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## Localization of Humanitarian Logistics

### Moving from Strategic Intent to Implementation

Frennesson, Lina

2025

*Document Version:*

Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

[Link to publication](#)

*Citation for published version (APA):*

Frennesson, L. (2025). *Localization of Humanitarian Logistics: Moving from Strategic Intent to Implementation*. [Doctoral Thesis (compilation), Engineering Logistics]. Department of Industrial and Mechanical Sciences.

*Total number of authors:*

1

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# Localization of Humanitarian Logistics

## Moving from Strategic Intent to Implementation

LINA FRENNESSON

DIVISION OF ENGINEERING LOGISTICS | FACULTY OF ENGINEERING | LUND UNIVERSITY





# Localization of Humanitarian Logistics

Moving from Strategic Intent to Implementation

Lina Frennesson



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DOCTORAL THESIS

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To be defended at M:B, Lund University, November 21<sup>st</sup>, 2025, 09:00.

*Faculty opponent*

Dr. Jonas Stumpf, Kühne Logistics University, Germany

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| <b>Organization</b><br>LUND UNIVERSITY<br>Department of Mechanical Engineering Sciences<br>Division of Engineering Logistics<br>Author(s)<br>Lina Frennesson                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                             |                            | <b>Document name</b><br>DOCTORAL THESIS<br><b>Date of issue</b> 20251121<br>Sponsoring organization<br>Crafoord Foundation |       |
| <b>Title and subtitle</b><br>Localization of Humanitarian Logistics: Moving from Strategic Intent to Implementation                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                      |                            |                                                                                                                            |       |
| <b>Abstract</b><br><p>The international humanitarian system has, since the 19th century, been activated during large-scale disasters when the capacities of the affected countries are overwhelmed. It comprises international humanitarian organizations (IHOs) and is funded by a variety of donors. Recently, this system has faced increasing criticism, mainly because of its failure to empower and include local and national actors (LNAs). LNAs should have the legitimacy to control disaster response, and they often play a vital role within their own countries. However, within the current system, they often function as subcontractors without decision-making authority over resources. Localization aims to address these shortcomings by making aid more locally led. This is seen as "the right thing to do" through rebalancing power and as a way to make humanitarian assistance more efficient, effective, sustainable, and culturally sensitive. Although localization is not new, it has gained momentum over the past decade through various initiatives. Localization encompasses all aspects of humanitarian assistance. This doctoral thesis focuses on humanitarian logistics, which involves managing goods, services, and related information through supply chains. Since logistics account for up to 80% of humanitarian aid costs, localizing logistics would significantly shift responsibility to national and local actors. Progress on the localization agenda has been slow, and several challenges still persist. There is little agreement within the system on what localization actually means. Different interpretations lead IHOs to strengthen their own local offices instead of external actors who are more locally embedded and aligned with local norms and values. IHOs are influenced by external pressures that push them away from localization. Localization also encounters country-specific contextual challenges that require adjustments. This thesis addresses these issues primarily from the perspective of IHOs, as their role is crucial for advancing the localization agenda. The aim is to explore and explain the concept of localization of humanitarian logistics from a top-down perspective, focusing on the path from strategic intent to implementation. This objective is achieved through three qualitative studies. The first is an interview study, the second is an expert elicitation study, and the third is a case study. Together, the three studies offer different perspectives and nuances on localization in humanitarian logistics. The findings reveal that actors within the humanitarian system perceive localization in three main ways, which hinder the development of a clear strategic plan. The studies also highlight several challenges to localization. These include reasons for IHOs to either centralize or decentralize, instead of localizing. The thesis further suggests measures to address several of these challenges. Above all, the humanitarian system needs greater unity to tackle issues that span the system as a whole. Individual IHOs can also develop new strategies for internal organization. This thesis is the first to examine the localization of humanitarian logistics, making significant contributions to research and practice. Most importantly, it enhances the understanding of localization and its complexity by clarifying what localization involves, why its implementation has been slow, and what solutions may help overcome current barriers. Other theoretical contributions to humanitarian logistics include updating the definition of humanitarian logistics, challenging the assumptions of IHOs as the primary decision-makers and implementers, and reconceptualizing the role of IHOs in this context. The thesis also adds to paradox theory by engaging a growing research stream that distinguishes between interorganizational and intraorganizational tensions in supply chain studies. Practically, the thesis can help stakeholders build a shared vision of localization and help IHOs understand the forces pushing them in different directions. Furthermore, it offers pathways for IHOs by proposing a roadmap, responses to tensions, and a concrete example of how localization can be achieved. Societally, understanding localization deepens the comprehension of the humanitarian system, which is shaped not only by aid objectives but also by global forces and broader mandates.</p> |                            |                                                                                                                            |       |
| <b>Keywords:</b> Localization, humanitarian logistics, humanitarian supply chains, the international humanitarian system, locally-led, preparedness, logistics capacities, paradox theory, multi-national corporations                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                   |                            |                                                                                                                            |       |
| Classification system and/or index terms (if any)                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                        |                            |                                                                                                                            |       |
| Supplementary bibliographical information                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                |                            | <b>Language</b> English                                                                                                    |       |
| <b>ISSN</b> and key title                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                |                            | <b>ISBN</b> 978-91-8104-743-1 (print)<br>978-91-8104-744-8 (PDF)                                                           |       |
| Recipient's notes                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                        | <b>Number of pages</b> 118 |                                                                                                                            | Price |
|                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                          | Security classification    |                                                                                                                            |       |

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# Localization of Humanitarian Logistics

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Lina Frennesson



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Paper 3 © 2024 The authors. Published by Wiley Periodicals LLC

Paper 4 © 2025 The author. (Manuscript unpublished)

Paper 5 © 2025 The authors. (Manuscript unpublished)

### **Published by:**

Department of Industrial and Mechanical Sciences

Faculty of Engineering

Lund University

Lund 2025

ISBN 978-91-8104-743-1 (print)

ISBN 978-91-8104-744-8 (electronic)

Printed in Sweden by Media-Tryck, Lund University,  
Lund, 2025



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**MADE IN SWEDEN** 

*To Elsie, Lilly, and Gunnar*

# Acknowledgements

My PhD journey is coming to an end, and I am filled with mixed emotions: joy, pride, and uncertainty about what comes next. It has been an exciting journey, challenging and rewarding at the same time, with this past year representing one of the most intense of my life. I am mostly glad that I have reached this point, with this doctoral thesis largely representing the knowledge gained as a PhD student. Throughout, I have been blessed to have so many wonderful and supportive people by my side, cheering me on and making me stronger. I will try to express what each of you has meant to me.

To my main supervisor, Joakim Kembro, I owe you a debt of gratitude. Without you, none of this would have been possible. You have guided me while also allowing me to make my own decisions. Like Mowgli learned from Baloo in “The Jungle Book”, I have learned everything about academia and the PhD process from you. You have consistently taken the time to support, challenge, and encourage me. Some of your soundbites will always stay with me. And yes, “words matter.”

To my co-supervisor, Marianne Jahre, it has been a privilege to pick your brain on important matters, as your knowledge in both the field and research is vast. I am very grateful for your support, both academically and personally. You also provided calm during times of chaos, and the experiences you have shared with me have been a guiding light. I will always be thankful that you encouraged me to focus on my maternity leave and not let the PhD work overshadow that important time in my life.

To my co-authors, the time I spent with you was incredibly valuable. I learned much from working with you and observing how you tackled academic challenges. Your input helped me improve in ways I could not have on my own. I specifically want to thank Harwin de Vries for consistently dedicating time to providing feedback and discussing my research.

To all my colleagues, thank you for always supporting me and making the time spent at the office more enjoyable. I would also like to extend my gratitude to Ala Arvidsson for the insightful comments during the pre-defense, which greatly elevated this thesis.

To all of the participants in my studies, thank you for sharing your time and knowledge, making this thesis possible. A warm thanks to the “Case Organization” and its representatives for allowing me access to this interesting case and for hosting me during my field trip.

To my fellow PhD students, having such a wonderful group of people to share this journey with is a luxury. We have shared laughter, tears, tips, and tricks along the way, which have been invaluable. Some of you have finished, some are still underway. A special thanks to Ebba and Lina, who were with me from the start and

with whom I have shared many ups and downs, joy, and friendship. I will never forget our COVID times. I have also had the benefit of bonding with international PhD students in my field, especially during conferences, making me feel less lonely. To Félicia: your encouraging words stayed on my whiteboard for the last year of my PhD, reminding me of you and our friendship.

To my friends, I am lucky to have you in my life. Not only are you a bunch of fun people to be around, but you never hesitate to help when needed. I am so grateful for all of you. A special thanks to my “extended family” in Malmö/ Furulund/ Karlskrona: Amanda, Johan, Frida, Björn, Johanna, Erik, Evelina, and Gustaf, who I can always rely on, in good times and bad.

To my family—my parents Ann and Ulf, my sister Johanna, my brother Jonas with families—thank you for always believing in me, sometimes more than I believe in myself. I can always turn to you for support, cheers, and encouragement to keep going. To my parents-in-law, Christina and Björn, thank you for your endless support. You are always there to help out in tough times, with nothing but smiles on your faces.

To my little family—Elsie, Lilly, and Gunnar—you mean the world to me. You force me to step out of my PhD bubble and focus on what truly matters in life. If there is one thing I have looked forward to over this past year, it is spending more quality time with you, and I intend to do just that from now on.

Lina

Lund, September 2025

# Abstract

The international humanitarian system has, since the 19th century, been activated during large-scale disasters when the capacities of the affected countries are overwhelmed. The system comprises international humanitarian organizations (IHOs), including UN agencies, international non-governmental organizations (INGOs), and the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC), and it is funded by a variety of donors, most of whom are institutional. Recently, this system has faced increasing criticism, mainly because of its failure to empower and include local and national actors (LNAs) in the system, which ultimately reduces their aid dependency. LNAs should have the legitimacy to control disaster response, and they often play a vital role in disaster management within their own countries. However, within the current humanitarian system, they often function as subcontractors without decision-making authority over resources.

Localization aims to address these shortcomings by making aid more locally led. This is seen as “the right thing to do” through rebalancing power and as a way to make humanitarian assistance more efficient, effective, sustainable, and culturally sensitive. Although the idea of localization is not new, it has gained momentum over the past decade through various initiatives, such as the Grand Bargain. Localization encompasses all aspects of humanitarian assistance. This doctoral thesis focuses on humanitarian logistics, which involves managing goods, services, and related information through supply chains. Since logistics account for up to 80% of humanitarian assistance costs, localizing logistics would significantly shift responsibility to national and local actors. This could serve as a starting point for progress, rather than attempting a complete system overhaul all at once.

Progress on the localization agenda has been slow, and several challenges still persist. There is little agreement within the system on what localization actually means. Different interpretations lead IHOs to strengthen their own local offices instead of empowering external actors who are more locally embedded and aligned with local norms and values. IHOs are also influenced by external pressures that push them away from localization. For instance, they face challenges connected to their mandate as they are pressured to respond to rising humanitarian needs with shrinking budgets. Localization also encounters country-specific contextual challenges that require adjustments. Overall, the localization agenda needs a clearer definition, and its challenges must be better understood and addressed.

This thesis addresses these issues primarily from the perspective of IHOs, as their role is crucial for advancing the localization agenda. The aim is *to explore and explain the concept of localization of humanitarian logistics from a top-down perspective, focusing on the path from strategic intent to implementation*. This objective is achieved through three qualitative studies. The first study involves interviews with 28 respondents from 12 different IHOs who have extensive

experience in humanitarian logistics or localization. The second study relies on email conversations and questionnaires with 16 researchers and 13 practitioners in humanitarian logistics. The third is a case study of one IHO, the Case Organization, and its localization process, based on interviews with 46 respondents from the organization, donors, and local government representatives, as well as 22 related documents.

Together, the three studies offer different perspectives and nuances on localization in humanitarian logistics. The findings reveal that actors within the humanitarian system perceive localization in three main ways, which hinder the development of a clear strategic plan for implementation. The studies also highlight several challenges to localization. These include reasons for IHOs to either centralize or decentralize, instead of localize. Other obstacles stem from IHOs' perceptions of local actors and their capacities, which may be influenced by contextual factors or Western-centric assumptions shaping the broader humanitarian system. A significant barrier is the donor system, which is not designed to fund LNAs directly. The thesis further suggests measures to address several of these challenges. Above all, the humanitarian system needs greater unity and collaboration to tackle issues that span the system as a whole. Individual IHOs can also develop new strategies for internal organization. For example, IHOs could reassign responsibilities so that a dedicated group focuses on advancing localization while other parts of the organization continue to fulfil their humanitarian assistance mandates.

This thesis is the first to examine the localization of humanitarian logistics, making significant contributions to both research and practice. Most importantly, it enhances the understanding of localization and its complexity by clarifying what localization involves, why its implementation has been slow, and what solutions may help overcome current barriers. Other theoretical contributions to humanitarian logistics include updating the definition of humanitarian logistics, challenging the assumptions of IHOs as the primary decision-makers and implementers, and reconceptualizing the role of IHOs in this context. The thesis also adds to paradox theory by engaging a growing research stream that distinguishes between interorganizational and intraorganizational tensions in supply chain studies and identifying system-level tensions that are often neglected. Practically, the thesis can help stakeholders build a shared vision of localization. The thesis provides a solid basis for IHOs to understand the forces pushing them in different directions and reflect on their norms and values underpinning humanitarian assistance, which may also hinder localization. Furthermore, it offers pathways for IHOs by proposing a roadmap, responses to paradoxical tensions, and a concrete example of how localization can be achieved. Societally, understanding localization deepens the overall comprehension of the humanitarian system, which is shaped not only by aid objectives but also by global forces and broader mandates. In this way, the thesis contributes to wider societal knowledge.

# Populärvetenskaplig sammanfattning

Det internationella humanitära systemet har, sedan 1800-talet, aktiverats vid storskaliga katastrofer när de drabbade ländernas kapacitet inte har räckt till. Systemet består av internationella humanitära organisationer (IHO:er), däribland FN-organ, internationella icke-statliga organisationer (NGO:er) och Internationella rödakors- och rödahalvmånefederationen (IFRC), och finansieras huvudsakligen av institutionella givare. På senare tid har systemet mött växande kritik, särskilt för sin oförmåga att inkludera och stärka lokala och nationella aktörer (LNA:er) och därigenom minska deras biståndsberoende. LNA:er bör ha legitimitet att leda katastrofinsatser och spelar ofta en central roll i sina egna länder. I det nuvarande systemet agerar de dock ofta som underleverantörer utan inflytande över resurser och beslut.

Lokalisering syftar till att åtgärda dessa brister genom att göra biståndet mer lokalt lett. Det framhålls både som ”det rätta att göra” genom att återställa maktbalansen och som ett sätt att göra humanitärt bistånd mer effektivt, hållbart och kulturellt förankrat. Även om idén om lokalisering inte är ny, har den fått ökad betydelse under det senaste decenniet genom initiativ som ’the Grand Bargain’. Lokalisering omfattar alla aspekter av humanitärt bistånd. Denna avhandling fokuserar särskilt på humanitärlogistik, det vill säga hanteringen av varor, tjänster och relaterad information i försörjningskedjor. Eftersom logistiken står för upp till 80 procent av biståndskostnaderna, skulle en lokalisering innebära ett betydande ansvarsskifte till nationella och lokala aktörer. Detta skulle kunna fungera som en startpunkt för utveckling, snarare än att försöka genomföra en total systemförändring på en gång.

Trots tydliga fördelar går utvecklingen mot lokalisering långsamt och flera hinder kvarstår. Det råder begränsad samsyn inom det humanitära systemet kring vad lokalisering egentligen innebär. Otydligheterna leder till att IHO:er i hög grad stärker sina egna lokala kontor i stället för att stärka externa aktörer som är mer lokalt förankrade och representerar lokala normer och värderingar. Dessutom påverkas IHO:er av yttre tryck som förskjuter fokus från lokalisering. Till exempel står de inför utmaningar kopplade till sitt mandat eftersom de pressas att möta ökande humanitära behov med minskad budget. Lokalisering utmanas också av kontextuella faktorer på landsnivå som kräver anpassning. Sammantaget behöver agendan tydliggöras och dess hinder hanteras på ett systematiskt sätt.

Avhandlingen belyser dessa frågor främst ur IHO:ers perspektiv, då deras roll är central för att driva lokaliseringsagendan. Syftet är att utforska och förklara lokalisering av humanitärlogistik ur ett top-down-perspektiv, med fokus på hur man kan röra sig från strategiska ambitioner till praktiskt genomförande. Tre kvalitativa studier ligger till grund för analysen. Den första bygger på intervjuer med 28 respondenter från 12 IHO:er med bred erfarenhet av humanitärlogistik eller

lokalisering. Den andra utgår från mejlkonversationer och frågeformulär med 16 forskare och 13 praktiker inom området. Den tredje är en fallstudie av en specifik IHO och dess lokaliseringsprocess, baserad på 46 intervjuer med representanter från organisationen, givare och lokala myndigheter samt 22 relevanta dokument.

Studierna bidrar med olika perspektiv och nyanser på lokalisering inom humanitärlogistik. Resultaten visar att aktörer inom det humanitära systemet tolkar lokalisering på tre huvudsakliga sätt, vilket försvårar utvecklingen av en sammanhållen strategi. Dessutom identifieras flera hinder, däribland spänningar kring centralisering kontra decentralisering, IHO:ers syn på lokala aktörers kapacitet, samt givarsystemets bristande anpassning för direkt finansiering av lokala och nationella aktörer. Avhandlingen föreslår åtgärder för att hantera dessa utmaningar. Framför allt krävs ökad samordning inom det humanitära systemet som helhet, men även att enskilda IHO:er utvecklar nya interna strategier. Exempelvis, kan IHO:er separera uppgifter där en särskild grupp driver på utvecklingen av lokalisering, samtidigt som andra delar av organisationen fortsätter att uppfylla sina humanitära mandat.

Avhandlingen är den första som specifikt undersöker lokalisering av humanitärlogistik och gör därmed viktiga bidrag till både forskning och praktik. Teoretiskt bidrar den genom att klargöra vad lokalisering innebär, varför implementeringen går långsamt, och vilka lösningar som kan bidra till att övervinna hindren. Den utmanar också etablerade antaganden om IHO:er som primära beslutsfattare och genomförare, föreslår en uppdaterad definition av humanitärlogistik samt omdefinierar IHO:ers roll i detta sammanhang. Dessutom bidrar avhandlingen till paradoxteorin genom att urskilja spänningar på både inter- och intraorganisatorisk nivå i försörjningskedjor samt lyfta fram systemnivåspänningar som ofta förbises. Praktiskt ger den stöd för att skapa en gemensam vision om lokalisering, erbjuder IHO:er en färdplan och verktyg för att hantera paradoxala spänningar samt presenterar ett konkret exempel på hur lokalisering kan förverkligas. Att förstå lokalisering innebär också en ökad förståelse för det humanitära systemet som till mångt och mycket påverkas av globala krafter och andra ändamål än enbart bistånd. Avhandlingen bidrar därför till en djupare samhällsförståelse.

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## List of abbreviations

ICRC = International Committee of the Red Cross

IFRC = International Federation of the Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies

IHS = International Humanitarian System

IHO = International Humanitarian Organization

INGO = International Non-Governmental Organization

LNAs = Local and National Actors

NGO = Non-Governmental Organization

SNF = Specialized Nutritious Food

SDGs = Sustainable Development Goals

UN = United Nations

USAID = United States Agency for International Development

# List of appended papers

## *Paper 1*

Frennesson, L., Kembro, J., de Vries, H., Van Wassenhove, L., & Jahre, M. (2021). Localisation of logistics preparedness in international humanitarian organisations. *Journal of Humanitarian Logistics and Supply Chain Management*, 11(1), 81-106.

## *Paper 2*

Frennesson, L., Kembro, J., de Vries, H., Jahre, M., & Van Wassenhove, L. (2022). International humanitarian organizations' perspectives on localization efforts. *International Journal of Disaster Risk Reduction*, 83, 103410.

## *Paper 3*

Kembro, J., Kunz, N., Frennesson, L., & Vega, D. (2024). Revisiting the definition of humanitarian logistics. *Journal of Business Logistics*, 45(2), e12376.

## *Paper 4*

Frennesson, L. Unpacking and managing tensions for integrating specialized nutritious food into national supply chains: a paradox theory perspective. Submitted to the *Journal of Business Logistics*, under review.

## *Paper 5*

Frennesson, L., & Kembro, J. Transitioning from localization strategic intent to implementation: an in-depth case study.

## Contribution statement

### *Paper 1*

As the lead author, I was involved in all aspects of this paper, with the main contributions in the literature review, data collection and analysis, presenting results, discussion, and writing.

### *Paper 2*

As this paper is connected to the same study as Paper 1, I had a nearly equal role to play. My main contributions include conducting a literature review, collecting data, analyzing the results, presenting the findings, and writing up the report.

### *Paper 3*

For Paper 3, I was part of the research group from the beginning and was involved in generating ideas and clarifying issues with the current definition, with a specific focus on humanitarianism. I assisted in conducting the literature search and contributed to writing specific sections related to humanitarianism and localization in the literature review and discussion.

### *Paper 4*

I am the sole author of this paper.

### *Paper 5*

As the lead author, I have played a significant role in all aspects of the paper and am solely responsible for idea generation, data collection, and analysis.



# 1. Introduction

*This chapter provides the background of this doctoral thesis and outlines its purpose and research questions. It then explains how the included papers relate to the research questions. Next, the delimitations are described to clarify the scope of the thesis. The chapter concludes with an overview of the structure for reading the rest of the thesis.*

## 1.1 Background

When large-scale disasters strike and the capacities of the affected countries are overwhelmed, an international humanitarian system (IHS) stands ready to respond to their effects, often referred to as humanitarian assistance. This predominantly donor-funded system comprises various international humanitarian organizations (IHOs), including United Nations (UN) agencies, international non-governmental organizations (INGOs), and the International Federation of the Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC)—often residing in Global North countries. The IHS dates back to the mid-nineteenth century and has become a multi-billion-dollar sector, employing hundreds of thousands of people (Bennett et al., 2016; Alexander & Parker, 2020). Over the years, it has saved millions of lives, improved public health, and built stronger communities in crisis (Spiegel et al., 2025). The system can be mobilized quickly to organize and coordinate disaster relief operations, often within 72 hours after a disaster occurs (see, e.g., UNHCR, 2025; UNICEF, 2025; ICR, 2025). Due to the actors' extensive experience in humanitarian assistance, there is a wide range of skills and expertise available within the system.

Despite the system's global achievements and benefits, it has been increasingly criticized by academics and practitioners in the humanitarian sector over the last decade. Several proponents of change have argued that the IHS is no longer fit for purpose and cannot handle the rising global challenges. According to OCHA (2025a), by the end of May 2025, 300 million people urgently needed humanitarian assistance or protection due to the multiple disasters worldwide. Out of these, 181 million people were targeted to receive help, requiring 45.3 billion dollars. There are two main drivers behind these increasing needs: conflicts and climate change, and more and more countries experience recurrent, protracted crises (OCHA, 2024; Urquhart et al., 2022). At the same time, funding is decreasing, resulting in reduced budgets and hyper-prioritized response plans (OCHA, 2025a). The sudden closure of USAID caused further disruptions in an already fragile system, forcing many

programs to shut down abruptly (Spiegel et al., 2025). As of August 2025, only 18.1% of the required funding has been received (OCHA, 2025b).

In addition to these worldwide trends, the way that the IHS functions has also received heavy criticism (Bennett, 2023; Alexander, 2023). The IHS is intended to complement the existing national disaster-relief capacities but has long been accused of excluding local and national actors (LNAs) from meaningful participation and decision-making in their own countries. LNAs represent an array of actors in the Global South, such as governments, local and national non-governmental organizations (NGOs), civil society, women-led, and community-based organizations (Robillard et al., 2021). Typically, they play a significant role in disaster response within their country, but in the current IHS, they do so as subcontractors without decision-making authority over resources (Roepstorff, 2020). As a result, there is a power imbalance where Global North actors “dominate and dictate the rules” of humanitarian assistance (Roepstorff, 2020, p. 3). This is further reflected in the structures and processes within the IHS that are considered bureaucratic and biased toward the Global North. They create high entry barriers for LNAs, leading to legitimacy issues in disaster-prone Global South countries and increased aid dependency (Ayobi et al., 2017; Barbelet et al., 2021). One recent example is the response to COVID-19, where African countries depended on Global North states for sufficient aid and were treated unfairly in vaccine distribution (United Nations, 2020).

Several attempts have been made to reform the IHS in order to address these multiple concerns. One of the most prominent aims concerns the empowering and strengthening of LNAs’ disaster-relief capacities while including them in the IHS on equal terms. This aim is commonly referred to as localization, although other terms, such as local solutions and decolonization of aid, are also used (Robillard et al., 2021). Localization is both seen as a panacea for the shortcomings of the IHS and “the right thing to do”—giving back power and resources where they belong (Robillard et al., 2021). Including LNAs in the IHS is considered critical to enhancing the overall capacity, efficiency, and effectiveness of humanitarian assistance (OCHA, 2023). For example, one report suggests that local responses can be up to 32% more cost-efficient than international ones due to avoiding international overhead and salary costs (Cabot Venton et al., 2022). Strengthening and empowering LNAs are also seen as having multiple benefits for the local population. One key advantage is that LNAs are present on the ground and can respond immediately when disasters strike (Ramalingam et al., 2013). Their constant presence also facilitates better bridging between response and recovery, leading to more sustainable interventions (De Geoffroy & Grunewald, 2017). Letting LNAs oversee disaster response in their own countries further allows for a culturally tailored approach and higher legitimacy and trust within affected populations. LNAs are often recognized for having context-specific knowledge and skills that IHOs often lack or undervalue. Strengthening LNAs’ capacities also aims

to build local preparedness. This can lead to increased self-reliance, reducing dependence on international aid over time (Van Brabant & Patel, 2018).

The idea of localization is not new, but it has gained more acclaim and support in the last decade with the rise of several international initiatives representing a strategic intent by the IHS. The most prominent is the Grand Bargain—signed by the largest IHOs and donors at the World Humanitarian Summit in 2016—aiming at transferring 25% of funding directly to LNAs by 2020 (Agenda for Humanity, 2016). Other initiatives include the Charter for Change, the Pledge for Change, and several of the SDGs, all pledging various members of the IHS to commit to more locally led responses (Charter4Change, 2025; United Nations, 2019).

