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## **MOMENTS OF NEGOTIATED INDEPENDENCE**

LOCALIZED KNOWLEDGE  
ECOSYSTEMS ON FORCED  
MIGRATION IN EAST AFRICA AND  
THE MIDDLE EAST HEATHER

**HEATHER ALEXANDER**

*Carleton University*

**MAYSA BAROUD**

*American University of Beirut*

**KIYA GEZAHEGNE**

*Addis Ababa University*

**KASSEM KASSAK**

*American University of Beirut*

**YARA MOURAD**

*American University of Beirut*

**NADIA NAMEH**

*American University of Beirut*

**DULO NYAORO**

*Moi University*

**LINDA OUCHO**

*African Migration and Development Policy  
Centre*

**ZEIN SOUFAN**

*The Specialists Development and Financial  
Consulting*

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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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There exists extensive research on the ways in which North-South research partnerships replicate existing power imbalances and inequalities in the humanitarian system. As the field of refugee and forced migration studies continues to grapple with and address power asymmetries, however, there remains a lack of information on where and under what conditions localized knowledge ecosystems can demonstrate agency amid these oppressive structures. We lack an understanding of the mechanisms by which global South actors exercise agency despite the oppressive power structures that exist in forced migration knowledge production.

This paper argues that such agency exists and is exercised by localized knowledge ecosystems throughout the Middle East and East Africa. To contribute to our collective understanding of localization, this paper summarizes recent research on localization in forced migration knowledge production, adopting an empirical approach.

# INTRODUCTION

For more than twenty years, researchers and academics have documented the ways in which North-South research partnerships replicate existing power imbalances and inequalities in the humanitarian system (Shacknove 1993; Chimni 1998; Bradley 2008; Betts and Loescher 2011; Landau 2012; Shivakoti and Milner 2021).

**Yet there remains a gap in our understanding of the extent to which North-South research partnerships can escape this dominant paradigm to carve out moments of negotiated independence, moments when researchers and knowledge producers in the global South, including those with lived experience, are able to set the agenda, control the research process and disseminate their findings on their own terms.**

We lack an understanding of the mechanisms by which global South actors exercise agency despite the oppressive power structures that exist in forced migration knowledge production.

To help fill this gap and contribute to our collective understanding of localization, this paper summarizes recent research on localization in forced migration knowledge production, adopting an empirical approach. It seeks to answer the following questions:

1. Is localization a useful frame to understand and unpack the power asymmetries in forced migration knowledge production?

2. How do we define localization?

3. Who are the actors involved and how do they cooperate to produce knowledge according to their priorities and negotiate movements of independence from the dominant power structures in forced migration research?

4. What further research is needed to better understand localization in forced migration knowledge production?

Power asymmetries in the humanitarian sector and in knowledge production on forced migration are well documented. Despite commitments towards localization made at the 2016 World Humanitarian Summit and ongoing discussion of the importance of localization (Asylum Access 2021; DA Global 2021), humanitarian crises that impact the global North often receive far more press coverage, money, and attention than crises that mainly impact the global South (Fiddian-Qasmiyeh 2020; Roepstorff 2020). The amount of funding for local humanitarian organizations remains just over 3% of total humanitarian funding. Less than 1% goes to refugee-led organizations. Yet even these numbers obscure the true extent of the problem. Research by Asylum Access shows the extent of the disconnect within the humanitarian space: only 3% of attendees of the UN's 2019 Global Refugee Forum were themselves refugees (Asylum Access 2021).

**3 %**

**of total humanitarian funding goes to local humanitarian organizations.**

**> 1 %**

**goes to refugee-led organizations.**

**only 3 %**

**of attendees at the UN's 2019 Global Refugee Forum were refugees.**

Power imbalances between global North and global South researchers, academics and knowledge producers are also well known. While research partnerships between the global North and the global South have many benefits, Richa Shivakoti and James Milner (2021) summarize some of the many ways in which the global North often acts as the funder of knowledge collection and dissemination, sets the research agenda, and controls and disseminates the findings, while the global South is often the receiver of funds, influence, and agendas. Scholars based in the global North overwhelmingly dominate publishing on forced migration in influential journals like the *Journal of Refugee Studies* (Vargas-Silva 2019; McNally and Rahim 2022; El Refaei 2020; Icduygu et al. 2021; Mason 2022).

Why are such power imbalances important? They call into question the accuracy and relevance of the knowledge being produced. The vast majority of the world's refugees are in the global South, causing a disconnect between where the research agenda on forced migration is set and where the knowledge originates (Robillard et al. 2021).

