

# LOCALISATION IN HUMANITARIAN LEADERSHIP

PROFILING NATIONAL  
NGO ENGAGEMENT  
IN INTERNATIONAL  
HUMANITARIAN  
COORDINATION  
STRUCTURES IN  
THE MENA REGION

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A GLOBAL NGO NETWORK  
FOR PRINCIPLED AND EFFECTIVE  
HUMANITARIAN ACTION



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# ABBREVIATIONS

<b>ACG</b>	Area-based Coordination Group
<b>CBPF</b>	Country-Based Pooled Funds
<b>HC</b>	Humanitarian Coordinator
<b>HCT</b>	Humanitarian Country Team
<b>HLG</b>	Humanitarian Liaison Group
<b>ICCG</b>	Inter-Cluster Coordination Group
<b>ICVA</b>	International Council of Voluntary Agencies
<b>IHF</b>	Iraq Humanitarian Fund
<b>INGO</b>	International NGO
<b>IRQ</b>	Iraq
<b>JDN</b>	Jordan
<b>JHF</b>	Jordan Humanitarian Fund
<b>LCRP</b>	Lebanon Crisis Response Plan
<b>LEB</b>	Lebanon
<b>LHDF</b>	Lebanon Humanitarian and Development Fund
<b>LHF</b>	Lebanon Humanitarian Fund
<b>LIB</b>	Libya
<b>MENA</b>	Middle East and North Africa
<b>NCCI</b>	NGO Coordination Committee for Iraq
<b>NGO</b>	Non-Governmental Organisation
<b>NNGO</b>	National NGO
<b>OCHA</b>	UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs
<b>OPT</b>	Occupied Palestinian Territories
<b>PRCS</b>	Palestinian Red Crescent Society
<b>SAG</b>	Strategic Advisory Group
<b>SCHF</b>	Syria Cross Border Humanitarian Fund
<b>SHF</b>	Syria Humanitarian Fund
<b>SSG</b>	Whole of Syria Strategic Steering Group
<b>SYR</b>	Syria
<b>THF</b>	Turkey Humanitarian Fund for Syria
<b>UN</b>	United Nations
<b>WoS</b>	Whole of Syria
<b>YHF</b>	Yemen Humanitarian Fund
<b>RC</b>	Resident Coordinator

# GLOSSARY

**Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC)** – A global inter-agency forum for humanitarian coordination, policy development, and decision-making that aims to strengthen humanitarian assistance. Its members include both United Nations (UN) and non-UN agencies.

**Non-governmental organisations (NGOs)** – this report discusses three broad categories of humanitarian NGOs: international (INGO, an organisation that operates in multiple countries outside the country in which it is based); national (see below); and local (based in a single country and operating at the sub-national level). As discussed below, these conceptual categories can be problematic in practice.

**National non-governmental organisations (NNGOs)** – NGOs that are not affiliated with an international organisation and work within the country within which they are based. National NGOs operate in multiple subnational regions, as distinct from local NGOs which are more geographically contained.

**NGO forums** – an independent coordination platform or coalition for communication, advocacy, networking, and cooperation among national and/or international NGOs. Across MENA these consist of NNGO-only forums, INGO-only forums, and mixed INGO and NNGO forums.

**Humanitarian Country Team (HCT)** – the senior inter-agency humanitarian leadership body in a country. It is headed up by the Humanitarian Coordinator (HC, the most senior humanitarian official in a country) or Resident Coordinator (RC), if no HC is designated. Secretariat support is provided by the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA).

**Humanitarian clusters** – coordination platforms for humanitarian organisations covering the main sectors of humanitarian action. Membership includes both UN and non-UN agencies, and may include government line agencies. The cluster approach aims to strengthen system-wide preparedness and response efforts, and to provide clear lines of leadership and accountability.

**Country-Based Pooled Fund (CBPF)** – country-specific multi-donor humanitarian financing instruments, managed by OCHA and under the leadership of the HC. Management is supported by an Advisory Board which contributes to the strategic direction and performance of a CBPF.

**World Humanitarian Summit** – the first ever humanitarian summit was held in Istanbul, Turkey in May 2016 with the aim of reforming the humanitarian system to become more global, more accountable, and more robust. The primary commitments agreed to at the Summit were consolidated as the “Grand Bargain.”

**The Grand Bargain** – an agreement reached in 2016 between many of the largest institutional donors and humanitarian agencies to strengthen the humanitarian system. Among other issues, signatories committed to “making principled humanitarian action as local as possible and as international as necessary.”

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In the years since the Grand Bargain was signed, national NGO (NNGO) engagement has expanded significantly within international humanitarian coordination structures across the Middle East and North Africa region (MENA). In many countries, NNGO representatives have begun to play an increasingly influential role as decision-makers who shape collective response strategies. But whilst national NGOs regularly hold a proportion of seats on high-level strategic humanitarian forums, they rarely enjoy the same level of influence as their international counterparts. And although the impact of national actors is felt particularly at the technical and operational level, they seldom lead technical coordination platforms themselves.

Challenges to localisation and local leadership vary significantly across MENA, as do the makeup and the nature of national humanitarian actors. Contexts like Jordan, Lebanon, and the occupied Palestinian territories (oPt) enjoy a multitude of experienced and well-connected NGOs and other civil society actors who work in the humanitarian space – and beyond. In other countries like Iraq, Libya, and Syria, however, many local and national humanitarian actors have emerged more recently, leading to substantially different challenges for strategic NNGO engagement and leadership. Levels of funding to national partners also vary enormously between countries, impacting the ability of national NGO staff to meaningfully participate in coordination structures.

Despite these country-level differences, regional trends are apparent. NNGOs across MENA face issues related to the inaccessibility of complex coordination structures that are steeped in jargon and often held in a language in which they are less comfortable operating. National actors also face significant resource constraints that impact their ability to attend coordination meetings. Perhaps more critical however, is the tendency of humanitarian coordination structures to be seen to primarily serve international interests, often appearing to offer little of value to NNGO participants.

Despite these challenges, progress has been made to enhance national humanitarian leadership. Leaders – both national and international – are in place across the region who are genuinely committed to increasing national voices within humanitarian coordination structures. But they face a range of structural challenges that impact their ability to deliver on global commitments around localisation. System-level inequalities continue to perpetuate power imbalances that disadvantage and disempower national actors. Humanitarian leadership must also contend with competing strategic priorities in which efforts to foster local leadership are often seen by international leaders to be a trade-off with operational efficiencies and the impact of a response. Structural challenges with localisation also relate to the ability of individual NNGOs to represent diverse and emergent indigenous humanitarian perspectives, as well as frequent competition between NNGOs. Finally, international humanitarian actors across MENA are concerned that national humanitarian NGOs often fail to adhere to humanitarian principles in the face of entrenched societal tensions, identity politics, and political affiliations.

These concerns have not been addressed to the satisfaction of many participants in this research – both national and international. These dynamics stifle engagement by NNGOs within international humanitarian coordination structures and undermine their ability to play a leadership role within them. Concerted efforts are therefore needed to support country-level humanitarian teams to overcome these challenges and enable national actors to engage more meaningfully within the humanitarian system. The responsibility for realising these aspirations is shared between humanitarian actors, who must work together to foster greater coordination *among* national NGOs, strengthen the institutional capacity of NNGOs to enable them to more meaningfully engage in humanitarian coordination structures, and adapt coordination platforms and processes to be more inclusive and accessible to NNGOs.

These measures are essential in light of the challenges facing the humanitarian sector across the region. NNGOs are likely to play a critical role in mass-vaccination campaigns related to the global Covid-19 pandemic. Further, the anticipated non-renewal of UN Security Council support for cross-line operations into Syria could solidify the central role played by national actors in the response. National authorities are also increasingly demonstrating their resistance to heavily internationalised responses, whilst formidable access challenges continue to plague operations across many of the countries examined throughout this report. Renewed efforts are therefore required if we are to enhance the leadership role of national NGOs within humanitarian coordination structures across the region.

## INTRODUCTION

National and local humanitarian actors have long been recognised as central players within humanitarian responses across the MENA, as elsewhere.<sup>1</sup> Locally led responses are widely understood to generally be more timely, more sustainable, and more cost effective. They are also perceived to facilitate better operational access and lead to stronger networks with affected communities. National NGOs also tend to more effectively bridge the humanitarian-development nexus and offer an avenue through which international actors can tap into an emergent civil society. Locally led responses are also seen to reflect a more comprehensive understanding of the historic, cultural, and geopolitical contexts within which crises and affected communities are grounded. Experienced staff within NNGOs can also serve as the institutional memory of the humanitarian sector, promoting continuity in the face of rapidly rotating international personnel. National NGOs are also often seen as critical to addressing issues of sustainability and transition during humanitarian responses.<sup>2</sup>

Reflecting a recognition of the unique value of NNGOs, diverse and largely disconnected approaches to localisation within the humanitarian system converged with renewed emphasis at the 2016 World Humanitarian Summit. The localisation agenda was among the key reforms agreed at the Summit as part of the Grand Bargain, including specific commitments by aid agencies and donors to:

*Support and complement national coordination mechanisms where they exist and include local and national responders in international coordination mechanisms as appropriate and in keeping with humanitarian principles.<sup>3</sup>*

Despite these commitments (now made over four years ago), the meaningful and effective participation of national NGOs within the international humanitarian response architecture is widely perceived to be insufficient.<sup>4</sup> NNGOs are regularly excluded or inadequately represented within humanitarian coordination structures. This gap is particularly pronounced within high-level strategic and decision-making forums.

A global survey from early 2020 found that national NGOs were present in around 4 out of 5 Humanitarian Country Teams (HCTs) but represented only 7 per cent of overall participants. The same study found NNGOs accounted for 43 per cent of sector or cluster members but only 8 per cent of subnational sector leadership, with none leading national-level clusters or sectors.<sup>5</sup> In comparison, NNGOs were directly represented on a little over half of the HCTs examined in this study, but were represented directly or indirectly (through an NGO forum) in every HCT across MENA (see section 2). Indeed, Peer 2 Peer supports missions — a mechanism to strengthen collective responses in field operations — have consistently identified the engagement of local actors in decision-making bodies as a particular challenge for humanitarian Coordinators (HC) and HCTs.<sup>6</sup> And even when local actors do participate in strategy and coordination processes, these structures do not appear to adequately support their effective engagement.

To better understand and address these issues, this project aims to map and document the extent of effective and meaningful national NGO engagement in international humanitarian coordination structures. It focuses on HCTs, Country-Based Pooled Fund (CBPF) Advisory Boards, and sector or cluster coordination platforms. Drawing on both qualitative and quantitative data, section 1 briefly profiles national leadership within seven responses across MENA. Section 2 outlines the state of NNGO engagement across the region and identifies themes that recur between contexts. It also analyses the role and limitations of CBPFs in enhancing NNGO engagement. Section 3 draws on this analysis to outline the primary obstacles to NNGO participation and engagement, including the accessibility of coordination structures to national actors, the lack of incentives to participation, capacity limitations, and resource constraints. It also identifies some of the structural challenges that impede NNGO leadership, including a frequent lack of political will, concerns over the ability of NNGOs to adequately adhere to humanitarian principles, questions over the representativeness of national actors, issues related to structural inequality, as well as internal competition among national actors. Section 4 offers a conclusion. And section 5 advances a series of recommendations for improving the participation and engagement of NNGOs, targeted to NNGOs themselves, donors, the HC, OCHA and the coordination secretariat (a national or sub-national administrative structure that supports humanitarian coordination), clusters and sector leads, UN agencies and international NGOs (INGO), and NGO coordination forums. These recommendations are intended to share risks and enhance accountability related to enhancing NNGO humanitarian leadership.

