organizations, as leadership may see it as complex and difficult to achieve consensus about its meaning. Others saw it as an opportunity to engage local partners in discussions about what localization and decolonization mean for their work, helping IFBOs better frame their questions around these topics. Importantly, they emphasized including Global South voices to understand the language and concepts they use. Therefore, ensuring that the paper gains enough buy-in from local actors, not just the Leadership Council, is crucial.

The consultation revealed several areas that JLI Leadership Council members felt should be explored to enhance the paper's efficacy. They broadly agreed that understanding "decolonization" is vital for the future and is an "*existential question for IFBOs.*" Some members suggested rethinking localization to move beyond financial transfers, focusing instead on "value-based localization," where local value systems influence humanitarian and development efforts. Given the term's colonial overtones, this approach would add depth. One participant questioned, *"who is at the center and the center of what?"* highlighting the need to rethink how funding allocation should be measured beyond just financial distribution.

Conversations that "engage local partners in discussions about what localization and decolonization mean for their work" are crucial

Another key challenge discussed was the perception of international FBOs as being tied to proselytization, seen as a form of "colonial" intervention. Members emphasized understanding the implications of localization and decolonization for addressing this issue. Additionally, there was recognition that colonization varies across contexts; it is not just about the historical legacy of the Empire but also an internal issue within many Global South regions. Even countries that were never colonized by outside forces remain economically, intellectually, and culturally colonized through global systems. Nationalism was also discussed as a form of colonialism, closely tied to religious identities, with political, economic, and cultural dimensions.

Finally, participants highlighted specific barriers to localization. For the Muslim community, localization is complicated by a highly political climate where the legacy of 9/11 continues to prompt American leadership to restrict financial transfers. Localization is also limited without shifting power dynamics; if international organizations control economic resources, true localization cannot be achieved. Some Christian FBOs with missionary roots followed the expansion of the British Empire, and many of these structures remain unchanged today. Although these organizations work locally, their operations still reflect colonial origins—raising the question of what impact this has. One participant noted that decolonization was not a focus for their organization due to a lack of interest or resources. However, it may be possible to identify other areas of their work that overlap with decolonization where connections could be made.

1.3. Conceptual Framework and Research Questions

1.3.1. The conceptual framework

This research adopted a conceptual approach grounded in understanding faith actors as critical yet often underrepresented stakeholders in global development and humanitarian contexts. The approach integrated key theoretical and practical dimensions to provide a holistic framework for inquiry. At its core, the study was anchored in critical constructivism, which recognizes that the concepts of localization and decolonization are socially constructed and context dependent. This perspective allowed the research to explore how faith actors, shaped by their unique spiritual, cultural, and institutional contexts, interpret these concepts and the relationships between them. Acknowledging the role of power, history, and ideology, the approach also sought to critically examine how these actors navigate a field often dominated by secular norms and frameworks.

The first conceptual dimension of the research revolved around how faith actors understand localization and decolonization. While central to global development and humanitarian debates, these terms are often interpreted differently depending on cultural, ideological, and institutional perspectives. For faith actors, these interpretations are further influenced by theological principles and the moral imperatives of their faith traditions. The research adopted an inductive approach to explore this, encouraging participants to articulate their definitions and conceptualizations of localization and decolonization. This approach allowed for identifying meanings rooted in local contexts, spiritual beliefs, and historical experiences. The analysis sought to uncover how these concepts intersect and whether faith actors perceive them as complementary or conflicting in their aims and implications.

The second aspect of the conceptual approach focused on the opportunities faith actors perceive to engage with localization and decolonization efforts. Faith actors often hold a unique position in their communities, are deeply embedded within local contexts, and possess long-standing trust and influence. This research conceptualized faith actors as agents capable of bridging global frameworks with local realities, offering culturally and spiritually grounded solutions to complex challenges. By framing faith actors as "critical interlocutors," the study examined how their values, networks, and practices might enhance localization and decolonization efforts. It also explored how faith perspectives could provide alternatives to secular norms, contributing to rethinking power dynamics and development paradigms. This research dimension sought to understand what faith actors bring to the table and how their presence could shift the focus of debates and practices to be more inclusive and contextually grounded.

The third dimension of the research focused on understanding the tensions and challenges faith actors encounter when engaging in localization and decolonization. The conceptual approach recognized that the global development and humanitarian sectors are historically rooted in Western, secular traditions, which often marginalize or misunderstand faith-based perspectives. The study conceptualized these challenges as multi-layered. On one level, faith actors may experience structural challenges, such as exclusion from decision-making spaces or limited access to funding. They may face ideological tensions on another level, as their faith-based approaches can clash with secular frameworks. The research also examined internal challenges within faith communities, such as the difficulty of addressing power imbalances or colonial legacies within their institutions. By situating these tensions within broader historical and structural contexts, the study aimed to provide a nuanced understanding of the barriers faith actors face.

The final dimension of the conceptual approach involved generating actionable recommendations based on the findings. The research recognized the potential of faith actors to contribute to localization and decolonization, conceptualizing recommendations as pathways for fostering greater collaboration and inclusivity. The conceptual approach provided a cohesive framework for exploring faith actors' perspectives on localization and decolonization by addressing these four dimensions. It combined theoretical inquiry with practical considerations, ensuring that the findings were grounded in participants' lived experiences and relevant to broader debates in the field. The approach was intentionally inclusive, acknowledging the diversity of faith actors and the complexities of their engagement in these processes.

By situating the research within a constructivist paradigm and adopting a participatory lens, the study prioritized the voices of faith actors while critically examining the structural and ideological dynamics that shape their involvement. This conceptual approach enabled

the research to uncover the unique contributions of faith actors and critically interrogate the broader frameworks and assumptions underpinning localization and decolonization efforts.

1.3.2. Research questions

The research has been driven by four questions as follows:

- **Conceptualization:**

How do faith actors understand the concepts of 'localization' and 'decolonization' and their relationships?

- **Opportunities:**

What are the opportunities/advantages for faith actors to be involved, or faith, to be considered in debates and practice about 'localization' and 'decolonization' in a field that secular actors and frameworks commonly dominate?

- **Challenges:**

What are tensions/challenges when faith actors get involved, or faith is considered, in decolonization/localization-focused debates and practice?

- **Recommendations:**

What are recommendations for future policy, practice and research?

2. Research Methodology

2.1. Research Approach and Data Collection

The research adopted a consultative and participatory approach throughout the various stages, ensuring that tacit knowledge among stakeholders, including JLI leadership council members and staff, were involved and their thoughts included in the research design and implementation. Campos and Gómez (2013) argue that participatory approaches are more effective as they prioritize stakeholder collaboration. A purposive sampling approach was utilized as respondents were intentionally targeted, including academics, faith-based actors, and religious leaders in the larger JLI community. The researchers adopted a mixed methods approach where both qualitative and quantitative data were collected. The whole process was split into two phases, with the first featuring an online survey and the second involving collecting data through online key informant interviews.

Conversations that "engage local partners in discussions about what localization and decolonization mean for their work" are crucial

The survey was hosted online and targeted leaders and practitioners from faith-based organizations collecting a total of 113 responses between July and August 2023, with a pilot survey coming earlier from 16th May 2023 to 30 May 2023. It included a variety of questions to cater to the research objectives. Closed-ended questions, such as multiple-choice and Likert-scale items, were used to capture quantitative data, while open-ended questions gathered qualitative insights. Demographic data, such as respondents' location and faith tradition, were also collected to contextualize the responses. As part of the second phase, key informant interviews were conducted virtually via Teams, Zoom, and Google Meet platforms, gathering in-depth insights from 31 participants regarding their perspectives on localization and decolonization. These semi-structured interviews allowed for flexibility in exploring specific themes while adhering to a core set of guiding questions. Each interview lasted approximately 1 hour and was audio-recorded, with participants' consent, to ensure accurate transcription and analysis. The virtual format facilitated the inclusion of geographically diverse participants and allowed for direct engagement despite logistical challenges. The recordings were subsequently transcribed verbatim to preserve the richness of the data. Researchers also conducted desk research investigating available literature on the two concepts of localization and decolonization.

In adherence to JLI and the University of Leeds University's ethical standards for conducting similar research, the research team sought signed consent forms by participants, ensuring respect for faith actors' beliefs and contexts. The researcher made great efforts to ensure representation across marginalized faith traditions and underrepresented geographies. Ethics permission for this research was secured from the University of Leeds research ethics committee.

2.2 Data Analysis Approach

Data from the survey hosted on Online Surveys in the first phase was exported as an excel file to facilitate analysis. Much of the quantitative data was automatically analyzed on the platform and presented in charts. Once exported, the data was cleaned to ensure its accuracy and relevance. Duplicate responses were removed, and incomplete entries, especially for critical questions, were excluded from the analysis. Categorical data were standardized to maintain consistency. The qualitative data from open-ended responses were analysed through thematic analysis. Key phrases and recurring ideas were identified and coded using the qualitative analysis software ATLAS.ti. Emerging themes were then cross-referenced with quantitative findings to ensure a cohesive interpretation.

Closely related to the approach taken with responses from open-ended questions from the online survey, interviews from the qualitative phase of the research were transcribed verbatim to capture the full depth of participants' responses. The transcripts were carefully reviewed for accuracy and anonymized to protect the confidentiality of the participants. The anonymized transcripts were then prepared for analysis and imported into ATLAS.ti. An inductive approach to analysis was followed, allowing themes to emerge directly from the data rather than imposing a pre-defined framework. The first step involved familiarizing oneself with the transcripts by reading them multiple times to comprehensively understand the content. Initial observations were documented, focusing on recurring ideas, unique perspectives, and the tone of the responses. These initial impressions informed the development of a preliminary coding framework.

The coding process was conducted in three phases: open, axial, and selective. During the open coding phase, text segments were tagged with descriptive codes that captured the essence of the participants' responses. This process was done systematically, line by line, to ensure that no data were overlooked. In the axial coding phase, relationships between codes were identified, and similar or related codes were grouped into broader categories. ATLAS.ti's visualization tools, such as network diagrams, were handy during this stage, enabling the researcher to map connections between codes and categories. The final phase, selective coding, involved identifying core themes that captured the overarching narratives in the data. These themes were developed by integrating the broader

categories established during axial coding. The final set of themes provided a comprehensive framework for understanding the perspectives of key informants. Thematic analysis was then conducted to interpret the data and draw meaningful insights. Each theme was described in detail, accompanied by direct participant quotes to illustrate key points. ATLAS.ti proved invaluable in enhancing the analytical process. Its code frequency analysis function was used to identify the most frequently discussed topics, while the query tool enabled the identification of co-occurring codes, revealing interconnections between themes. Quantitative and qualitative findings were integrated to provide a holistic understanding of the data. The mixed methods integration ensured viable triangulation between qualitative and quantitative findings, generating integrated insights.

2.3. Methodological limitations

While the study provided valuable insights into perspectives on localization and decolonization, some methodological limitations should be acknowledged to contextualize the findings.

- One notable limitation was the reliance on virtual platforms, such as Zoom, for conducting key informant interviews. Although this approach enabled the inclusion of geographically diverse participants, it also introduced challenges. Poor internet connectivity in some regions occasionally disrupted interviews, leading to interruptions or loss of critical non-verbal cues that might have added depth to the data. Additionally, some participants may have felt less comfortable discussing sensitive topics in a virtual setting than in in-person interviews, potentially affecting the richness and candor of their responses.

- Researchers also recognize the potential for sampling bias. The survey was distributed online, inherently limiting participation to individuals accessing reliable internet and digital devices. This may have excluded respondents from marginalized or rural communities with limited internet access, thereby skewing the sample toward more technologically connected and potentially more affluent individuals. As a result, the survey findings may not fully represent the views of the broader population affected by localization and decolonization. Linked to this is that the research team did not have the resources to generate the survey in multiple languages. Therefore, the survey was only prepared in English, which will have excluded some potential participants. It is also important to acknowledge that the primary focus on Christian and Muslim participants, coupled with specific geographic concentrations, means these findings offer valuable insights but do not represent an exhaustive overview of all faith traditions and global regions.

- There was also the risk of self-selection bias inherent in voluntary online surveys. Participants who chose to complete the survey may have had a pre-existing interest or strong opinions about the subject matter. Those less engaged or indifferent to the issues might have opted out, potentially leading to an overrepresentation of certain perspectives while underrepresenting others.

- Another limitation was the dependency on self-reported data. Since participants were reflecting on their experiences, perceptions, and beliefs, their responses may have been influenced by social desirability bias, wherein they provided answers they believed aligned with the expectations of the researcher or their professional roles. This could have limited the study's ability to capture more critical or controversial views.

- From an analytical perspective, the researcher's reliance on transcription and qualitative coding involved subjective interpretation. Although tools like ATLAS.ti helped to systematize the process, the researcher's perspectives and assumptions influenced the coding and thematic development. This subjectivity, while inevitable in qualitative research, could have impacted the identification and prioritization of themes.

3. Findings

This section presents the research findings as captured from the online survey and qualitative phases of the study. It highlights participants' demographics, with each section deeply assesses faith actors' understanding of localization and decolonization and their relationships. The study reveals that localization and decolonization are understood and applied in varied ways by faith actors, shaped by theological, cultural, and ethical contexts. It highlights the strategic strengths of faith actors—including deep community ties, moral authority, and interfaith potential—as assets in advancing these agendas. However, Faith actors face significant challenges, such as inter-religious tensions, colonial legacies, mistrust from secular actors, and internal power hierarchies. To address these barriers, the report recommends clearer conceptual framing, inclusive engagement, practical strategies for implementation, confronting power dynamics, avoiding isolationist interpretations, and strengthening research and policy contributions by faith actors. Below, the report explores these findings in detail as gathered from respondents.

3.1. Participant Demographics

3.1.1. Online survey demographics

The online survey was rolled out between July and August 2023, registering responses from 113 individuals representing organizations linked to many different faith traditions across the globe.

Figure 1 shows the breakdown of the respondents' organizations' traditions. We did not ask whether they were members of those religious traditions. The survey, designed using Online Surveys, was distributed via the JLI newsletter to its member organizations and disseminated through their networks. Unsurprisingly, 80.5% of the organizations identified as Christian, reflecting the predominance of Christian FBOs within the broader FBO sector and JLI membership. While Christianity is the largest faith tradition globally, it is overrepresented in the FBO sector relative to other faiths (as discussed by Marshall and Keogh, 2004).

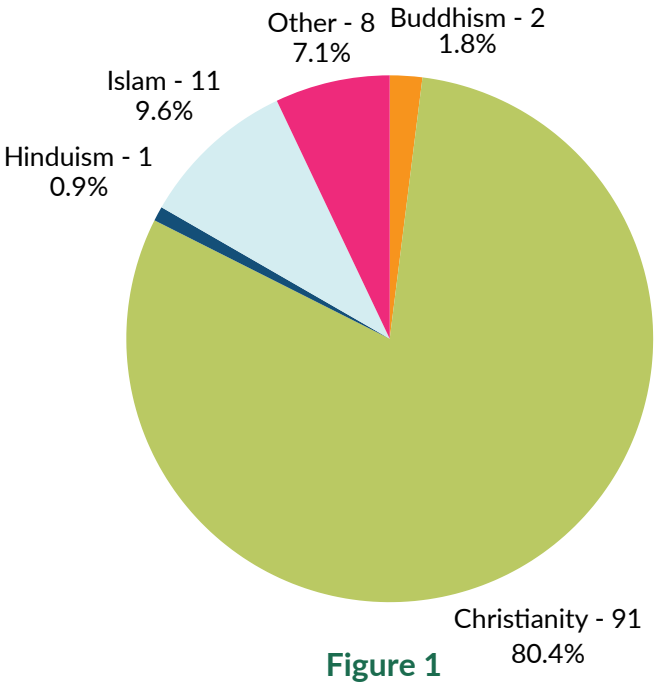

Figure 1

Islam accounted for 9.7% of respondents, Buddhism 1.8%, and Hinduism 0.9%, with no responses from Jewish or Sikh organizations. Intentional efforts were to be made during the interview phase to include such groups together with additional Buddhist and Hindu organizations. The dominance of Christian organizations in this field could also be attributed to survey distribution challenges, including language barriers (English-only), perceived survey relevance, or limited reach. 7.1% of all respondents chose 'other' for faith identity, which included individual consultants, multi-faith organizations, Christian mission hospitals, an ecumenical theological school, a Buddhist faith-inspired organization, a Quaker organization, and an umbrella group working across different agencies.

