

Local Voices, Donor Power: Rethinking Localisation in Zimbabwe

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Abstract

Localisation has recently taken a central position in the discourse on international development. However, it is not quickly discernible whether it has shifted power, voice and decision-making to local actors in Zimbabwe or whether it reproduces donor-centric practices under new terminology. There is a dearth of research on how localisation is experienced, negotiated and represented by local organisations, communities and the media within Zimbabwe's highly politicised aid landscape, as most scholarship focuses on donor commitments and frameworks while overlooking community perspectives. This paper examines how localisation is enacted, resisted and reinterpreted across different levels of Zimbabwe's development ecosystem, assessing whether the country can advance toward a genuinely decolonised localisation agenda. It is grounded in a decolonial epistemological orientation and informed by media framing theory. The study employed a qualitative, interpretivist design, drawing on data from 26 questionnaires with local and community-based organisations, practitioners, donor and intermediary representatives, key informant media interviews, and analysis of policy and organisational documents from 2016–2025. Findings provide original empirical insight into localisation in practice, revealing tensions between donor-driven compliance systems, intermediary gatekeeping, local agency and elite-centred media representations. Community and media data illuminate contrasting portrayals of advocacy-oriented aid, exposing how visibility, voice and narrative control shape development representation. The paper concludes that advancing decolonial localisation requires structural reforms in funding modalities, recognition of African epistemologies such as Ubuntu, and transformation of media practices that marginalise local voices.

Keywords: Localisation; Decolonial Theory; Media Framing; Ubuntu; Zimbabwe; Aid Representation; Development.

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1.0 Introduction: Rethinking Development Ownership

It is common cause that external actors have been instrumental in shaping Zimbabwe's development landscape. As such, the country's development agenda has been externally determined albeit with significant conditionalities attached to it. In the grand scheme of international aid and donor-driven frameworks, local communities are positioned as passive recipients, referred to as beneficiaries, rather than active agents of change (Rodney, 1972; Moyo, 2009; Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2018). This carefully constructed narrative by outside forces is a major reason for the persistent power asymmetries, where donor priorities, conditionalities and reporting requirements frequently override and outrightly ignore local needs and knowledge systems (Escobar, 1995; Peace Direct, 2021). Localisation is emerging as a panacea to some of these imbalances. However, its implementation in Zimbabwe is fraught with crucial questions about voice, representation and the political economy of aid. Soon after the World Humanitarian Summit in 2016, many local actors in Zimbabwe are moving to reclaim agency and redefine development through locally led approaches. This is providing a foundation to challenge the supremacy of donor-driven models whilst advocating for the decolonisation of aid (Groupe URD, 2024; Murisa, 2025).

The localisation agenda, anchored on the commitment by some of the largest humanitarian funders and organisations to increase resources directly to local communities (The Grand Bargain, 2016; World Humanitarian Summit, 2026), is gaining traction in Zimbabwe's civil society and policy spaces. Although at a small scale for now, local organisations and community-based groups are progressively asserting their voices in shaping development priorities, contesting donor narratives and promoting endogenous models of sustainable transformation (Letseka, 2012; Cornwall & Eade, 2010). This shift reflects a broader continental and global push to centre local community agency, knowledge and African epistemologies particularly Ubuntu in development discourse and practice (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2018; Krishnan, Salihu & Smith, 2024). Despite rhetorical support for localisation, it is unclear whether these reforms redistribute power to

local actors or reinforce donor authority under new language. The term localisation has gained prominence in policy spaces. However, the lived realities of community members and local civil society organisations reveal contradictions between donor discourse and practice.

Existing literature is mainly on donor frameworks and global commitments, leaving insufficient analysis of how localisation is experienced, interpreted and contested within Zimbabwe's socio-political and media environment. This paper examines how diverse actors such as donors, local organisations, communities and the media negotiate the meanings and practices of localisation. It also goes further to assesses whether current approaches move Zimbabwe toward a genuinely decolonised aid system. The analysis draws on decolonial theory and media framing to interrogate how power, narrative authority and epistemic hierarchies shape development practice. It situates the Zimbabwean experience within wider debates on decolonisation and localisation. The study argues that reclaiming the narrative, regarding who speaks, whose knowledge counts and how development is represented, is central to any substantive localisation agenda.

