Regional Dialogue Cafe Narrative Report

Regional Dialogue Café on Localization

North Region of Afghanistan

Theme

Strengthening Local Leadership, Building Trust, and Advancing Localization with Stability in Afghanistan

Citizen Organization for Advocacy and Resilience (COAR)

Activity Title	Two-day Regional Dialogue Cafe
Organization – Afghanistan Localization Lab Convener	Citizen Organization for Advocacy and Resilience (COAR)
Date	15 - 16 June 2026
Location	North Zone (Mazar-e-Sharif City) – Samir Walid Hotel
Prepared by:	Baz Halim Shinwari, Dialogue Specialist

Balkh, Afghanistan

Participants

The Regional Dialogue Cafe brought together representatives from national and international organizations, government institutions, and local communities. A total of 47 participants attended the event, including:

S/NO	Organization/Institution Category	Number of Participants
1	INGO	3
2	NGO	20
3	UN Agencies	3
4	Government Officials	7
5	Women-Led Organizations	7
6	Formal/Informal CBO + CSO	12

A total of 52 participants attended the event, including 40 male and 12 female participants.

1. Executive Summary

The Citizen Organization for Advocacy and Resilience (COAR), through the Afghanistan Localization Lab (ALL) and with financial support from the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC), successfully organized a two-day Regional Dialogue Café on Localization under the theme "Strengthening Local Leadership, Building Trust, and Advancing Sustainable Localization in Afghanistan." The event was held on 15–16 July 2026 at Sameer Walid Hotel, Mazar-e-Sharif, Balkh Province.

The Regional Dialogue Café brought together 52 representatives from six provinces in the Northern Region, including 40 male and 12 female participants, representing government institutions, United Nations agencies, international NGOs, national NGOs, local NGOs, women-led organizations, community-based organizations, civil society organizations, and community leaders.

The Dialogue Café was designed as a participatory platform where humanitarian and development actors could jointly reflect on the progress, challenges, and future direction of localization in Afghanistan. Through technical presentations, facilitated group discussions, and open dialogue, participants examined practical ways of strengthening local leadership, improving trust among humanitarian actors, promoting equitable partnerships, and identifying concrete actions that can accelerate the localization agenda in northern Afghanistan.

The first day focused on establishing a common understanding of localization by exploring its global evolution, the outcomes of the 2016 World Humanitarian Summit, the Grand Bargain commitments, and the rationale for localization within the Afghan context. Participants were also introduced to the work of the NEAR Network, the Afghanistan Localization Lab (ALL), and the Civil Society Empowerment Network (CEN), while representatives from ACBAR and Save the Children International shared organizational experiences and strategic approaches to advancing localization.

The second day concentrated on practical solutions. Through structured group discussions, participants analyzed the barriers preventing effective localization, proposed measures to strengthen the leadership role of Afghan organizations, and identified priority actions that should be implemented over the next one to two years. These discussions culminated in an open dialogue where participants openly shared institutional experiences, operational challenges, and recommendations for improving collaboration among government institutions, donors, UN agencies, INGOs, national NGOs, local NGOs, and community representatives.

The Dialogue Café demonstrated a strong consensus among participants that localization should no longer be viewed solely as the transfer of financial resources but rather as a comprehensive process involving the transfer of leadership, decision-making authority, institutional trust, and equitable partnership. Participants emphasized that sustainable humanitarian and development outcomes in Afghanistan depend on empowering Afghan institutions to assume greater responsibility for designing, implementing, and leading humanitarian responses.

The event concluded with participants reaffirming their commitment to strengthening collaboration, promoting direct funding opportunities for Afghan organizations, enhancing institutional capacities, and establishing regular regional dialogue platforms to monitor progress on localization.

2. Background

Localization has emerged as one of the most significant reforms within the global humanitarian system during the past decade. Experiences from major humanitarian emergencies—including the 2004 Indian Ocean Tsunami, the 2010 Haiti Earthquake, the Pakistan Floods, the Nepal Earthquake, and the Syria crisis—demonstrated that although international assistance mobilized substantial financial resources, local organizations and affected communities consistently played the most immediate and effective role in responding to humanitarian crises.

These experiences highlighted important weaknesses within the traditional humanitarian architecture. International organizations often faced delays in accessing affected communities due to logistical, administrative, security, and coordination challenges, while local organizations remained present before, during, and after emergencies. Despite their critical role, local actors frequently had limited access to funding, leadership opportunities, and strategic decision-making processes.