If research agendas on forced migration in the global South are dominated by aid agencies and donor governments, the research topics will reflect global North priorities (Landau 2012). Popular topics for research by the global North reflect the concerns of global North countries, including refugee integration in Europe and North America, the need for “securitization” to keep northern countries safe, feel-good white savoir narratives of the “worthy” refugee, and policies of refugee containment that have become a priority for many northern governments since the end of the Cold War (Chimni 1998; Landau 2019; Rother 2019; Fiddian-Qasmiyeh 2020; Refaei 2020). These priorities, those of global North, mean that forced displacement research may not reflect the priorities or needs of countries and communities in the global South, including the communities where most refugees are living.



**These power imbalances also raise questions of equity and fairness among the global forced migration research community.**

There may be negative psychological effects for local researchers and research participants. If money for forced migration research usually flows from the global North to the global South, this creates an employer/employee relationship, rather than a partnership of equals (Binka 2005; Bradley 2008; Refaei 2020). When working for or with international academics, local researchers may suffer negative consequences or carry unpaid and unacknowledged burdens that negatively affect their work (Kalinga 2019; Tilley and Kalina 2021).

Negotiation between donors and researchers exacts a psychological cost on researchers due to the constant need to go above and beyond the work of researching to carve out space for academic independence or counterbalance entrenched assumptions. There is also a growing awareness of how northern dominance can erode local capacity in humanitarian settings, often by replacing or replicating local actors (Juma and Suhrke 2002).

This erosion of capacity may also occur in forced migration research, with institutions in the global North dominating academia.



**Refugee communities in host countries may suffer from “research fatigue” without seeing benefits from research (Kalinga 2019).**

As the field of refugee and forced migration studies continues to grapple with how to address power asymmetries, there remains a lack of information on where and under what conditions localized knowledge ecosystems can demonstrate agency amid these oppressive structures.

This paper argues that such agency exists and is exercised by localized knowledge ecosystems throughout the Middle East and Africa. These ecosystems can negotiate a degree of independence from the top-down, hierarchical system of international forced displacement research. Yet the process by which this occurs is poorly understood.

This paper draws on recent research conducted as part of a project funded by Canada’s International Development Research Centre to provide direct support to the Issam Fares Institute for Public Policy and International Affairs at the American University of Beirut and the African Migration and Development Policy Center (AMADPOC) in Kenya to research localized knowledge production in Kenya, Jordan, Ethiopia and Lebanon. This work was supported by the Local Engagement Refugee Research Network (LERRN) at Carleton University.

The methodology of the project consisted of an initial series of consultations on the concept of localized knowledge ecosystems as proposed by Shivakoti and Milner (2021), particularly its applicability in East Africa and the Middle East, followed by a mapping study of examples and validation of the concept of localized knowledge ecosystems with partners. This paper encapsulates observations from these initial stages of research, which will be followed by case studies in Jordan, Ethiopia, Kenya, and Lebanon.

**While these observations cannot be generalized, they provide insights into the relevance of the concept of localized knowledge ecosystems as a frame for understanding power dynamics between the global North and global South when it comes to knowledge production on forced migration.**

This paper will discuss the actors involved in these knowledge ecosystems and the ways in which they collaborate to negotiate moments of independence from the dominant power structures at various stages of the research cycle, including setting the research agenda, designing and implementing the methodology, controlling dissemination, and mobilizing findings. This paper therefore contributes to the ongoing conversation on localization. It will ground future work on addressing power asymmetries in forced migration research.

The concept of “localized knowledge ecosystems on forced migration research” was adopted as a frame to understand these power dynamics, but it is first necessary to clearly define what is meant by this concept. What is a knowledge ecosystem on forced displacement? What does it mean for a knowledge ecosystem to be localized, as opposed to local?

The paper starts by defining localized knowledge ecosystems and explaining why this concept provides a useful frame for understanding how local organizations, individuals with lived experiences of displacement, and grassroots actors negotiate the sometimes oppressive power dynamics of forced displacement research. Next, this paper presents identifies the range of actors implicated in these ecosystems and provides examples of how these actors collaborate throughout the research cycle to achieve localization.

