

# **SUMMARY** **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

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. On many occasions, locally led responses reflect a more comprehensive understanding of the historic, cultural, and geopolitical contexts within which crises and realities of affected communities are grounded. Experienced staff within national NGOs (NNGOs) can serve as the institutional memory of the humanitarian sector, promoting continuity in the face of rapidly rotating international personnel. They are also often in a critical position to address issues of sustainability and transition and bridge the humanitarian-development.<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>*

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.

## ABOUT THE RESEARCH

Against the current background of sustaining local responses, ICVA initiated this research aiming at mapping and documenting the extent of effective and meaningful NNGOs engagement in international humanitarian coordination structures. Focusing in specific at MENA region, the research explores NNGOs engagement in Humanitarian Country Teams (HCTs), Country-Based Pooled Fund (CBPF) Advisory Boards, and sector or cluster coordination platforms. The contexts covered are Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon, Libya, the occupied Palestinian territories, Syria (Damascus and Turkey-based operations as well as the Whole of Syria response), and Yemen. Drawing on both qualitative and quantitative data, this research briefly profiles national leadership within the seven responses across MENA and outlines the state of NNGO engagement across the region. It identifies themes that recur between contexts, looking at areas of progress, but also existing challenges. It 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; as well as capacity limitations and resource constraints by the NNGOs side. Various challenges that impede NNGO leadership are discussed by the research including political will, concerns over the ability of NNGOs to adequately adhere to humanitarian principles; questions over the representativeness of national actors and, internal competition among national actors; as well as an existing perception among many NNGOs that such mechanisms serve primary the interests of national actors. The research advances a series of recommendations for addressing such challenges and ensuring a more equal participation and engagement of NNGOs throughout the coordination structures in the MENA region.

# FINDINGS

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.

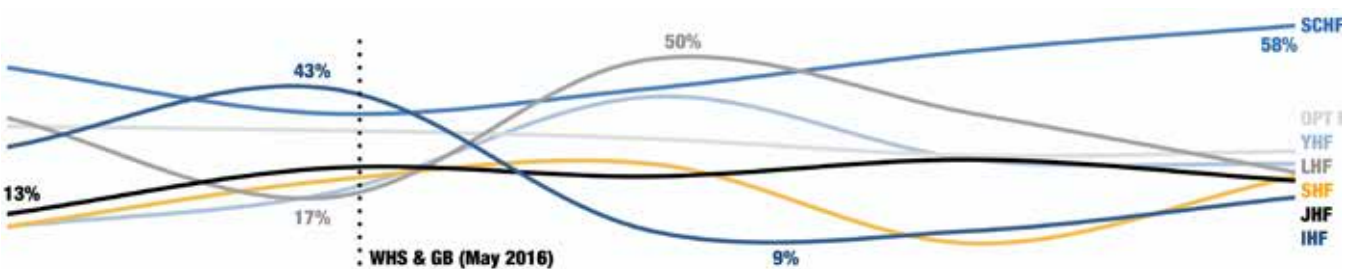
Despite these country-level differences, regional trends are apparent. NNGOs across MENA face issues related to the inaccessibility of complex coordination structures that are steeped in jargon and often held in a language in which they are less comfortable operating. National actors also face significant 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.

## NNGO representation in key coordination structures by country (% of total membership)



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

## 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.

The research found that 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 (although it had four INGO forum representatives). 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).

Despite the identified gaps, 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.

## 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>4</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>5</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>6</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>7</sup>

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>8</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.

# 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. The following recommendations are intended to share risks and enhance accountability related to enhancing NNGO humanitarian leadership.

## Recommendations to NNGOs

- Join, strengthen, or form coalitions involving other national humanitarian partners.
- Prioritise and explore new opportunities to mobilise funds for liaison and coordination functions, where they are not already in place.
- Clearly identify and uphold expectations and responsibilities for membership and representation in humanitarian coordination forums.
- Build partnerships between NNGOs, in which more established and better resourced organisations commit to support smaller national actors.
- Prioritise the engagement of women-led and women-focused organisations within humanitarian coordination structures.

## Recommendations to Donors

- Provide funding to NNGOs in support of capacity building, liaison functions, or to support their participation in coordination structures.
- Provide funding for NNGO and mixed NGO forums, including key secretariat staff.
- Ensure adequate contributions to CBPFs, recognising their unique value as often the only window through which NNGOs can access international funds.

## Recommendations to 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.
- Seek opportunities to promote the leadership role of women-led and women-focused NNGOs.
- Create an environment in which strategic and decision-making processes are more accessible to and inclusive of national NGOs.
- Strengthen links with existing national humanitarian leadership and coordination structures.
- Foster more strategic approaches to localisation and NNGO leadership, and integrate localisation objectives into response planning and monitoring.
- Initiate a coordination architecture review to ensure coordination is fit for purpose, where appropriate.

## Recommendations to 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.
- Step up efforts to orient national actors on international humanitarian coordination structures.
- Seek opportunities to strengthen national coordination platforms by supporting the establishment of new forums or strengthening existing NNGO networks or mixed NGO coordination structures.
- Consult with local actors on their preferred ways to receive and access information.
- Continue to support NNGO applications to CBPFs and other international funding mechanisms available to them.

## Recommendations to 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.
- 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.
- Provide regular guidance, training, and orientation for NNGOs on humanitarian coordination architecture and the benefits and responsibilities of cluster or sector participation.
- Ensure cluster or sector terms of reference prioritise localisation, where not already in place.
- Solicit the support of the global cluster or sector lead agency to initiate a localisation review.
- 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.

## Recommendations to UN agencies and INGOs

- Invest in the capacity of national NGOs within preparedness and early recovery activities.
- Develop new approaches to strengthen the capacity of NNGOs to participate and engage effectively with international humanitarian coordination systems.
- Seek opportunities to strengthen national coordination platforms.
- Ensure NNGOs are provided with adequate administrative overheads and staffing costs within project budgets.
- Where not already in place, advocate for adequate representation of NNGOs on key strategic and decision-making humanitarian forums.

## Recommendations to 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.
- Where resources allow, directly provide orientation for NNGOs on humanitarian architecture and invest in strengthening the capacity of national members.
- Consider holding pre-meetings with NNGOs in advance of key decision-making forums.
- 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.

## NOTES

- <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 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>5</sup> IFRC and UNICEF, "Interim Guidance: Localisation and the Covid-19 Response," IASC, May 2020, 2.
- <sup>6</sup> Barbelet et al., "Covid-19 and Local Humanitarian Action," 3.
- <sup>7</sup> IASC, "Interim Guidance: Localisation and the Covid-19 Response," May 2020.
- <sup>8</sup> CARE Palestine, "Reaching Higher: Women's Political Participation & Access to Decisionmaking in the COVID-19 Crisis," October 2020.







## Geneva Office

26-28 Avenue Giuseppe Motta 1202 – Geneva – Switzerland

Tel: +41 (0)22 950 9600 – Fax: +41 (0)22 950 9609

Email: [secretariat@icvanetwork.org](mailto:secretariat@icvanetwork.org)

[www.icvanetwork.org](http://www.icvanetwork.org)

 [@ICVANetwork](https://twitter.com/ICVANetwork)

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