

From Donor Retrenchment to Local Agency: Reconfiguring Development in Zimbabwe

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Research Article

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Abstract

This paper examines how donor retrenchment re-models local agency and power relations in Zimbabwe's development landscape. Localisation has grown in popularity in donor discourse. Yet it remains unclear whether it redistributes authority or repackages donor control in softer language. Addressing this empirical gap, the paper links localisation to political economy and decolonial debates on epistemic authority. Using an interpretivist, qualitative approach, it draws on three datasets: shifts in donor funding, alternative resource flows such as remittances and community finance and programme-level evidence from rural women's initiatives. Findings show retrenchment deepens organisational precarity while exposing the limits of aid architectures and opening space for locally grounded practice. Local actors respond through a myriad of actions including resource diversification, community accountability and programme adaptation. Rural women's groups emerge as producers of knowledge and strategy. Meaningful localisation requires direct funding, simplified reporting and a shift from gatekeeping to facilitation.

1. Introduction: localisation in a moment of donor retrenchment

Localisation has become one of the most widely known and visible reform agendas in contemporary development cooperation (USAID, 2022a; USAID, 2022b). It circulates through donor strategies, multilateral policy processes and practitioner debates as a promise to move decision-making, resources and ownership closer to communities. Yet the development sector is undergoing one of its most profound donor retrenchment periods characterised by aid budget reductions, pauses, reallocations and reconfigurations in international development funding. The import of all this is a new reality that reshapes the terrain on which localisation is expected to occur. In Zimbabwe, this juxtaposition creates a practical tension. On the one hand, the localisation discourse suggests a forward movement toward local leadership. While on the other, retrenchment accelerates a shrinking space, heightened compliance pressures, increased competition and intensified pressure on local organisations to deliver under uncertainty. This paper takes that tension as its point of departure. Rather than facilitating a straightforward transfer of authority, it raises a more fundamental question: does localisation redistribute power under conditions of scarcity, or does it reconfigure existing hierarchies in new ways?

This tension also needs to be situated in wider debates on agency and the localisation gap. Kabeer (2005) conceptualises agency as the ability to define goals and act upon them, a formulation that is useful here because it shifts analysis away from organisational proximity alone and toward the actual capacity to make consequential choices. Read through this lens, localisation is not achieved when local actors merely deliver activities, a role they are repeatedly made to play for varied reasons. It is achieved when they gain meaningful authority over priorities, resources and interpretation of their lived realities and experiences. This distinction matters in Zimbabwe, where organisations may be physically close to communities but remain distant from the arenas in which strategy, budgets and evidence are authorised for these same communities.

A further tension sits beneath this argument. Aid is often presented as the most readily available response to urgent social need. However, it is also part of the architecture through which power is exercised in development. In practice, aid can work as a temporary relief mechanism (Duffield, 2007). It eases immediate pressure without necessarily addressing the structural conditions that produce vulnerability and entrench hierarchical power asymmetries. When donors retrench, those underlying pressures re-emerge sharply. Retrenchment therefore becomes a diagnostic moment. It reveals how deeply programmes, organisations and policy assumptions have been organised around external finance, and it exposes the governance routines and epistemic hierarchies that continue to shape whose knowledge counts.

In other words, this paper argues that donor retrenchment should be understood beyond the prism of financial contraction. In essence it is a revealing moment in the political economy of development broadly and development financing narrowly. As external funding declines occasioned by the reorganization of priorities in donor countries, the underlying architecture of the aid system becomes more visible: who controls resources, who defines evidence and who sets the terms of accountability. At the same time, retrenchment creates uneven space for local actors to adapt, negotiate and rework development practice in ways that are not always captured by formal localisation frameworks.

Zimbabwe's aid ecosystem has long been shaped by layered histories of colonial rule, structural adjustment, contested governance and periodic donor withdrawal and re-engagement and an uneasy state-civil society relationship. It provides a particularly instructive context for examining these dynamics. In such a context, localisation cannot be approached or let alone understood as a purely managerial or technocratic reform. It is inherently political as shown by its concerns on who defines development problems, allocates resources, sets accountability terms and authors knowledge about what counts as legitimate evidence and successful practice. Local organisations are frequently recognised for their proximity to communities (Peace Direct, 2021), yet remain constrained in their influence over funding, strategy and evaluation processes (Trócaire, 2025). It is for this, among many other reasons why they frequently encounter localisation as partial and uneven. They are usually positioned as implementers rather than decision-makers. In this role they are required to translate local realities into donor templates and thereafter regimented and disciplined through a series of compliance systems that determine which practices are visible and fundable.

Localisation discourse and lived practice are analytically distinct (Pearson and Rieger, 2026). For the purposes of this paper, discourse refers to the language of commitments seen through policy statements about shifting power and resourcing local actors. Whereas practice refers to what actually happens in budgets, contracts, reporting, decision-making and community accountability. In Zimbabwe, the gap between these two is often experienced as a gap between 'being recognised' and 'being trusted'. Local organisations may be recognised as essential because they are close to communities and can deliver quickly, yet they may not be trusted to control budgets, set strategy or define evidence (Peace Direct, 2021). This trust deficit is reproduced by risk narratives, audit routines and intermediary gatekeeping (Peace Direct, 2022). The paper addresses an empirical gap fashioned out of localisation

debates. Putting donor retrenchment at the center of analysis enables the paper to show that localisation is not experienced as a linear reform process. It is actually a contested and uneven set of practices shaped by constraints as much as by opportunities.

