Regional Dialogue Cafe Narrative Report

Activity Title	Two-day Regional Dialogue Cafe
Organization – Afghanistan Localization Lab Convener	Citizen Organization for Advocacy and Resilience (COAR)
Date	11 - 12 August 2026
Location	West Zone (Herat City) – Sadaf International Hotel
Prepared by:	Baz Halim Shinwari, Dialogue Specialist

Participants

The Regional Dialogue Cafe brought together representatives from national and international organizations, UN Agencies, government institutions, and local communities. A total of 48 participants attended the event, including:

S/NO	Organization/Institution Category	Number of Participants
1	INGO	4
2	NGO	15
3	UN Agencies	2
4	Government Officials	10
5	Women-Led Organizations	3
6	Formal/Informal CBO + CSO	16

A total of 48 participants attended the event, including 38 male and 10 female participants.

Agenda of the Two-Day Regional Dialogue Café

Day 1

Time	Session Day One	Facilitator
08:30 – 09:00	Registration of Participants	COAR Team
09:00 – 09:10	Opening	Baz Halim Shinwari
09:10 – 09:15	Recitation of the Holy Quran	Participant
09:15 – 09:30	Welcome Remarks and Opening Speech	Dialogue Specialist-DoEC Herat
09:30 – 09:45	Participant Introductions and Expectations	Facilitator
09:45 – 10:00	Distribution of Stationery and Pre-Test Assessment	COAR Team
10:00 – 10:30	Tea Break	-
10:30 – 12:00	COAR Presentation: Introduction to Localization	CoAR Dialogue Specialist
12:00 – 01:00	Lunch Break	-

01:00 – 01:30	ACBAR and SCI Presentations: Localization Technical Working Group	Khalid Ziarmal- ACBAR Localization Coordinator, Zulaikha Kaihan-SCI Localization Coordinator

Day 2

Time	Session	Facilitator
08:30 – 09:15	Recap of Day One and Introduction to Day Two	Facilitator
09:15 – 10:45	Group Work: Identifying Localization Challenges	Participants
10:45 – 11:00	Tea Break	-
11:00 – 12:30	Group Presentations and Discussion	Participant Groups
12:30 – 01:30	Lunch Break	-
01:30 – 02:15	Open Discussion: Community Participation, Donor Engagement	All Participants
02:15 – 03:15	Development of Strategic Priorities and Action Points	Facilitator and Participants
03:15 – 03:30	Tea Break	-

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), organized a two-day Western Regional Dialogue Café on 11–12 August 2026 at Sadaf International Hotel, Herat City, under the theme *"Strengthening Local Leadership, Building Trust, and Advancing Sustainable Localization in Afghanistan."*

The event brought together 48 participants (38 men and 10 women) representing government institutions, UN agencies, INGOs, NNGOs, local and women-led organizations, civil society, community-based organizations, and community leaders from four Western provinces.

The Dialogue Café provided a participatory platform to exchange experiences, discuss localization challenges and opportunities, and identify practical priorities. Day One focused on building a shared understanding of localization, while Day Two focused on key barriers, practical solutions, and priority actions to strengthen local leadership and institutional capacity over the next one to two years.

A key outcome was a shared understanding that localization goes beyond financial resources and requires local leadership, decision-making authority, institutional capacity, trust, and equitable partnerships. Participants also emphasized stronger coordination among government, donors, UN agencies, INGOs, NNGOs, and local actors.

The dialogue concluded with practical recommendations to expand direct and equitable funding, strengthen local organizational capacity and participation in decision-making, improve collaboration, and maintain regular regional dialogue and follow-up to advance localization in Western Afghanistan.

2. Background

Localization has become a key reform agenda within the global humanitarian system, recognizing the essential role of local organizations and affected communities in designing and delivering effective humanitarian responses. Experiences from major crises have demonstrated that local organizations often have stronger relationships with communities, deeper contextual knowledge, and better access to affected populations. Despite these advantages, local and national actors continue to face barriers to direct funding, leadership opportunities, equitable partnerships, and meaningful participation in strategic decision-making.

The 2016 World Humanitarian Summit and the Grand Bargain further strengthened the localization agenda by promoting increased funding and support to local and national actors, more equitable partnerships, institutional capacity strengthening, and locally led decision-making.

In Afghanistan, localization remains particularly relevant given the prolonged humanitarian crisis, evolving operational environment, and increasing reliance on Afghan organizations to deliver humanitarian and development assistance. While Afghan organizations play a critical role due to their local presence, contextual understanding, and community relationships, they continue to experience challenges related to access to direct and flexible funding, partnership arrangements, organizational capacity, and participation in strategic decision-making.

Against this backdrop, COAR, through the Afghanistan Localization Lab (ALL), organized a series of Regional Dialogue Cafés to bring together humanitarian and development stakeholders to discuss localization, exchange experiences, identify common challenges, and develop practical, context-specific recommendations.

The Western Regional Dialogue Café, held in Herat on 11–12 August 2026, was the third event in the series. It provided a platform for government institutions, UN agencies, INGOs, NNGOs, local and women-led organizations, civil society, and community representatives to examine the current state of localization in Western Afghanistan and identify practical pathways for strengthening local leadership, equitable partnerships, coordination, and locally led humanitarian and development action.

3. Objectives of the Regional Dialogue Café

The **Western Regional Dialogue Café** aimed to provide an inclusive and participatory platform for humanitarian and development stakeholders in the Western Region to discuss localization, strengthen trust and collaboration, identify common challenges, and develop practical actions to advance locally led humanitarian and development responses.