Figure 2 shows the breakdown of the types of organizations that respondents represented. The largest group identified as "international faith-based organizations" (51.4%), followed by "national faith-based organizations" (16.9%), "regional faith-based organizations" (9.9%), "community of faith" (e.g. a community of believers, perhaps united through a place of worship or a network of places of worship) (8.5%), "local faith-based organizations" (6.3%), and "other" (7%). We acknowledge that there is no fixed definition for these types of faith-based organizations, and people often use these terms differently, with overlaps between categories. However, the broad understanding of these terms was sufficient for our survey's purposes.

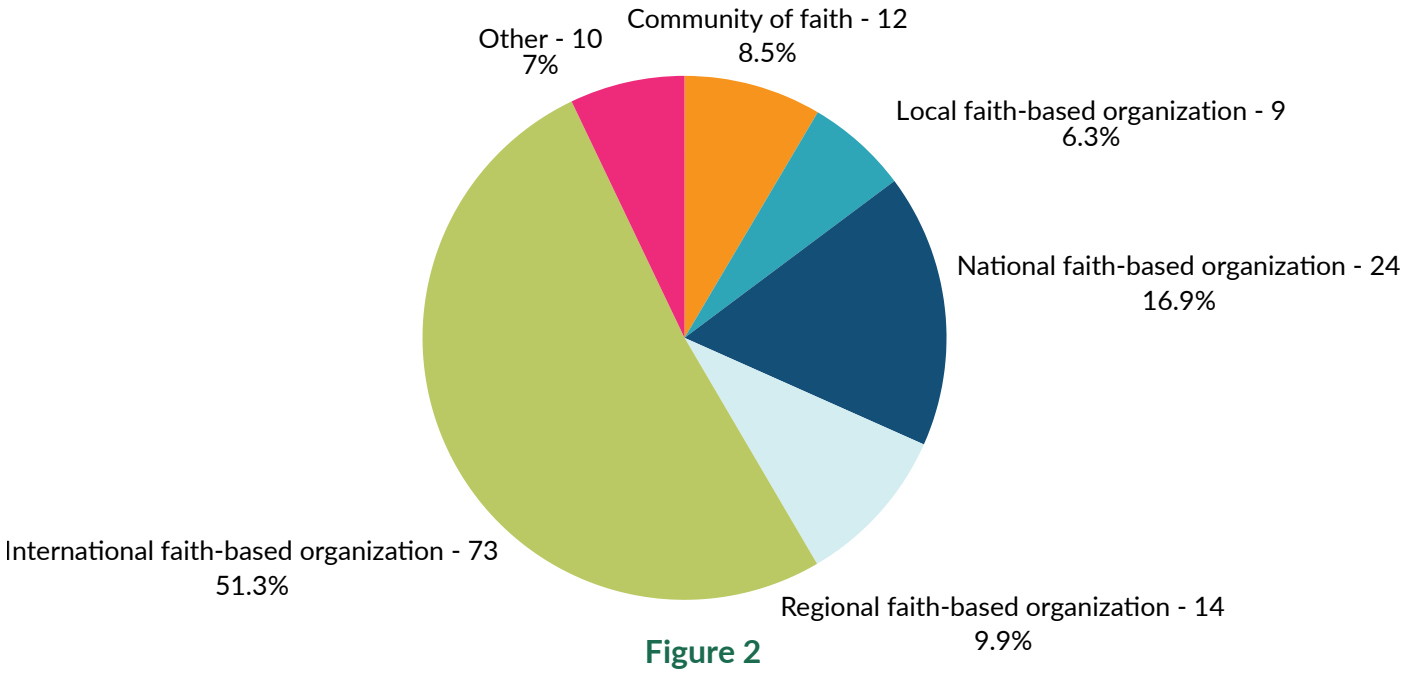

Figure 2

Participants were allowed to select multiple categories if they felt appropriate for their organization. Thirteen respondents did, while 100 identified with only one category. A common reason for choosing multiple categories was that an organization might operate internationally but also have regional, national, or local branches, such as the Salvation Army, where respondents identified with both "international" and other categories.

Figure 3 illustrates the headquarters locations of respondent organizations: 42.3% in Europe, 22% in North America, 16.3% in Africa, and 3.3% in Latin America and Australia/Oceania. We anticipated fewer responses from Latin America because the survey was available only in English. However, we were surprised to find nearly twice as many organizations headquartered in Europe as in North America. This discrepancy may reflect factors beyond our control, such as a European organization encouraging its European members to complete the survey, leading to higher European participation.

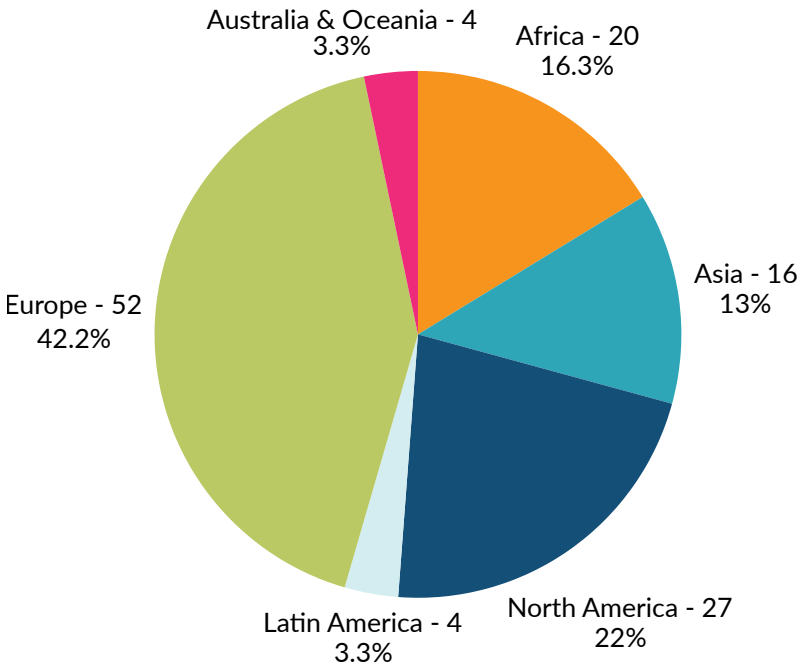

Figure 3

Summary

Most respondents identified as Christian, underscoring the overrepresentation of Christian faith-based organizations within the sector. Representation from other faith traditions was more limited, which could be influenced by factors such as language barriers or the perceived relevance of the survey. The largest group of respondents worked for international faith-based organizations, followed by national, regional, and local organizations. Participants could choose multiple categories, typical for organizations like the Salvation Army operating across different levels. More than anticipated, many respondent organizations were headquartered in Europe. This may have been influenced by the survey's broader dissemination within Europe, partly due to encouragement from specific European organizations.

3.1.2. Qualitative Study Demographics

Geographical reach of the qualitative research phase.

The second phase of data collection was conducted between March and May 2024. This was a qualitative research phase which featured online Key Informant Interviews with various stakeholders. This phase aimed at gathering in-depth perspectives on the conceptualization of localization and decolonization as an addition to data already collected via the online survey. Specifically, 31 individuals were interviewed during the qualitative phase. The snowballing sampling process adopted made efforts to include participants of diverse while ensuring broad representation across various demographic parameters.

Global representation was a key consideration, with participants hailing from different geographic regions, including the Latin region, Africa, Europe, North America, North East Asia and South Asia. This geographic diversity provided a comprehensive range of socio-cultural insights and experiences, contributing to the richness of the study's findings. Below we include an illustration of the geographical reach of this research phase.

Like the online survey, most respondents were Muslims or Christians, with a few representing Buddhism. Unfortunately, efforts to reach out to respondents of Judaism, Sikhism or Hinduism faith were not fruitful. However, the variety of respondents added depth to the analysis, highlighting the intersection of spirituality, culture, and lived experiences, complementing those collected during the online survey phase.

3.2. Findings on Conceptualization

This section of the report delves into how faith actors conceptualize localization and decolonization, examining the nuances of their engagement with these ideas. It explores how faith-based organizations align with or diverge from secular approaches. With growing global development discourse around "localization" and "decolonization" concepts, it is imperative to examine how these concepts are understood, interpreted, and enacted by faith-based organizations and individuals. By shedding light on their perspectives, the paper will later illuminate the opportunities and barriers faith actors encounter as they grapple with the dual imperatives of localization and decolonization.

3.2.1. Usage of the terminologies

Out of our sample of 113 organizations in the online survey, 46% said they used both terms, 35% said they used localization alone, 13% said neither, and 6% said they used decolonization alone. Both terms are linked to specific knowledge fields related to the language used within the development/humanitarian sphere. At the same time, most organizations surveyed were Christian International Faith Based Organizations (IFBOs), who are more likely to have adopted the dominant lexicon. Other organizations, particularly those identified as national, local, or communities of faith, had not yet been inculcated into this field. Respondents from across the different settings drew attention to the way that they perceived both terms as specialized and more likely to be used in Western aid settings with sentiments such as: 'We talk a lot about localization and contextualization of terms and concepts; especially those coming from Western academic/policy references' (online survey respondent from a Christian NGO based in Asia) and '*the terms are only used by staff with extensive development experience'* (online survey respondent from a Europe-based research organization).

At 35% of the responses, localization was noted to have been commonly used alone, besides having been around longer and being widely used in aid and development, particularly after the 2016 WHS, with some directly mentioning the C4C. There were sentiments that usage and adoption of the term localization was a result of imposition by donors where they were expected to inculcate it as captured by one participant from a Christian IFBO in North America; 'most of our resource development is responsive to institutional donors, and "localization" is a major priority.To some extent, the use of the term localization was expected in countries where IFBOs operate.

Others felt that localization was a buzzword with minimal implementation and actualization. Some participants described it as a trendy word that most organizations like to use in reports and dialogs but with no real intention of implementing it practically. One

participant from a Christian national FBO in Asia observed, *"Our organization finds localization one of those NGO words that lots of people talk about doing but never actually do it."*

There were also sentiments that usage of the term localization ideally reflected the desire of Northern states to reduce their aid funding: 'It became popular as donors started wanting to increase the "sustainability" of governments and partners especially when it comes to reducing the donor money being given' (online survey respondent from a Christian IFBO in North America).

The 6 % of respondents who had used decolonization alone highlighted the sensitivity around it, observing that historical atrocities associated with colonialism made conversations painful:

> *So far, we have been using the term 'decolonization' for our conferences and meetings on this topic. However, a shift is slowly being made to start using 'localization'. It is felt that the former term carries negative connotations, whereas the latter does not (online survey respondent from an IFBO in Europe).*

Another survey respondent observed that it tends to trigger tensions between IFBOs in the North and partners in the global South, "Decolonization has a negative connotation that seems divisive between Western agencies and the global South" (online survey respondent from Africa). Decolonization was also recognized as a term used in a broader range of knowledge fields than just aid and development. Some pointed out that it is newer in usage than localization, and there is limited understanding of it: "Within international development teams in the organization, we are beginning to talk about decolonization, but it is not a widespread or commonly used term," online survey respondent from Europe. Another respondent from an IFBO in Europe pointed out that:

> *I am not sure there is a widespread common understanding of the goal towards decolonization. It still seems to be an ambiguous term for many that refer to a cultural approach which restores the indigenous way of being stolen by colonial structures, and not necessarily a goal towards indigenous sovereignty (online survey from an IFBO in Europe).*

It is also important to note that most (46%) online survey respondents used both terms. Respondents felt that both terms reflected the observation that 'development' had failed to achieve its aims and that it represents poor strategies that have continuously caused more harm than good. One respondent from a Muslim IFBO in North America noted, "the popularity may be attributed to the failure of reaching the development goals by development actors from the Global North," online survey. Another respondent of the Christian faith and from Australia opined as captured in the quote box here:

> *In the early 21st century, the term "decolonization" gained significant prominence due to the emergence of development and ecological crisis faced by various regions. The prevailing Western approach to development has proven to be socially, economically, politically, culturally, and ecologically destructive. As a result, there is a growing awareness among the Global South about the erosion of their cultures, values, and principles concerning the preservation of life in all its interconnectedness – the "whole of life" approach (online survey from a Christian FBO in Australia.*

Some respondents took a more critical view, noting that these concepts are only popular in high-level policy dialogs. When it gets to the level where such conversations can influence the decision-making power of the international agency or the national/big city agency, they are met with 'red tape' arguments like Monitoring, Evaluation, Accountability, and Learning (MEAL) priorities. One participant from an IFBO in North America noted that 'INGOs devolve or localize when it's in their self-interest. When they want to free up funds for new work that is sexier."

In addition, there were those organizations who said that they use neither term in their work. However, they observed that much of what is envisioned in their usage is already inculcated into their work. For instance, a respondent from a Muslim IFBO in North America opined that "we are conscious of the effects of both terms and act accordingly without necessarily using the terms to describe our actions," similar to another one from a Christian IFBO in Europe who noted that "though the words are not used directly the aspect of the two is felt, and things are done in the context of the local level to fit the common man at the local community setup." Some of them, therefore, mentioned other terms currently in use instead of localization and decolonization. Among those who had not adopted or used the two terms, there was also the suggestion that they were irrelevant to their local languages, as noted by a respondent from a Muslim national FBO in Asia, "We are not in the habit of using terms irrelevant to the local languages."

Generally, "localization" and "decolonization" are highly contextual, often Western-centric, and more theoretical than practical for many organizations. There are mixed perceptions about their relevance and utility in faith-based and localized development work.

3.2.2. An in-depth look at localization

As earlier indicated, respondents reported having widely used the term localization alone (35%) or combined with decolonization (46%). This section comprehensively analyses this terminology and the concept's usage, definitions, and adoption. Localization is a well-established term within the international development/humanitarian lexicon that our respondents felt most comfortable and familiar with. The idea of localization in

development has its roots in the ‘local turn’ that had begun by the mid-1970s into the early 1980s with the recognition that local knowledge from the ‘bottom-up’ was an essential dimension of effective development solutions rather than relying on the remote input of western development experts from the ‘top-down’ (Smith,1999; Chambers, 1997). Fast-forward, localization has become a central theme in global development and humanitarian debates, gaining momentum after the 2016 Grand Bargain commitments, which sought to shift resources, power, and decision-making closer to affected

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However, critics note that localization efforts often fall short of transferring real power, with local actors confined to subcontracting roles under international frameworks (Roepstorff, 2020). Localization holds particular significance for faith actors due to their long-standing roles as trusted, embedded actors in communities. However, as the idea of localization became further embedded within development/humanitarian discourse, it moved beyond a focus on local knowledge and input. Also, it came to emphasize ownership of the development process, including funding. This section delves deep into some perspectives and thematic issues about the localization concept as captured by survey respondents and participants in the qualitative study.

Defining/understanding localization

This study also investigated how faith actors define or understand the localization concept. As discussed below, the online survey respondents and qualitative study participants provided varied insights.

- **Localization as community empowerment through local ownership**

Faith actors view localization as a means of empowering communities to take ownership of their development and humanitarian efforts, as observed by one participant from a Christian IFBO in Europe,

> *We are focusing on localizing the decision-making programs driven by local communities. Their voices should not only be heard but also valued, and their local solutions must be incorporated into the programs. Local communities and local actors (frontliners) must be involved in the whole project cycle management rather than just the implementation, and they must be treated as equal partners (Christian IFBO in Europe).*

This perspective is grounded in their longstanding presence within local communities, often predating and outlasting secular organizations. As a result, they view themselves as uniquely positioned to implement community-driven approaches that respect and leverage local knowledge, traditions, and capacities. As one Buddhist respondent from South Asia observed,

> *In the past, much of the support to the community came from religious sources. The monks, for instance, were always there with the community. Whenever difficulties arose, the monks were ready to support them. In comparison, donor-based support usually comes with a one-, two-, or three-year timeframe. If something goes beyond that timeframe or focus, it won't be supported. For example, in some communities along the Thai-Myanmar border, villagers got dengue fever, but funding from global donors like the EU or UN was targeted at specific diseases like TB. They couldn't do anything when dengue fever struck because it didn't fit within their funding focus. This approach is very rigid, fitting everything into boxes, which can be limiting (respondent from South Asia).*

Some respondents also defined localization in line with holistic empowerment, which extends beyond economic or technical capacity-building to include spiritual, emotional, and social dimensions. For many faith actors, localization involves nurturing the self-confidence and resilience of communities, enabling them to become active agents of change. This approach contrasts with traditional top-down development models, which often treat communities as passive recipients of aid, as described by this respondent from an Islamic IFBO in Europe, *"Our rule is to build the capacity of the local organization and to*

better the standard of said organization on an international level." A participant from a national-level FBO in Africa opined that, *"I understand localization from the notion that there is significant need for changes in funding practices, partnership models, and organizational structures to make the humanitarian response more efficient, effective and emancipatory."*

Others acknowledged that local partners have a deep understanding of their local context and should be trusted with resources and decisions that are relevant to their setting, were of the view that:

> *Localization should be understood as an approach that seeks local engagement and ownership in development projects by prioritizing local entities for funding and/or involving local communities in setting priorities and designing and managing projects (respondent from a Christian IFBO in North America).*

- **Localization and power redistribution**

Localization was also described in relation to the redistribution of power from international to local actors. Faith actors understand this process as a practical necessity and a moral imperative rooted in the principles of justice, equity, and inclusivity. Faith-based organizations have long criticized the inequities in the global aid system, where decision-making authority and financial resources are concentrated in the hands of large, Northern-based organizations. This imbalance often marginalizes local actors, limiting their ability to shape priorities or access funding. Localization, as understood by faith actors, seeks to redress these inequities by empowering local organizations and ensuring that their voices are heard in global forums (Fiddian-Qasmiyeh & Ager, 2013) as described by one respondent from a Christian IFBO in North America:

> *Localization is a process that cedes space, control, and leadership to local staff and actors, not centralizing control in the hands of ex-pats and also not centralizing control in the hands of staff in the US or Europe. It means opening decision-making beyond the central office and letting those in particular locations have their own say (respondent from a Christian IFBO in North America).*

One way that faith actors advocate for power redistribution is by challenging the donor-driven nature of international aid. Faith-based organizations argue that funding mechanisms should prioritize direct support to local actors rather than filtering resources through intermediary agencies. This shift requires structural changes and a transformation in how donors and international organizations perceive local capacity and leadership.

