

---

the

---

# Humanitarian Leader

---

**Digging in: A consideration of 'grassroots' in  
localisation discourse**

JANAKA MCGEARY



# THE HUMANITARIAN LEADER:

## Digging in: A consideration of 'grassroots' in localisation discourse

WORKING PAPER 045

MAY 2024

---

### Author Details

#### Janaka Mcgeary

Janaka recently completed a Master's of Humanitarian Assistance at Deakin University and currently works as a Manager in Program Design and Coordination in disability services.

### Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Dr Nazanin Zadeh-Cummings for her support in the development and writing of this article.

### Editorial Office

The Centre For Humanitarian Leadership  
Deakin University  
221 Burwood Highway  
Burwood 3125 VIC  
Australia

**Co-editors-in-Chief (English edition):** Phoebe Downing and Marian Abouzeid

**Editor-in-Chief (French edition):** Justine de Rouck

**Production Editor:** Cara Schultz

**Translation:** Benoit Glayre and Isaline Doucot

**Layout:** Diana De León

**ISSN:** 2653-1011 (Online)

The Centre for Humanitarian Leadership acknowledges the Australian Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples of this nation. We acknowledge the traditional custodians of the lands on which we work. We pay our respects to ancestors and Elders, past and present.

### Copyright

This paper was prepared for the Centre for Humanitarian Leadership. The views expressed herein are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Centre for Humanitarian Leadership. These papers are circulated for discussion and comment purposes. They have not been peer-reviewed.

© 2024 by Janaka Mcgeary. All rights reserved.

Cover image: Young plants grow in a backyard garden set up by a mother in Karamoja region, North Eastern Uganda.

© James Mbiri / Save the Children International

# Abstract

---

Humanitarian localisation seeks to make aid more equitable and effective by empowering local actors. However, ambiguity surrounding the definition of 'local actors' hinders progress in this direction. Despite growing discussions on localisation, there remains a significant gap in understanding the role and consideration of grassroots actors within humanitarian discourse. This article aims to critically review some of the discourse on humanitarian localisation, particularly focusing on the consideration given to grassroots actors, to address this gap and foster a deeper understanding of their significance. Using a scoping review, the article analyses three key articles published between 2020-22, examining their consideration of grassroots actors and concepts within the context of humanitarian localisation. While specific explorations of the idea of 'grassroots' are limited, the reviewed articles reveal critical engagement with related concepts, such as the emergent transnational, transcultural and translocal dynamics that are challenging traditional notions of local action. Expanding the understanding of grassroots beyond traditional boundaries is essential for promoting local empowerment and more effective and inclusive localisation efforts in humanitarian responses. Acknowledging grassroots actors as distinct stakeholders is crucial for advancing equitable and impactful humanitarian practices.

## Leadership relevance

*This paper critically informs humanitarian leadership practices by highlighting the overlooked role of grassroots actors within the discourse of humanitarian localisation. By scrutinising the consideration of grassroots concepts in key articles, it challenges traditional assumptions and underscores the necessity for humanitarian leaders to recognise the unique contributions of grassroots initiatives. This understanding urges leaders to adopt more inclusive and contextually sensitive strategies, fostering meaningful partnerships and enhancing the transformative potential of localisation efforts. This paper prompts humanitarian leaders to reassess their approaches, ensuring they are responsive to the diverse needs and dynamics of local communities.*



## Introduction

Since the 2016 World Humanitarian Summit (WHS), the concept of 'localisation' has been centre stage in discussions around humanitarian reform and has shaped the understanding of best practice in humanitarian decision-making and leadership. The sentiment within the WHS for the future of humanitarian assistance to be "as local as possible, as international as necessary" spoke to a need for humanitarianism to become more equitable, efficient and effective by playing a more supportive role to local responders (United Nations, 2016). The transfer of funding as directly as possible to local actors and the subsequent localising of humanitarian action has increasingly come to be seen as the panacea to the ineffectiveness and inefficiencies seen in traditional international paternalistic humanitarian response mechanisms (Roepstorff, 2022). Yet despite the steps taken towards this reform, the question might be asked: how can we know the impact that funding local actors brings when it has not been properly explained what a 'local actor' really means (Roepstorff, 2020)? In an effort to answer this question, this paper will review a small part of the discourse surrounding localisation—how and to what extent 'grassroots' actors are considered within localisation literature.