The paper proceeds as follows: Section 2 reviews literature on localisation, decoloniality and media framing, identifying conceptual and empirical gaps. Section 3 presents the methodological orientation and data collection strategies. Section 4 outlines findings thematically. Section 5 offers a theory-linked discussion. Section 6 concludes with implications and recommendations.

2.0 Literature review and theoretical framework

2.1 Localisation debates: Global and Zimbabwean perspectives

The Charter for Change in 2015 popularised localisation while the 2016 World Humanitarian Summit increased its prominence, effectively placing it at the centre of humanitarian interventions. At the core of these commitments, mainly by a small coterie of at least six of the largest humanitarian INGOs and International Organisations (IOs), was a call for increased shifting of resources and leadership to local actors. A decade later, far from the pomp and fanfare that characterised

the promulgation of localisation, available scholarship shows continued tension between donor rhetoric and practice (Peace Direct, 2021 & 2022). In these increasingly uncertain funding times, evidence also suggests that many INGOs, despite committing to shifting resources, have maintained tight control over high-risk funding streams, strategic decision-making and narrative framing. The literature highlights persistent barriers to direct funding for local organisations, risk aversion and the endurance of colonial-era power inequalities wedged into aid governance (Peace Direct, 2021; Underwood, Hunter-Franks & Jaramillo, 2025).

In Zimbabwe, localisation is slowly but surely finding its way in development policy engagements and civil society spaces. However, the landscape is still heavily skewed toward donor-defined priorities, cumbersome, complex reporting demands and intermediary structures that mediate access to resources. Recent Zimbabwe-focused analyses in the period between 2023-2025 make reference to the political nature of aid distribution (ZimRights, 2024), the hierarchical and centrality of compliance regimes (Mhazo and Maponga, 2024) and the impact of shifting donor priorities (ZIMCDD, 2025; United Nations Zimbabwe, 2024) on local organisational resilience. Despite this growing body of work, none of the studies examined localisation from the perspective of communities and media actors, creating a gap this study addresses.

2.2 Decoloniality and the politics of knowledge

Decolonial theory exposes the dominant thinking that animates and underpins present-day development discourses focusing on epistemic dominance, institutionalised hierarchies and representational control (Quijano, 2000; Mignolo, 2007; Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2018). These subtleties manifest in numerous ways including how donor institutions and intermediary agencies define, firstly, development in general and secondly, what counts as credible evidence, legitimate expertise or even successful outcomes. Underlying all these dynamics are assumptions couched in the global minority speak of their interventions and support being neutral (Peace Direct, 2021; Aloudat, 2021). For example, best practices are standardised, project designs follow a similar pattern or routine of

being linear and sometimes unflexible (Trócaire, 2021). Furthermore, technical toolkits and risk-management systems are passed off as neutral or objective and the standard that must be followed. However, a critical look at these reveals that they benefit and privilege the global minority worldviews while actively sidelining African modes of knowing or experiences.

In Zimbabwe, this epistemic ordering comes to the fore through donor-driven agendas, indicators and logical frames. These tend to frame development challenges in ways that are inconsistent, incompatible and divergent from communities' interpretation and definition of development, wellbeing, vulnerability or progress (Peace Direct, 2022; Coordination SUD, 2021). At the core of it all, these frameworks shape whose knowledge counts with global minority external consultants, expatriate staff and INGOs occupying the epistemic centre (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2018). Local actors are relegated to playing a role as implementers or data gatherers rather than generators of ideas for projects that are externally designed, ostensibly to serve their very communities.