> *Localization, for me, is to do with how we bring local faith actors into light more by adopting approaches that ensure financially useful partnerships while also allowing them to be significant players, which is ideally shifting more*

> *power that is traditionally bound by bureaucracies in humanitarian aid (respondent from a Christian IFBO in North America).*

Additionally, some respondents highlighted the importance of recognizing and valuing local knowledge as a critical component of power redistribution when defining the localization concept. They argue that communities possess unique insights and solutions that are often overlooked in favor of external expertise.

- **Localization and religious identity/theological foundations**

This study noted that faith actors' understanding of localization is deeply rooted in theological principles prioritizing human dignity, equity, and community. Across various faith traditions, religious teachings emphasize the importance of empowering individuals and communities to take charge of their destinies, often aligning these spiritual imperatives with localization's goals.

One key theological concept underpinning localization for Catholics is subsidiarity, derived from Catholic social teaching. Subsidiarity holds that matters should be handled at the local level, which can address them effectively, respecting the competence and agency of smaller entities (Pope Pius XI, 1931). For Catholic faith-based organizations (FBOs), subsidiarity supports the idea that local communities are best positioned to identify and address their needs, given their intimate knowledge of cultural, social, and spiritual contexts. It discourages external actors from assuming control unless necessary, a principle directly aligned with the localization goals. Comments from a majority of Christian respondents (even though they were not all Catholic) supported this notion in their definitions of localization, such as:

> *Localization entails making the country office operations as local as possible and international as necessary with staffing. Management should be from the country of operation, and consideration should be given to the region before international staffing is sought (respondent from an international Christian FBO from Europe).*

This notion is further supported by a Christian IFBO from Europe who observed that, *"Over the time that I have been with my organization we have worked to increase local staffing and ownership of work in the locations where we work throughout the world. This has been a process that might be described as localization."*

There is also the concept of Ummah among Muslims or the global community of believers, which complements localization by emphasizing collective responsibility and solidarity. However, Islamic teachings also prioritize the autonomy and leadership of local communities in addressing their challenges (Esack, 1997). This balance between global

solidarity and local agency reflects a nuanced theological understanding of power and responsibility as observed by one respondent from Islamic national level FBO:

> *This organization is trying to institutionalize zakat (compulsory charity from the wealthy Muslims for the poor). However, we need to design the programs based on the culture and socioeconomic condition of our country, this adaptation needs to be based on local needs, which is localization for me (respondent from Islamic national level FBO).*

This further revealed that faith actors' theological understanding of localization is deeply practical and not limited to abstract principles. For instance, African theologians such as John Mbiti (1970) have argued for an "inculturated theology" that situates religious practices within African cultural and spiritual contexts, enabling local communities to lead and own their spiritual and developmental journeys. This approach underscores the theological imperative of localization: enabling communities to flourish within their unique contexts rather than imposing external frameworks, as observed by one respondent from a Christian National FBO in Australia:

In Islamic teachings, Ummah complements localization by emphasizing collective responsibility and solidarity

> *In my Church Organization we are working on methodologies that will bring the Gospel come alive in our own contextual realities and we try to do away with foreign leadership and focus on empowering our own local people to take up leadership roles in the Church (respondent from a Christian National FBO in Australia).*

Additionally, faith traditions emphasize principles such as stewardship and justice, which inform localization efforts. Stewardship, a concept prominent in Christianity and Islam, calls for the responsible management of resources and relationships, emphasizing the need to empower those closest to the issues at hand. Justice, seen as a divine mandate in most faiths, compels faith actors to address inequities in the global aid system, advocating for a fairer distribution of resources and decision-making power. This points to the significant role spiritual mandates and moral frameworks play in understanding localization by faith actors in general.

Generally, faith actors described localization in terms of redistribution of power within the development sector. There was a general observation that the development field has been historically dominated by frameworks rooted in the global north, often perpetuating inequitable power dynamics. Faith actors argue that this can be addressed by shifting power to local actors, fostering more inclusive decision-making, and creating equitable resource distribution. It was further observed that by embracing localization, local communities can preserve their cultural heritage, strengthen their self-reliance, and promote sustainable and inclusive development that meets their people's specific needs and aspirations. It aligns with the idea that solutions for development challenges in the local communities must be contextually relevant and driven by the people themselves.

Critiques of using the term localization

Though the more preferred term, localization was seen as primarily symbolic compared to the structural change needed. Some respondents criticized localization for not going far enough in addressing structural power imbalances. It was viewed as insufficient if it did not lead to genuine shifts in decision-making power, as noted by this respondent from an IFBO in Europe:

> *Both terms are used within our organization, although we are moving away from the word "localization" as it is seen as not actually being decolonized. With that said, the idea of localization is important to us in the need to bring aid closer to communities, and our commitment to the Grand Bargain drives that work. Decolonization is part of our work over the last several years as we try to be aware of and react to the colonial reality of our history and cultures (respondent from an IFBO in Europe).*

Another respondent from an IFBO in Europe observed:

> *We think we work already in a localized way, strengthening partner church organizations in the Global South. Some of them find it not localized enough and challenge our coloniality (respondent from an IFBO in Europe).*

Some respondents pointed out that localization was not a new concept for their organizations but had been significant from the outset, highlighting its long-standing importance in their development approaches:

> *My organization often used the term localization, especially during community engagement and development work. By this, we mean the community should be consulted on developmental initiatives that are to take place in the community, allowing the community to participate in the process i.e., making their own contributions towards the development for proper ownership or transition or sustainability of the development (respondent from a Christian IFBO with presence in Liberia).*

Others felt that localization is vulnerable to becoming merely a buzzword without real intent, focusing only on surface-level changes rather than meaningfully empowering local actors. As one respondent from a Christian IFBO in Europe opined, *"Localization becomes a buzzword, but intentions of enhanced partnership are both decolonize and localize—the one requires the other."*

Historical context and influences

The study also sought to investigate some of the historical contexts or influences behind the increasing usage or adoption of localization as a term and a concept. Most respondents linked the rise of localization to the World Humanitarian Summit (WHS) in 2016, which provided a framework for decentralizing leadership and recognizing the importance of local actors. Respondents observed that the WHS formulated a framework for what had been out there for a longtime, highlighting the need for decentralization in the development world, where local leadership and capacity were to be the focus. Some opined that during that time, donors understood that top-down approaches were not working and that positive change happens through local influence.

> *Since the World Humanitarian Summit in 2016, between 2014 and 2016, during the preparation of the above-mentioned summit, we had many workshops with many local actors in different regions where the voice of local agencies needed to be included, invested in and to be trained (respondent from a Muslim IFBO in Europe).*

In addition to the WHS, the rise of localization was linked to the SDGs, with one respondent from Asia highlighting the work of 'Local2Global' over the previous decade.

> *Localization has become popular with the promotion of SDGs as UNSDG focuses on localization in terms of financing and customization of programs based on local needs (respondent from an IFBO in Asia).*

A respondent from another Christian IFBO, Europe) felt that localization had been significant *"from the start of our organization in the late 1900's."* A few drew attention to a speech by Samantha Power in the USA in 2021, noting that it has gained prominence over the past three years. However, it has been a concept driven by USAID and other donors for several administrations, going back even 15+ years. The Grand Bargain likely galvanized this agenda in 2016, with USAID Administrator Power solidifying its relevance in her Nov. 2021 speech at Georgetown University with significant, agency-wide commitments. This has had a great influence on other donors and stakeholders since.

COVID-19 also pushed the localization agenda forward, as travel restrictions highlighted the need for local capacity, as observed by one respondent:

> *The term has been discussed and talked about more after COVID-19. This is mainly because most international organizations were not able to visit to provide technical assistance in implementing some of the projects and initiatives because of travel restrictions and lockdowns. This highlighted the need for local organizations and partners to have the capacity to be able to work on their own (respondent from a Christian IFBO, North America).*

Others felt that, alongside COVID, major humanitarian crises, including refugee movements due to protracted wars and violence in places like South Sudan, Syria, and Ukraine, forced humanitarians to recognize and appreciate the important role local faith-based players play in emergency response and recovery. The first UNHCR Dialog on Faith and Protection in 2012 helped highlight this shift. COVID then played a powerful role in demonstrating the critical role of local FBOs and CBOs as international NGOs were significantly impacted.

Table 2: Summary of a more in-depth look at localization

Prevalence of Localization	Localization was the more widely used term among respondents, either alone or alongside decolonization. It is well-established in the development/humanitarian lexicon, and many organizations felt comfortable with it. Its origins lie in the "local turn" of the 1970s and 1980s, which emphasized the importance of local knowledge for effective development.
Defining Localization	Respondents described localization as promoting local engagement, ownership, and leadership in development projects, including prioritizing local entities for funding and decision-making. It emphasizes shifting control away from centralized (often Western) entities and towards local actors.
Historical Context and Influencers	Most respondents linked the rise of localization to the World Humanitarian Summit (WHS) in 2016, which provided a framework for decentralizing leadership and recognizing the importance of local actors. It was also associated with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and driven by major donors like USAID. A speech by Samantha Power in 2021 and the Grand Bargain in 2016 were highlighted as significant moments that further promoted localization.

Impact of COVID-19 and Humanitarian Crises	COVID-19 was seen as a major factor that pushed the localization agenda forward, as travel restrictions highlighted the need for local capacity. Major humanitarian crises, such as conflicts in South Sudan, Syria, and Ukraine, also underscored the importance of local faith-based actors in emergency response and recovery.
Localization and Religious Identity	Some respondents linked localization to their religious identities, emphasizing empowerment of local communities in line with faith values. However, this perspective was less common compared to other motivations for localization
Localization as Part of Development History	Several respondents emphasized that localization was not a new concept for their organizations but had been significant from the outset, highlighting its long-standing importance in their development approaches.

Overall, localization is perceived as a well-established and increasingly prominent approach within the development sector, particularly influenced by recent global events, humanitarian crises, and donor-driven agendas. It is centered around empowering local communities to lead development efforts and reduce reliance on external actors.

3.2.3. An in-depth look at decolonization

Decolonization as a concept has been around for some time now, and its in-depth understanding is crucial, especially for faith actors working in humanitarianism and development. To some scholars, decolonization takes a more transformative approach, seeking to dismantle the structural inequalities, power hierarchies, and epistemic dominance established during colonial rule and perpetuated in contemporary global aid systems. It critiques the centrality of Global North institutions in defining development priorities and practices, arguing that these systems often marginalize the voices and knowledge of Global South communities (Escobar, 1995). Decolonization calls for a fundamental rethinking of conceptualizing and delivering aid, emphasizing the need to center indigenous knowledge, prioritize local narratives, and confront the racialized power dynamics embedded in humanitarian and development sectors (Tuck & Yang, 2012). In practice, decolonization demands a shift from extractive partnerships to equitable collaborations, where local actors are not only participants but leaders in shaping global agendas.

Faith actors play a unique and influential role in the development sector, where their understanding of decolonization reflects their theological foundations, ethical commitments, and practical experiences. Their perspectives on decolonization in the development sector revolve around addressing systemic inequalities, empowering local communities, and challenging colonial legacies embedded in development frameworks. This section presents a detailed analysis of the key themes that emerge when studying faith actors' understanding of decolonization within this context. As highlighted earlier in the 'under usage of these terms' subsection, fewer (6%) survey respondents reported having used the term decolonization in their work than localization, with the majority of these representing Christian, international faith-based organizations, located in the Global North. Our respondents defined decolonization in several intersecting ways: concerning theological principles, as beyond physical colonization and instead as concerned with structural/symbolic dimensions, and with respect to its concrete manifestation in development/humanitarianism. They demonstrated an overall high level of awareness of the term despite many of our respondents telling us that their organizations did not actively use the term in their work (46.68%).

Defining/understanding decolonization

- **Theological perspective**

Similar to localization, faith actors often view decolonization as a deeply moral and theological obligation grounded in their spiritual teachings and ethical values. This perspective frames decolonization not merely as a political or structural endeavor but as restoring justice, dignity, and harmony in human relationships and societal systems. This

foundation serves as a basis for understanding and engaging in decolonization for many faith actors. For instance, in Christian theology, the concept of liberation is central to decolonization. Liberation theology, which emerged in Latin America in the 20th century, emphasizes the need for faith to confront systems of oppression and inequality. Passages such as Luke 4:18-19, where Jesus declares his mission to "proclaim good news to the poor" and "set the oppressed free," are frequently cited as a call to action for addressing colonial injustices.

The Christian notion of imago Dei (the belief that all humans are made in the image of God) reinforces the idea that colonial systems, which dehumanized and exploited marginalized peoples, violate the divine order and must be dismantled. One respondent from an IFBO in Europe observed that "Decolonization from a theological perspective refers to overcoming the conventional narrative of Christianity as a Western religion." Another respondent from an IFBO in Europe posited, *"Decolonization is the release of local organizations to be true to their context and to be led by the Spirit in their areas of ministry*."

Additionally, the Islamic principles of Adl (justice) and Tawhid (unity and oneness) resonate with the goals of decolonization. Adl emphasizes the need for fairness and equity in all human interactions, while Tawhid rejects systems that create hierarchies or divisions among people. The Quranic injunction to "stand out firmly for justice (Quran 4:135) provides a moral imperative for addressing the inequalities perpetuated by colonial legacies. Faith actors, therefore, described decolonization from this perspective of justice and restoration as captured by one respondent who observed that:

> *Decolonization is seeking to redress the systemic and historic injustices and prejudices that continue to be present in our culture and industry, leading to power imbalances, funding imbalances, and continued vulnerability (respondent from an IFBO in Africa).*

Through these theological lenses, some view decolonization as a sacred duty, aligning human action with divine principles of justice and compassion.

- **Beyond physical colonization**

While some of our respondents talked about physical colonization, there was an overall understanding of it that goes beyond territorial colonization where:

> *Decolonization now is not only about countries gaining independence but about communities adapting learning to how they understand it/view it might be the most beneficial. It goes beyond mere "land" to ideas, concepts, frameworks, tools, and structures (respondent from Christian NGO in Asia)*

Another respondent from South Asia opined that:

> *It is not just about decolonization from the pre-independence era but also about the new globalization and the emerging economic order. The shifting of capital and how transnational companies are entering into these spaces is a new threat. These countries may be politically independent and sovereign, but economically, they are being colonized in a different way—whether it's China or India doing this to Sri Lanka, for example. It's a very different dynamic. If we stay stuck on the idea of decolonization from Western powers 300 to 400 years ago, it becomes very hypothetical and academic. The current reality of external influence on our communities is much more sophisticated, involving complex geopolitics (respondent from an IFBO in South Asia).*

Decolonization, in this sense, as a transformative agenda, seeks not only to confront and dismantle the enduring legacies of material colonialism within humanitarian and development systems but also challenges the pervasive power dynamics, structural inequalities, and epistemic hierarchies that continue to privilege Global North actors, institutions, and ideologies over those of the Global South.