The key objectives were to:

1. **Enhance understanding of localization** by discussing its key principles, global commitments, and relevance to the Afghan context, including local leadership, decision-making, equitable partnerships, and institutional trust.
2. **Strengthen local leadership** by promoting greater participation and leadership of Afghan organizations in planning, decision-making, implementation, monitoring, and accountability processes.
3. **Build trust and equitable partnerships** among government institutions, UN agencies, INGOs, NNGOs, local and women-led organizations, civil society organizations, and community representatives.
4. **Identify barriers to localization** by examining key challenges related to funding, organizational capacity, coordination, partnerships, policy and regulatory processes, and participation in decision-making.
5. **Develop practical regional priorities** by identifying feasible recommendations and priority actions to advance localization in the Western Region over the next one to two years.
6. **Promote learning and coordination** through the exchange of experiences, good practices, lessons learned, and practical approaches among humanitarian and development stakeholders.
7. **Strengthen engagement with the Afghanistan Localization Lab (ALL)** by increasing stakeholder awareness of ALL and encouraging participation in its initiatives, coordination platforms, learning activities, and broader efforts to advance localization in Afghanistan.

3.1. Expected Outcomes

The Western Regional Dialogue Café was expected to contribute to:

- **Improved understanding of localization:** Increased participants' understanding of localization and its relevance to the Afghan context, particularly in the Western Region.
- **Stronger relationships and trust:** Strengthened relationships, trust, coordination, and collaboration among local and international stakeholders.

- **Shared understanding of challenges:** Identification of common barriers and operational challenges affecting effective localization and locally led development.
- **Practical recommendations and priority actions:** Development of concrete recommendations and priority actions to advance localization over the next one to two years.
- **Greater commitment to local leadership:** Increased commitment to equitable partnerships, meaningful local leadership, and greater participation of local and women-led organizations.
- **Increased engagement with ALL**: Enhanced awareness of and engagement with the Afghanistan Localization Lab (ALL) as a platform for coordination, learning, dialogue, and collective advocacy on localization.

These expected contributions guided the technical presentations, group discussions, peer-learning sessions, and open dialogue throughout the two-day event. They also provided a framework for assessing the key outcomes, recommendations, and follow-up actions emerging from the Western Regional Dialogue Café.

4. Methodology

The Western Regional Dialogue Café used a participatory, inclusive, and results-oriented methodology combining technical presentations, facilitated group discussions, peer learning, and open dialogue. The approach encouraged participants to share practical experiences, identify key localization challenges in the Western Region, and develop recommendations and follow-up actions.

The two-day event, held on 11–12 August 2026 in Herat, brought together representatives from government institutions, UN agencies, INGOs, NNGOs, local and women-led organizations, civil society organizations, community-based organizations, and community representatives from the Western Region.

Key methodological approaches included:

- **Multi-stakeholder participation**: Diverse stakeholders were brought together to ensure that different institutional, organizational, and community perspectives informed the dialogue.
- **Technical presentations:** Sessions provided participants with a shared understanding of localization, its relevance to Afghanistan, global commitments, and the roles of key localization stakeholders and networks, including NEAR, ALL, CEN, ACBAR, and SCI.
- **Interactive group work**: Participants worked in mixed groups to identify key barriers to localization, discuss opportunities for strengthening local leadership, and develop priority actions for the coming one to two years.
- **Participatory facilitation**: Facilitators used plenary discussions, brainstorming, Q&A, experience sharing, group presentations, and reflection sessions to encourage active participation and exchange of practical experiences.
- **Open dialogue**: Dedicated discussion sessions provided space for participants to raise institutional and operational issues related to funding, partnerships, coordination, MoU processes, organizational capacity, and community engagement, while collectively exploring possible solutions.
- **Learning and feedback**: Pre- and post-tests and participant feedback forms were used to assess learning, capture participant perspectives, and identify recommendations for improving future dialogue initiatives.
- **Documentation:** Attendance records, presentations, group work outputs, photographs, assessment results, and participant feedback were documented and used to inform the report and future localization initiatives.

Overall, the methodology was designed to move beyond information sharing and create a space for meaningful dialogue, joint problem-solving, and collective action. It enabled stakeholders in the Western Region to exchange practical experiences, identify shared challenges, and develop recommendations and follow-up actions to strengthen local leadership and advance localization in Afghanistan.

Dialogue Journey

The Western Regional Dialogue Café followed the trust-building process outlined in the Localization Café Facilitation Guide. The dialogue was designed as a participatory and results-oriented process, allowing participants to build connections, share experiences and perspectives, identify common challenges affecting localization in the Western Region, and collectively explore practical recommendations and actions to strengthen local leadership and localization efforts in Afghanistan.

5. The dialogue evolved through five interconnected stages:

The Western Regional Dialogue Café evolved through five interconnected stages, moving participants from relationship-building and shared understanding toward practical recommendations and action planning.

1. Opening the Dialogue

Participants were welcomed to the Café and introduced to its objectives, guiding principles, and dialogue norms. Ground rules promoting respect, equal participation, confidentiality, and constructive discussion were jointly established. Participants introduced themselves, shared their organizational roles and experiences, and outlined their expectations for the dialogue.

2. Building Trust and Shared Understanding

Participants reflected on their experiences of working with communities and discussed their understanding of localization and its relevance to the Western Region. These exchanges encouraged participants to share perspectives openly, reduced organizational and institutional barriers, and created a constructive environment for dialogue and mutual learning.

3. Core Dialogue

Through facilitated discussions and open-ended questions, participants examined the main barriers affecting localization in the Western Region. Discussions focused on access to funding, local decision-making and leadership, institutional capacity, coordination, equitable partnerships, and meaningful community participation. Participants also explored practical approaches to address these challenges.

4. Reflection on Roles and Responsibilities

Participants reflected on the respective roles and responsibilities of local and national NGOs, INGOs, government institutions, donors, UN agencies, communities, and coordination platforms in advancing localization. The discussions emphasized that sustainable localization requires shared responsibility, stronger collaboration, and more equitable relationships among stakeholders.

5. Action Planning

The dialogue concluded with participants identifying priority recommendations and practical actions to strengthen localization in the Western Region over the next one to two years. The proposed actions focused on strengthening local leadership, improving access to funding, investing in institutional capacity, enhancing coordination, and promoting more equitable partnerships.