Media framing further intensifies this politics of knowledge by influencing whose voices are heard, visible and authoritative. State and private media often converge in their reporting of national-level achievements or donor-sponsored targets. This tends to reproduce official narratives that focus on elite interests and perspectives while everyday experiences of rural communities remain peripheral (Mano, 2016; Zimbabwe Centre for Media and Information Literacy and Konrad Adenauer Stiftung, 2023). This creates an ordered hierarchy whereby the local community's chief concerns that constitute their lived realities such as what they eat or how far they travel for water among others are negated in favour of narratives that align with state interests or donor expectations. To that end, localisation could end up becoming no more than a technical fix or band-aid solution (Peace Direct, 2021; Peace Direct, 2022; Underwood et al, 2025; Kumar, 2025) rather than a transformative agenda unless it tackles head-on these deeper epistemic asymmetries. This paper contends that decoloniality therefore offers a critical lens for learning why at present, localisation strides may appear outwardly progressive,

though, remain bound by the underlying coloniality of knowledge. It goes without saying that without boldly shifting who gets to shape problem definitions, programme design, evaluation and public narratives, the potential of local leadership remains an unfulfilled pipe dream.

2.3 Ubuntu as an African epistemology for locally led development

Ubuntu grounded in an African worldview that values relationality, mutual care and collective responsibility, challenges the parochial, individual focused, technocratic mindset that is central to most development models (Ramose, 2003; Letseka, 2012). Marevesa (2023) posits that Ubuntu is critical in facilitating the foregrounding of indigenous knowledge systems and this extends to development processes as well. To that end, local perspectives, moral authority and community-defined notions of what constitutes development are put at the centre and advanced (Escobar, 2011). In the case of localisation, Ubuntu models leadership based on community stewardship rooted in trust, reciprocity and collective obligation as opposed to institutional or elite dominance. This essentially embeds power while advancing development as a communal undertaking rather than a donor-driven venture needing external verification or validation (World Bank, 2025). Integrating Ubuntu pushes back, providing a counterpoint against the leading global minority narratives that centre measurable outcomes over social cohesion and lived experiences. Furthermore, it dispels notions of transplanted micro-management paradigms that perpetuate and solidify asymmetries of power. This is done by providing a normative framework for reimagining localisation as an agenda grounded in African worldviews.

In Zimbabwe, harnessing Ubuntu to localisation brings to the fore local meanings of development, agency and solidarity. These dimensions are usually negated as a result of complex donor compliance regimes and inflexible reporting standards (Peace Direct, 2021). Emerging scholarship on Zimbabwe elevates the primacy of community actors in harbouring relational values and indigenous ethics to navigate complex aid dynamics (Mabvurira, 2020), mediate disputes and articulate development priorities (LAHF, n.d; ZAHA, n.d) within restrictive structural

conditions. These practices demonstrate the efficacy of the Ubuntu philosophy as a lived epistemology and ethical framework shaping everyday decision-making. When applied as an examination framework, Ubuntu reveals how donor-driven models can inadvertently undermine the very agency they supposedly intend to strengthen by imposing external definitions of success, risk and accountability (Peace Direct, 2021). At the same time, this also shows the irreconcilable differences between communal forms of governance and donor expectations (Mavuka, Gandidzanwa, Chirisa and Kwenda (2025), illustrating the tension that exists. Foregrounding localisation in Ubuntu enables Zimbabwean local actors to gain a foothold on the interpretive authority of what constitutes development and how it should be pursued.

There are many things that can be tried and tested to ensure localisation can move from mere lip service to practice. In this time of a dramatically changing funding landscape, one of those things can be Ubuntu. It presents opportunities to integrate it into both structural and epistemic layers of aid reform. Scholarship abounds highlighting how Ubuntu can reshape partnerships through shared engagements, collective problem solving and collaborative evaluation that centres community knowledge and moral reasoning (Gatwiri, 2024). This requires shifting from top-down to bottom-up accountability based in mutual respect and interdependence. Moreover, it urges recognition of African interconnected ways of being that prioritise communal wellbeing over institutional box ticking performance indicators. In this respect, Ubuntu provides a transformative pathway for dismantling the coloniality of knowledge (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2018) embedded in Zimbabwe's current aid architecture. Thus, Ubuntu provides the study's theoretical foundation, critiquing conventional aid systems. At the same time, it offers a perspective of development that is community driven, relational and rooted in local culture.