Respondents articulated diverse understandings of decolonization. Some referred to it as a process of removing, letting go of, or undoing "*the Western dominance of political, economic and social power*" (Christian, IFBO, Asia). Another respondent from a Christian national FBO in Africa described it as "*letting go of the hold that you have from the imperialists or the colonial hold which guides policy, governance, norms and so on.*" Others emphasized decolonization as a process of rectifying previous injustices, specifically "*returning power and wealth to where it belongs*" (Christian, IFBO, Asia). Another respondent from a Christian IFBO in Europe further defined it as "*seeking to redress the systemic and historic injustices and prejudices that continue to be present in our culture and industry, leading to power imbalances, funding imbalances, and continued vulnerability.*" Respondents also referred to decolonization as a mindset transformation, from one of inferiority to embracing one's own culture and values. A respondent from a Christian faith community in Oceania depicted it as "*a set of processes for transforming daily awareness from colonized (accepting inferiority to that of colonizers) to freedoms to believe in one's own culture and its consciousness.*" Similarly, another respondent from a Christian IFBO in North America highlighted it as "*taking the western mindset of knowing best and winding that back to be more grassroots.*"

- **Concrete manifestation in development/humanitarianism**

There was a recognition among faith-based actors that, despite their central role in many societies, they have frequently been co-opted into systems that prioritize Western development models. This dominance is reflected in the reliance on Western funding, the imposition of Western-centric accountability mechanisms, and the expectation that local faith actors align their practices with the agendas of Global North donors and institutions. Such dynamics often undermine the autonomy and agency of faith actors, reducing them to implementers of externally driven projects rather than leaders in crafting development solutions that resonate with their communities.

Decolonization in this context was, therefore, noted to involve challenging and removing these structures of Western dominance. It calls for reorienting development systems to recognize and respect the theological, cultural, and social frameworks through which faith actors understand and address poverty, inequality, and injustice. This means rejecting the assumption that Western approaches are universally applicable or superior and instead embracing the diverse ways faith communities conceptualize development—often as a holistic process that integrates spiritual, emotional, and material well-being.

Ultimately, according to study respondents, decolonization as the removal of Western dominance is about creating space for self-determination and the flourishing of diverse development paradigms. One participant from a Christian IFBO at the national level in Africa opined that:

> *Decolonization is intentionally undoing the effects of Western colonization and affirming local identities and their ways of doing things, including crisis response, which involves refusing to assume Western responses are best and choosing to work and respond under local leadership. (respondent from a Christian IFBO at the national level in Africa).*

There was also a perspective that decolonization is breaking the monopoly of the Global North in determining development imperatives (e.g., its concepts, tools, processes, and means) in the Global South, as observed by one respondent from a Muslim IFBO, "*It is an act of liberation that allows faith-based organizations to fully embody their mission to serve their communities in ways that honor their values, history, and spiritual heritage.*"

Some respondents' descriptions of decolonization emphasized power redistribution, especially in development and humanitarian action. This was primarily based on the historical view that the development field has been dominated by frameworks, institutions, and funding mechanisms rooted in the Global North, often perpetuating inequitable power dynamics. Faith actors posited that decolonization involves several aspects, which will be discussed below.

- **Shifting power relations**

Closely related to how localization was perceived, respondents' conceptualization of decolonization presented aspects of shifting power relations regarding decision-making. Faith actors advocated for a fundamental shift in decision-making processes, ensuring local communities play a central role in shaping development agendas and policies. In the words of one Buddhist respondent from South Asia:

> *Decolonization is about power and who has control of resources. That's why, if the local community can make decisions as much as possible, it will help them bring up their values, esteem, and empower their community process to grow, rather than always needing to ask the donor, which takes time and is distant (Buddhist respondent from South Asia).*

Another respondent from a Christian FBO operating in Africa noted that *"decolonization means a systemic overhaul that entails interrogating the historical and political structures. within which global health and 'development' work operates and dismantling unequal power structures."* There was also an aspect of shifting power relations, characterized as participatory development. Several qualitative study participants observed that faith actors champion participatory development approaches, which actively involve community members at every stage of the project cycle; as noted by this respondent from an Islamic FBO in Asia, "*decolonization for us, is an approach which consists in associating people directly impacted by aid and development programs in decisions making."* This not only empowers communities but also fosters greater accountability and ownership. This shift from external control to local leadership is seen as a cornerstone of equitable and effective development. It is worth noting that power redistribution in development frameworks is a critical aspect of decolonization, particularly for faith actors who are deeply committed to justice, equity, and community empowerment. Faith actors believe decolonization is possible by advocating for local leadership, equitable resource allocation, and the recognition of diverse knowledge systems.

- **Equitable resource allocation**

Apart from shifting power relations, respondents also spoke of decolonization in relation to equitable resource allocation as an approach towards fostering self-reliance and reducing reliance on external donors. Participants generally recognized that international donors and large NGOs control a significant portion of development funding based in the Global North. These organizations often channel resources to projects and priorities that align with their own agendas rather than those identified by local communities- something that faith actors noted as key in perpetuating dependency and undermining local autonomy. As stated by one respondent from a Christian FBO in Asia:

> *Decolonization means the independence of the countries/ nations/ organizations from the imperial (Global North). Policy development and implementation, decisions on the funding and allocations must be rationalized according to the local needs of the affected populations; their voices must be heard and considered while making decisions (participant from a Christian IFBO in Asia).*

- **Recognizing and valuing local knowledge:**

Participants also opined that decolonization is characterized by recognizing local knowledge reservoirs. They emphasized the importance of valuing the knowledge, expertise, and cultural practices of local communities, which have often been devalued or ignored in traditional development frameworks, as observed by one participant from a Christian IFBO in Europe:

> *Decolonization is recognizing where Western models of thinking and approaches and Western leadership have been uncritically adopted, re-examining in light of local models/approaches and leadership options that are available, and moving towards the latter (participant from a Christian IFBO in Europe).*

Another respondent from a research network based in North America observed that,

> *For us we think about it in terms of decolonizing research. And I think that's been a huge part of it through our work, which have forced us to rethink what research is and what research should look like. And that's something that we're trying to do in the sector, like pushing out this idea of creative and non-conventional approaches to research. But I think it's also forced us to unlearn a lot of our own, colonized mentalities internally at our organization. About what we think good research looks like in the process (respondent from a research network based in North America).*

This can be perceived as part of the process toward epistemic justice, which underlines the fact that development practices have historically privileged Western knowledge systems, marginalizing Indigenous and local perspectives. Faith actors argue that decolonization involves challenging this epistemic injustice and creating space for diverse ways of knowing.

Critiques of using the term decolonization

The research team also noted that faith actors acknowledge that decolonization efforts can sometimes face resistance within their institutions, which may reflect colonial hierarchies and practices. It was widely evident from many respondents that the usage of

the term decolonization itself was somehow sensitive. For instance, some respondents were critical of using the term as it seemed that the goal of "decolonization" emphasized the disempowering of "*Western*" entities rather than strengthening the voice of the "*Global South*" and developing trusting relationships. One respondent from a Muslim IFBO in North America even pointed out that *"the one who did the colonization is the one who is trying to decolonize. [But there is] no role for the people who are colonized, and now the global north is trying to de-colonize them."*

Another respondent questioned its usage because some IFBOs do not understand what it is and find it confusing, especially when mentioned with localization:

> *I think this is problematic because large international NGOs can pat themselves on the back for sharing only a small portion of their funding "pie" with local partners (in the name of localization) and call it decolonization, which it very much is not (respondent from Christian IFBO North America).*

Others observed that debates about decolonization and development are not new.

Some respondents drew attention to the fact that the term 'decolonization,' more so than 'localization,' was a sensitive topic and therefore largely avoided by some organizations, as noted by one respondent from a Christian IFBO in Europe,

> *So far, we have been using the term 'decolonization' for our conferences and meetings on this topic. However, slowly, a shift is being made to start using 'localization'. It is felt that the former term carries negative connotations, whereas the latter does not.*

Others plainly explained that "*decolonization has a negative connotation that seems divisive between Western agencies and the Global South.*" Some even mentioned that using the term decolonization was contentious as stakeholders would question the extent of decoloniality with sentiments like,

> *You're still working in English, you're still an NGO, you're still engaging with the UN, and so on. So many times we resort to other terminologies to avoid some of the backlash from people who felt threatened by a decolonial approach (respondent from a research network in North America).*

On the other hand, some respondents intentionally use the term for the very reasons many shy away from it. Organizations adopt the term precisely because it calls out problematic colonial history. As a Christian IFBO North America respondent opined: *"Our organization, for instance, came out of Victorian England in the mid-1800s and is aware that it needs to address the issue of Colonization."* Decolonization was generally described as more than a political or economic process, it is a moral and theological imperative grounded in the principles of justice, liberation, and restoration.

Historical view on the usage of the term decolonization

In the decades following political independence, when formerly colonized nations gained sovereignty and self-governance, formally ending colonial rule, the development and humanitarian sectors faced increasing scrutiny for perpetuating colonial legacies. Even after independence, many countries remained economically and structurally tied to their former colonizers. Scholars and practitioners pointed out that while formal colonial rule had ended, many systems of aid and development continued to reflect asymmetrical power relations, with institutions in the Global North exerting significant control over resources, decision-making, and knowledge production (Escobar, 1995).

For faith-based organizations, these dynamics were particularly evident in the dominance of Western operational frameworks, which shaped how development and humanitarian efforts were conceptualized and implemented (Tomalin, 2015). As a result, many faith-based organizations headquartered in the Global North aligned with mainstream development paradigms that often avoided explicit discussions of colonial legacies.
It was not until the 21st century, amid growing calls for "localization" and critiques of the humanitarian sector's racialized and hierarchical structures, that the term decolonization gained prominence. Scholars and practitioners increasingly argued that meaningful localization required addressing the deeper structural inequities embedded in the aid system. This argument brought the concept of decolonization to the forefront of faith-based development discourse (Tuck & Yang, 2012).

However, faith actors had been developing their decolonial critique long before this. The emergence of liberation theology in the mid-20th century marked a critical moment in the intersection of faith and decolonization within development discourse. Originating in Latin America, liberation theology framed development as a struggle for justice, dignity, and the empowerment of marginalized communities, directly challenging the paternalistic approaches of traditional aid models (Gutiérrez, 1973). It provided a theological foundation for decolonization by emphasizing the need to confront systemic oppression—including the lingering effects of colonialism—within both church structures and broader societal systems. This theological movement inspired faith actors globally to adopt decolonial perspectives, advocating for development approaches prioritizing local leadership and cultural authenticity.

Despite this, the explicit use of "decolonization" among faith actors in development remained limited for much of the 20th century. The term's historical trajectory within faith-based development reflects an ongoing journey—from its initial association with political independence to its current application as a framework for challenging and transforming the global development system.

For many respondents, the 2016 World Humanitarian Summit (WHS) was a key catalyst in raising the profile of decolonization. More recently, respondents linked the growing focus on decolonization to the global response to the Black Lives Matter movement following George Floyd's racist murder in 2022. This broader attention to racism and decolonization has gained traction in the development and humanitarian sectors, as noted by a respondent from a Christian IFBO based in North America: "*Decolonization in the US seems to have become a popular term more recently, in tandem with anti-racism movements that became very prominent after the George Floyd murder.*"

Identifying a single catalyst for the increased public interest in racism and decolonization is challenging. Events such as the toppling of statues and the defacing of artworks have contributed to the momentum, but so has the immigration crisis, particularly its impact on Europe and North America. The rapid expansion of social media has amplified discussions and mobilization. Additionally, there has been significant backlash against the rise of right-wing populism, which has intersected with the push for racial and decolonial justice. As one of our respondents attempted to capture some of this complexity,

> *There are so many factors that may have contributed to this; I guess more and more people have had access to education, have been exposed to critical thinking, have joined protest movements such as Black Lives Matter and Me Too, have connected on social media, gradually developed a political conscience, etc (respondent from an IFBO in North America).*

Another respondent from South America noted that: "*decolonization is becoming popular due to the increased debates in the region, mainly around Indigenous peoples' rights and climate justice*." It is important to note that, faith actors are of late finding space, albeit slowly, to discuss decolonization. Faith actors are reshaping the narrative of decolonization, aligning it with their mission to serve communities in ways that honor their agency, dignity, and self-determination.

Table 3: Summary of a more in-depth look at decolonization

Usage of decolonization	Fewer respondents used "decolonization" compared to "localization." The term was primarily used by Christian international faith-based organizations in the Global North. Although many organizations did not actively use it, there was a high level of awareness.
Definitions of decolonization	**1. Beyond physical colonization:** Decolonization was understood as not only about independence from colonial powers but also about reclaiming control over ideas, frameworks, and development practices. **2. Removing western dominance:** Some respondents viewed it as the undoing of Western dominance in political, economic, and social spheres. **3. Righting historical injustices:** Others emphasized decolonization as a process to correct historical injustices and redistribute power and resources. **4. A shift in mindset:** Decolonization was also described as transforming the mindset from one of inferiority to embracing one's own culture and values. **5. In development aid:** Respondents linked decolonization to aid, calling for the removal of Northern control and prioritizing local leadership in decision-making.
Criticism of the term	Some respondents criticized the use of "decolonization" in development, seeing it as merely symbolic without real shifts in power. Others viewed it as focusing more on disempowering Western entities than empowering the Global South.
Sensitivity around decolonization	The term "decolonization" was seen as sensitive, often avoided due to its negative connotations. Some organizations opted for "localization" as it was perceived as more neutral. On the other hand, some embraced the term to acknowledge colonial histories.
Broader context	Decolonization was recognized as a broader political concept used in various fields beyond development, such as politics and academia. It was seen as relatively new in development discourse compared to localization.
Recent catalysts	The 2016 World Humanitarian Summit was a key catalyst for localization. The increased focus on decolonization was linked to the global response to the Black Lives Matter movement after George Floyd's murder. This broader attention has influenced the development and humanitarian sectors, highlighting systemic racism and colonial legacies.

In summary, decolonization is viewed as a multifaceted concept addressing colonial legacies, challenging power structures, and shifting mindsets. However, it remains controversial and less widely used than localization, with sensitivities around its implications for both the Global North and South.

3.2.4. Preferences for one term or another and how they are related

As earlier highlighted under the usage of the two terminologies, 46% of survey respondents said they used both terms; 35% said they used localization alone, 13% said they used neither, and 6% said they used decolonization alone. This section summarizes the comparisons between the two terms, their conceptualization, and the relationship based on which is preferred most, per insights from the survey and the key informant interviews (KIIs).

A good number of respondents felt that decolonization was a more specialist term. It was generally perceived as something common for academics or government setups, while localization is what people talk about on the ground. Localization was viewed as a practical approach to enhance local ownership and leadership in aid and development. It is often used to address issues related to decision-making and reducing top-down approaches but is sometimes criticized for not going far enough in shifting structural power. Compared to decolonization, localization is seen as more widely accepted and pragmatic, though the two terms are often seen as complementary. A KII participant from a Christian IFBO in North America observed, *"Localization is an active verb with a specific though implied object, while decolonization is an academic term limited that seems more a world view than a practical strategy."*

Others felt that localization was a more widely applicable term since they did not view 'colonization'/'decolonization as relevant to every setting. According to one respondent, *"Since I am from Ethiopia, we do not use the term colonization. Ethiopia is not affected by "colonization" that is what we believe."* This was the same perspective from a respondent from an IFBO in Europe who noted, *"As a Finnish organization, we do not have a history with colonizing other countries."*

Localization as complementary to decolonization

To many respondents, localization and decolonization aim to shift power to local communities. However, the two operate on different levels as localization focuses on operational reforms, while decolonization addresses the deeper historical and structural inequities that underpin the aid sector. Together, these approaches provide a framework for reimagining humanitarian and development practices in inclusive, equitable, and genuinely transformative ways. Specifically, some respondents saw localization as a

practical means to achieve the broader goals of decolonization, emphasizing that genuine localization must incorporate structural change; as opined by one respondent from an IFBO in North America *"Localization is a form of decolonization, but must be used with other approaches that center Indigenous knowledge, experience and values for full realization of decolonization."*

Many, therefore, considered localization and decolonization to be interconnected, where one supports and complements the other, particularly in creating equitable partnerships. Some felt that "localization" and "decolonization" can be important concepts in efforts to be more inclusive, culturally sensitive, and responsive to the needs of the communities they serve. A respondent from a Christian IFBO in Africa told us, *"These terms reflect a broader trend in society toward recognizing the importance of local and Indigenous perspectives and addressing historical injustices."*

Another respondent from a Muslim FBO in Africa noted that:

> *Both decolonization and localization are very meaningful to us. Decolonization because we believe that people directly impacted by aid and development programs should fully participate in decision-making. Localization because international organizations should effectively capacitate local organizations and transfer progressively a significant amount of their interventions to local organizations. The two are complementary (respondent from a Muslim FBO in Africa).*

Context-specific use

Respondents also reported utilizing localization and decolonization as terminology in varied ways to suit different settings. Organizations adjust terminology depending on their geographical or operational setting to ensure alignment with local perceptions. For instance, a respondent from a Christian FBO operating at the national level observed that *"Decolonization is widely used for a wide variety of reasons—notably with reference to the Anglican Communion, Localization is used with reference to the parish system."*

Some stated that it all depended on the strategic debate and the environment where there is a need to raise awareness to be heard as a catalytic faith-based organization. Another respondent from a Christian FBO in Africa opined that *"we use localization in relation to aid and decolonization on a wider range of issues, including the discourse on aid."* Many respondents reported preferring to use localization to avoid historical colonial connotations, making it more acceptable in regions where colonization was not a historical factor.