Dialogue Questions

The discussions throughout the Café were guided by a series of open-ended questions designed to encourage reflection, experience sharing, and practical problem-solving rather than one-way presentations.

Participants discussed:

- What are the main barriers preventing effective localization in the Western Region?
- How can local leadership and meaningful participation in decision-making be strengthened?
- What changes are required to improve local organizations' access to direct, flexible, and predictable funding?
- What practical actions can stakeholders take over the next one to two years to advance localization in the Western Region?

These questions encouraged participants to move beyond identifying challenges and to collectively explore realistic solutions, define shared responsibilities, and identify practical actions that can contribute to stronger local leadership and sustainable localization in Western Afghanistan.

Reflection on Power and Partnerships

Participants reflected on the distribution of power within the humanitarian system and its implications for local organizations and partnerships in the Western Region.

Several participants highlighted that Afghan organizations often possess strong contextual knowledge, established relationships with communities, and significant operational access, particularly during emergencies. However, they noted that local actors continue to have limited influence over strategic decision-making and face challenges in accessing direct, flexible, and predictable funding.

The discussion emphasized that localization is not only about transferring financial resources. Participants stressed the importance of transferring trust, leadership, decision-making authority, and greater ownership to local actors. They also called for more equitable partnerships in which local organizations are engaged as strategic partners rather than primarily as implementing partners.

Participants further emphasized the need for greater transparency, mutual accountability, and shared decision-making between local organizations, INGOs, UN agencies, donors, and other stakeholders to ensure that localization results in meaningful and sustainable changes in the humanitarian system.

1. Opening Session

The Western Regional Dialogue Café commenced with welcoming remarks from the organizer, highlighting the purpose of the Café as a platform for stakeholders to exchange experiences, discuss localization challenges and opportunities, and identify practical ways to strengthen locally led humanitarian and development action in the Western Region. Participants were encouraged to actively contribute their perspectives throughout the two-day dialogue. The opening session included the recitation of verses from the Holy Quran, participant introductions, distribution of stationery, and completion of a pre-test assessment.

During the opening remarks, Baz Halim Shinwari, Dialogue Specialist at COAR, welcomed the participants and expressed appreciation for their engagement in the dialogue. He highlighted localization as both a national priority and a practical necessity, emphasizing the need to move beyond discussions and translate localization commitments into concrete actions.

Mr. Shinwari shared COAR's experience in promoting localization and emphasized that sustainable localization requires stronger local capacities, expertise, leadership, ownership, and meaningful participation in decision-making. He noted that Afghanistan continues to face significant humanitarian and development challenges, making collaboration among local organizations, international partners, government institutions, and communities essential for developing contextually appropriate solutions.

He further emphasized that localization is a shared responsibility and called on all stakeholders to contribute to creating more equitable partnerships, strengthening local leadership, and improving collaboration and coordination. He concluded by appreciating organizations that have supported and collaborated with COAR on localization initiatives and encouraged stakeholders to work collectively and advocate with a stronger, unified voice for advancing localization in Afghanistan.

2. Participants Expectations from Dialogue Cafe

At the beginning of the Western Regional Dialogue Café, participants shared their expectations and highlighted the following priorities:

- **Deepen understanding of localization:** Gain a clearer understanding of localization concepts, principles, processes, and their practical relevance to Afghanistan.
- **Share experiences and perspectives:** Exchange experiences, lessons learned, and perspectives on localization among local, national, and international stakeholders.
- **Identify pathways for positive change:** Explore practical ways to translate localization commitments into meaningful changes in humanitarian and development programming.
- **Improve access to funding:** Learn about approaches for engaging donors and increasing opportunities for direct, flexible, and sustainable funding for local organizations.
- **Strengthen resources and capacities:** Explore mechanisms for improving organizational, technical, financial, and institutional capacities of local organizations.
- **Promote local talent and leadership:** Identify ways to better utilize local expertise and ensure meaningful participation of Afghan organizations and communities in development and humanitarian initiatives.
- **Find solutions to local challenges:** Discuss context-specific solutions to operational and institutional challenges affecting local organizations in the Western Region.
- **Understand barriers to localization:** Identify key structural and practical barriers to localization in Afghanistan and develop realistic recommendations to address them.

These expectations provided an important foundation for the dialogue and helped shape discussions toward practical solutions, shared responsibilities, and actionable priorities for advancing localization in the Western Region.

6. Key Discussions and Outcomes

The first day focused on developing a common understanding of localization and its relevance to the Afghan context. Presentations and discussions highlighted the need to move beyond traditional, transactional partnership models toward equitable, trust-based, and locally led approaches.

ACBAR and Save the Children International shared their experiences and efforts to advance localization in Afghanistan. Ms. Amina, UN Women Western Zone Manager, also presented on UN Women's localization efforts in Afghanistan, with particular focus on achievements and initiatives in the Western Region, as well as the organization's planned priorities and next steps to further strengthen localization in the region.

The discussions emphasized that localization extends beyond the transfer of financial resources and requires greater local leadership, decision-making authority, equitable partnerships, accountability, and ownership. These presentations and exchanges helped participants connect broader localization commitments with practical experiences and ongoing efforts in the Western Region.

Day Two: Challenges, Solutions, and Priority Actions

The second day focused on identifying practical barriers to localization and exploring context-specific solutions. Group discussions highlighted several recurring challenges in the Western Region, including:

- Limited access of local organizations to direct, flexible, and predictable funding.
- Unequal decision-making power between international and national/local actors.
- Gaps in institutional, technical, and organizational capacity.
- Limited trust and transparency between international and national actors.
- Insufficient involvement of local organizations in programme design, planning, and strategic decision-making.
- Limited opportunities for local actors to influence priorities and partnership arrangements.
- Weak or irregular platforms for regional coordination, learning, and experience sharing.

Participants noted that these challenges can affect the quality, relevance, sustainability, and local ownership of humanitarian and development interventions.