A series of case studies are also spread throughout this report that detail steps undertaken by NNGO leaders to amplify national voices within key coordination structures, the role and importance of pooled funds, and the impact of the global Covid-19 pandemic on local leadership. Certain details that could identify the individuals or agencies involved have been removed.

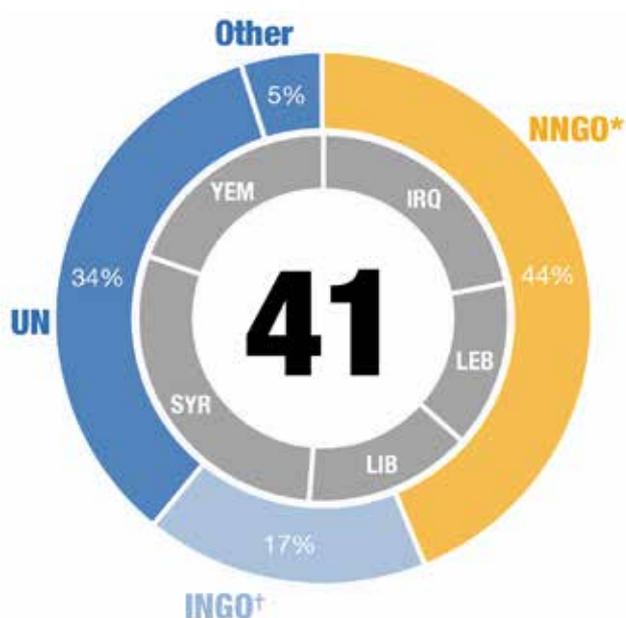
## Research approach

Research and recommendations on localising aid have tended to focus on the international level, leading to more general findings,<sup>7</sup> or have generated context-specific policy prescriptions for individual countries.<sup>8</sup> There is, however, limited data on the regional experience of localisation and on progress towards enhancing the role of NNGOs within humanitarian coordination structures. To bridge this gap, this research attempts to provide a brief overview of the shared approaches and challenges to enhancing national humanitarian leadership, whilst also highlighting some of the divergent experiences across the MENA region. This project does not directly address the role of community-based organisations or the role of local or national authorities in humanitarian coordination or leadership.

Research for this project consisted of both quantitative and qualitative data. With the assistance of the relevant OCHA offices, the project team collated quantitative data on membership and participation in international coordination structures by organisation type for each of the target countries: Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon, Libya, the occupied Palestinian territories, Syria (Damascus and Turkey-based operations, as well as the Whole of Syria response), and Yemen. This data was used to identify the ratio of participants from NNGOs, INGOs, coordination bodies, institutional donors, UN agencies, and national governments or de facto authorities within clusters or sectors, the HCT, and on the CBPF Advisory Boards, presented in sections 1 and 2, below. Variations in the types of technical working groups that were in place across the region, as well as the fluidity in these structures and their membership, made them too hard to track for the purposes of this research. Data was gathered for inter-sector and inter-cluster coordination structures but has not been included in this report as it largely duplicated the composition of cluster and sector leadership.

Qualitative data for this research is grounded in an extensive review of relevant literature on localisation and national NGO leadership across MENA as well as a series of key informant interviews conducted remotely with humanitarian practitioners in a sub-set of countries: Iraq, Lebanon, Libya, Syria (Damascus and Gaziantep), and Yemen. Interviews were semi-structured, held with 41 participants from across the region. NGOs accounted for 61 per cent of interviews (25 participants), with the remainder from UN agencies (34 per cent) and institutional donors (5 per cent, see figure 1). Over 40 per cent of respondents were women, with a similar ratio of men-to-women among NNGO interviewees. Travel restrictions related to the global Covid-19 pandemic prevented field-level research.

**Figure 1: Interviews by type and country**



\* Includes both national-only and mixed international and national coordination forums.

† Includes international-only coordination forums.

Some inconsistencies were apparent in how different entities are understood and recorded between contexts in MENA. The project team has attempted to resolve these inconsistencies as far as possible. Variations may nevertheless remain related to whether the chairs and secretariat of coordination forums are recorded as members (specifically the HC and OCHA within CBPF advisory boards and the HCT), how rotational members are counted, and which entities are understood as national NGOs (particularly with respect to national Red Crescent societies). The distinction within HCTs between members and observers (for which statistics have not been presented here) may also vary across the region.

This research uses the definition of NNGOs established by the Grand Bargain workstream 2 on localisation, in which local or national non-governmental organisations are understood to be headquartered and operating in their own country, and not affiliated with an international entity (see glossary). This definition nevertheless presents a number of challenges. The concept of a 'national' NGO was found to be particularly complex in the context of the Syrian operation, for example. Many NGOs that appeared to self-identify as 'national' were also operating regionally, often having expanded their humanitarian activities to Lebanon, Jordan, or Iraq. Some had concertedly pursued internationalisation, reportedly fostering international diaspora links and expanding operations beyond the greater Syria response. Other 'national' NGOs working on the Syria response had chosen to retain their focus on the north of the country, but were based in Turkey. These cross-border dynamics introduce questions around the suitability of the IASC definition of an NNGO for this project.

Similarly, several National Societies of the of the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement were considered by participants in this research to be NNGOs (sometimes counting as local actors in the balance of HCT membership), despite their status as auxiliaries to government and their international institutional links. Many participants in this research also made the distinction between national and local NGOs, with the latter considered to operate only at the sub-national level (see glossary). Moreover, national organisations were at times perceived to differ from one another as markedly as they did from their international counterparts, raising important questions around the utility of broadly categorising humanitarian actors as local, national, or international. Whilst these definitional discussions are largely beyond the scope of this research, they are nevertheless worth noting here.<sup>9</sup>

## 1. COUNTRY PROFILES

This section details membership within key humanitarian coordination structures in each country as an indicator of levels of national participation. This data does not suggest levels of engagement, nor is it intended to serve as a report card on the progress of each Humanitarian Country Team towards realising the localisation agenda. Indeed, a key finding of this study is that effective approaches to localisation must be tailored to the unique dynamics and challenges within each context. Levels of participation and engagement should therefore be expected to vary across the region. Moreover, low NNGO membership in some of the bodies reported here may at times mask other leadership roles played by national partners, such as through a Strategic Advisory Group (SAG), technical working groups, or sub-national coordination structures. Further, the lack of national NGO representatives in some forums should not be automatically attributed to a failure by in-country leadership to be more inclusive, but may instead be the result of limited uptake by national partners or related to government restrictions.

These country profiles presented below draw also on perceptions of participants and a brief literature review. This data is intended to contribute to a regional analysis and is not considered a comprehensive account of the localisation dynamics within each country.

### Iraq

IRQ	HCT MEMBERS								
	Donors	8	UN	17	INGO	2	1	NNGO	3
	Mixed NGO Coord.								
	CLUSTER LEADS								
UN	15	Gov.	2	INGO	8				
IHF ADVISORY BOARD MEMBERS									
HC & OCHA	2	Donors	4	UN	4	INGO	2	NNGO	2

Note: data for Iraq not verified by OCHA.

NNGO engagement in humanitarian coordination structures in Iraq was generally perceived to have increased since the World Humanitarian Summit, in particular through the representation of national actors on the HCT (3 seats were allocated to NNGOs at the time of research, in addition to the mixed NGO forum). There was nevertheless a sense among both national and international participants in this research that progress towards localisation had stalled over recent years. Many interviewees also reported limited engagement from NNGOs within decision-making forums, despite their physical participation.

With two seats each, NNGOs and INGOs had equal representation on Iraq Humanitarian Fund (IHF) advisory board. Several participants nevertheless pointed to a lack of trust between national and international actors, which some attributed in part to an audit of the IHF, which reportedly found high levels of corruption and mismanagement among national implementing partners. These findings coincided with a marked decrease in direct IHF allocations to NNGOs from the highest percentage in the region in 2016 (43 per cent) to the lowest proportional allocation the following year (9 per cent, see figure 3). Interviewees also emphasised societal divisions within the country that they perceived to have permeated national NGOs. Many national humanitarian actors were reported to operate at a sub-national level due to ethnic and sectarian divisions, further limiting their ability to play a representational role. These issues also introduced concerns around the ability of some national NGOs to represent the broader sector or adhere to humanitarian principles. Nevertheless, the mixed NGO coordination forum, the National Coordinating Committee for Iraq (NCCI, suspended at the time of research), was uniformly seen by participants to be essential to ensure transparent elections of national representatives to coordination positions and to foster greater engagement among national actors (see case study on 'The role of NGO coalitions,' below).

Participants from both international and national organisations described the indigenous humanitarian sector in Iraq as young, fragile, and somewhat inexperienced. National NGOs were perceived to have had limited exposure to international humanitarian coordination structures and often saw little value in participating. Many NNGOs were also reportedly small and struggled to allocate staff to attend coordination meetings – particularly operational staff that were required for the project delivery. As with other countries examined here, participation in coordination structures often increased the workload for national NGO staff, many of whom had to sacrifice their free time to attend meetings. Competition between national actors over funding was also perceived to be high, contributing to a lack of cohesion and coordination among NNGOs.

Interviewees emphasised the impact of language on NNGO engagement in Iraq. Most coordination meetings were held in English, limiting the pool of national actors that could participate as well as the level of engagement of those representatives that did attend. Both national and international interviewees also reported a limited understanding among NNGOs of humanitarian coordination architecture that undermined their ability to participate effectively within it. National actors reportedly faced resource constraints that undermined their engagement and often resulted in limited uptake of positions allocated for NNGOs, such as on SAGs or as cluster co-leads.

National capacities were perceived to have been eroded by the scale of the international response. The last three years of humanitarian appeals in Iraq were over 90 per cent funded, with the 2020 appeal at 83 per cent as of late 2020 (well above the global average of 43 per cent).<sup>10</sup> Participants in this research described how these dynamics had resulted in a large international presence that had drawn capacity from NNGOs and reduced incentives for international actors to localise or foster more equitable partnerships with their national counterparts. Opinions were divided among interviewees on whether anticipated reductions in international funding levels over the coming years would lead to a greater recognition of the need to localise and transition to national leadership. Several pointed to budding early recovery and durable solutions initiatives as key opportunities to enhance national leadership.

OCHA managed the Iraq Humanitarian Fund (IHF), which in 2019 allocated a total of \$77.9m, \$13m (17%) of which went directly to NNGOs – the lowest proportion in the region.

## Lebanon

HCT MEMBERS							
Donors	15	INGO Coord.	3	NNGO Coord.	3		
EOC CLUSTER LEADS							
UN	11	INGO	5	NNGO	1		
LHF ADVISORY BOARD MEMBERS							
Donors	9	UN	5	INGO	3	NNGO	3
LCRP SECTOR LEADS *							
UN	16	Government	12	INGO	1		

\* LCRP data from "The Lebanon Crisis Response Plan 2017-2020," January 2020.

NNGOs in Lebanon appear to be among the most diverse and numerous of those examined through this research, many of which are less formal community-based organisations. Individual staff capacities among national NGOs were generally perceived to be very high, but the limited engagement of much of the Lebanese humanitarian sector with coordination structures was widely reported to present challenges for collective NNGO representation. Participants in this research also raised concerns over the political and religious affiliations of some national NGOs and questioned their ability to resist external pressures that could compromise their adherence to humanitarian principles.

