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# LET US LEAD

A case study on the engagement of local and national non-government organizations in the humanitarian coordination architecture for the Syria crisis response

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The decade-long Syria crisis remains one of the world's worst humanitarian emergencies. In response, the international community has established a complex humanitarian coordination architecture that operates within Syria and across neighbouring countries. Despite the critical role played by local and national NGOs, their leadership, representation and participation remains limited, and they lack adequate resources and support. Transforming the system demands fundamental changes in the existing humanitarian coordination architecture, and requires that international actors consciously cede power, resources and decision making to local and national counterparts.

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# ACROYNYS

3RP	Syria Regional Refugee and Resilience Plan
GoS	Government of Syria
HCT	Humanitarian Country Team
HLG	Humanitarian Liaison Group
HNO	Humanitarian Needs Overview
HRP	Humanitarian Response Plan
INGO	International non-government organization
L/NA	Local/national actor
L/NGO	Local/national non-government organization
LGBTQI+	Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer and intersex
NGO	Non-government organization
OCHA	United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs
RC/HC	Resident Coordinator/Humanitarian Coordinator
RHC	Regional Humanitarian Coordinator
SARC	Syrian Arab Red Crescent
SCHF	Syria Cross Border Humanitarian Fund
SHF	Syria Humanitarian Fund
STD	Syria Trust for Development
UN	United Nations
UNSCR	United Nations Security Council Resolution
WoS	Whole of Syria

# INTRODUCTION

The decade-long Syria crisis remains one of the world's worst humanitarian emergencies. Since the outbreak of the Syrian civil war in 2011, thousands of people have lost their lives and many more have been injured. According to the United Nations (UN), 13.4 million people in Syria are in need of humanitarian assistance and protection.<sup>1</sup> The conflict has displaced over six million people inside Syria, and over five million people have fled the country as refugees.<sup>2</sup> In response to the enormous scale of the crisis affecting the Middle East and Europe, the international community has established a complex humanitarian coordination architecture that operates within Syria and across neighbouring countries.

Local and national actors<sup>3</sup> (L/NAs) play a key role in humanitarian action, and are often the first and best responders when a crisis strikes. L/NAs already provide leadership for the Syria response; however, they lack adequate resources and support. While the recent COVID-19 pandemic has further underscored the need for local leadership, international humanitarian actors including donors, UN agencies and international non-government organizations (INGOs) continue to overlook the existing capacities of L/NAs, such as non-government organizations (NGOs) and government agencies, to lead and implement effective humanitarian programming. Supporting the leadership of L/NAs is a moral imperative to ensure their self-determination.<sup>4</sup> L/NAs must drive the direction of policies and programmes in the humanitarian contexts in which they operate.

Shifting power and resources to L/NAs is fundamental to rooting out the systemic racism and colonial assumptions embedded in these global structures and processes. L/NAs have long called for greater leadership in humanitarian responses. Commitments such as the Agenda for Humanity, the World Humanitarian Summit's Grand Bargain and the Charter for Change have accelerated efforts to ensure that responses are 'as local as possible and as international as necessary'.<sup>5</sup> However, transforming the system also demands fundamental changes in the existing humanitarian coordination architecture, and requires that international actors consciously cede power, resources and decision making to local and national counterparts.

## METHODOLOGY

This case study summarizes research undertaken on the engagement of L/NAs in the international humanitarian coordination architecture for the Syria response. The research explores the barriers and enablers for the leadership, representation and participation of local and national NGOs (L/NNGOs). Oxfam reviewed academic and grey literature from publicly available sources on relevant themes, including localization,<sup>6</sup> local humanitarian leadership<sup>7</sup> and humanitarian coordination architecture,<sup>8</sup> with a particular emphasis on publications focused on the Syria context. The review primarily covered English language documents published between 2015 and 2021.

The research also draws upon six semi-structured key informant interviews with representatives from five L/NNGOs and one stakeholder convening platform, conducted virtually between December 2021 and January 2022. Oxfam offered access to an Arabic-speaking interpreter; however, all informants chose to conduct interviews in English. Oxfam selected informants and organizations based on their current or previous relationship with Oxfam, and/or their familiarity with the humanitarian coordination architecture in Syria.