Despite the IHS's emphasis on localization and its prominence, large-scale implementation efforts are lacking. Some IHOs do put their words into action, but overall, there is a lack of commitment in turning strategic intent into implementation (Robillard et al., 2021). The Global Humanitarian Overview 2025 described localization progress as “incremental” and “slow and challenging” (OCHA, 2024). The IASC (2024, p. 3) further concluded that the IHS has “failed to increase funding, capacity development, and equitable and meaningful partnerships and participation for local actors.” The initial localization commitments have even been scaled down; for example, the Grand Bargain was remade to Grand Bargain 3.0 with fewer concrete targets (IASC, 2023). In the Grand Bargain 3.0, the 25% goal of directly funding LNAs has been removed. This could be due to the poor results over the years. As an example of the failing implementation, direct funding to LNAs has fluctuated between 1.7% to 4.5% over 2017 to 2023—far from the target. The latest numbers show a continuation of this trend, particularly in the Grand Bargain signatories. In 2024, they provided only 4.4% of funding to LNAs, with 0.6% reaching them directly (OCHA, 2024).

The slow progress of localization indicates that the agenda faces major challenges that must be analyzed and addressed. First, academic research on localization is scarce, which calls for various perspectives to shed more light on the concept. So far, research has focused on capacity-development processes led by LNAs and supported by international actors within the disaster risk reduction field (e.g., Scott et al., 2016; Hagelsteen & Becker, 2013; Kong et al., 2020; Albris et al., 2020). This bottom-up approach remains critical and relevant but is insufficient to fully understand the complexity of the localization agenda. *This doctoral thesis aims to complement the bottom-up view by studying localization from the top-down with a particular focus on humanitarian logistics (see Figure 1.1), which has received little attention in academic research.* The top-down approach entails considering the actors in the IHS and their views and actions on localization. This is because the IHS is currently setting the rules for how and when LNAs engage in humanitarian assistance (Roepstorff, 2020). As such, their role in empowering and strengthening the capacities of LNAs is vast, and IHOs' and donors' views are, therefore, important to understand. In fact, these actors are considered important enablers in

advancing the localization agenda (Robillard et al., 2021). *The thesis focuses primarily on IHOs, as the implementation of set localization goals in the IHS falls on them.* Being the primary recipient of international humanitarian funding means they have access to resources, capacities, and expertise that many practitioners argue must be shared with LNAs. For example, De Geoffroy and Grunewald (2017, p. 4) call for a “shift in power relations between actors, both in terms of strategic decision-making and control of resources.” In other words, IHOs must ‘let go’ of control and let LNAs decide how to manage their activities and resources, offering their knowledge and experience to aid them in this task. The focus on humanitarian logistics in localization means that *the thesis primarily considers a subset of humanitarian assistance that includes managing goods, services, and related information throughout the supply chain, from procurement to distribution to affected populations and waste management* (Thomas & Kopczak, 2005). Its localization would thus mean that LNAs control the supply chains at a national level and have the resources necessary to perform these activities.



**Figure 1.1.** Schematic overview of the main concepts in the thesis and how they are connected

Second, despite the strategic intent, there is a lack of consensus within the IHS regarding the meaning of localization. Several interpretations exist, ranging from IHOs conducting activities at the local level to a transformative change of the entire system (see, e.g., Wall and Hedlund, 2016; Barbelet et al., 2021; Robillard et al., 2021). This ambivalence creates simultaneous strategic aims that may align to varying degrees with the original idea behind localization. For example, IHOs may choose to strengthen their country offices’ capacities instead of national actors outside the IHS, thereby missing the goal of the localization agenda. Therefore, a clear definition of localization is crucial to guide the various actors in the IHS and ensure they work toward a common goal. Precise definitions are also important for academia, as vague descriptions can cause misunderstandings and obstruct communication among researchers (Suddaby, 2010; Podsakoff et al., 2016). On that note, humanitarian logistics, as the main focus of the thesis, needs clarification. Although not always explicitly stated, humanitarian logistics primarily centers on the IHS and the actions of IHOs in countries of the Global South, funded by donors

from the Global North. Other fields, such as disaster risk reduction, examine disaster management in countries where LNAs are responsible. As a result, the perspective on humanitarian logistics raises many questions about localization and what localization of humanitarian logistics means. Therefore, *understanding humanitarian logistics is a key component of this thesis and sets the boundaries for the approach to localization.*

Third, it is essential to understand why localization progress has stalled and how actors in the IHS perceive localization challenges. This analysis serves as the first step in finding relevant ways forward. Localization is complex due to the range of actors and countries involved. For example, localization is not a straight path; instead, each country context faces its specific challenges and enablers (Robillard et al., 2021), which necessitate adaptations and require resources. In addition, the IHOs are a heterogeneous group with diverse mandates and focus areas, and may need to adopt localization differently. They face challenges connected to their mandate as they are pressured to respond to increasing humanitarian needs under decreasing budgets (OCHA, 2025a). This implies that there are forces pushing IHOs in directions other than localization. Also, localization implementation is complicated by the bureaucratic structures and processes within the IHS that are not suited to localization (Robillard et al., 2021). Several researchers have argued that localization, in its current form, is inherently paradoxical because the IHS's structures and processes tend to reinforce and reproduce power rather than shift it (Mulder, 2023; Khoury & Scott, 2024).

Finally, it is essential to move beyond merely identifying difficulties and focus on exploring possible solutions to the challenges that hinder the progress of the localization agenda, going from strategic intent to implementation. As Shah (2005) states, it is easy to make grand promises without clearly demonstrating how they will be achieved. This has historically been a problem for the IHS. The current relief chief, Tom Fletcher, recently said that ideas exist in the sector, "but we have often suffered from a failure to implement and execute on those ideas" (The New Humanitarian, 2025). For real progress to occur, there must be a clear plan of action for the IHS to follow. For example, examining successful business cases can provide the inspiration needed to make meaningful progress. Additionally, emphasizing humanitarian logistics in localization efforts could serve as a starting point since it accounts for up to 80% of humanitarian assistance expenses (Van Wassenhove, 2006; Stumpf et al., 2017). This suggests that localizing these efforts would shift a large portion of the overall responsibility for humanitarian assistance to LNAs and may help address the call for more technical solutions, which are argued to hold the greatest potential for advancing localization (Alexander, 2022).

## 1.2 Purpose and research questions

The purpose of this doctoral thesis is to explore and explain the concept of localization of humanitarian logistics from a top-down perspective, focusing on the path from strategic intent to implementation. This purpose is explored through three research questions (RQs):

*RQ1: How can localization of humanitarian logistics be understood from a top-down perspective?*

The first research question (RQ1) lays the foundation for the thesis by scrutinizing both the localization and humanitarian logistics concepts. It focuses on understanding localization from a top-down perspective, acknowledging primarily the IHOs' role in making localization happen. This is important, as IHOs' visions shape the agenda and determine the pace and direction of localization of humanitarian logistics. Currently, numerous interpretations hinder implementation in line with the original localization aim. Therefore, clarifying the *strategic intent* within the IHO community is important and serves as a first step in uniting around a common understanding of localization. Furthermore, the lack of scientific research invites a proper investigation of the localization concept.

To fully answer RQ1, the concept of humanitarian logistics needs clarification. Humanitarian logistics is a research field with unique features, although not explicitly stated. For example, most studies focus on the IHS and the actions of IHOs in countries of the Global South, funded by donors from the Global North. Such a focus suggests that humanitarian logistics is primarily executed by the IHS, which has implications for localization. The thesis needs to answer questions such as “Is it possible to localize humanitarian logistics?” and “Is it still humanitarian logistics if those aims are accomplished?” This can only be done by an in-depth study of the definition of humanitarian logistics.

*RQ2: What are the main challenges and paradoxical tensions in localizing humanitarian logistics?*

The second research question (RQ2) considers *why* the IHS is slow to implement the localization strategy. It aims to cover the difficulties during the entire localization effort, from *strategic intent to implementation*. A deeper understanding of the IHS's difficulties with the localization agenda is crucial to suggest relevant actions to accelerate progress. These difficulties are formulated as challenges and paradoxical tensions. Challenges concern all difficulties that may be resolved with proper actions. Paradoxical tensions, on the other hand, are specific challenges composed of “contradictory yet interrelated elements that exist simultaneously and persist over time” (Smith & Lewis, 2011, p. 382).

RQ2 aims to illustrate challenges and tensions from the perspectives of IHOs and donors. Both are important because they make up the central part of the IHS. IHOs' views on difficulties are very relevant since they are responsible for implementing localization and must find ways to overcome challenges and respond to tensions. However, the donors control the funding, making their perspective essential to understanding the larger obstacles to the localization agenda.

*RQ3: How can localization challenges and tensions be addressed to support progress in localization of humanitarian logistics?*

The third research question (RQ3) shifts focus from challenges and tensions to solutions and responses. To advance the localization agenda, it is essential not only to identify the difficulties but also to demonstrate how they can be addressed. RQ3 covers *strategic intent to implementation*, with an emphasis on localization implementation as the final step in the process. RQ3 seeks to clarify how IHOs can approach localization to make progress on set localization goals by concretely outlining the necessary steps and success factors. This could inspire broader change within the IHS, which is highly desired. Paradox theory is a suitable lens also for understanding how IHOs can respond to paradoxical tensions, which might otherwise be seen as a significant barrier.

### 1.3 Connecting the research questions with the studies

The three research questions are addressed in the four (five) separate but connected papers listed below. Table 1.1 presents an overview of the connection between the research questions and papers.

1. Frennesson, L., Kembro, J., de Vries, H., Van Wassenhove, L., & Jahre, M. (2021). Localisation of logistics preparedness in international humanitarian organisations. *Journal of Humanitarian Logistics and Supply Chain Management*, 11(1), 81-106.
2. Frennesson, L., Kembro, J., de Vries, H., Jahre, M., & Van Wassenhove, L. (2022). International humanitarian organizations' perspectives on localization efforts. *International Journal of Disaster Risk Reduction*, 83, 103410.
3. Kembro, J., Kunz, N., Frennesson, L., & Vega, D. (2024). Revisiting the definition of humanitarian logistics. *Journal of Business Logistics*, 45(2), e12376.
4. Frennesson, L., Unpacking and managing tensions for integrating specialized nutritious food into national supply chains: a paradox theory perspective.
5. Frennesson, L., & Kembro, J. Transitioning from localization strategic intent to implementation: an in-depth case study.

**Table 1.1 Connecting research questions with the studies.**

| <b>Research questions</b>                                                                                                     | <b>Interview study</b> |                | <b>Expert elicitation study</b> | <b>Case study</b> |                |
|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------|----------------|---------------------------------|-------------------|----------------|
|                                                                                                                               | <b>Paper 1</b>         | <b>Paper 2</b> | <b>Paper 3</b>                  | <b>Paper 4</b>    | <b>Paper 5</b> |
| RQ1: How can localization of humanitarian logistics be understood from a top-down perspective?                                | X                      |                | X                               |                   | X              |
| RQ2: What are the main challenges and paradoxical tensions in localizing humanitarian logistics?                              | X                      | X              |                                 | X                 |                |
| RQ3: How can localization challenges and tensions be addressed to support progress in localization of humanitarian logistics? | X                      | X              |                                 | X                 | X              |

The first research question concerns how localization of humanitarian logistics can be understood from a top-down perspective. All studies contribute to answering this question. The primary source of evidence is Paper 1, which includes an empirical study of the IHO community's understanding of localization in a humanitarian logistics context. It shows the variety in how the IHO community views localization parameters and concludes by illustrating four dominant perspectives. Paper 3 clarifies the humanitarian logistics concept, which is needed to fully understand localization of humanitarian logistics. The paper scrutinizes the definition of humanitarian logistics and suggests a new updated version with accompanying properties. Paper 5 also contributes to RQ1 by concretely visualizing what localization of humanitarian logistics may look like.

The second research question aims to understand the challenges and paradoxical tensions within the localization agenda—from strategic intent to strategic implementation. Two studies resulting in three papers contribute to this understanding, mainly Papers 1, 2, and 4. Paper 1 identifies challenges related to the various localization views in the IHO community and shows the lack of implementation. Paper 2 showcases the overall challenges to localization at the strategic intent level and the forces pulling IHOs in strategic directions other than localization. This is done by comparing IHOs to multinational corporations (MNCs) (see, e.g., Bartlett & Ghoshal, 1988; Harzing, 2000; Benito, 2005), who can be viewed as IHOs' commercial equivalent. Paper 4 identifies and analyzes paradoxical tensions in one specific localization initiative, covering the implementation phase. These tensions are further explained by applying paradox theory (see, e.g., Poole & Van de Ven, 1989; Smith & Lewis, 2011).

The third research question goes beyond only understanding the challenges and paradoxical tensions and instead focuses on how they can be addressed to make progress on localization. Two studies and a large majority of the papers contribute to this aim. The first two papers originate from an empirical interview study, providing insights into IHOs' perceptions. Paper 1 suggests how to solve issues related to varying localization views. Paper 2 adds propositions for overcoming challenges at the strategic intent level. To address RQ3 at the strategy implementation level, empirical evidence from a case study is primarily used to examine how IHOs respond to tensions during localization and to explore the activities, resources, and actors involved in these efforts. Specifically, paper 4 proposes responses to the paradoxical tensions faced during localization implementation by applying paradox theory. Paper 5 provides insights into how a specific IHO has progressed with localization, offering unique practical knowledge and understanding. The IHO's process is described through the activities-resources-actors model (ARA) (see, e.g., Håkansson & Snehota, 1995), which provides structure and insights into how different elements interact.

## 1.4 Delimitations and borders of the thesis

The delimitations of this thesis are outlined as follows. First, the focus is on localization of humanitarian logistics rather than all aspects of humanitarian assistance. Specifically, it emphasizes empowering LNAs and strengthening their logistics capacity to manage the national supply chains of products and services during disaster responses. Second, related to this, the thesis adopts a top-down perspective, primarily considering the actors within the IHS and their views and actions regarding localization. The current structure of the IHS requires international actors' involvement in this process for change to occur. Notably, the thesis mainly examines the IHOs, responsible for implementing the localization goals endorsed by the IHS. Localization efforts also involve other important stakeholders, such as donors, who control the funds allocated to IHOs to perform necessary activities. The funding perspective is covered through secondary sources and interviews with IHO employees. Additionally, the perspectives from 10 donor representatives were added through interviews in the final study.

Hence, the thesis addresses one piece of the broader localization puzzle. For localization to happen, the top-down perspective considered in this thesis must be complemented with bottom-up approaches. Localization cannot be implemented without the involvement and willingness of the LNAs themselves. It is assumed that LNAs desire localization due to its numerous benefits to their populations and organizations. This assumption is supported by the rising demand from various stakeholders, especially LNAs themselves, to have more control over their own countries and to reduce aid dependency (OCHA, 2025c). The thesis briefly

discusses the opinions of LNAs, but including a broader range of perspectives is beyond the scope. Instead, this is an opportunity for future research.

Third, this thesis acknowledges the importance of context when discussing localization and primarily considers localization in countries less affected by conflicts or severe political instability. This is because localization is challenging to implement in politically unstable countries where LNAs do not respect humanitarian principles (Spiegel, 2017). The main goal of localization is to benefit the local population and the country. However, the objectives of self-reliance and aid independence cannot be achieved in a country that does not prioritize its population's best interests. In such cases, the IHS is necessary to independently provide aid to the local population (Spiegel, 2017). This is further discussed in the thesis.

## 1.5 Thesis structure

The chapters of the thesis are structured as follows. The next chapter provides the frame of reference, introducing the various concepts and literature that form the foundation for the thesis. The third chapter outlines the methodology, encompassing the philosophical stance and the methods employed. The fourth chapter presents and discusses the main findings from the five papers related to each research question. Finally, the fifth chapter offers a conclusion, outlines contributions, and suggests future research possibilities.

## 2. Frame of reference

*The chapter aims to position this doctoral thesis in current research and present the key concepts that inform localization of humanitarian logistics. First, a brief overview of the international humanitarian system is provided. This captures knowledge about humanitarian assistance, the historical origins, and recent criticisms of the international humanitarian system. Next, the concept of localization is presented, including a short introduction to strategic intent and implementation. After that, the concept of humanitarian logistics is introduced, followed by the main theoretical lenses used in this thesis. The chapter ends with a summary of the literature, captured in a conceptual framework.*

### 2.1 The International Humanitarian System

The International Humanitarian System (IHS) is an overall term that represents the international actors involved in delivering humanitarian assistance, that is, to help a population in need during and after a disaster or a crisis. This aim has many available terms (including humanitarian aid, humanitarian action, and humanitarian interventions). However, in this doctoral thesis, the following definition of humanitarian assistance provided by Urquhart et al. (2022) is used:

*“Humanitarian assistance is intended to save lives, alleviate suffering and maintain human dignity during and after human-made crises and disasters associated with natural hazards, as well as to prevent and strengthen preparedness for when such situations occur. Humanitarian assistance should be governed by the key humanitarian principles of humanity, impartiality, neutrality, and independence. These are the fundamental principles of the international Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement, which are reaffirmed in UN General Assembly resolutions and enshrined in numerous humanitarian standards and guidelines.”*

As indicated in the definition, the actors in the IHS distinguish themselves from others through their commitment to the principles of humanity, impartiality, neutrality, and independence. The principles are also what set humanitarian work apart from other forms of disaster relief in both academia and practice. Humanity entails alleviating human suffering whenever it is found, which is the core of any humanitarian endeavor (Tomasini & Van Wassenhove, 2009). Impartiality means humanitarian assistance is provided solely based on need, prioritizing the most urgent cases regardless of race, nationality, gender, religion, politics, or social class (UNHCR, 2025a). Neutrality states that humanitarian actors should avoid taking

sides in conflicts, while independence requires them to be autonomous and free from political control or subordination (UNHCR, 2025a).

The actors in the IHS comprise mainly large international humanitarian organizations (IHOs) and institutional donors—often based in the Global North. The affiliated IHOs typically include United Nations (UN) agencies, international non-governmental organizations (INGOs), and the International Federation of the Red Cross and the Red Crescent Societies (IFRC) (Robillard et al., 2021). The various types of organizations have different roles. The UN focuses on supporting national governments where needed (Natsios, 1995). The INGOs, conversely, work more independently from national host governments and thus have more autonomy (Stoddard, 2003). The IFRC, like INGOs, is independent of governments but differs in its unique position as an auxiliary to governments (Macleod, 2021). Almost every country has an IFRC national society, which is sometimes considered a local organization. The IHOs have different mandates and focus areas. They may, for example, have a certain part of the population in focus (e.g., children or the elderly), respond to a specific type of disaster (e.g., conflict, refugee crisis), or concentrate on a particular commodity (e.g., WASH, food). The institutional donors provide the bulk of the money to IHOs (Kovács & Spens, 2007). In addition, they often have their own organizations that participate in the response. Institutional donors engage in humanitarian assistance for various reasons, both for alleviating human suffering and protecting their interests in a country or a region (Olsen et al., 2003; Schiffing & Piecyk, 2014). When USAID funding was suddenly terminated, USAID consultants argued for its survival, stating that: “Foreign aid is not just charity—it’s an investment in stability, diplomacy, and American interests”<sup>1</sup>. This includes economic interests and foreign policy concerns.

The IHS is meant to complement the existing capacities within the disaster-affected countries. In fact, the local and national actors (LNAs) are the primary bearers of responsibility for managing disasters within their own countries. National governments and public authorities have the key task of protecting and assisting the affected population, as stated by human rights law (IASC, 2008). Public services, including police, fire rescue, and health, are included in this category. The municipal level should have the primary responsibility, whereas the other levels (subnational/national/international) are those of coordination (Alexander, 2005). When a large-scale disaster occurs, for which the LNAs’ capacities are insufficient, governments should declare a “state of emergency” to activate the IHS (OCHA, 2017).

Other important LNAs include various community and non-governmental organizations (NGOs). These actors range from national NGOs to various civil society organizations (CSOs), including faith-based organizations and community-

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<sup>1</sup> (<https://www.usaidstopwork.com>)

based organizations. National and local organizations are valuable in disaster response due to their local knowledge, strong connections to the people, and vast networks (McConnell & Drennan, 2006). They are often the first to respond to a disaster. Furthermore, the affected population in a disaster often has existing capacities and can offer substantial skills, knowledge, and other resources to complement the often-limited resources of governments (Pardasani, 2006; Perry, 2007; Méheux et al., 2010; Sheppard et al., 2013).

The IHS plays a significant part in the disaster relief operations worldwide, particularly in large-scale disasters that wipe out national capacities and human-made crises where the LNAs may lack the willingness or capacity to help the entire population. Most IHOs in the IHS have worldwide reach with the resources and capacities to respond anywhere within 72 hours (e.g., UNHCR, 2025b; UNICEF, 2025; IRC, 2025). Throughout its history, it has developed into the large industry it is today. The IHS is a multi-billion-dollar enterprise, with thousands of known organizations, employing hundreds of thousands of people (Bennett et al., 2016; Alexander & Parker, 2020). The numbers also show that the large IHOs are getting bigger and bigger. MSF, for example, quadrupled its budget between 2004 and 2019, while the WFP has increased its budget seven times since 1997 (Alexander & Parker, 2020). Partly due to this significant expansion, the IHS has been very successful in its mission. Today, humanitarian assistance saves more lives, cares for more wounded, and feeds more hungry people than ever before (Bennett et al., 2016). The number of deaths, diseases, and malnutrition in conflicts and disasters has dropped due to progress in clean water, sanitation, education, and shelter. Every year, tens of millions of people in emergencies get access to these basic needs. Despite this progress, the IHS is under heavy criticism and scrutiny. To fully understand why, a short historical review is provided.

### **2.1.1 Historic roots of the international humanitarian system**

The IHS has been developed since the mid-nineteenth century. The International Committee of the Red Cross's (ICRC) foundation in 1863 and the first Geneva Convention in 1864 marked the beginning of this system, which aimed to help wounded war combatants on both sides of a conflict (Bennett et al., 2016). As international fundraising and disaster response grew, so did European colonization in Asia and Africa. Humanitarianism was used as a control mechanism in the colonies, disguised by the supposed benefits (Davey, 2012). The current shape of the IHS was established after the First and Second World Wars with the formation of the United Nations and the creation of hundreds of NGOs, especially in the USA and Western Europe (Bennett et al., 2016).

The power of NGOs increased during the Cold War and because of decolonization (Davey et al., 2013). Newly established governments of the Global South needed skills and resources from the Global North NGOs as they were “struggling with

inadequate resources and infrastructure after the rapid withdrawal of the colonial powers” (Davey, 2013, p. 11). As such, decolonization contributed to a persistent resource gap and aid dependency that continues today. Some NGOs grew a stronger bond with their home governments due to geopolitical tensions, where they acted on their behalf. According to Barnett (2011, p. 107), states in the Global North were not only concerned with disaster relief but also believed that “their political, economic, and strategic interests were at stake.” In fact, history shows that humanitarian assistance has been used for political purposes since its inception. In addition to the examples above, Bennett et al. (2016) also cite instances of using humanitarian assistance to garner local support and bolster certain national groups.

### **2.1.2 Perceived issues and criticism with the IHS**

The IHS faces many issues today and is sometimes proclaimed a “broken system” that no longer fits its purpose (Spiegel, 2017; Harter, 2024). There are many reasons for this. First, the original intentions of the IHS can be compared to an emergency room, providing temporary relief (Dubois, 2018). However, this is not the picture today as conflicts that are getting more protracted (OCHA, 2024), meaning they have long-term “extreme, widespread and unpredictable needs exist alongside long-term structural vulnerabilities” (Bennett et al., 2016, p. 35). Hence, the IHS is no longer solely about providing temporary relief; instead, many IHOs are established in countries of the Global South through national or local offices and are often involved in development projects or ongoing operations (Van Wassenhove, 2006; Bhattacharya et al., 2014). Some critics argue that humanitarian mandates and methods are not designed to address these long-term crises and lack the appropriate tools (Bennett et al., 2016; Dubois, 2018). Additionally, climate change is driving disasters caused by “natural” hazards. For example, in 2023, 363 weather-related disasters affected at least 93.1 million people and caused thousands of deaths (OCHA, 2024). The IHS has not been able to meet these increasing needs worldwide.

Second, the IHS is a closed system to a relatively few but large IHOs and institutional donors, hindering its ability to meet the increasing needs. There are several aspects to this critique, including issues with the system and how it perceives humanitarian assistance and other actors outside the system. Some of these issues may be traced back to the historical development of the IHS. System-wise, the IHS has become increasingly bureaucratic and institutionally rigid (Davey et al., 2013). This causes a disconnect between the LNAs’ ways of working and the IHS’s processes, structures, and decision-making (Bennett et al., 2016). Also, the perceptions of the Western aid model and the long history of Global North IHOs giving humanitarian assistance to Global South countries have spurred the creation of hierarchies of rich vs. poor, safe vs. unsafe, giver vs. receiver, and capacitated vs. lacking capacity (Bankoff, 2001; Dubois, 2018). This further nurtures an aid

dependency within the Global South, which may be uncalled for. All of this means that IHOs are often accused of overlooking the capacities of various LNAs (Robillard et al., 2021). Both academics and practitioners agree that the power balance between LNAs and the IHS is highly uneven (Sphere, 2019; Clements et al., 2021; Khoury & Scott, 2024). Although national governments hold overall responsibility for disaster response and numerous national and local organizations are actively involved, IHOs often control key decisions and resources in the countries where they operate (Saez et al., 2021). LNAs are often relegated to the backseat, working as subcontractors to large IHOs and performing various activities at their request, for example, transportation and distribution, while taking the most risks (Khoury & Scott, 2024).

Further, the IHS has firm ties to Global North values and norms, which limit its view on who counts as a humanitarian actor and who can perform humanitarian work. For example, Currión (2018) explains that the entire IHS rests on a belief that in order to do humanitarian work, one must comply with the humanitarian principles. However, a few of the principles sit uneasily with current actors of the IHS. Whereas humanity and impartiality are emphasized as the primary principles of helping others (Slim, 2015; Schenkenberg van Mierop, 2016), neutrality has been debated in the humanitarian sector. Neutrality is meant to establish trust that no agendas beyond a humanitarian one are pursued (Schenkenberg van Mierop, 2016). However, this also implies that actors cannot engage in advocacy work or changes in society, as this can be seen as political. Some actors, specifically NGOs, may therefore consider their work as not adhering to neutrality (and that it should not) (Schenkenberg van Mierop, 2016).