Practical Solutions Identified

Participants identified several areas for improvement, including:

- Expanding direct and flexible funding opportunities for Afghan organizations.
- Increasing equitable partnership and co-leadership opportunities for local actors.
- Investing in the institutional, technical, financial, and organizational capacity of local organizations.
- Involving local organizations and communities earlier in programme design, planning, and decision-making.
- Improving transparency, communication, mutual accountability, and trust between partners.
- Establishing regular regional platforms for coordination, learning, experience sharing, and follow-up on localization commitments.
- Strengthening the participation and leadership of local and women-led organizations in localization processes.

Key Outcome

A key outcome of the dialogue was a shared understanding that localization must extend beyond the transfer of financial resources. Participants emphasized that meaningful localization requires greater local leadership, decision-making authority, institutional trust, shared accountability, and equitable partnerships.

Participants further recognized that Afghan organizations and communities should have a stronger role in shaping priorities, designing programmes, making strategic decisions, and leading humanitarian and development responses, drawing on their contextual knowledge, community relationships, and practical experience.

7.Participants' Perspectives, Key Findings and Recommendations

The group discussions and open dialogue generated a set of findings and recommendations on the key barriers to localization in the **Western Region**, as well as practical measures for addressing them. Participants emphasized that advancing localization requires changes in funding practices, partnership models, institutional capacity, transparency, coordination, decision-making, and community participation.

1. Key Challenges and Barriers Identified

Participants identified the following key challenges:

- **Limited local participation in decision-making:** Local organizations are often engaged primarily as implementing partners, with limited influence over programme design, strategic planning, budgeting, and key decisions.
- **Limited and short-term funding:** Direct access to donor funding remains restricted, while many local organizations depend on short-term, project-based funding and have limited access to core, flexible, or institutional support.
- **Institutional and technical capacity gaps:** Participants highlighted capacity needs in proposal development, financial management, reporting, monitoring and evaluation, strategic planning, organizational leadership, and internal systems.
- **Limited transparency and access to opportunities:** Participants noted challenges in accessing timely information on funding opportunities, project calls, tenders, and partnership opportunities. They also highlighted the need for more transparent feedback and grievance mechanisms.
- **Weak awareness of localization:** Some local organizations, communities, and other stakeholders have limited understanding of the localization agenda and its implications for local leadership, equitable partnerships, and decision-making.
- **Limited trust and unequal partnerships:** Participants identified gaps in trust, communication, and mutual accountability between local and international actors, with partnership arrangements often remaining unequal.
- **Contextual and sustainability challenges:** Cultural and socio-economic factors, community resistance to change, staff turnover, limited retention of skilled local personnel, and insufficient long-term transition or exit planning were identified as factors affecting sustainable localization.

2. Strategies for Strengthening Local Leadership

Based on these challenges, participants proposed the following measures:

- **Promote equitable partnerships:** Involve local organizations throughout the programme cycle, from assessment and design to planning, implementation, monitoring, evaluation, and learning.
- **Increase direct and sustainable funding:** Expand direct, flexible, multi-year, and core funding opportunities for local organizations, including appropriate re-granting mechanisms.
- **Invest in institutional capacity:** Establish longer-term capacity-strengthening initiatives covering project management, financial management, proposal development, reporting, monitoring and evaluation, organizational systems, and leadership.
- **Strengthen inclusive participation:** Increase the meaningful participation and leadership of communities, women, and youth in programme design and decision-making, while ensuring approaches remain appropriate to the local context.
- **Invest in local human resources:** Support professional development, mentoring, and staff retention to strengthen the availability of experienced local professionals.
- **Promote longer-term partnerships:** Move away from fragmented, short-term project relationships toward multi-year strategic partnerships that provide greater predictability, institutional learning, and sustainability.
- **Strengthen trust and mutual accountability:** Promote transparent communication, shared decision-making, clear roles and responsibilities, and joint accountability between local and international partners.

3. Priority Actions for the Next 1–2 Years

Participants identified the following practical actions to translate the dialogue into continued progress:

Priority Area	Proposed Action	Potential Follow-up
Funding	Increase direct, flexible, and predictable funding and the proportion of programme resources reaching local organizations.	Donors, UN agencies, and INGOs to review funding and partnership mechanisms and identify opportunities for increased direct funding.
Equitable Partnerships	Involve local organizations in programme design, planning, budgeting, decision-making, implementation, and learning.	INGOs, UN agencies, donors, and NNGOs to review partnership models and establish more equitable roles and responsibilities.
Transparency	Establish accessible channels for sharing funding opportunities, project calls, tenders, and partnership opportunities.	COAR/ALL and partners to explore centralized information-sharing mechanisms and regional communication networks.
Localization Roadmap	Develop a practical 1–2-year localization action plan for the Western Region.	ALL and relevant stakeholders to define priorities, responsibilities, indicators, and timelines.
Coordination	Establish or strengthen multi-stakeholder coordination and learning mechanisms at relevant levels.	Stakeholders to identify focal points and establish regular follow-up and coordination meetings.
Capacity Strengthening	Promote joint learning, mentoring, peer exchange, exposure visits, and capacity-building initiatives between local and international organizations.	ALL and partners to identify capacity priorities and develop relevant learning opportunities.
Community Engagement	Increase community awareness and meaningful participation through consultations, seminars, and appropriate communication channels.	Local organizations and community actors to integrate awareness, consultation, and participation into programme design and implementation.
Accountability	Strengthen transparent feedback and grievance mechanisms, including mechanisms for organizations that are not selected for funding opportunities.	Donors and implementing partners to strengthen feedback, complaints, and response procedures.
Monitoring and Learning	Develop a joint mechanism to monitor progress against localization commitments and assess results.	ALL and stakeholders to agree on indicators and conduct periodic reviews of progress and challenges.

4. Key Learning and Follow-up

The discussions demonstrated that stakeholders broadly share the objective of strengthening locally led humanitarian and development action; however, practical changes are required in funding arrangements, partnership models, decision-making, and capacity strengthening. Participants emphasized that localization cannot be achieved by local organizations alone and requires the collective commitment and action of donors, UN agencies, INGOs, NNGOs, government institutions, civil society, and communities.