### What is local and why do definitions matter?

One common idea expressed within the localisation discourse is the need to move away from ambiguous and consequentially assumptive use of terminology. Without agreed upon definitions, many local stakeholders can be excluded from humanitarian practices, effectively narrowing the scope and mobility of localisation efforts (ICVA, 2019). The ambiguous and varied use of 'localisation' within humanitarian practice literature results in an overwhelmingly dichotomous lens being cast onto the 'local' and equally, the 'international'—a contradiction that doesn't account for a multitude of other actors that don't easily fit within these two binary categories (Roepstorff, 2020; Mac Ginty, 2015).

---

***The ambiguous and varied use of 'localisation' within humanitarian practice literature results in an overwhelmingly dichotomous lens being cast onto the 'local' and equally, the 'international'—a contradiction that doesn't account for a multitude of other actors that don't easily fit within these two binary categories***

---

When talking about local actors, it is important to understand what is meant by the term 'local' in a humanitarian context. In 2018, the Inter Agency Standing Committee (IASC) worked alongside Grand Bargain

signatories and a network of Global North and South actors to create a 'localisation marker' and decide what constitutes a local and national actor. This localisation marker was designed to be used for measuring global localisation outcomes. The resulting definition of local non-state actors includes local and national NGOs, civil society organisations, national Red Cross/Crescent Societies, and private sector for-profit organisations (IASC, 2018). These broad subcategories outline which nonstate actors qualify as part of the 'local' in the eye of the international majority, but fail to distinguish any priority as to how the share of localisation funding should be divided between differing local and national actors. Both the Grand Bargain and the localisation marker also fail to recognise the nuanced and complex translocal and transcultural dynamics that exist within local humanitarian practice (Roepstorff, 2020; IASC, 2018; IASC, 2016). These dynamics are important to consider within both humanitarian policy and practice, as the current binary construction of the local and the international risks the recreation of historic power imbalances and stereotypes within humanitarian action (Melis and Apthorpe, 2020).

One subcategory of the IASC's definition of local non state actors that is oversimplified and requires further examination is the subcategory of 'civil society organisations' (IASC, 2018). Although much has been published on the legitimacy and effectiveness of civil society, little attention is paid to what makes up the civil society or what constitutes a civil society organisation, ultimately leaving the definitions and uses of these terms open to interpretation (Tjahja et al., 2021, p1). Civil society's broad membership has been stated to include but is not limited to: community-based organisations, NGOs, social movements, nonsecular groups, local initiatives and grassroots organisations operating in the public sphere outside the market and the state (Tjahja et al., 2021, p4; WEF, 2013; Publications Office of the European Union, 2022). All these groups offer their own unique strengths and benefits to broader society, contribute to its functioning and risk being overlooked if not explicitly referred to within social policy and practice literature (WEF, 2013), but it is the latter with which this study is most concerned. Grassroots organisations (GROs) function across multiple sectors, including the humanitarian sector, and offer a particular point of interest in the dynamics that exist at the intersection of grassroots action, humanitarian work and broader society, especially when considered within localisation discourse.

### Aims and objectives of the study

In taking these ideas on board, this paper asks—to what extent do current concepts of localisation consider the grassroots? I argue that while there is limited direct consideration of grassroots because of a lack of inclusion of grassroots terminology, there is still a critical engagement with concepts relating to these types of organisations and actions.

What follows then, is an overview of the concept of 'grassroots' in the humanitarian context, after which the methodology for a scoping review of the academic localisation discourse is outlined to identify key theories, concepts and research gaps (Grimshaw, 2020) and consider how the 'grassroots' concept is used, discussed and studied within literature (Peters et al., 2020).

This paper then provides a brief overview of recent academic humanitarian localisation literature and explores to what extent this literature considers grassroots, using an inclusion criterion to identify which data is extracted and how. The results are summarised and discussed in depth, along with a discussion of the various implications for further research and practice that are associated with this review.

### What does grassroots mean in the humanitarian, aid and development space?

'Grassroots' is a concept that exists within many aspects of society and across different sectors. 'Grassroots organisation' (GRO) refers to individuals associating through mostly voluntary and not-for-profit work, pursuing common interests and often formed by activists within social movements (Flores & Samuel, 2019). Grassroots action is often linked closely to local concerns and communities, as motivation generally comes from the desire to improve the current physical, cultural, economic and social wellbeing of individuals' families, communities and societies. While there are many conceptions of what constitutes grassroots, grassroots associations usually gain members from the communities that they wish to help and within which they function (Chowdhury et al., 2021).

