

## **LOCALISING THE RESPONSE TO THE SYRIAN CRISIS AND BEYOND IN LEBANON: TOWARDS ENHANCED COMPLEMENTARITY, EFFECTIVENESS AND ACCOUNTABILITY**

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### **1. Overview of the aid context in Lebanon**

Eleven years into the onset of the Syrian crisis, the affected populations in Lebanon – including Syrian refugees and Palestinian refugees from Syria – face an increasingly dire situation amidst a steadily deteriorating socio-economic crisis, compounded by the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, the Beirut Port Explosion of August 4, 2020, and the cholera outbreak declared on 6 October following the confirmation of the first cholera case in the country since 1993. Beyond the populations affected by the Syrian conflict, the multi-faceted and unprecedented crises the country is experiencing is impacting all population groups –including Lebanese, refugees and migrants – further exacerbating pre-existing inequalities and systemic failures, and fueling tensions within and between communities over competition for scarce resources and access to essential services<sup>1</sup>. With the Government of Lebanon (GoL) failing to guarantee basic rights for the country’s populations, humanitarian actors are faced with staggering needs, whilst they are increasingly depleted from resources and their operational space steadily shrinks. Moreover, the overly complex and fragmented coordination architecture and response frameworks impact humanitarian actors' ability to timely respond to acute needs across populations, affecting the overall quality and accountability of the humanitarian community.

Longtime praised as an exception in the region, the vibrant civil society in Lebanon has played a critical role since the beginning of the Syrian crisis, with local and national NGOs (LNNGOs) –including refugee-led organisations (RLOs) and women-led organisations (WLOs)–remaining at the forefront of the response to the multiple crises.

### **2. Localisation: from theory to practice**

Whilst calls to reform the formal international humanitarian system to be inclusive of local actors from crisis-affected countries is not new, it is not until the World Humanitarian Summit (WHS) in 2016 that localisation was placed firmly on the global agenda<sup>2</sup>. A key feature of the Grand Bargain commitments resulting from the WHS, the word ‘localisation’ has since then become commonplace in humanitarian jargon. Six years on, beyond the profuse and oftentimes tokenistic reference to the term, a significant gap

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<sup>1</sup> UNDP-ARK (2022). [Tensions Monitoring Dashboard WAVE XII](#).

<sup>2</sup> Tufts University, *Localization: A “Landscape” Report*, 2021.

persists when it comes to executing the various commitments encompassed under the localisation agenda.

For LHDF, localisation is a collective process aiming at achieving a paradigm shift in the humanitarian aid system that will address the structural disadvantages LNNGOs face by ensuring they have **equal access to power, funding and resources**.

In practice, this demands all actors take concrete steps on several fronts, including increasing direct access to quality funding for LNNGOs, investing in their institutional capacities, achieving equitable partnerships, and promoting meaningful participation and leadership of LNNGOs in coordination and decision-making structures and processes. In spite of the increase in rhetoric and attention paid to the localisation agenda, progress has been uneven across areas, with a series of challenges and barriers persisting to date, namely:

### **1. Lack of access to quality funding opportunities**

At present, a very **limited number of international donors and partners are offering funding opportunities** which are predictable, flexible and encompass multiple years of operation. This has a critical impact on LNNGOs' ability to set up, maintain and scale up sustainable operations grounded on community-led prioritisation of needs and design of responses. Moreover, when quality funding is available, it is rarely accessible to LNNGOs, and is instead predominantly channeled to international actors<sup>3</sup>. Support to overhead costs is equally rare to access for LNNGOs, which has a critical impact on their sustainability and preparedness capacity<sup>4</sup>.

As a result, LNNGOs see their human resources overstretched, with staff members performing managerial, administrative and representation functions simultaneously. Moreover, LNNGOs cannot compete with the salaries and benefits offered by INGOs in the same country who receive most of the funding, directly leading to a humanitarian 'brain-drain' at the local and national level.

### **2. Prevalence of top-down partnership approaches**

LNNGOs very often work in partnership with international actors, including donors, UN agencies and INGOs. However, the way many of these partnerships are carried out in practice tends to reflect a hierarchical approach where the international partner effectively holds the power to determine the nature and scope of the work to be implemented by the local actor, whose position becomes that of a mere 'subcontractor'. LNNGOs are therefore left with little to no say when it comes to the design of the projects they are meant to implement – often in the very communities they historically serve and are a part of.

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<sup>3</sup> [The Grand Bargain in 2021: an independent review](#), ODI, 2022.

<sup>4</sup> Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC), [Guidance on the provision of overhead costs to local and national partners](#), 2022.

### **3. *Inadequate capacity-sharing opportunities***

LNNGOs struggle to access **capacity-sharing** opportunities that truly respond to their needs in terms of reinforcing staff skills and strengthening their institutional capacities with regards to governance and donor compliance, and supporting them in eventually passing acquired skills to the official institutions in the country. In fact, capacity-sharing is still predominantly considered from a one-size-fits-all approach, and is limited to individual activities linked to a specific project, rather than considering holistically the medium and long-term organisational needs of local actors. Moreover, capacity-sharing is often seen as a one-way process whereby the international partners 'build up' or 'strengthen' the capacities of their local counterparts. Such an approach fails to recognise the full dimension and diversity of capacities of LNNGOs, to the detriment of mutual processes in which both LNNGOs and international actors' respective skills and assets could be mutually shared.