A key learning from the Western Region was the importance of regular, structured, and inclusive dialogue mechanisms where stakeholders can jointly review localization progress, discuss emerging challenges, share experiences, and agree on practical solutions. Participants recognized that one-off events are not sufficient to sustain momentum and that continued engagement and follow-up are essential.

The recommendations generated through the Dialogue Café provide a basis for continued advocacy and stakeholder engagement. As a follow-up, COAR and the Afghanistan Localization Lab (ALL) can use the findings to inform future

advocacy, capacity-strengthening initiatives, stakeholder engagement, and regional and national dialogue platforms. Progress against the identified priority actions can be periodically reviewed to assess achievements, identify remaining gaps, and agree on adjustments.

This follow-up approach will help ensure that the Western Regional Dialogue Café moves beyond awareness and discussion toward measurable, coordinated, and sustained progress on localization in Afghanistan.

Participation and Inclusion:

The Western Regional Dialogue Café promoted inclusive participation of diverse stakeholders. A total of 48 participants (38 men and 10 women) attended, representing national and local NGOs, WLOs, government institutions, UN agencies, INGOs, civil society, community-based organizations, and community representatives from the Western Region.

Female participants actively contributed to presentations, group discussions, experience sharing, and open dialogue, bringing important perspectives on women's leadership, decision-making, access to opportunities, and equitable partnerships.

The participation of women and WLO representatives enriched the discussions and ensured that gender perspectives were reflected in key challenges, priorities, and recommendations. Facilitators encouraged balanced participation and provided space for stakeholders from different backgrounds to share their views and experiences.

Participants reaffirmed that meaningful localization requires the active participation and leadership of women and WLOs. Their engagement demonstrated the value of inclusive regional platforms in ensuring diverse perspectives contribute to advancing locally led humanitarian and development action in Afghanistan.

Participants Voices

Participants shared practical reflections on the challenges, opportunities, and changes needed to advance localization in the **Western Region**. Their perspectives highlighted the importance of reforming funding practices, strengthening equitable partnerships, increasing local leadership, and ensuring greater community ownership.

- ***On funding:*** *Participants highlighted that short-term project cycles, funding delays, limited direct funding, budget reductions, and changing donor priorities affect the sustainability of local organizations and restrict their ability to invest in long-term institutional development.*
- ***On equitable partnerships:*** *Participants noted that partnership arrangements can remain largely top-down, with local organizations having limited influence over programme design, budgeting, implementation, and strategic decisions. They called for greater trust, transparency, shared responsibility, mutual accountability, and more equitable partnership models.*
- ***On local leadership and decision-making:*** *Participants emphasized that meaningful localization requires local actors to have greater authority, representation, and influence in coordination and decision-making structures. They stressed that local organizations should be recognized as strategic partners and leaders rather than primarily as implementing partners.*
- ***On community ownership:*** *Participants stressed that communities should be meaningfully involved from programme design through implementation, monitoring, and evaluation to ensure that interventions respond to local needs, cultural values, and contextual realities.*
- ***On capacity strengthening:*** *Participants identified gaps in human resources, organizational systems and policies, financial management, technical expertise, technology, and access to professional development. They emphasized the need for longer-term and needs-based capacity strengthening tailored to local organizations.*
- ***On transparency and access to opportunities:*** *Participants highlighted the need for more transparent and accessible information on funding opportunities, project calls, tenders, and partnership opportunities. They also called for clear feedback mechanisms for organizations participating in funding and partnership processes.*

- ***On coordination and collaboration:*** *Participants emphasized the need for stronger coordination among local organizations, INGOs, UN agencies, government institutions, donors, and communities to reduce duplication, improve information sharing, and create more coherent approaches to localization.*
- ***On the value of dialogue:*** *Participants recognized the Western Regional Dialogue Café as a valuable platform for local and international actors to openly discuss localization challenges, exchange practical experiences, build trust, and jointly identify realistic solutions and priority actions.*
- Overall, participants' voices reinforced that localization requires a shift in power, resources, leadership, and decision-making, supported by stronger trust, equitable partnerships, and sustained collaboration among all stakeholders.

8. Strengthening Trust and Mutual Understanding

The Western Regional Dialogue Café provided a constructive and inclusive space for national and local NGOs, INGOs, government institutions, UN agencies, women-led organizations, civil society, and community representatives to exchange experiences and openly discuss localization challenges and opportunities in the Western Region. The dialogue enabled participants to better understand the different roles, perspectives, operational constraints, and expectations of stakeholders involved in humanitarian and development work.

Discussions highlighted that trust, transparency, mutual accountability, shared responsibility, and equitable partnerships are essential foundations for meaningful localization. Participants emphasized the importance of moving beyond traditional transactional relationships and creating partnerships based on mutual respect, open communication, and shared decision-making.

The dialogue also highlighted the need for greater involvement of local organizations and communities in programme design, planning, decision-making, implementation, and coordination. Participants recognized that stronger local ownership and leadership can improve the relevance, effectiveness, and sustainability of humanitarian and development interventions.

Overall, the Dialogue Café contributed to strengthening mutual understanding and trust among stakeholders, while identifying practical areas for improved collaboration, communication, and locally led action in the Western Region.

Key Messages and Collective Outcomes from the Dialogue Sessions

Presentations from COAR, ACBAR, and Save the Children International, complemented by facilitated group discussions, experience-sharing, and open dialogue, provided participants with an opportunity to reflect on the current state of localization in Afghanistan and examine the specific challenges and opportunities affecting the Western Region.

The sessions generated a number of key messages and collective outcomes, including the need to strengthen local leadership and decision-making, improve access to direct and flexible funding, promote equitable partnerships, invest in institutional capacity, strengthen transparency and coordination, and increase meaningful community participation.

Participants collectively recognized that advancing localization requires sustained commitment and action from all stakeholders rather than relying on local organizations alone. The dialogue therefore helped establish a shared basis for continued collaboration, advocacy, and practical follow-up on localization priorities in the Western Region.