Recognizing these challenges, the international community adopted the localization agenda during the World Humanitarian Summit (WHS) held in Istanbul, Türkiye, in 2016. One of the Summit's landmark outcomes was the Grand Bargain, a global commitment aimed at making humanitarian assistance more efficient, transparent, and locally led. Central to the Grand Bargain is the commitment to increase direct funding to local and national actors, promote equitable partnerships, strengthen local institutional capacities, and ensure that decisions affecting crisis-affected populations are increasingly made by organizations closest to those communities.

Within Afghanistan, localization has become even more relevant given the country's protracted humanitarian crisis, changing political environment, shrinking international presence, and increasing reliance on Afghan institutions to deliver humanitarian and development assistance. Afghan organizations possess extensive contextual knowledge, longstanding community relationships, cultural understanding, and operational access that position them as indispensable actors in humanitarian response. However, these organizations continue to face structural challenges, including limited direct funding, unequal partnerships, administrative constraints, and insufficient participation in strategic coordination and decision-making processes.

Recognizing these realities, the Citizen Organization for Advocacy and Resilience (COAR), through the Afghanistan Localization Lab (ALL), organized a series of Regional Dialogue Cafés across Afghanistan to promote constructive dialogue among humanitarian stakeholders and develop practical, region-specific recommendations for advancing localization. The Northern Region Dialogue Café represented the second event in this national dialogue series and served as an important platform for bringing together government institutions, humanitarian organizations, civil society, women-led organizations, and community representatives to collectively examine the current state of localization and identify practical pathways for strengthening locally led humanitarian action in northern Afghanistan.

2.1. About the Citizen Organization for Advocacy and Resilience (COAR)

The Citizen Organization for Advocacy and Resilience (COAR) is a national, non-governmental, non-profit humanitarian and development organization committed to improving the lives and resilience of vulnerable communities across Afghanistan. COAR works in close partnership with government institutions, local communities, civil society organizations, international partners, and donors to design and implement sustainable, community-driven interventions that address both immediate humanitarian needs and long-term development priorities.

Since its establishment, COAR has implemented a diverse portfolio of programs in sectors including humanitarian response, education, livelihoods, food security, community resilience, social cohesion, governance, and capacity development. Guided by the principles of participation, accountability, inclusion, transparency, and local ownership, COAR places communities at the center of planning, implementation, monitoring, and decision-making processes.

Recognizing that sustainable development and effective humanitarian action can only be achieved through strong local leadership, COAR has positioned localization as one of its strategic priorities. The organization actively promotes equitable partnerships between local and international actors while advocating for increased recognition, capacity strengthening, and direct financing for Afghan organizations. Through evidence-based advocacy, knowledge sharing, networking, and collaborative learning platforms, COAR contributes to strengthening the role of Afghan institutions in leading humanitarian and development responses.

As the convener of the Afghanistan Localization Lab (ALL) under the global NEAR Localization Labs initiative, COAR plays a leading role in advancing the localization agenda in Afghanistan. In collaboration with the Civil Society Empowerment Network (CEN) and with financial support from the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC), COAR facilitates multi-stakeholder dialogue, conducts research and capacity assessments, supports innovation and learning, and advocates for policy and practice that enable locally led action.

The organization has successfully developed a range of localization tools, guidance materials, capacity-building initiatives, and regional dialogue platforms that bring together government institutions, United Nations agencies, international NGOs, national NGOs, women-led organizations, community-based organizations, academia, and community representatives. These initiatives aim to strengthen mutual trust, improve collaboration, identify systemic barriers, and develop practical solutions for advancing localization across Afghanistan.

The Regional Dialogue Café Series is one of COAR's flagship initiatives under the Afghanistan Localization Lab. Through these regional forums, COAR creates inclusive spaces where humanitarian and development stakeholders can openly exchange experiences, discuss challenges, identify opportunities, and jointly develop practical recommendations to strengthen local leadership and promote sustainable localization. The Northern Region Dialogue Café in Mazar-e-Sharif represents the second regional event in this nationwide series and reflects COAR's continued commitment to fostering collaboration, trust-building, and locally led humanitarian action throughout Afghanistan.

2.2. About the Afghanistan Localization Lab (ALL)

The Afghanistan Localization Lab (ALL) is a collaborative, multi-stakeholder platform established to advance the localization agenda in Afghanistan by promoting locally led humanitarian and development action. As part of the global NEAR Localization Labs initiative, ALL serves as a national platform that brings together local and national civil society organizations, government institutions, international partners, donors, United Nations agencies, academia, and community representatives to strengthen local leadership, build trust, and foster equitable partnerships.