### **4. *Lack of meaningful participation of LNNGOs in coordination structures and decision-making bodies***

Corollary of the above, LNNGOs' ability to meaningfully engage in the multiple coordination mechanisms and decision-making bodies and processes in Lebanon as well as globally is impaired, further deepening a pre-existing imbalance in power within the humanitarian field.

### **3. Recommendations**

The above challenges and barriers testify to an approach to aid that perpetuates an unequal power dynamic between the global North and South by reinforcing existing structures/relations that reflect historical colonisation practices. Such an approach negatively impacts the overall relevance and sustainability of interventions, thereby undermining the accountability to and the agency of affected populations.

In line with global commitments on Localisation, including notably the Grand Bargain, a localised response is now needed more than ever before in order for the humanitarian community to live up to the challenges posed by the increased needs in Lebanon and across the region, as well as globally.

As the largest coordination forum of humanitarian and development LNNGOs in Lebanon, the LHDF calls on the humanitarian community to walk the talk on their localisation commitments. To this end:

#### **Donors should:**

1. Make more funding available and accessible to LNNGOs, instead of further promoting subcontracting relationships through UN agencies or INGOs where LNNGOs comparative advantages and skills fail to be utilised to their fullest.
2. Commit to channel at least 25% of humanitarian funding as directly as possible to LNNGOs, in line with the Grand Bargain commitments.
3. Track on a yearly basis the amount of funding reaching both directly and indirectly LNNGOs , as a means to ensure accountability and transparency.
4. Provide overhead and institutional development costs to LNNGOs on equal footing with INGOs, and in proportion to the budget managed by the organisation.
5. Harmonise compliance and due diligence requirements and simplify procedures to enable access to available humanitarian funding.
6. Promote leadership of LNNGOs by prioritising consortia including LNNGOs as leads, and ensuring having a local co-lead .
7. Appoint Localisation Focal Points responsible to follow up on procedures to enhance localisation policies and practices.
8. Hold regular meetings with LNNGOs fora and networks to address localisation concerns, including reflecting on the need to decolonise the aid system.
9. Increase support to LNNGOs networks and fora as a means to enhance local actors' visibility and influence.
10. Facilitate and support adequate and fair representation of LNNGOs in coordination mechanisms, including clusters/sectors, and decision-making bodies and processes in Lebanon and globally. This includes allocation of dedicated financial resources as needed as well as support the strengthening of their advocacy, representation and coordination capacities.

#### **UN agencies and INGOs should:**

1. Explicitly refer to the [Principles of Partnership](#) (PoP) in any partnership agreement with LNNGOs, and foresee mechanisms to monitor adherence to the PoPs in practice, in particular with regards to the principle of Equality
2. Develop long-term, strategic partnerships with LNNGOs, rather than project-based ones
3. Ensure adequate outreach to and coordination with LNNGOs when planning for new interventions in areas and sectors where LNNGOs are well-established, to avoid duplication, inefficiencies and loss of know-how.
4. Ensure local ownership and sustainability of interventions by involving LNNGOs in all phases of the project cycle, including needs assessments and project design

5. Acknowledge the existing capacities of LNNGOs, and offer meaningful and sustained capacity-strengthening opportunities, designed jointly with LNNGOs partners, that go beyond one-shot, project-related trainings
6. Harmonise and simplify partner assessment tools and procedures to avoid repetitive and time-consuming bureaucratic processes
7. Share on a systematic basis overhead costs with LNNGOs, in proportion to the budget managed
8. Take concrete steps to support local CSO partners meaningful and effective engagement in coordination mechanisms at regional and national level
9. Credit the role of local partners, ensuring fair representation and visibility of local CSO partners with donors and other stakeholders
10. Include in their country strategies indicators to measure the organisation's commitment to the Localisation agenda and/or support to local empowerment and leadership of national actors

**LNNGOs should:**

1. Hold accountable donors and international partners for the implementation of their respective commitments on Localisation, including through regular monitoring.
2. Reinforce complementarity their action to ensure their fulfillment
3. Join coordination fora to raise collectively challenges and recommendations



**About LHDF:**

*The Lebanon Humanitarian and Development NGOs Forum (LHDF), established in 2014, is an independent entity composed of 90 local and national humanitarian and development NGOs operating in Lebanon across a wide range of sectors. The Forum is currently the largest network of local and national NGOs in Lebanon, and it facilitates the coordination with relevant stakeholders to ensure an efficient, principled and localized response to both humanitarian and development needs in the country. With coordination and representation at its core, the LHDF entails voicing out the challenges and needs of its members while building consensus amongst them, mainly through facilitating inter and intra-cooperation and collaboration including, but not limited to, public entities, donors, international community and affected populations.*