Oxfam interviewed some L/NNGO informants in their capacity as UN cluster/sector leads or members of UN pooled fund advisory boards, rather than as representatives of their own organizations. Given the important role that L/NNGOs play in delivering the humanitarian response inside Syria as well as

cross-border assistance, Oxfam selected informants from several operational hubs for the Syria response. Due to the restrictive operating context, Oxfam was unable to interview L/NNGOs registered in North East Syria, but included one L/NNGO registered in Damascus and delivering programmes in North East Syria.

## CONTEXT

The Syria humanitarian response is characterized by high levels of involvement of donors, UN agencies, INGOs and L/NNGOs due to the challenging operational context.<sup>9</sup> In an environment where access is restricted, L/NNGOs play a critical role as first responders in delivering assistance and meeting immediate humanitarian needs.<sup>10</sup> Since 2011, there has been a dramatic increase in the number of humanitarian actors operating in the country.<sup>11</sup> The proliferation of L/NNGOs can be explained by the existence of a highly educated population prior to the crisis, an active global diaspora network, and a wealthy business community that has provided ongoing support for these organizations.<sup>12</sup>

Syrian civil society, as is the case in other countries, is composed of a wide spectrum of organizations with differing mandates, size, levels of formality, affiliation, expertise and operating models.<sup>13</sup> Organizations range from smaller, loosely formed and grassroots organizations to larger NGOs that ‘mimic western NGO culture and organization’.<sup>14</sup> Civil society actors also include professional bodies (often medical groups) that existed prior to the conflict, charities, networks of community activists, diaspora organizations, and coordination networks that also provide relief.<sup>15</sup> As is the case in other contexts, the NGO community is highly diverse and at times fragmented.<sup>16</sup> The existence of a multitude of NGO networks is perhaps an indication of this fragmentation.

L/NNGOs face major bureaucratic impediments related to registration, operations and programme activities in Government-of-Syria- (GoS) controlled areas.<sup>17</sup> Restrictive practices and regulations enforced by the GoS limit partnerships between INGOs and L/NNGOs, and lead to delays in project approvals (which can take several months).<sup>18</sup> Women-led organizations and women’s rights organizations face particular challenges in obtaining legal recognition, and experience increased scrutiny from authorities.<sup>19</sup> Social and cultural attitudes severely limit women’s leadership, decision making, and access to opportunities and resources.<sup>20</sup> INGOs, rather than L/NNGOs, predominantly deliver programmes focused on disability inclusion,<sup>21</sup> and Syria is one of 30 countries in the world where there are no formal (registered or unregistered) LGBTIQ+ organizations.<sup>22</sup>

## OVERVIEW OF HUMANITARIAN COORDINATION ARCHITECTURE

Within Syria, there are four primary contexts: GoS-controlled areas, North East, North West, and territories held by Turkish-backed non-state armed groups. The Humanitarian Response Plan (HRP) for Syria lays the framework for the humanitarian community’s response, while the UN-led Whole of Syria (WoS) approach provides an ‘umbrella structure’ for coordination, co-led by the UN Resident Coordinator/Humanitarian Coordinator (RC/HC) in Damascus and the UN Regional Humanitarian Coordinator (RHC) in Amman.<sup>23</sup> The RC/HC chairs the Humanitarian Country Team (HCT) based in Damascus and UN agencies lead sectors. There are also Area HCTs chaired by the UN in Aleppo, Homs, Qamishli and Tartous.<sup>24</sup>

The passage of UN Security Council Resolution (UNSCR) 2165 in July 2014 led to the establishment of cross-border operations from Turkey, Iraq and Jordan;<sup>25</sup> however, following UNSCR 2533 in July 2020, the only authorized open border crossing between Syria and Turkey is now Bab al Hawa.<sup>26</sup> The Deputy RHC chairs the Humanitarian Liaison Group (HLG) from Gaziantep, which leads UN cross-border operations for northern Syria, while UN agencies, INGOs and L/NNGOs lead clusters. The Syria Humanitarian Fund (SHF) covers humanitarian programming within GoS controlled areas and the North East, while the Syria Cross Border Humanitarian Fund (SCHF) covers programming in the North West. While the UN has a hub in Qamishli, its access to the North East is limited following the nonrenewal of UN cross-border operations through Al-Yarobiyah in January 2020, which has left the humanitarian response highly dependent on L/NNGOs operating out of Iraq.<sup>27</sup>