Broader adoption

The 2016 World Humanitarian Summit was a key catalyst for localization, sparking greater commitment within the development community. This led to many organizations incorporating localization as a standard practice, particularly in humanitarian aid. As noted by one respondent:

> *Localization came first as donors began to understand that top-down wasn't working and that positive change happens at local level through influence at local level. The World Humanitarian Summit and aftermath was significant in promoting the term. On the other hand, decolonization was popularized in development circles more recently as a result of increased awareness about unjust power dynamics racism, white privilege, etc (respondent from a IFBO in Europe).*

Another KII participant from a Christian IFBO in Europe added:

> *Localization gained popularity in the lead-up to the Grand Bargain. Decolonization has been growing in importance and engagement over the last several years and came strongly onto the radar of our organization in 2021. Both concepts have to do with redressing historic and systemic injustices, so it does not surprise me that as we become more aware of the depth of the impact of racism and colonization around the world, organizations focused on justice would seek to address them.*

Utilization of the two terms interchangeably

We all also sought to understand if the two terms had been used in place of the other to mean the same thing. We were curious about the problematic complexities that could arise with the interchangeability of the terms. While the two concepts share common goals, such as shifting power to local actors and addressing structural inequalities, they differ significantly in scope, intent, and application. However, some respondents reported having seen these terms used interchangeably, "*We use the terms somewhat interchangeably*" (respondent from a Christian FBO in North America). Another African Christian IFBO respondent observed that *"a genuine practice of decolonization and localization addresses many of the pitfalls of a top-down approach to peacebuilding; this is why these terms are used interchangeably."*

On the other hand, some respondents noted that despite there being some commonalities, they would not use them interchangeably:

> *I don't think they're interchangeable. Decolonization has a moral "ring" to it, a matter of righting historical wrongs and changing the mindset that Western is best. Localization is more pragmatic, focusing on how things work rather than the moral/philosophical/historical underpinnings" (respondent from a Christian IFBO in North America).*

It is worth further research, but conflating the two risks reducing decolonization to a series of technical reforms, undermining its transformative agenda, and perpetuating the power imbalances it seeks to dismantle. Clear differentiation and alignment of these concepts are essential for meaningful progress in creating a more equitable and inclusive humanitarian and development system.

3.2.5. Other terms or concepts used for localization or decolonization

13% of the online survey respondents indicated they had not used the two terms in their line of work but instead used other related terms. This could be to avoid sensitive language (e.g., decolonization) or because the mainstream lexicon had not established itself within their discourse. Most of the alternative terminologies shared by respondents primarily reflected contextual nuances, theological foundations, or operational priorities specific to faith-based organizations (FBOs). While these terms may align with the overarching goals of localization and decolonization, they also bring unique perspectives and emphases to the conversation, influenced by faith traditions, histories, and values, as discussed below.

Community-led development

Top on the list was the term community-led development, which emphasizes the centrality of local communities in defining, implementing, and sustaining development initiatives. This approach rejects top-down, externally imposed solutions and instead positions communities as the primary agents of change. Most respondents drew close comparisons with localization but found community-led development more suited to -determination, allowing communities to define success based on their values and priorities.

Accompaniment

Some respondents mentioned the term accompaniment as one that involves walking alongside communities in their journey toward self-determination, providing support without dominating or imposing external agendas. The concept of accompaniment is central to faith-based organizations such as World Vision, which emphasizes empowering communities to take ownership of their development processes while providing long-

term, supportive relationships. A respondent from a Christian FBO in Africa noted that:

> *Long before these words were in vogue, we were working with local partners with their long-term capacity-strengthening in mind, and some of those partners have now 'graduated,' taking full leadership and very much in the spotlight ... so that they're the "prime," and we're the "sub". The term we used (and still use sometimes) is "accompaniment", connoting mutuality of effort and benefit.*

Participatory development

Closely related to community-led development, participatory development was also highlighted as it emphasizes the active engagement of communities in all stages of development processes, from needs assessment to decision-making and implementation. Some respondents opined that faith actors have adopted participatory approaches more as they are perceived as the practical embodiment of solidarity and justice.

Empowerment

Empowerment is another key term mentioned several times by respondents as it aligns with the goals of localization and decolonization. It reflects a commitment to enabling individuals and communities to gain control over their lives, resources, and decision-making processes. As reflected in previous works, faith-based organizations often frame empowerment as a practical and spiritual endeavor rooted in the belief that every individual possesses inherent worth and the capacity to thrive (Wilkinson, 2022). Empowerment involves more than transferring resources or skills; it challenges the systemic barriers perpetuating inequality and dependency.

Decentralization

Decentralization was equally mentioned about localization, where redistribution of decision-making authority, resources, and responsibilities from central or international actors to local or regional entities are visualized as observed by one Muslim respondent from an IFBO in Europe, "*We have historically supported decentralization as a practical and ethical strategy for enhancing the effectiveness and sustainability of aid efforts.*" Decentralization resonates with faith-based organizations' emphasis on subsidiarity, the principle that decisions should be made at the most local level possible. For instance, many faith-based organizations, such as the Islamic Relief, World Vision, and Lutheran World Federation, have implemented decentralized governance structures to ensure that national and regional offices have autonomy in decision-making and program implementation.

Adoption of the fair and equitable approach

The terms fair and equitable approaches were also mentioned, especially considering that they are present in most of JLI's research works and regional shared learning hubs. This emphasizes justice and balance in relationships, decision-making, and resource allocation within the development and humanitarian sectors. This terminology aligns with the localization agenda's call for power-sharing between Global North and Global South actors and to remove structural inequities in funding, governance, and representation. As noted by one respondent from a research network in North America:

> *When we started mentioning aspects of decolonization, we made a conscious decision not to overtly use the term decolonization because of how the meaning was interpreted in different ways how it really was contested. And so instead, we chose to focus on fair and equitable. But, in principle, it's the same idea with what we've always talked about in terms of shifting power or decision-making to members at different levels.*

Inclusivity

Another term equally highlighted was inclusivity, which focuses on ensuring that all individuals, particularly those from historically marginalized or excluded groups, have equitable access to resources, opportunities, and decision-making processes. Some observed that inclusivity recognizes the diversity of religious expressions, which ensures that development programs are sensitive to the spiritual needs of different groups, as observed by one respondent from a Christian IFBO in Europe, *"by fostering inclusivity, faith-based organizations contribute to the broader goals of decolonization, challenging structures of exclusion that are often rooted in colonial legacies."*

Contextualization

Some respondents also reported using the term contextualization, specifically about localization. Faith actors often use this terminology to describe the process of adapting development and humanitarian interventions to align with local cultural, spiritual, and social contexts. It goes beyond operational concerns to ensure that programs are culturally sensitive and theologically relevant, integrating local faith traditions into development work (Lunn, 2009). While contextualization overlaps with localization in its emphasis on respecting local realities, it also echoes decolonial principles by challenging the dominance of Western frameworks and promoting Indigenous knowledge systems and spiritual practices, as observed by one respondent from an IFBO in North America here:

> *I think contextualization is more related to the content itself to make sure that whatever is being implemented, whatever is being developed, takes the context into consideration. Localization is more also related to the involvement of local stakeholders in the development of something or in the implementation certain processes or even in getting feedback on what works and what doesn't.*

Another respondent from an IFBO in Europe added that:

> *We do use localization and contextualization a lot because we work with partners from all over the world, and we know sometimes that there are frameworks that our partners try to implement that don't necessarily work in certain contexts. So we try to take these best practices and contextualize them to the dynamics in Lebanon at a national level, but also to those of very local communities because they differ greatly in some areas.*

Participatory development is an important aspect of the development process, from needs assessments to decision-making and implementation

Generally, many other terminologies were mentioned about aspects of localization and decolonization that are worth further investigation, such as ***self-reliance, collaboration, integral mission, community-owned, community-driven, community-defined, equity, grass-roots movement, liberation, locally led, community-based, anti-racism, independent, and even active citizenship***. These terms reflect the theological and operational priorities of faith-based organizations and contribute to broader debates about power, agency, and justice in global development. While they often align with the goals of localization and decolonization, they also bring unique perspectives highlighting the importance of spirituality, mutuality, and cultural sensitivity in addressing systemic inequalities.

Table 4: Summary of preferences for one term or another and how they are related

Usage of Localization	• More respondents used "localization" compared to "decolonization." While some organizations preferred it, many viewed it as a necessary practical strategy for local empowerment.
Definitions of Localization	• **Practical action:** Localization was seen as a concrete approach focusing on empowering local communities through ownership of solutions and decision-making. • **Aid and development:** Respondents linked localization to humanitarian and development work, emphasizing the importance of local leadership and reducing reliance on international actors. • **Reducing top-down approaches:** The term was described as counteracting top-down aid models, with an emphasis on building capacity and transferring power to local entities.
Complementary to Decolonization	• **Interlinked concepts:** Some respondents saw localization as a practical means to achieve the broader goals of decolonization, emphasizing that genuine localization must incorporate structural change. • **Mutual support:** Many considered localization and decolonization to be interconnected, where one supports and complements the other, particularly in creating equitable partnerships.
Criticism of Localization	• **Symbolic vs. structural change:** Some respondents criticized localization for not going far enough in addressing structural power imbalances. It was viewed as insufficient if it didn't lead to genuine shifts in decision-making power. • **Risk of being a buzzword:** Localization was also critiqued as becoming a buzzword without real intent, focusing only on surface-level changes rather than meaningful empowerment of local actors.
Context-Specific Use	• **Varied depending on setting:** The usage of localization varied based on the context and audience. Organizations adjusted terminology depending on their geographical or operational setting to ensure alignment with local perceptions. • **Avoiding historical connotations:** Many chose localization because it lacked colonial connotations, making it more acceptable in different regions where colonization was not a historical factor.

Localization vs. Decolonization	• **Pragmatism vs. ideological shift:** Localization was often seen as more pragmatic compared to the ideological and historical undertones of decolonization. It focused on how aid could be more locally driven without necessarily addressing the broader colonial power dynamics. • **Less sensitivity:** Localization was generally seen as less controversial and more widely accepted. Its neutral connotation allowed it to be used more easily in diverse settings compared to decolonization, which carried more historical weight.
Broader Adoption	**Increased Relevance Post-2016:** The 2016 World Humanitarian Summit was a key catalyst for localization, sparking greater commitment within the development community. This led to many organizations incorporating localization as a standard practice, particularly in humanitarian aid.

In Summary: Localization is viewed as a practical approach to enhance local ownership and leadership in aid and development. It is often used to address issues related to decision-making and reducing top-down approaches but is sometimes criticized for not going far enough in shifting structural power. Compared to decolonization, localization is seen as more widely accepted and pragmatic, though the two terms are often seen as complementary.

Table 5: A summary of the key points addressed in this section

Preference or Viewpoint	Description	Quotes
Use of Both Terms	46% use both localization and decolonization, seeing them as interconnected and complementary.	“We use localization in relation to aid and decolonization on a wider range of issues, including the discourse on aid” (Muslim IFBO in Europe)
Localization Alone	35% use only localization, seeing it as more practical and widely applicable.	"Localization is a better term... it does not have a connotation of the past" (Christian IFBO, North America)
Decolonization Alone	6% use only decolonization, emphasizing academic and structural aspects of addressing power imbalances.	“We have been using the term 'decolonization'.... But that has shifted as it carries negative connotations, (a Muslim IFBO in Europe).
Neither Term Used	13% do not use either term, often due to lack of relevance to their specific context or history.	"Ethiopia is not affected by colonization..." (Christian Theologian, Africa) “We are not in the habit of using terms irrelevant to the local languages”(Buddhist respondent from South Asia).
Localization as Practical	Localization is seen as an active, action-oriented approach to local ownership of solutions.	"Localization means locally owned... local solutions by local people" (Interfaith IFBO, North America)
Decolonization as Broader	Seen as addressing broader historical power dynamics, beyond just local ownership.	"Decolonization requires a shift in mindset..." (Christian IFBO, North America)

Complementary View	Both terms are seen as complementary, with localization being practical and decolonization addressing structural issues.	"Our commitment to localization and decolonization are inseparable." (Christian IFBO, North America)
Interchangeable Use	Some organizations use both terms interchangeably.	"We use the terms somewhat interchangeably" (Christian FBO, North America)
Localization Insufficient	Some view localization as not fully addressing decolonization or colonial legacies.	"We are moving away from 'localization'... as it is seen as not actually being decolonized" ((Interfaith IFBO, Europe)

3.3 Opportunities and Challenges of Working With/As Faith Actors on Decolonization and Localization

Debates and practices about decolonization and localization tend to be dominated by secular actors and frameworks. Secularism has long been regarded as the default lens in international development, driven by the assumption that religion is a private matter, incompatible with the universal and technocratic principles of modern development systems (Tomalin, 2015). Consequently, much of the discourse on decolonization and localization has been shaped by Western secular ideologies, which often prioritize political, economic, and institutional reform while sidelining the spiritual, cultural, and moral dimensions that faith-based approaches might contribute (Lunn, 2009).

This dominance is partly rooted in the legacy of colonialism, where development was framed as a "civilizing mission" led by Western secular institutions, leaving little room for indigenous spiritualities or religious perspectives (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2018). Modern development frameworks have inherited these biases, emphasizing secular governance structures and technocratic solutions that often marginalize the role of faith actors in advancing localization and decolonization efforts. As a result, faith actors' contributions, deeply embedded in local communities and bringing nuanced understandings of decolonization and localization, are frequently overlooked or undervalued. This secular dominance limits the scope of debates, reducing them to operational and institutional considerations while neglecting the holistic and transformative potential of including religious and spiritual dimensions in these processes (Marshall, 2004). Recognizing this imbalance and integrating faith perspectives can enrich discussions, offering culturally resonant and morally grounded approaches to decolonization and localization.

This study sought to understand some of the opportunities or advantages for faith actors who work in development or for social change to be involved and/or for faith to be considered in debates about or practice of decolonization and localization. We also sought to understand some of the challenges or tensions for faith actors to be involved and/or for faith to be considered in debates and practice about localization and decolonization. This section presents some of the findings from the survey responses and online interviews while highlighting relevant examples.

3.3.1 Opportunities of Working With/As Faith Actors on Decolonization and Localization

Some respondents noted that faith actors possess unique strengths that position them as critical contributors to debates and practices surrounding decolonization and localization in development and social change. They offer distinct advantages that can address the

complexities of power imbalances and promote more equitable systems of aid and development.

Unique approach

Respondents alluded to their unique approach to discussions and practice on localization and decolonization. One respondent from a Christian FBO in Africa felt that their organization approached decolonization and localization differently from other organizations:

> *We always start with pursuing relationships of trust with local FBO and CBO in a given context - primarily with the affected people (usually refugees in our case) but also in the host community. It helps us assume a long-term commitment to any given context and its people. Although we serve in humanitarian contexts, we do not compete with humanitarian players focused on helping people physically survive. We choose to complement what they are doing by focusing on partnering with the affected people and getting behind their hopes and plans to help people survive and recover. It often turns out that their assessment of what is needed is different from what large international agencies assume. We recognize both kinds of responses are necessary- but more often than not, there isn't any agency focused on partnering with local FBO/CBO in ways that affirm their assessment, strategy, and leadership (respondent from a Christian FBO in Africa).*

Others noted that incorporating religious principles set them ahead of secular organizations. As observed by one Muslim respondent in Africa, "We are inspired by the texts of Islam rather than other concepts." There was also recognition that there can be uniqueness in focusing on personal transformation, with one respondent noting:

> *We also work on changing ourselves. As a result of partnerships, we see this as part of being a worldwide (church) community. The concept of brother- and sisterhood strengthens localization and decolonization, it complements the development language on power relations.*

In addition, some felt that uniqueness could result from acknowledging that addressing decolonization and localization involves personal humility and integrity at all levels.