# 1. DEFINING LOCALIZATION

To research power imbalances in forced migration knowledge production between the global North and global South, it is necessary to identify knowledge ecosystems that are not only located in the global South, but are centered, run, funded, or empowered there. For example, a non-profit may have an office in the global South. However, if all its funding, staff, resources, management structure, mission statement, planning and organization originates in the global North, is it really localized? Without clearly defining what we mean by localization, we run the risk of masking the very power imbalance we seek to illuminate and study. The risk of tokenization and lip service is high in a system that remains entirely dominated by international actors and large donor countries, where politics plays an important role in humanitarian aid (Goodwin and Ager 2021). According to Shivakoti and Milner (2021: 806), the process of localization: is generally understood to be the process of transferring power from transnational actors, including international non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and agencies of the United Nations (UN), to local actors.

Importantly, no knowledge ecosystem exists in a vacuum, immune from the influence of the UN, donor governments, INGOs or large research institutions located in the global North. As a result, it is not possible to find an organization or entity that is entirely localized. Rather, as this paper will show,



**localization is less a category and more a process.**

Categorizing knowledge ecosystems according to an overly rigid binary between localized and non-localized is unhelpfully narrow and self-defeating (Roepstorf 2020). Instead, this paper will identify and discuss moments of localization. Moments of localization may occur at any stage of the knowledge production process, including setting the research agenda, crafting research questions, creating a methodology and research tools, conducting the research, disseminating the findings, and incorporating the findings into an advocacy strategy.

**Localization in forced migration knowledge production does not require that the knowledge produced leads to a change in policy. Rather, a local organization able to access a policy arena, produce its own research or access an audience on its own terms may be localization.**

Measuring influence and results is very difficult. The key is that the knowledge ecosystem is producing the knowledge that it deems most useful, and that the knowledge is being heard by policy makers in a meaningful way, without outside interference. The very idea of localization, however, risks being co-opted by a humanitarian system that is excellent at preserving the status quo. Localization is in danger of becoming a buzz word with little real content: “performative localization” or tokenization (Shuayb 2022). There is not always a clear dividing line between tokenization and localization, as this paper will discuss.



## 2. LOCALIZATION VERSUS DIVERSITY AND DECENTRALIZATION

In identifying moments of localization, it is important to say what is not, necessarily, localization. For example, it is important to distinguish between localization and diversity within an international organization. Staff may be from diverse origins, but this diversity may not, in and of itself, lead to localization if they are international staff employed by an international organization. While increased representation in hiring processes has brought increased diversity to international organizations.



**Simply employing diverse staff does not necessarily increase localization if staff are beholden to a top-down, heavily centralized system.**

It is also important, however, to avoid letting the involvement of international staff obscure moments of localization. International staff may support localization in some contexts if they do not dominate decision-making or set the agenda.

It is also important to distinguish between localization, where power is centered in local actors, versus decentralization (Van Brabant and Patel 2021), where the functions of an international actor are distributed throughout multiple global South countries.

Moving towards more humanitarian work directed from regional offices may support localization, or it may not, as top-down power structures may be simply replicated at the regional level.

**Decentralization may instead serve as a cover to avoid localization, or to give the appearance of ceding control to the global South.**

The humanitarian system is also in constant flux, opening new opportunities for localization while closing off others. For example, the COVID-19 pandemic, when many international actors were simply unable to function as before (Robillard et al. 2021), may have opened new opportunities for localization.

**These complexities and nuances show that identifying moments of localization requires a case-by-case approach, focusing on the diverse spectrum of ways in which local organizations and actors have managed to carve out moments of negotiated independence.**

### 3. DEFINING KNOWLEDGE ECOSYSTEMS ON FORCED MIGRATION

It is necessary to better define what is meant by “knowledge” in a “localized knowledge ecosystem.” This paper draws from research in the social sciences on knowledge ecosystems (Roepstorf 2020; Atputharajah and Wanga 2020; Erdilmen and Sosthenes 2020). Knowledge in the domain of forced migration research is usually assumed to take the form of academic papers and reports, but a more accurate definition would be much broader to reflect the fact that knowledge comes in many forms.

**This paper adopts a broad definition of knowledge (Fiddian- Qasmiyeh 2020), including oral history, artwork, media articles and radio shows, NGO reports, [10] government statistics, works of art, and academic publications.**



**Adopting a broad definition of what constitutes “knowledge” is critical because refugee communities often do not share knowledge through written means.**

A knowledge ecosystem may contain actors or participants who do not primarily identify as academics or researchers, such as refugee community groups, but who produce knowledge.

The knowledge that is produced may include any information in any form that increases or deepens an understanding of refugees and forced migration.