2.4 Media framing theory and the politics of representation

Media framing theory provides a basis for examining how journalists and news media contribute to meaning making through the selection, framing and omission

of information (Entman, 1993; McCombs & Shaw, 1972). In Zimbabwe, this is evidenced in how the state media reports on government-aligned interpretations of aid, while independent media outlets highlight contestations and unmet needs. These opposing frames significantly play a part in influencing how localisation, donor interventions and community agency are understood by the public. Recent studies show that dominant frames often privilege political elites and institutional actors – whose narratives are easily obtainable, while sidelining rural and hard to reach communities (Media Monitors Zimbabwe, 2024; Voluntary Media Council of Zimbabwe, 2023). This reinforces representational hierarchies, power imbalances and whose voices are heard in a context where external and elite voices define development priorities. The theory therefore is critical to examining why locally led development remains peripheral in the national development discourse despite increased policy attention especially within civil society.

This study utilises media framing theory as both an analytical tool and as a methodological guide. Furthermore, it informed the decision to sample journalists and editors as key informants due to their role that actively constructs the public meaning of aid and localisation. The theory was also crucial in guiding the design of interview questions that probed how development stories are selected, verified, narrated and legitimised. To that end, the theory provided a platform for systematic examination of how frames across state and independent media reinforce, reproduce or challenge power dynamics in the aid sector. In doing so, it bolsters the paper's overarching claim that media representation is central to understanding how localisation is enacted, contested and imagined in Zimbabwe.

3.0 Methodology

3.1 Philosophical orientation: Decolonial and interpretivist foundations

This study is grounded in a qualitative, interpretivist epistemology informed by decolonial theory and critical perspectives on knowledge production. Its point of departure is derived from the understanding that research is never neutral but deeply embedded in power relations that determine whose knowledge is validated,

visible, silenced or marginalised (Smith, 2012; Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2018). An interpretivist design was the best fit because the research was animated by understanding how local actors *make meaning* of localisation, navigate donor power and articulate their own visions of development. In the same vein, decoloniality was primed to centre community voices and narratives, institutional experiences and community reasoning as legitimate sources of knowledge. Additionally, media framing theory moulded the study by providing the basis for how meanings are built, disseminated and contested in Zimbabwe's public sphere. Together, these philosophical guidelines justified a qualitative design centred on depth, subjectivity and contextual interpretation rather than measurement or prediction.

3.2 Research approach and design

The study employed a qualitative, interpretive research design combining semi-structured interviews, narrative-style questionnaires and document analysis. In this study, questionnaires were not used in the typical quantitative surveying mode but rather employed to elicit narrative prompts to describe experiences, perceptions and interpretations in respondents' own words. To maintain consistency with the study's epistemological orientation, the questionnaires operated as a qualitative tool. Semi-structured interviews with media practitioners, intermediary agency and donor representatives enabled deeper exploration of framing processes and the politics of representation. Furthermore, these provided for deeper probing of interpretations of localisation, allowing flexibility to explore emerging themes. Document analysis of policy statements, donor guidelines and organisational reports produced between 2015-2025 provided complementary insights into how localisation is formally articulated versus how it is practised in situ. Together, these methods created a solid base for examining the interactions between donor rhetoric, local agency and media representation within Zimbabwe's aid ecosystem.