Local authorities also play a crucial role in the humanitarian coordination architecture in Syria. The GoS's response is organized through the High Relief Committee, chaired by the Minister of Local Administration and the Environment.<sup>28</sup> Members include line ministries and some local actors, notably the Syrian Arab Red Crescent (SARC) and Syria Trust for Development (STD),<sup>29</sup> although neither UN agencies nor INGOs participate in this committee.<sup>30</sup> The role of local authorities is threefold: granting access, coordinating the response, and advancing resilience through early recovery programming. SARC maintains strategic leadership of the emergency response in most parts of Syria (with the exception of the North West and parts of the North East), as the leading implementing partner of the UN.<sup>31</sup> Humanitarian organizations are often required to form a partnership with SARC or STD for registration in Damascus,<sup>32</sup> although Oxfam and a few other INGOs hold registration through memorandums of understanding with relevant technical ministries.

## MAIN FINDINGS

### LIMITED LEADERSHIP, REPRESENTATION AND PARTICIPATION OF L/NNGOS IN DECISION MAKING AND COORDINATION MECHANISMS

Despite the critical role played by L/NNGOs in the humanitarian response, their roles in leadership, decision making and coordination remain limited, and their views are often neglected in key debates and planning processes. Institutions based in the Global North, such as donors and UN agencies, continue to dominate the humanitarian coordination architecture for the Syria response. UN agencies account for 67% of the WoS Strategic Steering Group membership (10 seats), although L/NNGOs also have a modest presence with 20% of the membership (three seats).<sup>33</sup> Notably, L/NNGOs have greater representation on this forum than INGOs, which make up 13% of the membership (two seats).<sup>34</sup>

UN agencies account for 60% of the membership (12 seats) on the HCT operating out of Damascus, although there is also considerable representation of NGOs.<sup>35</sup> INGOs hold 25% of the membership (five seats) and L/NNGOs hold 15% of the membership (three seats).<sup>36</sup> UN agencies lead all sectors, as INGOs are ineligible to co-lead sectors, although a few INGOs co-lead sub-sector working groups.<sup>37</sup> L/NNGOs account for 30% of the membership (six seats) on the HLG operating out of Gaziantep.<sup>38</sup> L/NNGOs also hold 12% of cluster co-leadership roles, in collaboration with UN agencies.<sup>39</sup> L/NNGO representation on the Area HCTs in Aleppo, Homs, Qamishli and Tartous varies, depending on the operational capacity of the organizations.<sup>40</sup>

Membership of the SHF Advisory Board is composed of donors, UN agencies and INGOs, with no L/NNGO representation.<sup>41</sup> Representation of L/NNGOs on the SCHF Advisory Board is more substantial, as they account for 19% of the membership (three seats).<sup>42</sup> L/NNGO interview

respondents frequently shared positive experiences of engaging with the clusters and sectors to inform planning and benefit from knowledge sharing, technical expertise and relationship building with international actors. One success story is the Gender-Based Violence Sub-Cluster, where over 70% of the members are L/NNGOs who lead specific task forces and are involved in decision making.<sup>43</sup>

Gender-disaggregated data for membership of humanitarian coordination mechanisms was unavailable, and gender or other inclusion considerations did not feature prominently in the literature. However, interview respondents highlighted that prevailing patriarchal norms and attitudes continued to permeate the culture of L/NNGOs, which has subsequently contributed to a gap in the representation of women in leadership roles across the various humanitarian coordination mechanisms. There is some progress on this issue – for example, the SHF and SCHF now aim for gender balance on Advisory Board review committees; however, the role and contribution of women remains sorely limited.

While many L/NNGOs are actively engaged in humanitarian assessment, strategy and planning initiatives, such as those to develop Humanitarian Needs Overviews (HNOs) and HRPs, they remain limited in their ability to influence agenda-setting, decision-making and approval processes.<sup>44</sup> However, some L/NNGO interview respondents found their participation in humanitarian coordination mechanisms useful to build experience working with international actors, which in turn improved their ability to secure funding from those partners. L/NNGOs also valued the opportunity to contribute to the development of policies and guidelines, and learn more about humanitarian principles.