What is a knowledge ecosystem? The term knowledge ecosystem first emerged from studies on organizational learning in the domains of technology and management (Bowonder and Miyake 2000; Slavazza et al. 2006; Bray 2007) to describe the complex web of actors that conceptualize, produce, analyze, disseminate, and promote knowledge.

Knowledge ecosystems may be bounded by space and time, by type of knowledge, or by rules of membership. According to some definitions, a knowledge ecosystem may be organized around a shared intention to create new knowledge through joint research work, collaboration, or the development of a knowledge base (Valkokari 2015; Järvi et al. 2018). According to other definitions, however, a shared intention or search is not necessary (Thomson 2007; Van Der Borgh et al. 2012).

Research into knowledge ecosystems demonstrates that influencing public opinion, governments, or international policy on forced migration, as well as raising the profile and voices of refugees and displaced persons with the end goal of improving their lives, are important objectives of knowledge ecosystems. Finally, this paper focuses on knowledge ecosystems on forced displacement, which is the forced movement and displacement of persons, often because of war, conflict, or other man-made causes (King 2005). Forced migration incorporates humanitarian emergencies as well as climate and natural disasters. It may be international or internal to a country.

This paper adopts the following working definition of knowledge ecosystems on forced displacement: Knowledge ecosystems on forced displacement are constituted of actors with lived experience, researchers and practitioners who produce and use knowledge on forced migration, including, but

not limited to, NGOs/INGOs, research centers, institutes, networks and universities and academics who coordinate with each other to advance new knowledge production and translate and mobilize this knowledge to influence policy, practice, action and discourse and narratives to advance the well-being of refugees and others who have been forcibly displaced. Knowledge ecosystems will also include several sub-ecosystems (such as networks and initiatives, including grassroots or refugee-led initiatives) consisting of local, international, research and practitioner actors that may collaborate or interact with one another with the intention to mobilize knowledge and influence policy, research, practice and discourse by promoting protection and solutions.

## 4. KNOWLEDGE ECOSYSTEMS ON FORCED DISPLACEMENT IN KENYA, ETHIOPIA, LEBANON AND JORDAN

This section surveys some of the various actors that form knowledge ecosystems on forced displacement in Kenya, Ethiopia, Jordan, and Lebanon and explores how they inter-relate to form an ecosystem. This survey is not exhaustive, but it highlights some of the actors, individuals and institutions that make up such ecosystems. It explores how they identify, collect, analyze, and disseminate knowledge within the ecosystem. There is an enormous amount of diversity among actors. Research agendas, methodologies and methods of dissemination differ between different types of actors, as do institutional relationships. Yet all these actors and organizations are bound together by a common cause to influence policy and to elevate the voices of refugees and displaced persons and ultimately improve their lives.

### 4.1 LOCAL NON-GOVERNMENTAL ORGANIZATIONS, NON-PROFITS, CIVIL SOCIETY ORGANIZATIONS AND NGO NETWORKS

Local non-government organizations (NGOs), non-profits, civil society organizations, and NGO networks are important components of knowledge ecosystems on forced displacement in Kenya, Lebanon, Ethiopia, and Jordan.

While these organizations do not always count knowledge production as among their primary outputs, many engage in the collection and dissemination of knowledge through, for example, researching and publishing reports, supporting community activities, helping small businesses, and supporting income generation activities. Influencing government, public opinion and international policy is often a core function of many NGOs. In this way, their



**knowledge production may differ from some academic institutions, where knowledge production for its own sake is more common.**

NGOs often have close relationships with the international donor community and UN agencies, receiving funding and support, while also influencing donor policy. NGOs also have relationships with host governments, sometimes through formal registration requirements and legal frameworks, but also by forming an important component of the policy debate within host countries.

NGOs in Kenya that form part of a knowledge ecosystem include the Xavier Project and the Refugee Consortium of Kenya. The Xavier project is an international NGO dedicated to refugee education that helps to find funding for and coordinate refugee-led organizations.

The Refugee Consortium, a local NGO, offers legal services and conducts research to influence policy and educate affected communities, with funding from the international community. In Ethiopia, the Organization for Welfare and Development in Action, an implementing partner of the Norwegian Refugee Council (an international NGO), works across multiple sectors, including water and sanitation, protection, livelihoods, and education. In Jordan, the Tamkeen for Legal Aid and Human Rights supports labor rights for migrants. Another example is the Lebanon Policy and Research Network on Displacement (LPRND), formed in September 2016 as part of the MENA Civil Society Network for Displacement (CSND), which was established by UNHCR's Regional Office in 2016. The Network members cooperate to emphasize the protection of displaced persons and refugees, support host communities, and plan for future post-conflict scenarios. Also in Lebanon, Legal Agenda is a regional legal research, advocacy and media organization that aids lawyers, judges and others working with refugees and migrants.

