



Local and International NGOs partnerships in Palestine

The LandScape





Palestinian NGO's Network - PNGO

Local and International NGOs partnerships in Palestine The Landscape

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*The views and opinions expressed in this document
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1 Table of Contents

1	Table of Contents.....	2
2	Executive Summary.....	1
3	Introduction.....	4
4	Study Objectives and Scope.....	6
4.1	Main and Specific Objectives.....	6
4.2	Study Boundaries (Geographic/Institutional/Temporal Scope).....	7
4.3	Study Challenges.....	8
4.3.1	Impact of Constraints on Results and Mitigation Measures.....	9
5	Methodology.....	10
5.1	Conceptual Framework.....	10
5.2	Data Collection Tools.....	10
5.3	Sampling.....	10
5.4	Data Analysis.....	11
6	Context Analysis.....	12
6.1	Palestinian non-governmental organizations (NGOs).....	12
6.1.1	Emergence and Evolution of NGOs in Palestine.....	12
6.1.2	The Importance of NGOs under Ongoing Israeli Occupation.....	13
6.1.3	Challenges Facing NGOs.....	13
6.2	International Organizations in Palestine.....	14
6.2.1	Challenges Facing International Organizations.....	15
6.3	Relationship with the Local Community.....	16
6.4	Operating Context in Gaza and the West Bank under Israeli Violations.....	16

6.4.1	Risks to Humanitarian Workers	16
6.4.2	Shrinking Civic Space in Palestine	17
6.4.3	Funding in Wartime.....	17
7	Partnership Principles between International and Local NGOs	18
7.1	Charter for Change -C4C (2015–2016).....	19
7.2	The Grand Bargain (2016)	19
7.3	The Core Humanitarian Standard (CHS).....	20
7.4	PNGO–AIDA Partnership Principles (Local Framework).....	20
8	Humanitarian Partnerships in Palestine	21
8.1	Overall Political and Humanitarian Context.....	21
8.2	Characteristics of the Local Humanitarian Landscape	21
9	Study Findings	23
9.1	Partnership Landscape and Typologies	23
	1) Service Contracts.....	24
	2) Project-based Partnerships.....	26
	3) Strategic Partnerships.....	29
	4) Coalitions.....	33
9.1.1	Why Do “Implementation/Contracting” Partnerships Predominate?.....	34
9.2	Partnership Principles: To What Extent Are They Applied in Practice?	36
9.3	Governance and Decision-Making.....	39
9.3.1	Balance within Cluster Working Groups	42
9.3.2	What Does This Mean in Practice?.....	43
9.4	Localization	44
9.4.1	What Does “Localization” Mean in This Study?	44

9.4.2	From Consultation to Co-Ownership	44
9.4.3	Access to Funding and Institutional Financing (Core/ICR)	46
9.4.4	Strengthening the Capacities of Local Partners.....	48
9.4.5	Direct Implementation	49
9.5	Funding and Resource Sharing.....	53
9.5.1	The Big Picture- Ample Activity Funding vs. Scarcity of Core Support.....	53
9.5.2	Budget Allocation Mechanisms.....	54
9.6	Transparency and Accountability	57
9.6.1	What Do We Consider “Transparency” Within a Partnership?	57
9.6.2	Strong Procedural Transparency... and Weak Two-Way Accountability.....	57
9.6.3	Financial Transparency and Accountability- Compliance or Partnership?	60
9.6.4	Accountability Mechanisms Between Partners: What Exists and What Is Missing? 62	
9.6.5	Partnership Review and Evaluation.....	63
9.7	Equality and Trust.....	64
9.7.1	Mutual Appreciation -Recognition of Local Expertise and Positive Experiences 65	
9.7.2	Public Visibility of the Local Partner and Explicit Recognition	66
9.7.3	Where Does Trust Fracture?	66
9.7.4	Challenges that Undermine Trust.....	67
9.8	Partnerships in the Context of the Israeli War “The Crime of Genocide”	68
9.8.1	The Crisis of Bringing Supplies into Gaza	69
9.8.2	Effects of Israeli Attacks and Restrictions- The “Invisible” Cost.....	70
9.8.3	What We Learned About “Partnerships Under War”	70
9.8.4	How Context Affects Both Sides of the Partnership.....	71