The persistence of the discourse-practice divide is also consistent with wider critiques of localisation. Pearson and Rieger (2026) note that a substantial gap remains between rhetorical commitments to shifting power and the institutional arrangements that continue to privilege international actors. Zimbabwe's aid ecosystem reflects this pattern sharply: localisation is affirmed normatively, yet decision-making continues to be filtered through risk hierarchies, intermediary brokerage and donor-defined accountability architectures (National Association of Non-Governmental Organisations, 2025). What appears as reform at the level of language may therefore reproduce continuity at the level of power.

Donor retrenchment intensifies these conditions but also alters the field of possibility. As conventional funding contracts, local actors are pressed to diversify resources, deepen community partnerships and experiment with hybrid arrangements that blur the boundary between 'aid-funded' and 'locally resourced' development. At the same time, reduced funding often coincides with elevated risk sensitivities, pushing donors and intermediaries to demand tighter reporting, more assurance and greater control over programme design. The result can be a paradox: less money, more control. This paradox raises fundamental questions about power and agency that cannot be resolved at the level of rhetoric.

The changing development and development aid landscape including recent financing aid data reinforce the importance of analysing localisation under shrinking rather than expansion conditions. Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) preliminary figures show that Development Assistance Committee (DAC) members' official development assistance fell to USD 212.1 billion in 2024, representing 0.33 per cent of combined Gross National Income (GNI) (OECD, 2025) and marking the first decline after five consecutive years of growth. At the same time, bilateral aid, humanitarian aid and support associated with Ukraine all fell, while net ODA to sub-Saharan Africa also declined slightly in real terms (OECD, 2025). These aggregate shifts do not mechanically determine national outcomes in Zimbabwe, but they sharpen the relevance of studying how scarcity reorders bargaining power across the aid chain.

This paper addresses a practical and empirical gap that is especially salient for African development studies. The analysis is grounded in a critical, decolonial political economy framework that links four interrelated dimensions: funding modalities, governance arrangements, knowledge authority and programme control. Within this framework, agency is approached as practice rather than capacity. It examines how local actors navigate, adapt to and sometimes circumvent the constraints imposed by funding and compliance systems. Far less is known about how changing funding flows reshape power relations within specific national contexts and how local actors exercise agency under constraint. This gap is not simply academic. If localisation is to be more than a slogan, if it is to enable local leadership in substance - then we need to understand how funding infrastructures and governance arrangements shape local autonomy and how local actors respond when the funding landscape shifts.

The paper addresses three research questions:

1. How do changing funding flows reshape power relations across Zimbabwe's aid ecosystem?
2. How do local actors exercise agency under conditions of precarity and compliance pressure?
3. What forms of 'glocal' practice emerge as communities translate global shocks into locally grounded solutions?

The paper draws on three complementary datasets capturing funding shifts, alternative and diverse resource flows and programme-level adaptation in rural women's rights and food production initiatives. It makes three contributions. Empirically, it documents how donor retrenchment restructures organisational practice and community engagement. Conceptually, it reframes localisation as a question of political economy rather than managerial reform. Analytically, it foregrounds epistemic agency as central to how local actors define and measure development in practice.

The paper proceeds as follows. Section 2 presents the conceptual framework. Section 3 outlines the study context and methodology. Section 4 presents the findings. Section 5 discusses the implications for glocal solutions and epistemic agency. Section 6 reflects on implications for African development studies and Section 7 concludes with policy recommendations.

2. Conceptual framework: localisation, decolonial power and epistemic agency

This section situates the paper within debates on localisation, political economy and decolonial theory. The central claim is that localisation under donor retrenchment can only be understood by explicitly linking four elements that are often treated separately: funding modalities, governance arrangements, knowledge authority and programme control. Together, these elements form a chain through which visible, hidden and invisible power is made durable in development cooperation.

2.1 Localisation as political economy (not managerial reform)

A political economy reading also benefits from participatory scholarship that has long warned against reducing participation to technique. Chambers (1997) argued that the central issue is not simply whether poor people are consulted, but whose realities count in the production of development knowledge and action (Cornwall, 2008; Mansuri & Rao, 2013). This insight helps clarify why localisation cannot be inferred or derived from procedural inclusion alone. Local actors may be invited into consultations, proposal workshops or review meetings and still remain structurally excluded from defining the terms on which programmes are designed and judged.

Localisation is frequently framed as a technical improvement, a mechanism that undo's historical injustices in development cooperation broadly and development financing in particular. Furthermore, it is touted as a more effective and efficient way to deliver development assistance by leveraging proximity,

contextual knowledge and local legitimacy (Peace Direct, 2021). In such framings, power appears as a secondary concern, rarely acknowledged. When it is in fact acknowledged, the refrain tends to be that it will be addressed through capacity strengthening or co-created partnership guidelines (Cornwall & Brock, 2005). For this study, the political economy approach starts elsewhere. It regards localisation as a struggle over resources, authority and legitimacy within an aid ecosystem (Mosse, 2005). Funding modalities are not neutral vehicles concerned with only development. They embed assumptions about risk, trust, accountability and expertise (Eyben, 2014). They have sway on the structure of who can participate, on what terms and with which degrees of freedom among other things.