Despite these questionable exceptions, humanitarian principles are still the primary way to distinguish humanitarian assistance. However, the narrow view of humanitarian assistance also means that other actors are excluded from participating despite their potential usefulness in conducting humanitarian work, limiting the potential capacity of the IHS. For example, actors such as businesses and the military play an important role in many disasters. The military is well-positioned to handle logistics operations in disaster response. In some countries, such as those in the Asia-Pacific region, the military is often regarded as a primary actor and is the first to respond (Caballero-Anthony et al., 2021). This contrasts with the Western view, which considers the military a last resort in humanitarian disasters because they are also an ‘instrument of war’ (Caballero-Anthony et al., 2021, p. 4). NGOs, often with Dunantist roots, refuse to work with the military because it threatens their humanitarian principles. Bennett et al. (2016, p. 53) argue that a “fuller recognition of the ‘complex heterogeneity’ of the various existing forms of humanitarianism, as they are understood across the South as well as the North, may help in reconceptualising humanitarianism beyond the current understanding(s) of the term in the formal humanitarian sector, and in accepting the legitimacy of other humanitarianisms beyond the traditional, Northern-based form”.

Third, a central issue concerns donor funds. The primary problem is that funding is far from enough to cover the needs. Over the past few years, most donors have cut their funding for humanitarian assistance, and 2024 saw the biggest drop in funding on record of 10% (ALNAP, 2025). 2025 started even worse with severe funding cuts in the first quarter, which forced the humanitarian community to drastically reprioritize its response (OCHA, 2025a). A second problem is that IHOs depend largely on only a handful of donors, making them very sensitive to their decisions (Bennett et al., 2016). For example, earlier this year, the largest donor, USAID, was terminated, leading to a significant drop in funding since they supplied 40% of all humanitarian funds (MSF, 2025).

Furthermore, IHOs' activities are limited by the views and values of institutional donors. The historical development shows that the IHS has deep ties with Western politics and (de)colonization, and may have other drivers than just needs. Funding often has specific characteristics that influence relief operations. It is common for funding to be earmarked for a particular disaster or region, to be restricted to a shorter timeframe, or to require extensive documentation and compliance (Wakolbinger & Toyasaki, 2023). The IHOs are therefore criticized for being motivated by interests other than humanitarianism: "Humanitarian choices aren't being guided by the needs of people affected by crises but by what will resonate better with donors and Western audiences – by what will be covered more by the media and bring in more funding" (Aloudat, 2025). This implies the failure of the principle of independence, as humanitarians are affected by donors using humanitarian assistance for political motives (Schenkenberg van Mierop, 2016).

## 2.2 Localization

Localization has become the ubiquitous term that reflects one of the advocated system changes: the process of empowering, strengthening, and including LNAs in the IHS. This suggests that LNAs, too, would have access to state donor funds, collaborate with IHOs on equal terms, and have more decision-making power over resources. Other terms that reflect this process include locally led, local humanitarian action, decolonization, and supporting local solutions (Barbelet, 2018).

The ideas behind localization are closely connected to the issues of the current IHS, its history of deep ties to Western politics, and its foundation in the values and cultures of Global North states. The localization agenda acknowledges the need to address humanitarian assistance's historical roots and give power and resources back to LNAs. The argument "because it is right" is frequently mentioned in localization reports (Robillard et al., 2021). However, the arguments for localization transcend the mere motivation of doing what is right. Several localization

proponents argue that including LNAs is important to adding to existing capacities within the IHS today, especially given the increasing needs arising from more protracted disasters (Bennett et al., 2016). It is often argued that LNAs have the capacity and indigenous knowledge that IHOs overlook, which could be better utilized (Kuipers et al., 2020).

In addition, putting LNAs in the driver's seat for handling disasters has many potential benefits for the affected population. First, it may increase the speed and effectiveness of response, as LNAs are often the first to respond and can activate large networks in the disaster-affected region (Ramalingam et al., 2013). Second, LNAs can provide culturally adapted responses and recovery by understanding local traditions, norms, and values (Duyne Barenstein & Leemann, 2012). In some countries, LNAs may be more trusted by other local actors or the population, and therefore possess more legitimacy (Caballero-Anthony et al., 2021). Third, LNAs remain involved after the immediate response and can more effectively bridge response and recovery (De Geoffroy & Grunewald, 2017). All of these points should enhance the effectiveness of national disaster relief.

Localization also implies a more efficient response to disasters. Flying in international personnel, equipment, and other resources is expensive (Van Brabant & Patel, 2018). One report states that a local response can actually become 32% less costly (Cabot Venton et al., 2022). By investing in localization, LNAs can increasingly handle disasters and decrease their aid dependency. In the long term, this implies a reduced need for international aid and funding when countries become more resilient and independent (Van Brabant & Patel, 2018). In this sense, localization also suggests that international actors can utilize their resources more effectively. Investing in both local and global capacities helps reduce vulnerability to disasters and enhances societal resilience (McBean & Rodgers, 2010; Bennett et al., 2016).

### **2.2.1 Localization strategic intent and implementation**

The need for localization has been embraced by the IHS, which has committed to several initiatives. The Grand Bargain is the largest, with currently 71 signatories, spanning all system actors, including state donors, UN agencies, INGOs, and the IFRC/ICRC. The Grand Bargain dates back to 2016 and the World Humanitarian Summit. One of the work streams committed the signatories to directly donate 25% of the global humanitarian funds to national and local responders by 2020, as well as to invest in their institutional capacities, including preparedness (Agenda for Humanity, 2016, p. 11). A second early initiative—the Charter for Change—pledged INGOs to commit to localization: “to practically implement changes to the way the Humanitarian System operates to enable more locally-led response” (Charter4Change, 2025). Another INGO-led initiative, the Pledge for Change, focuses on: “to encourage a more resilient, independent, and diverse civil society

that works in real solidarity with international organizations” (Pledge for Change, 2025). Finally, localization is visible in several of the SDGs, including Goal 11, “sustainable cities and communities,” and Goal 13, “climate action”. Target 13.1, for example, aims to “strengthen resilience and adaptive capacity to climate-related hazards and natural disasters in all countries” (United Nations, 2019).

The international initiatives correspond to a strategic intent of localization. Strategic intent is closely tied to the vision or symbolic aspect of strategy development and is a long-term aspiration that should drive an organization’s strategy (O’Shannassy, 2016). Creating a shared strategic intent is important in several aspects. First, it can motivate and energize employees and stakeholders by providing direction and meaning (Hamel & Prahalad, 1989). This enables organized action and gives legitimacy to leaders. Second, it can guide organizations’ work by shaping choices, priorities, and resource allocations over time (O’Shannassy, 2016).

However, turning strategic intent into implementation has proven difficult and received considerable criticism in the humanitarian sector (see, e.g., Alexander, 2022; Loy, 2024). Strategy implementation is defined by Lee and Puranam (2016, p. 1529) as “the extent to which an organization’s actions correspond to its strategic intentions.” It requires a company-wide effort with strategic goals aligned with key organizational factors (Porck et al., 2020). Researchers agree that implementing strategies is much harder than creating them, as it demands substantial and lasting changes across the entire organization. For non-profit organizations, like IHOs, there is extra complexity in managing “the pressures of fiscal, political and social concerns in addition to dividing attention among stakeholder groups” (Lewis et al., 2001, p. 8). Implementing strategies is often seen as less exciting than creating them and is filled with uncertainty about what is involved, where it starts, and where it ends (Alexander, 1991).

## 2.3 Humanitarian logistics

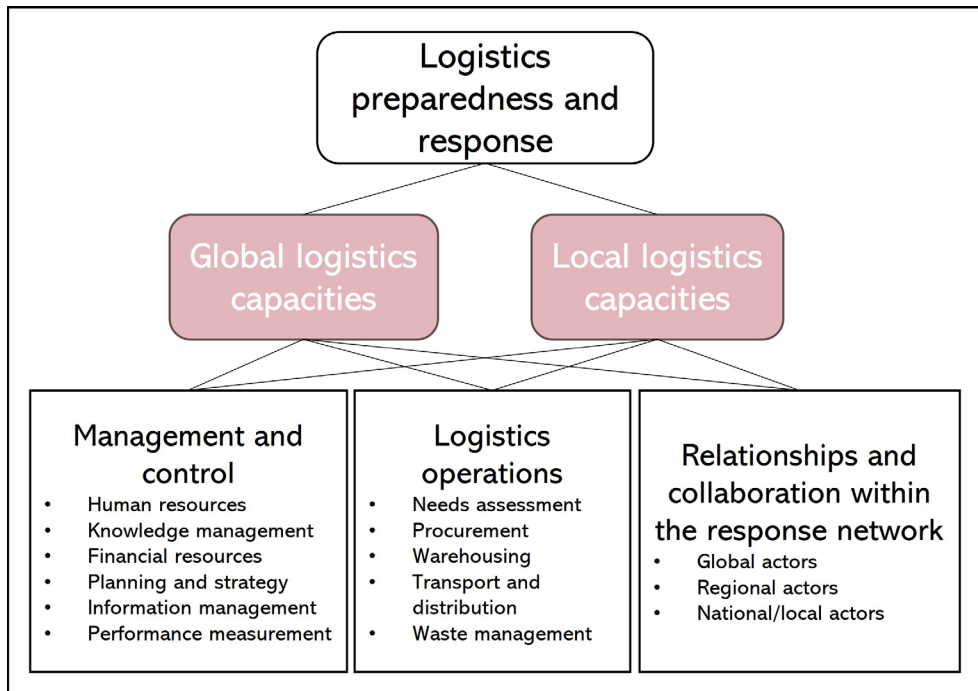
Humanitarian logistics (a concept that also includes humanitarian supply chain management) focuses specifically on logistics and supply chain management within humanitarian assistance (Pettit & Beresford, 2009). It spans a wide range of activities, also reflected in commercial logistics and supply chain management, such as procurement, transportation, warehousing, and distribution, but for humanitarian purposes. IHOs are key actors in humanitarian logistics and often take responsibility for ensuring vital goods and services reach the disaster-affected population. The importance of logistics when responding to disasters cannot be overstated. Although its role is often downplayed in humanitarian organizations, logistics constitutes up to 80% of disaster response costs, including the value of purchased items (Van Wassenhove, 2006; Stumpf et al., 2017).

Humanitarian logistics is a relatively new research area and has been a topic in its own right since the early 2000s, with an academic plethora growing during the 2000s (see, e.g., Altay & Green, 2006; Kovács & Spens, 2007; Van Wassenhove, 2006). Academic papers often refer to the definition provided by Thomas and Kopczak (2005, p. 2): “Humanitarian logistics is defined as the process of planning, implementing and controlling the efficient, cost-effective flow and storage of goods and materials, as well as related information, from the point of origin to the point of consumption for the purpose of alleviating the suffering of vulnerable people. The function encompasses a range of activities, including preparedness, planning, procurement, transport, warehousing, tracking and tracing, and customs clearance.”

Considering the logistics part in the humanitarian logistics concept, localizing it implies strengthening local logistics capacity, which can be derived from the logistics preparedness framework by Jahre et al. (2016). In the framework, different elements compose logistics preparedness, which in turn forms logistics response. These include management and control, referring to the systems, structures, and processes that are needed to manage various resources (Jahre et al., 2016). Another element involves designing, planning, training, implementing, and measuring logistics operations such as needs assessment, procurement, warehousing, and transportation. There is also an interorganizational element of logistics preparedness that showcases the need to establish relationships before the disaster (Jahre et al., 2016). As preparedness and the related response are multilevel concepts that must be established at all levels, from local to global, it is important to invest in both local and global capacities to help reduce vulnerability to disasters and enhance societal resilience (McBean & Rodgers, 2010; Bennett et al., 2016). Hence, the framework in Jahre et al. (2016) is adapted to include both global and local logistics capacities and see these as forming the response in addition to preparedness (see Figure 2.1). Global logistics capacities encompass management and control measures, as well as logistics operations and network relationships, at a global level. Similarly, local logistics capacities encompass the same elements at a local level.

Just like with humanitarian assistance, “humanitarian” is the word that distinguishes humanitarian logistics from other types of logistics (for example, commercial logistics). However, it is not clear from Thomas and Kopczak’s definition exactly what makes it unique, other than having a different purpose from commercial logistics. Since the definition is 20 years old, it might not reflect the current uses of the term, which may need to be more clearly defined. For example, papers on humanitarian logistics often have an implicit focus on IHOs (Jahre et al., 2016), but this is seldom mentioned in papers. The definition of humanitarian logistics has consequences for understanding its localization and what happens when LNAs, instead of IHOs, perform related activities. Seeing that research often distinguishes humanitarian assistance from disaster relief, there might also be a difference between humanitarian logistics and disaster logistics. If localizing humanitarian

logistics to LNAs, does it then become disaster logistics? These questions relevant to localization can only be answered by scrutinizing the humanitarian logistics concept further.



**Figure 2.1.** Global and local logistics capacities

## 2.4 Central theoretical perspectives

Three theoretical perspectives guide the research on localization of humanitarian logistics. First, literature on multinational corporations (MNCs) is utilized, as they can be compared to IHOs due to their similar characteristics. IHOs and MNCs both operate in the international arena, delivering products and services to customers/beneficiaries in a range of countries. They face similar strategic choices, such as balancing between functions that should be kept at a central level and those kept at a national/local level. Scholars have previously examined the factors that drive the MNCs in various strategic directions (see, e.g., Prahalad & Doz, 1987; Bartlett & Ghoshal, 1988). By applying this perspective, the strategic directions of IHOs beyond localization can be better understood.

Second, paradox theory is applied as a theoretical lens due to localization, in its current form, being inherently paradoxical. This is because the IHS's structures and

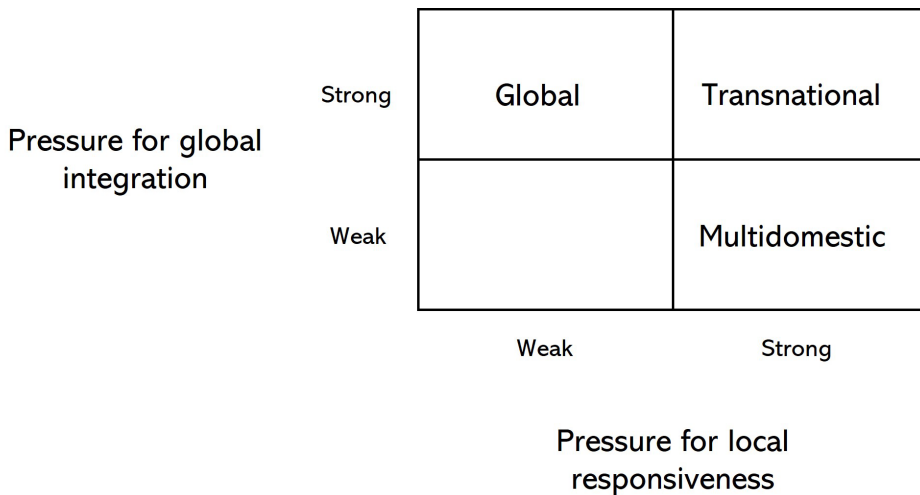
processes tend to reinforce and reproduce power rather than shift it (Mulder, 2023; Khoury & Scott, 2024). In addition, the first study pointed towards several tensions impeding localization progress. These included the tension within IHOs between global efficiency and local responsiveness, which is also pertinent to MNCs (Bartlett & Ghoshal, 2002), and the tension arising from the expectations placed on IHOs to respond efficiently and effectively versus the expectations for localization. As a result, paradox theory was chosen to provide insights into potential paradoxical tensions facing the localization agenda as well as possible responses. The choice of paradox theory was made over other theories, seeing that IHOs should pursue both poles of the identified tensions, such as the one between localization aims and humanitarian assistance aims. Paradox theory helps to answer how to engage A and B simultaneously, whereas contingency theory, for example, answers under what conditions managers should emphasize A or B (Lewis & Smith, 2014). Additionally, paradox theory has been used in research on MNCs to navigate tensions between global and local (Keh & Thelisson, 2021; Carmine et al., 2024), making it relevant to IHOs.

Third, the Activities-Resources-Actors (ARA) model from the Industrial Network Approach (INA) is used in this thesis. The model describes relationships between organizations and identifies three layers to characterize them: actor bonds, activity links, and resource ties (Lenney & Easton, 2009; Choi & Hara, 2018). Since localization depends on the relationships between actors in the IHS and LNAs, the ARA model was deemed a suitable choice. It is applied by examining what constitutes localization in the core elements of the model—activities, resources, and actors—as well as how these elements interact through actor bonds, activity links, and resource ties.

### **2.4.1 The perspective of multinational corporations**

Due to their similar characteristics, an IHO operating worldwide can be compared to multinational corporations (MNCs), which are researched primarily in the international business (IB) field. MNCs are companies that control value-added activities within and across nations (Benito, 2005). IB scholars have examined the factors that drive MNCs in various strategic directions. By applying the IB perspective, IHOs' strategic decisions can be better understood. This helps illuminate the forces pulling IHOs into other strategic directions than localization and why progress towards localization is slow.

MNCs share a global scope, but their strategies and structures can be profoundly different, partly due to the characteristics of the industries in which they compete. The literature typically distinguishes between two industry pressures—global integration and local responsiveness, which form the dimensions of the integration-responsiveness (IR) framework (see adaptation from Prahalad & Doz, 1987; Bartlett & Ghoshal, 1988) in Figure 2.2.



**Figure 2.2.** The Integration-Responsiveness Framework

The pressure for global integration exists in an industry that is linked across countries and where an organization's "competitive position in one national market is affected by its competitive position in other national markets" (Ghoshal, 1987, p. 425). Product needs are homogeneous, and competitive advantages can be found in scale and scope economies (Roth et al., 1991). There are also location advantages in terms of arbitrage of cost differences, such as those in production and government policies (Kogut, 2013). In an industry with high pressure on local responsiveness, an organization's competitive position in one country is independent of its position in other countries (Porter, 2023). Product needs are heterogeneous, with high demand for national flexibility and responsiveness to customers' needs.

The classic typology of MNCs is based on the extent to which companies try to respond to these pressures. These are the global, multidomestic, and transnational companies. A global company, often operating in an industry characterized by high pressure for global integration but low pressure for local responsiveness, is required to gain a competitive advantage through cost efficiency. This is done by integrating its value chain across borders and coordinating main functions and activities. A global organization is to a higher degree centralized, where subsidiaries work on behalf of HQ's strategic direction and provide a pipeline for standardized products and services to the markets (Harzing, 2000). Location advantages are achieved through the strategic positioning of production and R&D facilities. The main issue faced by the global company stems from the distance to its markets and customers. Centrally, managers and decision-makers may face a challenging task in understanding market needs. Conversely, local subsidiaries may not understand the central direction or may not be committed to carrying it through (Bartlett & Ghoshal, 1988).

The multidomestic company is operating in an industry opposite to the global company, with low pressure for global integration but high pressure for local responsiveness. The company is characterized by the power and independence of its subsidiaries. At its most extreme, the multidomestic company operates like a federation of self-sufficient units, responding to its markets through a national supply chain (Ghoshal & Bartlett, 1988). A multi-domestic company gains advantages through high product and service differentiation, tailored to the needs of national customers. As each subsidiary has more control of the value chain, they can build a flexible organization that can respond quickly to changing needs and demands. The primary issue for multi-domestic companies is the lack of coordination and integration. Consequently, they have difficulties responding to global threats. They may also face high risks of technological divergence, cost-inefficient purchasing, and operational duplication.

Finally, the transnational company tries to respond to a market characterized by high pressure for both global integration and local responsiveness. The strategy to “think globally, act locally” was introduced during the 1980s and often referred to as the transnational solution. While in theory, this strategy seems to combine the best of two worlds, it has proven challenging to do in practice (Benito, 2005). The strategy focuses on building a network of interdependent subsidiaries to leverage both integration and responsiveness (see, e.g., Bartlett & Ghoshal, 1988). The subsidiaries are often centers of excellence for the entire firm, with a strong emphasis on a high volume of people, products, and knowledge flowing between all subsidiaries and the headquarters.

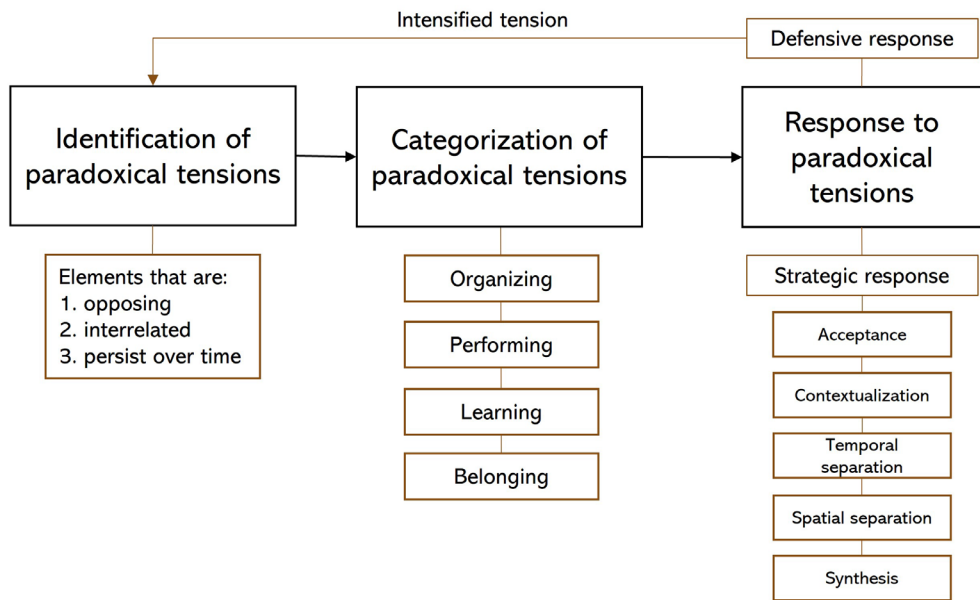
The pressure for global integration and local responsiveness can vary within an MNC across functions, as well as within a function (Devinney et al., 2000). There is often more pressure on downstream activities, such as sales and service, to be locally responsive, while upstream activities are expected to be more globally integrated. Rugman and Verbeke (2004) claim that a combination of global integration and national responsiveness is necessary. Devinney et al. (2000) make the case that different strategies in terms of global integration and local responsiveness can yield the same result. Aside from industry pressure as the sole determinant for MNC strategy, endogenous factors such as managerial beliefs and technological feasibility affect and constrain the strategic direction of a firm.

Exogenous factors also impede the preferred strategy. For example, a multidomestic approach may be constrained by the lack of suppliers, intermediate products, and raw materials. In contrast, host governments can exert influence on a company’s strategy through regulations and/or incentives, thereby encouraging a responsive approach (Hamel & Prahalad, 1983). The spillover effects of local production and other supply chain activities on a host country can benefit local employment, infrastructure, and technology development.

### 2.4.2 Paradox theory

A paradox is defined as “contradictory yet interrelated elements that exist simultaneously and persist over time” (Smith & Lewis, 2011, p. 382). Stemming from philosophy and psychology, the concept has been widely applied in organizational studies because organizations are inherently paradoxical (Jarzabkowski et al., 2013; Hargrave & Van de Ven, 2017; Schad et al., 2016). Paradox theory mainly explores how organizations can handle ongoing tensions and conflicting demands in their environment (Schad et al., 2016). These tensions are often driven by changes in the organizational landscape, such as rising strategic alliances, technological advancements, and increased global competition. Paradox theory helps visualize and categorize these tensions, which are characterized by being contradictory yet interconnected. For example, the stability vs. change tension illustrates the balance between consistency and adaptation (Lewis, 2000; Schad et al., 2016). A paradox persists over time, necessitating both/and approaches to prevent fueling new tensions; one side influences the other, creating a constant balancing act (Schad et al., 2016). A theoretical framework of paradox theory, inspired by Hahn et al. (2014), Schad et al. (2016), and Xiao et al. (2019), can be seen in Figure 2.3.

Literature on paradox theory highlights four types of paradoxical tensions in organizations: organizing, belonging, performing, and learning (Smith & Lewis, 2011). These exist at various levels, from organizational to individual (Smith & Lewis, 2011; Jarzabkowski et al., 2013). Organizing tensions arise from parts-whole tensions (Jarzabkowski et al., 2013). Organizations contain subsystems that operate independently while being part of the whole, leading to contradictory designs, structures, processes, and practices that can create tensions (Smith & Lewis, 2011). For instance, tensions can arise from balancing efficiency and adaptability or autonomy and control (Lewis, 2000; Hargrave & Van de Ven, 2017). Organizing paradoxes often manifest as mixed messages and system contradictions (Lewis, 2000). Major changes or restructuring can provoke tensions as individuals confront the need for stability and change (Jarzabkowski et al., 2013).



**Figure 2.3.** Theoretical framework – Paradox theory

The second category, belonging, relates to identity tensions between individual and collective affiliations or various organizational values and roles (Schad et al., 2016). These tensions can increase due to conflicts from belonging to multiple groups with differing values and identities (Erthal et al., 2021; Jarzabkowski et al., 2013). Such tensions arise from blurred hierarchical, occupational, and national distinctions (Lewis, 2000). They become evident when individuals from different groups interact and struggle to reconcile differing values (Jarzabkowski et al., 2013). Increased globalization may further amplify belonging tensions (Lewis, 2000). Third, performing tensions occur when stakeholders have conflicting demands, causing issues in organizations striving for multiple goals or competing visions of success (Smith & Lewis, 2011; Jay, 2013). Employees may face performing tensions at an individual level from conflicting roles and tasks (Jarzabkowski et al., 2013). These tensions emerge during periods of change when new goals are set, roles shift, and relationships are redefined (Jarzabkowski et al., 2013). The fourth category, learning, addresses tensions between existing knowledge and new, uncertain approaches (Schad et al., 2016; Erthal et al., 2021). Lewis (2000) characterizes the learning paradox as a “struggle between the comfort of the past and the uncertainty of the future.” These learning tensions become especially evident during change processes that require balancing past knowledge with the emergence of new insights (Lewis, 2000; Smith & Lewis, 2011). Research suggests that organizational routines and skills are often driven more by inertia than by conscious thought (Lewis, 2000).