Internationally-led humanitarian activities in Lebanon fell broadly within either the Lebanon Crisis Response Plan (LCRP, a response framework designed to meet the needs of Syrian refugees and vulnerable Lebanese, whilst strengthening national systems and bolstering the country's economic, social, and environmental stability)<sup>11</sup> or the OCHA-supported Emergency Operations Centre (EOC) that has overseen the response to the Beirut blast and Covid-19. Activities under the LCRP – led by national authorities in partnership with the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees and the United Nations Development Programme – were coordinated through government-led sectors supported by either a UN agency or an INGO co-lead. In contrast, the EOC was more closely aligned with other response structures from across the region and fell under the leadership of the HCT. National NGOs and international NGOs were represented equally at the EOC through coordination forums. The HCT and LHF advisory board both enjoyed relatively high levels of NNGO representation with 3 seats allocated in each, equal to INGO representation.

NNGOs operating in Lebanon appear to have faced considerable challenges engaging with these dual coordination structures, compounding issues related to the complexity of the system and transaction costs associated with participating in humanitarian coordination structures. A recent NGO report described the system as "a patchwork of different ad-hoc coordination mechanisms" that had led to a "duplication of coordination structures, division of resources and lack of harmonisation."<sup>12</sup> These dual coordination structures were undergoing a 'pivot' or 'realignment' at the time of research that was reportedly designed to better address the multi-layered crises affecting the country. Participants in this research were widely supportive of this process, perceiving it to offer opportunities for streamlining coordination structures, improving lines of accountability, and enhancing the ability of NNGOs to engage effectively within them.

OCHA managed the Lebanon Humanitarian Fund (LHF) which in 2019 allocated a total of \$11m, \$2.6m (23%) of which directly went to NNGOs. INGOs and NNGOs had an equal share of seats (3 in each) in both the HCT and LHF advisory board.

## Libya

<b>LIB</b>	<b>HCT MEMBERS</b>					
	UN	15	INGO	3	INGO Coord	4
	<b>CLUSTER LEADS</b>					
UN	12	Nat'l Gov.	2	INGO	5	
<b>NO CBPF</b>						

The coordination structures for the Libya response were split between Tripoli and Tunis, presenting a substantial challenge to national NGO engagement. With the absence of Libyan NGOs from the primary leadership and decision-making platforms in Tunis, NNGOs were reported to have had a very limited strategic impact to date. Indeed, NNGOs were represented in neither the HCT nor among cluster leadership. There was no CBPF for Libya at the time of research.

Capacity to effectively engage in humanitarian structures among Libyan NGOs was also perceived to be relatively weak due to the nascent nature of the sector and the conflict or post-conflict environment, in which tribalism and political allegiances were perceived to have resulted in a highly fragmented national NGO sector. Civil society actors were also reported to be very local, operating only in specific districts rather than at the national level, further undermining their ability to engage in national coordination structures.

Area-based Coordination Groups (ACGs) covered the west and south of the country, and offered a platform through which some national NGOs could engage humanitarian coordination structures (although only ACG-South was reported to involve national actors in mid-2020). These platforms were nevertheless perceived by some participants to duplicate cluster functions and add to confusion regarding reporting lines and coordination responsibilities. ACGs were also reported to have increased the reporting burden on agencies who were expected to feed into both clusters and the ACG. Concerns were raised in mid-2020 at what members of the Inter-Cluster Coordination Group described as “the alarming lack of presence of national actors at all levels” within the response architecture.<sup>13</sup>

Some participants in this research reported a chronic lack of trust between national and international actors, with allegations of high levels of corruption and the affiliation of some NNGOs with militia groups. Libyan NNGOs were also not represented by a national coordination body, despite efforts by international actors to foster one.

## Syria

<b>SYR</b>	<b>HCT MEMBERS (DAMASCUS)</b>							
	UN	12	INGO	5	NNGO	3		
	<b>HLG MEMBERS (GAZIANTEP)</b>							
	UN	11	INGO	2	INGO Coordination	1	NNGO	6
	<b>WoS SSG MEMBERS *</b>							
	UN	10	INGO	2	INGO Coordination	1	NNGO	2
	<b>CLUSTER LEADS (DAMASCUS)</b>							
	UN				12			
	<b>SECTOR LEADS (GAZIANTEP)</b>							
	UN	14	INGO	8	NNGO	3		
<b>SHF ADVISORY BOARD MEMBERS (DAMASCUS)</b>								
Donor	4	UN	5	INGO	4			
<b>SCHF ADVISORY BOARD MEMBERS (GAZIANTEP)</b>								
Donor	7	UN	4	INGO	2	NNGO	3	

\* WoS SSG membership not verified by OCHA.

The Syria response was perhaps the most diverse of those examined here. A UN-led Whole of Syria (WoS) framework provided an umbrella structure that was led by the HC in Damascus. Humanitarian activities in government-controlled areas of the country were run out of Damascus, which was home also the HCT and humanitarian cluster system. Operational hubs were also established in Turkey and Jordan to support cross-border operations, with field level coordination platforms operating in both the northwest and northeast. Inter-agency humanitarian activities from Turkey were led by the Humanitarian Liaison Group (HLG) and supported by clusters, all linked through the WoS framework.

The role of NNGOs was felt to be particularly important in Syria, given the obstacles faced by international actors to directly engage communities for project planning and monitoring in both the south and north of the country. Localisation and leadership dynamics nevertheless varied across these different operating areas, as did the makeup and roles played by NNGOs in the response. A smaller number of national NGOs (often reportedly affiliated with national authorities) were well represented and appeared to play a major role in operational and strategic decision-making forums in the Damascus hub. The Syrian government reportedly prevented co-leadership of sector coordination structures by NGOs.<sup>14</sup> Bureaucratic impediments were also reported to have delayed and constrained the ability of INGOs to partner with anyone other than a select few Syrian NGOs, limiting also the access of most NNGOs to international actors and structures.<sup>15</sup> National NGOs were not represented on the advisory board of the Syria Humanitarian Fund (SHF).

In contrast, cross-border operations from Turkey and humanitarian activities in northern Syria were characterised by an abundance of diverse civil society actors and national NGOs, ranging from humanitarian to human rights groups. The cross-border nature of the response in northern Syria appears to have provided a unique opportunity for international and national humanitarian actors to develop deeper and more genuine partnerships than were evident in most of the other response structures examined here. Localisation appears to have been driven by concerns around the non-renewal of a UN Security Council resolution that was anticipated to impact funding for cross-border operations. INGOs also faced considerable administrative and bureaucratic impediments to operating in Turkey. Both national and international participants in this research described a gradual shift throughout the lifespan of the response to become more national, with several pointing to a concerted strategic focus on national cluster leadership.

OCHA managed two CBPFs for the Syria crisis: the SHF, which allocated a total of \$52.6m in 2019, \$12.3m (23%) of which directly went to NNGOs, and the Syria Cross-Border Humanitarian Fund (SCHF), which allocated a total of \$117m in 2019, \$67.9m (58%) of which directly went to NNGOs – the largest percentage in MENA.

## Yemen

HCT MEMBERS							
UN	14	INGO	7	NNGO	3		
CLUSTER LEADS							
UN	14	De facto authorities	2	INGO	7	NNGO	1
YHF ADVISORY BOARD MEMBERS							
Donors	4	UN	5	INGO	2	NNGO	2

Many national NGOs in Yemen appeared to be particularly vulnerable to threats, intimidation, and the predatory behaviour of authorities on both sides of the conflict. Yemeni civil society was reported to be relatively inexperienced working with international partners and within humanitarian coordination structures,<sup>16</sup> and many national organisations were historically perceived to have been affiliated with political factions or tribal groups.

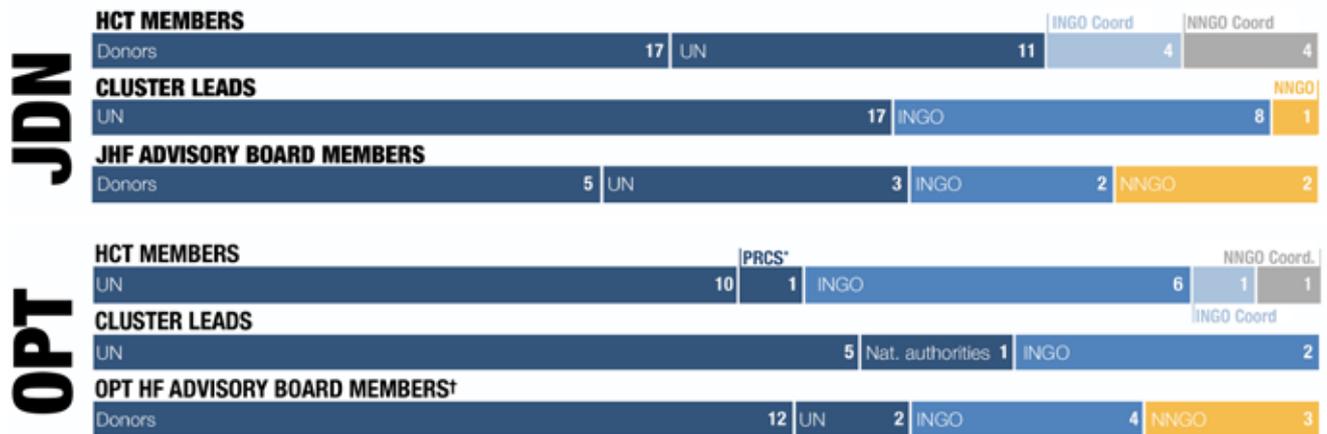
NNGOs in the north were also reportedly affected by efforts by de facto authorities to prevent their collective action, in which both international and national NGO forums were prohibited. These measures appear to have significantly compromised engagement by the NNGO community in humanitarian leadership forums and raised concerns over the representativeness and partisanship of national actors. National NGOs nevertheless held a relatively high proportion of seats on the HCT and were represented in both cluster leadership (as co-lead of the GBV sub-cluster) and on the Yemen Humanitarian Fund (YHF) advisory board.

National NGOs based in the government-controlled south of the country were perceived to be somewhat disconnected from the primary decision-making forums in Sanaa, which was under the control of de facto authorities. Long-standing coordination hubs were nevertheless felt to offset some of these challenges, providing effective platforms for sub-national coordination that were often more inclusive of national actors.

Most donors were not physically represented in Yemen. This appears to have exacerbated distrust between donors and national partners and undermined the ability of NNGOs to address their funding concerns or influence donor policies.

The OCHA-managed Yemen Humanitarian Fund (YHF) distributed \$239.4m in 2019, \$59.3m (25%) of which directly went to NNGOs.

## Jordan and oPt



\* Palestine Red Crescent Society.  
† Not including the HC as chair or OCHA as secretariat.

The most recent influx of refugees from Syria appears to have eroded levels of community acceptance for refugees, marking a shift in government attitudes towards humanitarian actors that were supporting refugee communities. Recent research on Jordan found that INGOs were frequently reluctant to share project-level decision-making power with NNGOs. NNGOs were also reported to suffer from limited access to sustainable funding that drove competition among national NGOs. Cultural norms were also found to have prevented women-led organisations from effectively participating in humanitarian activities. The report further argued that INGOs needed to invest more in efforts to strengthen NNGO structures.<sup>17</sup>

In keeping with the initial project design, no interviews were held with humanitarian personnel working in Jordan or the oPt. Quantitative data was collected for each, which shows equal membership between international and national NGO representatives within both the HCT and JHF advisory board. NNGOs held 3 seats on the OPT advisory board (one less than INGOs), and were represented in the HCT through a national-only NGO forum, in contrast to INGOs that held 6 seats in addition to the INGO forum.