The Afghanistan Localization Lab is convened by the Citizen Organization for Advocacy and Resilience (COAR) in partnership with the Civil Society Empowerment Network (CEN), with financial

support from the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC). It operates on the principle that sustainable humanitarian and development outcomes can only be achieved when Afghan organizations and communities are empowered to lead decision-making, planning, implementation, monitoring, and accountability processes.

The overarching goal of ALL is to create an enabling environment in which Afghan organizations play a central role in shaping and leading humanitarian and development responses. Rather than focusing solely on increasing direct funding, the Lab promotes localization as a broader transformation that encompasses local leadership, equitable partnerships, institutional trust, shared decision-making, and strengthened organizational capacity.

To achieve this vision, the Afghanistan Localization Lab works through four strategic pillars:

3. Objectives of the Regional Dialogue Café

The Regional Dialogue Café on Localization was organized to provide an inclusive and collaborative platform for humanitarian and development stakeholders in Afghanistan's Northern Region to engage in meaningful dialogue on advancing the localization agenda. The event sought to strengthen partnerships, build trust among key actors, and identify practical, region-specific solutions for promoting locally led humanitarian action.

The specific objectives of the Dialogue Café were as follows:

4.1 Enhance Understanding of Localization

To improve participants' understanding of the localization agenda by introducing its global evolution, key principles, and international commitments, including the outcomes of the 2016 World Humanitarian Summit (WHS) and the Grand Bargain. The Dialogue also aimed to strengthen participants' understanding of localization as a process that goes beyond financial transfers to include local leadership, decision-making authority, equitable partnerships, and institutional trust.

4.2 Strengthen Local Leadership

To promote the leadership role of Afghan local and national organizations in humanitarian and development programming by encouraging greater participation in planning, decision-making, implementation, monitoring, and accountability mechanisms. The Dialogue emphasized the importance of recognizing local organizations as strategic partners capable of leading effective and sustainable responses.

4.3 Build Trust and Strengthen Partnerships

To create a safe and inclusive space where government institutions, United Nations agencies, international NGOs, national NGOs, local NGOs, women-led organizations, community-based

organizations, civil society representatives, and community leaders could openly exchange perspectives, strengthen mutual trust, and foster more equitable and collaborative partnerships.

4.4 Identify Barriers to Effective Localization

To facilitate participatory discussions aimed at identifying the key challenges and structural barriers affecting the implementation of localization in the Northern Region. Participants were encouraged to share their experiences and perspectives on issues related to funding, coordination, institutional capacity, policy, partnership practices, and access to decision-making processes.

4.5 Develop Practical and Context-Specific Recommendations

To generate practical, evidence-based recommendations for strengthening localization in the Northern Region. Through facilitated group discussions and plenary sessions, participants identified priority actions that humanitarian and development actors, government institutions, donors, UN agencies, and civil society organizations could undertake to advance localization over the next one to two years.

4.6 Promote Learning and Knowledge Sharing

To provide an opportunity for humanitarian and development actors to share experiences, good practices, innovative approaches, and lessons learned related to localization. The Dialogue encouraged peer learning by highlighting successful initiatives implemented by organizations working at community, provincial, and national levels.

4.7 Strengthen Coordination Among Humanitarian Stakeholders

To enhance coordination and communication among humanitarian and development actors operating in the Northern Region by promoting regular dialogue, information sharing, and collaborative planning. The Dialogue sought to encourage stronger alignment between government institutions, donors, UN agencies, international organizations, national NGOs, local organizations, and community representatives.

4.8 Introduce the Afghanistan Localization Lab (ALL)

To familiarize participants with the vision, objectives, strategic priorities, and ongoing initiatives of the Afghanistan Localization Lab (ALL), while encouraging interested organizations to engage with the platform, contribute to collective learning, and explore opportunities for collaboration and membership through the Civil Society Empowerment Network (CEN).

4.9 Contribute to National Localization Efforts

To ensure that the insights, recommendations, and priorities identified during the Regional Dialogue Café contribute to the broader national localization agenda in Afghanistan. The findings from the event will inform future advocacy, policy dialogue, capacity-strengthening initiatives, and collaborative actions led by COAR, the Afghanistan Localization Lab (ALL), and its partners.

Expected Outcomes

By the conclusion of the two-day Dialogue Café, the following outcomes were expected:

- Increased awareness and understanding of localization concepts and global commitments among participants.
- Strengthened relationships and trust among humanitarian and development stakeholders in the Northern Region.
- A shared understanding of the principal barriers to effective localization in the regional context.
- Practical recommendations and priority actions for advancing localization over the next one to two years.
- Enhanced commitment among stakeholders to promote equitable partnerships, strengthen local leadership, and support locally led humanitarian action.
- Increased awareness of the Afghanistan Localization Lab (ALL) and opportunities for collaboration through its localization initiatives.