Embeddedness in local communities

Most respondents opined that their proximity to local communities enables faith actors to serve as trusted intermediaries between external actors and local populations, fostering culturally relevant and context-sensitive approaches to development as noted by one respondent from a research network in North America:

> *Despite the secular dominance of international development spaces, faith actors are integral to development and humanitarian action. They tend to be deeply rooted in their communities, and many of them have been at the forefront of developing, advocating for, and practicing more fair, equitable, and locally led approaches to their work—even if they do not necessarily refer to this work as 'decolonization.'*

Another respondent from a Christian FBO in Africa noted that:

> *Faith plays a key role in any person's life, and we cannot deny it. The relationships based on faith and the work derived from the values of faith are very trustworthy and long-lasting within the communities. In times of crisis, faith actors are the first responders, and we cannot deny this. That is why, being faith-based actors, we can raise the collective voice for the communities at all levels (district/ provincial/ national/ regional/ global) to be heard, valued and honored.*

One Buddhist respondent gave an example that:

> *Our partner in Sri Lanka is working with local temples, churches, Hindus and so on. This creates a kind of collective local community involving local faith-based leaders. When they start to have their own success stories on the ground, they can share these as contributions to peace work.*

Lunn (2009) observes that faith actors' deep-rooted presence can provide a natural pathway for advancing localization efforts by transferring leadership and decision-making power to local actors. This thereby challenges the top-down, externally imposed structures historically characterized by colonial and neocolonial development paradigms.

Moral and ethical mandates for justice and equity

Some respondents referred to the moral and ethical mandate characteristic of faith traditions as advantageous for decolonization and localization. One respondent from an IFBO in Europe observed that "*our Biblical worldview that sees everyone as a creation of God and of equal value sets the stage for discussions on justice and equity.*" Tomalin (2015) posited that many religious teachings stress the importance of serving the marginalized and

addressing structural inequities, providing a moral framework that can galvanize support for dismantling hierarchical aid systems. Another respondent from a National FBO in Africa similarly noted that:

> *The philosophy and theology of faith are about acts of mercy, about transforming people's lives. Since they change and transform people's lives, it is important that they are part of this conversation because they manage a lot of resources, which are then invested in social transformation.*

Faith actors can leverage this moral authority to advocate for systemic change within the development sector, challenging colonial legacies and promoting localized solutions that respect the agency and knowledge of local communities.

Promotion of Indigenous knowledge and spiritual values

Some respondents acknowledged that faith actors, particularly those grounded in indigenous or non-Western traditions, are uniquely positioned to elevate alternative knowledge systems as vital resources for sustainable development, "*Faith-based organizations understand the intricacies of local belief systems and can help ensure that interventions are aligned with the cultural context,*" respondent from a national FBO in Africa. Another respondent from an IFBO in North America observed that this is evident in the various documented cases such as:

> *The case of African Independent Churches, which emerged in the mid-20th century with alternative Post-Colonial Theology as a response to the colonial domination of mission churches. These churches adapted Christian teachings to reflect African cultural and spiritual traditions, challenging the hegemony of Western theology (respondent from an IFBO in North America..*

Today, similar movements within faith-based development advocate for the decolonization of aid by prioritizing local agency, knowledge systems, and leadership. By integrating spiritual and cultural values into development frameworks, faith actors help challenge the dominance of secular, technocratic approaches and advocate for holistic solutions that align with local worldviews.

Institutional and relational capacities

There was a general perspective that faith actors often operate through extensive networks of religious institutions, providing substantial institutional capacity for mobilizing resources, delivering services, and advocating for local, national, and global change. The relational nature of these networks fosters strong interpersonal and communal bonds, which are essential for building trust and ensuring the sustainability of development efforts, as noted by one respondent from an IFBO in Europe:

> *I think faith networks offer another way of viewing the world where aspects of belonging are both strengthened by ethnic and cultural ties that sort of link with faith but also moved beyond them. So again, thinking about, for instance, Sikh networks across the world and how it plays itself out in different cultures and communities is a really important complementary or additional framework to think about how societies mix and blend and who's in power and why (respondent from an IFBO in Europe).*

Another respondent from Kenya gave an example of the 2007/2008 post-election violence, which saw faith actors coming together to call for mediation between parties and an end to the conflict:

> *For example, in the case of Kenya, if the Catholic Church, the Anglican Church, and Pentecostals came together like they do sometimes - and they make a statement to the government, the government listens because they know they can easily lose out [votes] by what these leaders can tell their congregations. And so they have a very huge role to play… Sometimes, situations change. We've been challenging the church particularly and just not the church, but generally the faith actors in the country, in 2007/2008 when we had the worst political post-election violence in Kenya (respondent from Kenya).*

In the context of localization, these relational assets enable faith actors to convene diverse stakeholders and facilitate inclusive decision-making processes.

Advocacy for power redistribution

Several respondents saw an opportunity in the faith actor's ability to advocate for power redistribution. One respondent from an IFBO in Europe opined that:

> *Faith actors' understanding of decolonization and localization as the transformation and redistribution of power, provides meaningful narratives to add to the discourse about what happens when we give power up, and when we work together to ensure marginalized groups can reclaim it.*

These frameworks align with decolonization efforts, which seek to dismantle colonial hierarchies and empower historically marginalized communities. Another respondent from an FBO in Africa gave an example of the SDG framework by noting that:

> *When we look at something like the sustainable development goals, which may be a helpful framework for a global course, I can see faith actors mobilizing around fostering the voice of local actors or making sure that those who are not heard are heard.*

Faith-based advocacy rooted in these traditions provides a powerful moral and ethical rationale for challenging inequitable power dynamics within the global aid system as observed by a respondent from an IFBO in Europe:

> *A case in point is faith-based advocacy at the United Nations, where Organizations like the World Council of Churches (WCC) and Islamic Relief Worldwide leverage their global networks to advocate for policies that reflect the principles of localization and decolonization. These organizations have lobbied for the inclusion of indigenous voices in climate negotiations, amplifying local perspectives on global platforms.*

This demonstrates the unique ability of faith actors to connect grassroots movements with international advocacy efforts.

Reconciliation and healing

There was also an understanding that decolonization is not merely about structural change but also involves addressing the psychological and emotional scars left by colonialism. Some respondents, therefore, opined that faith actors, emphasizing reconciliation, healing, and forgiveness, can play a crucial role in fostering dialog and building trust among stakeholders. Their ability to facilitate reconciliation processes can help bridge divides between international and local actors, as well as between communities with historical grievances, as one respondent from a FBO in Africa observed on the case of Rwanda:

> *After the 1994 genocide, faith actors in Rwanda played a pivotal role in healing and reconciliation efforts. Churches facilitated truth-telling sessions and provided spiritual counseling, addressing both the psychological and spiritual dimensions of recovery. These efforts contributed to the rebuilding of social cohesion and local empowerment, demonstrating the transformative potential of integrating spiritual considerations into decolonization and localization practices (one respondent from a FBO in Africa).*

Also, another respondent from an FBO in Latin America gave an example of the mediation process in Colombia:

> *Where faith actors played a significant role in mediating between the Colombian government and Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) during peace negotiations. Organizations like Caritas Colombia combined spiritual perspectives with practical mediation skills, addressing the multi-dimensional challenges of peacebuilding. Their involvement demonstrates*

how faith actors navigate the intersection of social, political, and spiritual issues, making them vital contributors to decolonization and localization efforts (respondent from an FBO in Latin America).

Respondents widely observed that faith-inspired initiatives for transitional justice and peacebuilding have demonstrated the potential of faith actors to contribute to healing in post-conflict and post-colonial settings.

Faith as a bridge across sectors

There were also sentiments that faith actors possess the unique ability to bridge the secular and spiritual dimensions of development and humanitarian work. In debates on decolonization and localization, this dual capacity allows faith actors to engage with technical development practitioners and local communities rooted in spiritual traditions. One respondent from a Muslim FBO in South Asia pointed out that *"Faith actors understand that the social contract between the government and the governors is through the religious leaders; there is, therefore, an opportunity with that in mind.*" By facilitating dialog across these domains, faith actors can foster a more inclusive and holistic approach to development that integrates diverse perspectives and values.

To summarize, the involvement of faith actors in debates and practices of decolonization and localization presents significant opportunities for advancing more equitable and community-driven approaches to development and social change. Their embeddedness in local contexts, moral and ethical mandates, promotion of Indigenous knowledge, and institutional capacities position them as valuable partners in challenging colonial legacies and fostering sustainable, localized solutions. Recognizing the unique contributions of faith actors can enrich ongoing efforts to transform global aid systems, ensuring that they reflect the diverse realities, aspirations, and values of the communities they aim to serve.

Table 6: Summary of the key opportunities for faith actors in debates and practices around "localization" and "decolonization"

Unique Approach	• Faith actors emphasize trust, long-term commitment, and partnering with local communities differently from secular organizations, complementing their work rather than competing.
Spiritual and Theological Perspective	• Faith actors use religious teachings to frame their work, which offers a different perspective from secular frameworks. • Faith actors emphasize humility, integrity, and trust derived from their religious values, making them particularly effective in engaging with marginalized communities.
Embeddedness and Trust	• Faith-based organizations have deep, long-standing connections to the communities they serve, creating trust and mutual respect. • In many regions, faith plays a crucial role in cultural life, making faith actors well-positioned to advocate for communities and align development interventions with cultural contexts.
Community Influence	• Churches, mosques, and temples are key places of community organization, allowing faith actors to spread messages effectively and influence change. • Faith actors often command sizable constituencies, leading to faster delivery of information and greater influence compared to secular organizations.
Alignment with Community Values	• Faith-based organizations understand the cultural and spiritual nuances of the communities they serve, making their interventions more culturally relevant and respectful. • Faith actors are often the first responders in times of crisis, providing immediate support rooted in community trust.
Advocacy and Representation	• Faith actors have a unique role in advocating for the needs of their communities at local, national, and international levels, drawing on their deep relationships and credibility. • They help ensure that the voices of indigenous and local faith communities are heard in discussions on decolonization and localization, highlighting the importance of local leadership and autonomy.

Promotion of Indigenous Knowledge and Spiritual Values	• Faith actors, particularly those grounded in indigenous or non-Western traditions, are uniquely positioned to elevate alternative knowledge systems as vital resources for sustainable development.
Faith as a Bridge Across Sectors	• By facilitating dialogue, faith actors can foster a more inclusive and holistic approach to development that integrates diverse perspectives and values.
Moral and Ethical Mandates for Justice and Equity	• Faith actors can leverage their moral authority to advocate for systemic change within the development sector, challenging colonial legacies and promoting localized solutions that respect the agency and knowledge of local communities.
Reconciliation and Healing	• There was also an understanding that decolonization is not merely about structural change but also involves addressing the psychological and emotional scars left by colonialism.
Advocacy and Representation	• Faith actors have a unique role in advocating for the needs of their communities at local, national, and international levels, drawing on their deep relationships and credibility. • They help ensure that the voices of indigenous and local faith communities are heard in discussions on decolonization and localization, highlighting the importance of local leadership and autonomy.

These points highlight how faith actors' unique spiritual perspectives, community connections, and cultural relevance position them to make significant contributions to localization and decolonization efforts in development work.

3.3.2. Challenges of Working With/As Faith Actors on Decolonization and Localization.

While faith actors bring unique opportunities, as explored in the previous section, their involvement is not without challenges and tensions. These complexities arise from the intersections of faith, culture, power, and global development frameworks, which can result in misunderstandings, conflicting agendas, or unintended consequences. Therefore, this study sought to understand some of these challenges/tensions for faith actors to be involved or for faith to be considered in debates and practices about decolonization or localization. This section presents some of the findings from survey responses and online interviews.

Historical legacy of colonization

Most respondents recognized the historical legacy of colonization as an ongoing challenge. During colonialism, faith was often used as a tool of control and assimilation, with missionary activities aligning closely with imperial agendas (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2018). Respondents noted that this had led to perceptions that faith actors, especially those rooted in Western traditions, are complicit in perpetuating colonial power structures as observed by one respondent from an IFBO in North America:

> *A major challenge has been the avoidance of faith actors to grapple with how institutions within faith have been implicated in colonization and its lasting legacy. Significant damage has been done and there has not been enough acknowledgement or repair.*

Another respondent from an IFBO in Europe observed that:

> *The Christian faith was once used by the West as the reason to colonize/conquer the East. This could still be happening in the guise of community projects. Projects funded by the West bring along thoughts and ideas from the donor country, which should not happen. The West should also 'learn' from the East and vice versa (respondent from an IFBO in Europe).*

Consequently, their involvement in decolonization debates may be met with scepticism or outright resistance, particularly from communities that view religion as part of the colonial problem rather than the solution. This role, mainly played by Christian missionaries during the colonial period in sub-Saharan African countries such as Kenya, remains a significant challenge. In Kenya, missionary activities were deeply entwined with colonial systems, often promoting Western cultural norms and values at the expense of indigenous traditions. This history has led to skepticism toward Christian FBOs, which are sometimes

perceived as perpetuating neo-colonial agendas. For instance, attempts by specific faith-based organizations to promote education or healthcare have been criticized as continuing the legacy of Western paternalism, making it difficult for these actors to engage in decolonization debates (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2018).

Mistrust between faith and secular actors

Some respondents highlighted mistrust in the relationship between faith and secular actors in development and humanitarian work as another significant challenge. Secular actors may perceive faith-based organizations as biased, proselytizing, or unscientific in their approaches. In contrast, faith actors may view secular frameworks as overly technocratic and dismissive of spiritual and moral dimensions (Clarke & Ware, 2015). Respondents, therefore, noted that this mistrust creates barriers to effective collaboration, undermining the potential for faith actors to contribute meaningfully to localization and decolonization efforts. As one responded from an IFBO in North America noted, 'Many secular actors see faith actors, especially those with active or legacy of mission as "part of the problem" and therefore discount that voice." The secular dominance in these debates can also lead to the marginalization of faith perspectives, perpetuating a power imbalance that runs counter to the goals of decolonization. Clarke and Ware (2015) noted that:

> *In Haiti, the mistrust between secular humanitarian organizations and faith-based actors became evident after the 2010 earthquake. While faith actors were among the first responders, their efforts were sometimes dismissed by secular agencies as uncoordinated or lacking in professionalism. This mistrust limited collaboration between the two groups, creating inefficiencies in aid delivery. Secular actors viewed faith-based organizations as prioritizing spiritual goals over humanitarian ones, while faith actors felt sidelined in decision-making processes despite their local expertise and community ties.*

Instrumentalization and limited scope

Some respondents noted that the instrumentalization of faith actors by external actors and the consequent limited scope of their contributions were significant challenges. These challenges arise when faith actors are treated as tools for achieving external agendas rather than as equal partners with their own visions for change or when their roles are narrowly defined to fit preexisting frameworks. As observed by one respondent from an IFBO in Europe about previous scholarly works:

> *For the past decade or so, critics have drawn attention to the instrumentalization of faith actors in aid and the limited parameters of acceptability available to faith actors as they participate in this domain. They argued that faith actors had been used by secular international aid for their assets and they had adapted to fit within boundaries defined by the aid system (respondent from an IFBO in Europe).*

Such dynamics undermine the transformative potential of faith actors in fostering genuine, community-led development and perpetuate the power imbalances that decolonization seeks to address. Another respondent from an IFBO in Europe opined that there was a sense in which the term could be essentializing and reductive:

> *One of the biggest challenges within the localization debate is the desire to create stereotypes or black/white categories like international actor, local actor, faith actor. Each of these terms includes so much diversity, and we must avoid the temptation to put people or organizations in a box. It is often challenging to leave space for nuance and tolerate the diversity in perspectives from a group that is thought of as a monolith.*

Religious diversity and tensions

Others believed religious diversity and tensions within and across communities often pose significant challenges when faith actors engage in decolonization and localization efforts. Competing theological views or even rivalries can create friction in contexts where collaboration and unity are essential (Tomalin, 2015). This was observed by one respondent from an IFBO in Europe noted that,

> *Religious diversity is a notable concern, as different faiths may have conflicting views on various issues, intra-faith and interfaith differences within and between religious traditions add another layer of complexity.*

For instance, interfaith tensions may hinder consensus-building and collaborative decision-making, particularly in regions where religion has been a source of division. This diversity also risks complicating efforts to localize aid, as external actors may struggle to navigate the nuanced dynamics of interfaith relations, potentially exacerbating existing tensions. Some tensions even arise where there is a risk of proselytization, as noted by one respondent from an IFBO in South Asia:

> *Faith-based organizations may be seen as exploiting opportunities for conversion when engaging in localization or decolonization efforts. This perception can create tensions, particularly in contexts where religious conversion is a sensitive issue.*

In Sub-Saharan Africa, for instance, religious diversity in Nigeria has often led to tensions that complicate development and humanitarian work. Conflicts between Muslim and Christian communities in northern Nigeria have created significant barriers to collaboration in aid delivery and peacebuilding. Faith-based organizations (FBOs) in these regions frequently struggle to navigate these interfaith dynamics, as their affiliations with one faith can lead to perceptions of bias or favoritism.