Under retrenchment, political economy dynamics become more visible (Gaventa, 2006). Scarcity heightens competition among organisations and can tighten the hierarchy of the aid chain. Intermediaries, particularly international NGOs, UN agencies or large contractors often become more central as donors seek assurance and risk management (Eyben, 2014). The irony is not lost on the centrality of intermediaries in conditions of retrenchment amid fervent pushes for localisation underscored by rhetorics of power transfer (Pearson and Rieger, 2026). Local actors may be pulled into consortium arrangements where they execute activities but have limited influence over budgets, strategy and narrative (Mosse, 2005). In these arrangements, local actors can become simultaneously more 'included' (as partners) and more constrained (as subcontracted implementers needing closer and tighter management). The political economy lens therefore foregrounds distributional questions: Who absorbs risk? Who captures overheads? Who authors strategy? Who is accountable to whom? Who owns learning?

2.2 Retrenchment as a governance technology

Gaventa's (2006) power cube helps deepen this argument by showing that power operates across spaces, levels and forms. In Zimbabwe, donor retrenchment reshapes invited spaces such as consultations and partnership reviews, but it also affects closed spaces where budgets, risk thresholds and approval chains are determined, often far from the communities concerned. It further works through visible power in formal contracts, hidden power in agenda-setting and invisible power in the normalisation of assumptions about who is 'credible', 'high risk' or 'strategic'. Analysing retrenchment through the power cube therefore makes clear that scarcity is not only fiscal; it reorganises the institutional spaces through which some actors can speak and others must adapt.

Retrenchment is often presented as budget discipline or strategic reprioritisation. In recipient contexts, it can function as a governance technology that reshapes behaviour through scarcity (Mosse, 2005). Scarcity alters bargaining power: it can increase donors' leverage over contracting terms, justify tighter assurance and normalise the transfer of operational risks to local actors (Eyben, 2024). It can also discipline organisational agendas by forcing organisations to chase what remains fundable. In this way, retrenchment does not merely reduce resources; it can reconfigure governance, making some pathways of action possible and others unviable (Gaventa, 2006).

This helps explain why retrenchment can coincide with more control. Where donors fear reputational or fiduciary risk, they may prefer tighter reporting and more formalised decision chains (Eyben, 2006), even if this reduces flexibility. Local actors then face a double bind. Firstly, they must demonstrate adaptive programming to respond to local realities (Peace Direct, 2022) amid scarcity conditions in their operational environment. Secondly, they have to simultaneously demonstrate strict compliance to external assurance systems.

2.3 Decolonial theory, coloniality and epistemic justice

This is where decolonial theory adds precision. Mignolo and Walsh (2018) and indeed Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2013; 2015) describe decoloniality not simply as critique but as an analytic and praxis concerned with delinking from the colonial matrix of power and enabling other ways of knowing, relating and organising life. Applied to aid, this means that localisation cannot be reduced to transferring contracts while the normative grammar of value, evidence and success remains externally set. A genuinely decolonial reading asks whether local actors can author categories of meaning rather than only populate categories already designed elsewhere (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2015).

Decolonial scholarship argues that colonial power relations persist beyond formal colonialism (Spivak, 1990; Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2013). This persistence is through coloniality as shown by historically constituted hierarchies of authority, knowledge and legitimacy that reproduce global minority dominance in the present (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2013). Within aid systems, coloniality is reproduced through material control over finance, political control over governance rules, epistemic control over what counts as evidence and representational control over narratives of success, failure and deservingness (Eyben, 2014).

Epistemic justice is central to this paper. If localisation is to enable genuine local leadership, local actors must have authority to define priorities, determine the meaning of progress and select what indicators matter. Epistemic justice concerns the conditions under which local knowledge is recognised as legitimate and authoritative (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2018). In the context of donor retrenchment, epistemic justice becomes both more difficult and more urgent. As funding shrinks, donors often rely more heavily on standardised metrics, templates and assurance systems to justify decisions and manage risk. At the same time, local actors are pushed to rely on their own reasoning, relationships and knowledge to sustain programming. The question is whether the governance infrastructure recognises this local knowledge as authoritative or treats it as anecdotal.

Mosse's (2005) work on development knowledge is especially relevant here because it shows how policy models often survive not because they describe practice accurately, but because they help sustain coherent representations of intervention. This insight is valuable for analysing localisation discourse. Claims about partnership, participation and local ownership may function symbolically to stabilise aid legitimacy even when everyday implementation depends on negotiation, brokerage and selective translation. The question is therefore not only whether localisation is proclaimed, but what kinds of knowledge must be produced for that proclamation to remain credible.

2.4 Risk as power: how ‘risk’ narratives reproduce hierarchy

‘Risk’ is one of the most influential and least interrogated concepts in contemporary aid governance (Eyben, 2014). Risk frameworks shape who receives funds, which organisations are considered credible and what kinds of programming are permitted. In practice, risk is unevenly allocated (Mosse, 2005). Donors often externalise risk downward: local organisations bear operational risk (working in complex environments) and reputational risk (being blamed for non-delivery), while donors and intermediaries control decision-making and set the terms of compliance (Pearson and Rieger, 2026). Under retrenchment, risk narratives can tighten, further justifying gatekeeping and intermediary control.