3.3 Sampling strategy and sample composition

Purposive sampling was employed in line with the study's interpretive and theory-informed design that prioritises depth, contextual meaning and the centring of marginalised voices (Smith, 2012; Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2018). The sample comprised 29 participants drawn from local NGOs (n = 9), community-based organisations and community members (n = 9), faith-based organisations (n = 4), donor and intermediary representatives (n = 5) and media practitioners (n = 2). This selection enabled the acquisition of multi-layered information on Zimbabwe's aid ecosystem, where donors, intermediaries and local actors, among others, interact in the making, understanding and contestation of development narratives. Including media practitioners was particularly important given the study's reliance on media framing theory, which positions journalists as central actors in shaping public understandings of aid and localisation (Entman, 1993; McCombs & Shaw, 1972). The sampling approach therefore facilitated triangulation between organisational, community and media perspectives, boosting the study's trustworthiness and depth of insights consistent with the research's interpretive orientation.

3.4 Data collection methods

3.4.1 Narrative questionnaires

The study disseminated twenty-three open-ended questionnaires to community leaders, organisations and practitioners active in the development sector. These questionnaires invited respondents to reflect on their experiences with aid in general, donor relationships, participation mechanisms, funding barriers, perceptions of localisation and organisational agency. The flexible open-ended design let participants steer the direction and substance of their responses.

3.4.2 Semi-structured interviews

Six key informant interviews were held with senior journalists, intermediary organisation advisors and donor representatives. Journalists were drawn from the state and independent media. These interviews examined how development

issues are packaged, which narratives are given attention or omitted and how media institutions navigate political constraints. Their inclusion reflects theoretical alignment with media framing theory, which privileges communicators as central meaning-makers.

3.4.3 Document analysis

Policy documents, donor frameworks, civil society statements and organisational reports from 2015–2025 were analysed. This included the Grand Bargain, Charter for Change, donor strategy papers and civil society advocacy documents. Document analysis provided for careful assessment of formal, institutional representations of localisation and the contrasting experiences reported by organisations and communities.

3.5 Data analysis

Data were analysed through an iterative thematic analysis process supported by Atlas.ti software, allowing patterns to emerge organically from participant narratives. Open coding was used in the analysis in which inductive codes such as “voice,” “conditionalities,” “risk,” “ownership,” and “representation” were generated directly from the data. To refine these, axial coding was used to cluster similar ideas into broader thematic categories including power, agency, epistemic authority and media framing. In the final stage, an interpretive synthesis brought these themes into dialogue with the decolonial and media framing theories. This facilitated a more contextually and nuanced understanding of the mechanisms of meaning-making and power interplay as they operate across Zimbabwe’s aid system. Media data were subjected to framing analysis, examining processes of selection, emphasis, repetition and omission (Entman, 1993), thereby strengthening the theoretical linkage between framing scholarship and empirical interpretation. Triangulation across donor, intermediary, local organisation, community and media perspectives enhanced analytical rigour. At the same time, reflexive journaling tracked the researcher’s positionality, shifts in interpretations

and potential biases in line with decolonial commitments to self-location and transparency.

3.6 Reflexivity and researcher positionality

The researcher is a Zimbabwean development practitioner, simultaneously occupying insider and critical observer roles. This positionality enabled deep contextual understanding while necessitating explicit reflexivity to avoid reproducing dominant narratives or assumptions. Reflexive journaling captured moments of discomfort, interpretive decisions and influences of personal experience. Consistent with decolonial ethics, the researcher aimed to “listen against the grain” (Spivak, 1988) by privileging under-researched, subaltern and community voices that are often overshadowed in formal aid discourse.

3.7 Ethical considerations

Informed consent was secured from all participants. Anonymity was meticulously maintained, particularly for those employed in donor-funded organisations. The study’s ethical posture was guided by Ubuntu tenets of relational respect, reciprocity and care, treating knowledge sharing as a co-constructive, rather than extractive, process. Findings were shared back with selected participating organisations as part of this reciprocal engagement. These ethical commitments informed all stages of data collection, analysis and representation, ensuring that research practice itself embodied the decolonial and community-centred principles underpinning the study.