Power struggles and resistance to change

It was also notable that efforts to include faith actors in localization and decolonization often encountered resistance from established power structures within the faith sector and the broader development ecosystem. Faith-based organizations themselves may replicate hierarchical or patriarchal structures, undermining their ability to advocate for equitable power redistribution (Lunn, 2009). As noted by one Christian respondent from an IFBO in Europe:

> *Faith actors may be seen as becoming territorial and trying to dominate, given their broad reach in communities. It is further difficult to decolonize where they are perceived as having their own agenda with fixed moral principles that could still be imposed on society(Christian respondent from an IFBO in Europe).*

Some also opined that international aid organizations may resist relinquishing control to local faith actors, fearing a loss of influence or accountability as noted by one respondent from an IFBO in Africa:

> *The threat to INGOs of losing some of their funding and power can lead to pushback against localization. Similarly, some faith groups and leaders refuse to repudiate colonized history and approaches (respondent from an IFBO in Africa).*

Faith actors must embrace reconciliation, healing, and forgiveness that can help foster dialog and build trust among stakeholders

These power struggles highlight the tension between the ideals of decolonization and the realities of entrenched institutional interests. One respondent from an FBO in Africa even wondered if *"is it possible to decolonize development given entrenched systems and unwillin*gness to cede power?" In the Democratic Republic of Congo, efforts to decentralize aid delivery and empower local faith-based organizations have faced resistance from international NGOs (INGOs). These INGOs, accustomed to controlling resources and decision-making, were reluctant to relinquish power to local actors. Similarly, some faith-based organizations replicated hierarchical structures within their operations, undermining calls for more equitable power dynamics. Such resistance to change highlights the challenges of advancing decolonization and localization within systems where entrenched power dynamics persist (Lunn, 2009).

Cultural representation and the imposition of beliefs

Cultural representation and the imposition of beliefs are other challenges noted to have adverse effects on inclusivity, and they often pop up in decolonization discussions. Some respondents opined that faith-based initiatives might inadvertently prioritize religious agendas over community needs, leading to conflicts between local traditions and external faith-driven interventions, as mentioned by one respondent from an IFBO in North America:

> *Faith actors need to balance their religious teachings with cultural sensitivity. Local communities may have their own cultural practices and traditions, and faith-based organizations must be careful not to impose their beliefs in a way that disrespects or disregards local cultures.*

Another respondent from an IFBO in Europe added that:

> *Faith-based organizations encompass a wide range of beliefs, practices, and values. When involved in debates about localization and decolonization, they must navigate diverse viewpoints within their own faith community, which may sometimes conflict with secular or other religious perspectives.*

A respondent from a Christian FBO in Africa also noted that:

> *Because faith actors work from a faith-based perspective, their work is often grounded in particular views of the world linked directly to religious belief. If religious belief is different within a country context than the belief of the faith-based actor, that can prove challenging as you move to take seriously local decision making and autonomy (respondent from a Christian FBO in Africa).*

This challenge is particularly acute in contexts where religious ideologies clash with progressive social agendas, such as gender equality or LGBTQ+ rights, creating friction between faith actors and other stakeholders. This has been evident in Uganda, for instance, where faith-based initiatives addressing public health challenges, such as HIV/AIDS, have faced criticism for imposing religious beliefs on local communities. For example, some Christian FBOs were reported to have prioritized the promotion of abstinence-only education, which conflicted with the needs and cultural practices of local populations. This approach prioritized religious ideology over evidence-based interventions, alienating community members and undermining the goals of inclusive and culturally sensitive development (Tomalin, 2015).

Perception of hierarchical structures

Other respondents were of the view that faith actors are sometimes viewed as perpetuating hierarchical structures that mirror the colonial systems they seek to dismantle. For instance, religious institutions often operate through centralized authority figures, such as clergy or denominational leaders, which can conflict with the decentralized, community-led approaches advocated by localization frameworks (Marshall, 2004). One respondent from an IFBO in Europe noted that:

> *Many churches are very top-down, and faith traditions are inherently conservative, passing down/along practices and approaches that are grounded in history, not local realities. Faith actors need to be conscious of this if they are to criticize the top-down, non-localized nature of the development industry.*

This perception undermines faith actors' credibility as champions of decolonization and may discourage grassroots participation in their initiatives. In Latin America, the Catholic Church's involvement in humanitarian and development work often faces criticism for its hierarchical structure. For instance, liberation theology movements sought to challenge traditional Church hierarchies and advocate for grassroots empowerment. However, these movements often clashed with the institutional Church, which was seen as maintaining centralized authority that conflicted with the principles of decolonization and community-led development (Gutiérrez, 1973).

Lack of skills and resources

Many respondents agreed that faith actors possess unique moral and cultural capital. However, they may often have inadequate technical skills, financial resources, or institutional capacities to engage in decolonization and localization efforts effectively. One respondent from an FBO in Africa noted, *"Faith actors may not have capacity or know where to start when looking into the issue of decolonization or even localization."* This lack of capacity can hinder their ability to implement complex development programs or navigate the bureaucratic demands of international aid systems, limiting their impact. In sub-Saharan Africa, for instance, local faith-based organizations in South Sudan that provide humanitarian relief often lack the financial and technical resources to scale their efforts effectively. These organizations rely heavily on international funding, which comes with restrictions that limit their autonomy. On the other hand, it was noted that some secular actors were unaware of the viability of faith actors in such discussions, *"Many secular organizations (developmental, academic, and governmental) are often ignorant of the impact of faith-based actors. They don't recognize that there are many thought leaders in this space,"* a respondent from an IFBO in North America

Systemic challenges

Faith actors must also contend with broader systemic challenges that impede progress toward decolonization and localization. These include the dominance of donor-driven agendas, rigid funding mechanisms, and the persistence of top-down aid models prioritizing external expertise over local knowledge (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2018). Respondents noted that faith actors often find themselves constrained by these systemic barriers, which limit their ability to advocate for structural change or fully engage in localized approaches:

> *There is a huge need to address the global power structures that enslave the global south. Both from a legislative and regulatory context. We can agree with non-faith actors in this endeavor. We would find common ground with them on the Universal Declaration of Human Rights as the common ground on which to operate. We go further as we see that not only are there human power structures that enslave people, but there are spiritual power structures that have a profound impact in the world. We also are those who see the sovereignty of God as paramount and we are devoted to His coming kingdom. We see emancipation both in human and spiritual terms (respondent from a Christian IFBO in Europe).*

Additionally, the lack of integration between secular and faith-based actors within these systems exacerbates fragmentation and inefficiencies, further complicating efforts to achieve decolonization.

Integrating faith perspectives can enrich discussions and widen the scope of debates around local communities and development

In summary, faith actors' involvement in decolonization and localization presents opportunities and challenges. While their deep community ties, moral imperatives, and cultural relevance offer valuable contributions, religious diversity, historical legacies, mistrust, and systemic constraints counterbalance these strengths. Addressing these challenges requires deliberate efforts to foster dialogue and collaboration between faith and secular actors and a commitment to inclusivity and mutual respect in pursuing equitable and localized development outcomes.

Table 7: Summary of the key challenges and tensions faced by faith actors in localization and decolonization debates and practices

Instrumentalization and Limited Scope	• Faith actors are often instrumentalized by secular aid organizations, valued mainly for their assets while forced to fit within predefined boundaries. • They are sometimes perceived as focused solely on spiritual work, not taken seriously in broader development efforts.
Religious Diversity and Tensions	• Religious diversity can lead to conflicts, making it difficult for faith actors to work together or align with secular organizations. • Tensions arise between faith-based beliefs and secular principles, particularly on gender equality and LGBTQ+ rights.
Historical Legacy of Colonization	• Faith actors, particularly Christian ones, face challenges acknowledging and grappling with their colonial legacies. • There is a perception that faith actors were once colonial instruments, creating mistrust and making it difficult for them to participate in decolonization conversations.
Mistrust Between Faith and Secular Actors	• There is often mistrust between secular and faith actors, with some secular actors viewing faith-based organizations as part of the problem due to their colonial past or missionary activities. • Secular actors may suspect faith actors of proselytism, especially Christian faith-based NGOs.
Power Struggles and Resistance to Change	• Some faith actors are reluctant to give up power and adapt to localization, which can hinder decolonization efforts. • Internal power struggles within faith communities, especially in Africa, also create challenges.
Cultural Representation and Imposing Beliefs	• Faith actors may impose their cultural values, risking cultural imperialism and not respecting local norms and traditions. • Policies influenced by faith actors may conflict with local customs, leading to resistance from communities.
Perception of Hierarchical Structures	• Many faith-based organizations are structured hierarchically, which can hinder dialogue and change, making them appear as perpetuating colonial-style power imbalances.

Lack of Skills and Resources	• Faith actors may lack the necessary skills, platforms, or capacity to participate in policy-making and competitive funding processes effectively. • They are often not recognized in mainstream development discussions and may lack the expertise required for evidence-based analysis and collaboration.
Systemic Challenges	• Many global funders impose restrictive policies and requirements on local actors in general, and local faith actors from the Global South and marginalized communities in particular, limiting their access to resources.

These challenges highlight the complexity of involving faith actors in localization and decolonization efforts, particularly due to historical legacies, cultural differences, power dynamics, and gaps in skills and resources. Addressing these issues requires open dialogue, mutual respect, and clear frameworks for collaboration between faith-based and secular organizations.

3.4. Recommendations For Future Policy, Practice and Research

As debates and practices surrounding localization and decolonization continue to shape the development and humanitarian sectors, findings from this study have revealed that understanding the perspectives of faith actors presents both immense opportunities and unique challenges. Faith-based organizations and communities are deeply embedded within social and cultural fabrics, making them critical stakeholders in fostering equitable and context-sensitive approaches to development. This section outlines key recommendations for consideration in advancing the involvement of faith actors in localization and decolonization-focused initiatives. These recommendations are grounded in the need for conceptual clarity, fostering inclusivity and collaboration, and adopting practical strategies reflecting local realities. Additionally, they highlight the importance of addressing power dynamics, promoting accountability, and setting a research and policy agenda that prioritizes the perspectives and needs of marginalized communities. Below is a discussion of each aspect, which was distilled from survey respondents and online interviews.

3.4.1. On conceptualization and approach

The conceptualization of localization and decolonization debates and practices by faith actors requires careful consideration of the underlying principles and frameworks driving these processes. We asked respondents how they think the two should not be conceptualized. The following aspects present some of the perspectives shared, which can help enrich these debates and practice in ways that empower local communities, challenge inequitable structures, and promote sustainable development.

- **Focus on action, not just theory**

Respondents also felt that conceptualizing the two should move deeper from theory to action. Theoretical debates about localization and decolonization often dominate academic and policy discussions but may fail to translate into meaningful action on the ground. With their strong grassroots presence, faith actors are well-positioned to focus on practical implementation. By prioritizing community-led initiatives, capacity-building efforts, and equitable partnerships, they can demonstrate the tangible benefits of these paradigms. For instance, faith-based organizations involved in disaster response often act as first responders and trusted intermediaries, exemplifying how localization can be operationalized (Tomalin, 2015). Bridging the gap between theory and practice strengthens faith actors' credibility and ensures that localization and decolonization efforts lead to measurable change in communities.

- **Avoid superficial approaches**

Some respondents noted that faith actors' engagement in these debates and practices on localization and decolonization should not adopt superficial approaches. Faith actors must avoid tokenistic gestures, such as symbolic representation of local actors without genuine decision-making power:

> *Localization should not be approached as simply transferring external solutions to local contexts. When localization is reduced to a superficial adaptation of solutions developed elsewhere, it disregards local knowledge, needs, and agency. This approach can perpetuate neo-colonial dynamics and fail to address the root causes of issues (respondent from a Christian organization from the Pacific region).*

Another respondent from an IFBO in Europe opined that:

> *Localization should not be defined from the perspective of organizations' registration as international or local. Rather it should be assessed from the comprehensive and deeper perspective of how organizations are empowering local communities to drive change and take ownership of processes (respondent from an IFBO in Europe).*

Respondents recommended that partners invest in building authentic relationships with communities and addressing the root causes of inequity.

- **Cultural sensitivity**

Some felt that localization and decolonization efforts must be rooted in cultural sensitivity, particularly when faith actors are involved. Faith-based organizations often bring their own religious and cultural frameworks to their work, enriching or complicating their engagement with diverse communities. Cultural sensitivity involves respecting local traditions, beliefs, and values while avoiding the imposition of external norms:

> *Localization should not be conceptualized as an opportunity for cultural appropriation, where elements of a culture are taken and used without permission or understanding. This approach can be disrespectful and offensive to the source culture, reinforcing colonial power dynamics and erasing the cultural context of the content being localized (respondent from a Christian IFBO in North America).*

Therefore, faith actors working in regions with indigenous spiritual practices recommended approaching these traditions with humility and openness rather than seeking to displace them.

- **Avoid oversimplification**

Some recommended that decolonization and localization debates are complex and multifaceted, yet they are often oversimplified into binary narratives. *"Neither should be oversimplified; nor should the descriptive and the normative be confused in either case,"* observed one Christian respondent from an IFBO in Europe. Faith actors must resist this tendency and embrace the complexities of these processes. There were sentiments that local communities are not monolithic; they encompass diverse and sometimes conflicting interests. Also, not all global frameworks are inherently colonial or oppressive as observed by one respondent from an IFBO in Europe, *"Decolonization is not a black-white concept, no clear distinction between colonizer-colonized, 'coloniality' may help to overcome the usual dichotomy. Localization should be used critically; not everything that is local is good."* Faith actors can consider adopting a nuanced understanding that recognizes these intricacies and avoids reductive solutions.

- **Balance global and local involvement**

Others felt it is important for faith actors to balance different levels of involvement. Most notable is the need to understand what is beneficial to all levels, *"I think there needs to be processes that involve dialog and exchange. There can't be processes that are controlled only by a central office, and they also can't only be pushed by local actors. There needs to be understanding and discussion for there to be change,"* observed a respondent from an IFBO in Europe. Another respondent from an FBO in Africa noted, "*but we don't have the capacity to manage all that resource, hire and execute on program goals; you're limiting our ability to get things done by removing external partners.*" Global faith-based organizations can use their platforms to advocate for systemic change, challenge exclusionary practices, and amplify local voices. However, they must also avoid overshadowing local actors or imposing their own agendas.

- **Move beyond guilt and blame**

Several respondents noted the tendency to fixate on guilt and blame, particularly about the legacies of colonialism and the dominance of Western frameworks in development. While acknowledging these historical injustices is essential, overemphasizing guilt can create adversarial dynamics and hinder constructive dialog: *"Decolonization should not be approached as a blame game where entire communities or nations are held responsible for past colonial actions. Instead, it should focus on addressing systemic injustices and ensuring accountability where necessary,"* observed one respondent from an IFBO in Europe. Faith actors are uniquely positioned to help move beyond this impasse by drawing on their reconciliation, forgiveness, and justice traditions.

3.4.2 On inclusivity and collaboration

We also sought to understand who respondents felt should be included or not included in debates and practices on decolonization and localization. Inclusivity and collaboration are fundamental for advancing localization and decolonization in the development and humanitarian sectors. Below are two aspects of inclusivity and collaboration that came as recommendations from respondents:

- **Avoid exclusionary practices**

Other respondents felt that, despite their potential for fostering inclusion, faith actors must be vigilant about avoiding exclusionary practices that can inadvertently undermine localization and decolonization efforts. Religious institutions and organizations, like other power structures, can perpetuate exclusion by prioritizing certain groups or voices over others, *"The degree of involvement should not be based solely on the category of stakeholders but should adapt to each unique context, focusing on empowering local communities and marginalized groups to define their own development priorities and solutions,"* observed one respondent from an IFBO in Europe. Faith actors should, therefore, create spaces for the meaningful participation of women, youth, indigenous groups, and religious minorities.

- **Engagement beyond elites**

Some respondents opined that there is a tendency to leave such discussions solely to local elites, which may perpetuate colonial mindsets, *"Many developing societies are still heavily influenced by elites that embraced colonial values and concepts and who rejected their pre-colonial heritage. Sometimes difficult and painful discussions are needed between generations and groups in the global south,"* said one respondent from an IFBO in Europe. While these individuals may play essential roles, focusing exclusively on elites risks marginalizing the broader community and perpetuating existing inequalities. Due to their grassroots connections, faith actors are uniquely equipped to engage beyond elites and include traditionally excluded groups in localization and decolonization processes. Instead, include marginalized voices, including indigenous leaders and everyday community members.