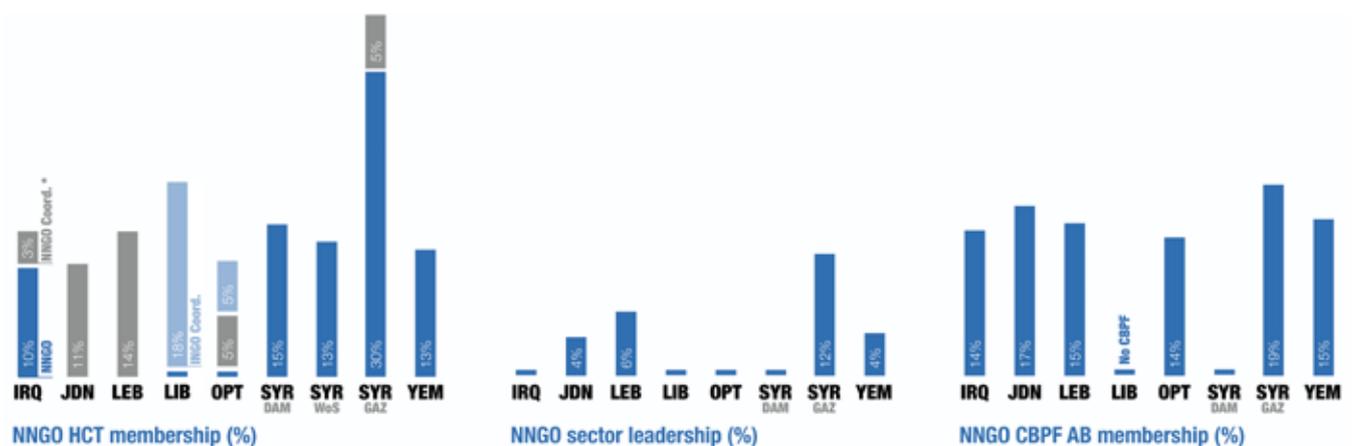
The Jordan Humanitarian Fund (JHF) allocated a total of \$8.6m in 2019, of which \$1.8m (21%) went directly to NNGOs. The OPT Humanitarian Fund (OPT HF) distributed \$27.4m for humanitarian activities in 2019, \$7.6m (28%) of which directly went to NNGOs.

## 2. THE STATE OF NNGO ENGAGEMENT

Despite the diverse contexts across MENA, some common themes emerged from this research. The diversity and sheer numbers of NNGOs working on humanitarian issues proved challenging for both national and international humanitarian actors, presenting significant issues related to identifying and engaging appropriate NNGO representatives (see section 3). To overcome this issue, NGO forums were often appointed as members of international coordination structures to supplement or replace individual NNGO membership. National NGO participation and engagement were generally perceived among interviewees to be higher within more operational or technical forums – particularly at the sector or cluster level. Indeed, NNGOs in some responses were perceived to be the driving force behind many clusters, playing vital strategic decision-making roles – both informally and formally, for example through Strategic Advisory Groups (SAG). Nevertheless, national NGO representatives accounted for less than 6 per cent of overall sector or cluster leadership or co-leadership positions across MENA, with the exception of Gaziantep in which 12 per cent of positions were held by national representatives (see figure 2).

NNGOs were generally well represented within CBPF Advisory Boards, usually representing between 10 and 20 per cent of all seats (largely comparable with those allocated to international NGOs). The experience of HCTs, however, was mixed. Most HCTs had between 1 and 3 seats allocated to NNGOs, whilst in some countries NGO forums represented national voices. Only Libya had no NNGO representation on the HCT due to the political and security situation detailed above (although it had one INGO forum representative). The Turkey-based HLG had the highest proportion of national representation across the region with 6 members from NNGOs (including 5 Syrian and 1 Turkish NGO) in addition to one NNGO forum representative (see figure 2). Several countries also had sub-national HCTs or ACGs. These structures generally appear to have had higher levels of representation from national actors, but this research did not collect comprehensive data on sub-national coordination forums.

Figure 2: NNGO representation in key coordination structures by country (% of total membership)



\* Includes both national-only and mixed international and national coordination forums.

## Strength in numbers

One former member of an HCT in the MENA region described increasing the seats allocated to national NGOs as her most significant achievement. As a member of an NNGO herself, she worked to ensure space within the HCT agenda within which to raise problems and challenges that were unique to national partners. She convened pre-meetings before each HCT to identify the issues facing her national colleagues and raised these herself – usually as ‘any other business.’ She also helped to build a link between the Humanitarian Coordinator and NNGOs, sometimes inviting the HC to meetings with her national colleagues.

These efforts reportedly encouraged NNGOs to become more interactive and more engaged on

strategic issues, but also highlighted some of the fractures within the national NGO community. She quickly saw a need to increase the number of national voices on the Humanitarian Country Team to more effectively raise the concerns of national organisations. She secured the support of ICVA and others to help her design an advocacy strategy, and began lobbying for a further two seats to be awarded to NNGOs on the HCT. Existing members of the Humanitarian Country Team were initially sceptical, she reported, but after establishing a rigorous selection process to minimise their concerns, she was able to officially shift the makeup of the HCT. Two more seats were added, amplifying the voices of national NGOs within the country’s most senior strategic humanitarian forum.

## Humanitarian pooled funds

While this project is not specifically concerned with NNGO funding, the primary constraint identified by national NNGOs to participate and engage in coordination structures was reported to be resources (see section 3). Indeed, a key commitment under the Grand Bargain was for donors to ensure a greater share of humanitarian funds reach national partners. Most institutional donors pursue these commitments almost exclusively via sub-granting, with primary grants passing through INGOs or UN agencies. NNGOs are rarely perceived to have the resources or capacity to meet the demands and requirements of larger donors. Corruption and counter-terrorism concerns across MENA also discourage donors from awarding grants directly to national actors. The scale of the response in some countries, as well as domestic pressures to reduce administrative overheads, also reportedly encourage institutional donors to award a smaller number of larger grants to international actors (who may in turn sub-contract NNGOs) rather than the larger number of small grants that would be required to work primarily through national partners.

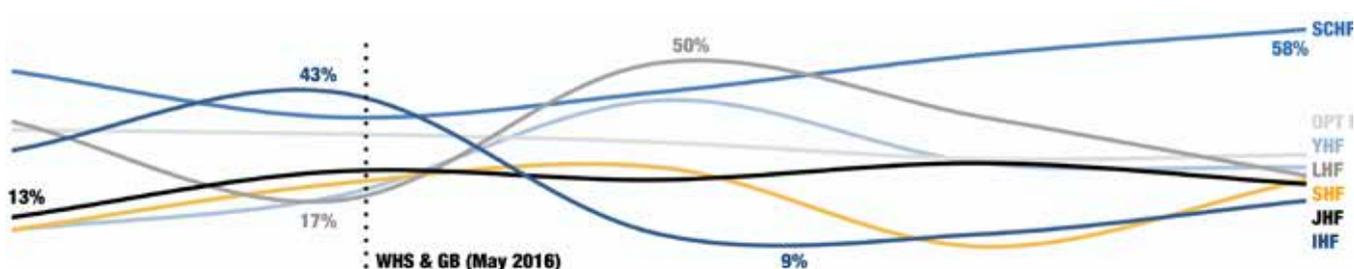
Due to these limitations, Country-Based Pooled Funds provide a key (sometimes the only) source of international funding available to NNGOs, and importantly allow them to recoup administrative costs of up to 7 per cent of project budgets.<sup>18</sup> Humanitarian pooled funds tend to be more flexible and have lower reporting demands than many other funding mechanisms, making them better suited to national partners. CBPFs also provide an important platform within which NNGOs can play a leadership and decision-making role through Fund advisory boards (which are responsible for the strategic direction and performance oversight of a CBPF) and review committees (which provide technical and strategic project vetting).

Pooled funds allow donors to channel funds more directly to national NGOs when they cannot do so bilaterally, and they facilitate NNGO engagement and exposure to the wider humanitarian coordination system. The IASC recognised these funds as “important tools for allowing local

actors to design proposals and obtain flexible funding... encouraging local actors to engage more substantially in clusters and international coordination architecture.”<sup>19</sup> Indeed, the ability of NNGOs to engage within humanitarian coordination structures was reportedly heavily influenced by their access to a CBPF, which often supported institutional strengthening initiatives and met staffing costs.

In 2019, three out of the seven CBPFs across MENA met or exceeded commitments under the Grand Bargain to allocate 25 per cent or more to NNGOs (OPT HF, SCHF, and YHF). Historical trends, however, were mixed. Some funds, like the OPT HF have maintained relatively consistent levels of funding to national partners. Others have varied significantly over recent years. The LHF, for example, saw the percentage allocated to NNGOs halve from 2017 to 2019. Similarly, the IHF provided 43 per cent of overall funding to national NGOs in 2016 but just 9 per cent the following year (see figure 3).

**Figure 3: Direct CBPF allocations to NNGO, 2015–2019 (% of total allocations)**



*Note: allocations do not include sub-grants received by NNGOs through INGOs or UN agencies.*

Participants in this research held different perspectives regarding the purpose of humanitarian pooled funds. Many interviewees perceived CBPFs to be an essential tool for advancing localisation and enhancing NNGO leadership. Humanitarian pooled funds were seen to be particularly critical given the limited availability of international funding mechanisms for most NNGOs. Other participants, however, insisted that CBPFs should focus primarily on meeting acute humanitarian needs, regardless of the type of organisation implementing activities. The expansion of pooled funds to serve a limited capacity building role appears to have been driven largely by necessity than design, with many participants in this research advocating for other sources of funding to play this role instead.

In keeping with advancing the localisation agenda, some pooled funds in other regions have begun disallowing sub-granting in an attempt to increase efficiencies by removing intermediary organisations and to encourage direct funding of NNGOs.<sup>20</sup> No participants in this research advocated for this approach, however. On the contrary, many interviewees – including from NNGOs – pointed to the valuable role often played by UN agencies and INGOs in compliance, technical support, and administration.

Similarly, some Advisory Boards have decided to award additional points to NNGO applicants, giving them an advantage over their international counterparts. Participants in this research did not advocate for this approach, but instead emphasised the need to ensure that NNGOs were afforded adequate time to submit proposals. Participants also suggested that NNGOs should be better supported to apply to humanitarian pooled funds through capacity building in proposal writing and reporting, and institutional development to strengthen organisational financial and accountability systems. Research from outside MENA suggests that national NGOs seeking funds

could also benefit from opportunities to discuss application processes and receive feedback in advance of submissions, perhaps through so-called 'walk-in clinics.'<sup>21</sup>

Participants in this research also advocated for NNGOs to receive a fixed percentage of annual allocations through CBPFs – often suggesting 50 per cent. It is unlikely, however, given varying capacities and challenges between contexts, that an arbitrary percentage would be viable across MENA. Moreover, predetermined percentages could effectively cap the funds that are made available to national partners, potentially stifling support to NNGOs when the trend in some countries is for the majority of allocations to be made directly to NNGOs.