The literature on paradox theory explains how organizations respond to paradoxical tensions and manage them to ensure sustainable operations (Smith & Lewis, 2011). These responses generally fall into two categories: defensive and strategic (see Figure 2.3). Defensive responses tend to focus on one pole of the paradox and are characterized by “either/or” thinking (Lewis & Smith, 2014), which includes actions aimed at avoiding or suppressing tension and returning to states when tension was absent (Lewis, 2000; Lewis & Smith, 2014). Although these methods can offer short-term relief, they may lead to increased tension over time (Lewis, 2000). Paradox theory indicates that tensions can fuel creativity and innovation instead of being suppressed defensively. Strategic responses aim to develop new solutions (Lewis, 2000; Jarzabkowski et al., 2013). Recognizing the tension is crucial for actively addressing it (Poole & Van de Ven, 1989; Hahn et al., 2015). Poole and Van de Ven (1989) propose four approaches to manage paradoxical tensions: acceptance, spatial separation, temporal separation, and synthesis. The SCM literature adds a fifth approach, contextualization (Xiao et al., 2019). Zehendner et al. (2021) include contextualization after acceptance as a way to manage tension. Acceptance involves acknowledging the paradox and contradictions without actively responding (Hahn et al., 2015), which may offer temporary relief but is insufficient for tackling major challenges that require new methods (Zehendner et al., 2021). Contextualization considers the poles within specific contexts (Xiao et al., 2019), enabling organizations to manage paradoxes more flexibly by adjusting priorities and objectives (Zehendner et al., 2021).

The three other approaches involve the organization attempting to address the paradox and meet conflicting demands simultaneously without resolving the underlying tension (Smith & Lewis, 2011). Spatial separation involves managing the opposing elements at different levels or locations, such as in separate organizational units, while temporal separation deals with managing these elements at different times (Poole & Van de Ven, 1989; Kocabasoglu-Hillmer et al., 2023). Both strategies focus on maintaining a separation between opposing poles, which helps managers identify and define objectives within each area. Separation allows for the development of skills needed to handle each pole independently, potentially preventing interference and inertia from opposing forces (Hahn et al., 2015). Synthesis, on the other hand, sees the poles as interconnected and explores ways to accommodate both by developing new methods of working (Smith & Lewis, 2011; Dieste et al., 2022). As noted by Dieste et al. (2022), fresh perspectives can be achieved through implementing new organizational processes, routines, or technological solutions.

### **2.4.3 The ARA model**

The Activities-Resources-Actors (ARA) model analyzes how actors interact within business networks, focusing on their processes and results (Ford et al., 2008;

Abrahamsen & Håkansson, 2016). It suggests that actors are interconnected and rely on each other, gaining advantages by sharing and combining resources and activities across organizational boundaries (Håkansson & Waluszewski, 2002). Such combined resources become more valuable and unique, and activities are performed more efficiently when adapted among actors (Abrahamsen & Håkansson, 2016). Achieving this depends on strong commitments or bonds between actors. Therefore, organizational interactions are structured on activity links, resource ties, and actor bonds.

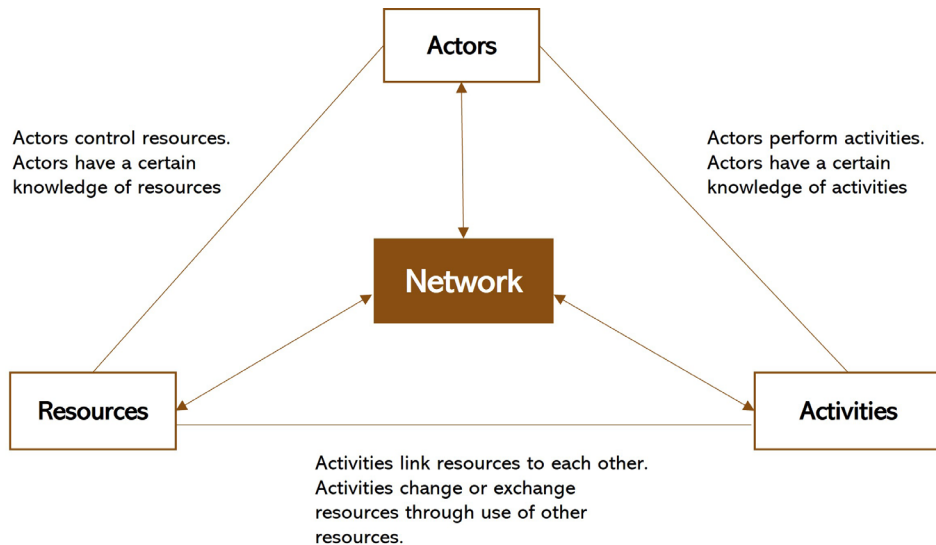
Activity links refer to the connections between internal activities within organizations. Håkansson and Snehota (1995, p. 52) describe activities as “a sequence of acts directed towards a purpose.” These activities can be technical, administrative, or commercial, among other types. Organizations establish links through mutual and internal adjustments, or “adaptations” (Choi & Hara, 2018). Adapted activities are tailored specifically to fit the needs of the other organization in the network, while some activities remain the same regardless of the relationship. Developing these activity links is vital for improving an organization’s effectiveness in exchanges with others. Moreover, they facilitate the reallocation of activities among actors, promoting increased collaboration and efficiency.

The second layer, resource ties, connects resource elements between two companies (Lenney & Easton, 2009). All organizations require resources to operate, tangible (such as technology, materials, or finances) or intangible (like skills and knowledge). Relationships can act as a means for companies to acquire these resources, and in some cases, relationships themselves become valuable resources (Håkansson & Snehota, 1995). Over time, resource ties develop as resources become more aligned and explicitly oriented toward each other through various activation levels.

The third layer focuses on the actors within a network and their mutual bonds. These actors include both individuals within organizations and the organizations themselves. Bonds are formed through mutual commitment (Raskovic, 2015), which involves giving and receiving attention and prioritization. Trust is a key element in fostering these commitments (Lenney & Easton, 2009; Finch et al., 2010). The relationships influence how companies perceive and interpret situations, what they know about each other, and how they interact. Furthermore, these bonds require actors to adhere to certain rules to maintain their identity or be trusted. Business relationships are inherently complex, involving not just collective entities but also various subunits and individuals within organizations, whose goals, perceptions, and behaviors may not always align (Ritter et al., 2004). Ultimately, these bonds shape how resources are utilized and how activities are coordinated.

In ARA, every relationship is distinct, with the three layers interacting through different levels of activity links, resource ties, and actor bonds (Håkansson & Snehota, 1995). For example, actors engage in activities and use resources as part

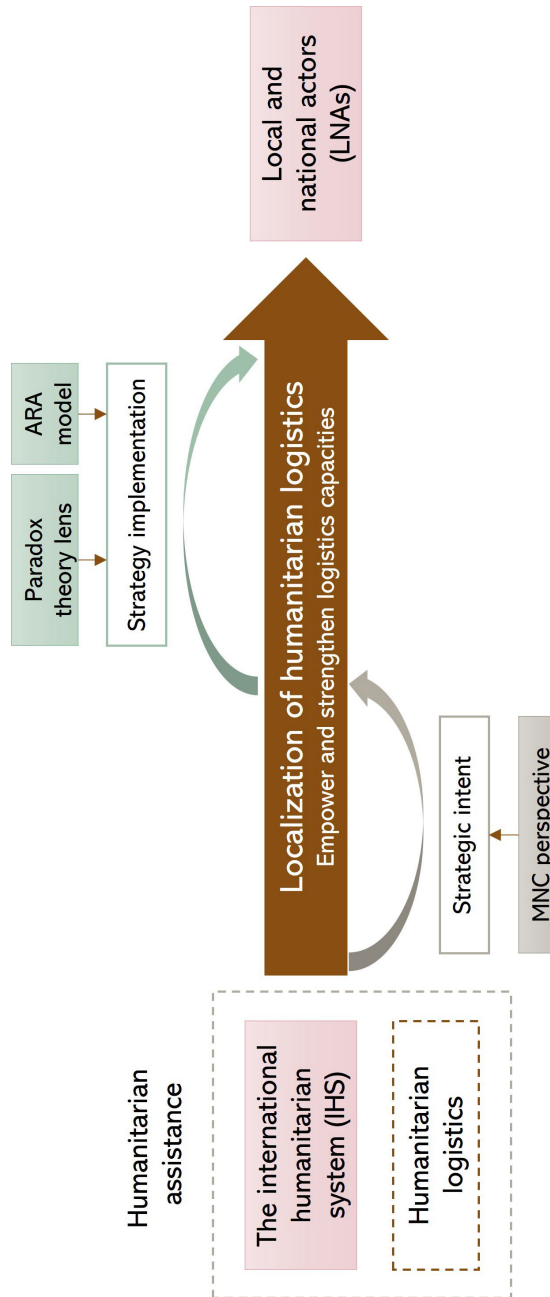
of the process. These activities grow as actors develop their capabilities, but the scope of possible activities depends on their resources. Bonds between actors facilitate collaboration around activities and resources, and the activities help forge bonds, creating a cycle of mutual reinforcement. This interaction shows that a change in one dimension will affect the others (Abrahamsen & Håkansson, 2016). Håkansson and Snehota (1995) emphasize that resource scarcity limits what activities can be carried out and how. The interconnectedness between actors, activities, and resources can be seen in Figure 2.4 (inspired by Håkansson, 1987).



**Figure 2.4.** The ARA model

## 2.5 Conceptual framework

A synthesis of the reviewed literature and theoretical lenses is presented in the framework shown in Figure 2.5. The figure represents the conceptual framework for the thesis. As depicted in the figure, localization involves the interaction between the international humanitarian system (IHS) and local and national actors (LNAs). This thesis focuses on humanitarian logistics as a subset of humanitarian assistance (the dotted line). As such, localization of humanitarian logistics includes strengthening and empowering the LNAs' logistics capacities. Furthermore, the framework outlines the stages of localization, starting from strategic intent and progressing to strategy implementation. The strategic intent stage is analyzed through the MNC perspective, while the strategy implementation stage has been informed by paradox theory and the ARA model.



**Figure 2.5.** The thesis's conceptual framework

# 3. Methodology

*This chapter outlines the methodology used in this doctoral thesis. It begins by discussing the philosophy of science, including the perspective adopted in the thesis. Next, the overall research approach and process are presented, describing the journey, the challenges, and the decisions made along the way. This is followed by an introduction to the various methods employed in the studies and concludes with a discussion on research quality.*

## 3.1 Philosophy of science

Methodology comprises not only the methods used but also the philosophical underpinnings (Duberley et al., 2012). These underpinnings are often described in the form of ontological and epistemological viewpoints. Ontology and epistemology influence how researchers conceptualize reality, what they consider valid knowledge, and how they approach the study of various phenomena. Consequently, they shape the entire research process—from research design to data collection and analysis to interpreting findings (Cunliffe, 2010). Ontology concerns the nature of a phenomenon's existence, whether real or illusory (Duberley et al., 2012). An objective ontological view means that reality exists independently of human perception, whereas a subjective view considers reality socially constructed. Epistemology examines how knowledge is acquired and what constitutes valid knowledge (Stentoft Arlbjörn & Halldórsson, 2002). As such, it is closely connected to ontological beliefs. The combination of ontological and epistemological stances constitutes various research paradigms, which communicate the fundamental assumptions of the researcher (Stentoft Arlbjörn & Halldórsson, 2002).

In this doctoral thesis, a critical realist perspective serves as the foundation of the research (Bhaskar, 2013). The adoption of this perspective evolved throughout the PhD process, which is why it may be better reflected in later papers. Within this perspective, reality is acknowledged to exist independently of perception (cf. Duberley et al., 2012). However, this reality can never be fully understood or measured. As Easton (2010, p. 119) states, “our knowledge of the world is fallible and theory-laden.” Rather than accessing reality directly, understanding is shaped by social, historical, and cultural contexts (Mingers, 2015).

Critical realism occupies a position between positivism, which assumes knowledge is objective and absolute, and constructivism, which views knowledge as entirely relative and subjective (Mingers, 2015). It recognizes that all research methods have

inherent limitations (Hodgkinson & Rousseau, 2009). Therefore, no single approach is superior to another; instead, triangulating between methods and data sources is valued as a means of arriving at the most probable explanation. From an epistemological standpoint, critical realism asserts that while knowledge is socially constructed, scientific knowledge can still be generalizable, though always conditional (Hodgkinson & Rousseau, 2009). Scientific theories are understood as provisional and fallible because knowledge is mediated through human perception; no theory can claim absolute truth (Easton, 2010). However, unlike social constructivism, which may treat all knowledge as equally relative, critical realism argues that some explanations are closer to reality than others.

Hence, this research fits with critical realism, as a large part of it is based on people's perceptions of the localization phenomenon. Furthermore, the research process has provided insights that come closer to explaining localization and its complex mechanisms. This knowledge is conditional on the humanitarian logistics domain and partly on humanitarian assistance overall, as localization is unique to this specific setting. Nevertheless, the knowledge gained can be used across the sector to inform and inspire localization topics.

## 3.2 Research approach and process

Given the novelty of localization in humanitarian logistics, this thesis adopts a phenomenon-driven approach, which is well-suited for building theory around emerging phenomena (Von Krogh et al., 2012). In the early stages of the thesis, exploratory methods were most effective in capturing foundational insights due to the lack of research on localization. However, as the research progressed, the focus shifted toward theorizing, examining how localization aligns with or diverges from existing theories (Von Krogh et al., 2012).

To support this phenomenon-driven approach, qualitative methods have been employed throughout the thesis (Edmondson & McManus, 2007). This aligns well with the critical realist perspective, which emphasizes the importance of qualitative studies in understanding complex interactions. Mingers et al. (2013, p. 800) advocate for the use of qualitative methods within critical realism, noting that they are “more capable of describing a phenomenon, constructing propositions, and identifying structured interactions between complex mechanisms.”

The qualitative methods include collecting empirical material from three studies: an interview study, an expert elicitation study, and a case study. The data primarily consists of interviews and participation inputs, and is complemented by various reports and documents, and a field visit. The total amount of collected data can be seen in Table 3.1.

Table 3.1. Total amount of data collected in this thesis

| Type of data source                        | Study                         | Total amount of data collected |
|--------------------------------------------|-------------------------------|--------------------------------|
| Interviews                                 | Study 1 (28) and Study 3 (46) | 74 interviews                  |
| Participant input (for expert elicitation) | Study 2                       | 29 participant inputs          |
| Reports and documents                      | Study 3                       | 22 reports and documents       |
| Field visit observations                   | Study 3                       | 1 field visit                  |

The three studies focus on different aspects and phases of localization of humanitarian logistics, as seen in Figure 3.1. All are relevant to the thesis’s purpose *of exploring and explaining the concept of localization of humanitarian logistics from a top-down perspective, focusing on the path from strategic intent to implementation*. They also help answer the three research questions.

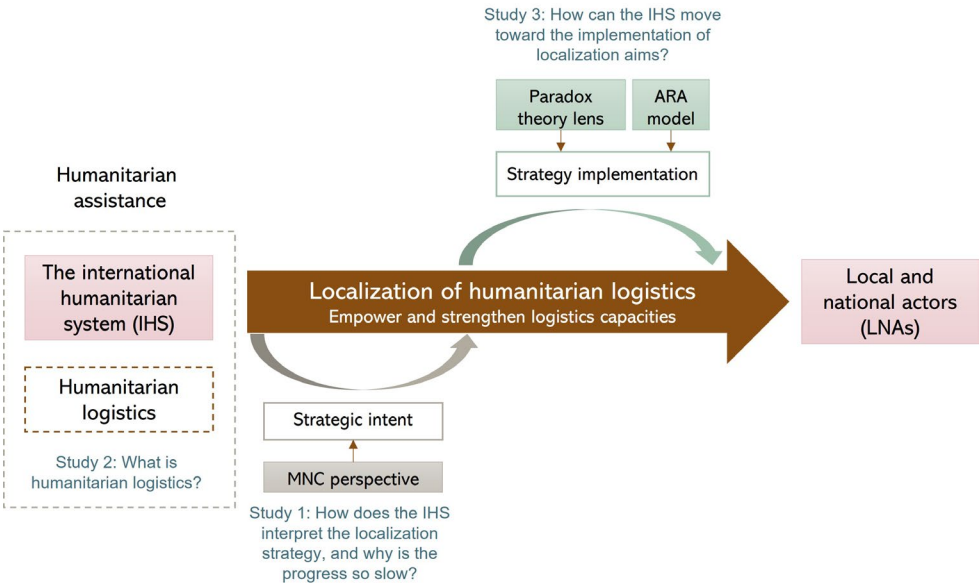
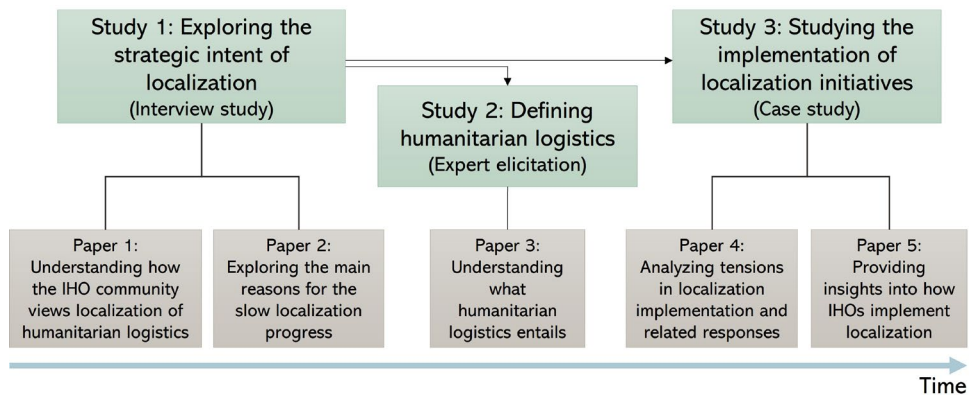


Figure 3.1. An overview of the studies in the thesis and their position in the frame of reference

Study 1 addresses the fundamental question: *What is localization of humanitarian logistics?* It focuses on the *strategic intent* within the IHS, seeking to understand localization’s scope and the challenges that have hindered progress. Given the limited prior research on localization in a humanitarian logistics context, this study adopted an exploratory and inductive approach to establish a working definition of localization. To achieve this, an interview study was conducted with representatives from the IHO community. Appropriate methods were discussed within the research group, and a broader interview study was selected to capture as many views as

possible on the localization phenomenon. This method allowed for a comprehensive understanding of localization views within the various IHOs. An interview study was considered the better option compared to a multiple case study that might overlook important aspects if limited to a few IHOs. Interviewees were mainly contacted through the research team's professional networks and later identified using snowballing techniques. Interviewees were asked to define localization, articulate their vision for its implementation, describe their organizations' approaches, and discuss the challenges encountered.

Study 1 resulted in two papers that form the foundation of this thesis (see Figure 3.2). Establishing a clear understanding of localization and its varying interpretations was key in developing the following studies. Furthermore, exploring localization challenges resulted in identifying forces pushing IHOs in various strategic directions. This provided more profound insight into how IHOs work, the expectations placed upon them, and the complexity of the environments in which they operate. A total of 28 interviews were conducted between May 2018 and September 2019, which provided extensive knowledge about both humanitarian logistics and localization.



**Figure 3.2.** The studies and their corresponding papers as well as their connections

The second study takes a step back to examine the broader concept of humanitarian logistics. This follows many discussions with the main supervisor about what humanitarian logistics really means. The discussions revolved around comparing humanitarian logistics with disaster logistics and whether they are considered the same. For example, is it considered humanitarian logistics if it is conducted by LNAs in a Global North state that also provides funding as part of the IHS? These nuances are not covered in the dominant definition of humanitarian logistics used in many academic papers (see Thomas & Kopczak, 2005). The view of humanitarian logistics shapes how localization is understood in this context. Given the centrality

of humanitarian logistics to this research, it was important to first clarify its scope before examining how localization applies within it.

Initiated in April 2020, the study involved a group of four researchers. The study leveraged the research team's extensive academic and practice network. Following the premise that those working with or researching humanitarian logistics are best suited to define its key elements, the discussion on possible research methods resulted in the choice of expert elicitation. This approach has participants giving feedback on a particular issue through several rounds of questionnaires (Hasson et al., 2000; de França Doria et al., 2009). It resembles the Delphi method but offers more flexibility than Delphi's structured processes. In the study, the 29 panel experts provided feedback on successive drafts of a new definition of humanitarian logistics until consensus was reached. This resulted in an updated definition of humanitarian logistics, along with accompanying properties. The new definition more accurately reflects current practices and answers the question of what makes humanitarian logistics unique (compared to other types of logistics, e.g., disaster logistics).

Building on the first study, the third study investigates the implementation of localization in humanitarian logistics. After defining localization and understanding the major challenges, the goal was to examine how localization is actually put into practice and to analyze real initiatives despite the challenges described in the second paper. Therefore, a case study methodology was chosen to investigate localization practices in detail. Also, an in-depth case study could complement the broader interview study (Study 1). However, finding a suitable setting, theoretical framework, and case was difficult. The largest challenge was gaining access to relevant cases, which involved several months of chasing unsuccessful leads. Eventually, a breakthrough occurred after a discussion with a contact at an IHO, following a guest lecture in a humanitarian logistics course (henceforth referred to as the Case Organization). Sharing similar views on localization, this discussion resulted in a proposal to explore the Case Organization's efforts to localize the supply chain for specialized nutritious food (SNF) to host governments. This led to selecting the Case Organization's initiative to localize the SNF supply chain as the focus of the case study.

The next challenge concerned access to relevant people within the Case Organization. Some interviews were conducted with initial support from the Case Organization contact, but further progress was slow. LinkedIn was then used to identify and contact the Case Organization employees working with nutrition and supply chains. Emails and LinkedIn messages were sent to all relevant people identified. One key contact—who later proved instrumental—accepted an interview proposal. Through her connections, additional individuals who would otherwise have been inaccessible became reachable. The same approach was applied to identify donors and government representatives who could provide complementary perspectives. A parallel difficulty concerned the alignment of the research with an

appropriate theoretical lens. After exploring different theories, a productive conversation with a colleague led to discovering paradox theory. Further engagement with this theory revealed its strong relevance to localization research. In particular, the paradox framework proved helpful in analyzing the tensions arising during localization implementation and identifying strategies to navigate these challenges.

Between April 2023 and September 2025, 46 interviews were conducted for this study. Compared to Study 1, some changes were made in the interview process. For example, another decision was made regarding the option to let interviewees review transcriptions. In Study 1, transcripts were sent to interviewees, and the results were adjusted according to the interviewees' wishes. The reason for sending the transcripts at the time was to comply with certain research ethics and reinforce the interviewees' rights as research participants (Hagens et al., 2009). However, the negative consequences of sending the transcripts for review became evident when interviewees wanted to change their initial statements to something more politically sound. This is a known problem, which risks making the transcripts no longer accurately reflect the verbal exchange and the interviewees' initial views (Hagens et al., 2009; Mero-Jaffe, 2011). Transcripts can also make interviewees feel uncomfortable, particularly if the topic is sensitive or if the transcripts contain poor grammar, since it is spoken language in text (Forbat & Henderson, 2005). Additionally, interview transcripts reviewed by participants often add little to the transcript's accuracy, and candid responses might be more valuable than edited ones (Hagens et al., 2009). From a critical realist perspective, a reviewed transcript is considered no more accurate than the original, as both are interpretations of the interviewee's reality (Forbat & Henderson, 2005). In conclusion, due to the dilemmas involved, researchers suggest careful consideration in sending transcripts to interviewees (Forbat & Henderson, 2005; Hagens et al., 2009; Mero-Jaffe, 2011). In Study 3, these established risks were deemed too high due to the sensitive nature of the study and its context, involving international relations between the Case Organization, institutional donors, and host governments. The previous experiences from Study 1 also went against sending the transcripts, as the aim was to reflect the interviewees' initial thoughts about localization and its challenges. Instead, the interviewees were promised anonymity to uphold their rights as research participants.

The study resulted in two papers. Paper 4, a single-case study, examines and explains the paradoxical tensions encountered during the Case Organization's localization implementation and their potential responses. Paradox theory serves as a particularly useful lens in this regard. Paper 5 can be seen as a single case study with embedded units of analysis. Paper 5 describes how the Case Organization has implemented localization of the SNF supply chain in practice. In addition, it shows the Case Organization's experiences of localization benefits and proposes how roles and responsibilities shift with increasing localization. The paper contributes to a

more nuanced understanding of localization implementation and offers valuable insights for other organizations with similar objectives. It also provides a foundation for further theoretical development.

### **3.2.1 Navigating difficulties connected to the humanitarian context**

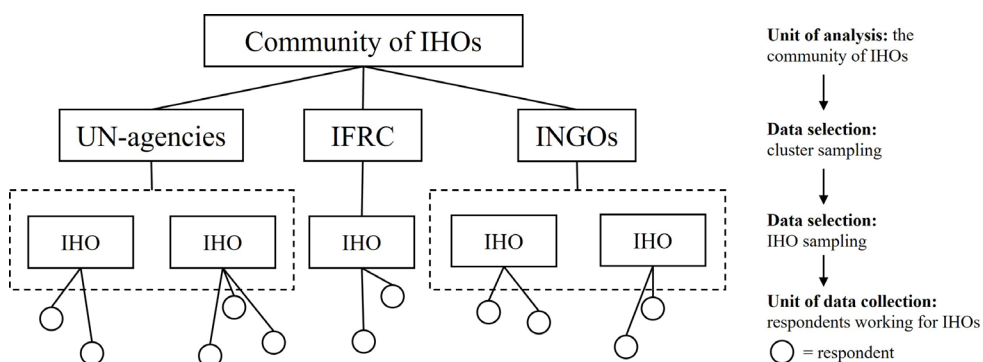
This research was conducted in a specific context: the humanitarian. This context is closely linked to politics (Barnett, 2005; Whittall, 2015), making it a delicate topic to study. Additionally, localization can be sensitive as it involves international relations where misinterpretations may lead to unintended consequences. This sensitivity became evident during the research process in Study 3, which faced additional challenges related to the significance of these relationships. First, a few interviews, especially with certain donor representatives, were difficult because some were hesitant to answer questions about their experience and preferred to reflect on their organization's policies related to localization. Second, although the research focus was established and communicated early, issues arose later in the process when the findings were compiled and the papers were written. The main issue was that the papers' findings did not align with the Case Organization's official stance on localization, its role, and relationships—both within and outside the organization. As a result, the researcher's interpretation of the interviewees' statements, supported by internal and external documents, differed from how it was supposed to work. Considering the role of the research and the importance of maintaining independence, the decision was made to anonymize the entire study. This was unfortunate because some contextual understanding was lost in the process. Although publishing sensitive information can be problematic in other contexts, the humanitarian field may be especially sensitive due to its close ties to politics. Therefore, Study 3 served as a valuable learning experience in navigating these challenges and handling similar situations in the future.