## **4.2 ORGANIZATIONS AND NETWORKS LED BY INDIVIDUALS WITH LIVED EXPERIENCE AND/OR MEMBERS OF AFFECTED COMMUNITIES**

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Knowledge ecosystems on forced displacement often include individuals with lived experience such as refugees) or members of affected communities.

Such individuals may come together to form NGOs or other types of more informal, community groups, which differ from local

NGOs because they are primarily led and staffed by refugees or other persons with lived experience of displacement, or by affected members of host communities. While such organizations may not view themselves as primarily engaged in knowledge production, they nevertheless may collect and disseminate knowledge as part of their work.



**Such organizations may form a critical part of localized knowledge ecosystems and often form with the intention of elevating under-served populations and drawing attention to neglected issues.**

Amplifying the voices of affected communities in policy debates, whether in the host country or in international fora, is often an important goal of such organizations. Results of a mapping study in Lebanon has uncovered several examples of organizations led by persons with lived experience and/or members of affected communities who engage in the wider conversation on forced migration in Lebanon. One example is Basmeh and Zeitooneh, a refugee-led organization that helps the most marginalized and desperate Syrian refugees, launched in September 2012 and registered by the Lebanon government under the decree #145/2014 in February 2014. Basmeh and Zeitooneh use a community center approach, conduct field visits to marginalized Syrian refugee communities, and provide services and assistance to under-served areas, including Arsal, the Bekaa Valley, Tripoli and the Palestinian refugee camps in Beirut.

Also in Lebanon, Multi-Aid Programs (MAPS) is a Syrian-led, community-based organization that frequently partners with universities in the global North. These organizations collect a wide variety of information on refugees and affected communities, including the views of refugees themselves. Such information may be critical to identifying gaps in humanitarian assistance, for example, or elevating marginalized issues that affect refugee communities.

Basmeh and Zeitooneh, for example, have produced a report on the effect of compulsory military service on refugees that contains recommendations to governments and international humanitarian organizations, including UNHCR (Basmeh and Zeitooneh 2020).

In Kenya, there are a wide range of refugee and community-led organizations, including Kintsungi and Vijana Twaweza, which focus on children, families, and youth. The mapping project identified over 30 organizations led by refugees or by members of affected communities. All of these organizations operate at the grassroots level according to the needs of the refugee communities with which they work. Several organizations, including the Community Empowerment and Self-support Organization and the Foundation for Lesbian, Bisexual and Queer, are dedicated to assisting LGBTQ+ individuals. These organizations form as a social group targeting their immediate needs, such as income generating opportunities or training.

This approach allows them to form a community where they can share their concerns regarding their experiences and challenges, as well as identify opportunities where they can amplify their voices in different platforms. In Ethiopia, Dagu leaders form a traditional, grassroots information and advocacy network, sharing information at the community level among the Afar community. International experts have long recognized how the Dagu system forms a vital part of community education and awareness in the domain of public health, for example (Menbere and Skjerdal 2008). The Dagu system has proven useful for engaging with the local community, especially during the pandemic.

### 4.3 THINK TANKS AND ACADEMIA

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**Think tanks and academia are critical to knowledge production and often cite influencing policy as a major goal of their work.**

Producing knowledge for its own sake may also occur in academia, particularly in a university setting. Universities may receive host government funding, and therefore may operate under a different set of constraints from NGOs, which more often receive funding from donor governments, often via international NGOs or UN agencies. Think tanks and universities may enjoy a certain degree of academic freedom that allows them to operate somewhat independently.

The dissemination of findings in academia often comes in the form of peer-reviewed journal articles, books or other forms of specialized knowledge production that may not be designed to directly impact the policy debate, but rather to increase knowledge of an aspect of forced migration. Think tanks and academia may take part in a knowledge ecosystem by supporting student groups, including creating student means of communication like newsletters and blogs, hosting conferences, publishing journals and books, operating libraries, screening films, and housing artwork.