Analysing risk as power means asking: whose risk counts? whose risk is insured? and whose risk is rendered invisible? It also means asking how risk frameworks interact with coloniality: local organisations are often framed as high risk because they are ‘unknown’ to donors, lack internationally recognised systems, or operate in politicised spaces. Yet these assessments can reproduce epistemic hierarchy by equating credibility with conformity to external standards.

2.5 Agency as practice: navigation, adaptation, circumvention

Framing agency as practice is also consistent with Kabeer’s (2005) insistence that agency includes not only overt decision-making but also processes of negotiation, resistance and subversion. Under constrained aid conditions, agency may appear in modest but politically significant forms. These include adjusting delivery logics to fit community realities, translating donor language into locally legible priorities or quietly protecting collective practices that would otherwise be rendered invisible by formal templates. This broader understanding avoids collapsing agency into either formal authority or heroic resistance.

This paper approaches agency not as an abstract attribute (such as ‘capacity’) but as practice, looking at what actors do to create room for their priorities within constrained environments (Kabeer, 2005). Under retrenchment, agency can take the form of navigation (working within rules while seeking flexibility), adaptation (reconfiguring programmes and partnerships) or circumvention (creating parallel arrangements that reduce dependence on donor systems) (Mosse, 2005). Practices may be overt such as negotiating budgets, timelines and indicators or subtle including tactical compliance, selective reporting, informal redesign, strategic invisibility, and shifting accountability toward communities. Agency is not romanticised here. It is constrained, uneven and sometimes costly. It can involve ethical tensions and trade-offs. However, it has to be noted that it is also real. It is one of the primary sites where power is negotiated in everyday development practice.

2.6 Linking funding modalities → governance → knowledge authority → programme control

The analytical chain proposed in this paper can be summarised as follows:

Funding modalities (who funds whom, under what terms) shape governance arrangements (who decides, who approves, who audits and whose risks count). Governance arrangements shape knowledge authority (whose evidence and metrics are legitimate, whose interpretation counts and who controls evaluation). Knowledge authority shapes programme control (who designs, adapts and evaluates interventions and whose definition of success prevails).

The chain is recursive rather than linear. Programme outcomes feed back into funding decisions; knowledge production influences governance claims; governance shapes who can access funds. Moreover, holding the chain explicitly in view is essential if localisation is to be analysed as power shift rather than operational decentralisation.

In Zimbabwe, this framework helps explain why localisation discourse can be embraced while local autonomy remains constrained. A working theory of change can be summarised thus – if funding continues to flow through intermediary layers, if governance remains oriented toward donor assurance rather than community legitimacy and if knowledge authority remains anchored in external metrics, then programme control will remain contested even when local actors are recognised as ‘partners’. The empirical sections that follow use this framework to analyse how retrenchment reorganises these links and how local actors respond.

3. Study context and methods

This section presents the study context and methods, including the Zimbabwe funding landscape, the three datasets and the approach to positionality and ethics. The purpose is conference-level transparency: to show what evidence the analysis draws on and how interpretation is grounded.

3.1 Zimbabwe funding landscape: retrenchment and reconfiguration

Zimbabwe’s development cooperation environment reflects both enduring needs and contested politics. Traditional donors have periodically reduced or reconfigured support at specific points in history, shifting between direct engagement, intermediary-driven programming and issue-specific funding (for example, humanitarian response, health, governance or resilience) (NANGO & Zimbabwe Human Rights Association, 2025). In recent years, contractions in official development assistance in several donor systems have intersected with Zimbabwe’s own political and economic volatility. The result has been a production of an unpredictable funding environment marked by uncertainty, shorter cycles and heightened emphasis on risk management.

Retrenchment is not experienced uniformly across sectors. Some thematic areas may see relative protection while others experience sharp declines (Peace Direct, 2021). Moreover, the modality of funding matters. For instance, reductions in flexible or core support can be more damaging than

reductions in tightly earmarked project funds because they erode organisational backbone functions including staff retention, learning, systems and community engagement (Pearson & Rieger, 2026).

For national and rural community-based organisations, these shifts translate into concrete pressures. These pressures manifest in reduced core support, fragmented project funding, greater competition and increased dependence on intermediaries who can meet donor compliance requirements (Pearson & Rieger, 2026). It goes without saying that these rural community-based organisations are often most affected because they are furthest from funding decision centres yet closest to communities that experience development shortfalls most sharply (Peace Direct, 2021).

3.2 Data and design

Methodologically, the paper is informed by interpretive qualitative inquiry, which treats meaning, context and social relations as central to explanation rather than as residual background variables. In Denzin and Lincoln's framing, qualitative research is concerned with understanding phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them and with situating those meanings in the worlds they inhabit (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018). That orientation fits the present study because localisation and retrenchment are not only policy categories; they are lived, narrated and negotiated realities that acquire significance through practice.

As already alluded to above, the paper draws on three complementary datasets designed to capture system-level funding shifts, alternative resource flows and programme-level practice.

Dataset 1 on funding shifts and organisational impacts mapped reductions and reconfigurations in traditional donor funding and analyses their effects on local organisations have. It includes (i) descriptive mapping of donor shifts (allocations, thematic priorities, modality changes) and (ii) organisational accounts of impacts on staffing, programme scope, planning horizons and compliance burdens. The analytical emphasis is on how funding shifts reshape power relations across the aid chain.