### **3. CHALLENGES TO ENHANCING NNGO ENGAGEMENT**

Research for this project suggests that the participation and meaningful engagement of national NGOs within international humanitarian coordination structures are constrained by the inaccessibility and complexity of the system. NNGO representatives also face significant resource and capacity constraints that undermine their ability to play leadership and decision-making roles. And all too often, national actors see insufficient incentives to justify the necessary investment in time and resources to participate, perceiving coordination structures to primarily serve international interests.

In parallel, significant structural obstacles limit the willingness of international actors to transfer more power to national actors in keeping with global institutional commitments around localisation.<sup>22</sup> Structural inequalities between national and international actors – driven primarily by a dependency on international funding – have limited the ability of NNGOs to challenge existing leadership. Competing strategic priorities around impact and efficiency also hamper efforts to foster greater levels of local leadership. Moreover, issues of representativeness and questions around who should be empowered to appoint national decision-makers to key humanitarian structures remain largely unanswered, often compounded by competition between NNGOs. Many participants were also concerned at the ability of national NGOs across MENA to adhere to humanitarian principles in the face of profound societal, religious, and political pressures, as detailed below.

The research team looked specifically for gendered aspects of enhancing national humanitarian leadership. To this end, efforts were made to ensure a gender balance among participants (see introduction for a breakdown of participants) and to specifically explore the gender dimensions of this study. Nevertheless, very few issues related to gender were raised by participants. Anecdotal evidence suggests that national women leaders were more readily accepted by international counterparts as impartial representatives and as being focused primarily on the welfare of affected communities (in contrast to some of the findings related to adherence to humanitarian principles, outlined above). Women-led and women-focused NNGOs were also perceived by some participants to enjoy unique levels of access to certain communities and to have unique technical expertise – particularly related to gender-based violence and protection against sexual exploitation and abuse. To date, however, gender has not tended to be a central consideration within most localisation literature.

Evidence nevertheless suggests that involving women in humanitarian responses can have a gender-transformative impact and can contribute to designing more appropriate interventions and response strategies.<sup>23</sup> Moreover, a recent comparative study of Jordan and Lebanon by ActionAid found that women-focused organisations were chronically underfunded, curtailing opportunities for women to engage with the humanitarian system, influence decisions, or effect resource allocation.<sup>24</sup> Efforts to enhance national NGO engagement and participation in humanitarian coordination structures could therefore benefit from emphasising the role of women-led and women-focused NNGOs. The research team did not collect gender disaggregated data on membership within coordination structures.

## Obstacles to participation and engagement

### Accessibility

Several interviewees described language barriers as one of the most significant obstacles to NNGO participation in international humanitarian coordination structures. Language was believed to limit the pool of national representatives who could participate within the HCT in some countries. English was the primary language in all HCTs and most (but not all) clusters across MENA. Technical staff attending cluster meetings were felt to be less likely to be as confident or proficient in English as senior management from NNGOs, limiting their ability to speak out or influence decisions. Those cluster meetings that were held primarily in Arabic, with translation provided for international staff, reported higher levels of national staff engagement. Several participants saw the transition from English to Arabic within coordination structures as a component of a strategic response transition away from addressing only acute humanitarian needs towards early recovery and development activities, with national actors playing an increasingly more significant role.<sup>25</sup>

The heavy use of jargon and technical language was widely reported to have compounded feelings of the inaccessibility of international structures by NNGOs within all levels of coordination. Participants from both national and international agencies similarly expressed concern that coordination meetings tended to be dominated by a 'western way of working,' which could reportedly consist of packed agendas, short discussions, and quick decisions being taken. Most participants also conceded that the complexity of the system itself was alienating, often compounding the difficulties national actors faced navigating humanitarian coordination platforms. Several interviewees from NNGOs were also unclear who was invited to particular meetings or how membership was determined.

Meeting locations were also reported to be an obstacle to NNGO participation. Some local and national NGOs struggled to justify the cost and time required to send staff to coordination meetings – particularly for those not based in the capital. Some NNGO staff based in the same city as coordination structures also faced challenges commuting to distant UN premises, or were deterred by the prospect of intense security screening before meetings. Several coordination platforms were also based outside the country of operation and therefore inaccessible to most national actors (see also 'The disruptive effects of Covid-19').

## The disruptive effects of Covid-19

Early reports suggested the global Covid-19 pandemic had ushered in a new era of locally led humanitarian responses. Some observers pointed to shifts in the status quo within humanitarian leadership as a result of the public health emergency, claiming it had the potential to significantly elevate the role and importance of national NGOs within the international system.<sup>26</sup> Amid international travel and movement restrictions, responses to the pandemic had reportedly seen an increased reliance on local and national actors who were generally more free to operate than their international counterparts. Guidance issued by the IASC claimed that localisation was “both a necessity and an opportunity for effectively meeting humanitarian needs and recovery efforts post COVID-19.”<sup>27</sup>

Responses to Covid-19 have frequently been embedded within the humanitarian-development nexus, across which local actors are generally better positioned to navigate. The pandemic was therefore “forcing the humanitarian sector to ask hard questions about who is best placed to deliver aid given the local context, restrictions and needs,” argued a recent report by the Humanitarian Policy Group (HPG).<sup>28</sup> These dynamics were expected to persist or even increase over the coming years, further elevating the role of national NGOs and their importance within strategic decision-making structures. A report by ICVA from mid-2020 concluded that the Covid-19 pandemic represented “an opportunity to rethink levels of participation and engagement by national NGOs in coordination mechanisms.”<sup>29</sup>

The findings from this research, however, do not entirely support this narrative. Participants from across MENA generally perceived that Covid-19 had done little to change the role of national actors within humanitarian leadership structures. In most contexts examined here, international agencies were accustomed to access constraints that already hampered staff movement and travel. Remote management and local partnerships were common operating modalities across much of the region that appear to have largely allowed

humanitarian operations to continue alongside the scaling up of new public health responses – albeit generally implemented by national NGOs. The global outbreak was even reported in some contexts to have reduced the interface between international and national actors, further undermining opportunities for NNGOs to influence humanitarian strategies and decisions.

Many coordination meetings moved online from early 2020. National NGO participants reported initial obstacles to attendance, often facing connectivity and technological issues. These obstacles were reported to have been largely resolved at the time of research. And online participation for some national partners had reduced their travel times and costs (a significant burden for many, as detailed in section 3). Email sign-ins (required on most digital platforms) also ensured that coordinators had access to valid contact details for all participants, allowing them to share meeting agendas, schedules, and minutes. Yet virtual meetings may also have reduced the quality of engagement from NNGO representatives. Several participants in this research reported that staff from NNGOs tended to be less comfortable speaking during an online coordination meeting than they were in person, and consequently tended to be less vocal and less engaged.

National NGOs were widely reported to have been at the forefront of pandemic response operations. And whilst national actors were perceived in several countries to have been integral to developing Covid response strategies, this perception applied primarily to contexts that already demonstrated high levels of engagement among NNGOs. Limited evidence from the oPt also suggests that regional responses to Covid-19 have tended to marginalise women leaders and women-led organisations.<sup>30</sup>

Several participants did perceive some positive changes related to localisation amid the global pandemic, which appeared to have had an organising effect on civil society in some contexts, encouraging NNGOs to pool their resources and operate more closely than ever before.

## Capacity and resource constraints

Many national NGO staff across MENA appear to have only a partial understanding of the humanitarian coordination systems and mechanisms operating in their country. Some participants from NNGOs reported having been only exposed to cluster-level trainings and were unaware of where to find further information about UN-led coordination systems. Many interviewees acknowledged that system-level information does exist and training sessions are regularly held to induct national NGO staff into international humanitarian coordination structures, but the structures nevertheless appear to have remained opaque and poorly understood by many national actors. Some participants conceded that NNGOs often do not seek out information or ask international actors for support to better understand how to effectively work within international humanitarian coordination structures. Most participants agreed that the preferred training modalities (workshops and online courses) were poorly suited to national representatives. Few opportunities were thought to exist to support longer-term capacity and institutional development.

National humanitarian actors were also perceived to be highly diverse, often small, and with weak links to other national actors. The smaller size and relatively limited experience implementing humanitarian activities of some NNGOs in certain countries was also believed to make them more vulnerable to threats and intimidation by combatants and political actors. And in one country studied here, the efforts of an INGO to strengthen NNGO capacity was blocked by a party to the conflict. The sheer number of national actors also reportedly challenged outreach and capacity building initiatives by international NGOs and UN agencies.

For many participants, the primary obstacles to NNGO participation in humanitarian coordination structures were seen to be linked to resources. Travel costs, access to transport, or adequate IT infrastructure to join virtual meetings were all reported to limit NNGO participation in coordination meetings. Some national NGO staff reported having to attend meetings and perform coordination functions in addition to their official responsibilities, often in their own time. Moreover, many national NGOs were entirely project-driven and heavily dependent on CBPFs (see 'Humanitarian pooled funds'), leading to unpredictable and short-term planning timeframes.

In most countries examined here, NNGOs were either ineligible to receive funds directly from institutional donors or found donor application and reporting requirements too onerous. Several NNGOs also complained of a lack of transparency around the partner selection processes of international NGOs and UN agencies that reportedly made it particularly hard for newer national actors to 'break in.' Further, a number of governments in MENA reportedly controlled national-international partnerships, limiting opportunities for capacity building and knowledge sharing. Capacity limitations among national actors in some countries were also perceived by interviewees to be a function of staff being 'stolen' or 'poached' by international actors willing to pay higher salaries.<sup>31</sup>

Despite commitments made under the Grand Bargain to channel funds directly to local and national partners, institutional donors throughout MENA fund NNGOs primarily as subgrantees through UN agencies or INGOs. Overhead and indirect cost recovery policies varied, but national NGOs often reported being unable to fund coordination and liaison positions from international funds (with the exception of the CBPF). Limited staff capacity, weak institutional systems, and historical concerns over corruption and financial mismanagement continued to hinder direct NNGO funding in many countries examined here. Moreover, institutional donors did not maintain a physical presence in several countries (including Yemen, Libya, and to a lesser extent Syria), undermining the ability of national representatives to build trust or relationships among donors.

## Lack of incentives

NNGOs often appear to lack sufficient incentives to overcome these challenges and invest the requisite resources to fully engage in international humanitarian coordination structures. Some national NGOs reportedly perceive participation to be an avenue for fundraising, a prerequisite for eligibility for receiving international funds, and as a proving ground for international partnerships. This often leads to minimal levels of commitment and engagement by national actors. Other NNGO staff saw their participation in these structures as a means for international actors to collect more data or merely as a 'rubber stamp' for INGOs and UN agencies looking to label decisions as having been endorsed by national actors.<sup>32</sup>

NNGOs also regularly perceived meeting agendas to be internationally focused and poorly aligned to their own interests and challenges. Many national actors have consequently formed the perception that humanitarian systems primarily serve international interests.

## Structural challenges

### Structural inequality

At the heart of the localisation agenda is the recognition of a power imbalance between national and international actors. NNGOs regularly perceive themselves to be at a structural disadvantage, due primarily to the dependence of national actors on their international counterparts for resources and technical support. The frequent confidence, forcefulness, and technical experience of international representatives was also reported to limit national engagement and leadership. These dynamics were compounded in countries like Yemen and Libya, in which donors were not located in the country of operation. NNGOs therefore had no direct access to institutional donors and often relied instead on UN agencies and INGOs to pass messages and advocate on their behalf, adding to their perceived dependency on international actors.