- **Faith actors and local voices**

Respondents noted that the amplification of local voices is central to the success of localization and decolonization, particularly those historically marginalized. Faith actors, with their extensive grassroots networks, have a unique ability to access and engage with diverse local communities. Their role as trusted intermediaries allows them to facilitate platforms where local voices can shape decision-making processes, ensuring that interventions are contextually relevant and culturally sensitive. One respondent from an IFBO in Europe noted that: *We must find local leaders who are willing and able to speak into these issues. They are out there in the communities.*"

Another respondent from an IFBO in North America noted that:

> *More conservative voices (Liberal voices are important to have, but these seem comparably plentiful), more local practitioners (private and public sector voices). These individuals are the groups that enact change and should be primary stakeholders to be listened to/empowered rather than manipulated (respondent from North America).*

Faith-based organizations can bridge gaps between global agendas and local realities by acting as cultural translators, ensuring that the needs and aspirations of local communities are heard. Also, *"The local communities other than local leaders should participate in localization issues. Usually, if left with the local leadership, they do not cascade to other communities. Political parties shouldn't be involved as they tend to blow things out of proportion,"* observed another respondent from an FBO in Africa. This, however, requires faith actors to go beyond tokenistic consultations and engage in genuine co-creation of solutions with local stakeholders.

This Community Resilience Building session is an example of diverse involvement in policy development, amplifying the voices of women, minority groups, and youth in the policy-making process

3.4.3. Practical implementation

We also sought to understand some of the best approaches to 'localization' and 'decolonization' in development/social change work that participants had experienced. Faith actors are vital in advancing localization and decolonization debates and practices due to their deep-rooted relationships with communities and their ability to mediate between global and local systems. However, translating these concepts into tangible, practical outcomes requires careful planning and execution. Some of these aspects are discussed below as recommended by respondents.

- **Community ownership**

Firstly, regarding best practices in implementation, respondents noted a need to empower communities to take charge of their destinies, reducing dependency on external actors. This means ensuring that local communities lead developing, implementing, and monitoring development initiatives. Ownership empowers communities and ensures that interventions are sustainable and culturally relevant. Faith-based organizations, with their

long-standing connections to local populations, are uniquely positioned to foster this ownership. However, achieving actual community ownership requires more than consultation or representation; it necessitates the devolution of decision-making power and resources to local stakeholders.

- **Gradual capacity building**

Equally notable was the recognition that effective localization and decolonization require sustained efforts to build the capacity of local communities and institutions. Faith actors are often well-placed to engage in capacity-building initiatives due to their trust-based relationships and grassroots presence. Gradual capacity building allows communities to develop the skills, knowledge, and resources necessary to take ownership of development initiatives, reducing dependency on external actors as observed by one respondent from a Christian IFBO in Europe, *"Faith-based organizations need capacity building in terms systems, technical skills and reporting to be eligible for accessing the funding from a diverse range of donors."* It was also noted that this process requires faith actors to be patient and flexible, recognizing that systemic change takes time. Imposing unrealistic timelines or benchmarks can undermine local ownership and lead to unsustainable outcomes.

- **Avoid tokenism**

Some respondents also noted that tokenistic approaches to localization and decolonization—such as symbolic inclusion of local actors without genuine participation in decision-making—undermine the credibility and effectiveness of these efforts. *"Localization and decolonization should not be conceptualized as tokenistic engagements, which continue imposition of western solutions while ignoring Indigenous voices,"* observed one respondent from an FBO in Africa. Faith actors must avoid superficial gestures that merely create the appearance of localization without addressing underlying power imbalances. Faith actors must critically examine their practices to ensure that localization efforts are substantive and transformative rather than performative.

- **Integration of religious ideas**

There was also a feeling that embedding these concepts in theological foundations can help improve understanding and adoption. Respondents felt faith actors bring unique perspectives to localization and decolonization debates rooted in their religious traditions and moral frameworks. One respondent from a Christian IFBO in North America observed that *"faith actors need to explain the concepts from the religions perspective and highlight what are missing elements in the conventional concepts of decolonization' and 'localization."* Thoughtful integration of religious ideas can enhance these efforts by fostering trust, inspiring action, and providing culturally resonant solutions. Another respondent from a Christian FBO in Africa noted:

> *We have a huge repository of knowledge among retired religious leaders. We have quite a number of religious leaders who are now retired. And sometimes we forget about our existence. They have retired quietly into their Village Homes yet they played a very key role in the days when they were active religious leaders. These people have information.*

However, integrating religious ideas must be approached carefully to avoid alienating diverse stakeholders or imposing specific beliefs. Faith actors should ensure that their interventions are inclusive and respectful of the religious and cultural diversity within their communities. This may involve drawing on shared values across religious traditions rather than emphasizing denominational differences.

3.4.4. Power dynamics and accountability

Faith actors engaging in localization and decolonization debates and practices must grapple with deeply entrenched power dynamics and systemic inequities that often undermine the intended outcomes of such efforts. The need to challenge power imbalances and foster a culture of mutual accountability is central to achieving meaningful progress in this arena. These elements are critical for creating equitable partnerships, empowering marginalized communities, and ensuring the sustainability of localization and decolonization initiatives. Below, these aspects are examined in detail, with specific recommendations for faith actors.

- **Challenge power imbalances**

Some respondents also felt it essential to intentionally challenge and shift power dynamics from external actors to local communities, noting that the process is far from straightforward. Faith actors, especially those with global affiliations, must navigate complex power dynamics, ensuring their efforts genuinely empower local actors rather than perpetuating dependency. *"In my experience, the conversations about decolonization tend mainly to be in Europe/USA-based offices - which is ironic. I would like to see this move more to places/regions in the Global South and being led from there,"* one respondent from a Christian IFBO in North America opined. This shift requires rethinking funding structures, decision-making processes, and representation in leadership roles.

- **Mutual accountability:**

Respondents recognized that traditional models of accountability in development and humanitarian work often flow in one direction, with local actors held accountable to international donors and organizations. This asymmetry reinforces power imbalances and undermines mutual respect and partnership principles underpinning localization and decolonization efforts. "localization should not imply that there is no need for

accountability, but it should be mutual. It also doesn't mean handing over control without a process of building capacity," observed one respondent from an IFBO in Europe. Faith actors must, therefore, prioritize the establishment of mutual accountability frameworks that ensure all stakeholders are held to the same standards of transparency, responsiveness, and responsibility.

3.4.5. On avoiding misconceptions

Some respondents noted that when engaging in localization and decolonization debates and practices, faith actors must navigate several misconceptions that can hinder the effectiveness and integrity of their efforts. If left unaddressed, these misconceptions risk distorting the principles of localization and decolonization and undermining their transformative potential. Some of the misconceptions highlighted included:

- **Not about isolation or xenophobia**

There were sentiments on the common misconception that localization and decolonization advocate for a complete rejection of external or international involvement, potentially fostering isolationism or xenophobia. Faith actors must communicate that these frameworks are not about excluding global actors but rather about recalibrating relationships to promote equitable partnerships. One respondent observed that *"localization should not lead to isolation and threaten collaboration and global initiatives."* While another noted that *"Decolonization should not emphasize xenophobia and break historical bridges between civilizations."* Faith actors should make honest attempts to emphasize the importance of mutual respect and shared responsibility, highlighting that external expertise and resources can complement local knowledge and priorities when managed inclusively.

- **Not just about terminology**

Other respondents mentioned the need to dispel the misconception that localization and decolonization are merely terminological exercises—buzzwords used to reframe existing practices without substantive change. The risk of 'localization' and 'decolonization' becoming mere buzzwords highlights the need for engagement that moves beyond performative gestures to truly meaningful, transformative efforts. Such an approach is vital for maintaining the integrity and impact of these processes as observed by one Christian respondent from Asia, *"Our organization finds localization one of those NGO words that lots of people talk about doing but never actually do."* Another respondent from an IFBO in North America observed that:

> *Decolonization should not be conceptualized as a change in the language/terminology that we use. This has seemed to be the dominant way that people are doing it, and it is turning into a new way to include/exclude actors into the development space based on who uses the "right words", and*

> *seems to be more about policing who is "just" and who isn't, without really affecting any change to how various stakeholders are actually given voice and power.*

Faith actors must stress that these concepts are deeply rooted in structural and systemic transformation. They involve rethinking power dynamics, redistributing resources, and ensuring that development and humanitarian efforts are community-driven and context-specific.

- **Not a feel-good topic**

There was also a feeling that localization and decolonization are sometimes treated as feel-good topics that allow organizations to signal their commitment to equity without confronting the complex realities of systemic injustice. Respondents recommended that faith actors recognize that these debates demand hard conversations about historical legacies, entrenched power structures, and uncomfortable truths about their roles in perpetuating inequities. *"Most of our resource development is responsive to institutional donors, and localization is a major priority for our donors,"* observed one respondent from an FBO in Africa. Another respondent from an IFBO in Europe added that *"this should not be a 'feel good' topic for white Western people to use as a checkbox. Real systematic change is needed in the sector."* Addressing these issues requires humility, courage, and a willingness to embrace accountability. Faith actors must approach localization and decolonization not as opportunities for self-congratulation but as ongoing, challenging processes of reflection and action.

3.4.6. On research and policy focus

Finally, we sought recommendations on the research and policy focus areas for consideration by faith actors in debates and practices on localization and decolonization. There is general recognition that research and policy development play pivotal roles in advancing the principles of localization and decolonization. For faith actors to contribute meaningfully, they must prioritize inclusive and diverse approaches in their engagement with these processes. Two critical aspects pointed out are:

- **Local involvement in research**

Respondents felt that research in development and humanitarian contexts has historically been dominated by external actors, often leading to knowledge production that lacks context-specific insights or reinforces colonial narratives. There is an understanding that faith actors can play a significant role in reversing this trend by ensuring that local communities actively participate in research design, data collection, and interpretation. One respondent from an IFBO in Europe observed that:

> *We have to understand that information coming from the ground is sometimes really valuable, but it's sometimes foggy and it's sometimes biased and this is the challenge of finding a balance between understanding*

> *what the needs of the community are but what are the real needs and knowing when to use this information how to use this information and taking the information seriously.*

There is general recognition that local involvement enhances the relevance and accuracy of research findings and empowers communities to take ownership of the knowledge produced.

- **Diverse involvement in policy development**

Faith actors must also advocate for diversity in policy development processes, ensuring that a wide range of stakeholders—including women, youth, minority groups, and representatives of different faith traditions—are included. One respondent from the pacific region noted that:

> *It's crucial to ensure that collaborations between faith-based organizations and secular groups respect religious diversity and secular principles. Effective partnerships involve open dialogue, respect for differences, and a shared commitment to common goals of social justice and equity.*

This diversity is crucial for avoiding the replication of power imbalances and ensuring that policies reflect the needs and priorities of all segments of society. Some recognized, "Faith groups often advocate for justice and policy reforms that align with the principles of fairness and equity," respondent from an IFBO in Europe. For example, interfaith coalitions working on humanitarian issues have often brought together representatives from various religious and cultural backgrounds to influence policies on reconciliation after civil wars, as was the case for Kenya during and after the 2007 post-election violence.

Faith actors are uniquely positioned to facilitate inclusive dialogues, leveraging their moral authority and community networks to bridge divides and promote equity.
Faith actors must strongly focus on inclusive, locally driven research and policy development to effectively engage in localization and decolonization debates and practices. By prioritizing local involvement in research and ensuring diverse participation in policy-making processes, faith actors can contribute to more equitable, contextually relevant solutions that align with the principles of justice and empowerment.

Table 8: Summary of the key recommendations for future policy, practice, and research on "localization" and "decolonization"

Conceptualization and approach	• **Move beyond guilt and blame:** These efforts should not be guilt-based but rather opportunity-driven, with responsible parties taking accountability for redress. • **Focus on action, not just theory:** More implementation at grassroots levels is needed rather than lengthy theoretical discussions at large conferences. • **Avoid superficial approaches:** Localization and decolonization must be genuine and not reduced to tokenism, cultural appropriation, or merely changing language. • **Cultural sensitivity:** Ensure these efforts respect cultural differences and are sensitive to local social norms, avoiding cultural imperialism or the imposition of Western values. • **Power shifts:** These should be more than just local leadership involvement; they must entail a true power shift to local communities. • **Avoid oversimplification:** Decolonization and localization are complex and should not be simplified into binary concepts or top-down approaches. • **Context-specific:** Localization and decolonization approaches should be tailored to each region's unique history, avoiding one-size-fits-all solutions. • **Balance global and local involvement:** Western engagement is still valuable but must be balanced with local leadership. Relationships of trust should be developed to bridge differences.
Inclusivity and collaboration	• **Faith actors and local voices:** The perspectives of faith actors and people from the Global South must be included in the conceptualization and discussions of localization and decolonization. • **Avoid exclusionary practices:** Localization should not mean excluding international NGOs entirely, but rather working collaboratively while shifting power and resources to local communities. • **Engagement beyond elites:** Avoid leaving discussions solely to local elites, as they may perpetuate colonial mindsets. Instead, include marginalized voices, including indigenous leaders and everyday community members.
Practical implementation	• Community ownership: Empower communities to take charge of their own destinies, reducing dependency on external actors. Localization should be rooted in community-driven solutions and local ownership.

	• **Gradual capacity building:** Localization should involve gradual capacity building, focusing on strengthening local institutions to effectively handle responsibilities. • **Avoid tokenism:** Avoid turning localization into a checkbox exercise or allowing international organizations to merely "localize" for funding purposes. It must be about genuine local empowerment. • **Integration of religious ideas:** Faith actors should be part of the solution, and their spiritual perspectives should be integrated into localization and decolonization efforts.
Power dynamics and accountability	• **Challenge power imbalances:** Address systemic power imbalances and avoid practices that perpetuate neocolonial dynamics. • **Mutual accountability:** Localization should involve mutual accountability between international actors and local communities, focusing on capacity building and local autonomy.
Avoiding misconception	• **Not about isolation or xenophobia:** Localization should not lead to isolation or undermine global collaboration. Decolonization should not become a xenophobic movement that alienates others. • **Not just about terminology:** Decolonization should not be limited to changes in language or bringing in more people from colonized countries without addressing underlying power dynamics. • **Not a feel-good topic:** It must not become a trend for Western actors to feel good about themselves without creating real systemic change.
Research and policy focus	• **Local involvement in research:** Research on decolonization should not be dominated by Western perspectives; there needs to be more investment in research from the Global South. • **Diverse involvement:** Stakeholders like indigenous leaders, women, youth, and faith actors should be actively engaged in policy-making, with less involvement from powerful international entities that dominate decision-making.

4. Conclusion

The interaction of faith actors with the debates and practices of localization and decolonization represents a vital yet intricate area of inquiry within the development and humanitarian sectors. Throughout this study, we have explored the conceptual frameworks, opportunities, challenges, and recommendations surrounding their involvement in these potentially transformative discourses. The findings emphasize the critical role faith actors can play, the barriers they must address, and the strategies they can adopt to ensure meaningful and equitable contributions. Localization and decolonization are not merely buzzwords but urgent calls to shift power, resources, and agency to local communities. For faith actors, these concepts align with their long-standing principles of justice, empowerment, and service. However, achieving this alignment requires a clear understanding of what localization and decolonization mean in practice—moving beyond guilt, blame, or superficial terminologies to embrace action-oriented, culturally sensitive, and context-specific approaches. Faith actors must recognize their potential as intermediaries between global systems and local realities while acknowledging the risks of perpetuating hierarchical structures or imposing beliefs.

The opportunities for FBOs to engage in these debates are profound. Their deep-rooted presence in communities, cultural relevance, and moral authority position them uniquely to facilitate inclusion, empower marginalized groups, and address systemic inequities. FBOs can serve as bridges between diverse stakeholders by amplifying local voices and fostering collaboration across sectors. Their capacity to integrate spiritual dimensions into development and humanitarian work also brings a critical perspective often overlooked in secular frameworks. However, these opportunities come with significant challenges. Religious diversity and tensions, the historical legacies of colonization, and mistrust between faith and secular actors pose significant barriers. FBOs must also contend with power imbalances, cultural representation issues, and systemic challenges that complicate their role in these debates.

Actionable recommendations have been proposed to navigate these complexities. These recommendations emphasize the need for faith actors to prioritize inclusivity, collaboration, and community ownership in their work. They call for a deliberate effort to challenge entrenched power dynamics, foster mutual accountability, and balance global and local involvement. Avoiding misconceptions, such as treating localization and decolonization as feel-good topics or isolating processes, is equally crucial. Furthermore, research and policy must reflect diverse and local perspectives, ensuring knowledge production and decision-making are grounded in equity and inclusivity.

In conclusion, the state of the debate on faith actors' experiences of and perspectives on localization and decolonization reflects both immense potential and significant complexity. Faith actors are not passive participants in these discourses but active agents capable of driving transformative change. However, their contributions must be rooted in humility, inclusivity, and willingness to examine their practices critically. Localization and decolonization are not endpoints but ongoing processes that demand collaboration, reflection, and a commitment to dismantling inequities. If FBOs can embrace these principles with integrity and intentionality, they can advance a more just, equitable, and sustainable future for development and humanitarian work.

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