Dataset 2 on alternative flows examines alternative resource mobilisation, including remittances, diaspora giving, community-based resource pools, mutual aid, savings groups, cooperative mechanisms and local private sector contributions. The core question is how these flows are mobilised and how they reconfigure accountability relationships and risk framing. Furthermore, this dataset looks at whether they strengthen local autonomy and downward accountability or introduce new constraints.

Dataset 3 on programme-level evidence was concerned with issues from rural women's rights and food production initiatives. Furthermore, the dataset focuses on rural practice, foregrounding women-led enterprises that connect rights, livelihoods and food production. It captures how community-based women's groups innovate under resource constraints, how interventions are practically reshaped and what outcomes communities define as 'sustainability'. This dataset is especially relevant to the conference theme because it illustrates how global funding shocks translate into locally grounded 'glocal' solutions.

To protect participant confidentiality, respondents are cited throughout using role-based codes. These are DR (Donor Respondent); IR-A, IR-B and IR-C (Intermediary Respondents); and LO-A through LO-E (Local Organisation Respondents). Codes are assigned by actor category only and do not follow a meaningful sequence. All respondent citations are treated as personal communications and are therefore excluded from the reference list.

The study adopts a purposive, cross-actor sampling strategy designed to enable triangulation across the aid chain rather than depth within a single actor category. Ten respondents were included – two donor respondents, three intermediary respondents representing international and faith-based INGOs and fund-management structures active in Zimbabwe and five local-actor respondents spanning a national disability-sector umbrella body, a women's land-rights and grassroots advocacy organisation, a community-based water, sanitation and livelihoods organisation, a sexual and reproductive health-focused organisation and a rural community development organisation. Because the study seeks analytical rather than statistical generalisation, adequacy was judged by explanatory richness and repeated cross-actor patterns rather than numerical saturation.

Respondents were purposively selected for their direct exposure to donor retrenchment and their position within Zimbabwe's civil society and INGO sector, drawing on the author's professional networks as a sector practitioner. Donor and intermediary data were collected in 2024; local-organisation data were collected in 2025, reflecting a staggered data collection process rather than a single cross-sectional moment. Access to donor personnel was constrained by organisational gatekeeping and confidentiality requirements, making donor perspectives necessarily fewer than those of local organisations.

Data collection used a common semi-structured question guide adapted by actor category, administered in written and interview form according to respondent availability and preference. This mixed-mode approach reflects a practical accommodation to a professional, geographically dispersed sample rather than a methodological ideal and is acknowledged as a limitation below.

Sample size was not fixed in advance but judged sufficient when responses across actor categories began to show patterned convergence and divergence on the same underlying questions. For example, intermediary and local accounts of decision-making authority rather than by a formal saturation criterion applied within a single actor category.

3.3 Positionality and ethics

The decolonial dimensions of the methodology are further strengthened by drawing on Chilisa's (2012) account of Indigenous research methodologies. Chilisa argues that research in formerly colonised contexts must interrogate whose knowledge systems define validity, ethics and method. This paper does not claim to be an Indigenous methodology in any pure sense; rather, it is informed by a relational and reflexive commitment to taking local interpretive frameworks seriously, resisting extractive knowledge

practices and recognising participants not merely as informants but as situated knowers whose analyses shape the study's claims.

Positionality is central to decolonial research. The author occupies an insider researcher–practitioner position within Zimbabwe's development sector. This position provides access to organisational processes and community spaces that are often difficult for external researchers to enter. It can also build trust, enabling participants to discuss sensitive practices such as tactical compliance and negotiation with intermediaries.

Insider positionality also carries risks: over-identification, blind spots and the temptation to treat sector narratives as self-evident (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018). To manage these risks, the research process includes reflexive memos, explicit interrogation of assumptions and triangulation across actor categories. The aim is not neutrality but transparent, accountable interpretation.

Ethical practice is especially important in Zimbabwe's politicised context. The study applies strict confidentiality, anonymising individuals and organisations. It respects selective disclosure by participants, recognising that some strategies are protective and should not be exposed. Finally, it is guided by reciprocity: where feasible, insights are shared back with participating organisations and communities (Chilisa, 2012).

3.4 Quality, limits and what 'empirical grounding' means in this paper

This section outlines the study context, research design, data sources and analytical procedures, so it is important to state how interpretation moved from raw material to argument. The study used iterative, manual thematic coding across the three datasets, conducted in two cycles. The first cycle applied open, descriptive codes close to respondents' own language, including funding loss, abrupt withdrawal, staff attrition and welfare loss, ISAL and solidarity-fund savings mechanisms, corporate in-kind giving, reporting-template burden, donor-defined thematic prioritisation, digital and access exclusion, indigenous and faith-based knowledge channels, and accountability directionality.

The second cycle grouped these descriptive codes into higher-order analytic themes read against the conceptual framework set out in Section 2, principally the relationships between funding modalities, governance arrangements, epistemic authority and programme control. For example, first-order codes for reporting burden and donor-defined thematic prioritisation were grouped into the second-order theme of compliance as extraction of organisational labour, while ISAL, solidarity-fund and corporate in-kind codes were grouped into alternative resource mobilisation and its accountability effects.

Coding was conducted manually rather than using qualitative analysis software, given the modest corpus size and the emphasis on close, contextual reading over large-scale pattern detection. Throughout, contradictory cases were retained rather than smoothed away, particularly where intermediary narratives of partnership diverged sharply from local accounts of control (Mosse, 2005)

and where a single intermediary respondent's account diverged from the more favourable framing offered elsewhere in the same dataset. This strengthens robustness by showing that the argument emerges from patterned comparison rather than selective illustration.