Key Collective Outcomes and Consensus Points

Stronger Local Leadership and Decision-Making

Participants agreed that meaningful localization should result in greater leadership, representation, influence, and decision-making authority for Afghan organizations. Local actors should be meaningfully involved in programme design, planning, budgeting, strategic processes, and coordination structures rather than being engaged primarily as implementing partners.

Improved Access to Funding

Limited, short-term, and unpredictable funding was identified as a major barrier to the sustainability of local organizations. Participants called for increased access to direct, flexible, predictable, and longer-term funding, alongside more proportionate, transparent, and accessible compliance and reporting requirements.

More Equitable Partnerships

Participants emphasized the need to move away from predominantly transactional or top-down partnership models toward relationships based on trust, transparency, shared responsibility, mutual accountability, and joint decision-making. Local organizations should be treated as strategic partners with meaningful influence throughout the programme cycle.

Long-Term Institutional Strengthening

Participants recognized that short-term training alone is insufficient to address the institutional capacity gaps faced by local organizations. They called for longer-term, needs-based support covering organizational systems, human resources, financial management, technology, leadership, proposal development, monitoring and evaluation, and other institutional capacities.

Greater Community Ownership

Participants stressed that communities should be meaningfully involved throughout the project cycle, particularly in needs assessment, programme design, implementation, monitoring, feedback, and evaluation. Greater community ownership was considered essential to ensuring that interventions reflect local priorities, cultural considerations, and contextual realities.

Stronger Coordination and Follow-up

Participants recognized the need for regular and structured coordination and dialogue among local organizations, INGOs, donors, government institutions, UN agencies, and communities. They emphasized that the recommendations emerging from the Dialogue Café should not remain as standalone commitments but should be followed through continued engagement, joint learning, coordinated action, and collective advocacy at both regional and national levels.

9. Stakeholder Responsibilities Identified

Participants emphasized that advancing localization in the **Western Region** requires shared responsibility, stronger coordination, and mutual accountability among all stakeholders. The following roles and responsibilities were identified:

Local and National Organizations

- Strengthen community engagement and ensure local priorities inform programme design and decisions.
- Improve accountability and feedback mechanisms for affected communities.
- Invest in organizational systems, staff capacity, leadership, and institutional development.
- Take greater leadership in programme design, implementation, monitoring, learning, and coordination.
- Strengthen collaboration and knowledge-sharing among local organizations.

International NGOs and UN Agencies

- Promote more equitable, transparent, and trust-based partnerships with local organizations.
- Increase opportunities for local actors to participate meaningfully in programme design, strategic planning, coordination, and decision-making.
- Provide needs-based, longer-term capacity strengthening and technical support.
- Gradually transfer responsibilities, leadership, resources, and decision-making authority to local actors.

- Improve communication, transparency, and mutual accountability within partnerships.

Donors

- Expand direct, flexible, predictable, and longer-term funding opportunities for local organizations.
- Review and reduce unnecessary administrative and compliance barriers that may disproportionately affect local actors.
- Support core and institutional funding where appropriate to strengthen organizational sustainability.
- Encourage equitable partnership models and meaningful local participation in programme decisions.

Government and Coordination Structures

- Facilitate effective coordination and contribute to an enabling environment for locally led humanitarian and development action.
- Strengthen meaningful representation of local and women-led organizations in coordination and decision-making forums.
- Support policies, mechanisms, and platforms that promote localization and local leadership.
- Facilitate constructive engagement among government institutions, humanitarian actors, local organizations, and communities.

Communities

- Identify and communicate local priorities, needs, and concerns.
- Participate meaningfully throughout the programme cycle, including planning, implementation, monitoring, evaluation, and feedback.
- Strengthen community ownership, participation, and accountability of humanitarian and development interventions.

Participant Reflections and Emerging Priorities

Participants recognized progress in advancing localization while highlighting persistent barriers, including limited direct and predictable funding, unequal partnerships, institutional capacity gaps, limited local representation in decision-making, weak coordination, and insufficient community participation.

The following priorities emerged for the next two years:

- Increase direct, flexible, predictable, and longer-term funding opportunities for local organizations.
- Strengthen local leadership and meaningful participation in programme and strategic decision-making.
- Promote more equitable, transparent, and trust-based partnerships between local and international actors.
- Expand needs-based institutional and organizational capacity strengthening.
- Increase meaningful participation and leadership of communities, women, and women-led organizations.
- Strengthen accountability, feedback, joint monitoring, learning, and evidence-generation mechanisms.
- Improve representation of local actors in coordination and decision-making forums.
- Strengthen regional coordination, knowledge-sharing, and collective advocacy on localization.

Additional Dialogue Outcomes

The Dialogue Café generated several immediate outcomes:

- Strengthened relationships and mutual understanding among local and international stakeholders.
- Greater awareness of the operational challenges, expectations, and constraints faced by different stakeholder groups.
- Joint identification of practical priorities and recommendations for advancing localization in the Western Region.
- Increased recognition of local leadership, community participation, and equitable partnerships as essential elements of sustainable humanitarian and development responses.
- Greater interest among stakeholders in maintaining regular regional dialogue, coordination, learning, and collective advocacy.
- Increased awareness of the role of the Afghanistan Localization Lab (ALL) as a platform for continued engagement and collaboration on localization.

Next Steps

Participants emphasized the importance of maintaining momentum beyond the Dialogue Café and translating the recommendations into continued action. Priority follow-up actions include:

- Continue regular regional dialogue, coordination, and learning platforms on localization.
- Share key findings and recommendations with relevant localization, coordination, and decision-making mechanisms.
- Promote advocacy for increased direct, flexible, and predictable funding for local organizations.
- Strengthen meaningful participation and representation of local actors in coordination and strategic decision-making forums.
- Support continued engagement and leadership of women-led organizations and other locally rooted actors.
- Promote joint capacity-strengthening and peer-learning opportunities based on identified organizational needs.
- Develop mechanisms to follow up on agreed actions and monitor progress through continued stakeholder engagement.
- Use ALL and other relevant coordination platforms to facilitate collective learning, advocacy, and follow-up on regional localization priorities.