4.0 Findings

4.1 Localisation as a disputed and uneven process

The findings show that localisation in Zimbabwe unfolds as a contested and uneven process that operates as a site of negotiation rather than a settled reality or a coherent shift of power. Local NGOs and CBOs consistently described localisation as “development designed, implemented and championed by communities” (Local Organisation 1, 2025). In contradiction, their lived realities

point to a system heavily skewed in favour of donor authority that systematically oppose their aspirations. Respondents reported that donor compliance regimes and reporting templates frequently supersede local priorities, with one noting that “required reporting is opposite what would be on the ground” (Local Organisation 2, 2025). This echoes broader misgivings that localisation is another fleeting term and experiment that cannot substantively shift power (Peace Direct, 2022). Such experiences evidence the impartiality of donor-driven indicators over the narratives local organisations produce, reinforcing external definitions of legitimacy. This tension demonstrates that there is more to localisation than being a mere technical adjustment in project delivery, but rather a political process. The process is largely shaped by competing epistemologies – local lived knowledge on one side and donor-defined legitimacy on the other. The dichotomy syncs well with decolonial notions that epistemic superiority is vested with external, mainly global minority actors.

In addition to the above, the data clearly shows that trust and access to resources remain stratified along the aid hierarchy. Community-based organisations acknowledged the uneasy relationship with donors premised on the perception that they are high risk. The perceptions are born out of fear and limited understanding of their approaches that are markedly dissimilar to intermediary agencies. As a result, inevitably local organisations find themselves in perpetual competition with intermediary agencies and international actors which diminishes their chances of accessing direct funding. These accounts surface a rather unpalatable truism, that institutional credibility and not proximity to communities, holds much sway in determining resource flows (Peace Direct, 2021; Coordination SUD, 2021). Local actors therefore operate within a system where they have absolutely few options such as adapting. The context is also not in their favour given they should translate or soften their realities to align with donor expectations. In this reality, localisation comes across as an aspirational discourse constrained by entrenched structural and epistemic hierarchies. Taken together, the findings signal that effective and meaningful localisation does not require performative and procedural commitments but rather, robust structural reforms and recognition of local

epistemologies. Without these, power dynamics remain largely unchanged within a defiant status quo.

4.2 Community experiences: Agency, exclusion and definitions of development

Community accounts revealed a persistent pattern of exclusion from meaningful participation in project design and decision-making. Respondents frequently described being informed about projects only after decisions had been made – “they are not involved in planning; they only come in as recipients” (CBO 6, 2025). This exclusion revealed a stark reality relating to local political dynamics, in which participation was often contingent on favour with gatekeepers: “we only benefit if we are in good books with our leadership” (CBO 9, 2025). Such patterns demonstrate that local participation is contingent upon local power relations that inadvertently reinforce and reproduce the same power imbalances and hierarchies that donor systems possess. In the process, this adds layers of exclusion that are barely captured in formal and institutional participation frameworks.

Despite these constraints, communities clearly defined what meaningful development constitutes, and this includes inter alia, co-identifying problems, co-designing solutions and leading implementation (CBO 3, 2025). Their definitions of development emphasised improved quality of life, dignity and sustainability, utilising criteria grounded in lived experience and Ubuntu rather than externally imposed indicators. This reveals a glaring gap in understanding what development means and entails and a conflict between donor-driven logics of effectiveness and community-centred interpretations of what counts as progress. The tensions highlight how epistemic hierarchies operate at different levels including between donors and local organisations as well as at the community interface where “localisation” is ostensibly meant to have its strongest impact.

4.3 Donor and intermediary perspectives: gaps between rhetoric and reality

Donor and intermediary actors portrayed themselves as committed to partnership, capacity strengthening and accountability, frequently emphasizing them as

important. Yet, the language used buttresses these skewed relationships such as “value for money,” “risk management” and “fiduciary assurance.” At the same time, these draw attention to the persistence of global minority driven logics that serve to preserve donor control, justify existing compliance systems and strategically position intermediaries (Intermediary 1, 2025). While some expressed a genuine interest in shifting power to local actors, they also defended the structures that maintain donor control, reflecting a tension between stated intentions and institutional realities. As one local organisation noted, “Donor funds are rigid...we engage communities to tick boxes and please the donors instead of fighting for real change” (Local Org 5, 2025).