## **3.3 Study 1: Interview study**

The first study explores localization of logistics preparedness capacities from the perspective of the international humanitarian organizations (IHOs)—a leading actor in the IHS. Since no research had been conducted in the humanitarian logistics domain before, a phenomenon-driven, exploratory, and qualitative study was conducted. This research strategy has strong validation for theory building in the early phases of the research, as no theory yet exists (Von Krogh et al., 2012; Edmondson & McManus, 2007). The research was designed as an interview study that aligns with the exploratory approach. A broader interview study enabled a gathering of various views of the localization phenomenon and gaining in-depth information based on perceptions and experiences from a diverse range of

individuals representing the IHOs (Hennink et al., 2011; Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015).

The unit of analysis in the first study is the community of IHOs, as the aim was to understand the various perspectives on localization existing within the IHOs as a group (see Figure 3.3). IHOs are a significant actor in the IHS and currently, together with donors, hold the power and decision-making authority over resources (Barnett, 2021). They are, therefore, a key stakeholder in facilitating localization. The study examined the localization views of 12 of the largest IHOs (see Table 3.2). Together, these organizations constitute a representative set of IHOs with diverse mandates and products/services delivered (cf. Miles & Huberman, 1994). All selected IHOs recognize logistics as a critical component of their operations, representing the three primary types of IHOs: United Nations (UN) agencies, international non-governmental organizations (INGOs), and the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC). Additionally, there is variation in their stance on the sector-wide localization agenda, with 10 out of 12 IHOs having signed the Grand Bargain—MSF and SOS being the exceptions. Since these attributes could affect how IHOs approach localization, a purposeful sampling method (Patton, 2002) was employed to account for relevant localization factors.



**Figure 3.3.** The unit of analysis and the unit of data collection in Study 1

For the interviews, IHO employees were approached who were uniquely positioned to offer valuable perspectives on the organization's approach to the localization agenda. In total, interviews were conducted with two or three experts per organization, which enabled triangulation of the results (cf. Alvesson, 2011). Two respondents did not work for a specific IHO but provided valuable insights into the localization agenda based on their extensive experience in the humanitarian sector. The individual respondents were purposefully selected (Patton, 2002, p. 230) through professional networks and snowball sampling (Biernacki & Waldorf, 1981, p. 141), which enabled a high acceptance rate for participation in the study.

**Table 3.2 Organizations represented in Study 1**

| Type        | Organization* | Focus/mandate                                                     | Commodities              |
|-------------|---------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------|
| <b>UN</b>   | UNFPA         | Reproductive health, all disasters                                | Reproductive health kits |
|             | UNHCR         | Refugees and internally displaced people, human-induced disasters | Multi                    |
|             | UNICEF        | Children, all disasters                                           | Multi                    |
|             | WFP           | Food, all disasters                                               | Food                     |
|             | WHO           | Health care, all disasters                                        | Health care              |
| <b>INGO</b> | CARE          | Women and girls                                                   | Multi                    |
|             | MSF           | Health care, all disasters                                        | Health care              |
|             | NRC           | Refugees and internally displaced people, human-induced disasters | Multi                    |
|             | Oxfam         | Poverty, all disasters                                            | Multi                    |
|             | SOS           | Children, all disasters                                           | Multi                    |
|             | WVI           | Children and families, all disasters                              | Multi                    |
| <b>IFRC</b> | IFRC          | Government auxiliary, disasters caused by natural hazards         | Multi                    |
| <b>N/A</b>  | Consultants   | Humanitarian system                                               | N/A                      |

### 3.3.1 Data collection and analysis

A semi-structured interview guide was developed and piloted with three interviewees from different IHOs. Following the pilot tests, the interview guide was slightly altered to better frame the localization theme (cf. Yin, 2009). The interviews lasted between 75 and 110 minutes, resulting in 42 hours of recorded empirical material. Each interview was conducted by the first author together with one of the other authors. This improved transparency, ensured replication logic, and reduced interviewer bias (cf. Yin, 2009). After transcription of the recorded material, the content was analyzed and, based on the interview guide, different themes were identified and coded using Excel.

The rich material enabled several angles on the localization agenda and resulted in two papers. The first paper centers on the respondents' views toward localization (i.e., localization trends, localization definition, localization vision within the organization, level of operationalization within the organization, and the future role of the organization). During coding, various operationalization aspects of localization were detected. These included opinions connected to (1) what capacities to transfer, (2) to whom, and (3) to which level in the organization. Together with the overall vision of localization (4), these aspects formed the basis for Paper 1. During this inductive coding process, each respondent's statement was categorized into one of the four identified themes. The second paper explores additional themes related to the reasons behind the slow progress of localization. In the first inductive coding, several "forces" behind the lack of localization operationalization were

identified, pushing IHOs in other strategic directions. In the next step, axial coding (Saldaña, 2013, p. 218) was used to compare and contrast the identified forces. Applying various literary sources to the analysis enhanced the empirical material. This literature was mainly connected to multinational corporations (MNCs), considered the commercial equivalent of IHOs. The accumulated knowledge about forces pushing MNCs in different strategic directions was applied to IHOs, which face similar choices as MNCs.

### 3.4 Study 2: Expert elicitation

As this research considers the localization of humanitarian logistics, it is central that the humanitarian logistics concept is well understood. However, the current dominant definitions do not reflect the underlying assumptions or how the concept is used, indicating the need for a new definition. As explained in Chapter 2, the most common definition in humanitarian logistics literature is provided by Thomas and Kopczak (2005, p. 2):

*“Humanitarian logistics is defined as the process of planning, implementing, and controlling the efficient, cost-effective flow and storage of goods and materials, as well as related information, from the point of origin to the point of consumption for the purpose of alleviating the suffering of vulnerable people. The function encompasses a range of activities, including preparedness, planning, procurement, transport, warehousing, tracking and tracing, and customs clearance.”*

This definition fails to clarify the uniqueness of humanitarian logistics and whether there is a difference, for example, between humanitarian logistics and disaster logistics. Furthermore, given that this definition is 20 years old, the scope of humanitarian logistics activities and objectives has expanded. Consequently, the second study aims to revisit and possibly update the definition of humanitarian logistics. This was done by combining a literature review with an expert elicitation approach, similar to a Delphi study. The literature review scrutinized the concept of humanitarian logistics, particularly focusing on its underlying assumptions in academic literature as well as the meaning of the term *humanitarian*. This literature review provided the basis for discussing an initial revision of the definition, which was then used in the expert elicitation study.

Expert elicitation is an effective method for identifying key properties of a concept (Podsakoff et al., 2016). This process can be used to facilitate the convergence of opinions and involves “successive questioning of the individual experts, without face-to-face confrontation” (Helmer, 1964, p. 3). Typically, the process involves an initial question or questionnaire—in this case, an initial revision of the definition—followed by multiple rounds of interaction between facilitators and experts (Hemming et al., 2018). A consensus is generally reached after two to four rounds,

with suggested agreement levels ranging from 51% to 80% (Hasson et al., 2000). The expert elicitation approach enabled the gathering of insights from leading experts in HL research and practice, fostering a consensus within the community. As a result, the new definition was grounded in both theory and the practical experience of HL. The direct feedback from experts also minimized the risk that biases of the research team would influence the new definition.

The expert panel was established by selecting 19 leading scholars who have significantly shaped the current knowledge base of HL. Selection was carried out using purposeful sampling (Patton, 2002) based on publication impact (i.e., number of citations in Google Scholar overall and in the field of HL, number of HL papers published, and overall contribution to the field of HL in recent years). In addition, 23 practitioners were included in the elicitation process to ensure that the revised HL definition would be relevant for real-world applications (cf. Ketchen & Craighead, 2023). Previous definitions in other fields have similarly relied on input from both academics and practitioners (e.g., Stock & Boyer's 2009 definition of SCM). Practitioners were selected using purposeful sampling to represent large humanitarian organizations with diverse mandates, geographic focuses, and operational types (e.g., the UN, NGOs, and the IFRC), thereby enabling a broad range of perspectives on humanitarian logistics. All organizations are actively involved in or overseeing supply distribution during humanitarian crises. Out of the 42 experts that were invited to the study, 29 participated (16 academics and 13 practitioners).

### **3.4.1 Elicitation process**

Following the approach from de Franca Doria et al. (2009), the elicitation process began with offering the experts the initial revised definition. Panel members were contacted via email, which included a brief introduction and a set of three questions: 1) Do you agree with the revised definition?, 2) Is there anything in the definition that you disagree with?, and 3) Is there anything missing from the revised definition? The feedback was analyzed using Atlas.ti, a qualitative content analysis tool. One author conducted an initial coding round, following an inductive coding process (Mayring, 2000), where codes were generated as the expert responses were read. The codes were refined until nine unique codes were identified that represented the most common suggestions for correcting the revised definition. The relevance of each comment was assessed based on its frequency of mention and the level of agreement among experts (cf. de Franca Doria et al., 2009). The other authors then reviewed and validated the coding. Based on this analysis, a new revised definition was developed and sent to the experts for validation. A questionnaire was distributed to the experts, who were asked to validate the changes through a 4-point Likert scale (agree, somewhat agree, somewhat disagree, and disagree), deliberately excluding a neutral option (Ilic et al., 2017). Respondents were also invited to provide open

comments or suggestions for each question. After the second round of elicitation, 90% agreement on the suggested changes was reached, which led to the proposition for a revised definition of humanitarian logistics.

### 3.5 Study 3: Case study (single/embedded)

The third study shifts focus from strategic intent to implementation to examine actual initiatives that could provide valuable insights for other IHOs involved in similar localization efforts. Strategy implementation studies are generally scarce, making strategy implementation a “black box” marked by uncertainty and complexity (Tawse & Tabesh, 2021; Holm et al., 2025). Holm et al. (2025) suggest that to better understand strategy implementation processes, additional qualitative empirical research, like case studies, is necessary to examine the underlying structures and contextual factors of the phenomenon. In localization research, implementation studies are still scarce, especially in humanitarian logistics, making this study important for the thesis. The study employed a qualitative, single-case study approach, as such designs have strengths in enabling an in-depth understanding of complex and context-dependent phenomena (Dyer & Wilkins, 1991; Stake, 1995). In addition, single-case studies capture the nuances of real-world complexity, and the selected case offers a unique opportunity to examine localization implementation (Siggelkow, 2007). As such, the study provides both theoretical insights and practical implications that would be difficult to obtain through broader comparative studies, like multiple case studies.

Through professional networks, a relevant localization case at the Case Organization was identified within the specialized nutritious food (SNF) supply chain. This involves the Case Organization’s ongoing efforts to integrate SNF into government-led, national supply chains within an African context. This is achieved by strengthening government capacity and transferring operational responsibility for managing the SNF supply chain to them. The Case Organization refers to this process as supply chain integration (SC integration), which has been used in both Paper 4 and Paper 5. It pertains to a specific part of localization in the SNF supply chain—specifically, governments taking responsibility for managing the SNF supply chain from the central warehouse to health facilities—reflecting a partial transfer approach (as seen in Paper 1). Eby et al. (2019) also use the same term in this context: “integration of parallel health commodities supply chains into one national supply chain is becoming more common globally as national health systems are strengthened.” This initial localization process can be expanded further, for example, by transferring more functions and responsibilities to governments, such as procuring and paying for the commodities. It is important not to confuse this with the same academic term used in logistics research, which has a different meaning. In logistics, supply chain integration refers to “the coordination mechanisms in the

form of business processes that should be streamlined and interconnected both within and outside company boundaries” (Jayaram & Tan, 2010, p. 262), and is hence profoundly different.

SC integration is far from being realized in all countries where the Case Organization has a malnutrition treatment programme. Instead, the most common setup before integration is that the Case Organization procures and manages the distribution of SNF down to the district level (see Figure 3.4). This supply chain runs in parallel to the national, government-led supply chains that often distribute other goods, particularly those from the essential medicine list. The Case Organization transfers responsibility for the SNF to the health facilities, after which the Ministry of Health-appointed personnel handle distribution to the population. With an integration process, the Case Organization seeks to shift the handover point upstream in the supply chain and make the government responsible for a larger part of the supply chain (see Figure 3.4). For those countries where this has been achieved, the Case Organization procures SNF and supplies it to the central warehouse, leaving the responsibility of all inbound logistics and distribution to national governments. Governments often engage third-party companies to manage the central warehouse and supervise distribution to the health facilities.



**Figure 3.4.** The responsibilities of actors in the SNF supply chain before and after integration

The Case Organization’s main goal is for governments to manage the SNF supply chain instead of running a parallel supply chain. A secondary goal is to encourage governments to increase their financing for SNF and procure a larger share of the commodities. The study mainly focuses on the SC integration goal, highlighting cases where governments in certain countries now manage the national supply chain of SNF. Still, it also discusses the financing and procurement aspects.

### 3.5.1 Data collection

A SC integration process, as described above, involves key supply chain actors: the Case Organization, national governments, and donors. While the Case Organization and governments are the primary actors, donors are crucial for the necessary funding. Consequently, the data collection focused on these three actors with an emphasis on the Case Organization due to its history with the SNF supply chain and its ongoing goal of transferring responsibility to governments. Data collection primarily involved 46 semi-structured interviews with key individuals engaged in or influencing the Case Organization's localization efforts—covering headquarters, regional, and country-level offices, major donor agencies, and government representatives from three selected countries (A, B, and C, see Table 3.3). The countries were chosen through purposeful sampling (Patton, 2002) based on the Case Organization's statements indicating which countries had advanced the most in the localization effort. The interviews lasted between 41 and 143 minutes, averaging 67 minutes, and were transcribed, validated, and analyzed using NVivo software. The interviews were supplemented by 22 organizational and policy documents that provided additional empirical grounding and supported triangulation. For Country A, a field trip took place in September 2025, including visits and meetings with the local supplier, government officials, and two health clinics. Besides conducting interviews at these sites, observations were also recorded to verify earlier findings.

**Table 3.3 Overview of interviewees in Study 3**

| Organization-level (specified countries/donors)                      | Number of respondents (46) | Roles in the organization                                                                                                                                                                            | Interviewees |
|----------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------|
| The Case Organization<br>3 HQ offices                                | 10                         | Supply chain and technical leads/associates, specialists within nutrition programmes, innovation, finance, partnerships and communications, managers for various nutrition and supply chain sections | HQ1-HQ10     |
| The Case Organization<br>3 regional offices in Africa                | 7                          | Supply chain strengthening specialist, supply chain and logistics specialists and managers, nutrition advisors and specialists                                                                       | RO1-RO7      |
| The Case Organization<br>3 African country offices (Country A, B, C) | 11                         | Supply chain officers and managers, nutrition specialists and managers                                                                                                                               | CO1-CO11     |
| 3 Host governments (Country A, B, C)                                 | 7                          | Nutrition and supply chain specialists and managers                                                                                                                                                  | HG1-HG7      |
| 4 Donors (Donor $\alpha$ , $\beta$ , $\gamma$ , $\delta$ )           | 10                         | Nutrition advisors and officers, programme manager, partnership managers (to the Case Organization), localization managers and team leads, supply chain team lead                                    | D1-D10       |
| 1 Supplier (Country A)                                               | 1                          | Managing director                                                                                                                                                                                    | S1           |

### 3.5.2 Data analysis

The study resulted in two papers. The first paper focuses on tensions and suggested responses arising during the Case Organization's localization process, seen with a paradox theory perspective (c.f. Smith & Lewis, 2011). Paradox theory was selected as an appropriate lens for this study because localization involves many important tensions overall (Paper 2). The decision to use paradox theory over other theories was based on the idea that IHOs should address both sides of the identified tensions, such as the tension between localization goals and humanitarian assistance goals. Paradox theory helps explain how to engage with both sides simultaneously, whereas contingency theory, for example, explains under what conditions managers should emphasize one side over the other (Lewis & Smith, 2014). This research examines explicitly one supply chain and the challenges encountered during the localization implementation phase. Utilizing paradox theory helps highlight the underlying tensions, leading to a more profound understanding of the complexities involved in localization (c.f. Smith & Lewis, 2011). Furthermore, it can provide direction by evaluating current methods and proposing new strategies for managing these paradoxical tensions. This is crucial for making progress in localization, which has been difficult (Barbelet et al., 2021; Mulder, 2023). The unit of analysis can be described as the tensions arising during the localization implementation and the related responses.

The data analysis for the first paper proceeded in three iterative coding cycles. The first-cycle coding applied a mix of *in vivo* and *a priori* codes to capture the breadth of perceived difficulties, which were then organized into eight overarching themes (Miles et al., 2020). The second-cycle coding refined these themes into 40 sub-themes, allowing for a deeper examination of tensions. In the third-cycle coding, paradox theory was applied to distinguish paradoxical tensions across the four core dimensions: organizing, performing, learning, and belonging. A parallel analysis of response strategies revealed patterns in how the Case Organization navigated and managed these tensions, categorized according to theoretical response types (e.g., acceptance, contextualization, separation). The influence of paradox theory is evident in the research. It shaped the interview guide to ensure coverage of challenges, tradeoffs, and responses. Similar to previous paradox studies, questions focused on the terms used for challenges or tradeoffs due to ambiguous words like tensions (see e.g., Xiao et al., 2019; Zehendner et al., 2021; Pålsson & Sandberg, 2022). Additionally, it informed data analysis by helping identify and categorize paradoxical tensions and their responses, which range from acceptance and contextualization to more active resolution techniques like synthesis and separation.

The second paper has embedded units of analysis. The first concerns the localization effort, which is examined through the lens of the ARA model. The analysis focuses on the three key dimensions—activities conducted, resources deployed, and actors involved—and investigates how these elements interact. Each country context and

the overall localization approach of the Case organization were coded separately. For the overall approach, each element was analyzed across headquarters, regional, and national levels, enabling a cross-level understanding of linkages. Codes were aggregated to understand the different SC integration procedures. These were then compared across countries for similarities and differences, as well as against the general Case Organization approach. The second unit of analysis is the realized and expected changes in roles and responsibilities with increasing localization. These were also coded across the various countries and then analyzed and compared. The third unit of analysis is the perceived benefits of localization. The benefits were coded separately to allow for an overall understanding of the possible localization gains. Both the benefits and the changing roles and responsibilities provide insights that are essential for guiding future localization efforts and demonstrating their value. As Barbelet et al. (2021) noted, evidence on the effects of localization remains limited, often relying on anecdotal reports. This study, therefore, provides a rare, practice-based perspective on how the Case Organization operationalizes localization and how key actors involved in the process perceive its outcomes.

### 3.6 Research Quality

Due to the thesis's philosophical stance and the choice of qualitative methods, trustworthiness as a quality criterion is applied (Halldórsson & Aastrup, 2003; da Mota Pedrosa et al., 2012). Halldórsson and Aastrup (2003) argue for the need to better fit qualitative methods in logistics research to the perceptions of quality and find alternatives to traditional positivist criteria. Qualitative research has other characteristics and ways of building or extending theory and therefore requires criteria that align and can assess those characteristics (da Mota Pedrosa et al., 2012; Erlandson et al., 1993). Trustworthiness has, therefore, been suggested as an overall quality criterion that meets the rigor required for qualitative research. Trustworthiness acknowledges the significance of contextual data in qualitative studies, where generalization is achieved through replication logic rather than statistical inference (Yin, 2009; Barratt et al., 2011). For qualitative research in the logistics field, trustworthiness consists of four components: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Halldórsson & Aastrup, 2003).

First, credibility reflects the conformity between the interviewees' statements and the researcher's interpretation (Guba & Lincoln, 1989; Halldórsson & Aastrup, 2003). In positivistic terms, credibility corresponds to internal validity, with the difference that credibility does not claim that the knowledge gained from interviews can be evaluated to any 'true' reality. Credibility aligns with the critical realist approach, where contexts and perceptions shape our knowledge of reality. What is being studied is the interpretation of reality rather than the reality in itself.

This thesis aims to establish credibility in various ways, as detailed in Table 3.4. Triangulation has been the primary method for determining credibility. In all studies, interviewees/participants have been triangulated to validate findings. For example, in Study 1, two or three experts from each organization were interviewed to facilitate triangulation of results within the same organization (cf. Alvesson, 2011). In Study 3, multiple employees working at the same geographical level (HQ/regional/national) were approached to triangulate findings. Investigator triangulation has also been used in Studies 1, 2, and parts of Study 3. For example, in Study 2, several research team members analyzed responses to propose a new definition. Additionally, in Study 3, data source triangulation was employed, where findings were based on interviews and internal and external documents. Studies 1 and 2 also used respondents' confirmation to establish credibility and confirmability. In Study 1, transcripts were sent to interviewees. In Study 2, several rounds of expert elicitation were performed, allowing participants to confirm or oppose changes. Communication with respondents was essential to the expert elicitation method and necessary to complete the study. However, as discussed in Chapter 3.2, in Study 3, it was decided not to send the transcripts to respondents for review. This decision was made because the negative consequences were considered to outweigh the positive effects.

Second, transferability relates to the extent to which research findings can be applied to different settings or contexts (Halldórsson & Aastrup, 2003; da Mota Pedrosa et al., 2012). The positivistic version of transferability is external validity, which focuses on generalizing findings to other contexts (Guba & Lincoln, 1989). However, transferability is better suited to the critical theorist paradigm as it recognizes that context and circumstances evolve over time (Erlandson et al., 1993). This implies that generalization is still possible but not universally; instead, it requires a replication logic within similar settings. This evaluation falls to some extent on other researchers (da Mota Pedrosa et al., 2012). To enhance the transferability of the thesis, certain actions have been taken, as specified in Table 3.4. Transferability actions in this thesis include explaining the methodological choices made and the reasons for them. This was done in all three studies. Also, rich descriptions of the cases and the interviewees' belonging and expertise have been added in the studies to increase transferability.

Third, dependability concerns the stability of data over time (Guba & Lincoln, 1989). Dependability mirrors positivistic reliability in that research findings should be consistent and replicable (da Mota Pedrosa et al., 2012). This is done by documenting the methodological decisions, including research design, protocols, guidelines, and respondent selection (Gammelgaard, 2017). The difference between dependability and reliability is that dependability does not problematize changes in methodology during the research process as long as they are well documented (Erlandson et al., 1993). The dependability actions taken in this thesis are presented

in Table 3.4. These include demonstrating the research process and design choices made in all studies.

Finally, confirmability addresses whether findings are rooted in data rather than researcher bias (Halldórsson & Aastrup, 2003). This can be compared to the positivistic objectivity of research. In the critical realism view, objectivity is neither possible nor aimed at, as critical realists acknowledge that reality is understood through various lenses. As such, it is important to value reflexivity in all research and that the researcher cannot be separated from the study (Alvesson et al., 2008). Confirmability allows for such recognition but aims to ensure that the findings of the study come from the data. The confirmability actions taken in this thesis are presented in Table 3.4.

**Table 3.4 Research quality actions employed in this thesis**

| <b>Research quality action</b>                                 | <b>Description</b>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                  | <b>Matching component</b>                      |
|----------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------|
| Triangulation of interviewees                                  | In Study 1 and Study 3, several interviewees with knowledge of the same phenomenon were approached to confirm findings.                                                                                                                                                                                                                             | Credibility, confirmability                    |
| Triangulation of data sources                                  | In Study 3, internal and external documents complemented the interviewees' statements.                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                              | Credibility, confirmability                    |
| Investigator triangulation                                     | In Study 1 and 3, other researchers and/or practitioners evaluated the interpretations made by the first author. In Study 2, several researchers analyzed the input from the expert elicitation.                                                                                                                                                    | Credibility, confirmability                    |
| Respondents' confirmation                                      | In Study 1 and Study 2, transcripts and/or research findings were sent to interviewees for review.                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                  | Credibility, confirmability                    |
| Clarify and demonstrate the research process.                  | All studies described the research process, including data collection, coding procedures, and analysis, as precisely as possible.                                                                                                                                                                                                                   | Credibility, dependability, and confirmability |
| Display methodological choices in the research design.         | All studies in the thesis clearly demonstrate the underlying theoretical aims, unit of analysis, and case or interviewee selection. This helps determine the boundaries of the study's applicability to different contexts and, thus, analytical generalization. It also facilitates an assessment of the suitability of the selected data sources. | Transferability, dependability                 |
| Present detailed case descriptions and interviewee belongings. | The case in Study 3 and the respondents in Study 1 and Study 2 are presented with detailed descriptions to enable evaluation of possible generalization.                                                                                                                                                                                            | Transferability                                |
| Include interview/ data protocols.                             | Every study includes interview/data protocols that enhance the reproducibility of the findings.                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                     | Dependability                                  |
| Use quotes.                                                    | Throughout the three studies, numerous quotes from interviewees have been used to validate the findings.                                                                                                                                                                                                                                            | Confirmability                                 |

## 4. Discussing the findings

*This chapter presents and discusses the findings for each research question, drawing on the results from the five papers included in this doctoral thesis. Before proceeding, a brief overview of the papers, including their methods, theories, and key contributions, is provided.*

### 4.1 Paper overview

This doctoral thesis comprises five interlinked papers that collectively address the purpose of *exploring and explaining the concept of localization of humanitarian logistics from a top-down perspective, focusing on the path from strategic intent to implementation*. An overview of the papers is presented in Table 4.1. The first three papers have been published in different academic journals, the fourth is under review, and the fifth is to be sent to an academic journal. The papers contribute various perspectives and nuances to the localization phenomenon and humanitarian logistics. Together, they lay the foundation for understanding localization of humanitarian logistics, its challenges and tensions, and how to move from strategic intent to implementation.