One example of a think tank is the Syrian Center for Policy Research in Beirut, which produces research to influence policy on Syria, including on forced displacement. An example from academia is AUB4Refugees, an initiative launched in September 2016 by the American University of Beirut to bring together faculty and departments from across the University who are working on addressing the impacts of the Syrian refugee crisis in Lebanon and the region. This initiative currently involves 64 projects led by 35 researchers from every department. In Jordan, the Refugees, Displaced Persons, and Forced Migration Studies Center was established at Yarmouk University to focus on the Syrian refugee crisis and related events. The center produces regular research outputs on forced migration. The center also hosts events, bringing together experts from a diversity of fields.

It is funded by Yarmouk University and various international donor agencies, including the German government. The Arab Renaissance for Democracy and Development is a think tank and civil society organization devoted to promoting pluralism and tolerance. It provides legal assistance to refugees and migrants and is a UNHCR partner organization. It produces reports and analysis on forced migration in Jordan and the region.

In Ethiopia, the Network of Ethiopian Researchers links together researchers of forced migration and it is creating a database of refugee research. The Regional Durable Solutions Secretariat, created in 2015 by a consortium of international organizations, conducts research to inform policy on durable solutions in East Africa. In Kenya, there are several think tanks that are foreign led with very few locally led think tanks. One example is the East African Center for Forced Migration and Displacement that works on forced displacement issues in terms of research and dialogue. Local experts engaging in the subject matter operate within existing academic institutions, international NGOs and UN agencies, or as independent consultants. The Kenya Institute of Migration Studies at the University of Nairobi's Population Studies and Research Institute is one of the first migration institutes in Kenya dedicated to migration management in terms of training. The institute focuses on general migration issues where forced displacement is a thematic group.



## 4.4 HOST GOVERNMENT AGENCIES

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Host government agencies may play a critical role in knowledge production, particularly given their resources and access, as well as their role in collecting and publishing official statistics and informing the public.

Governments often use such data to inform their own policies on forced displacement. Because governments produce knowledge in a context where they also set policy, government knowledge fills a unique role in a knowledge ecosystem. Governments bring enormous financial resources and almost total freedom in their ability to select, collect and disseminate knowledge, meaning that they alone are often the only entities capable of the large-scale collection of statistics on forced migration. Governments often exercise a high degree of control over a knowledge ecosystem due to their power to set and enforce laws and policies regarding the creation and dissemination of knowledge.

The Administration for Refugee and Returnee Affairs in Ethiopia, for example, is the main government agency that oversees activities related to refugees in the country such as determining refugee status, establishing and managing refugee camps, providing protection and basic social services to refugees, and coordinating assistance programs. Also in Ethiopia, the Regional Multi-Stakeholder Platform, organized in collaboration with UNHCR, coordinates the refugee response, including through gathering data.

In Kenya, the National Coordination Mechanism for Migration (NCM) is a platform where state and non-state actors engage on migration issues in general, including on forced displacement. The Refugee Affairs Secretariat (RAD) also engages with UNHCR and other key implementing partners on refugee management within the country. In Jordan, the Ministry of Planning and International Cooperation, Host Community Coordination Platform (MOPIC) is a partnership between the Government of Jordan and various UN agencies to coordinate assistance to Syrian refugees. In Kenya, the Refugee Affairs Secretariat manages most aspects of Kenya's government response and assistance to refugees, including refugee protection and registration, in close collaboration with UNHCR. Such UN-government collaborations are common in the forced migration arena and demonstrate UNHCR's close partnership with many refugee-hosting states.



## 4.5 OTHER ENTITIES ENGAGED IN KNOWLEDGE PRODUCTION

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Knowledge production on forced migration is not limited to the above entities.



**In many countries, a knowledge ecosystem may include artists, arts institutions, museums, the media, and the private sector and business community.**

A filmmaker may produce a documentary on refugees, a museum may host an arts installation showcasing refugee artists, or refugee-owned restaurants may come together in a network to promote their businesses or to collect money for charity. Such entities may collect and disseminate knowledge as part of their work. These are all examples of the myriad of ways in which other types of entities may form part of a localized knowledge ecosystem on forced migration.

However, the mapping studies on which this article is partially based, primarily focused on community/refugee-led organizations, NGOs, think tanks, academia, and government agencies, as the agencies and entities most directly engaged in policy debates on forced migration. Further study is needed into the effects of other types of knowledge production on localization.

To what extent have the knowledge ecosystems described above been able to achieve moments of localization? Does the definition of localization described above provide a useful frame for understanding how these ecosystems exert their independence and control the knowledge they share and produce? The next section will explore these critical questions.