There is a wide range of terminology used to refer to grassroots movements within humanitarian, development and wider political literature. Some of these include: GRO, grassroots movement, new social movement, citizen initiatives, small-scale civil society actors, micro movements, demotic humanitarianism, volunteer humanitarianism and informal humanitarianism. This diverse use of terminologies referring to the grassroots within various theoretical backgrounds leaves the literature specifically related to 'grassroots' fragmented and disjointed (Fechter and Schwittay, 2019).

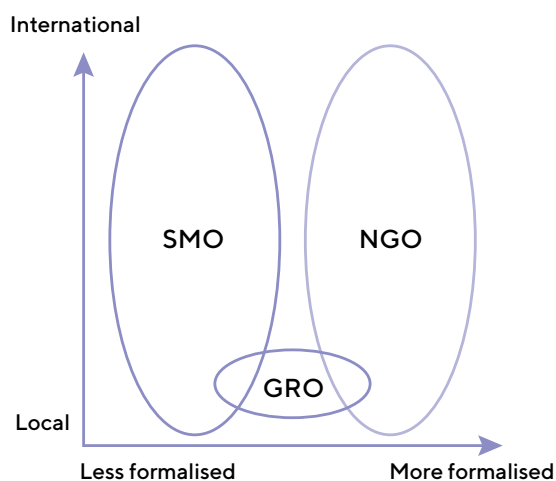
**[The] diverse use of terminologies referring to the grassroots within various theoretical backgrounds leaves the literature specifically related to 'grassroots' fragmented and disjointed.**

It has also been contended that some of the terminologies used to refer to grassroots are misused, such as the use of

'new social movement', 'civil initiative' and 'NGO' (Pattnaik & Panda, 2005; Vandevordt, 2019). This is important to note, as even though a GRO may exist within one or all of these categories, it is the specific characteristics relating to the nature of grassroots that sets GROs apart from other distinct forms of association, therefore necessitating an explicit distinction when discussing these groups (Chowdhury et al., 2021). This distinction of GROs as separate from other civil associations allows for a deeper investigation into the grassroots and the dynamics that exist within grassroots initiatives and between GROs and other civil, state or international initiatives.

Chowdhury et al. (2021) construct a visual framework for understanding the distinction between GROs, NGOs and social movement organisations (SMOs), the two types of civil initiatives in which GROs are often grouped (see Figure 1). The distinction is made with the use of two key characteristics of GROs, namely locality and moderate formality.

**Figure 1. Comparison of Social Movement Organisations (SMOs), Non-government Organisations (NGOs) and Grassroots Organisations (GROs)**



Source: Chowdhury et al. 2021: p424

The notion of locality is central to grassroots. As the name suggests, grassroots is often understood to encompass one of the fundamental building blocks of society—that is, regular people. It is often through dissatisfaction with the status quo that these regular local people associate (Fechter & Schwittay, 2019). This means that GROs are generally driven by a shared, locally specific mission created through common dissatisfaction, and guided by the core values and interests of the members through their shared locality (Chowdhury, 2013). In contrast with this, SMOs usually address larger societal issues across multiple organisations, and NGOs tend to be more driven by policies which pertain to broader groups of people across multiple localities (Chowdhury et al., 2021). However, with greater globalisation and increasing social technologies, the characteristic of locality in relation to

grassroots has evolved to now include more complex relational networks that extend beyond a single place, embracing local and translocal relationships of solidarity (Roepstorff, 2020; Fechter & Schwittay, 2019; Dunn & Kaliszewska, 2023).

Central to the achievement of the usually very specific goals of GROs, is the need for moderate formality in order to maintain a strong internal democracy, uphold independence and autonomy from other networks, and avoid bureaucracy (Chowdhury et al., 2021). This moderate level of formality is perceived by many stakeholders to be a lack of capacity rather than a strategic choice. As a result, GROs are often excluded from meaningful discussions (Jalali, 2013). This issue of marginalisation forces GROs to construct their legitimacy as stakeholders in addressing societal issues (Van Oers et al., 2018). To maintain this legitimacy, GROs are often best placed to narrow their focus and aim at addressing much more specific problems (Brown & Kalegaonkar, 2002). Addressing narrow and specific issues requires the use of more formal processes relating to membership and objectives than that of SMOs, while still being less bureaucratic and formal than what is required of NGOs (Chowdhury et al., 2021). This characteristic of moderate formality allows GROs to carve out a space across different sectors that is uniquely strategic in its tackling of locally specific issues (Van Oers et al., 2018). GROs can over time begin to act as SMOs and transform into NGOs; it is the changing level of formality and locality of a GRO that signals this transformation (Chowdhury et al., 2021).