These contradictions confirm that localisation, in theory and practice, remains heavily influenced by donor frameworks that prioritise predictability and control over flexibility and community responsiveness. Donors recognised these limitations but framed them as unavoidable risks rather than structural inequities. This suggests that localisation is being implemented within unchanged epistemic and bureaucratic architectures, thus limiting its transformative potential. The result is a localisation agenda that is rhetorically embraced but structurally constrained, with both donors and local actors recognising the need for change but facing persistent barriers to genuine power shift.

4.4 Media narratives and the politics of representation

Media coverage of development in Zimbabwe was widely described as elite-centred, with rural and grassroots voices often marginalised. As one community respondent put it, “We will only see them (local organisations and their intermediary handlers) when they are preparing for donor visits that are accompanied by the media” (Local Organisation 5, 2025). This selective engagement reinforces representational hierarchies negating the viability of locally driven initiatives. Furthermore, the instrumentalised representation reinforces hierarchies where communities are turned into symbolic subjects at the expense of being narrators of their own development stories. Media practitioners themselves acknowledged these patterns, noting that most of the stories that are

written are elitist in nature and outlook. They want to talk about things that are suited to their agendas and divorced from the lived realities of communities...the real people who should be commenting on development are not given the platform,” (Media 1, 2025).

Journalists also highlighted challenges such as self-censorship, editorial pressures, limited access to information, training and institutional capacity, which further restricts the inclusion of community perspectives in development reporting. As one media respondent observed, “There is too much selectivity in terms of how reportage is done in terms of development... the real voices are not being represented,” (Media 2, 2025). These findings reveal that both structural and editorial factors contribute to the persistent marginalisation of local voices confirming that representational inequities are not accidental.

4.5 Agency, innovation and the influence of Ubuntu

Despite persistent barriers – both structural and procedural, local actors demonstrated resilience and agency, calling for bottom-up approaches and context-specific solutions. Furthermore, they emphasised ownership, accountability to communities and the centrality of sustainability, itself an implicit invocation of Ubuntu principles including collective responsibility and relationality (Local Organisation 3, 2025; CBO 1, 2025). Their desire for development to be “community-led, not donor-driven” (Local Org 5, 2025) is based on an ethical foundation in contradiction with technocratic models of aid governance. These perspectives bring to the fore the efficacy of local models grounded in agency, innovation and a commitment to nuanced, contextually grounded, participatory development informed by lived realities and local knowledge.

These insights demonstrate that while donor systems restrict autonomy, local actors continuously negotiate space for self-determination. The emphasis on co-creation and local stewardship reflects a grounded ontology of development that is relational, embodied and community defined. Such perspectives challenge

dominant paradigms and illustrate the presence of alternative worldviews that can provide more equitable and contextually rooted development practice.

4.6 Key conclusions and discussion

4.6.1 Reframing localisation through lived experience and epistemic tensions

This study set out to address the gap in understanding how localisation is experienced, negotiated and represented by local organisations, communities and the media in Zimbabwe's politicised aid landscape – a perspective often missing in existing literature (Peace Direct, 2021; Underwood et al., 2025). Empirical findings demonstrate that, despite extensive acceptance of localisation rhetoric, substantive shifts in power, voice and decision-making remain limited. This is exemplified by how localisation in Zimbabwe functions as a contested terrain shaped by conflicting logics: donor-driven proceduralism on one hand and community-centred relationality on the other. While donors articulate commitments to partnership and local leadership, the continued dominance of rigid compliance frameworks reveals that power has not significantly shifted. This confirms decolonial critiques that formal reforms often fail to alter underlying epistemic hierarchies (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2018; Quijano, 2000), as donor systems continue to define what counts as legitimate knowledge, risk and success.