## 5. MOMENTS OF NEGOTIATED INDEPENDENCE

This section will explore the extent to which the concept of localization as a series of moments of negotiated independence is a useful framework for analyzing the ecosystems described above and, if so, what these moments of localization look like. It will look at localization during the process of setting of an independent research agenda and localization during the dissemination of research findings, two key moments in the production of knowledge.

**As a result of the centralization and concentration of power within global North entities, particularly donor governments, the global agenda on forced displacement is dominated by a few voices, overwhelmingly reflecting the priorities of the global North and its institutions.**

### 5.1 SETTING THE RESEARCH AGENDA



**The power to set research agendas emerged as one of the most important moments of possible localization, according to interviews with experts (Shivakoti and Milner 2021).**

Agenda setting is closely related to the concept of issue emergence, whereby a previously marginalized human rights issue gains attention and importance at the global level, often through the efforts of independent researchers and institutions (Kingston 2019). Yet, many participants in knowledge ecosystems in the global South struggle to set their own research agendas.

This situation can have a chilling effect on the promotion of agendas and methodologies that do not conform. Despite the dominance of a few large international and regional organizations, local entities within knowledge ecosystems can achieve moments of localization in setting the agenda on forced displacement knowledge production.

One example of localization is the experience of refugee-led organizations in Kenya who are led by, and work with, the LGBTQ+ community. International agencies dominate field research on forced migration in Kenya, along with prominent INGOs.

Local groups have often struggled to appropriately elevate and address LGBTQ+ rights in this environment. Scholars have noted this issue is often marginalized by international entities, who in the past have supported harmful practices (Crehan et al. 2020; Pincock 2020). LGBTQ+ rights are also sensitive politically in Kenya and the government has the power to deny research permits. The issue is seen by researchers as a topic that might trigger a negative government response. Taken together, this climate can produce a chilling effect. Nevertheless, refugee-led organizations have identified and elevated LGBTQ+ issues and guided a more substantive, rights-based discourse in Kenya, sometimes forcing the hands of the larger international organizations. In this example, local organizations are forcing an urgent issue onto the agenda and leading the way in how to address it, though the work does not always fit within the traditional understanding of knowledge production. More research is needed to fully understand how localization contributed to the emergence of LGBTQ+ rights as an issue of importance in the discussion of forced migration in Kenya and how to support localization in action, where an unmet need is exposed when space is created for communities to raise awareness of the issues that affect their lives. The cost to grassroots activists and organizations of forcing an issue onto the agenda in this way can be very high.



**Localization may bring with it substantial risks that should and must be acknowledged.**

In another example of agenda setting from Lebanon, local researchers have elevated the challenges of refugee returns in an environment where governments and donors are eager to create a narrative of safe and voluntary return. Basmeh and Zeitooneh in Lebanon visits and distributes assistance to marginalized refugee communities that are neglected by other aid organizations, enabling it to gather information on issues like refugee returns that are sometimes overlooked, mischaracterized, or minimized by international organizations and the government. Basmeh and Zeitooneh's 2020 report, funded in part by Irish INGO Troicare, highlights issues with Syrian refugee returns, including refugee concerns about forced conscription, providing a viewpoint that is not always highlighted by UNHCR and the government (UNHCR 2004; UNHCR 2014; UNHCR 2019). More research is needed into if and how localization can push back against established narratives on sensitive political topics like refugee returns (Araman and Loutfi 2019).

In Jordan, organizations have often been quite successful in achieving a degree of localization in setting their agendas by occupying a grey area, contributing to agenda setting while managing the expectations and pressures of the government, international agencies, and foreign donor governments. The research space in Jordan shows signs of constant negotiation between the various actors, including researchers, governments, international agencies, and NGOs.

The Refugees, Displaced Persons, and Forced Migration Studies Center at Yarmouk University is a good example of an institution in Jordan that has developed expertise not only in forced migration, but in negotiating space for localized forced migration research. Such a “dual mandate” for local organizations, however, means that they must expend a great deal of uncompensated time and labour on negotiating independence, which is one hidden cost of the localization process. More research is needed on the effects of managing this hidden “dual mandate” particularly for staff well-being.



**Staff well-being and the costs of localization can also manifest through security and safety risks.**

In Ethiopia, the ongoing conflict means that the government’s security concerns, perceived and real, often colour the selection of topics and locations for research. Similarly, the Kenyan government also takes different views of research being conducted in Kakuma versus Dadaab camps, due to the different security environments and political contexts.