Following coding, themes were compared both within and across actor categories to identify areas of convergence and divergence. Particular attention was paid to instances where donor, intermediary and local organisation accounts described the same organisational process differently, allowing the analysis to identify structural asymmetries rather than individual opinion.

A methodological limitation follows from this sampling design. Because data collection combined written and interview responses across a professional, geographically dispersed sample rather than a single uniform mode, response length, spontaneity and depth vary across respondents; written responses in particular may understate the hesitations, qualifications and follow-up probing that interview exchanges can surface. This is a trade-off accepted in exchange for reaching a small but structurally diverse sample spanning the aid chain, rather than a larger sample confined to a single actor category or a single data-collection mode.

It is important to clarify the status of claims in this paper. The analysis is empirically grounded in the sense that it draws on multiple datasets, triangulates across actor perspectives and is anchored in observed organisational and community practices. It is not a claim to statistical representativeness. Instead, it aims to illuminate mechanisms – how funding shifts restructure power, and how agency is practised under constraint (Kabeer, 2005).

The paper also acknowledges that some local practices are intentionally partial in what they disclose. Tactical autonomy often relies on selective visibility. Ethical research must respect that (Scott, 1990). The consequence is that some evidence will appear as patterns rather than as exhaustive documentation. This is not a weakness but a reflection of the political realities through which local actors protect autonomy and safety.

A generative AI tool (Claude, Anthropic) was used during preparation of this manuscript to help refine the articulation of ideas and to check grammar and language. It was not used to generate data, analysis or findings and all interpretive claims are the author's own.

4. Findings

Four themes structure the findings: (1) funding retrenchment and organisational precarity; (2) alternative resource strategies and the reworking of accountability; (3) programme adaptation and women's agency and (4) negotiation of donor systems and intermediary control.

4.1 Funding retrenchment and organisational precarity

Across all local respondents, donor retrenchment was experienced as sudden and compounding rather than gradual. One local organisation described the change as arriving without warning:

"We temporarily failed to plan as we were not certain about the future... we abruptly stopped responding to community priorities as resources became scarce – funds, transportation, vehicles and manpower." (LO-A, personal communication, 2025)

A second respondent similarly reported that 'the abrupt withdrawal of funding mid-project hindered our ability to respond effectively to the needs of targeted communities' (LO-B, personal communication, 2025), disrupting sustainability plans and staff welfare simultaneously. These accounts corroborate the paper's conceptual framing of retrenchment as governance disruption, not merely budget reduction (Munyaka, 2025).

Staff attrition and loss of institutional memory were consistent secondary effects. Loss of experienced personnel, withdrawal of welfare provisions such as medical aid and reliance on unpaid volunteerism were all documented (LO-B, LO-E, LO-A, personal communications, 2025). Critically, the donor respondent acknowledged capacity gaps among local actors while simultaneously citing those gaps to justify retained intermediary oversight (DR, personal communication, 2024) – a circular logic that reproduces dependency precisely when local leadership is rhetorically demanded.

A paradox of less funding but intensified control ran through the data. One respondent described being required to overhaul reporting templates while operating with a fraction of previous resources (LO-D, personal communication, 2025). Another noted that donor metrics remained 'highly focused on numbers where reach is central,' generating compliance work that diverted organisational attention from community engagement (LO-D, personal communication, 2025). In political economy terms, compliance functions as an extraction of organisational labour, in this sense referring and including time and attention redirected from community accountability to donor assurance (Cornwall & Brock, 2005).

4.2 Alternative resource strategies and reworked accountability

In response to financial precarity, local actors developed or deepened alternative resource strategies with both economic and political dimensions. Community co-financing was the most consistently documented. One organisation facilitated a transition to household savings for water point maintenance after a carbon credit project collapsed. When donor funding ended, 'households were able to sustain their water points from their own savings' (LO-A, personal communication, 2025) – an outcome enabled by prior experience of donor abandonment rather than by programme design.

Internal Savings and Lending (ISAL) groups emerged as cross-cutting infrastructure across multiple respondents (LO-A, LO-B, LO-C, personal communications, 2025). Women who had participated in donor-supported ISAL schemes continued them independently after project closure, 'having realised the benefit and taken it upon themselves to do these savings without external support' (LO-A, personal communication, 2025). One organisation established a solidarity fund drawing on over 3,000 members

contributing one dollar each to cover costs such as medical treatment, legal access and funeral expenses that donor budgets systematically exclude (LO-E, personal communication, 2025).

These strategies shift accountability downward. In this case, where community members contribute resources, organisations become answerable to contributors in ways that externally funded programmes rarely enable. However, alternative flows introduce their own inequalities. Volunteerism transfers precarity to individuals; community co-financing can burden the most vulnerable households. Alternative resource strategies supplement rather than replace donor power and should not be read as evidence that communities can absorb further retrenchment (Scott, 1990; Peace Direct, 2022).