Separating GROs from other civil society actors through the theoretical distinction above is helpful in properly understanding GROs, however, GROs don't operate exclusively in these theoretical silos. While many GROs working in more politically charged situations will choose not to work with governments or international agencies as a form of civil disobedience or protest, there can be many benefits from collaboration between GROs and other stakeholders (Vandevoordt, 2019; McGee and Pelham, 2018; Flores and Samuel, 2019). Increased accountability, mobilisation and transparency are three key areas that highlight the strength of GROs and the benefits of collaboration between GROs and other stakeholders. Because GROs are made up of members of the community in which they are operating, they offer a unique strength to social operations in the form of citizen monitoring (Flores and Samuel, 2019; Jalali, 2013). By mobilising members of the community to collect data via interviews or observation, more frequent accountability updates on quality-of-service delivery or operation can be made. Because the information can be taken across the community for a longer period, GROs can better record systematic problems as well as smaller or individual issues relating to social action (Flores and Samuel, 2019). Campaigns that are created by or involve grassroots action, such as citizen monitoring, will be much more likely to gain higher mobility into the community and surrounding areas (Jalali, 2013). Along with the higher

rates of mobilisation, the resulting increase in local knowledge of best practice and the concurrent increase in operational expectations of social action campaigns enables GROs to demand a higher level of transparency from various operations (Flores and Samuel, 2019).

---

**Accountability, mobilisation and transparency are three key areas that highlight the strength of GROs and the benefits of collaboration between GROs and other stakeholders.**

---

## Methodology

### Inclusion Criteria

It is important that the study selection and inclusion criteria are systematic in nature, in order to ensure consistency in decision making and the possibility to replicate or repeat the review (Arksey & O'Malley, 2005). As the research question is relevant to conceptual positions on localisation, rather than works of policy or practice within the humanitarian discourse, this review only includes academic peer reviewed articles in its review. Furthermore, the studies included in this review are only articles that offer a conceptual understanding or analysis of localisation. The question is also specifically interested in current concepts of localisation. Accordingly, this review only analysed articles that were published within three years of this review being written, i.e. 2020-22. This choice was made under the rationale that the humanitarian sector is very rapidly changing, and that more recent work would account for the failure of the Grand Bargain's major goal to provide 25% of global humanitarian funding to local and national responders by 2020, as this is a very significant event within the localisation discourse (IASC, 2016; Development Initiatives, 2021).

The number of citations in each article was also considered as one of the inclusion criteria, with an inclusion of articles with 20 citations and above. This preference for higher citations ensures articles have a high level of influence within the localisation discourse (Teplitskiy et al., 2022). It should be noted that the time and scope restraints of this review greatly limited the amount of data that was analysed and affected how generalisable the findings will be. This review aimed to accommodate these limitations by selecting the most influential articles, but there are also many articles with less than 20 citations that are very influential and significant to humanitarian reform. As such, this review aims to serve as a glimpse into the localisation discourse. It should also be noted that this review only included articles that were written in English.

## Search Strategy

The three sources that were used to find suitable studies to answer the research question are the online databases EBSCOHOST and Google Scholar, and the bibliographies and reference lists of significant relevant peer reviewed and grey literature. Searches were performed through a key phrase search on both online databases: “local OR localisation OR localization” AND “humanitarian OR humanitarianism”. The articles from these searches that included the key phrases in their titles and were published between 2020-22 were flagged for further inspection. A citation search was also used, in which the lists of significant and relevant articles’ citations were searched, flagging the articles in this list with titles that included the key phrases used in the key phrase search. The bibliographies and reference lists of significant, relevant and recent peer review literature (flagged in previous searches) and grey literature were also searched, with articles that included the key phrases in their title being flagged for further inspection. Once this list of articles was narrowed, further inclusion criteria were applied, which included the reading of abstracts of the articles to assess whether they offered a conceptual understanding or analysis of localisation.

## Data extraction

The articles that were chosen were then analysed for data specific to the research question and any instance of direct or indirect consideration of ‘grassroots’ was recorded. Direct consideration was taken to be any use of the terms: grassroots, grassroots organisation, grassroots movement, grassroots aid, volunteer groups, citizen initiative, citizen aid, micro movement, demotic humanitarianism, demotic humanitarian, demotic aid, everyday humanitarianism, and everyday humanitarian. Indirect consideration was understood to be the description of key characteristics of GROs, as outlined in the literature review, without directly naming them. These key characteristics included: locality, moderate formality, specific/narrow goals and low resources. It should be noted that because there isn’t a unified description of grassroots, this analysis considered the description of concepts similar enough to, but not the same as, this review’s depiction of grassroots as a consideration of grassroots.