Participants from some national NGOs expressed concern that by advocating for localisation they would endanger the international funding on which the viability of their organisation was built. This power balance was believed to have a stifling effect on levels of NNGO participation and engagement in strategic and decision-making forums, with a degree of self-censorship practiced by national partners for reasons of perceived self-preservation. In other responses, however, participants reported an abundance of local and national partners that were willing to speak up – even in high-level coordination forums.

## Competing strategic priorities

A range of competing operational and strategic priorities have undermined efforts to implement the localisation agenda and enhance NNGO engagement in humanitarian coordination structures. First, many participants described a trade-off between the impact of programmes and building national capacities to absorb funds and play a more effective leadership role. All interviewees acknowledged the need to invest more in national NGO systems and personnel, but many expressed concerns that doing so would drain resources that could otherwise be used to meet acute humanitarian needs. This was a particular challenge for CBPFs that sought to balance the imperative to respond immediately and efficiently with the need to do so as appropriately and sustainably as possible.

In several of the larger crises in MENA, national NGOs were reportedly unable to operate at sufficient scale to ensure efficiencies and minimise donor overhead costs.

Domestic pressures in some donor countries have encouraged institutional donors to favour fewer large projects through international actors to ensure lower internal administrative costs, as opposed to the many small projects that may be required if they were to channel a greater share of their aid budgets through national NGOs.<sup>33</sup>

Several responses across the region were undergoing significant contextual changes during the time of research. Many participants pointed to these shifts as an opportunity to enhance NNGO leadership as a component of a strategic transition. Humanitarian partners were planning for the possible non-renewal of a UN Security Council resolution on cross-border activities that were anticipated to dramatically impact international operations in northern Syria. Enhancing the leadership role of NNGOs was therefore seen as a crucial component of contingency and continuity planning. And amid an anticipated decline in international attention in Iraq, international humanitarian actors were reportedly committed to a gradual transition to national leadership.

## Representativeness and competition

Another major obstacle to NNGO leadership relates to the representativeness of national members appointed to coordination structures. Participants working in contexts characterised by ethnic divisions, sectarian tensions, and intractable conflict dynamics often expressed apprehension over whether national actors could or should represent the broader indigenous humanitarian sector within coordination structures. International actors were concerned by the risk of reinforcing or replicating existing power structures, or imposing new ones through their selection of partners.

Echoing this concern, Qatar-based academics Sultan Barakat and Sansom Milton cautioned that the localisation agenda is “being utilised by incumbent elites in conflict and crisis affected countries to serve nationalist agendas that shut out international aid actors whilst restricting space for local actors that challenge ruling ideologies.”<sup>34</sup> Research commissioned by medical Journal *The Lancet* on the role of national responders in northern Syria similarly warned that by capacitating and co-opting local responders into existing international structures, the localisation agenda may “reproduce the very ‘hierarchies’ it aimed to tackle.”<sup>35</sup>

Issues of representativeness are not unique to the NNGO leadership discussion, but plague the broader localisation agenda itself. Barakat and Milton warn of a “reductionist binary” between the concepts of local and international where the “identification of the ‘local’ as an untainted, pure category is problematic, for instance, due to elite capture of locally driven processes and the hybridisation of the ‘local’... with subnational, national, or international influences.”<sup>36</sup> Indeed, the definition of a ‘national NGO’ is inevitably problematic, as briefly explored above (see Introduction). The complex response dynamics in northern Syria, for example, raise questions related to the identity of different types of humanitarian actor – whether Syrian, Turkish, regional, diaspora, or a fusion of these categories.

These challenges are frequently compounded by competition within national humanitarian sectors – which typically increases as resources become scarcer. Societal divisions were often perceived to have permeated civil society, resulting in tensions and competition between NNGOs. Rivalries had reportedly emerged between national humanitarian actors affiliated with different political entities in some countries. Membership in international coordination structures was sometimes perceived to be a zero-sum game (that is, when a gain by one party entails a loss of equal value by another), in which NNGO representatives could advance their own (largely financial) interests at the expense of their national colleagues.

Competition was particularly pronounced in contexts in which NGO forums were weak or absent. NGO forums were widely acknowledged to play a critical role in fostering a more cohesive, consistent, and collaborative indigenous humanitarian sector (see ‘The role of NGO coalitions,’ below).

Related to representativeness and competition was the issue of accountability. Several national participants in this research expressed concern that NNGO representatives were not able to be held to account by their colleagues. Similarly, systems of accountability related to advancing localisation efforts in-line with global commitments were widely described as weak or absent. Terms of Reference (ToRs) for coordination forums offer one avenue through which clusters, SAGs, Advisory Boards, and HCTs could make country-level commitments around localisation, to which they would be more directly accountable. HCT compacts offer another potential avenue. Yet very few strategy documents accessed for this research referenced localisation directly, and none were found to prioritise efforts to enhance national leadership (although many guaranteed NNGO membership on key coordination platforms).

## The role of NGO coalitions

National NGOs are regularly limited in their size and the resources with which they operate. They routinely have minimal exposure to international actors and structures, and can sometimes struggle to function effectively within internationally-led coordination systems. NGO forums overcome many of these constraints by offering an accessible platform for national partners to pool their resources and magnify their influence. NGO forums also help to reduce the friction or transaction costs of participating in international structures for national actors and can provide a valuable service by inducting national actors into international structures. These coalitions can foster more consistent and consolidated national positions that are likely to prove more influential within key strategies and decisions, but can also give NNGOs a degree of cover or protection during sensitive discussions to which they may not wish to be visibly associated.

NGO forums have been instrumental in creating and strengthening leadership opportunities for national NGOs across MENA.<sup>37</sup> NGO forums – whether mixed or national-only – sit on three quarters of HCTs in the region, representing national voices and national issues directly. In some HCTs they are the *only* representatives for NNGOs. In all countries examined here in which they were present, NGO forums were seen to play a critical role. They often organised pre-meetings before HCTs, during which critical issues affecting national NGOs were discussed, key messages and recommendations agreed, and a spokesperson identified. NGO forums also help to identify national actors who do not otherwise participate in international coordination structures. They also often help to organise elections for seats allocated to NNGOs on the HCT or a CBPF Advisory Board. Representation and the representativeness of members nevertheless often appeared to be a challenge for NNGO forums, particularly when operating in highly diverse contexts or when the activities of national NGOs included a broad range of humanitarian, development, human rights, and stabilisation activities.

Most countries within MENA had separate international and national NGO forums that often worked closely together. The NGO Coordination Committee for Iraq (NCCI) was unlike most coalitions in the region in its representation of both national and international humanitarian actors. Participants in this research invariably saw this integration as an asset, through which international actors had been better exposed to issues affecting NNGOs (although some suggested that NCCI should transition to become more nationally-led). Both national and international NGOs were seen to have greater leverage together than they did apart. The North-East Syria NGO Forum was also a mixed forum that oversaw a coordination system based on traditional UN-led structures in the absence of authorisation for UN agencies to work in the area.

NGO forums across MENA had been forced to fundraise creatively. Many charged minimal membership fees, whilst some were supported from partner agencies abroad. Others had secured capacity building funds from UN agencies or INGOs, whilst some relied on the CBPF to meet operating budgets and staffing costs. Several forums, however, reported difficulties securing sufficient long-term funding to maintain capacity in key functions.

The effectiveness of NGO forums appears to have sometimes put them at odds with national authorities looking to limit collective action or play a convening role within civil society themselves. At the time of research, NCCI had been suspended by national authorities in Iraq, whilst the Yemen Forum had been disbanded by de facto authorities in a presumed attempt to limit collective action on the behalf of NGOs. An emergent national humanitarian sector in Libya, combined with often highly localised humanitarian NNGOs, had reportedly undermined attempts to create a national NGO platform in the country.

## Adherence to principle

Several participants in this research raised concerns over whether NNGOs could reasonably be expected to act according to humanitarian principles in many of the contexts across MENA. The very characteristics of national and local partners that have been recognised as being so essential (such as proximity to affected communities and being embedded in local culture and society) were seen by some interviewees to also undermine the ability of national partners to take decisions and operate in a neutral and impartial fashion. National NGOs were generally perceived in all of the countries covered by this study to be less able to resist pressure from national authorities and other parties, and were invariably understood to be heavily bound up in the local dynamics of the crises to which they were responding. Indeed, medical humanitarian NGO Médecins Sans Frontières has long maintained that the localisation discourse has failed to adequately distinguish between different contexts, advocating instead for a more nuanced (and more limited) approach to localisation that better accounts for the pressures and challenges that NNGOs face – particularly with respect to their adherence to humanitarian principles.<sup>38</sup>

This concern extends beyond questions around the level of national NGO leadership and is instead central to the localisation discourse itself. But it largely fails to acknowledge how international humanitarian actors may themselves fall short (or be reasonably perceived to fall short) of adhering to principle – particularly in the context of protracted and intractable armed conflict, internationalised conflict, or integrated UN missions.<sup>39</sup> Perhaps more significant is the growing recognition that the core humanitarian principles are a means to an end and not an end in themselves. Ethical compromises may be inevitable during complex humanitarian operations where options are limited. Humanitarian principles – fundamental and foundational though they are – should therefore not be fetishized and treated as inviolable, but should instead help to guide decision-makers to reach what is often the ‘least bad’ option available to them.<sup>40</sup> This more pragmatic approach to the role and purpose of humanitarian principles allows for both an acknowledgement of the unique challenges that NNGOs face, whilst also recognising the invaluable contribution they make to humanitarian coordination and leadership, if afforded the opportunity.

Several participants stressed the importance of relying on the Humanitarian Programme Cycle and its accompanying tools to guide strategic decisions and reduce the risk of manipulation. The use of a Humanitarian Needs Overview or Periodic Monitoring Reports, for example, was widely perceived to support more principled decision-making and avoid many of the problems associated with certain actors pursuing the interests of their individual agency. Finally, as detailed in section 1, NGOs (and NNGOs, in particular) are far from a majority in any of the strategic decision-making forums examined throughout this research. The balance of different types of actors on humanitarian coordination structures ensures these platforms are unlikely to be captured by self-interested parties – whether national or international.

## 4. CONCLUSION

Both the participation and the engagement of national NGOs within international humanitarian coordination structures has grown over the years since the Grand Bargain was signed. This research has nevertheless pointed to a number of challenges and obstacles that threaten to stifle further progress in this area. International humanitarian actors across MENA have not yet adequately shared with local partners their decision-making power or their control over resources. Indeed, they appear to face few incentives to implement these changes, even though they are in line with global commitments. At the same time, many NNGOs have remained too passive in advancing the localisation agenda, waiting for opportunities instead of making them. All too often, the process of localisation has therefore remained a rhetorical commitment with limited impact at the operational level.

Various impediments continue to undermine the ability of national NGOs to play a leadership role within humanitarian coordination structures across the region. Many meetings remain inaccessible to representatives from NNGOs, as does the broader humanitarian architecture. National NGOs also regularly lack the systems, resources, and capacities to meaningfully contribute to strategic discussions or influence decisions. But for many national NGOs, the transaction costs of participating in complex coordination forums are too high to justify the returns, meaning their participation in these platforms may become ostensibly a fundraising activity. It is hoped that the ongoing UN reform process will go some way to reducing the complexity and costs of engagement.