These objectives collectively guided the design of the Dialogue Café and provided the foundation for the technical sessions, group discussions, and open dialogue that took place throughout the two-day event. The outcomes generated through this process are intended to support both regional and national efforts to strengthen localization and foster a more inclusive, effective, and sustainable humanitarian system in Afghanistan.

4. Methodology

The Regional Dialogue Café on Localization was designed using a highly participatory, inclusive, and dialogue-oriented methodology that encouraged active engagement, peer learning, knowledge sharing, and collaborative problem-solving among humanitarian and development stakeholders. Rather than relying solely on formal presentations, the methodology combined technical learning with facilitated discussions and interactive group work to ensure that participants could jointly analyze challenges, share experiences, and develop practical recommendations for advancing localization in the Northern Region.

The event was conducted over two consecutive days (15–16 July 2026) at Sameer Walid Hotel, Mazar-e-Sharif, and brought together representatives from government institutions, United Nations agencies, international NGOs, national NGOs, local NGOs, women-led organizations, community-based organizations, academia, civil society organizations, and community representatives from across the Northern Region.

The methodology consisted of the following key components:

4.1 Multi-Stakeholder Participation

The Dialogue Café adopted a multi-stakeholder approach to ensure that diverse perspectives were represented throughout the discussions. A total of 52 participants (40 men and 12 women) attended the event, representing a broad range of institutions and sectors. This diversity enriched the discussions by bringing together policy makers, humanitarian practitioners, development actors, technical specialists, community leaders, and civil society representatives to jointly explore localization challenges and opportunities.

Special attention was given to promoting inclusive participation by ensuring representation from women-led organizations, local and national NGOs, government institutions, international organizations, UN agencies, and community representatives. Participants also represented six provinces of the Northern Region, allowing for the exchange of experiences across different geographical and operational contexts.

4.2 Technical Presentations

The Dialogue Café began with a series of technical presentations that established a common understanding of localization before participants engaged in group discussions. These presentations covered:

- The concept and evolution of localization within the global humanitarian system.
- Lessons learned from major humanitarian crises that influenced humanitarian reform.
- The outcomes of the 2016 World Humanitarian Summit (WHS) and the Grand Bargain commitments.
- The importance of localization within the Afghan context.
- The role of the NEAR Network in promoting locally led humanitarian action.
- The objectives, strategic priorities, achievements, and future plans of the Afghanistan Localization Lab (ALL).
- The role of the Civil Society Empowerment Network (CEN) in strengthening Afghan civil society organizations.

- Experiences and strategic approaches shared by ACBAR and Save the Children International (SCI) through online presentations.

These presentations provided participants with a shared knowledge base and stimulated informed discussions during the interactive sessions.

4.3 Interactive Group Discussions

To maximize participation and encourage collaborative learning, participants were divided into six mixed working groups, each comprising representatives from different stakeholder categories, including government institutions, UN agencies, international NGOs, national NGOs, local NGOs, women-led organizations, and community representatives.

The composition of each group was intentionally designed to promote diversity of perspectives, strengthen dialogue among different actors, and encourage cross-sector collaboration. Female participants formed two groups while remaining fully integrated into the overall dialogue process in accordance with the event arrangements.

Each group discussed a predefined thematic question, documented its findings on flipcharts, and presented its conclusions during plenary sessions. Following each presentation, participants engaged in open discussions, allowing for clarification, feedback, and collective reflection.

4.4 Participatory Facilitation

The Dialogue Café was facilitated using participatory learning techniques that encouraged equal participation and constructive dialogue among all attendees. Facilitators guided discussions while ensuring that every participant had an opportunity to contribute their experiences, perspectives, and recommendations.

Interactive facilitation methods included:

- Guided plenary discussions;
- Small-group brainstorming sessions;
- Flipchart presentations;
- Question-and-answer sessions;
- Experience sharing;
- Open dialogue and reflection.

This participatory approach created an environment where participants could openly discuss both successes and challenges while jointly identifying practical solutions.

4.5 Group Work Themes

Three structured group work sessions formed the core of the Dialogue Café. Each session focused on a strategic question directly linked to the objectives of the event.

Group Work Session One

Topic:
"From your perspective, what are the main barriers and challenges preventing the effective implementation of localization in this region?"

Participants identified operational, institutional, financial, coordination, and policy-related barriers affecting localization in the Northern Region.

Group Work Session Two

Topic:
"What practical actions can strengthen the leadership role of local organizations in humanitarian programmes and emergency responses?"