## Limitations

The restrictive inclusion criteria (papers published between 2020-23 with at least 20 citations) combined with journal publication lag times (including the time required for papers doing the citing to be published), means that not all relevant papers published during the study period were necessarily captured in this review. The resultingly small sample size limits understanding of the breadth of the localisation discourse and its consideration of grassroots and is better placed as a review of only the most influential current concepts of localisation and the extent to which they consider grassroots. Because of this, the findings of this review are not easily generalised across a larger humanitarian discourse. Furthermore, as the

humanitarian landscape and literature are very broad and rapidly changing, many more articles that were excluded from this review’s narrow inclusion criteria could offer significant value on this subject. There is space, therefore, for a broader review of the consideration of grassroots within the localisation literature in the form of a scoping review with a greater sample size or a systematic review.

## Results

Given the above parameters and limitations, three articles were chosen for the scoping review:

- Roepstorff, K. (2020). ‘A call for critical reflection on the localisation agenda in humanitarian action’, *Third World Quarterly*, 41(2):284-301, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01436597.2019.1644160>
- Barakat, S. and Milton, S. (2020). ‘Localisation across the humanitarian-development-peace nexus’, *Journal of Peacebuilding & Development*, 15(2):147-163, DOI: 10.1177/1542316620922805
- Pincock, K., Betts, A. and Easton-Calabria, E. (2021). ‘The rhetoric and reality of localisation: refugee-led organisations in humanitarian governance’, *The Journal of Development Studies*, 57(5):719-734, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00220388.2020.1802010>

Each article offers a different critical analysis of localisation, and considers the concept of ‘grassroots’ to varying levels. While Roepstorff (2020) and Barakat and Milton (2020) both use language that directly references grassroots, there is minimal effort to unpack the concept. In saying this, Roepstorff (2020) critically engages with concepts relating to grassroots, offering a meaningful indirect consideration of the term. In contrast, Pincock et al. (2021) offer a direct and critical engagement with the concept of grassroots through the analysis of refugee led organisations within the humanitarian system.

Written in 2020, Roepstorff’s ‘A call for critical reflection on the localisation agenda in humanitarian action’ deconstructs the movement towards localisation and examines the dynamics that exist between actors that are often constructed as binary opposites—such as local and international. There is limited consideration of any specifically grassroots actions or groups, with the closest mention being the use of “ad hoc volunteer groups” in a discussion of crisis first responders (Roepstorff, 2020, p284, p287). While this is an important consideration, as it outlines the centrality of volunteers within the humanitarian response, the use of “ad hoc volunteer groups” without further examination leaves the meaning of this term unclear. The label “civil society” is also used throughout the article. This can be considered as a bucket term in which GROs are included, but as there are many varied members of and interpretations of ‘civil society’, it is too broad and vague to consider it a direct consideration of GROs and their actions.



While an explicit consideration of grassroots in the article is limited, Roepstorff does critically engage with concepts that relate to grassroots. She states that there is a tendency to construct the local as being inherently authentic and legitimate, which “circumvents the need to critically assess who the local represents” (Roepstorff, 2020, p291). This concept of a romanticised, amorphous ‘local’ offers an explanation to why various actors, including GROS, are often overlooked in humanitarian academia. Roepstorff also interacts with grassroots concepts in her consideration of the emerging transnational, translocal and transcultural relationships that exist as part of the local within the humanitarian space (Roepstorff, 2020, p285). Her analysis points to the limiting nature of conceptualising grassroots action as only existing within a certain locality.