The commitments made through the Grand Bargain have not adequately addressed the structural obstacles associated with localisation to enhance national humanitarian leadership. Progress on this front will depend on the ability of both international and national humanitarian actors to find appropriate solutions to these challenges. Efforts must be made to reduce the structural inequalities that stifle national voices in coordination platforms. Realistic solutions that are tailored to each context are also needed to address issues of representativeness and competition among NNGOs, with NGO forums likely to play a central role in resolving these tensions. The perceived trade-off of localisation with operational impact and response efficiencies must also be acknowledged, with pressures on CBPFs to build local capacities alleviated through alternative funding models. Reflecting the nexus approach, these resources will likely come from non-humanitarian and non-traditional donors, which must also provide a degree of predictability and sustainability for national NGOs.

The unique role and contribution of international actors should not be lost in this discussion. Their ability to mobilise quickly, at scale, and to apply decades of experience drawn from across the globe are an invaluable complement to national capabilities. But national and regional actors are growing increasingly wary of heavily internationalised responses across MENA, as in other regions, further underscoring the growing importance of national responders and national leaders within humanitarian coordination structures. Strategic opportunities for enhancing NNGO leadership exist across the region related to realigning coordination structures, changing funding environments, shifting conflict dynamics, the global pandemic, as well as the changing geopolitical landscape of the region. The following recommendations will go some way towards capitalising on these opportunities.

## 5. RECOMMENDATIONS

The responsibility to realise institutional commitments around localisation – and specifically around strengthening national NGO engagement in international coordination structures – is shared between humanitarian actors. No single entity can or should be expected to address the current shortfalls on their own. National NGOs themselves must adapt to new ways of working, as must institutional donors, humanitarian leadership, UN agencies, and INGOs.

Three key themes to enhancing NNGO engagement in international coordination structures are apparent throughout this project. First, there is an ongoing need to foster and strengthen coordination *among* national NGOs to ensure national partners have access to an effective platform within which they can safely engage each other to identify their specific needs and challenges, and to advocate with their international counterparts from a unified and more influential position. At the same time, however, international actors must recognise that not all national partners will or should participate in humanitarian strategic and decision-making platforms. Greater efforts are therefore required to ensure outreach and coordination beyond international humanitarian coordination structures.

Second, it is essential to strengthen the institutional capacity of NNGOs to enable them to more meaningfully engage in the international humanitarian architecture. This issue has long been identified as a global priority within the localisation agenda, but remains a significant gap across the region. And all too often, addressing local capacities is reduced to a financial issue. Whilst financial resources are inevitably critical for national NGOs to overcome these obstacles – particularly around staffing coordination functions – NNGO engagement in international coordination structures should also be strengthened through longer-term non-financial partnerships between national and international humanitarian actors, and among national actors themselves.

Third, there is a compelling case for continuing to adapt existing coordination platforms and processes to be more inclusive and accessible to NNGOs. International humanitarian coordination structures are invariably complex and often require substantial commitments in terms of resources and staff time that undermine the ability of NNGOs to play a leadership role within them. Ultimately, broad system-wide change is therefore required if the obstacles to national leadership identified in this report are to be more meaningfully addressed. The ongoing UN Reform process offers a welcome opportunity to implement these changes.

The following targeted recommendations reflect these themes. And over time it is hoped they will help to build greater levels of trust between national and international humanitarian actors.

### NNGOs

- **Join, strengthen, or form coalitions involving other national humanitarian partners.** Use these platforms to foster shared national approaches to humanitarian action, jointly advocate for localisation and funding opportunities, provide a structure for mutual support, and strengthen collective national voices within international coordination structures. Consider formal or informal partnerships with international NGO networks where they do not exist, for example through a mixed NGO forum or through a memorandum of understanding between national and international NGO forums that outlines opportunities for mutual support.
- **Prioritise and explore new opportunities to mobilise funds for liaison and coordination functions,** where they are not already in place. Advocate with donors to cover these costs within both direct and indirect grants. Consider also opportunities for funding coordination positions through local, non-humanitarian, and non-traditional fundraising activities, or through overseas networks or foundations. Consider increasing staff remuneration and opportunities for professional development to improve retention.

- **Clearly identify and uphold expectations and responsibilities for membership and representation in humanitarian coordination forums.** Make clear the requirements related to representing and actively advancing the interests a broader NNGO constituency as opposed to individual organisational interests, stressing also expectations around active engagement as opposed to passive representation. Take steps to hold to account both national and international representatives by raising concerns with them directly, through OCHA, the HC, or an NGO forum. Ensure systems are in place for NNGO representatives to identify issues of importance to national partners in advance of key meetings and that outcomes are promptly reported back to national constituents. Support processes that have broad backing from both national and international actors (for example through NGO forums) to nominate and appoint national representatives to coordination structures.
- **Build partnerships between NNGOs, in which more established and better resourced organisations commit to support smaller national actors that are less familiar with international humanitarian systems and structures.** These arrangements could consist of establishing a 'shadow' or 'buddy system,' or may consist of mentoring in humanitarian coordination and liaison functions. These relationships could be either technical (for example among cluster members) or higher-level (among agency representatives).
- **Prioritise the engagement of women-led and women-focused organisations** within humanitarian coordination structures to better address the unique needs of women and to appoint national representatives who are likely to be more widely accepted.

## Donors

- **Provide funding to NNGOs in support of capacity building, liaison functions, or to support participation in coordination structures.** Ensure more funding is channelled to local and national organisations, exploring opportunities for providing flexible multi-year funding to ensure the sustainability and continuity of NNGO projects and capacities. Consider also providing unrestricted direct or indirect funds that can be used at the discretion of NNGOs to enable them to strengthen their systems and engage more meaningfully in international humanitarian coordination platforms. Encourage INGOs and UN agencies to partner with NNGOs during project development stages and allow international funding recipients to pass on to national partners indirect cost recovery and overhead costs.
- **Provide funding for NNGO and mixed NGO forums,** including key secretariat staff, recognising that platforms that are not adequately resourced with funding for independent secretariat staff are likely to be weaker and less able to represent diverse NNGO perspectives.
- **Ensure adequate contributions to CBPFs, recognising their unique value as often the only window through which NNGOs can access international funds.** Allow also the allocation of un-earmarked funding through country-based humanitarian funds.

## Humanitarian Coordinators and HCTs

- **Encourage and incentivise participation from national NGOs within coordination structures, ensuring an appropriate allocation and composition of seats within key strategic and decision-making forums.** National representation in coordination structures should be determined primarily by national actors themselves, through a transparent and inclusive process that has both local and international support, perhaps overseen by OCHA or an NGO forum. Appropriate levels of participation in the HCT should not be imposed arbitrarily but will best be determined by local and national capacities, the nature of the crisis, as well as local political dynamics.

- **Seek opportunities to promote the leadership role of women-led and women-focused NNGOs** who will be better able to address the unique needs of women and who are likely to be more widely accepted representatives.
- **Create an environment in which strategic and decision-making processes are more accessible to and inclusive of national NGOs.** Consider holding meetings in the local language or providing simultaneous interpretation and translation, where required. Take steps to discourage the use of technical jargon, as far as possible, or to ensure this can be clarified as needed. Care should be taken to ensure national partners have adequate opportunities and time to contribute to meeting agendas to ensure their relevance. Explore opportunities to adapt meeting modalities to better accommodate national NGO representatives, perhaps by holding virtual meetings, hosting sub-national meetings, splitting meetings across multiple locations to enable those not based in the capital to participate and to reduce their travel time and costs, or implement decentralised sub-national coordination hubs. Consider a staged approach through which sub-national coordination platforms prioritise national engagement and leadership as a first step to modifying national structures. Ensure humanitarian appeals include strategic considerations related to localisation, ideally aligned to an HCT localisation strategy. Include reporting on progress towards these objectives within periodic monitoring reports, mid-year reviews, and other elements of the programme cycle. Ensure localisation and NNGO leadership are prioritised within transition strategies, particular within early recovery and durable solutions initiatives.
- **Strengthen links with existing national humanitarian leadership and coordination structures.** Where these do not exist or are weak, take steps to enhance or foster the creation of effective coordination platforms for NNGOs by advocating that national representatives collaborate more closely with each other and encourage donors to invest in national coordination structures and NGO forums. Play a convening role to increase opportunities for NNGO representatives to interact with donors and other key stakeholders, particularly in countries in which institutional donors are not physically present.
- **Foster more strategic approaches to localisation and NNGO leadership, and integrate localisation objectives into response planning and monitoring.** Ensure the HCT compact and HCT terms of reference address localisation, clearly defining roles related to enhancing the role of national leadership to ensure a greater degree of accountability on these issues. Consider establishing a working group under the HCT to identify opportunities to enhance localisation and national leadership, noting that coordination systems are already process-heavy and highly institutionalised.
- **Initiate a coordination architecture review to ensure coordination is fit for purpose,** where appropriate. Such reviews should investigate the role and representation of national NGOs and identify additional measures to ensure their effective participation and engagement. Consider requesting localisation support missions, for example through the Peer 2 Peer Support Project.

## OCHA and coordination secretariat

- **Take steps to create an environment in which strategic and decision-making structures are more accessible to and inclusive of national NGOs.** Ensure meeting agendas are sensitive to the needs and priorities of national NGOs and do not overly emphasise issues of unique relevance to international actors. Ensure also that translation is available within key coordination forums, where necessary, and take steps to discourage the use of technical jargon, as far as possible. Consider rotating meeting venues (for example encouraging national NGOs to host coordination meetings with secretariat support) and explore the viability of retaining online options for participating in coordination structures, post-Covid.

- **Step up efforts to orient national actors on international humanitarian coordination structures**, recognising that trainings and online modules can have limited impact and minimal uptake among NNGO representatives. Develop and regularly hold innovative induction initiatives that orient NNGOs to the international humanitarian architecture – addressing roles and responsibilities of HCT and cluster participation – that are better tailored to their needs and preferred learning modalities.
- **Seek opportunities to strengthen national coordination platforms by supporting the establishment of new forums or strengthening existing NNGO networks or mixed NGO coordination structures.** When not already doing so, consider providing direct funding to NNGO forums (for example through a CBPF) and advocate with donors to meet the funding needs of these platforms.
- **Consult with local actors on their preferred ways to receive and access information.** This may require multiple channels of communication, rather than relying on email and website uploads.
- **Continue to support NNGO applications to CBPFs and other international funding mechanisms available to them.** Consider offering regular ‘walk-in clinics’ where those seeking funding are able to discuss and receive feedback on their proposals. When not already permitted, advocate with donors to allow NNGOs to recover indirect costs to build internal systems and capacities, and assign liaison and coordination focal points. Ensure NNGOs receive an appropriate proportion of all fund allocations through a CBPF, taking into considerations national capacities and the local context. Ensure adequate time for applications from national NGOs and consider conditioning access to pooled funds on cluster participation, whilst emphasising that sectoral coordination platforms are not primarily a funding mechanism.

## Cluster and sector lead agencies

- **Take steps to create an environment in which cluster and sector meetings are more accessible to and inclusive of national NGOs.** Consider holding meetings in the local language or providing simultaneous interpretation and translation to overcome language barriers, where required. Encourage transition to holding meetings primarily in the local language as soon as possible, particularly for sub clusters and field-based meetings, and limit the use of jargon and technical language as far as possible. Ensure the translation of key documents. Care should be taken to ensure national partners have adequate opportunities and time to contribute to meeting agendas to ensure their relevance to NNGOs and do not reflect only international interests. Cluster and sector leads should also explore the utility of hosting virtual meetings, sub-national meetings, or splitting meetings across multiple locations to enable those not based in the capital to participate and to reduce their travel time and costs. NNGO representatives may also benefit from pre or post-coordination meetings to provide a safer space exclusively for national partners to identify issues specific to their constituents. And where not already in place, consider assigning sub-national cluster focal points to ensure greater participation among NGOs without a national presence. Deploy multiple channels of communication with cluster and sector partners and engage local actors on their preferred ways of communicating and accessing information. Ensure also careful meeting scheduling to minimise clashes between sectors. Seek opportunities to promote the leadership role of women-led and women-focused NNGOs.
- **Encourage and incentivise sector and cluster co-leads from national NGOs whilst taking steps to reduce the resource and capacity constraints that prevent NNGOs from taking up these opportunities.** Explore opportunities for funding NNGO co-leadership and advocate with donors for such opportunities where they do not exist.