Participants proposed strategies for strengthening local leadership, enhancing organizational capacity, improving partnerships, and increasing local participation in humanitarian coordination and decision-making.

Group Work Session Three

Topic:
"What practical steps can be taken over the next one to two years to advance localization in this region?"

This session focused on identifying realistic and actionable priorities for government institutions, donors, UN agencies, international organizations, national NGOs, local organizations, and community representatives.

4.6 Open Dialogue Session

The Dialogue Café concluded with a moderated open discussion that provided participants with an opportunity to freely share institutional experiences, operational challenges, and recommendations related to localization. Unlike the structured group work, this session encouraged participants to raise issues that extended beyond the predefined discussion topics.

Representatives from local NGOs, international NGOs, government institutions, ACBAR, sectoral departments, and community organizations contributed valuable perspectives on direct funding,

partnership models, Memoranda of Understanding (MoU) processes, organizational capacity, coordination mechanisms, and community engagement. The open dialogue enabled participants to collectively explore practical solutions and build greater mutual understanding among stakeholders.

4.7 Knowledge Assessment and Participant Feedback

To assess learning outcomes and gather participant feedback, the following tools were used:

- **Pre-Test:** Administered at the beginning of the Dialogue Café to assess participants' baseline knowledge of localization concepts.
- **Post-Test:** Conducted at the conclusion of the event to measure changes in participants' understanding and learning.
- **Participant Feedback Form:** Distributed at the end of the programme to collect participants' views on the quality, relevance, facilitation, organization, and overall effectiveness of the Dialogue Café, as well as recommendations for future events.

The findings from these assessment tools will contribute to improving future Regional Dialogue Cafés and informing the ongoing work of the Afghanistan Localization Lab (ALL).

4.8 Documentation and Reporting

Throughout the two-day event, discussions, presentations, group work findings, and participant recommendations were systematically documented by the facilitation team. Attendance records, photographs, flipchart outputs, pre- and post-test results, and participant feedback forms were collected to support comprehensive reporting and learning.

The information generated through the Dialogue Café forms the basis of this activity report and will also inform future advocacy, capacity-building initiatives, policy engagement, and regional localization efforts led by COAR and the Afghanistan Localization Lab (ALL).

Transition to the next section:
The following section presents a detailed profile of the participants, including institutional representation, provincial coverage, gender composition, and stakeholder diversity, highlighting the inclusive nature of the Regional Dialogue Café.

5. Participant Profile and Representation

5.1 Overview

The Northern Regional Dialogue Café was intentionally designed as a multi-stakeholder platform that brought together a diverse range of humanitarian and development actors working across the Northern Region of Afghanistan. In line with the objectives of the Afghanistan Localization Lab (ALL), the participant selection process aimed to ensure balanced representation from government institutions, United Nations agencies, international non-governmental organizations (INGOs), national and local NGOs, women-led organizations (WLOs), community-based organizations (CBOs), civil society organizations (CSOs), academia, and community representatives.

A total of 52 participants attended the two-day event, representing six provinces of the Northern Region. The diversity of participants created an inclusive environment for dialogue and enabled participants to exchange perspectives from different institutional, technical, and geographical contexts.

The Dialogue Café also sought to promote gender inclusion by encouraging the participation of female professionals and leaders from humanitarian organizations, women-led organizations, and community institutions. Of the total participants, 12 (23 %) were women and 36 (76 %) were men, reflecting the operational realities of the current context while maintaining meaningful female participation throughout the programme.

5.2 Participant Statistics

Category	Number
Total Participants	**52**
Male Participants	**40**
Female Participants	**12**
Provinces Represented	**6**
Duration	**2 Days**

5.3 Provincial Representation

Participants travelled from six provinces across Afghanistan's Northern Region, ensuring that discussions reflected a broad range of regional experiences and operational realities.

Table 1. Provincial Representation

Province	Representation
Balkh	Government institutions, UN agencies, INGOs, LNGOs, CSOs, CBOs
Samangan	Local NGOs, Education Sector
Jawzjan	National NGOs
Kunduz	NGOs, Community Representatives
Baghlan	National NGOs
Badakhshan	Women-led Organizations, National NGOs

The broad geographical representation enriched discussions by enabling participants to compare challenges and successful practices across different provinces.

5.4 Institutional Representation

The Dialogue Café succeeded in bringing together representatives from a wide spectrum of humanitarian and development stakeholders.