4.3 Programme adaptation and women's agency

Women's groups and women-led community-based organisations emerged across the data not as passive beneficiaries but as active redesigners of programmes and producers of local knowledge. One organisation adapted a disability employment project mid-implementation expanding eligibility beyond graduates, extending geographic reach and adding in-person workshops after recognising that digital onboarding excluded most intended beneficiaries (LO-C, personal communication, 2025). Another pivoted from donor-prescribed institutional structures toward its own grassroots women's movement to lead citizen advocacy, recognising that women were 'better positioned to engage duty bearers without triggering political victimisation' (LO-B, LO-E, personal communication, 2025).

Indigenous knowledge systems were identified as productive yet structurally invisible. Wetland farming (*matoro*) was cited as a locally managed system that provides drought-resilient crops and food sources through dry seasons. This is a practice predating and outlasting any donor project (LO-E, personal communication, 2025). Women's social networks such as church groups, informal savings clubs, peer teaching circles were identified as channels through which health education and livelihood knowledge circulate beyond NGO reach (LO-A, LO-D, personal communications, 2025). These practices constitute what Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2018) terms *epistemic agency*: the authority of local actors to define priorities, determine the meaning of progress and produce knowledge that is authoritative within community contexts.

Community-defined success indicators diverged consistently from donor metrics. Respondents called for M&E frameworks prioritising 'qualitative indicators that speak to behaviours and social components of communities reflecting real change' (LO-D, personal communication, 2025) and measuring 'participation in decision-making, sustainable income generation, reduced dependency and improved access to services' (LO-C, personal communication, 2025). One respondent described a flood response in which donor-restricted funding covered sanitary products but not toilet reconstruction, producing measurable harm to women's and girls' hygiene – a direct consequence of metric systems designed without community input (LO-B, personal communication, 2025).

4.4 Negotiating donor systems and intermediary control

A striking methodological feature of this dataset is the divergence between intermediary self-accounts and local actor accounts of the same structural relationships. Intermediary respondents described genuine co-creation, light-touch support and local leadership commitments (IR-A, IR-B, personal communications, 2024). One intermediary, however, provided a notably more candid account

local partners do not have much influence as strategic decisions remain the purview of international agencies and their donors. Project tools and templates are shared to local partners as final products and they do not have any rights to alter or enhance these (IR-C, personal communication, 2024).

The same respondent acknowledged that 'tendencies to revert to default settings of a top-down approach' persist even within formally consultative frameworks. A second intermediary conceded that colonial dynamics are unintentionally reproduced 'in deciding on how much local partners get in terms of budgets' (IR-B, personal communication, 2024).

Local actors navigated these constraints through documented strategies of tactical compliance, informal redesign and negotiated dialogue (Scott, 1990). One organisation sustained community water infrastructure by introducing savings contributions that fell outside the approved programme design (LO-A, personal communication, 2025); another relied on social capital rather than unavailable budget lines to maintain stakeholder relationships when allowances were restricted (LO-B, LO-E, personal communication, 2025). These strategies are rarely visible in official documentation; their effectiveness depends partly on invisibility.

Community accountability was structurally subordinated to donor accountability across all actor categories. One respondent was direct stating that accountability goes 'largely to donors so that funds keep on coming' (LO-D, personal communication, 2025). Another identified a deeper problem that communities self-censor accountability claims for fear of programme exclusion: 'they fear to question, because they fear being left out or dropped in the project' (LO-A, personal communication, 2025). Structural reform was consistently articulated as the remedy encompassing direct funding, multi-year grants, flexible programming and 'no strings attached' relationships in which communities 'tell their own stories and define their needs, rather than having external experts interpret them' (LO-E, personal communication, 2025).

5. Discussion: Glocal solutions, epistemic agency, and the limits of localisation

5.1 Retrenchment as governance technology

Eyben's (2014) analysis of aid relations is helpful in interpreting this finding because it emphasises that aid is shaped by messy relationships of power and knowledge rather than by neutral transfer alone. Seen this way, retrenchment does not suspend aid relations; it intensifies and lays bare their asymmetries. Donors remain able to narrate strategic discipline while local actors absorb the operational

consequences of interruption, redesign and uncertainty. The relational character of aid means that cuts are experienced not just as resource loss but as a reordering of who can demand justification from whom and at what stage.

The findings confirm that retrenchment functions as a governance technology in the sense articulated in the conceptual framework, that scarcity increases donors' leverage, tightens assurance requirements and transfers operational risk downward to local actors, while strategic authority remains upstream (Quijano, 2000; Rodney, 1972). The paradox of less money, more control is not incidental. It reflects the structural incentive for donors and intermediaries to manage reputational risk by tightening compliance precisely when resources shrink. Breaking this cycle requires direct funding, simplified reporting and multi-year support and not incremental partnership improvements.

5.2 Women's groups as epistemic producers

The findings also resonate with Tilly's (1998) account of durable inequality. What persists in the aid chain is not only episodic exclusion but categorical differentiation between actors imagined as strategic and actors imagined as implementational. These paired categories are organisationally useful to the system because they justify differential access to resources, voice and authority. Women's groups may generate indispensable knowledge, but unless the categorical ordering itself is disrupted, their contributions continue to be translated upward rather than recognised on their own terms.

The programme-level evidence demands a conceptual shift. Women's groups are not beneficiaries to whom capacity is transferred but knowledge and strategy producers whose epistemic contributions are structurally marginalised. They generate situated knowledge about intervention effectiveness, risk management and community-defined sustainability. They maintain social infrastructures including savings clubs, informal teaching networks, wetland farming systems that outlast projects and constitute the durable substrate of development.