- **Provide regular guidance, training, and orientation for NNGOs on humanitarian coordination architecture and the benefits and responsibilities of cluster or sector participation.** Emphasise the operational and strategic advantages beyond funding opportunities.
- **Ensure cluster or sector terms of reference prioritise localisation, where not already in place.** This document should clearly define opportunities for enhancing the role of national leadership within the sector or cluster, and should ensure a greater degree of accountability on these issues.
- **Solicit the support of the global cluster or sector lead agency to initiate a localisation review.** Such support could consist of desk reviews, self-assessments and surveys of cluster or sector partners, key informant interviews, country visits, and workshops to identify opportunities for advancing localisation and enhancing the role of national NGOs within the work of the cluster or sector.
- **Maintain effective liaison arrangements with national NGOs and local coordination structures and sector-specific information networks and ensure outreach to non-participating NNGOs working in the sector,** recognising that not all national humanitarian actors will participate in clusters and sectors. Where possible, enhance and complement rather than replace local coordination and information-sharing networks.

## UN agencies and INGOs

- **Invest in the capacity of national NGOs as part of preparedness and early recovery activities.**
- **Seek new approaches to strengthen the capacity of NNGOs to participate and engage effectively with international humanitarian coordination systems.** Recognising that multi-day workshops and online training modules are perceived by national partners to be ineffective, pursue alternative modalities for orienting NNGO representatives into the cluster system and broader humanitarian architecture. Consider developing longer-term non-financial partnerships in which national NGOs can ‘shadow,’ establish a ‘buddy system,’ or receive mentoring in humanitarian coordination and liaison functions. Such shadowing relationships could be either technical (for example among cluster members) or higher-level (among agency representatives). These opportunities will ideally be of mutual benefit, strengthening national structures and staff whilst allowing international actors to benefit from local knowledge and better understand national dynamics.
- **Consider multi-agency commitments to reduce the impact of ‘poaching’ NNGO personnel, thereby eroding national capacities.** Recognising that staff mobility between international and national actors is both inevitable and often desirable, explore opportunities for compensating national NGOs when hiring staff directly from them, ensuring transparent recruitment processes and adequate notice periods, as well as more balanced compensation packages.
- **Seek opportunities to strengthen national coordination platforms.** Ensure INGO coordination platforms link to national platforms and support issues of relevance to NNGOs. Support national networks to facilitate national NGO coordination and more effectively share information with national partners.
- **Ensure NNGOs are provided with adequate administrative overheads and staffing costs within project budgets.** Recognising the need for national NGOs to fund coordination and liaison positions, allow national partners to recover adequate indirect project costs and staff salaries to ensure their ability to participate in key coordination structures. When not already permitted, advocate with institutional donors to allow NNGO subgrantees to pass on overheads.
- Where not already in place, **advocate for adequate representation of NNGOs on key strategic and decision-making humanitarian forums.**

## NGO forums

- **Advocate to ensure an appropriate allocation and composition of seats are assigned to NNGOs within key strategic and decision-making forums**, if not already in place. Consider leading or facilitating a transparent and inclusive process to select coordination representatives from NNGOs that has both local and international support. Particular attention should be given to enhance the role of national women leaders within humanitarian coordination structures. Seek opportunities to promote the leadership role of women-led and women-focused NNGOs.
- Where resources allow, **directly provide orientation for NNGOs on humanitarian architecture and invest in strengthening the capacity of national members**. Advocate for OCHA and others to provide regular guidance, training, and orientation for NNGOs on humanitarian coordination architecture and the benefits and responsibilities of cluster or sector participation. Ensure national NGO representatives clearly understand their representational responsibilities to NNGO constituents, perhaps through localised guidance. Strengthen the organisational and meeting skills of NNGO members.
- **Consider holding pre-meetings with NNGOs in advance of key decision-making forums** to ensure key national issues are discussed, key messages agreed, and a national spokesperson identified.
- For international-only NGO forums, **seek opportunities to strengthen national forums and develop links with NNGO networks**, where not already in place.
- **Foster support among members to develop a sector-wide localisation strategy that prioritises national leadership within international humanitarian structures**.
- **Consult with local actors on their preferred ways to receive and access information**. This may require multiple channels of communication, rather than relying on email and website uploads.

## DATA

**Table 1. NNGO membership in coordination structures, 2020 (% of overall seats, including NNGO-only forums)**

	HCT	Sector / Cluster	CBPF AB
Iraq	9.7*	0*	14.3*
Jordan	11.1	3.8	16.7
Lebanon	14.3	5.9	15
Libya	0	0	n/a
OPT	0	0	14.3
Syria (Damascus)	15*	0	0
Syria (Turkey)	30	12	18.8
Yemen	12.5	4.2	15.4

\* Data not verified by OCHA  
Source: documents provided by OCHA

**Table 2. CBPF direct allocations to NNGOs, 2015–2019 (% of total allocations)**

	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019
IHF	29	43	9	9	17
JHF	13	24	22	26	21
LHF	36	17	50	37	23
OPT HF	34	n/a	31	27	28
SCHF	48	37	43	52	58
SHF	10	21	25	6	22
YHF	10	18	41	26	25

Source: <https://www.unocha.org/our-work/humanitarian-financing/country-based-pooled-funds-cbpf>.

**Table 3. 2019 CBPF allocations (US\$ millions)**

	<b>Total allocations</b>	<b>To NNGO</b>
<b>IHF</b>	77.9	13
<b>JHF</b>	8.6	1.8
<b>LHF</b>	11	2.6
<b>OPT HF</b>	27.4	7.6
<b>SCHF</b>	117	67.9
<b>SHF</b>	52.6	12.3
<b>YHF</b>	239.4	59.3

Source: CBPF annual reports, available at <https://www.unocha.org/our-work/humanitarian-financing/country-based-pooled-funds-cbpf>.

- <sup>1</sup> See in particular UN General Assembly Resolution 46/182 (1991), arts. 5, 18, and 39; and IFRC, Code of Conduct for the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement and NGOs in Disaster Relief (1994), art. 6.
- <sup>2</sup> See for example HPG and ICVA, "Localisation in Humanitarian Practice," June 2016; and IFRC, "Localization: What it Means and How to Achieve it," April 2018; and IASC and Peer 2 Peer Support, "Supporting Principled Local Action in Humanitarian Response: Practical Steps for Humanitarian Coordinators and Humanitarian Country Teams," January 2019.
- <sup>3</sup> IFRC, "Localization: What it Means and How to Achieve it," 5.
- <sup>4</sup> See in particular IASC and P2P, "Supporting Principled Local Action in Humanitarian Response"; and Emily McDonald, Gabriel Green, Gillian Moir, and John Kamau, "Participation of National NGOs and NGO Fora Within Humanitarian Country Teams," London School of Economics and Political Science and ICVA, April 2020.
- <sup>5</sup> IASC, "Note on IASC Coordination Structures at Country Level." 23 March 2020.
- <sup>6</sup> Peer 2 Peer Support, "Learning Priorities: Localisation," available at: <https://www.deliveraidbetter.org/learning-priorities/localisation>.
- <sup>7</sup> See for example HPG and ICVA, "Localisation in Humanitarian Practice"; Bennet et al., "Time to Let Go"; and LSE and ICVA, "Participation of National NGOs."
- <sup>8</sup> See for example Global Protection Cluster, "Libya Mission Report"; Bruschini-Chaumet et al., "The Localisation of Aid in Jordan and Lebanon"; and IASC and Peer 2 Peer Support, "Supporting Principled Local Action."
- <sup>9</sup> See also HPG and ICVA, "Localisation in Humanitarian Practice," June 2016.
- <sup>10</sup> OCHA Financial Tracking System, available at <https://fts.unocha.org>.
- <sup>11</sup> United Nations and Government of Lebanon, "The Lebanon Crisis Response Plan 2017-2020," January 2020.
- <sup>12</sup> Lebanon Humanitarian INGO Forum, "Reflection on response coordination in Lebanon," August 2020, 4
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- <sup>15</sup> NRC and Oxfam, "Hard Lessons," 10-11.
- <sup>16</sup> Véronique de Geoffroy, Ali Azaki, François Grünewald, and Audrey Chabrat, "SOHS 2018 Case Study: Yemen," Groupe URD, Sana'a Center for Strategic Studies, and ALNAP, April 2018, 37.
- <sup>17</sup> Cassiopée Bruschini-Chaumet, Heba Shama, Nadeen Othman, and Melle van Hilten, "The Localization of Aid in Jordan and Lebanon: Barriers and Opportunities for Women-led Organizations," London School of Economics and ActionAid, 2019.
- <sup>18</sup> OCHA, "Operational Handbook for Country-based Pooled Funds," October 2017, 42.
- <sup>19</sup> IASC, "Interim Guidance: Localisation and the Covid-19 Response," May 2020, 5.
- <sup>20</sup> Christian Els, "Country-Based Pooled Funds: The NGO Perspective," Norwegian Refugee Council and OCHA, November 2019.
- <sup>21</sup> See Els, "Country-Based Pooled Funds."
- <sup>22</sup> See also ICVA, "United Nations Reform and Potential Implications for NGOs," May 2020.
- <sup>23</sup> Cassiopée et al., "The Localization of Aid in Jordan and Lebanon."
- <sup>24</sup> Elizabeth Fletcher-Wood and Roy Mutandwa, "Funding a Localised, Women-led Approach to Protection from Gender Based Violence: What is the Data Telling Us?," ActionAid, March 2019, 3.
- <sup>25</sup> See also Larissa Fast and Kate Sutton, "Localisation: Opportunities and Challenges for Protection in Disaster Response," HPG, October 2018, 9.
- <sup>26</sup> See for example Veronique Barbelet, John Bryant, and Barnaby Willitts-King, "All Eyes are on Local Actors: Covid-19 and Local Humanitarian Action: Opportunities for Systemic Change," Humanitarian Policy Group, July 2020.
- <sup>27</sup> IFRC and UNICEF, "Interim Guidance: Localisation and the Covid-19 Response," IASC, May 2020, 2.
- <sup>28</sup> Barbelet et al., " Covid-19 and Local Humanitarian Action," 3.
- <sup>29</sup> IASC, "Interim Guidance: Localisation and the Covid-19 Response," May 2020.
- <sup>30</sup> CARE Palestine, "Reaching Higher: Women's Political Participation & Access to Decisionmaking in the COVID-19 Crisis," October 2020.

- <sup>31</sup> See also Charter 4 Change, "Localisation of Humanitarian Aid." February 2019.
- <sup>32</sup> See also HPG and ICVA, "Localisation in Humanitarian Practice"
- <sup>33</sup> Barbelet et al., " Covid-19 and Local Humanitarian Action, "; and IASC, "Mission Report: Grand Bargain Localisation Workstream Demonstrator Country Field Mission to Iraq," November 2018,
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A GLOBAL NGO NETWORK  
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