Overall, the Western Regional Dialogue Café established a foundation for continued collective action, with participants recognizing that sustainable localization requires not only greater resources for local actors but also meaningful shifts in leadership, power, decision-making, partnerships, and accountability.

10.Strategic Priorities, Responsible Actors, and Follow-up Actions (2026–2027)

The Western Regional Dialogue Café identified the following strategic priorities and practical follow-up actions for advancing localization in the Western Region during 2026–2027. The priorities are intended to guide continued engagement among local and national organizations, INGOs, UN agencies, donors, government institutions, communities, and coordination platforms.

Priority Area	Responsible Actors	Suggested Follow-up Actions
Increase direct and flexible funding for local organizations	Donors, INGOs, NNGOs, ACBAR	Expand direct funding opportunities, simplify proportionate requirements, and promote predictable, flexible, and longer-term funding mechanisms.
Strengthen local leadership and decision-making	INGOs, Donors, NNGOs, UN Agencies	Develop transition and localization plans, increase co-leadership, and progressively transfer responsibilities, resources, and decision-making authority to local actors.
Promote equitable partnerships	INGOs, NNGOs, Donors, UN Agencies	Review partnership arrangements, strengthen transparency and mutual accountability, and establish joint planning and decision-making processes.
Strengthen regional coordination and dialogue	ACBAR, NGOs, INGOs, Government, Donors, ALL	Organize regular regional coordination and dialogue meetings, strengthen information sharing, and develop joint action points on localization.
Strengthen institutional capacity of local organizations	NNGOs, INGOs, Donors, Capacity-Building Providers	Conduct organizational capacity assessments and provide targeted, longer-term mentoring, technical support, and organizational development.
Increase community participation and ownership	NGOs, Government, Community Leaders	Strengthen community consultation and feedback mechanisms and ensure meaningful community involvement throughout the project cycle.
Strengthen representation of local actors	ACBAR, Clusters, INGOs, Government, NNGOs	Promote meaningful participation and representation of local organizations in coordination, strategic planning, and decision-making forums.
Improve evidence and learning	NGOs, INGOs, Donors, ACBAR, ALL	Strengthen monitoring, documentation, evidence generation, and systematic sharing of good practices and lessons learned among relevant stakeholders.
Strengthen accountability and feedback mechanisms	NGOs, INGOs, Government, Communities	Establish accessible complaints, feedback, and response mechanisms and strengthen transparency and accountability to affected communities and partners.
Promote joint monitoring and learning	NGOs, INGOs, Donors, NNGOs	Conduct joint monitoring, share findings, identify corrective actions, and use lessons learned to improve partnerships and programme quality.
Ensure meaningful participation of women-led organizations	NGOs, INGOs, Government, ACBAR, WLOs	Create appropriate and meaningful opportunities for WLOs and women representatives to participate in dialogue, coordination, decision-making, and localization initiatives.

Priority Area	Responsible Actors	Suggested Follow-up Actions
Strengthen regional advocacy on localization	ALL, ACBAR, NNGOs, INGOs, WLOs	Develop and communicate evidence-based advocacy messages and collectively engage relevant stakeholders to promote localization commitments and reforms.

Follow-up

Implementation of these priorities will require sustained stakeholder engagement, regular regional dialogue, joint advocacy, and systematic monitoring of agreed actions. COAR and the Afghanistan Localization Lab (ALL) can support this process by facilitating continued dialogue, documenting progress, connecting relevant stakeholders, and sharing evidence, learning, and emerging good practices.

Progress against these priorities can be reviewed through subsequent regional and national dialogue platforms, allowing stakeholders to assess achievements, identify remaining barriers, and agree on further actions. This will help ensure that the recommendations of the Western Regional Dialogue Café translate into practical, measurable, and sustained progress toward locally led humanitarian and development action in Afghanistan.

11. Workshop Evaluation

Participants representing national and international NGOs, government institutions, women-led organizations, civil society, and community-based organizations positively evaluated the Western Regional Dialogue Café and recognized its relevance to the current localization context in Western Afghanistan.

Participants appreciated the Café as a useful platform for knowledge sharing, experience exchange, networking, and collective reflection on localization challenges and opportunities. The presentations, group discussions, and open dialogue were considered relevant and contributed to the identification of practical recommendations related to local leadership, equitable partnerships, funding, institutional capacity, community participation, coordination, and accountability.

The participation and active engagement of female participants was highlighted as an important strength of the dialogue. Women participants contributed to group discussions and open dialogue, helping ensure that women's perspectives were reflected in the identification of challenges and recommendations. Participants emphasized that the meaningful participation and leadership of women and Women-Led Organizations (WLOs) are essential for inclusive and sustainable localization.

Overall, participants expressed appreciation for the initiative and emphasized the importance of continuing regional dialogue and learning platforms to strengthen partnerships, build trust, improve coordination, and support practical follow-up on localization commitments in Afghanistan.

12. Knowledge Pre- and Post-Test Assessment

A pre-test and post-test assessment was conducted to measure changes in participants' knowledge and understanding of localization.

- **Average Pre-Test Score:** 20%
- **Average Post-Test Score:** 85%
- **Overall Improvement:** 65 percentage points

The results demonstrate a substantial improvement in participants' understanding of localization, indicating that the Dialogue Café's presentations, discussions, and learning activities contributed positively to participants' knowledge of localization principles and their practical relevance to Afghanistan.