**The reality of politics may not leave much room for negotiation when it comes to national governments, leaving certain topics and locations for research off the table unless international actors are willing to expend considerable political capital.**

In such contexts, critical information on forced migration may be widely talked about and “known” to many people, but never be documented in a form that can be disseminated. The challenges of producing localized research in highly politicized, conflict zones raise many serious concerns that are beyond the scope of this paper, but worthy of future study.

What are some keys to successful moments of localization that emerge from the above discussion? Moments of localization often come at high cost. Carving out space for agenda setting is something of a second job, raising the issue of staff well-being and the burden that localization can create for staff.

**While localization has become a popular concept in international circles, more research is needed to understand the potential risks and costs that occur when grassroots activists, local researchers and persons with lived experience are expected to lead the way in elevating an issue.**



**Another question is the role that top-down funding structures play in localization.**

Diversifying funding may be an important factor in creating more space for localization, by making local organizations less reliant on a single donor, but this connection remains unclear.

More research is needed into the possible positive effects of diversifying funding sources for localization. What other factors can help create space for localization in setting a research agenda? It may help to have a strong, established mandate and an established reputation within the forced migration research community, including a commitment to localization. The impact on localization of having a strong, clear mandate shows promise as an area of future research.

In looking at the various examples of agenda setting discussed above, it is worth noting the tendency of the international research community to prioritize certain forms of research, such as reports and articles, over others, such as the arts.

**Much knowledge that is produced by refugee communities falls outside the traditional realm of policy or academic research, a fact which may hinder its acceptance by the broader international academic community and donors.**

By contrast, reports and position papers better fit into donor notions of policy research, potentially making them more accessible to governments or other policy makers, but less accessible to refugee communities and grassroots activists.

The need to frame knowledge production according to global North norms and how this requirement intersects with localization requires further study.

## 5.2 DISSEMINATING RESEARCH FINDINGS

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Controlling and disseminating research findings is another point of the knowledge production process which may allow space for localization.

**While the internet has weakened the power of traditional gatekeepers somewhat, there remains a crisis of legitimacy for knowledge that has not received the stamp of approval from an international or global North gatekeeper organization.**

- There are few opportunities to publish and disseminate research in specialized journals on forced migration that are not controlled by an institution or university based in the global North.
- Most major international conferences are controlled by global North institutions. Donor support for local universities is often limited to one-off events.

Yet moments of localization in the dissemination of findings may be found. For example, the Refugees, Displaced Persons, and Forced Migration Studies Center at Yarmouk University, in collaboration with the German Jordanian University and other partners, held an international conference on protracted displacement in October 2020.

Though UNHCR and the German government's development agency (GIZ) sit on the steering committee and multiple German-funded institutions participated in the conference organizing, alongside UNHCR, the conference placed Yarmouk University in a central leadership role in organizing the conference, with the express goal of elevating contributions of refugee and displaced scholars from the region.



**This conference demonstrates that funding is not always a barrier to localization if the funders consciously adopt a hands-off approach, though it also demonstrates how much global South institutions must rely on global North financial support.**

More research is needed into how such initiatives can provide more space for localization, while also looking for other ways to support localization in the dissemination of knowledge, including breaking out of the dominant paradigm of academic conferences.

# CONCLUSION

This paper established that global South organizations and actors have the power to influence policy debates through an ongoing and complex process of negotiation, as moments of localization. This paper adopted a definition of localized knowledge ecosystems, demonstrating that when localization is understood as a process rather than as a binary, it is a useful frame to discuss power relationships between donors and international actors, on the one hand, and global South knowledge ecosystems, on the other hand. This paper also advocated for the adoption of a broad definition of knowledge, particularly knowledge that is produced in formats that are most accessible to persons with lived experience.

This paper focused primarily on two important moments when localization may occur: setting the research agenda and controlling the ways in which research outputs are disseminated. It exposed the myriad of ways in which localization risks being co-opted and eroded and the dangers associated with localization for global South actors. There is an urgent need for further research to identify and successfully nurture true localization, which incorporates not only token gestures, but concrete support for agenda setting and the ownership of knowledge production at every level.

This paper has also identified important areas of future research. It exposed the need for a deeper understanding of where and how localization occurs at all moments of the knowledge production process, as well as how non-academic knowledge production can be supported. It highlighted the need for a deeper understanding of how funding impacts localization and raised the question of the role of mandates and mission statements in creating space for localization. Finally, this paper also exposed the need for further research in other regions, on the extent of localization in forced migration research in other parts of the world (such as the Americas, Europe and Asia), on what makes localization successful, and on how localization can be nurtured.



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