Government Institutions

Senior representatives attended from several key government departments, including:

- Governor's Office
- Directorate of Economy
- Provincial Education Directorate
- Directorate of Agriculture
- Directorate of Rural Rehabilitation and Development (PRRD)
- Afghanistan National Disaster Management Authority (ANDMA)
- Directorate of Refugees and Repatriation (DoRR)

The active participation of government officials strengthened dialogue between public institutions and humanitarian actors and demonstrated government support for advancing localization.

United Nations Agencies

The event was attended by representatives from:

- UNDP
- UNAMA
- IOM

Their participation contributed valuable international perspectives on humanitarian coordination, partnership models, and localization commitments.

International Non-Governmental Organizations (INGOs)

Representatives from several international organizations participated, including:

- Save the Children International (SCI)
- Welthungerhilfe (WHH)
- Women for Afghan Women (WAW)

In addition, Save the Children International delivered an online technical presentation highlighting its Localization Strategy 2030 and organizational experience in strengthening locally led humanitarian action.

National and Local NGOs

National and local NGOs formed the largest participant group and represented organizations working in education, livelihoods, humanitarian response, WASH, governance, community development, and social protection.

These organizations contributed extensive operational experience and practical insights into the barriers affecting localization in Afghanistan.

Women-Led Organizations (WLOs)

Representatives from women-led organizations actively participated throughout the Dialogue Café.

Their participation enriched discussions by bringing perspectives on:

- Women's leadership
- Community participation
- Inclusive humanitarian programming
- Organizational sustainability
- Gender-responsive localization

Female participants actively contributed during presentations, group discussions, and plenary sessions.

Community Representatives and Civil Society

Community leaders, civil society representatives, and community-based organizations played an important role throughout the Dialogue Café.

Their participation ensured that discussions reflected community realities and highlighted the importance of community ownership, accountability, and locally driven decision-making.

One particularly notable contribution came from a community representative from Kunduz Province, who shared practical experiences of community engagement in project design, implementation, monitoring, and advocacy. His presentation was widely appreciated by participants and demonstrated the important role communities can play in strengthening localization.

5.5 Stakeholder Composition

The Dialogue Café achieved a balanced representation of humanitarian and development actors.

The event included participation from:

- Government institutions
- United Nations agencies
- International NGOs

- National NGOs
- Local NGOs
- Women-led organizations
- Community-based organizations
- Civil society organizations
- Community leaders
- Humanitarian coordination bodies (ACBAR)

This diversity promoted constructive dialogue among stakeholders who do not always have opportunities to engage directly on issues related to localization.

5.6 Gender Participation

Gender inclusion was considered during participant selection.

The event included:

- **Male Participants: 76.9%**
- **Female Participants: 23.1%**

Despite the operational constraints affecting women's participation in public events, female participants actively engaged in all technical sessions, group discussions, presentations, and the open dialogue.

Women participants represented:

- Women-led organizations
- National NGOs
- Community organizations
- Education institutions
- Civil society organizations

Their contributions strengthened discussions on equitable partnerships, organizational leadership, and community engagement.

5.7 Significance of Diverse Participation

One of the Dialogue Café's greatest strengths was its ability to convene stakeholders who seldom have the opportunity to engage in open and constructive dialogue on localization.

By bringing together government authorities, UN agencies, international organizations, national NGOs, local NGOs, women-led organizations, humanitarian coordination bodies, academia, and community representatives in one forum, the event fostered mutual understanding, strengthened trust, and encouraged more collaborative approaches to humanitarian action.

Participants repeatedly emphasized that localization can only succeed through shared ownership, continuous dialogue, equitable partnerships, and meaningful participation of Afghan actors at every level of humanitarian programming.

6. Challenges and Suggestions

1. Key Challenges Identified

Participants identified several structural, operational, and policy-related barriers that continue to hinder effective localization in Afghanistan, particularly in the Northern Region.

1. Limited Direct Access to Funding

- Afghan local and national organizations continue to have limited access to direct donor funding.
- Most funding is channelled through international organizations, limiting local ownership and leadership.

2. Unequal Partnership Models

- Partnerships between international and local organizations often remain imbalanced.
- Local organizations are frequently treated as implementing partners rather than equal strategic partners.

3. Limited Participation in Decision-Making

- Local organizations have insufficient representation in humanitarian coordination mechanisms and strategic planning forums.
- Key decisions affecting local communities are often made without adequate consultation with local actors.

4. Institutional Capacity Gaps

- Many local organizations require further strengthening in:
    - Organizational governance
    - Financial management
    - Compliance systems
    - Proposal development
    - Monitoring and evaluation
    - Resource mobilization

5. Administrative and Compliance Barriers

- Complex donor procedures and compliance requirements make it difficult for many local organizations to compete for funding.
- Administrative requirements often exceed the capacities of smaller local organizations.