In other cases, L/NNGOs do not consider it an effective use of their time to engage in these processes due to the complexity of humanitarian coordination mechanisms or the feeling that the topics covered are not relevant to their work.<sup>45</sup> One L/NNGO felt international actors could be dismissive or sceptical of L/NNGO contributions, and they sometimes resorted to lobbying donors to present their ideas as the donor's own in meetings, so they would have a greater chance of being accepted. Some L/NNGOs may also choose to operate outside of these mechanisms due to a lack of awareness, limited capacity to participate, or a preference to stay independent of internationally led processes.<sup>46</sup>

International actors' perceptions and assumptions influence the ability of L/NNGOs to participate in humanitarian coordination structures.<sup>47</sup> Several studies highlighted concerns from international actors regarding the perceived politicization of L/NNGOs, their ability to respond to humanitarian needs in an independent, impartial and neutral manner, and their level of capacity.<sup>48</sup> International actors can also be sceptical about the capability of L/NNGOs to represent the diverse views of a broader network of local actors.<sup>49</sup> Moreover, international actors found the idea that L/NNGOs can be motivated to participate in humanitarian coordination mechanisms and planning processes for the sole purpose of securing funding, rather than to inform strategic or policy issues, to be problematic.<sup>50</sup>

The frequency of coordination meetings can be demanding, and L/NNGOs may lack the time, resources and expertise (such as appropriate staff roles with leadership or technical specializations) to participate.<sup>51</sup> Most coordination meetings are held in English, the use of complex humanitarian acronyms and technical jargon is common, and access to interpretation and translation services remains limited.<sup>52</sup> Until recently, coordination meetings were often hosted in capital or regional centres, which limited the attendance of L/NNGOs who had to travel long distances.<sup>53</sup> Several L/NNGOs explained that while the introduction of online meetings due to the COVID-19 pandemic had improved accessibility, it remained difficult to participate because of unreliable access to electricity and internet.

While greater representation of L/NNGOs in humanitarian coordination mechanisms is welcome, this on its own does not create an environment for meaningful participation. Enabling factors to promote greater L/NNGO representation in humanitarian coordination mechanisms include having a Terms of Reference that clearly outlines roles and responsibilities,<sup>54</sup> and implementing good

meeting management practices, such as ensuring that HCT and cluster/sector leads send out agendas in advance with pending decisions outlined, and an agreed decision-making process.<sup>55</sup> L/NNGOs welcomed greater efforts by international actors to make documents available in Arabic and provide interpretation services in meetings. L/NNGOs also felt that transparent communications were important, such as using email lists to share updates and publishing documents online.

## LACK OF QUALITY AND SUSTAINABLE FUNDING FOR L/NNGOS

Taking place in a largely middle-income region, the humanitarian response to the Syria crisis is one of the most expensive emergency responses in history. As the conflict continues to drag on, there is also a rapidly widening gap between humanitarian needs and available resources to support the response. For 2021 alone, the UN appealed for a record \$4.2bn to support 11.1 million people in need through relief efforts inside Syria,<sup>56</sup> plus \$5.8bn to support refugees and host communities in neighbouring countries.<sup>57</sup> However, in the same year, the UN appeal raised just \$1.9bn (46%), and there are early indications that the 2022 UN appeal will be even more underfunded.

Institutions headquartered in the Global North, including UN agencies and INGOs, dominate the funding landscape, and most L/NNGOs receive very limited direct funding.<sup>58</sup> In 2021, just 5% of funding (\$95m) under the Syria HRP went to L/NNGOs, with the majority going to UN agencies and INGOs.<sup>59</sup> As such, international actors have failed dismally in their Grand Bargain commitments to channel 25% of all humanitarian funding to L/NAs by 2021. Another concerning trend is that while UN agencies and INGOs receive the vast majority of funding (both in terms of proportion and overall value), international actors are also able to secure funding to meet a higher proportion of their requirements than L/NNGOs. In the 2021 Syria HRP, 33% of UN programmes and 85% of INGO programmes were funded, compared with just 24% of L/NNGO programmes.<sup>60</sup>

L/NNGOs primarily receive funding indirectly through partnerships with UN agencies and INGOs. UN pooled funds have become the preferred option for many donors to meet Grand Bargain commitments to localization, as they are seen to offer greater flexibility and accountability, with less administrative burden than would be required to manage multiple small grants.<sup>61</sup> In 2021, the SHF provided 20% (\$13m) of funds to L/NNGOs<sup>62</sup> and the SCHF provided 49% (\$74.4m) of funds to L/NNGOs.<sup>63</sup> One L/NNGO noted that the SHF was highly competitive, but felt that their experience working with the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) over several years had served to strengthen their reputation as a 'trusted partner', which in turn had enabled greater access to funding.

Access to sustainable multi-year funding was also a significant barrier to greater local humanitarian leadership for L/NNGOs. In 2021, the average duration of SHF and SCHF grants was just 10 months.<sup>64</sup> These types of short-term project agreements created a number of challenges for L/NNGOs, such as staff retention, disruptions to programming, weakened trust from affected communities, and increased administrative burden due to the need to renegotiate existing funding agreements. L/NNGOs also raised concerns about the quality of funding, particularly in relation to inadequate coverage of overhead costs such as staff salaries and office infrastructure, which undermined their long-term sustainability.

While some L/NNGOs displayed confidence in securing funding, others were less familiar with the country funding landscape, key donors and their priorities, and the different opportunities available. While the key informant interviews highlighted examples of donors that had relaxed funding requirements for L/NNGOs (the US and German development agencies were two mentioned), several L/NNGOs felt that funding proposal and application procedures were still too complex, and that donors often expected unrealistic levels of detail within short, fixed deadlines that were difficult to meet.

Multiple and burdensome requests from donors, UN agencies and INGOs to complete rigorous due diligence and capacity assessments also posed obstacles for L/NNGOs to obtain funding.<sup>65</sup> In the Syria context in particular, international actors have adopted a strong focus on risk aversion and are particularly sensitive to issues related to fraud, financial mismanagement, corruption and counter-terrorism.<sup>66</sup> One L/NNGO understood the requirements related to strict international standards on counter-terrorism financing, but said that donors were not prepared to support them with funding to purchase the required screening software.

## INEQUITABLE PARTNERSHIPS BETWEEN INTERNATIONAL ACTORS AND L/NNGOS

Given the bureaucratic impediments in delivering humanitarian programmes in Syria and cross-border assistance from Turkey, L/NNGOs face significant barriers in accessing direct funding from donors. This includes restrictions on the registration and operation of NGOs, high levels of competition for funding and an unwillingness on the part of international actors to localize their programming and operations, short-term agreements, donor risk aversion, and patronizing attitudes from international actors towards L/NNGOs. L/NNGOs operating in GoS-controlled areas are limited to forming partnerships with UN agencies, and partnerships with INGOs require prior approval. As such, the most common model of partnership for the response is between UN agencies or INGOs and L/NNGOs.<sup>67</sup>

While reflections on the quality of partnerships between international actors and L/NNGOs varied, L/NNGOs did highlight some positive and constructive examples. One L/NNGO explained the mutual benefit of partnerships between international and local actors, as L/NNGOs deliver programmes in areas others are unable to access, while international actors offer technical expertise and funding. The same L/NNGO shared: 'We both need each other. It's a real partnership. We can add to them, and they can add to us.' Another L/NNGO expressed a similar sentiment: 'At the beginning we didn't have experience, but now INGOs work with us as a true partner.'

However, while international actors have made some progress in supporting local humanitarian leadership, there is still a long way to go. Large bureaucracies such as UN agencies and INGOs have their own stake in maintaining the status quo,<sup>68</sup> and can be resistant to change, worried about losing reach and influence, and reluctant to share power, decision making and funding.<sup>69</sup> Interview respondents felt it was common for international actors to prioritize localization commitments at the institutional level; however, these were not always reflected in interactions with partners. One L/NNGO explained that while UN agreements included the language of equitable partnership, in practice their experiences were more reflective of sub-contracting arrangements.

For some L/NNGOs, these dynamics influenced their communications and ways of working with international partners. One L/NNGO felt that international actors frequently sent them long and unwieldy written communications that lacked clear actions, and made it difficult for them to respond. They suggested that the level of required reporting to the GoS and donors had driven a culture of 'documenting everything', which while important for the purposes of accountability could be overwhelming for L/NNGOs. The same L/NNGO also noted that international actors provided short notice for meetings and workshops, limiting opportunities for effective and meaningful engagement.

These types of transactional partnership arrangements also affected opportunities for L/NNGOs to be involved in project planning, design and decision making.<sup>70</sup> Given the GoS restrictions on direct funding to L/NNGOs, it can be difficult for L/NNGOs to advocate directly to donors on policy, operational and funding issues. L/NNGOs must instead channel any communications through UN agency or INGO partners.<sup>71</sup>

It is possible to observe some common features of the humanitarian sector in the Syria context, including a high level of competition among all actors. This includes competition between L/NNGOs,

between L/NNGOs and INGOs, and between INGOs. For Damascus-based organizations in particular, bureaucratic obstacles and stringent donor due diligence requirements have constrained the ability of international actors to collaborate with more than a handful of Syrian L/NNGOs.<sup>72</sup> This has fuelled the concentration of funding, resources and visibility among a few larger L/NNGOs,<sup>73</sup> often at the expense of smaller, grassroots L/NNGOs.<sup>74</sup> High levels of competition and an absence of multi-year, flexible funding that can cover the operational expenses of L/NNGOs create a fertile ground for donor-driven projects that do not always align with the needs on the ground or the priorities outlined in the HNO and HRP.

## LIMITED INVESTMENT IN LONG-TERM INSTITUTIONAL CAPACITY STRENGTHENING OF L/NNGOS

Lack of capacity is one of the key arguments expressed by international actors to justify not transitioning activities to Syrian L/NNGOs in a more timely and sustainable manner.<sup>75</sup> Yet L/NNGOs continue to wage an uphill battle to secure adequate resources from international partners to invest in their long-term organizational development.<sup>76</sup> International actors often perceive that L/NNGOs have stronger 'operational capacity', such as knowledge of local context and access to affected communities, compared with 'organizational capacity', including management, governance and decision making.<sup>77</sup>

The most common capacity gaps for L/NNGOs include project management, monitoring and reporting; proposal development; technology skills; financial management; data protection; safeguarding; and institutionalized systems and policies. One Gaziantep-based L/NNGO felt that many L/NNGOs registered in Turkey responding to the crisis in Syria lacked detailed knowledge of the context. This was as a result of requirements to hire mostly Turkish nationals rather than Syrian nationals, due to a quota imposed by the Government of Turkey that requires a proportion of employees in any workplace to be Turkish nationals.<sup>78</sup>

Discussions with local and international actors responding to the Syria crisis surfaced delicate issues related to the perceived trade-off between greater local humanitarian leadership and an anticipated reduction in the quality of programmes and service delivery resulting from these changes. One L/NNGO explained that while many L/NNGOs operating in the North West were easily able to secure funding, they often ran into capacity challenges during programme implementation. Conversely, one interview respondent noted that L/NNGOs bring unique knowledge and experience to the response, such as demonstrating diverse ways to capture feedback from affected communities.

Training is the most common approach used by international actors for strengthening the capacity of Syrian L/NNGOs.<sup>79</sup> Several L/NNGOs found these approaches useful to build their technical knowledge and skills, and were able to access training from UN partners on their preferred topics. The literature also identified challenges related to training for Syria-based staff, including a lack of Arabic language courses and materials, difficulties in travelling to training workshops, and technological barriers such as access to internet for online courses.<sup>80</sup> Other L/NNGOs viewed these types of initiatives as top-down, one-way and lacking a focus on broader institutional strengthening.<sup>81</sup>

L/NNGOs are often deprived of the time and resources to participate in capacity strengthening initiatives,<sup>82</sup> particularly as limited funding for overheads and support costs continues to be a key challenge.<sup>83</sup> Most L/NNGOs reported that the majority of their UN agency and INGO partners did not allow them to claim overhead costs in their programmes. There was also limited evidence of international actors taking a coordinated approach to capacity strengthening, carrying out follow-up exercises or evaluations with participants on the impact of these initiatives, or providing ongoing support to apply learning.<sup>84</sup>

Many Syrian L/NNGOs already possess strong capacity; however, some gaps do exist and more targeted, longer-term support is required to strengthen the institutional capacity of L/NNGOs. The most effective strategies for capacity strengthening include one-on-one meetings, on-the-job training, mentoring, partnership focal points, staff secondments, pilot projects and seconded 'experts'.<sup>85</sup> One interview respondent also highlighted the importance of 'showing L/NNGOs what the possibilities and options [for capacity strengthening] can be'.

## TARGETED RECOMMENDATIONS

### INTERNATIONAL ACTORS TO:

- Fulfil existing commitments to the Grand Bargain and Charter for Change and ensure that at least 25% of humanitarian funding is shared directly with L/NNGOs. This should include support for efforts to agree on a common definition and methodology for calculating that percentage.
- Create spaces for regular dialogue within humanitarian coordination mechanisms on issues of colonialism, racism, power and patriarchy to reflect on how these dynamics continue to drive inequitable partnerships between international actors and L/NNGOs, and to identify opportunities for reform.
- Ensure the meaningful participation of women and men from L/NNGOs who represent local civil society and marginalized groups in leadership, coordination and decision making for humanitarian responses. International actors should reinforce the role and capacities of L/NNGOs in line with Grand Bargain commitments. Specific funding to support L/NNGO engagement in these mechanisms is crucial.
- Promote a stronger enabling environment for local humanitarian leadership. This includes addressing bureaucratic impediments related to L/NNGO registration, project approvals and access to funding.
- Review the use of existing language, including acronyms and jargon, in humanitarian operations, and commit to phasing out terms such as 'aid', 'beneficiaries', 'developing countries', 'capacity building' and 'the field'.
- Improve reporting of direct and indirect funding flows to L/NNGOs, including women's rights organizations and women-led organizations, using OCHA's Financial Tracking System.
- Develop a package of induction, information and training materials to facilitate greater knowledge and understanding of the humanitarian coordination architecture in Syria and cross-border operations. These materials should be published in Arabic and English, and made available in accessible formats.

### DONORS TO:

- Make greater levels of direct, flexible and multi-year funding available to L/NNGOs. Take steps to address specific barriers faced by L/NNGOs by reviewing due diligence requirements, making proposal applications available in Arabic, and providing technical support and feedback during proposal development.
- Provide dedicated funding to support simultaneous interpretation and translation services in humanitarian coordination mechanisms, including the HCT, HLG, cluster/sector working groups, and SHF and SCHF Advisory Boards.
- Reform partnership policies and guidelines to include requirements for international actors to demonstrate evidence of equitable, genuine and strategic partnerships with L/NNGOs in proposals, and share overhead costs with partners.

- Depoliticize local humanitarian leadership by supporting conflict-sensitive and principled engagement with government authorities (including local authorities) through humanitarian coordination mechanisms. The state – as the main duty bearer under International Humanitarian Law, responsible for the protection of affected people and their communities, as well as the equitable provision of basic services – remains a key interlocutor for aid delivery.

## **UN AGENCIES AND INGOS TO:**

- Pursue equitable, genuine and strategic partnerships with L/NNGOs that include opportunities for joint project planning and decision making, and invest in capacity-strengthening initiatives that are defined and prioritized by L/NNGOs.

## **HCT AND HLG TO:**

- Explicitly reference institutional capacity strengthening in HNOs and in HRP cluster/sector chapters to build connections with programme outcomes and funding.
- Build on opportunities presented by the COVID-19 pandemic to strengthen the engagement of L/NNGOs in humanitarian coordination mechanisms, including in online meetings.
- Undertake an annual mapping of L/NNGOs to identify priorities for capacity-strengthening initiatives, and encourage joined-up and coordinated approaches by international actors.

## **SHF AND SCHF TO:**

- Increase the average SHF and SCHF project duration to 12 months, and influence updates to the Country-Based Pooled Fund Global Guidelines to increase the maximum project duration from 12 months to 24 months.
- Develop strategies to increase the number of L/NNGO partners eligible to receive funding. Take steps to address specific barriers faced by L/NNGOs by reviewing due diligence requirements (specifically related to mandatory policies and manuals), and providing technical support and feedback during proposal development.

## **L/NNGOS TO:**

- Advocate for increased levels of L/NNGO representation on humanitarian leadership, decision-making and coordination forums, including the HCT, HLG, cluster/sector working groups, and SHF and SCHF Advisory Boards.

# NOTES

- 1 United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA). (2021). *Humanitarian Needs Overview – Syrian Arab Republic*. Retrieved 10 January 2022, from [https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/syria\\_2021\\_humanitarian\\_needs\\_overview.pdf](https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/syria_2021_humanitarian_needs_overview.pdf).
- 2 Ibid.
- 3 L/NAs are not a homogenous group and can include a diverse range of organizations such as local and national organizations, civil society organizations, faith-based organizations, Red Cross and Red Crescent National Societies, and local and national government authorities. This case study specifically focuses on the engagement of L/NGOs.
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