---

***This concept of a romanticised, amorphous ‘local’ offers an explanation to why various actors, including GROS, are often overlooked in humanitarian academia.***

---

In contrast to Roepstorff’s article, Barakat and Milton’s ‘Localisation across the humanitarian–development–peace nexus’ has more specific references to ‘grassroots’, with four direct uses of the term. However, although there are direct references to grassroots, there are no attempts to consider and interact with any of the concepts that surround the term. Barakat and Milton’s article analyses localisation across the three theoretical backgrounds that make up the ‘triple nexus’—humanitarianism, development and peacebuilding. While this article considers community level grassroots capacity and the challenges that the Arab region has in identifying this capacity, there is no discussion of why it is important to identify such a capacity (Barakat and Milton, 2020, p148). Further mentions of grassroots are made in the article’s outline of the history of development and peacebuilding, as an example of a bottom-up alternative to the Washington consensus in the 1990s (Barakat and Milton, 2020, p150). It seems then, that although grassroots is given a certain level of direct consideration within Barakat and Milton’s article, closer scrutiny reveals that ‘grassroots’ is not explored in a particularly meaningful sense. The article lacks an in-depth explanation or analysis of grassroots and the role that it plays within conflict response. The section of the article that more closely analyses humanitarian action in the conflict response also presents a limited understanding of the dynamics of a humanitarian response. In Barakat and Milton’s description, the only non-international non-state actors that are acknowledged to take part in a crisis response are NGOs (Barakat and Milton, 2020, p149). This failure to consider the different types of actors that take part in a crisis response—including nonsecular groups, community

groups and GROs—overlooks and actively excludes such actors from humanitarian discourse.

The final article analysed as part of this scoping review interacts much more significantly with concepts relating to grassroots. Pincock et al.’s 2021 article ‘The rhetoric and reality of localisation: refugee-led organisations in humanitarian governance’ directly analyses grassroots through the exploration of refugee-led organisations (RLOs) in Kampala, Uganda. The result of this exploration is a conceptual bottom up understanding of localisation that is driven by RLOs. The paper explores the RLOs striving for legitimacy by fostering transnational and transcultural relationships and their bypassing of the national level of humanitarian governance. Although there is only one direct use of the term ‘grassroots’, the concept of RLOs is taken to be a direct consideration of grassroots (Pincock et al., 2021, p725).

While RLOs fit the previously stated definition of grassroots, in Uganda many of these organisations register themselves as NGOs because of a desire to partner with INGOs and UN bodies and the country’s relatively easy process to legally register (Pincock et al., 2021, p720). Alongside this desire for partnership and the funding that comes with it, Pincock et al. outline the RLOs push to become increasingly formalised, culminating with the creation of the Refugee Led Organisation Network (RELON). By founding this network, Uganda’s refugee led grassroots action groups are moving away from narrow conceptions of grassroots by tackling broader goals, becoming more formalised and widening the definition of locality, resulting in a ‘grassroots’ movement that encompasses the broader translocal, transnational and transcultural definitions of Roepstorff’s critical localism (Roepstorff, 2020).

By understanding Uganda’s GROs as groups that are already filling key gaps and finding legitimacy by establishing transnational connections that bypass restrictive national humanitarian governance, and in finding ways to establish themselves as important actors in humanitarian responses despite a marginalising environment, Pincock et al. contend that RLOs succeed “in spite of, rather than because of, the formal humanitarian system” (Pincock et al., 2021, p721).

## Discussion

These articles all discuss different aspects of humanitarian response and how concepts of localisation function within humanitarianism. The consideration of grassroots varies greatly between each piece, although the direct use of the term ‘grassroots’ is limited across all three. When the term is mentioned, there is no effort to define or explicate the concept. This lack of definition leaves the concept open to interpretation and fails to contribute to axiological discussion specific to grassroots in localisation. While concepts relating to grassroots can be explored without needing to use specific terminology, this may limit



the unification of a larger and specifically 'grassroots' discourse. There also seems to be a tendency (perhaps in the interest of brevity), to use broad terminology when describing large groups of actors (Roepstorff, 2020, p291; Barakat and Milton, 2020, p149).

While the use of terms such as 'NGO' and 'civil society' do encapsulate a large array of actors in a concise and simple way, they can be problematic when used self-evidently. Grassroots groups can be understood to exist in both categories but, as previously mentioned, their unique characteristics require explicit distinction within literature, and failing to do so risks overlooking grassroots actors as distinct stakeholders in humanitarian response (Chowdhury et al., 2021).