**Table 4.1 Overview of the papers included in the thesis**

| # | Title                                                                                                                                 | Journal                                                                | Research aims                                                                                                                                                 | Context                             | Methods                                                                          | Theoretical lens/<br>Literature                           | Main contributions                                                                                                                  |
|---|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 1 | Localisation of logistics preparedness in international humanitarian organisations                                                    | Journal of Humanitarian Logistics and Supply Chain Management (JHLSCM) | Seek to enhance the understanding of localising logistics preparedness                                                                                        | Localization Logistics preparedness | Qualitative and exploratory study, interviews with 28 respondents                | Strategy implementation Logistics preparedness capacities | Presenting three different perceptions of localization and offering a framework to concretize the concept                           |
| 2 | International humanitarian organizations' perspectives on localization efforts                                                        | International Journal of Disaster Risk Reduction (IJDRR)               | Understand better why IHOs are slow to implement the localization strategy, supporting the transfer of capacities and resources to national and local actors. | Localization Logistics preparedness | Qualitative and exploratory study, interviews with 28 respondents                | Multinational corporations                                | Explaining why IHOs are pushed in other directions than localization and challenges to the localization strategy itself             |
| 3 | Revisiting the definition of humanitarian logistics                                                                                   | Journal of Business Logistics (JBL)                                    | Revisit and revise the definition of humanitarian logistics                                                                                                   | Humanitarian logistics              | Expert elicitation research, 16 academic and 13 practitioners                    | Humanitarian logistics                                    | Offering a new definition and accompanying properties for the concept of humanitarian logistics                                     |
| 4 | Unpacking and managing tensions for integrating specialized nutritious food into national supply chains: a paradox theory perspective | Submitted to the Journal of Business Logistics (JBL), under review     | Go beyond the strategic localization goal and focus on the tensions and suggested responses arising during the localization implementation                    | Localization SNF supply chain       | Single case study, 46 interviewees, 22 documents                                 | Paradox theory                                            | Explaining and categorizing tensions and related responses when localizing in the SNF supply chain                                  |
| 5 | Transitioning from localization strategy intent to implementation: an in-depth case study                                             | Unpublished manuscript                                                 | Understand how an organization has implemented localization along with perceived benefits, and changing roles and responsibilities                            | Localization SNF supply chain       | Single case study with embedded units of analysis, 46 interviewees, 22 documents | Activities-Resources-Actors (ARA) model                   | Providing insights into how localization can be implemented in the SNF supply chain and actors' shifting roles and responsibilities |

## 4.2 Findings contributing to answering RQ1: How can localization of humanitarian logistics be understood from a top-down perspective?

Due to the novelty of the phenomenon, the first paper explored the concept of localization in a humanitarian logistics setting. As such, it is one of the first academic articles on the subject. The paper examines the progress of international humanitarian organizations (IHOs) in implementing the sector-wide agreed-upon localization strategy, which aims to empower and strengthen capacities of LNAs in humanitarian efforts. The paper focuses explicitly on understanding localization of logistics-preparedness capacities within the IHO community. The study discovered a lack of clarity about what localization entails within the IHO community (see Table 4.2). Different IHOs interpret localization in various ways, with three dominant views mainly prevailing: decentralization (strengthening IHO-affiliated offices), partial transfer (shifting operational logistics-preparedness capacities to local actors), and full transfer (completely shifting logistics-preparedness capacities to local actors). The fourth view, centralization, primarily highlights the absence of a localization strategy and an intention to centralize logistics-preparedness capacities. This variance in localization view diverges from the agreed-upon localization intents and poses a significant obstacle to their implementation.

As concluded in the paper, neither centralization nor decentralization can be considered localization. Centralization is characterized by the absence of a localization strategy, whereas decentralization focuses on empowering country offices and IHO affiliations, granting them increased autonomy and resources. A decentralization strategy, hence, misses the target of strengthening independent LNAs outside the current system. This means that power will remain within the IHOs, rooted in the values and norms of the Global North. Partial and full transfer, however, are considered localization approaches as they focus on the independent actors that are locally situated and currently not a part of the IHS.

In Paper 1, decentralization, partial transfer, and full transfer were viewed as separate visions. However, they may instead function as a roadmap with incremental steps toward achieving localization. Although decentralization is not considered localization, it can serve as the first step toward localization. As the local staff of IHOs are often in direct contact with other independent LNAs, they are perhaps the most suited to directly empower and strengthen their logistics capacities. Therefore, a certain degree of decentralization may be necessary for localization to occur, as country offices of IHOs require the knowledge and resources that can be transferred to LNAs. This was evident in Paper 5, as the Case Organization needed to strengthen its own country offices with the necessary skills before embarking on a localization journey of integrating SNF into national supply chains.

**Table 4.2 Classification of localization views within the IHO community**

| <b>Localization view</b> | <b>Content</b>                                                                                                                                                            | <b>Illustrative quote</b>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                 | <b>Responses, # (% of tot)</b> | <b>Organization affiliation</b>                             |
|--------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------|
| Decentralization         | Transferring more capacity to regional/national/subnational offices or affiliations but still keeping global capacity for large disasters                                 | 'The vision now is that we have strong regular program, when there is not an emergency, which means that we are already in country before an emergency hits.' (R6)                                                                                        | 16 (57%)                       | NRC, CARE, UNFPA, SOS, IFRC, UNICEF, Oxfam, WVI, UNHCR, WHO |
| Partial transfer         | Transferring the operational part of logistics preparedness capacities to external, national/local actors with the purpose of having a more strategic role in the future. | 'It means our role is shifting to more supporting, bringing expertise, specific expertise, which would add value. Bringing more brokering type of roles, bringing stakeholders together, where we have a role and space to do that.' (R18)                | 7 (25%)                        | WFP, Oxfam, WHO, Consultants                                |
| Full transfer            | Transferring all capacities to external, national/local actors with the purpose of withdrawing international presence from that country.                                  | 'Localization is basically a commitment toward building the capacity of local and national actors to be able to deliver humanitarian response without an audience, without international NGOs.' (R23)                                                     | 9 (32%)                        | UNFPA, UNHCR, UNICEF, WFP, WHO, CARE, WVI                   |
| Centralization           | No aim to make capacities more local                                                                                                                                      | 'We have an organizational supply strategy set up recently and there are, if I remember, eight objectives and none of them says anything about what you call localization. It's not at all a strategic topic it's an operational optimistic topic.' (R15) | 3 (11%)                        | MSF, UNFPA                                                  |

It is imperative that IHOs do not limit their efforts to decentralization in their pursuit of implementing localization. Partial transfer is the natural next step in the localization process, where IHOs primarily transfer operational capacities/activities to LNAs (Paper 1). This also mirrors the Case Organization's transfer of SNF supply chain capacities to governments, as seen in Paper 5. As a step toward complete localization, governments, with the support of the Case Organization, integrated SNF into their national supply chain and took responsibility for storing,

transporting, and distributing the commodities to end users. Although much work remains until complete localization is achieved, this first step helped governments become more accountable and gain a sense of ownership, which may facilitate the final step of the localization process: full transfer. Full transfer is the IHOs' final destination: working themselves out of a job. This aim is reflected in several appended papers (e.g., Paper 1 and Paper 5). Full transfer is similar to the bottom-up approach of capacity development with a few exceptions. Where capacity development is more built on LNAs' cultures and values, full transfer mimics the values of the IHS. This is where the localization agenda receives most criticism. The IHS builds its localization approach around its internal values and ways of working instead of developing national and local solutions from the bottom up. Such solutions may be ignorant of cultural and local values and risk becoming unsustainable if not merged with the common working ways of LNAs.

On the other hand, in specific contexts, a top-down approach may be necessary, signalling that LNAs must adapt their methods and learn from IHOs. One example is SNF, which requires specific storage conditions and careful handling during distribution (Paper 4, Paper 5). SNF is critical in the fight against malnutrition and currently lacks a local substitute. Thus, SNF will remain essential for years to come in combating malnutrition. When governments and other LNAs take on the responsibility for the SNF supply chain, it is crucial that they 'get it right' by distributing the product in a way that preserves its quality. However, the top-down approach may impede the development of new local solutions with a more significant local impact. For instance, strict requirements in the SNF guidelines do not encourage innovation. The guidelines stipulate that a certain amount of the ingredients must come from a specific protein source, often necessitating imports for African suppliers. The SNF case highlights the challenging balance between a bottom-up and top-down localization approach, stressing that both perspectives are vital for effectively serving the population's needs and interests.

#### **4.2.1 Localization of humanitarian logistics**

The thesis focuses explicitly on the localization of humanitarian logistics. Humanitarian logistics (HL) is essential in disaster response, accounting for up to 80% of expenses (Stumpf et al., 2017). Localizing humanitarian logistics allows many aspects of the IHO's tasks to be delegated to LNAs. This approach responds to the call for more focused and technical localization efforts where previous large transformations have failed (Alexander, 2022). Therefore, the boundaries of localization in this context depend on the parameters of humanitarian logistics. The third paper in the thesis delves into the concept of humanitarian logistics, defines its boundaries, and proposes a new definition (see Figure 4.1). The paper suggests that humanitarian logistics can be defined as:

*“The logistics and supply chain management focusing on the preparation for, response to, and recovery from a humanitarian crisis, with the aim of saving lives and alleviating the suffering of affected populations.”*

Its accompanying properties, considered unique to humanitarian logistics but may change with time, can be described as follows:

*“HL is commonly supported by donations and/or volunteering, guided by nonprofit motives, and carried out by various types of national and international organizations, such as communities, volunteer groups, companies, and governments, acting in the spirit of humanitarian principles.”*

The results from the third paper answer several questions previously highlighted in this thesis. Humanitarian logistics is distinguished from other forms of logistics in a disaster setting, both by the new definition’s focus on humanitarian crises and by its accompanying properties. As explained in Paper 3, the UNIASC’s (2015, p. 2) definition of humanitarian crisis is utilized:

*“A singular event or a series of events in a country or region that cause serious disruption to the functioning of a society, resulting in human, material, or environmental losses, which exceed the ability of affected people to cope using their own resources.”*

Although this definition may be interpreted differently, humanitarian logistics is understood here to relate to large-scale disasters, often where the LNAs’ capacity is overwhelmed and international help is required.

Humanitarian Logistics (HL)

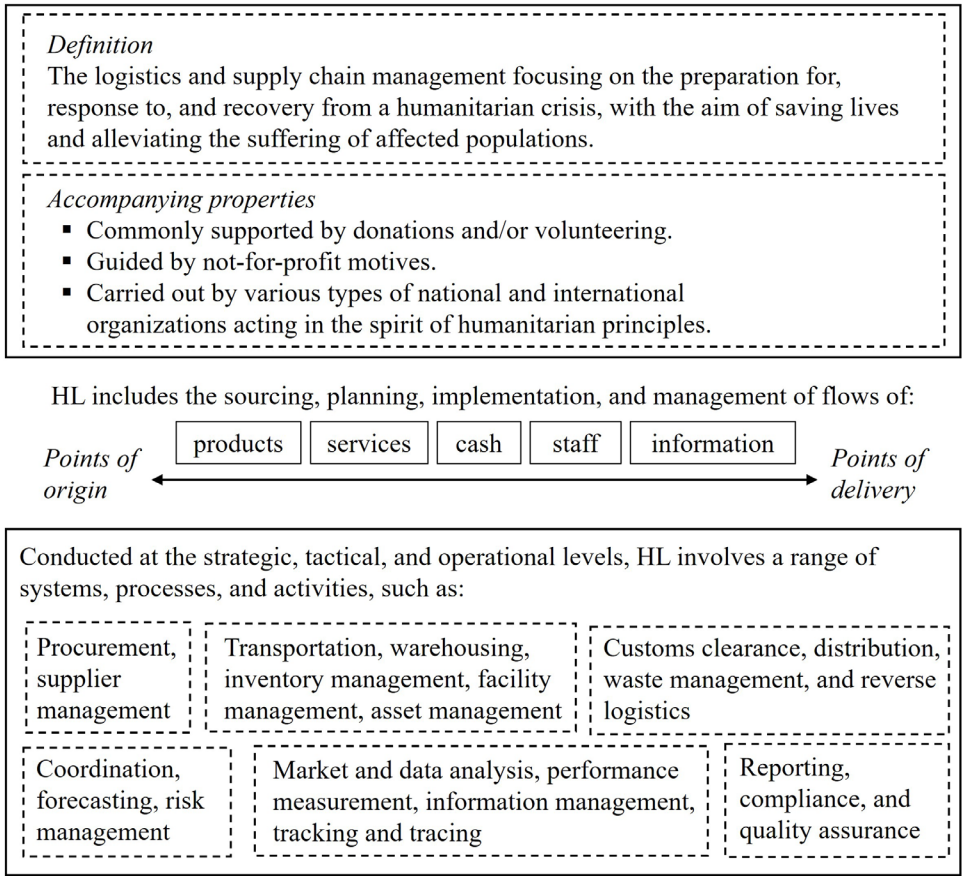


Figure 4.1. Humanitarian logistics definition and boundaries

The related properties further clarify that humanitarian logistics often relies on donations and is guided by the humanitarian principles, suggesting that the IHS is involved in some capacity. This involvement can be of varying kinds and levels. The suggested coordination models by Spiegel (2017) can act as an example to illustrate IHS’s possible participation in humanitarian crises. Spiegel (2017) used three scenarios to reflect these coordination models. In Scenario 1, LNAs adhere to humanitarian principles and can handle disaster response and recovery, with the funds provided by institutional donors. IHOs’ role is to offer strategic and tactical support and address gaps. In Scenario 2, LNAs adhere to humanitarian principles but lack sufficient capacity to manage disasters. This prompts IHOs to take charge of response and recovery—funded by institutional donors—as well as to strengthen LNAs. In Scenario 3, LNAs may have the capacity to respond but do not follow the

humanitarian principles, leading the IHS to manage the disaster independently. As seen in Chapter 2, the principles of concern are primarily humanity and impartiality, as even IHOs have difficulties adhering to neutrality and independence (Schenkenberg van Mierop, 2016).

The thesis takes the perspective that humanitarian assistance is carried out with some involvement from the IHS. Otherwise, it is simply disaster relief. This is based on the definition of humanitarian assistance (see Chapter 2.1) and complemented by other sources such as Spiegel (2017). Several papers looking at disasters in a Global North context using national resources and capacities refer to disaster management or relief, not humanitarian assistance (e.g., Oloruntoba et al., 2018; Drakes et al., 2021). Hence, each disaster needing the IHS in some capacity can be seen as humanitarian. In these instances, humanitarian logistics is required, seeing that this thesis views humanitarian logistics as a subset of humanitarian assistance. Also, the definition of humanitarian crisis, which the revised definition of humanitarian logistics is built upon, implicitly states that external means are required due to *“serious disruption to the functioning of a society”*, and that the *“ability of affected people to cope using their own resources”* is exceeded. The definition of humanitarian crisis should apply independent of where the disaster occurs—Global South or Global North. For example, Hurricane Katrina in the United States can be viewed as a humanitarian crisis (in need of humanitarian logistics), as LNAs’ capacities were overwhelmed and the IHS stepped in to help (Babic, 2015; IRC, 2016; American Red Cross, 2025).

This perspective has consequences for how localization of humanitarian logistics can be understood. One of the main ideas behind localization is to reduce countries’ aid dependency. Consequently, localization aims to reduce an event in a country from a humanitarian crisis to a disaster that the country can largely manage with its own resources and capacities. With the full transfer vision, humanitarian logistics capacities, fully integrated into national systems, become ‘just’ disaster logistics capacities. Using the Case Organization as an example, their goal is to integrate the SNF supply chain into the national system and, in the long term, make governments (partially) pay for the commodities. If they succeeded in this, there would be no reason to categorize the situation as humanitarian, reducing it to just a government tackling malnutrition among its citizens, much like any other government in the Global North already does. Then, it might as well be called long-term or ongoing disaster response in need of disaster logistics capacities. However, as long as this response is aided with funding from the IHS, the situation might still be called a humanitarian one, mimicking Spiegel’s (2017) Scenario 1.

The definition of humanitarian logistics further gives insights into when localization of humanitarian logistics can be seen as ‘complete’. As long as LNAs are in control of the flows, systems, processes, and activities specified in Figure 4.1, localization of humanitarian logistics has been achieved. Hence, localization of humanitarian logistics should focus on the capacities needed for L/NAs to manage these flows.

Most of these flows involve typical logistics activities conducted for the purpose of disaster management. The idea is that this first step can inspire LNAs to continue the localization journey to reduce their aid dependency and increase their sense of ownership. The next step could be to localize other important capacities and activities, such as those related to programs and funding. However, humanitarian logistics activities are directly connected to the specific programmes, meaning they cannot be separated entirely. For localization of ‘only’ humanitarian logistics to be relevant, the LNAs should manage the distribution of products and services to the affected population within the programme. It makes little sense for LNAs to handle certain parts of the supply chains if the products need to return into the hands of IHOs before distribution. If so, localization should perhaps start downstream at the needs assessment and final distribution before localizing more upstream activities. For example, in Papers 4 and 5, the governments were already responsible for treating the population with SNF at the health facilities, making localization of the other parts of the supply chain relevant and feasible.

Capacities indirectly linked to logistics were highlighted as important in Paper 1. It can be debated whether funding activities are part of humanitarian logistics. The definition includes cash flows and states that donors commonly support activities. This suggests that localization of humanitarian logistics may be ‘complete’ even if donors in the IHS still fund LNAs, with LNAs managing these cash flows from donors to carry out logistics activities. There might be a difference here depending on the type of LNA. This thesis has focused on governments expected to finance their own activities and capacities, especially if they aim to reduce aid dependence. However, like their international counterparts, local and national NGOs rely on funding. This implies that funding for NGOs is not a core part of the localization agenda; rather, they should have the capacity (and opportunity) to attract and apply for funding from various donors (as stated in Paper 1). The exact role of funding in localization requires more research, as described in Chapter 5.4.

This logic of what localization of humanitarian logistics means can also be applicable to other types of disasters than those studied in this thesis. Study 3 concerned malnutrition, which can be regarded as a slow-onset disaster requiring ongoing operations (cf. Kovács & Spens, 2007). In contrast, logistics capacities needed for a sudden-onset disaster have other requirements, with more focus on preparedness (cf. Holguín-Veras et al., 2012). Paper 1 explores this more in-depth, pinpointing what logistics-preparedness capacities need to be transferred to LNAs. This includes how to incorporate IHOs into their response if needed. This is an important aspect as the IHS will, in many cases, be needed to complement existing local capacities in one way or another (see, e.g., Spiegel, 2017). Localization does not mean humanitarian crises will not occur or that the IHS will become irrelevant. Instead, it suggests that LNAs remain in control of the response and can determine when, where, and how IHOs can support.

#### 4.2.2 Updating the definition of localization of humanitarian logistics

In Paper 1, a definition of localization of logistics preparedness was offered:

*“The process of transferring logistics preparedness capacities from IHOs to external, national/local actors, with the purpose of strengthening those actors to independently manage disasters and, when needed, have the capacity to integrate international help in the disaster relief effort.”*

In this thesis, an update to this definition is suggested based on knowledge gained through the three studies. The thesis also focuses on localization of humanitarian logistics, which differs slightly from localization of logistics preparedness. For instance, in Papers 4 and 5, localization addresses not only preparedness capacities but also ongoing long-term responses to combat malnutrition. By synthesizing insights developed throughout the PhD research, the following updated definition is proposed:

*“The process of strengthening humanitarian-logistics capacities and transferring related decision-making authority among external, local and national actors with the purpose of enabling these actors to manage disasters independently and, when needed, have the capacity to integrate international help in the disaster relief effort.”*

The updated definition distinguishes itself from the initial one in several ways. First, the terminology has been updated to focus on strengthening logistics capacities instead of transferring. This better reflects the need for IHOs to evaluate the logistics capacities of LNAs and enhance them when necessary, rather than simply reallocating IHOs’ existing capacities that may not fit LNAs. Second, removing IHOs from the initial definition indicates that the whole of the IHS, such as institutional donors, can apply the definition. Third, the new definition underscores the need to transfer decision-making authority alongside logistics capacities. This is essential, as localization otherwise risks viewing LNAs as subcontractors who perform increasingly more activities without the means to decide over their operations (cf. Khoury & Scott, 2024). Fourth, it highlights humanitarian-logistics capacities instead of logistics preparedness capacities. This better reflects a broader range of capacities that are necessary to manage the flows, systems, processes, and activities for preparedness, response, and recovery, as stated in the new definition of humanitarian logistics.

The definition of localization of humanitarian logistics suggested here is strictly towards strengthening and empowering national and local actors. It does not include other relevant local activities like *internal* strengthening within IHOs’ own structures or local procurement. Internal strengthening, as already discussed as decentralization, can be viewed as an important enabler to localization, but not localization per se. That is why the definition specifies the term external, referring to those actors outside the current IHS. In the same way, local procurement can be

essential for the economies of countries in the Global South and a catalyst for localization, as shown in Paper 5. However, including these concepts in the localization definition is a danger, as this risks diluting the agenda from the initial goals and having IHOs stop at just conducting more activities locally, precisely what has already received heavy criticism from localization proponents (e.g., Wall & Hedlund, 2016).

### 4.3 Findings contributing to answering RQ2: What are the main challenges and paradoxical tensions in localizing humanitarian logistics?

Localization as a phenomenon is not new in practice or research. Barbelet et al. (2021, p. 6) argue that efforts to improve accountability to affected populations date back to the 1970s. Alexander (2022) further states that “(f)indings and recommendations about localization and accountability to affected people from 25 years ago look quite similar to those of today.” Despite the long-standing aim of strengthening accountability, concrete initiatives and successful implementation have been lacking. The first paper mirrors this view, finding that localization is a highly discussed topic but lacks concrete initiatives. In the paper, 71% of the interviewees stated that localization is still on the envisioning level rather than being operationalized. This result was gained from interviews conducted in 2018 and 2019, but the lack of operationalization still prevails today. Advocates of localization have been greatly disappointed thus far. Many papers in this thesis contribute to illuminating the challenges that impede progress on localization, particularly Paper 2 and Paper 4, but also Paper 1.

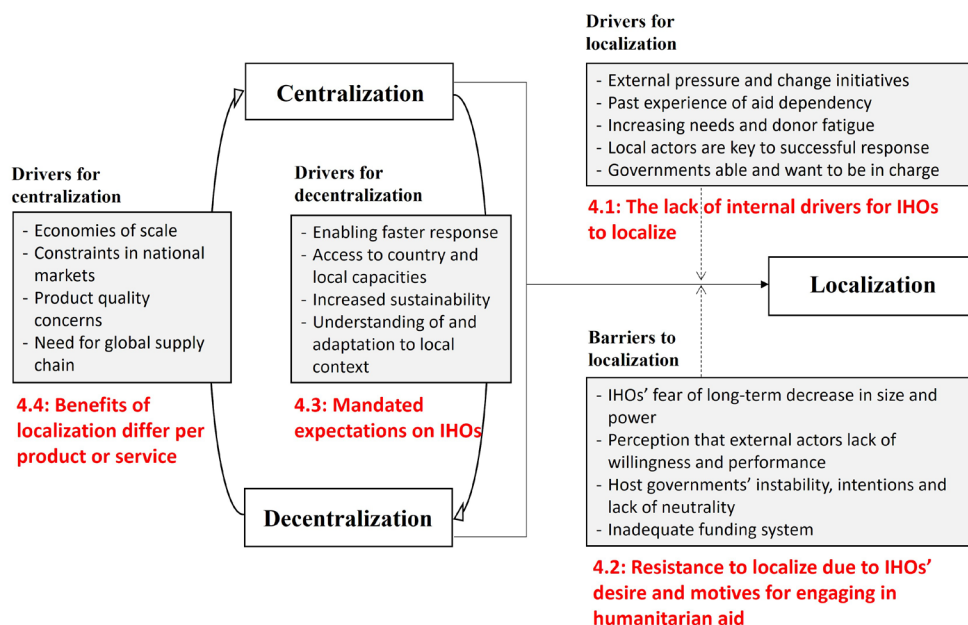
#### 4.3.1 Lack of a cohesive understanding of localization

In Paper 1, the conclusion is drawn that various visions and aspects of operationalization suggest a cohesive understanding of localization is lacking in the IHO community. This poses a significant barrier to its implementation. The term localization may itself present an issue, as its meaning varies depending on the context. For instance, commercial localization typically involves a company’s internal procedures for entering new markets, executing key activities locally, and customizing products and services to fit the local context (Ben-Ner & Siemsen, 2017; Wu & Jia, 2018). Another example pertains to the study on the Case Organization’s localization process of integrating SNF to the government-led supply chain, which the interviewees referred to as “integration” or “systems strengthening.” In contrast, the interviewees used the term localization for the process of positioning suppliers of SNF geographically close to the population they

serve (see, e.g., Paper 4). Clearly, the term localization can be confusing. Further, in the humanitarian context, particularly in grey and white papers, the term localization is often criticized as being paternalistic and neocolonial (Barbelet et al., 2021; Robillard et al., 2021). Other terms have been suggested, including local leadership, decolonization of aid, and local solutions. However, localization still seems to be the most widely used term to reflect the empowerment and strengthening of LNAs.

### 4.3.2 Forces driving IHOs towards centralization or decentralization

The second paper considers explicitly why IHOs have been slow in implementing the localization goals from the Grand Bargain and the Charter of Change. It focuses on the gap between strategic intent and practical implementation within IHOs. The findings revealed several forces pushing IHOs towards centralization and decentralization instead of localization (see Figure 4.2). These forces were compared to the forces that drive multinational corporations (MNCs)—commercial equivalents of IHOs—in different directions. The pressures of global efficiency versus local responsiveness are also influencing IHOs.



**Figure 4.2.** Forces pushing IHOs in different strategic directions

First, it was suggested in the paper that IHOs have valid reasons for pursuing both internal centralization and decentralization. Current mandated expectations on IHOs

to respond to large-scale, worldwide disasters imply the need for efficiency and effectiveness in operations. Interviewees emphasized the need to centralize certain activities and resources due to stringent requirements for quality and cost efficiency, while decentralization may be necessary to access specific countries.

These forces are most likely even more prevalent today, with the global outlook suggesting an expected increase in the amount and severity of crises combined with reduced funding. The UN describes the most challenging reality since World War II, where “humanitarian crises are unfolding against a backdrop of instability, rising conflicts, climate shocks and economic downturns” (Mishra, 2025), resulting in a steep rise in needs. At the same time, funding is on the decline. It is not only the disappearance of USAID that affects IHOs; overall funding from donors, excluding the US, has in fact been decreasing since 2022 (Obrecht & Pearson, 2025). This combination suggests that localization efforts may take a back seat, as large IHOs are likely to prioritize using scarce funding to build global capacity. Centralization thus becomes a more viable alternative for reasons of efficiency and effectiveness, and to reach as many people as possible as seen in Paper 2. Paper 4 confirmed this struggle, noting that the Case Organization, for instance, faces a tension between the efficiency of global procurement and the benefits of local development.