Communities and local organisations understand and interpret development through experiential and relational lenses that focus on dignity, livelihoods and sustainability. However, these are repeatedly negated in favour of donor priorities. The clash between these worldviews exposes localisation as a battleground of competing ways of knowing, where donor-driven epistemologies continuously retain institutional superiority. This demonstrates that localisation cannot be understood merely as administrative reform; it is fundamentally an epistemic struggle over whose definitions of development prevail.

4.6.2 Local agency within constrained structures

Local actors consistently demonstrated agency, particularly within Zimbabwe's highly restrictive environment. Community members echoed this exclusion, stating that they are only involved at project implementation stage for interventions that, at times, militate against their development aspirations and ambitions. Their navigation strategies including advocacy, adaptation, selective compliance and community mobilisation reflect what decolonial scholars describe as negotiated agency (Cornwall and Brock, 2005), where actors operate within but also push against structural constraints. These practices reveal that local actors are not passive recipients of donor agendas but active interpreters and influencers of development trajectories.

However, the sustainability of such agency remains limited by systemic constraints, particularly in funding structures. Donors continue to frame local organisations as risk-prone, thereby justifying the centrality of intermediaries who manage funds and therefore retain influence, control and define development agendas. This dynamic evidence how risk narratives become instruments of power, validating the sidelining of local institutions and frameworks, paradoxically under the guise of accountability to donors mainly. As long as these underlying narratives persist, localisation will remain partial and uneven.

4.6.3 Media framing as a structural and epistemic barrier

The media findings illustrate that representational hierarchies are central to how localisation is understood, legitimised and framed. Elite-centred reporting narrows public imagination of who drives development and whose experiences matter, reinforcing broader patterns of epistemic exclusion. Framing theory helps illuminate how omission and selection including misrepresentation, constitutes a powerful form of epistemic violence, where certain realities simply do not enter public discourse.

The silencing of community voices in media narratives mirrors their marginalisation in donor systems, showing the interconnectedness of structural and

representational imbalances. This underscores that decolonising localisation requires reconfiguring the whole system, from funding and organisational processes to the narrative infrastructures that contribute to shaping public understanding of aid.

5.0 Recommendations

5.1 Reconfigure funding systems to shift epistemic and structural power

Donors should simplify compliance regimes making them less cumbersome while redesigning funding mechanisms that entrench the coloniality of knowledge. Decolonial theory shows that power is maintained in various ways including through externally imposed norms that define credible practice. Adaptive reporting systems would allow local organisations to use context-driven approaches rather than conform to donor templates. Reducing intermediary gatekeeping would further open space for local actors to define priorities. These reforms make local knowledge authoritative, enabling a substantive and not rhetorical shift in power.

5.2 Embed ubuntu-informed participation in development practice

Ubuntu is based on the notion that collective responsibility and inclusive decision-making are prioritised over all else. Therefore, to ensure participation is effective and meaningful, institutionalising Ubuntu principles in needs assessments, programme design and monitoring would be required. This entails communities have the power to define what development means in their own terms. Such an approach strengthens accountability as a mutual, relational process rather than a technocratic requirement. Ubuntu therefore centres community agency at the expense of donor preference ensuring localisation is practical and meaningful.

5.3 Transform media representation to address hierarchies of voice

Media framing theory demonstrates that public meaning is shaped by selective emphasis and omission. Therefore, strengthening collaborations between journalists, local NGOs and community groups can ensure consistent representation of rural and marginalised perspectives. This challenges elite-

centred narratives that reproduce structural power imbalances in aid reporting. Supporting journalists to access and report from communities expands whose experiences inform national discourse. Inclusive media practices thus function as a pathway to epistemic justice.

5.4 Reimagine capacity strengthening

Capacity strengthening models designed externally and prescribed to privilege global minority standards must be ceased. Decolonial perspectives emphasise the need for mutually respectful, context-grounded institutional development. Long-term investments should support systems aligned with local values, not donor checklists. This enhances organisational confidence, autonomy and resilience. When capacity strengthening is relational and endogenous, local actors are better positioned to lead development on their own terms.

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