While specific grassroots terminology is inadequately explored in these articles, discussion of related terms and ideas offers important critical engagement with the concept. All the articles offer a similar critique of the common approach to localisation that creates a binary distinction between the local and the opposing international, arguing that it is not reflective of the true dynamics of humanitarian response (Roepstorff, 2020; Barakat and Milton, 2020; Pincock et al., 2021). This tendency to construct the local as inherently authentic, legitimate and parochial is counterintuitive to critical engagement with what constitutes local and who is represented by the local (Roepstorff, 2020; Barakat and Milton, 2020). A binary definition of local is also not reflective of local actors. As Pincock et al. show, the grassroots actions of RLOs in Uganda foster complex transnational and transcultural connections in order to achieve their complex goals (Pincock et al., 2021). This emerging concept of larger and more complex transnational, translocal and transcultural dynamics within which local actors exist, is alluded to and explored across all three articles (Barakat and Milton, 2020, p154; Pincock et al., 2021, p721; Roepstorff, 2020, p291). When applied to local grassroots actors, this more dynamic concept of 'local' challenges common conceptions of grassroots as being bound by locality and specific goals (Chowdhury et al., 2021; Van Oers et al., 2018). These transnational, translocal and transcultural grassroots dynamics can be seen in the actions taken by RLOs in Kampala (Pincock et al., 2021), as well as in the context of the European refugee crisis in 'The Jungle' refugee camp in Calais and in response to the influx of refugees from the war in Ukraine (Fechter and Schwittay, 2019; Dunn and Kaliszewska, 2023).

## Conclusion

Expanding the understanding of grassroots beyond traditional notions tied to locality and parochiality will better reflect the grassroots action that is seen today (Pincock et al., 2021; Fechter and Shwittay, 2019; Dunn and Kaliszewska, 2023). This more dynamic and globalised view of grassroots could be seen as a truly locally driven alternative to current attempts to 'localise', which are overwhelmingly top-down and hold a limiting and limited understanding of local actors.

---

***More dynamic and globalised view[s] of grassroots could be seen as a truly locally driven alternative to current attempts to 'localise', which are overwhelmingly top-down and hold a limiting and limited understanding of local actors.***

---

Further research on this topic, such as a larger-scale scoping review or systematic review, would help examine the extent to which grassroots is considered within the localisation literature. It could also tackle the implications of inherently political grassroots actors taking part in humanitarian action and what that means for the humanitarian principles of neutrality, impartiality and independence, as well as the possibly artificial divisions between grassroots driven and implemented humanitarian responses and grassroots development work.

Understanding and acknowledging grassroots actors as distinct stakeholders in humanitarian response is crucial for promoting inclusivity, local empowerment, and effective localisation efforts. Not only will localisation efforts become more successful, but by acknowledging and incorporating the unique strengths of grassroots actors, humanitarian leadership itself will become more effective, complementary, and context driven. As the humanitarian landscape is forever changing, humanitarian leadership needs to grow to incorporate new understandings of humanitarian stakeholders and response mechanisms. By critically engaging with grassroots concepts and challenging existing frameworks, humanitarian leaders can foster more meaningful partnerships and enhance the transformative potential of localisation in addressing humanitarian crises.