In addition, the analysis in Paper 2 revealed that the lack of internal drivers is a significant barrier to localization. The study showed that IHOs may lack motivation to localize, as they operate and view themselves like other businesses, with important organizational goals and employees in meaningful jobs. According to Bennett et al. (2016), the business-like character of IHOs today means there is more focus on competitiveness and gaining as much funding as possible rather than identifying opportunities to complement the existing capacities of LNAs. This challenge is exacerbated by the prevailing view that decentralization is an effective strategy for achieving local responsiveness, a strategy that also reduces risks associated with localization. As shown in Paper 2, the decentralization strategy yields the same benefits as localization for IHOs but provides more control. With the growing global turmoil, maintaining a presence in areas of greatest need and controlling how money is spent may be strategically important. Thus, there may be very few reasons for IHOs to pursue localization as intended in the global initiatives. From the IHO perspective, localization drivers can be reduced to a moral obligation and “doing what is right.” This is unlikely to be sufficient to drive localization efforts in the future.

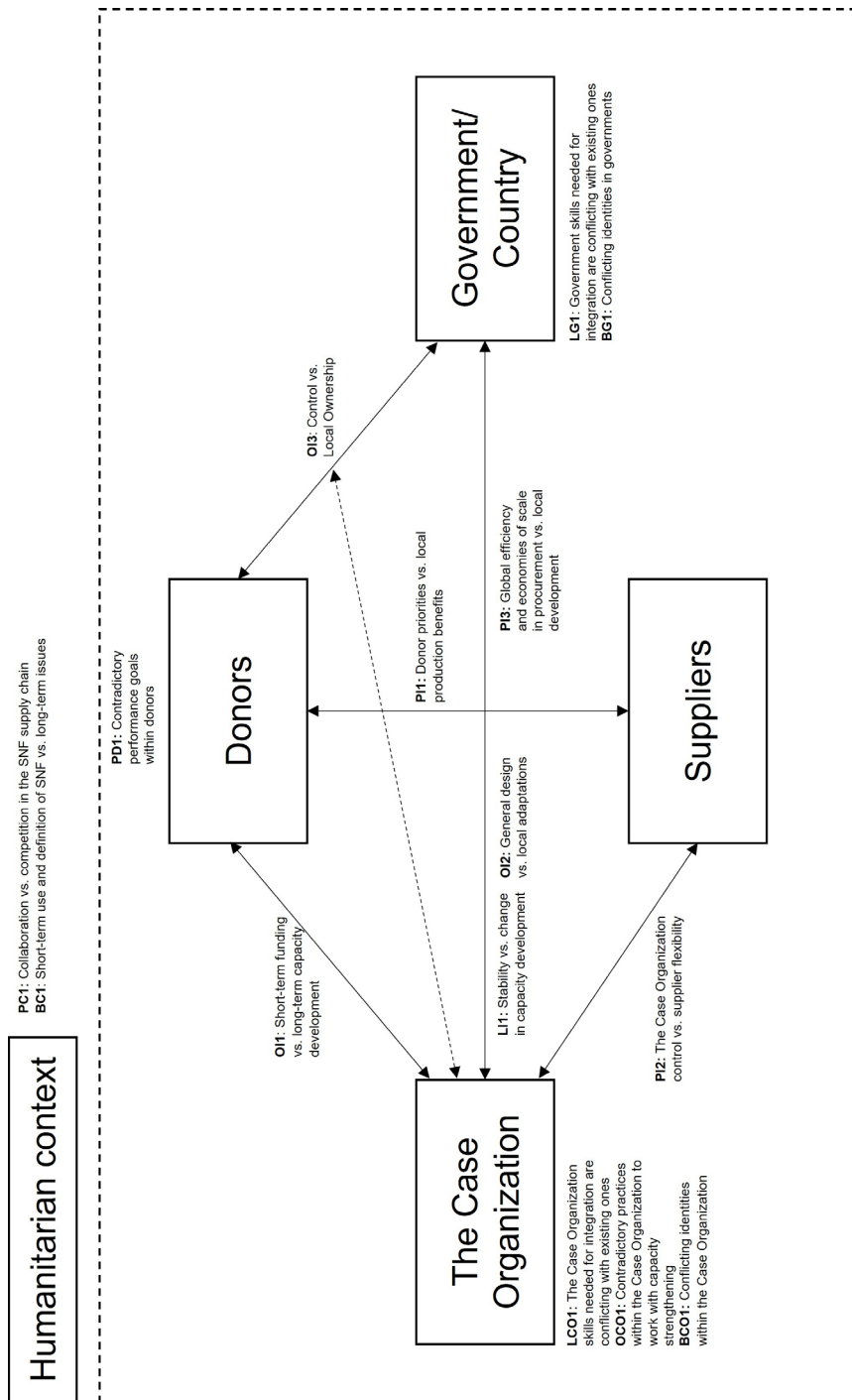
#### **4.3.3 Challenges to the localization agenda in itself**

In addition to the forces pushing IHOs toward centralization and decentralization, the localization strategy itself faces numerous challenges. Paper 2 describes these challenges at a multisectoral level, spanning various IHOs. Paper 4 examines them through the lens of a specific localization initiative using paradox theory. As shown

in Figure 4.2 the primary barriers identified in Paper 2 relate to the IHOs' resistance to localization, stemming from the IHOs' desire and motives for engaging in humanitarian assistance. This includes not only the already mentioned concerns about losing influence or diminishing in size, but also perceptions regarding a lack of commitment and effectiveness among LNAs, challenges due to unstable host governments or doubts about their intentions and neutrality, and a funding system that is poorly aligned with the requirements of a localized approach. Paper 4 confirmed most of the findings related to perceived barriers. For instance, the IHO's lack of motives for localization mirrored the conflicting identities within the Case Organization. Also, the finding in Paper 2 that IHOs perceive LNAs as lacking commitment and effectiveness can be viewed as a tension between general design and local adaptations, as found in Paper 4. By applying a paradox theory lens, these barriers can be better understood.

Following the paradox theory, fifteen paradoxical tensions were identified (see Figure 4.3). The tensions were classified into learning, performing, organizing, and belonging categories. They were also divided into intraorganizational, interorganizational, and system-level tensions. An intraorganizational tension worth highlighting from Paper 4 is the contradictory practices of working with localization, which likely span the entire humanitarian sector. The Case Organization struggles to strengthen governments while responding to disasters, creating disparities within the organization. Despite having a clear localization strategy, there is insufficient time and resources to address all strengthening needs, and they lack a holistic approach, meaning it primarily falls on the country offices to pursue this strategy. One example of an interorganizational tension identified in Paper 4 is between a global design for localization and local adaptations. Global designs for localization are necessary for efficiency, clarity, and communication throughout the organization. However, the local context may require fine-tuning, and limitations in government systems and capacities can make it difficult to absorb resources. Additionally, some governments and countries face unique challenges, such as political or accountability issues, which may necessitate tailored solutions to drive localization efforts or, conversely, to refrain from doing so.

This question of who decides where and when localization is suitable is a sensitive issue, requiring a balancing act that the IHS may lack. With localization's top-down approach, the IHS remains in the driving seat, deciding which local actors can be included, what capacity counts, and what they are allowed to do, thereby reinforcing the IHS's power (Khoury & Scott, 2024). This decision-making over who is worthy of being strengthened was seen in another paradoxical tension in Paper 4: donor control versus local ownership. In this dynamic, donors determine which governments receive funding, limiting the Case Organization's efforts to localize to those governments. As such, donors' actions diminish the possibilities of the Case Organization to adhere to the principles of independence.



**Figure 4.3.** Overview of paradoxical tensions in the SNF supply chain integration effort

Khoury and Scott (2024, p.10) further make the case that localization can be reconceptualized as a practice of power. This is because “international actors allocate local actor capacities and constitute local actors through institutions of their own creation. These institutions, fundamentally, embody international power over local responders and are thus unable to reshape the power relations between them; instead, they reinforce existing power dynamics.” Other researchers have also highlighted the risk that IHOs are localizing to a local elite that mimics the organizational setup of IHOs. This approach not only reinforces the IHS’s power but also risks undermining localization targets, as local actors may not accurately reflect the population they are supposed to represent (Roepstorff, 2020).

It is essential that the localization agenda serves the needs of local populations. The IHS is sometimes the most suitable actor for conducting humanitarian logistics activities, especially in contexts with various man-made disasters where neutrality is crucial. Localization can pose significant risks in such cases, as international oversight and spotlight may be vital (Nash, 2025). Another example is procurement, where IHOs have an advantage due to their economies of scale, which can greatly improve cost-efficiency. In Paper 4, some interviewees noted that the Case Organization should continue procuring SNF on behalf of governments because of the economies of scale, since individual governments do not purchase such large quantities. This indicates that IHOs might play a role in procurement, primarily as subcontractors to the government rather than the other way around. Governments should own the procurement process and make decisions, while leveraging IHOs’ strengths. To conclude, context is critical to consider in localization, but it is also crucial not to be used as an argument to exert power.

Both Paper 2 and Paper 4 illuminated issues with the current funding system as a major impediment to localization. In Paper 4, the funding system covers several paradoxical tensions, including contradictory performance goals, short-term funding versus long-term capacity strengthening, and control versus local ownership. As outlined in the paper, donors concentrate on humanitarian response, which creates resistance to investing in localization and limits IHOs’ ability to pursue it. Localization is also impacted by donors’ low-risk appetite, leading to strict funding conditions that ensure accountability and visibility but restrict local decision-making. The reduction in donor funding, driven by decreased willingness from taxpayers and lawmakers, results in resources being allocated primarily for the most urgent needs. Paper 4 confirms that, generally, the donor system does not promote localization, largely due to donors’ resistance to managing numerous small grants, engaging directly with LNAs, or adapting to local contexts. Bureaucracy and strict rules and procedures also complicate collaboration for actors (especially local ones) working with donors. Donors primarily provide short-term financing, which leads to inefficiencies in the supply chain and varying decision-making bases, ultimately hindering localization opportunities. Lastly, while close collaboration with donors presents advantages, it also fosters dependency, and donor funding

remains volatile. This volatility has become increasingly evident, particularly with the recent sudden cut of USAID funding. With the current decline in humanitarian funding, it is also likely that stricter requirements will emerge as a control mechanism for the funding that is still available. For instance, future funding from the US will only support life-saving aid, indicating that localization will receive nothing (Koppel, 2025), severely undermining the possibilities of reaching set goals. In Paper 5, the Case Organization had access to flexible funding from donors, allowing localization to take place as part of SNF funding. It is challenging to envision localization happening without this flexibility from donors.

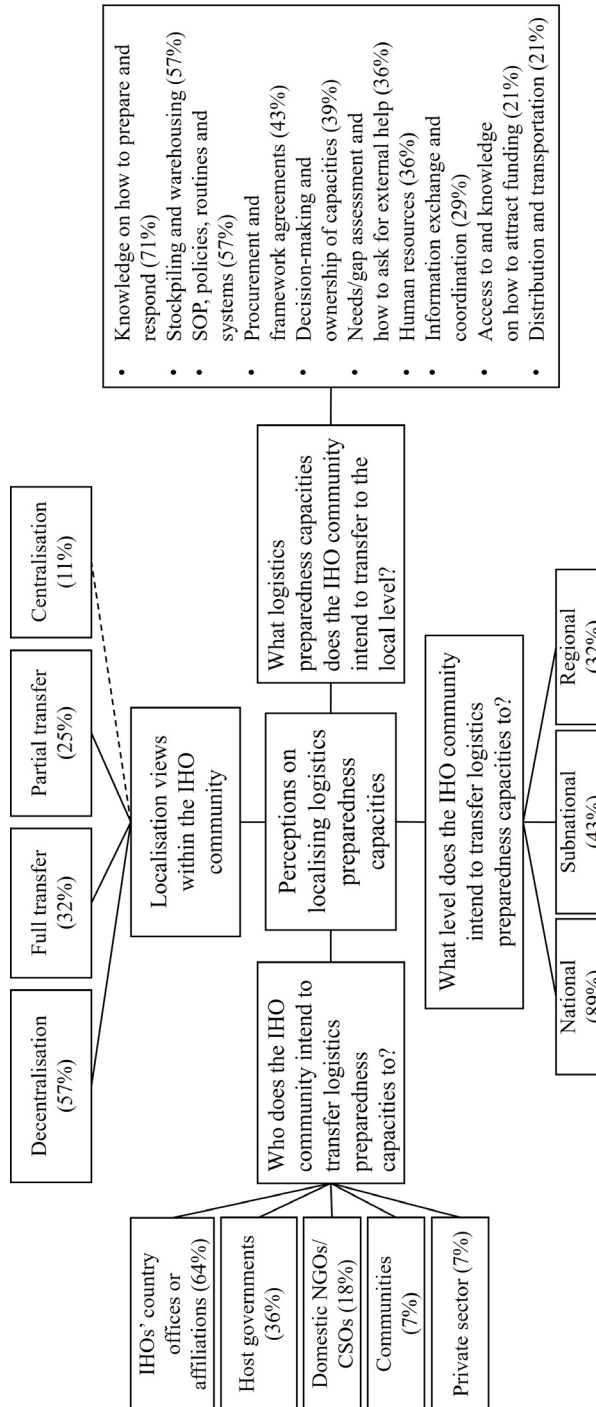
Paper 4 further revealed system-level tensions that significantly hinder localization implementation. These tensions can be traced back to the system's historical roots and its development over time. They expose issues in the very setup of the IHS, where organizations compete for funding but are also expected to collaborate. Additionally, it highlights the divergence between the original goal of the IHS to provide temporary relief—supported by short-term funding—and the current crises, which are protracted, long-term, and increasingly complex, necessitating a completely different approach and funding setup. Paper 4 exemplifies this by highlighting the systemic issue of treating malnutrition symptoms instead of its causes, reducing the possibility of sustainable results.

In conclusion, it is not surprising that localization progresses slowly. The localization agenda faces numerous challenges, including understanding its goals, encouraging IHOs to spearhead localization efforts, and ultimately overcoming various obstacles within the localization strategy itself. The complexity of this controlled form of localization has likely led some advocates to suggest abandoning humanitarian assistance altogether (Gumisiriza, 2025). However, the USAID aid freeze has recently highlighted the devastating consequences of such unregulated localization (for an extended discussion, see section 5.5). Rather than resorting to this extreme measure, the IHS must identify ways to achieve localization results more swiftly without endangering the well-being of local populations.

#### 4.4 Findings contributing to answering RQ3: How can localization challenges and tensions be addressed to support progress in localization of humanitarian logistics?

The last research question of the thesis focuses on finding ways forward with the localization agenda, seeing the necessity of transforming words into actions. Throughout the thesis, most of the papers provide recommendations on moving forward with the localization goals, and some papers give actual examples of how

IHOs have made progress with localization. First, in Paper 1, literature on strategy implementation suggests that clearer communication of the set strategy, a shared vision, and better integration of localization goals with daily operations are necessary. To assist with formulating a more precise strategy and vision, the IHO community's various views of localization were summarized in a framework (see Figure 4.4). The framework is intended to help IHOs use a common language and verbalize their overall vision, including what, to whom, and on what geographical level they aim to localize. This was considered an important first step toward implementing localization, as unclear definitions threaten to lose the intended impact.



**Figure 4.4.** Framework covering interviewees' perceptions of localization

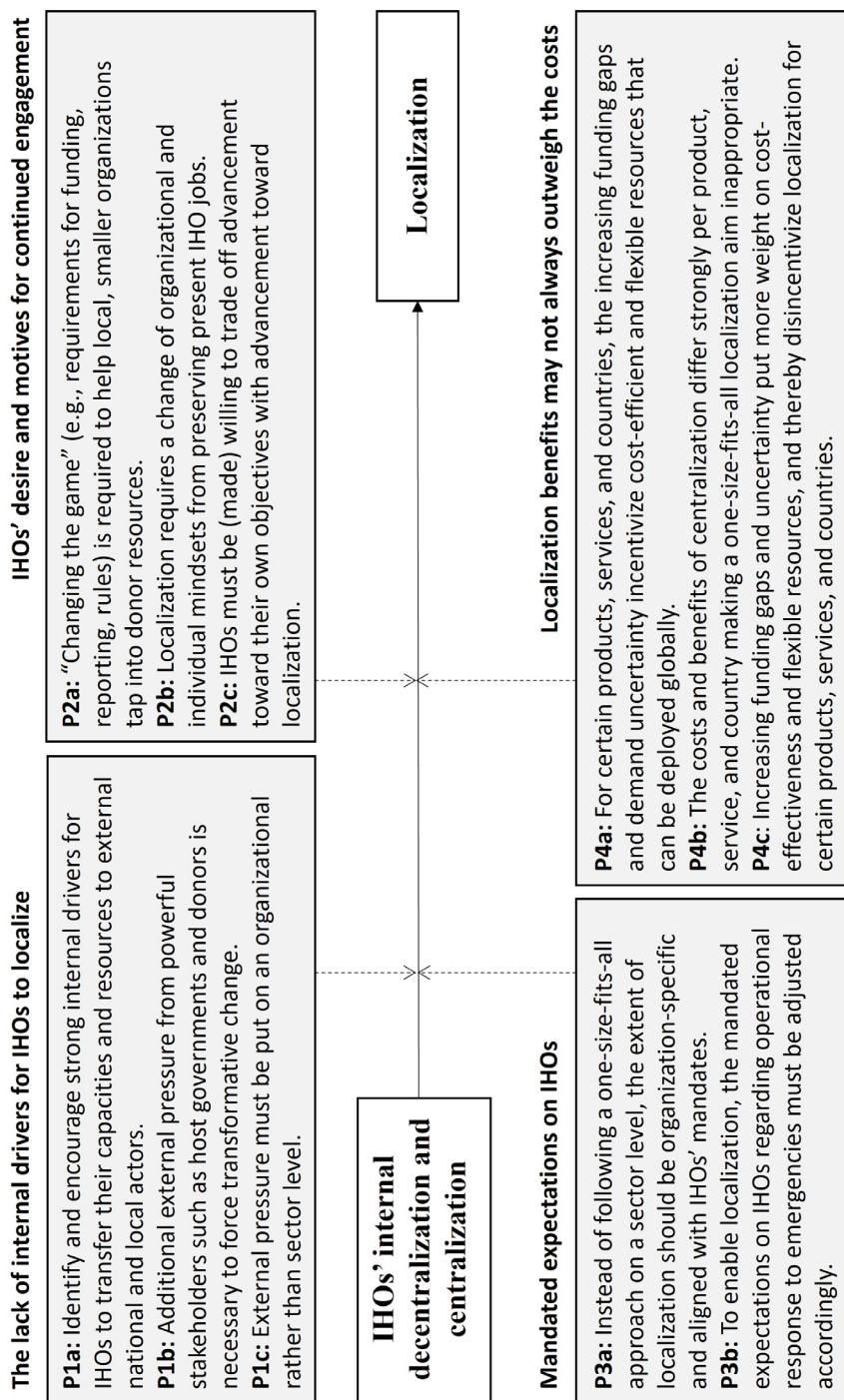
#### **4.4.1 Overcoming challenges related to the lack of strategic direction**

In Paper 2, forces that push IHOs in other directions than localization are acknowledged, and as a result, IHOs have valid and invalid reasons for pursuing only centralization or decentralization. As a remedy, eleven propositions were added focusing on understanding and overcoming barriers (see Figure 4.5).

First, the propositions at the top of Figure 4.5 (P1a-P1c and P2a-P2b) highlight the need for a contextual approach to localization. Propositions P1a-P1c propose that the possibilities for localization differ per product, service, and country and that it comes at a certain “price” regarding cost-effectiveness, flexibility, and quality control. Examples given in Paper 2 include medicines that need a controlled and centralized supply chain due to the strict quality and distribution requirements. Second, the propositions P2a-P2b acknowledge the various mandates of IHOs and that these affect organizational localization aims. For example, some IHOs, like MSF, take the position of independence seriously. This mandate does not go hand-in-hand with localization, which is why MSF has no aim for localization. Hence, localization is also sensitive to the mandate of IHOs.

The context-sensitive nature of localization was seen in Papers 4 and 5, concerning the localization of SNF. SNF is regarded as a medicine and shares the same characteristics as other medications. Even so, the Case Organization aims to make governments responsible for managing the SNF supply chain, but the possibilities for this localization differ per country. In the study, the interviewees highlighted important enablers, such as the motivation and readiness of the governments. They also mentioned the need for specific structures and systems in the national supply chains that could be further built on. As previously discussed, it is important that the perceived lack of capacity does not hinder the pursuit of localization. However, LNAs’ willingness to take on this responsibility is key. In fact, according to interviewees, the localization process of SNF often starts with a request from governments (Paper 5), bringing us to the next set of propositions.

The propositions at the bottom of Figure 4.5 (P3a-P3c and P4a-P4c) suggest different approaches for overcoming barriers. The analysis indicated that exercising external pressure is a remedy for the lack of motivation within IHOs. External pressure may come from host governments due to increased wealth and capacities that render the IHOs’ presence redundant or through regulations that hinder IHO operations. It may also come from donors with the money and power to direct IHO decisions. Hence, donors may need to take greater responsibility for pushing for localization and face their internal tensions concerning localization, as discussed in Paper 4. This needs to be combined with proposition P4a—changing requirements for funding, reporting, and rules, as the funding system is one of the most considerable barriers to localization. This thesis does not answer how this can be done, but finding a solution is fundamental for making necessary advancements toward localization.



**Figure 4.5.** Framework for overcoming barriers to localization

#### **4.4.2 Overcoming challenges related to localization implementation**

In Paper 4, paradox theory was applied to uncover paradoxical tensions in the Case Organization's efforts to localize the SNF supply chain to national governments. A paradox theory perspective also allowed for analysis of the Case Organization's responses to these tensions. These were classified into two categories: actual solutions, which reflect the responses the Case Organization has implemented in one or several business cases, and planned solutions, which denote actions that the Case Organization has undertaken but still require additional efforts (see Figure 4.6).

The analysis revealed that the Case Organization employs both defensive responses and strategic responses—contextualization, separation, and synthesis—in its localization efforts tailored to the organizational level and the type of tension. For actual solutions to tensions, the Case Organization primarily employs defensive responses, as well as contextualization and separation strategies, where the latter actively address intraorganizational tensions. The spatial separation strategy involves establishing distinct structures across various organizational units or contexts. This approach enables the organization to independently cultivate essential skills for addressing localization and other tasks (Hahn et al., 2015). At the Case Organization, the strengthening unit is responsible for implementing long-term localization initiatives and collaborates closely with country offices to develop and implement roadmaps, tools, and training programs. Also, certain staff members within some of the Case Organization's country and regional offices are dedicated exclusively to localization activities. This organizational distinction safeguards the long-term localization objectives from being sidelined during times of crisis. Additionally, it aids in nurturing specialized skills and ensuring ongoing engagement with national systems.

Another separation strategy is the temporal, which involves managing each pole of the tension at different times (Smith & Lewis, 2011). In some country offices, the Case Organization adopts this strategy to pursue localization and deliver on its mandate at various times. Most often, localization is in focus, but during disasters, the country office shifts its attention to disaster response. This temporal separation allows for pragmatic adjustments in disaster settings. However, the Case Organization must establish well-defined criteria for switching between priorities and ensure the capacity to reintegrate efforts once stability returns.



**Figure 4.6.** Overview of solutions and corresponding strategies to tensions

Both spatial and temporal separation strategies provide ways forward for other IHOs facing contradictory localization practices within the organization, or where the skills required for localization conflict with existing ones. Both strategies have pros and cons. For example, having a team dedicated to driving localization efforts can be effective, but it requires many resources at a time when they are scarce and declining (Obrecht & Pearson, 2025). The temporal separation strategy does not require additional resources. However, it may be risky, as it can be argued that IHOs often work in disaster settings and therefore never need to engage with localization efforts. Consequently, the strategy may need to be combined with other suggested solutions that motivate or put more pressure on IHOs to localize.

One could argue that specific disaster settings provide an opportunity for IHOs to empower and strengthen LNAs to take over responsibility for the supply chain. Most of the current disasters, like the ongoing need for SNF, are long-term and require a sustained response. This means that IHOs must establish supply chains that are needed for the foreseeable future, providing a window for LNAs to build their organization and, step by step, take over activities and resources connected to the supply chain. In light of the discussion in section 4.2, the emphasis should lie on ‘empower’, meaning that it is essential for LNAs to have decision-making power over activities and resources. Otherwise, they end up being only subcontractors, doing the heavy lifting and taking the most risks (Khouri & Scott, 2024).

So far, the findings have centered on the actions of the single IHO. Additionally, Paper 4 emphasizes the need for a coordinated response in the IHS to localization goals. As shown in the paper, many tensions are interorganizational and involve multiple actors. The responses to these tensions fall under the “planned” category, as they are inherently complex and cannot be managed by the Case Organization alone. Systematic processes and substantial engagement from all stakeholders are essential for paradoxical tensions, such as the conflict between control and local ownership. This is one of the lessons learned in Paper 5, which provides insights into how the Case Organization has progressed with localization. The study focuses on the Case Organization and demonstrates the consistency with which the entire organization is dedicated to strengthening governments, with many parts involved in the effort. By using the ARA model (Håkansson & Snehota, 1995), the paper shows that HQ activities and resources enable regional and country offices to execute their localization activities. The study also highlights the importance of LNAs’ and donors’ resources and activities, which are considered enablers for successful localization progress. The Case Organization plays an essential role in facilitating other stakeholders’ involvement and advocating for their engagement; however, the participation and willingness of all stakeholders are key.

The findings further indicate that localization requires a more holistic approach involving all stakeholders, particularly to tackle system-level tensions. This is far from being realized, as most localization responsibilities now lie with each IHO and each donor. The current working groups, for example, the one aiming at achieving

progress on the Grand Bargain, have been unsuccessful in creating real change in the sector. The IHS may, therefore, need to consider localization as a critical area that requires sector-wide coordination and a unified body. Localization could be included in the cluster system or supported by a humanitarian country coordinator dedicated to localization. This would imply pressure to actually make progress, in contrast to the current situation, where lofty promises are more important than real advancements. In conclusion, collaboration, coordination, and broader engagement from the sector are necessary to progress with localization.