Treating women's groups as epistemic producers (Smith, 2012; Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2018) reorients the central development question from 'how do we build local capacity?' to 'how do we recognise and protect the capacity that already exists without fundamentally reconfiguring how it operates?' The evidence of indigenous knowledge systems, community-led M&E alternatives and programme redesign driven by local feedback suggests that the gap is not one of knowledge but of recognition, resources and authority.

5.3 Localisation as everyday governance

The discourse-practice divergence documented in section 4.4 provides direct empirical evidence for the paper's core argument, that localisation, as policy reform, has not shifted the fundamental architecture of the aid chain. Budget authority, template design, strategic framing and reporting formats remain with donors and intermediaries. Yet localisation is already occurring as shown in ISAL groups that outlast projects, in community water savings that survive donor exit, in women's networks that extend health education beyond NGO reach. These are not donor-designed localisations; they are everyday governance

practices through which local actors continuously assert accountability to communities within systems structured to prioritise accountability to donors (Scott, 1990; Peace Direct, 2021).

This reframing has policy implications. If localisation is measured only through funding share percentages reaching local actors, these everyday governance practices remain invisible and unresourced. A more adequate measure would track distributions of epistemic authority, essentially asking who authors the strategy, who controls the template, who defines success. On these measures, the findings suggest that structural reform and not rhetorical commitment is the precondition for localisation to be substantive (Munyaka, 2025; Mkandawire, 2011).

5.4 Agency without romanticisation

This is why the paper insists that glocal solutions should be interpreted politically rather than sentimentally. Community adaptation demonstrates resourcefulness, but it also reveals the extent to which aid systems rely on unpaid labour, social obligation and hidden subsidy from those least able to bear additional burden (Kabeer, 2005). This paper therefore holds two propositions as follows: local actors exercise real agency and that agency often emerges within unequal structures that continue to offload costs downward (Scott, 1990). The analytic task is to keep both in view simultaneously.

The paper forecloses any reading of glocal solutions as evidence that communities can absorb further retrenchment. Agency under constraint involves trade-offs. In this case this involves volunteerism transferring precarity; community co-financing potentially excluding the most vulnerable and hybrid arrangements creating accountability complexity without additional support (Mosse, 2005). Recognising local innovation is not a rationale for donor withdrawal, it is an argument for structural investment. Precisely because local organisations and communities have demonstrated adaptive capacity under severe constraint, they deserve direct, flexible, multi-year funding directed toward community-defined priorities, not projectised micro-grants calibrated to donor risk tolerance (Pearson & Rieger, 2026).

6. Implications for African development studies

For African development studies, the argument of this paper is twofold. First, localisation should be analysed less as a managerial reform agenda and more as a question of political economy, governance and epistemic authority (Mignolo & Walsh, 2018; Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2018). Second, donor retrenchment should not be read only as loss. It is also an analytical lens that makes visible the infrastructure of dependency (Rodney, 1972) and the forms of agency through which local actors rework development practice from within (Scott, 1990). In that sense, Zimbabwe offers more than a country case. It offers a way of thinking about how global shocks are translated, resisted and repurposed in place.

A further implication is methodological. African development studies can contribute more decisively to localisation debates when it privileges grounded analysis of organisational practice, vernacular accountability and local theories of change, rather than treating policy commitments as sufficient evidence of transformation (Mosse, 2005). This does not mean abandoning macro-analysis; it means

connecting macro shifts in ODA, donor priorities and geopolitical restructuring to the meso- and micro-politics through which programmes are actually governed (Mkandawire, 2011). Such an approach can better capture how power is reproduced, negotiated and occasionally unsettled in everyday development work.

The paper also suggests a shift in what counts as evidence in scholarship on development reform. If analysis remains fixed on official commitments, funding shares or partnership language, it will miss the everyday practices through which local actors keep programmes socially legitimate and operationally relevant (Chambers, 1997). African development studies are especially well placed to make this shift because it can draw more fully on scholarship that treats knowledge, authority and lived practice as central to political economy rather than secondary to it (Chilisa, 2012).

7. Conclusion and policy implications

This paper has argued that donor retrenchment in Zimbabwe is not only a funding problem but that it is a revealing moment in the politics of development. As external finance contracts, the underlying architecture of control becomes easier to see, specifically regarding who carries risk, who defines evidence, who controls templates and who ultimately directs programme choices. At the same time, the paper shows that local actors are not passive recipients of these shifts. They respond through adaptation, negotiation and locally grounded experimentation, often in ways that keep community priorities alive even when formal localisation commitments fall short.

Policy-wise, the evidence points in a clear direction. If localisation is to become substantive rather than symbolic, donors and intermediaries need to cede greater control over resources, design and evidence. This means expanding direct and flexible funding to local organisations, simplifying reporting and assurance requirements, investing in community-defined monitoring approaches and recasting intermediary roles around accompaniment rather than gatekeeping. It also means treating locally produced knowledge as a basis for strategy, not merely as contextual colour added after key decisions have already been made.

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Author Contribution

L.T.K.M. conceived the study, designed the research, collected and analysed the data and wrote the manuscript in its entirety.

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Data Availability

The interview and written-response data generated during this study are not publicly available due to the confidentiality agreements made with research participants and the potential for re-identification given the small, purposively sampled respondent base. Anonymised excerpts are presented within the manuscript; further inquiries can be directed to the corresponding author.

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