## References

- Arksey, H. and O'Malley, L. (2005). 'Scoping studies: towards a methodological framework', *International Journal of Social Research Methodology*, 8(1):19-32, DOI: 10.1080/1364557032000119616
- Baguios, A., King, M., Martins, A. and Pinnington, R. (2021). *Are we there yet? Localisation as the journey towards locally led practice: models, approaches and challenges*, Overseas Development Institute, accessed 15 April 2023.
- Barakat, S. and Milton, S. (2020). 'Localisation across the humanitarian-development-peace nexus', *Journal of Peacebuilding & Development*, 15(2):147-163, DOI: 10.1177/1542316620922805
- Barbelet, V., Davies, G., Flint, J. and Davey, E. (2021), *Interrogating the evidence base on humanitarian localisation*, Overseas Development Institute, accessed 16 April 2023.
- Bond. (2021). *Catalysing locally led development in the UK aid system*, Bond.org.uk, accessed 10 April 2023.
- Brown, L. D. and Kalegaonkar, A. (2002). 'Support organizations and the evolution of the NGO sector', *Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Quarterly*, 31(2):231-258, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0899764002312004>
- Chowdhury, R. (2013). 'Reconceptualizing the dynamics of the relationship between marginalized stakeholders and multinational firms' [PhD thesis], University of Cambridge, Cambridge, accessed 26 April 2023.
- Chowdhury, R., Kourula, A. and Siltaoja, M. (2021). 'Power of paradox: grassroots organisations' legitimacy strategies over time', *Business & Society*, 60(2):420-453, DOI: 10.1177/0007650318816954
- Development Initiatives. (2021). *Global humanitarian assistance report 2021*, Development Initiatives, accessed 15 April 2023.
- (2022). *Global humanitarian assistance report 2022*, Development Initiatives, accessed 15 April 2023.
- Dunn, E. C. and Kaliszewska, I. (2023). 'Distributed humanitarianism: volunteerism and aid to refugees during the Russian invasion of Ukraine', *American Ethnologist*, 50(1):19-29, <https://doi.org/10.1111/amet.13138>
- Fechter, A. M. and Schwittay. (2019). 'Citizen aid: grassroots interventions in development and humanitarianism', *Third World Quarterly*, 40(10):1769-1780, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01436597.2019.1656062>
- Flores, W. and Samuel, J. (2019). 'Grassroots organisations and the sustainable development goals: no one left behind?', *The BMJ*, 365, article no. 12269, doi: 10.1136/bmj.12269
- Grimshaw, J. (2020), *A guide to knowledge synthesis: a knowledge synthesis chapter*, Canadian Institute of Health Research, accessed 1 May 2023.
- Inter Agency Standing Committee. (2016). *The grand bargain: a shared commitment to better serve people in need*, IASC, accessed 10 April 2023.
- (2018). *Localisation marker definitions paper*, IASC, accessed 10 April 2023.
- International Council of Voluntary Agencies and HLA. (2019). *Unpacking Localization*, ICVA, accessed 15 April 2023.
- Jalali, R. (2013). 'Financing empowerment? How foreign aid to southern NGOs and social movements undermines grass-roots mobilization', *Sociology Compass*, 7(1):55-73, DOI: 10.1111/soc4.12007
- Mac Ginty, R. (2015), 'Where is the local? Critical localism and peacebuilding', *Third World Quarterly*, 36(5):840-856, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01436597.2015.1045482>
- McGee, D. and Pelham, J. (2018). 'Politics at play: locating human rights, refugees and grassroots humanitarianism in the Calais Jungle', *Leisure Studies*, 37(1):22-35, <https://doi.org/10.1080/02614367.2017.1406979>
- Melis, S. and Aporthe, R. (2020), 'The politics of the multi-local in disaster governance', *Politics and Governance*, 8(4):366-374, DOI: 10.17645/pag.v8i4.3174
- Pattnaik, B. K. and Panda, B. (2005). 'Perceiving the role of grassroots NGOs: from the new social movement perspective', *Social Change*, 35(3):1-24, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0049085705035003>
- Peters, M. D. J., Marnie, C., Tricco, A. C., Pollock, D., Munn, Z., Alexander, L., McInerney, P., Godfrey, C. M. and Khalil, H. (2020), 'Updated methodological guidance for the conduct of scoping reviews', *JBI Evidence Synthesis*, 18(10):2119-2126, doi: 10.11124/JBIES-20-00167.
- Pincock, K., Betts, A. and Easton-Calabria, E. (2021). 'The rhetoric and reality of localisation: refugee-led organisations in humanitarian governance', *The Journal of Development Studies*, 57(5):719-734, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00220388.2020.1802010>
- Publications Office of the European Union. (2022). *Civil society organisation*, EUR-Lex, accessed 26 April 2023.

Roepstorff, K. (2020). 'A call for critical reflection on the localisation agenda in humanitarian action', *Third World Quarterly*, 41(2):284-301, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01436597.2019.1644160>

Teplitskiy, M., Duede, E., Menietti, M. and Lakhani, K. R. (2022). 'How status of research papers affects the way they are read and cited', *Research Policy*, 51:4, article no. 104484, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.respol.2022.104484>

Tjahja, N., Meyer, T. and Shahin, J. (2021). 'What is civil society and who represents civil society at the IGF? An analysis of civil society typologies in internet governance', *Telecommunications Policy*, 45(6), article no. 102141, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.telpol.2021.102141>

United Nations. (2016). *One humanity: shared responsibility - report of the secretary-general for the world humanitarian summit (A/70/709)*, United Nations, accessed 5 April 2023.

Vandevoordt, R. (2019). 'Subversive humanitarianism: rethinking refugee solidarity through grass-roots initiatives', *Refugee Survey Quarterly*, 38(3):245-265, <https://doi.org/10.1093/rsq/hdz008>

Van Oers, L. M., Boon, W. P. C. and Moors, E. H. M. (2018). 'The creation of legitimacy in grassroots organisations: a study of Dutch community-supported agriculture', *Environmental Innovation and Societal Transitions*, 29:55-67, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.eist.2018.04.002>

World Economic Forum. (2013). *The future role of civil society*, WEF, accessed 20 April 2023.

This publication is made possible with the generous support of the American people through the United States Agency for International Development (USAID). The contents are the responsibility of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the views of USAID or the United States Government.