# 5. Conclusions, contributions, and future research

*This chapter concludes the doctoral thesis by highlighting the main contributions to research and practice and provides avenues for future research. After a short summary of what has been achieved, the thesis's more specific contributions are presented. The chapter concludes with a discussion of limitations, future research, and a reflection on controlled versus uncontrolled localization.*

## 5.1 Conclusion

The aim of this doctoral thesis was *to explore and explain the concept of localization of humanitarian logistics from a top-down perspective, focusing on the path from strategic intent to implementation*. This aim was pursued through three research questions. The first examined localization of humanitarian logistics and what it constitutes. The second addressed challenges that impede progress in localization, while the third explored potential solutions to these challenges. Three qualitative studies were conducted, resulting in five interconnected papers. These draw from multiple methods, such as interviews, expert elicitation, and case studies, and incorporate different theoretical frameworks, including paradox theory, MNC literature, and the ARA model. The thesis addresses various perspectives on localization, creating a nuanced picture and showcasing its complexity.

## 5.2 Theoretical contributions

The overall contribution of this thesis is to enhance the theoretical field of humanitarian logistics regarding localization, thus contributing to domain-based knowledge (MacInnis, 2011). Seeing that humanitarian logistics is a subset of humanitarian assistance, the thesis also contributes to understanding localization from a broader perspective. When this PhD began in 2018, the localization concept, in terms of locally-led disaster relief, was absent from humanitarian logistics literature. For many researchers, localization was associated with the geographical level of activities rather than the more intrinsic transfer of power (see, e.g., Balcik & Beamon, 2008; Serrato-García et al., 2016). This thesis has advanced the

understanding of localization, its challenges, and possible solutions, thereby establishing a foundation that can serve as a starting point for further research.

### **5.2.1 Advancing the understanding of localization of humanitarian logistics and its complexity**

Localization is gaining prominence in humanitarian logistics research (e.g., Altay et al., 2021), but it suffers from conceptual ambiguity with many varying views on what is included. The thesis addresses this gap by improving the understanding of localization in both theory and practice. First, it illustrates the different views of localization within IHOs, emphasizing the need for a clear definition. An updated definition creates a common language among researchers and practitioners (Suddaby, 2010), which supports the localization agenda, as one challenge is the numerous terms and their slightly different meanings. The thesis, therefore, suggests a definition of localization in humanitarian logistics:

*“The process of strengthening humanitarian-logistics capacities and transferring related decision-making authority among external, local and national actors with the purpose of enabling these actors to manage disasters independently and, when needed, have the capacity to integrate international help in the disaster relief effort.”*

This definition helps clarify localization of humanitarian logistics, but it also aims to narrow its scope. It suggests that localization is not about internal strengthening within IHOs’ own organizations, conducting activities locally, using local actors as subcontractors, or procuring local goods. These may bring organizations closer to localization, but should not be included in the concept. The definition suggested in the thesis articulates the key dimensions of localization, thereby providing a theoretical foundation for future exploration of localization in humanitarian logistics.

Second, the thesis offers a comprehensive understanding of localization’s complexity, viewed from two theoretical lenses, which help explain why its progress is slow or even absent. As the thesis demonstrates, localization is inherently intricate, involving numerous stakeholders, and varies by context. Despite the potential benefits of localization, discussed in the Kappa and in Paper 5, the many complexities and nuances make it a hard-to-reach objective from the IHOs’ point of view. The theoretical perspectives help explain why. The comparison with MNCs has theoretical explanatory value, allowing for new knowledge concerning the rationales and actions of the IHOs. The parallels drawn to MNCs explain why IHOs may not dedicate themselves to localization. As visualized, employing MNC literature allows for identifying forces pushing IHOs in directions other than localization, that is, towards centralization and decentralization. Viewed through this lens, IHOs’ actions appear more rational as they encounter various pressures

and constraints connected to their mandates and declining funding. The findings in the thesis suggest that localization is a systematic issue that can only be addressed by involving other important stakeholders, such as donors. It also states that the mandated expectations on IHOs must change to allow for increased localization. The application of paradox theory highlights the underlying tensions salient during the implementation phase of localization (c.f. Smith & Lewis, 2011). Thus, the paradox lens facilitates a profound theoretical understanding of the complexity of localization of humanitarian logistics and the challenges in achieving meaningful progress. Paradox theory also facilitates a theoretical knowledge of how to move localization forward. Specifically, this thesis provides targeted responses to the paradoxical tensions likely experienced by most IHOs.

### **5.2.2 Updating the definition of humanitarian logistics**

The thesis makes further contributions to the field of humanitarian logistics by clarifying and updating the definition of humanitarian logistics. The new suggested definition helps distinguish humanitarian logistics from other forms of logistics performed in disaster relief. This is not only a contribution to understanding localization of humanitarian logistics but also to understanding humanitarian logistics in itself. The definition's effect on localization is analyzed in Chapter 4.2 and helps narrow the localization agenda to a first milestone, specifically focusing on the logistics in disaster relief.

Just like with the definition of localization, the contributions of a revised definition to the humanitarian logistics field and practice are manifold. In Paper 3, a consensus was reached between academics and practitioners on the definition, helping to establish a coherent research discipline (Richey et al., 2022). Theoretically, it prevents fragmented knowledge, clarifies research goals, and defines theoretical contributions to humanitarian logistics (Podsakoff et al., 2016; Richey et al., 2022). The revised definition acknowledges the evolving humanitarian landscape by differentiating between a core definition of humanitarian logistics and accompanying properties that can change over time. This helps unite the field, clarify the scope of humanitarian logistics, and guide future research (Stock & Boyer, 2009). Further, the updated definition involved practitioners, increasing the definition's relevance and bridging the gap between academia and practice (Suddaby, 2010; Hawkins et al., 2022).

### **5.2.3 Questioning the underlying assumptions in humanitarian logistics research**

This thesis questions the assumptions behind humanitarian logistics research. Since its beginning, humanitarian logistics theory has been shaped by an IHS-centric paradigm, where IHOs and donors are seen as the primary decision-makers and

implementers in the humanitarian supply chain design and operations. While early research on humanitarian logistics clearly distinguished humanitarian logistics from business logistics (see e.g., Van Wassenhove, 2005; Kovács & Spens, 2007), the deeper connection to humanitarian assistance and related assumptions has not been further examined. This is clear in frameworks that focus on centralized procurement, standardization, and accountability to donors rather than to affected populations (c.f., Moshtari et al., 2021; Paciarotti et al., 2021). The IHS-centric paradigm has improved the understanding of efficiency and effectiveness in humanitarian logistics. Nevertheless, it also implicitly supports the idea that logistics and supply chain flows are controlled from the top down, with local actors seen as passive implementers rather than active decision-makers.

Localization research in this thesis challenges these assumptions and explores humanitarian logistics as part of a system (the IHS) facing issues with accountability, power structures, and Western bias. Without this understanding of its larger context, research on humanitarian logistics risks being labeled as neocolonial, as it assumes the position that Global North-based IHOs are best suited to deliver logistics in humanitarian crises. This thesis contributes by clearly connecting humanitarian logistics to the IHS and raising the issues of accountability and decision-making power. It shows the need for humanitarian logistics studies to better display and argue for their underlying assumptions.

Additionally, the thesis clearly emphasizes the power dynamics at play in the IHS, a perspective that is generally missing in humanitarian logistics research. As localization shifts responsibility for supply chain design and implementation to LNAs, it not only alters the operational structure of supply chains but also impacts their governance (c.f. Barnett, 2013; Roepstorff, 2020). Therefore, humanitarian logistics is shown to be more than just a technical task; it is also inherently political and influences governance during humanitarian crises. The approach taken in this thesis suggests that studies on humanitarian logistics need to be broadened to explicitly address how global and local actors negotiate responsibility in the humanitarian supply chain and to place greater emphasis on downward accountability to LNAs and the affected populations.

#### **5.2.4 Reconceptualizing the role of IHOs in humanitarian logistics**

Related to the previous point, this thesis highlights a new role for IHOs in humanitarian logistics. IHOs are often portrayed as operational actors responsible for delivering goods and services to affected populations during disasters (e.g., Vega & Roussat, 2019; Moshtari et al., 2021). This framing has placed IHOs at the core of humanitarian supply chain design, overseeing global resources and coordination while being accountable to donors. However, localization indicates a fundamental change in the role of IHOs. Instead of primarily designing and executing humanitarian supply chains, IHOs are now tasked with enabling a shift in logistics

responsibilities to LNAs through the localization agenda and the strategic commitments made. As this thesis demonstrates, this new role involves developing logistics capacity within LNAs, advocating for increased government financing and donor support, and filling existing gaps (Spiegel, 2017). An example is provided in the case study in Paper 5, where the Case Organization took on a new role after its localization process in the three countries. From managing and overseeing the SNF supply chain, after localization, they shifted focus more toward technical support, advocacy, and conciliation, as well as monitoring performance.

This repositioning reflects a broader trend where IHOs should move from operational control to strategic oversight when the context allows them to do so. In this sense, IHOs are not withdrawing from humanitarian assistance but rather redefining their function: from implementers to supporters and facilitators who connect other stakeholders in the humanitarian context. This was also shown with the Case Organization orchestrating South-South information exchanges. The new role further suggests that humanitarian logistics models should expand by making capacity development a core element of IHOs' logistics activities. This indicates that IHOs' effectiveness increasingly lies in enabling LNAs to decide and act rather than remain in control.

### **5.2.5 Contributing to paradox theory**

This thesis demonstrates how various theories can be utilized to provide deeper insights into the localization challenges faced by the IHS and their solutions. This step is necessary to identify constructive ways forward and address the call for more relevant theories in humanitarian logistics research (Oloruntoba et al., 2019). In particular, paradox theory is employed in the thesis to inform both the tensions faced and their potential responses (c.f. Smith & Lewis, 2011). Paradox theory is still a novel theoretical lens in humanitarian logistics research and has not been applied to research on localization of humanitarian logistics until now. Therefore, the thesis contributes to humanitarian logistics literature by showing how to apply paradox theory in this context.

Additionally, the thesis contributes to paradox theory, which remains relatively underexplored in supply chain management (Kocabasoglu-Hillmer et al., 2023) and even more so in humanitarian logistics (Fernandes & Dube, 2023). The thesis joins a nascent emerging research stream that differentiates between interorganizational and intraorganizational tensions in supply chain studies (Pålsson & Sandberg, 2022; Björklund et al., 2024). Particularly in Paper 4, two system-level tensions are identified, which are largely overlooked in existing paradox theory. These tensions arise due to the characteristics of the humanitarian supply chain, which are bound by certain norms, rules, regulations, and funding systems. Additional research is required to determine if these system-level tensions extend beyond the humanitarian context. The thesis also adds to paradox theory and complements previous research

on paradox responses (Fernandes & Dube, 2023). Specifically, Paper 4 offers twelve propositions that focus on actors' responses to intra- and interorganizational tensions. Such empirical evidence of response strategies in a humanitarian context is largely absent.

### **5.2.6 Providing insights from unique empirical material**

Another contribution of the thesis is the collection of empirical material that offers new and unique insights into localization. The third study, in particular, builds on empirical evidence that enhances the understanding of the localization process, primarily from the perspective of the IHS. Localization is explored through the lenses of employees working at the HQ level, the regional level, and the national level. This approach provides both breadth and depth in understanding how the IHO as a whole works on implementing localization of humanitarian logistics, something that has not been demonstrated previously in the humanitarian logistics literature. The empirical material in the thesis further helps visualize the donors' perspective on localization. Empirical data about donors' views is under-researched in humanitarian logistics (one exception being Comes et al., 2020) and especially in studies focused on localization. This is surprising, considering that donors are consistently regarded as key stakeholders in humanitarian logistics (e.g., Kovács & Spens, 2007; Van Wassenhove, 2006). Donors' perceptions of localization are important, as they control the funding necessary for IHOs to implement their localization initiatives. For example, a finding of Paper 4 is that donors do not prioritize localization if it is not the best option from the start. They are thus unwilling to allow LNAs the time to build up their operations and skills. A few interviews were also conducted with governments, which is quite unusual in humanitarian logistics literature, possibly due to its emphasis on humanitarian organizations or access issues.

### **5.2.7 A complementary view to studies with a bottom-up perspective**

Finally, it is important to clarify this thesis's contribution to understanding top-down localization. The focus lies on international actors within the IHS—primarily IHOs—and their perspective on empowering and strengthening LNAs. This complements earlier research that has examined localization from the bottom up. Bottom-up localization (e.g., capacity development) has been more thoroughly studied in other fields, such as disaster risk reduction (e.g., Hagelsteen & Becker, 2013; Scott et al., 2016; Albris et al., 2020). While capacity development research provides valuable insights, bottom-up processes often rely on donors and organizations ceding control, sharing risks, and making long-term commitments (Hagelsteen, 2024). As this thesis argues, the IHS must actively engage in the

localization agenda, since it currently holds power over humanitarian logistics and the associated resources.

The thesis contributes to this debate by explaining how IHOs perceive localization and the challenges they face. Bottom-up studies focus on the processes and obstacles LNAs must overcome to assume greater responsibility in disaster relief. However, this perspective alone cannot explain the slow progress. A fuller understanding requires insight into IHOs' views and constraints, as these shape what is feasible and acceptable to both parties. As emphasized throughout, localization demands a contextual approach and a balance between top-down and bottom-up methods. Prioritizing the needs of affected populations means that localization is not always the most effective option. In some cases, direct top-down humanitarian assistance is necessary; in others, LNAs are well-positioned to take on a larger role, albeit often through approaches that differ from those of IHOs. Balancing this is the key to making humanitarian assistance count and putting LNAs in the driver's seat where possible.

### 5.3 Practical contributions

This thesis offers several practical contributions. These insights can help guide individual actors and the broader international humanitarian system (IHS) in advancing localization.

First, the suggested definition of localization can be used by localization stakeholders to unite around a shared vision and have more transparent communication around localization issues. This reduces the risks of strategic disagreement, where employees prioritize and interpret the strategy differently, which can hinder successful implementation (Porck et al., 2020). The definition can also help to direct initiatives more clearly towards the localization agenda. Using the suggested definition allows stakeholders to identify whether initiatives genuinely serve localization or have other aims. For example, donors seeking to prioritize localization can apply the definition to assess initiatives within IHOs and design performance measurements that specifically track progress in localizing humanitarian logistics. This also facilitates benchmarking and the development of effective practices (Stock & Boyer, 2009). Important to note is that the definition of localization focuses both on the strengthening of LNA's logistics capacities for disaster relief and on the capacity to integrate the IHS if necessary. This further shows the contextual nature of localization and the need for the IHS to still complement the existing capacities of LNAs in large-scale disasters.

Second, this thesis suggests a roadmap for localization. The emphasis on humanitarian logistics in the localization definition helps distinguish a specific subset of localization that can serve as a recommended starting point. This is deemed

important as it answers the call for more focused and technical efforts where large, transformational initiatives have previously failed (Alexander, 2022). Further, the thesis offers a framework to verbalize the intended localization vision better and communicate this throughout the organization. This can act as an enabler to find a common language to discuss localization (c.f., Suddaby, 2010). The thesis further suggests that the various localization views (decentralization, partial transfer, and full transfer) can serve as distinct steps in a localization process. For example, the combined insights from this thesis's studies propose that it may be necessary first to strengthen the national offices of an IHO to develop the right resources and capabilities for localization, since they are typically in most contact with LNAs. The new definition of humanitarian logistics also has managerial utility. It can assist in helping humanitarian leaders define and claim ownership over roles and processes connected to humanitarian logistics (Stock & Boyer, 2009)—something that is lacking today.

Third, the research on the challenges in the localization agenda offers further managerial contributions and can assist the IHS in its pursuit of localization. For example, the thesis suggests a genuine lack of commitment to localization. It appears that localization is not prioritized sufficiently within the IHS, and they may be entrenched in their existing ways of working in a system not designed for LNAs. The IHS can utilize this knowledge to tackle and reflect on internal challenges and question its own norms and values. They can leverage this new understanding to critically evaluate their localization vision and confront the deeper inertia present within the IHS.

Fourth, besides deepening the understanding of localization challenges, the thesis contributes to solutions to overcome them to progress with localization. This is essential for the localization agenda, seeing that implementation is still in its infancy. As the thesis emphasizes, concrete actions for implementing localization must occur both within the individual actors in the IHS and, more importantly, collectively, since many challenges and tensions are interorganizational or system-level issues. The thesis addresses the paradoxical tensions most IHOs likely face, offering practical solutions to their existing problems. For example, it demonstrates that separation strategies (temporal and spatial) can help achieve the IHOs' mandate and localization objectives simultaneously. For intraorganizational tensions, the thesis offers an understanding that localization requires a multisectoral approach, as these cannot be solved by a single IHO. Thus, to advance localization, all key stakeholders in humanitarian logistics must collaborate, requiring significant and joint efforts. As discussed in Chapter 4, this may be achieved by targeted actions from the IHS as a whole, for example, through a cluster approach or other existing coordination mechanisms. This is how the IHS has solved large interorganizational issues in the past, which might work for localization. Such efforts could also raise pressure on actors to meet their localization commitments.

A final managerial contribution to advancing localization is the detailed review of the Case Organization's localization approach that IHOs can learn from. As shown in Paper 5, localization involves all levels of the Case Organization—from headquarters to country offices. The work done by headquarters and regional offices helps country offices build government capacities, paving the way for localization. This aligns with the findings from Paper 1, which state that strategy implementation requires a shared strategy aligned with organizational goals and integrated throughout the organization.

## 5.4 Limitations and opportunities for future research

Considering that this thesis addresses a novel topic in humanitarian logistics research, the opportunities for future research on localization are abundant. The thesis focuses on the localization of humanitarian logistics, seen primarily through the eyes of the IHOs. This presents potential biases and raises questions about whether localization can really be understood from an international perspective. As argued in the thesis, the top-down perspective is important as actors in the IHS currently control the majority of funding and related activities and resources. Consequently, their perspectives remain critical for making progress on the localization agenda. More perspectives are, however, necessary to fully grasp localization as a concept, and the limited scope presents many opportunities for further research. First, while the thesis includes donors' perspectives, additional research is necessary to gain deeper insights into their views, localization practices, and the challenges they encounter, along with potential solutions. One of the key challenges to localization emphasized in the thesis pertains to the funding system, which is not designed to accommodate smaller LNAs or governments. Therefore, a central question is how the funding system can be modified to facilitate greater localization. To answer this, a larger study involving many donors would be helpful, possibly in a workshop format or another method that allows for brainstorming and collaboration discussions.

Second, humanitarian logistics is an integral part of humanitarian assistance. For successful overall localization to take place, the humanitarian logistics perspective must be combined with other perspectives, such as programmatic, financial, social, and environmental. This range of perspectives is closely linked to the influence of contexts, which could also be explored further. Contexts encompass not only country settings but also the type of IHO, the type of funding, and the types of LNAs involved in localization efforts. All of these factors impact the opportunities for and methods of conducting localization. In general, more studies focusing on ongoing localization processes would be helpful for the localization agenda and act as inspiration for the IHS.

Third, a promising avenue for future research is integrating the top-down localization approach with bottom-up perspectives and processes. In the thesis, both the understanding of localization and humanitarian logistics are viewed top-down from the perspective of actors involved in the IHS or Global North-based experts. Values from the Global North have influenced the IHS and related humanitarian narratives (Davey et al., 2013; Rose et al., 2013), further influencing the perspective on localization and humanitarian logistics. Therefore, the findings of this thesis need to be complemented by other perspectives, particularly LNAs and the populations of the Global South. Consequently, future research should incorporate the perspectives, norms, and values of LNAs and, preferably, the affected populations. Since localization aims to improve aid for these populations, their opinions on humanitarian logistics are vital. Research could also focus on how to merge top-down and bottom-up strategies, as this may reduce risks associated with the IHS's exercise of power (see discussion in Chapter 4).

Fourth, the findings of the thesis could be complemented by studies with other methodological choices. The localization agenda could benefit from utilizing quantitative methods, for instance, to validate the perceived benefits. Additional evidence and concrete data demonstrating the effects of localization on supply chain performance would, if positive, advance the localization agenda. In the other case, research could provide insights into what changes are necessary to impact performance positively. Also, the single case study in this thesis was limited to one specific supply chain and one multilateral IHO, which implies that the results may not apply to all IHOs. Conducting additional studies with other IHOs, other products and services, other LNAs, and other disaster settings would be beneficial. This could provide deeper insights into the contextual aspects of localization and its various impacts on implementation. One approach to achieve this is by conducting multiple case studies. Finally, it would be interesting to conduct longitudinal studies to research how the IHS works with localization over time and evaluate the results of localization efforts.

Fifth, this thesis employs the various theories to understand localization, its challenges, and potential solutions. Other theories might yield different insights. Contingency theory suggests that there is not a single best way to organize. Rather, organizational performance improves when structures and processes are adapted to fit the specific context in which they operate (Lawrence & Lorsch, 1967). Contingency theory could, for example, help establish how to approach localization in different contexts and with different actors. Another theoretical lens, the stakeholder resource-based view (SRBV), can be used to further visualize the localization process and the changing roles and responsibilities of the various supply chain actors. The SRBV emphasizes that the value created by a supply chain is determined by all the stakeholders' unique resources and capabilities. A third option is to look at the dynamic capabilities framework as a theoretical lens. It emphasizes how organizations and networks can adapt, integrate, and reconfigure resources and

capacities in response to changing environments (Teece et al., 1997). For localization, this is key, as IHOs need to adapt their operations to progress with localization and still be relevant to today's fast-changing humanitarian landscape.

Finally, research should look even more into how to make LNAs less dependent on international funding. Since the implementation of localization is still in its early stages, the primary focus is on strengthening the capacity of LNAs to perform the same activities as IHOs. Research should therefore investigate the next steps for reducing reliance on international donor funds. Over the past year, donor funding has proven to be inconsistent, highly affecting LNAs as well as IHOs (Loy, 2025). Therefore, studies should concentrate on discovering new and innovative ways to lessen this aid dependency as an essential step towards building resilience (cf. Coetzee et al., 2016). Furthermore, in light of the US aid cuts and the overall reduction in donor funds (Obrecht & Pearson, 2025), additional research is essential to comprehend the effects on localization initiatives and the IHS. In which direction will the IHOs go in the future? As briefly discussed in Chapter 4, will there be increased centralization and decentralization due to the unpredictable global situation? Or will the focus shift to localization when funding is insufficient to support all essential aid operations?

## 5.5 Concluding reflections

I started this PhD journey in 2018, when the world was different. So much has happened since then: COVID-19, digital development (e.g., AI), new wars, political tensions, funding cuts, etc. Although humanitarian logistics is a research area that interests me immensely, it is also sometimes hard to study the state of the world and the disasters and crises unfolding one after the other. My journey and research topic have, of course, been influenced by these changes. I have also seen firsthand how political the IHS is—through my own experiences studying these actors and in interviews with people working for them. So many want to contribute to a better world, and they do. However, the politics of the IHS is a major impediment to larger and more transformational change—at least in terms of localization. Unfortunately, at large, localization is in the same place as it was in 2018. Possibly, there is more unity in how it is understood, and the importance of local and national actors has never been more articulated in reports, papers, and policy briefs. But actual initiatives, actual implementation, are still lacking. As an example, COVID-19 was initially seen as an opportunity to strengthen LNAs due to the closed borders and travel restrictions. Ultimately, LNAs performed more direct delivery but were not awarded the decision-making power alongside their increased operational burden. The question is whether this is about to change, due to the sudden decline in funding and the shutdown of USAID, possibly leading to more uncontrolled localization.

By uncontrolled localization, I mean the sudden withdrawal of the IHS from countries that currently are relying on its help. This stands in contrast to controlled localization, which has been the focus of this thesis, where the IHOs aim for LNAs to slowly take over their activities and perform at a similar level. Uncontrolled localization can be swift, but as it happens without the necessary buildup of LNAs and experience transfer, it could have devastating results. For example, the aid cuts in the world's largest donor are a significant blow to all the humanitarian projects and organizations relying on USAID funding. Humanitarian organizations have had to lay off staff, and projects have suddenly been terminated with devastating effects. Oxfam reports that 95 million people risk losing access to basic healthcare, which could lead to more than 3 million preventable deaths per year (Oxfam, 2025). For example, the sudden stop of work orders on HIV treatment and prevention programmes has resulted in the closure of health clinics and severe shortages of medicines, further leading to thousands of new HIV infections each day and millions more dying in the coming years (Foulkes & Boyd, 2025). In addition, USAID funding cuts affect the international information networks that many humanitarians rely on to be the 'eyes and ears' of aid responses (Worley, 2025). Without those information systems, humanitarian organizations cannot evaluate the need for humanitarian assistance in various countries, meaning that potential disasters, such as famine, may risk falling under the radar.

Interestingly, the USAID funding cuts have not only received negative attention, but some are hopeful for the results they might bring. In an article from April 2025, where most South Sudanese people expressed fear of the consequences the cut would bring, a few others argued that USAID assistance had hindered the country from moving forward, and that governments should take responsibility for their citizens (Falzetta, 2025). Humanitarian assistance in itself is complex and not only beneficial. International salaries drive up the costs of living with inflated prices in, for example, housing. In many countries, foreign aid also represents a large share of the Gross National Income (e.g., 25% in South Sudan). Therefore, the loss of funding also affects local economies in cities and countries that host international and local humanitarian workers (Baba-Ibrahim, 2025). The sudden cut in funding serves as a reminder of the aid system's fragility and the risks countries face when relying too much on humanitarian assistance, and particularly on one donor.

Consequently, localization is growing in importance, and a more controlled transfer is needed more rapidly to avoid the havoc that uncontrolled localization may result in. UNAIDS' Executive Director Winnie Byanyima said in a BBC interview that it was "reasonable" for the US "to want to reduce its funding—over time", but that the "sudden withdrawal of lifesaving support [was] having a devastating impact" (Foulkes & Boyd, 2025). Many humanitarians deem a potential in the funding cut in that the IHS must reset and refocus and move quicker towards localization (Mishra, 2025). For example, Tom Fletcher, Under Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs, recently argued that strengthening local leadership is crucial

in dealing with the reduction in funding. He stated that: “We must shift power to our humanitarian leaders in-country and, ultimately, to the people we serve” (Mishra, 2025). It will be interesting to see in the coming years if this finally prompts the IHS to fulfill its commitments to localization and how this change will impact the IHS and the disaster-affected countries of the Global South.

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