13. Key Outcomes

The Western Regional Dialogue Café achieved the following key outcomes:

- Increased awareness and understanding of localization and its relevance to the Afghan context.
- Strengthened networking and collaboration among local and international organizations, government institutions, civil society, women-led organizations, and community representatives.
- Improved understanding of localization principles, commitments, and practical approaches.
- Identified key barriers and context-specific solutions for advancing localization in the Western Region.
- Developed practical priorities related to local leadership, equitable partnerships, funding, institutional capacity strengthening, community participation, and coordination.
- Strengthened mutual understanding of the roles, expectations, responsibilities, and operational challenges of different stakeholders.
- Increased recognition of the importance of community-led planning, local ownership, and participatory decision-making.
- Strengthened the participation and visibility of women and Women-Led Organizations (WLOs) in regional localization discussions.
- Enhanced understanding of the need for direct, flexible, predictable, and longer-term funding for local organizations.
- Generated stakeholder interest and commitment to continued dialogue, coordination, collective advocacy, and follow-up on agreed localization priorities.
- Established a stronger basis for continued engagement through the Afghanistan Localization Lab (ALL) and other relevant localization platforms.

14. Challenges Faced During the Workshop

Depite the successful implementation of the Western Regional Dialogue Café, several challenges were identified that may inform the design and delivery of future regional dialogues.

- **Limited Participation of Some Stakeholders**: While the event achieved representation from a range of stakeholder groups, participation from some key actors, particularly donors and certain UN agencies, remained limited. Greater engagement of these stakeholders would help strengthen dialogue and create a broader basis for discussions on funding, equitable partnerships, decision-making, and localization commitments.
- **Time Constraints:** The wide range of localization issues discussed required more time for detailed group discussions, experience sharing, and action planning. Participants noted that longer discussion sessions would allow for deeper exploration of regional challenges and the development of more specific and measurable follow-up actions.
- **Sustaining Follow-up:** Participants emphasized the importance of maintaining momentum beyond the Dialogue Café. Without structured follow-up, coordination, and monitoring, there is a risk that recommendations may not translate into practical action. Continued engagement through regional and national platforms was therefore identified as important.

- **Limited Availability of Regional Evidence:** The discussions also highlighted the value of having more region-specific evidence, data, and practical examples to support localization discussions and track progress. Strengthening documentation and evidence generation could help stakeholders better understand regional trends, identify gaps, and measure changes over time.

These challenges highlight the need for broader and more balanced stakeholder engagement, adequate time for participatory discussions, stronger evidence, and structured follow-up mechanisms in future Regional Dialogue Cafés.

15. Lessons Learned

The Western Regional Dialogue Café demonstrated that an open, participatory, and trust-based dialogue format can encourage stakeholders to share practical experiences, raise sensitive issues, and collectively explore solutions related to localization.

Key lessons included:

- **Adequate time is essential:** Participatory discussions are more effective when sufficient time is provided for experience sharing, problem-solving, reflection, and action planning.
- **Diverse participation strengthens dialogue:** Bringing together local organizations, women-led organizations, government institutions, UN agencies, INGOs, donors, and community representatives creates a more comprehensive understanding of localization challenges and opportunities.
- **Local voices should be central:** Local and women-led organizations should have meaningful opportunities to shape discussions, influence priorities, and contribute to decisions related to localization.
- **Regional evidence improves relevance:** Practical examples, local experiences, and region-specific evidence help move discussions beyond general localization principles toward realistic and context-specific solutions.
- **Trust requires continued engagement:** Building trust among local and international actors is an ongoing process that requires transparency, open communication, mutual accountability, and regular interaction.
- **Dialogue should lead to action:** Regional dialogues are more valuable when discussions result in clear recommendations, responsible actors, timelines, and mechanisms for monitoring progress.
- **Follow-up is critical for sustainability:** Recommendations should be revisited through subsequent coordination and dialogue platforms to assess progress, identify challenges, and maintain stakeholder commitment.
- **Regular regional platforms add value:** Continued regional dialogue can strengthen relationships, facilitate joint learning, support collective advocacy, and provide opportunities to track progress on localization beyond individual events.

16. Overall Observation

The Western Regional Dialogue Café demonstrated that while limited and unpredictable funding, unequal partnerships, institutional capacity gaps, and restricted participation in decision-making remain significant barriers to meaningful localization, there is a strong degree of consensus among stakeholders on the direction of change required.

Participants emphasized that these challenges can be addressed through greater investment in local leadership and institutional capacity, increased access to direct and flexible funding, more equitable and trust-based partnerships, meaningful participation in decision-making, regular multi-stakeholder dialogue, stronger coordination, and greater community ownership.

The discussions and recommendations generated through the Café provide a practical basis for continued engagement and a potential roadmap for advancing localization in the Western Region and contributing to the broader localization agenda in Afghanistan.

17. Conclusion

The Western Regional Dialogue Café on Localization, held on 11–12 August 2026 in Herat, successfully provided an inclusive and participatory platform for humanitarian and development stakeholders to discuss the current state of localization, share experiences, identify key barriers, and develop practical priorities for the Western Region. Organized by COAR through the Afghanistan Localization Lab (ALL) with financial support from SDC, the event brought together diverse stakeholders to strengthen local leadership, build trust, and promote more equitable partnerships.

The discussions confirmed that meaningful localization in Afghanistan must go beyond financial transfers to encompass local leadership, shared decision-making, equitable partnerships, institutional capacity strengthening, mutual accountability, community ownership, and meaningful participation of women and local actors. Participants identified persistent barriers, including limited direct and predictable funding, unequal partnership arrangements, administrative and compliance constraints, institutional capacity gaps, and insufficient participation of local organizations in strategic decision-making.

The Dialogue Café also contributed to strengthening relationships and mutual understanding among stakeholders and reinforced the value of ALL as a platform for dialogue, learning, coordination, and collective advocacy on localization. Participants expressed support for continued collaboration, increased investment in Afghan organizations, stronger local leadership, and more inclusive and participatory decision-making processes.

Overall, the Western Regional Dialogue Café generated practical recommendations and priority actions that can inform future localization efforts in the Western Region and contribute to the broader national localization agenda. It reaffirmed that sustainable and contextually appropriate humanitarian and development action in Afghanistan depends on empowering Afghan organizations and communities to meaningfully influence, participate in, and lead responses that affect their communities.

Photos:















