

GENDER ISSUES IN THE CONTEXT OF A HUMANITARIAN CRISIS

Choman Hardi

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The United Nations' Women, Peace and Security (WPS) agenda aims to achieve gender equality through increasing women's participation in peacebuilding and conflict prevention.¹ It also aims to protect vulnerable individuals who are forcibly displaced by violent conflict.² In reality, despite overlaps, the interests of these groups may compete for attention. The main concern of this paper is the marginalisation of some women's interests in the context of a humanitarian crisis. It outlines the findings of a research study on the effects of an emergency on the efforts of non-governmental organisations (NGOs) working to advance gender equality in the Kurdistan region of Iraq. The paper focuses on the funding priorities of regional and international agencies in the context of the Islamic State (IS) crisis and the consequences for women's rights organisations. IS cruelty in Syria and Iraq prompted the forced displacement of thousands of civilians. In Iraq, the majority of refugees and internally displaced people (IDPs) settled in Kurdistan. In the post-2013 era, funds were directed to support the displaced communities, to cope with the humanitarian crisis, and to meet the urgent needs of those affected. National NGOs adjusted their mandates, and local women's issues consequently took a back seat.

BACKGROUND

IS aimed to establish a caliphate in Iraq and Syria. After capturing the city of Fallujah (west of Baghdad) in January 2014,³ IS went on to take Mosul, a large city of over 1 million inhabitants, in June of the same year.⁴ This was followed by the capture of Sinjar, the Yazidi homeland, on August 3rd.⁵ The latter resulted in the Yazidi genocide and the sexual enslavement of thousands of women.⁶ Finally, Ramadi (west of Fallujah) was

captured in May 2015.⁷ It took three years for Iraqi forces to defeat IS and seize control of the occupied territories.⁸

The Kurdistan region started receiving large numbers of Syrian refugees in 2013, followed by IDPs arriving in 2014 due to IS advances in Iraq.⁹ At one point, it was estimated that 2 million forcibly displaced civilians were living in Kurdistan, such that one in five people in the region were IDPs or refugees.¹⁰ This coincided with a deteriorating relationship between the

Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) and the federal government of Iraq, and in 2015 the central government withheld a 17 per cent share of the federal budget from the KRG in retaliation for the latter's oil exports.¹¹ This caused a major economic crisis in Kurdistan when the salaries of civil servants, who are the majority of wage earners, were cut by 75 per cent. In the aftermath of the September 2017 Kurdish referendum for independence, the central government seized control of the disputed territories

WOMEN'S ORGANISATIONS AND NGOISATION

Islah Jad describes NGOisation to be “the process through which issues of collective concern are transformed into projects in isolation from the general context in which they are applied without taking due consideration of the economic, social, and political factors affecting them.”¹⁷ In line with Sidney Tarrow, Jad distinguishes between NGOs and social movements. According to Tarrow, social movements “are created when political opportunities open up for social actors who usually lack them.”¹⁸ Social networks and cultural symbols are seen to be essential for the success of social movements: “The denser the former and the more familiar the latter, the more likely movements are to spread and be sustained.”¹⁹ In other words, unlike NGOs, social movements have a large popular base and this widespread support strengthens their capacity to effect change.

In reality, despite differences between social movements and NGOs, there are often blurred lines between the two. Social movement activists may be more passionate advocates than NGO staff, but they are also under-resourced, subject to burn out, and they lack protection. The steadier income of NGOs means that professionalised NGO staff can work on the same issue more intensely and for longer periods than activists who do not have funds to work on issues full-time.

While considering women's NGOs in Latin America, Sonia Alvarez was concerned about the consequences of NGOisation when grassroots political organisations in the 1970s were transformed into organisations that dealt with policy assessment and project delivery in the 1980s and 1990s. According to Alvarez, “this trend threatens to reduce feminist

and reduced the KRG's share of the budget to 12 per cent.¹² Kurdistan has a long history of forced displacement as a result of decades of conflict with the central government in Baghdad, which led to genocide and the forced deportation of tens of thousands of Kurdish civilians.¹³ However, the arrival of Arab IDPs and Syrian refugees was a new phenomenon, bringing about a new dynamic.

NGOs in the Kurdistan region started to appear in 1992, after the no-fly zone was set up and the KRG was established.¹⁴ Each of these organisations had its own aims and objectives, focusing on, for example, gender, development, and media, among other issues. Studies show that women's NGOs can play a major role in building sustainable peace, and they have the power “to effect real change from the ground up” because of their connections to the grassroots.¹⁵ However, “lack of resources [...] gaps between international policies and local realities; and lack of trust between governments and civil society” are the top three obstacles impeding their progress.¹⁶

Reliance on funding by international NGOs (such as Wadi, Heartland Alliance, Mercy Corps, Norwegian People's Aid, Oxfam), UN agencies, the EU, the government, and the private sector has meant that NGOs in Kurdistan have, at times, adopted funders' aims and objectives and moved away from their own. Since the onset of the war against IS in 2014, most funds have been allocated to help refugees and IDPs, both in and out of camps. This paper investigates the consequences of this focus for the community at large and for gender-related issues in particular, contributing to the study of the ‘NGOisation’ of social movements in the Global South, especially women's movements.

- 1 UN Security Council Resolutions 1325 (2000), S/RES/1325; 1820 (2008), S/RES/1820; 1888 (2009), S/RES/1888; 1889 (2009), S/RES/1889; 1960 (2010), S/RES/1960; 2106 (2013), S/RES/2106; 2122 (2013), S/RES/2122; and 2242 (2015), S/RES/2242.
- 2 UN Security Council Resolution 1325, preamble; 1820, article 10; 2122, preamble; and 2242, preamble.
- 3 Liz Sly, “Al-Qaeda force captures Fallujah amid rise in violence in Iraq”, *Washington Post*, 3 January 2014, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/al-qaeda-force-captures-fallujah-amid-rise-in-violence-in-iraq/2014/01/03/8abaeb2a-74aa-11e3-8def-a33011492df2_story.html?utm_term=.a95aa05c6eb3.
- 4 BBC News, “Militants seize Iraq's second city of Mosul”, BBC News, 10 June 2014, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-27778112>.
- 5 Martin Chulov, “40,000 Iraqis stranded on mountain as Isis jihadists threaten death”, 7 August 2014, *The Guardian*, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/aug/07/40000-iraqis-stranded-mountain-isis-death-threat?CMP=share_btn_link.
- 6 For more details, see Choman Hardi, “Gender and Genocide, Two Case Studies”, in *Routledge Handbook of Gender and Security*, ed. Caron Gentry, Laura Shepherd, and Laura Sjoberg. (Abingdon: Routledge, 2018): 182-193.
- 7 Tim Arango, “Key Iraqi City Falls to ISIS as Last of Security Forces Flee”, *New York Times*, 17 May 2015, <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/05/18/world/middleeast/isis-ramadi-iraq.html>.
- 8 BBC News, “Iraq declares war with Islamic State is over”, BBC News, 9 December 2017, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-42291985>.
- 9 Guardian Development, “Syrian refugees adapt to life in Iraqi Kurdistan – in pictures”, *The Guardian*, 15 October 2013, <https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/gallery/2013/oct/15/syria-refugees-iraqi-kurdistan-in-pictures>.
- 10 Robert A. Destro and Carole A. O'Leary, “Kurdistan, a proven sanctuary and “safe haven” for refugees”, *Washington Times*, 26 July 2017, <https://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2017/jul/26/kurdistan-a-proven-sanctuary-and-safe-haven-for-re/>.
- 11 Rudaw, “Baghdad official blames Erbil for budget deal impasse”, Rudaw, 12 May 2015, <http://www.rudaw.net/english/kurdistan/120520151>; Anthony McAuley, “Iraq oil revenue deal with Kurdish Regional Government expected soon”, *The National*, 23 May 2015.
- 12 Financial Tribune, “IMF Objects Iraq's KRG Budget Share”, *Financial Tribune*, 10 March 2018, <https://financialtribune.com/articles/world-economy/83340/imf-objects-iraq-s-kr-g-budget-share>.
- 13 See George Black, *Genocide in Iraq: The Anfal Campaign Against the Kurds* (Human Rights Watch, 1993); See also Choman Hardi, *Gendered experiences of genocide; Anfal survivors in Kurdistan-Iraq* (Routledge, 1993).

NGOs' cultural-political interventions in the public debate about gender equity and women's citizenship to largely technical ones."²⁰ Jad identifies another problematic issue, which is the dependency of NGOs on funders and donors for their survival. She states that NGOisation spreads "values that favour dependency, lack of self-reliance and new modes of consumption."²¹ James Petras goes further and argues that NGOs are in the service of imperialism.²² Manij and O'Coill agree that NGOs are a continuation of prior forms of hierarchy, arguing that NGOs in Africa unwittingly play a similar role to the "missionaries and voluntary organisations that cooperated in Europe's colonisation and control of Africa."²³ Through offering marginal relief from poverty, they argue, NGOs undermine "the struggle of African people to emancipate themselves from economic, social and political oppression."²⁴

Petras claims that NGOs are "demobilising popular movements... undermining resistance" because they fill gaps in service provision and deliver "inferior services to fewer recipients" than those movements would.²⁵ Although Arundhati Roy (2004) stays away from generalisations about NGOs, she also believes that, through helping those in need, they can "blunt the edges of political resistance."²⁶ In other words, NGOisation is a process by which a community's long-term structural problems are addressed through providing short-term, and sometimes insufficient, help to marginalised and voiceless groups. This in turn has the potential to "blunt" and "undermine" resistance and consequently prevent political change.

The concern about NGOs arises, at least in part, out of a confusion about roles. The role of NGOs is to support the disadvantaged members of their communities, not to launch revolutions. Also, while some NGOs are implicated in mismanagement and corruption, the



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majority provide essential services to those in need. It seems unfair to blame NGOs for systematic problems that are beyond their control and scope.

The greatest limitation of NGOs is their dependency on international donors, which can disempower them, divert them from their initial aims and objectives, and curtail their efforts to bring about long-term change. Studying NGOs in the context of Bangladesh, Tania Haque and Abu Saleh Mohammad Sowad point out:

The wider international development and women's rights discourse[,] changes in funding trends and epistemic power of the donors have also influenced agenda mobilisation strategies of women's organisations.²⁷

The authors go on to explain that in the 1970s and 1980s, women's activism in Bangladesh was "genuine" and "natural," working to address women's issues.²⁸ This was before their work was determined by funding agencies. Haque and Sowad note that "donor-driven standard practice of program planning, reporting and accountability exercises" has led NGOs to "focus their accountability efforts upwards, with their priorities being defined by donor demands."²⁹ Citing a number of studies, the authors highlight funders' power to set conditions "on how aid is used and how programs are implemented," generate "program objectives in very different contexts than the location they will be executed," impose "their own values and standards," and prioritise "programs with

- 14 Choman Hardi, "Women's Activism in Iraqi Kurdistan: Achievements, Shortcomings and Obstacles", *Kurdish Studies Journal* 1 (1) (2013): 44-64.
- 15 Radhika Coomaraswamy et al., *Preventing Conflict, Transforming Justice, Securing the Peace: A Global Study on the Implementation of United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325* (New York: UN Women, 2015), 244, 302, 307.
- 16 Ibid, 305.
- 17 Islah Jad, "NGOs: between buzzwords and social movements", *Development in Practice* 17 (4/5) (2007), 623.
- 18 Sidney Tarrow, *Power in Movement, Social Movements and Contentious Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 2.
- 19 Tarrow, *Power in Movement*, 2.
- 20 Sonia E. Alvarez, "Advocating feminism: The Latin American Feminist NGO 'Boom'", *International Feminist Journal of Politics* 1 (2) (1999), 183.
- 21 Jad, "NGOs: between buzzwords and social movements", 623.
- 22 James Petras, "NGOs: In the Service of Imperialism", *Journal of Contemporary Asia* 29 (4) (1999): 429-440.
- 23 Firoze Manji and Carl O'Coill, "The Missionary Position: NGOs and Development in Africa", *International Affairs* 78 (3) (2002), 3.
- 24 Ibid, 3-4.
- 25 Petras, "NGOs: In the Service of Imperialism", 431.
- 26 Arundhati Roy, "Public Power in the Age of Empire: Arundhati on War, Resistance and Presidency", *Democracy Now*, 23 August 2004, http://www.democracynow.org/2004/8/23/public_power_in_the_age_of.
- 27 Tania Haque and Abu Saleh Mohammad Sowad, "Impact of NGOization on Women's Movement Organizations: A Critical Analysis from Bangladesh Perspective", *Social Science Review* 33 (2) (2016), 29
- 28 Ibid, 31.
- 29 Ibid, 34.



Three main themes emerged from the NGO interviews. These were, first, the shift in funding focus post-2014 and its consequences for the local community; second, lack of NGO inclusion in funders' decision-making; and, third, NGOs' perceptions of funder inadequacies.

Center for Gender and Development Studies had previously collaborated on gender issues were contacted. A snowballing technique was then used, so NGOs identified other NGOs to take part in this project. A summary of the findings was then shared with staff members of NGOs and funders in a workshop. This focus group discussion was used to solicit feedback from both sides. Finally, another focus group discussion was organised with funders only.³⁴ Participants A-O are NGO representatives and P-X are funders.

RESULTS

Three main themes emerged from the NGO interviews. These were, first, the shift in funding focus post-2014 and its consequences for the local community; second, lack of NGO inclusion in funders' decision-making; and, third, NGOs' perceptions of funder inadequacies. Below, each of these themes is discussed, along with the funders' responses.

Funding focus post-2014 and its consequences for the local community

Between 2013 and 2018, humanitarian projects focusing on IDP and refugee needs were prioritised by funders. This in turn shifted the focus of local NGOs' activities and projects. With the defeat of IS and the return of some IDPs to their homes, projects began moving towards development in the liberated areas and addressing the returnee population's needs. Participant A (from Erbil) clarified that, initially, there were 13 camps in the Kurdistan region but in 2018, three IDP camps were closed as people returned home. The focus of funding is shifting towards Mosul, Sinjar, and similar areas of heightened need.

While funders' attention is gradually shifting towards post-crisis, it is still focused on the same groups of people: the victims and survivors of the IS crisis. This focus had consequences for the

straightforwardly measurable results, but these often are not able to promote longer-term, sustainable projects.³⁰ All of this has resulted in NGOs "shifting their focus from important areas for their beneficiaries, towards areas of donor interest that will attract a large amount of funding."³¹

Similarly, Newcomer *et al* address the issue of NGO performance and evaluation. They highlight the pressure to demand evidence of performance from NGOs and public bodies, which "continues to exceed capacity to produce it, especially among the less wealthy providers."³² The authors propose "two-way accountability", where in order for NGOs to manage the funders' reporting requirements and learn from these assessments to improve future services, the funding agencies provide training and reward NGO learning from performance evaluation processes.

Building on these ideas, the study outlined in this paper explored the relationship between NGOs and their international donors, and the consequences of this dependency for women in the context of the IS crisis in Kurdistan.

METHODOLOGY

The study was conducted in three phases. In the first phase, representatives of 15 NGOs in Kurdistan that had a gender focus before the IS crisis were interviewed about their work and projects.³³ Initially, NGOs with whom the

30 Ibid, 35.

31 Ibid, 35.

32 Kathryn Newcomer, Laila El Bardel and Sandra Garcia, "Expectations and capacity of performance measurement in NGOs in the development context", *Public Administration and Development* 33 (2013), 63.

33 Between December 2017 and April 2018 over 20 NGOs were contacted. Two organisations preferred to answer questions by email, but these interviews were excluded from this study because of the responses' brevity and lack of detail. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 15 local NGOs in the cities of Sulaimani, Erbil and Dohok. Each interview consisted of a set questions about the history, objectives, and goals of the organisation; their past and present projects; their funders, donors, and partners; and the obstacles they faced while working to achieve their objectives. Despite efforts to include an equal number of NGOs from each city, we were able to interview the representative of only one organisation in Dohok. Seven NGOs from Erbil and seven from Sulaimani were also interviewed. Many of these organisations have branches or projects in other cities, including Dohok. 11 interviews were conducted in person, on the premises of the organisation; the other four were conducted via Skype. Institutional Review Board approval at AUIS was obtained before data collection commenced. Interviewees were assured that their identity would be protected and that the purpose of the study was purely academic, to understand and improve the relationship between NGOs and funders.

34 Of 14 funder organisations invited, seven confirmed attendance, of whom six had actual representation at the workshop. To include the perspective of another major funder in the field, we interviewed their representative in their office, shortly after the workshop.

local community. Six NGO representatives reported that the needs of the host community have often been ignored, including gender-related issues. Participant A stated that while previously their projects focused on “the women’s shelter, the juvenile centre, the host community,” their projects are now focused on IDPs and refugees. Participant B (from Erbil) addressed the same issue by stating:

[T]he host community is ignored. There are none or very few funds for the host community. For example, our female genital mutilation (FGM) project with [name of funder] which we both had the dream to develop in all the cities... because of the war, the priority of the funders has changed.

This was also confirmed by Participant C (from Dohok), who argued that the organisation wanted to work on gender-related issues but had to be strategic about it and integrate gender into IDP and refugee projects that funders prioritised. In fact, according to Participant D (from Erbil), the local community has similar needs to those displaced:

While a lot of money is available for those that were displaced, the needs in the host community and local population are also the same. There is a lot of trauma, there is a lot of violence in the homes, a lot of challenges for women and girls... it may be that those challenges of vulnerability are exacerbated for those [who have been] displaced but they exist here as well.

Participant B also stressed that in a place where the host community has a range of problems similar to the newly displaced communities, the interests of both communities should be kept in mind by funders, rather than only focusing on one side.

Participant L (from Sulaimani) also stated that the host community is ignored. Before the crisis, their focus was on promoting “justice, democracy, human rights, and gender equality.” This included supporting IDPs and refugees. Since 2013, however, all their projects support IDPs and refugees. The organisation used to provide training to local NGOs to build their capacity, to police, security, and governmental organisations on human rights issues, and to prison staff on elimination of torture. This kind of work has now entirely stopped.

Participant O (from Sulaimani) discussed the pre-2013 projects, which included skills development for women survivors of Anfal,³⁵ such as courses in English language, computing, sewing, and cosmetology, combined with legal and health awareness workshops facilitated by lawyers, gynaecologists, and psychologists. This organisation also monitored women’s shelters in Erbil and Sulaimani. Based on reports and recommendations produced from this monitoring, the government decided to open shelters in every city under the Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs. In addition, the organisation focused on FGM in rural areas, where they enlisted the support of heads of villages and religious leaders to end this practice. Through their efforts, the practice was eliminated in seven villages, which were rewarded through the provision of services such as “building a hospital, renovating a school, fixing their roads... providing a school bus... an electric generator.”

Participant O went on to point out that these were “great projects” which unfortunately stopped when the crisis intensified in 2014. Redirecting resources to help refugees and IDPs “harmed” Participant O’s organisation by rendering it unable to get funding for the projects they wanted to work on. Instead, they started supporting IDP/refugee women

35 This refers to women survivors of the 1988 Al-Anfal genocide. See: Choman Hardi, *Gendered Experiences of Genocide* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2011).

through building their capacity and skills and helping them find work as well as raising awareness about legal entitlements and UN Security Council Resolution 1325, in the hope of increasing women's participation in post-IS reconstruction and peacebuilding. Participant O continued by saying: "I do not believe that you should only work for one group. We should work for IDPs, refugees and host community people."³⁶

In such ways, with the onset of the humanitarian crisis, attention has shifted away from sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) issues amongst the host community. This was repeatedly emphasised by participants as an obstacle to achieving their objectives.

Funding agency representatives responded that during a humanitarian crisis, the priority is saving lives. Participant R, a funder, remarked that since resources are limited at such times, the question that funders ask regarding each funding applications is: "Is this a life-saving project?" According to participant R, NGOs need to understand that "there's no endless pool of money and so by nature you're prioritising life-saving projects rather than longer-term development projects during any humanitarian crisis." This will continue, it was argued, until the emergency passes: "it's still [an] emergency because there's no water, and they're still not living in sanitary conditions or still don't have a home." Participant P, also a funder, added that the humanitarian assistance will continue for as long as people cannot return home "because of the security issues in the places of origin... lack of services... [and] massive destruction of their property."

Participant P argued that part of the problem is caused by lack of reliable and "objective, vulnerability assessment" for the local population. "When we try to depend on certain lists, they're not objective." Participant S added that in

2017, the issue of host community needs was first raised by local NGOs and KRG officials, and as a result, the UN agencies decided to dedicate only 10-20 per cent of the project benefits to the local community because the needs were higher amongst IDPs and refugees:

The need in the host community started mainly because of the [civil servants'] salary reductions... So I want to emphasise why the partners are not willing to work on the host community. It's not because they're not willing to, it's because there are limited resources and the resources came to support the people with higher needs.

Participant Q, who monitors and evaluates projects, stated that most host community complaints are in relation to cash assistance, not in relation to other projects. When a women's centre is set up somewhere to support IDP and refugee women, host community women will not be turned away if they seek help. This will depend on host community women knowing that they can seek help from such places. According to Participant Q, funders can do a better job at communicating with the local community and explaining that:

[E]ven if you're in the same situation, IDPs and refugees are still more vulnerable than you. They don't have shelter... yes the host community has cash and salary issues but the refugees and IDPs need shelter and a place to live. And [you] cannot match up to the vulnerability of a family who has a destroyed home and was living here with no shelter. I think this should be communicated in terms of the PR awareness.

On the other hand, Participant P argued that because IDPs and refugees need similar services to the host community, they provide infrastructural

36 Focusing on meeting the needs of one community while ignoring the other can lead to social cohesion problems. For example, the daily electricity ration provided to some camps was higher than that of the local towns and cities, leading to tension between members of the host community and the displaced communities. Participant S (staff member in a funding body) explained that funders hired private companies to provide electricity to the camps for longer hours and for free. In order to avoid social cohesion problems, and because they were unable to provide the same service in all the camps, the funders shifted strategy. Now the camps are on the same system as the local towns and cities. The government provides the electricity ration and there are private generators for extra hours. Another example of a social cohesion problem was noted by Participant L (NGO staff from Sulaimani). Funders provided school busses for refugee children when local children were deprived of this, even though the budget cuts and reduced salaries meant that they could not afford transportation costs and missed out on school.

support through investing in “hospitals... schools... transformers... garbage disposers, sewerage cleaning.” These services benefit the host community as well. So Participant P argued that funders do provide support to the host community indirectly.

The issue remains that the humanitarian crisis has resulted in diverting funding and energy away from important issues such as the host community women’s protection from violence, social and economic security, and educational projects.

Funders’ decisions and lack of NGO inclusion in decision-making

Another issue highlighted in this study was the NGOs’ experience of powerlessness in their relationship with funders. They feel that they are not consulted in setting the agenda. Seven NGOs in this study believe that working on the ground gives them good knowledge of the most urgent issues, but when decisions are made by funders alone, this knowledge is not utilised. Participant E (from Erbil) pointed out that when the agenda is set by funders, some important issues become marginalised. According to this participant, even though NGOs have good ideas and proposals, it is not left up to them to decide what to do:

It is the priority of the donors that dictate [our] work and [we] have to adapt [ourselves] accordingly. Sometimes, very few donors give us the choice [and we] can propose what [we] want, based on the needs. But the majority of the donors unfortunately have their own call for proposal, and in their call for proposals they list their conditions. The project should be about this and that, and the project should be no more than 12 months or 18 months. The budget should be not more than [a specific] amount. All these



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conditions tie [us] down, and [do] not allow [us] to propose something that will fit the need.

There is a sentiment among participants from local NGOs that their inclusion is limited, and the valuable input of ground level actors is ignored, sometimes to the detriment of the efficacy of the project implementation. Participant E argued that funders need to listen to local NGOs, who are well connected to and know the community better than “someone sitting in Europe or making decisions in the US.”

Participant G (from Erbil) stated that when those who live far away from a region make decisions about what the priorities are, resources can be wasted on things that are no longer urgent issues. This participant cited working on FGM issues in Erbil as an example (FGM is much more prevalent in the rural areas than in the city):

[Funders] come with the concrete idea, even if there are better ideas, they refuse it because this money is associated with an agenda that they cannot change.

Funders who follow a foreign government’s agenda “regardless if the program is needed or not” do not listen to local NGOs, Participant G believes. Programmes “should be designed locally,” not somewhere else. In a similar vein, Participant E argued that there should be consultation with local NGOs, and that

the relationship between NGOs and funders should be a partnership with mutual responsibilities:

It is really important for donors to give us some choices in order to identify the need, and propose something accordingly, so we can meet the need.

The representatives of funding agencies in this study explained that it is a mistake to see funders and donors as a homogenous group. Participant R explained that some funders “have people on the ground who work with local communities and with national NGOs to get their ideas. But there are donors that don’t.” The latter group consists of individual country donors who prioritise certain issues, such as combating radicalism, FGM, or other issues. These decisions are usually made centrally, in the funding country, but this does not mean all funding agencies are the same.

The United Nations representatives addressed the way the UN includes NGOs in its decision-making during a humanitarian crisis. They highlighted the Humanitarian Needs Overview (HNO), through which the needs are assessed countrywide. The HNO is a channel for local and international NGOs, as well as local and national authorities, to contribute to setting the agenda. Organised twice a year, the HNO provides a comprehensive analysis of the situation to develop “a shared understanding of the impact and evolution of a crisis and to inform response planning.”³⁷ Participant V pointed out that each participating organisation “has an opportunity to share an assessment that has been done, because based on this assessment we prioritise the interventions.” The HNO identifies the most vulnerable people during a crisis. It is used, according to Participant R, “as a fundraising tool back in other capitals with donors”. Thus, UN representatives explained, funding decisions are made based on needs assessments to which NGOs contribute.

UN representatives highlighted the cluster system as a second mechanism to engage NGOs in the decision-making process. The cluster system was first applied by the UN in 2005 to coordinate efforts and avoid duplications following a humanitarian emergency in Pakistan.³⁸ The clusters consist of groups of humanitarian organisations, including UN agencies, in all the areas of humanitarian coordination, such as health, water, and protection.³⁹ The issue of gender-based violence (GBV) is addressed by a sub-cluster of protection. In Iraq, the protection cluster was established in February 2014, as a response to the IS-caused humanitarian crisis.⁴⁰ The GBV sub-cluster, chaired by United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), hosts bi-weekly meetings in the city of Sulaimani.⁴¹ This is one of the larger sub-clusters, with widespread participation from NGOs. The meetings last between two to three hours and translation is provided to facilitate dialogue. In these discussions, issues of concern and interest are raised by NGOs and recorded in the minutes. These issues then feed into expressions of interest for funding proposals. Funder representatives argued that attending cluster meetings provides opportunities for local NGOs to provide feedback, express issues of interest, and be included in setting the agenda.

The research team’s conversations with local NGO staff, including those who did not participate in this study, reveal NGO dissatisfaction with cluster meetings. There are various concerns, each of which will be identified here, followed by funders’ responses. Some NGO representatives argue that the meetings are useless because they take too much precious time (time that could be used to work on projects) without guarantees of getting funding. Others feel that their feedback and suggestions are recorded but never followed up with action. A third group believes that, even though the mechanism is for them to have a voice, in

37 UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, “Needs Assessment: Overview”, Humanitarian Response, accessed 3 August 2018, <https://www.humanitarianresponse.info/programme-cycle/space/page/assessments-overview>.

38 UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, “What is the Cluster Approach?”, Humanitarian Response, accessed 3 August 2018, <https://www.humanitarianresponse.info/en/about-clusters/what-is-the-cluster-approach>.

39 Ibid.

40 UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, “Cluster and Inter-Cluster Description Mapping: Iraq”, Humanitarian Response, accessed 3 August 2018, <https://www.humanitarianresponse.info/en/operations/iraq/cluster-and-inter-cluster-description-mapping-iraq>.

41 I have attended two GBV cluster meetings.

fact this is very limited because the only needs that are prioritised are those of IDPs and refugees. This means their proposals will only be taken up if they are addressing the displaced communities' needs, not the host community's.

UN representatives maintain that those who see the cluster meetings as a waste of time have misunderstood the point of the cluster system. Participant P explained that contributing to cluster meetings will not directly lead to receiving funding because the cluster system "is a coordination mechanism... where the operational actors get together to discuss the issue in order to avoid duplication of the services provided and in order to ensure the information flows about the certain activities provided." It is important to contribute to these meetings, Participant R pointed out, because this is like "club membership": one needs to know and engage in the architecture, otherwise one will not "reap the benefits."

Regarding the second point, Participant U, another UN representative, argued that even though there are differences between clusters, suggestions are usually followed up on. This does not mean the same NGO who identified the need will get the funding. The funding will go to the NGO that has the best project for addressing the need. According to Participant U, some local NGOs' dissatisfaction results from not understanding the UN system. Participant V explained that not all highlighted issues are actionable. For example, if NGOs report "a gap in a service in one location, it depends on the resources available and the budget availability on the ground." Also, this participant pointed out: "some issues [are] related... to policy, that entails and requires a lot of time and advocacy in order to change the policy to make things happen." Participant W added that "we're not here to wave the magic wand and create all these changes... [Sometimes] you reach a dead end because of lack of

resources or whatever else. But, I would say a vast majority of things that are brought to the clusters are resolved one way or another."

On the third point, Participant S explained that the NGOs are right in saying that the main focus is on IDPs and refugees: "Right now Iraq is in a crisis and this fund comes for humanitarian purposes." Participant R reiterated that the criteria for funding is human vulnerability. When the needs of the host community and the forcibly displaced communities are assessed, "the ones who are most vulnerable tend to be the IDP and refugees, so that is why the money [is] going there." Participant P also argued that it is important for NGOs not to be "static" and working on the same projects, but rather to develop themselves and integrate into the system.

Flexibility in funding was commended by the local NGOs. Sometimes, according to NGO representative Participant B, funders have funding left over and are willing to support a project of the NGOs' choosing:

A happy point is that sometimes the donors get the proposal ideas from us. They declare they have the funds, and they ask us what it is best to spend the budget on, so we give them the idea of proposals. But they usually set the agenda.

Participant H (from Sulaimani) described on the one hand the merits of working with flexible partners and funders who are willing to negotiate the objectives and implementation of potential projects. On the other hand, funders who are less flexible and more bureaucratic were reported to be more difficult to work with:

Some of the UN agencies are harder to work with because they are more bureaucratic and there are less opportunities to think and work on your own. When they ask for an apple, you must provide the apple; quality, size,



Even though some funding agencies have mechanisms to include NGOs in decision-making, the larger agenda is still set by the funders, who decide to focus on certain vulnerability-based priorities and ignore others.

shape, and colour are not that important to them. It makes the project more mechanical.

Participant O pointed out that sometimes it feels as if the NGOs are mere “implementers” of the funders’ projects, which leaves them feeling dissatisfied. Sometimes “the donor forces their ideas and vision on you even when it is not necessary and not important, and we could have done something better.” According to Participant O, there is “little room” for rearranging funds and changing activities such that resources can be wasted. In the past, when this participant’s organisation was “new and less experienced”, its members felt that they should do whatever the funder asked them to do, even if it was pointless or impossible to achieve within the proposed framework, only to get the funding. Now, they have learnt to discuss and argue back. Participant O believes that more NGOs are now speaking back to funders and pointing out their shortcomings, for example the funders’ tendency to demand speedy responses from the NGOs while taking a long time to respond to NGO inquiries themselves. The dependency in the relationship plays out in the details of exchange between NGOs and their funders.

Even though some funding agencies have mechanisms to include NGOs in decision-making, the larger agenda is still set by the funders, who decide to focus on certain vulnerability-based priorities and ignore others. It is true that the majority of the funding coming into the

region has been for the humanitarian crisis. Still, it is worth asking if there might be flexibility when a humanitarian crisis exists within a larger crisis between a regional government and the federal government. The political situation affects large numbers of people who have similar needs to the forcibly displaced communities.

Perceptions of funder inadequacies

Two organisations in this study, represented by Participants I and J (both from Sulaimani), had made a decision not to work with UN agencies because of perceived inadequacy in terms of bureaucracy, management, communication, and favouritism. Participants J and O observed that once a UN agency selects partners, it will not give other organisations an equal chance. These decisions are perceived to be based on personal or political connections. In this organisation’s view:

There are organisations that have 20 [UN funded] projects and there are organisations that have none, there should be a balance between this, there should be equal opportunities given to organisations.

The issue of lack of equal opportunity and privileging some partners based on political affiliation was also presented to the Special Representative of the Secretary General (SRSRG) in Iraq in August 2017.⁴² According to Participant S, this led to discussions within the UN and a meeting between the UN agencies and NGOs. Participant S, a UN representative, argued that a superficial look at the picture will confirm that there is some truth to this complaint, because the most funded NGOs in Sulaimani, Erbil, and Duhok are those affiliated with political parties. The reason, however, is not because they have political affiliation but rather because the political parties provide resources and train their staff. As a result:

42 This conversation took place during a dinner in August 2017 with the SRSRG organised by Dr. Barham Salih (former Prime Minister of the KRG and current President of Iraq), where many local NGOs, personalities and activists from the city of Sulaimani contributed. I was present during this dinner.

They have a very well-established management system... They have all the skills that you require, so when they go to the competition, they win! That's the issue... it is not because they are close to the political parties [but rather because]... they are well-capacitated and developed and now they can [get funding].⁴³

Funders look for partners who have the capacity to implement projects. According to Participant S, during a humanitarian crisis funders don't have time to build NGOs' capacity; they want an organisation that is already capacitated. Participant P confirmed that, even though this is frustrating for new and developing NGOs, once a funder has a satisfactory relationship with an NGO and it is established that the NGO has the capacity to do a good job, then "the NGO partnership can be extended." Despite that, Participant R pointed out, the UN has funded a large number of local NGOs: "we have currently 64 national NGOs working in different ways with different agencies."

The issue of capacity, or lack thereof, was identified by both NGOs and funders as a source of the problem. Funder representative Participant P argued that even though NGOs felt frustrated by funders' interventions and perceived them as micromanaging, in fact it was more like "babysitting" because some NGOs "don't have [the] required capacity to deliver the basic activities and report [them]." Funder organisations, according to Participant P, pay attention to building the capacity of local NGOs. While some NGOs see this as a positive intervention, others are fed up with it and see it as restrictive and unnecessarily bureaucratic. According to (funder) Participant R, the UN has played an important role in investing in local NGOs, leading to "a strengthening and professionalisation of the national civil society."

Seven NGOs in this study identified capacity building as one of the items on their "wish-list." Participant D believes that funders should invest in the "capacity of people who are working and living here, so they can deliver better services." Similarly, Participant A stressed the importance of capacity building:

I think as a local NGO, we may still need capacity building in term of policies, development, management, and overall working.

They also pointed out that sometimes there are multiple opportunities for training in a particular field, such as casework, but no opportunity for other equally important skills. Funder representatives pointed out that because different funders have their own mandates, they provide training on what they think is necessary, leading to duplications in training. More coordination, specifically amongst the UN agencies, may eliminate the problem of duplicated training, via different channels, to the same beneficiaries. Participant S also noted that sometimes there is lack of "willingness to promote yourself and your skills" amongst NGO staff members, meaning that NGO staff don't take advantage of the available opportunities.

Another problem that was highlighted by the NGOs was the "top down" nature of the funder-NGO relationships. Participant H explained that relationships with funders who are willing to seek advice and help from local NGOs and treat them as partners, rather than subordinates, are more conducive to success. Participant B also stated that, sometimes, funders' superior attitudes cause major problems. Even when an NGO is successful in getting funding, the objectives of the original proposal can get derailed by the time they get the funding because of funder interference and micromanagement. Participant B highlighted a case when the project

⁴³ This was disputed by local NGOs, who argue that if political parties were good at capacity building, they would have managed good governance.



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was so heavily “edited” by the funder that “the main aims of the project became ignored.”

NGO representative Participant O stated that sometimes funders encourage unrealistic expectations of NGOs amongst the community. One such example is paying transportation costs to people to ensure that they take part in seminars and workshops. Participant O’s organisation cannot afford to pay transportation costs for every activity they organise, but some of their funders insist on it. As a result, some of their activities include a fee paid to participants, while others don’t. The public then comes to expect the fee every time. Participant O complained that the “[funders] put you in a position that is bad for you and your work,” and NGOs then accept this condition “because you have to and you do not have a choice.” This participant also talked about the difficulties the organisations face when they have to write new proposals every year, designing new projects with new budgets, and finding staff to work on it. It is as if every year they “start working all over again.”

Another difficulty pointed out by participating NGOs was the lack of long-term vision by international funders. Participants in this study described the negative effect of the short-term nature of funds and projects, and the importance of a “long-term lens” when considering conflict-affected populations. Participant E stated that the short-term nature of the funding does not allow NGOs to develop long-term goals to achieve the

change they want to see. While establishing mechanisms to provide women with legal assistance, the project was stopped and “all the things we established were lost.”

Participant D also identified short-term funding as one of the obstacles to achieving sustainable change:

I see a lot of organisations start and stop programming, and I think that we can take a development focus which is a long-term focus. How can we make sustainable changes in people’s lives? I think we can apply that lens to a lot of the humanitarian programming that we do.

According to Participant D, to decrease violence and conflict in society, organisations need to tackle “the root causes of this violence” rather than seek quick solutions or “the superficial level stuff.” This participant’s advice to donors is to think about the quality of the programmes they offer and to take a long-term approach, because short-term projects are neither “fruitful” nor “good investments.” Participant F (NGO staff) stressed the importance of having long-term funds to work on social justice issues that are prevalent and pervasive. Also, according to Participant F, direct consultation with local NGOs could save a lot of resources which are “wasted on paying for consultation and security while working with foreigners.”

Funder representatives responded to this in various ways. Participant S argued that the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (UN OCHA) is a humanitarian organisation which abides by international conventions. It does not focus on long-term development programmes. On the other hand, according to Participant P:

[T]he root causes of the issue should be tackled by the government, not by us. We are here to support the government

in this emergency situation and humanitarian situation, so we are not in a position to solve these political, military, or security issues. This is totally the responsibility of the government.

This participant went on to say that tackling SGBV issues is also the government's responsibility. Establishing a culture of non-violence and respect starts by having proper legislation and enforcing the law. It is also essential for the civil society to work with the government and exert pressure to ensure the implementation of laws and agreements. Participant R added that this should be seen in the global context, where other priorities and emergencies emerge elsewhere, and that funding for Iraq is dropping year by year. When funding for a project runs out, according to Participant R: "the trick is then to try and look for new donors... donors that fund longer-term programming will look more favourably on projects that have already been existing to build on those."

A third important issue that NGOs highlighted was choosing a "partnership model, not a company model." This model would view the relationship between NGOs and funders as a relationship between equals, where decisions are made, and in which NGOs' development and capacity building would be part and parcel of making the projects a success. Participant M argued that the gap between NGOs and funders should be bridged, and funders should trust NGOs and take their suggestions and requests into consideration.

When asked why the funders have such control over the allocation of funds and choice of project, many participants expressed the sentiment that they felt obliged to accept what was offered, otherwise they would not survive. Few



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organisations were in a position to say no to any calls for proposals. Participant H pointed out that sometimes, if a call for funding did not match their objectives and strategies, they did not apply for them because they "do not work for the funders," but they work for themselves to "make a difference." Participant D also emphasised the importance of staying loyal to the NGO's original objectives:

I think that what we have done differently from other organisations is that we have set our priorities and gone after funds that we believe can be available to support what we need, rather than letting the donor advertisement and call for proposals and donor priority completely drive our priority... we set our priorities and try to find resources to support that work, rather than chasing every opportunity and adapting our organisation and what we do [to] where the money is.

It seems that some local NGOs are more established, better connected, and more developed in terms of their capacity and infrastructure than others. This makes them less dependent on continuous short-term funding from stakeholders who have different priorities than them. In an ideal world, if more NGOs were equally developed, they could be more focused on the priorities that they themselves identify.

CONCLUSION

NGOs working in Kurdistan identified a range of problems they face while trying to achieve their goals. In an increasingly competitive world, NGOs struggle to get funding and to meet the funders' requirements. Reliant on funding and struggling to survive, NGOs succumb to funders' prioritisation and get derailed from their initial aims and objectives. Some funding agencies have put mechanisms in place to encourage NGO participation and feedback, while others are driven by their country's agenda. Even when there are mechanisms to encourage NGO participation, the overall objective is set by funders. With changing funding trends, the focus of NGOs changes and their projects turn into short-term fixes for larger problems.

The humanitarian emergency caused by IS aggression led to forced displacement and insecurity of large populations. The host community that received the IDPs and refugees in Kurdistan was also going through major political and economic crisis, but the consequences of these issues for the community were largely ignored by funders. While funders rightly argue that bringing about long-term change is the responsibility of the government, they do, in part, play a role in deflecting efforts for change by driving NGOs away from their work for the host community, specifically for the women. This work had borne fruit in the past through changing legislation and increasing women's participation.⁴⁴ Since 2013, the majority of funders in this region have only engaged NGOs in so far as they were willing to work on issues related to IDPs and refugees. This in turn has created frustration and resentment amongst the NGOs and the community at large.

44 For more information see Choman Hardi, "Women's activism in Iraqi Kurdistan: achievements, shortcomings and obstacles" *Kurdish Studies* 1 (1) (2013): 44-64.



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Centre for Women, Peace and Security, London School of Economics and Political Science, Houghton Street, London WC2A 2AE

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