6. Weak Coordination

- Coordination among government institutions, donors, UN agencies, INGOs, and local organizations remains insufficient.
- Limited information sharing reduces opportunities for collaboration.

7. Limited Community Engagement

- Communities are not consistently involved in:
    - Project design
    - Decision-making
    - Monitoring
    - Evaluation

8. Trust Deficit

- Participants highlighted the need to strengthen mutual trust between international and local actors.
- Concerns remain regarding transparency, accountability, and confidence in local leadership.

9. Gender and Inclusion Challenges

- Although women participated actively, contextual restrictions continue to limit the meaningful participation of women-led organizations and female humanitarian professionals.

7. Suggestions and Recommendations

Participants proposed the following practical actions to strengthen localization and advance locally led humanitarian action.

1. Increase Direct Funding for Local Organizations

- Expand direct, flexible, and predictable funding opportunities for Afghan organizations.
- Reduce reliance on intermediary funding arrangements.

2. Promote Equitable Partnerships

- Build partnerships based on:
  - Mutual respect
  - Shared leadership
  - Transparency
  - Mutual accountability
- Recognize local organizations as equal partners throughout the project cycle.

3. Strengthen Local Leadership

- Increase the participation of local organizations in:
  - Humanitarian coordination forums
  - Strategic planning
  - Decision-making processes
  - Programme leadership

4. Invest in Institutional Capacity

Provide sustained support for strengthening:

- Organizational governance
- Financial and grants management
- Human resources systems
- Monitoring, Evaluation, Accountability and Learning (MEAL)
- Compliance and safeguarding
- Proposal writing and resource mobilization

5. Simplify Donor Procedures

- Review and simplify administrative and compliance requirements where possible.
- Adopt more context-appropriate funding and reporting mechanisms for local organizations.

6. Strengthen Coordination Mechanisms

- Promote regular dialogue among:
    - Government institutions
    - Donors
    - UN agencies
    - INGOs
    - National and local NGOs
    - Community representatives
- Improve information sharing and joint planning.

7. Enhance Community Participation

- Engage communities throughout the programme cycle:
    - Needs assessment
    - Design
    - Implementation
    - Monitoring
    - Evaluation
- Strengthen accountability to affected populations.

8. Continue Regional Dialogue Platforms

- Institutionalize Regional Dialogue Cafés as regular forums for:
    - Experience sharing
    - Trust building
    - Joint problem-solving
    - Monitoring localization progress

9. Strengthen the Afghanistan Localization Lab (ALL)

- Continue expanding ALL as a national platform for:
    - Research
    - Learning
    - Networking
    - Capacity strengthening
    - Policy dialogue
    - Localization advocacy

10. Advance Localization Through Collective Action

Participants emphasized that localization should extend beyond funding to include:

- Shared leadership

- Greater decision-making authority for Afghan actors
- Institutional trust
- Long-term investment in local capacities
- Inclusive and accountable humanitarian governance

8. Overall Observation

The Dialogue Café concluded that while limited funding, unequal partnerships, capacity constraints, and restricted participation in decision-making remain significant barriers to localization, there is strong consensus among stakeholders that these challenges can be addressed through greater investment in local leadership, equitable partnerships, direct funding, strengthened institutional capacity, regular multi-stakeholder dialogue, and enhanced collaboration among all humanitarian actors. These recommendations provide a practical roadmap for advancing the localization agenda in Afghanistan over the coming years.

9. Conclusion

The Regional Dialogue Café on Localization, held on 15–16 July 2026 in Mazar-e-Sharif, Balkh Province, successfully achieved its objective of creating an inclusive and collaborative platform for humanitarian and development stakeholders to discuss the future of localization in Afghanistan's Northern Region. Organized by the Citizen Organization for Advocacy and Resilience (COAR) through the Afghanistan Localization Lab (ALL), with the support of the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC), the event brought together a diverse group of representatives from government institutions, United Nations agencies, international NGOs, national and local NGOs, women-led organizations, civil society organizations, and community representatives to engage in constructive dialogue on strengthening local leadership, building trust, and advancing sustainable localization.

The Dialogue Café demonstrated that localization has evolved beyond a policy commitment into a practical necessity for Afghanistan's humanitarian and development landscape. Throughout the two-day programme, participants consistently emphasized that Afghan organizations and communities are not merely implementing partners but are indispensable actors with the contextual knowledge, community trust, and long-term presence required to deliver effective, timely, and sustainable humanitarian and development assistance. The discussions reinforced the understanding that meaningful localization requires more than increasing financial flows to local organizations; it also requires a deliberate shift toward shared leadership, equitable partnerships, greater participation in decision-making, mutual accountability, and sustained investment in the institutional capacities of Afghan actors.

The technical presentations provided participants with a comprehensive understanding of the evolution of the localization agenda, from the lessons learned during major humanitarian crises to the commitments made under the World Humanitarian Summit and the Grand Bargain. Presentations on the NEAR Network, the Afghanistan Localization Lab (ALL), and experiences shared

by ACBAR and Save the Children International further demonstrated that localization is a continuous process that requires coordinated action, innovation, and long-term commitment from all stakeholders.

One of the most significant achievements of the Dialogue Café was the quality and diversity of participation. Bringing together government authorities, humanitarian coordination bodies, UN agencies, international organizations, local and national NGOs, women-led organizations, and community representatives created a unique opportunity for open dialogue across institutional boundaries. The active engagement of participants throughout the presentations, group discussions, and open dialogue reflected a strong collective commitment to improving humanitarian partnerships and strengthening locally led responses in Afghanistan.

The participatory group discussions generated valuable insights into the realities of localization in the Northern Region. Participants identified a range of structural and operational challenges, including limited direct access to donor funding for Afghan organizations, unequal partnership arrangements, administrative barriers, capacity gaps, limited participation of local actors in strategic decision-making, and the need for stronger coordination among humanitarian stakeholders. At the same time, the discussions highlighted numerous opportunities to strengthen localization through increased investment in organizational capacity, more transparent partnership models, expanded leadership roles for local organizations, simplified administrative procedures, improved coordination mechanisms, and stronger engagement of communities in programme design, implementation, monitoring, and evaluation.

The open dialogue session further enriched the event by providing participants with an opportunity to openly discuss institutional experiences and practical challenges. Representatives from local organizations highlighted the need for more equitable access to funding and stronger relationships with donors, while international organizations emphasized the importance of organizational systems, quality assurance, and accountability in building confidence among donors and partners. Government representatives underscored the importance of improving coordination between humanitarian actors and sectoral authorities, and community representatives demonstrated how meaningful community participation can significantly improve programme relevance, ownership, and accountability. Collectively, these discussions illustrated that advancing localization requires collaborative efforts from all actors and cannot be achieved by any single institution working in isolation.

A notable outcome of the Dialogue Café was the strengthened sense of trust and mutual understanding among participants. The event provided a neutral and respectful environment in which different stakeholders could openly discuss challenges, exchange perspectives, and jointly explore practical solutions. This process contributed to building stronger relationships among humanitarian actors and reaffirmed the importance of regular dialogue platforms in promoting transparency, collaboration, and collective problem-solving.

The Dialogue Café also reinforced the strategic role of the Afghanistan Localization Lab (ALL) as a national platform for promoting learning, collaboration, innovation, and advocacy on localization.

Participants expressed strong interest in engaging with the Lab's future initiatives, including research, capacity-strengthening programmes, peer learning opportunities, networking activities, and collaborative advocacy efforts aimed at advancing locally led humanitarian action across Afghanistan.

Overall, the Regional Dialogue Café demonstrated that there is broad consensus among humanitarian and development stakeholders on the importance of strengthening local leadership and creating a more inclusive humanitarian system. While significant challenges remain, the discussions clearly indicated that there is both the willingness and the collective expertise to advance localization through stronger partnerships, greater trust, increased investment in Afghan institutions, and more inclusive decision-making processes.

The recommendations generated during the Dialogue Café provide a practical roadmap for government institutions, donors, United Nations agencies, international NGOs, national NGOs, and local organizations to accelerate progress on localization in the Northern Region and beyond. These recommendations will inform the future work of COAR and the Afghanistan Localization Lab (ALL), contribute to national localization dialogue, and support continued engagement with humanitarian partners in implementing the commitments of the Grand Bargain within the Afghan context.

Finally, the Regional Dialogue Café reaffirmed that sustainable humanitarian action in Afghanistan depends on empowering Afghan organizations and communities to lead the responses that affect their own people. Building trust, strengthening local leadership, promoting equitable partnerships, and investing in the capacities of national and local actors are not only essential for achieving localization commitments but are also fundamental to ensuring that humanitarian assistance remains effective, accountable, contextually appropriate, and sustainable. The event concluded with a shared commitment among participants to continue working together to transform localization

from a policy aspiration into an operational reality that benefits crisis-affected communities across Afghanistan.


















REGIONAL DIALOGUE CAFE – NORTHERN REGION