9.9	Where Do Local and International Visions Converge and Where Do They Diverge?	72
10	Challenges and Gaps	73
10.1	Imbalance of Power Between International and Local Partners.....	73
10.2	Weak Funding and Donor Policies	74
10.3	Weak Governance and Absence of Joint Accountability Mechanisms.....	75
10.4	Shrinking Civic Space	76
10.5	Unequal Competition that Hinders Localization	76
10.6	Balance in Visibility and Recognition: Symbolic Gaps That Affect Trust	77
10.7	Institutional Capacity Gaps	78
11	Best Practices	79
11.1	Joint Needs Diagnosis and Early Co-Design.....	79
11.2	Joint Governance with Real Authority (Steering + RACI).....	79
11.3	Flexible Funding + Explicit Core Funding for the Local Partner	79
11.4	Phased Partnership Pathway	79
11.5	Sharing Risk...and Sharing Visibility	79
11.6	Co-owned Learning Partnerships (MEAL Co-ownership)	80
11.7	Coalitions with Genuine Local Leadership/Participation.....	80
12	Capacity-Strengthening Needs for Local Organizations.....	80
13	Factors Driving Differences in Partnerships.....	83
13.1	Grassroots Organizations: The Weakest Link.....	83
13.2	Established NGOs in Core Sectors	84
13.3	Why These Differences Matter	84
13.4	Sectoral Differences and Their Impact	84

14	Recommendations.....	85
14.1	For International Organizations.....	85
14.2	For Local Organizations.....	86
14.3	For Donors.....	87
14.4	For PNGO and AIDA	88
14.5	For Cluster Coordinators and UN Bodies.....	88
14.6	Topics for Further Research.....	89
15	Conclusion	90
16	Annexes	92

2 Executive Summary

This study is situated within a highly complex humanitarian and development context in Palestine, where the effects of prolonged occupation, the ongoing crime of genocide perpetrated by Israel in the Gaza Strip, and continuous violations in the West Bank intersect with a shrinking civic space and volatility in humanitarian funding. These dynamics directly affect the fairness, effectiveness, and sustainability of partnerships between Palestinian civil society organizations and international institutions.

The study aims to bridge the gap between global public commitments—such as the Charter for Change, the Grand Bargain, and the Core Humanitarian Standard (CHS)—and actual practice on the ground, by providing quantitative and qualitative, measurable evidence that helps translate partnership principles (equity, transparency, accountability, complementarity, localization) into operational policies and procedures, and to reinforce localization under meaningful local leadership. The study also presents the widening funding gap between needs and actual financing, and the resulting bias in favor of low-cost partnership models with limited participation in decision-making.

The study followed a mixed-methods approach combining dual surveys (local/international), in-depth interviews, and case studies of both successful and faltering partnerships, alongside a critical literature review. This provided a multi-dimensional understanding that supports the reliability of conclusions and the practicality of recommendations. The scope covered the West Bank, Jerusalem, and the Gaza Strip, and spanned a broad spectrum of local and international organizations and partnership types—bilateral, multilateral, and consortium-based. The team faced constraints related to field observation, access to contractual documents, and the absence of perspectives from certain UN agencies and government-affiliated entities; these limitations were methodologically offset through triangulation, sample expansion, and clear statements regarding inclusion constraints.

Key findings include:

- **Partnership models and the cost of participation:** “Execution/contracting” models prevail because they are less costly for donors and international implementers (they do not cover institutional costs nor share risks/decision-making), whereas deeper partnerships require institutional (core) funding, joint design, and clear mechanisms for delegated authority and two-way accountability.
- **Governance and decision-making:** There is high local participation in operational planning, implementation, and monitoring, contrasted with ambiguity or imbalance in

decision legitimacy at critical junctures (reallocating resources, adjusting indicators, managing risks), which often leaves final decision-making power in the hands of international/donor actors.

- **Localization and divergent understandings:** Many international organizations view localization as incremental improvement within their frameworks, whereas local organizations understand it as a structural shift in the center of gravity toward genuine local leadership in analysis, design, decision-making, and resource management. This divergence produces a practice and trust gap that impedes a transition from “token representation” to “actual local leadership.”
- **Institutional funding and resource sharing:** There is relative abundance of financing for implementation alongside a marked scarcity of institutional/core funding (Core/ICR), which undermines the sustainability of local capacities and keeps relationships closer to “contracting” than to “partnership.”
- **Capacity strengthening:** Allocations appear in strategic partnerships and some project partnerships but are almost entirely absent from execution-style partnerships; they are further constrained by limited budgets and pressing activity priorities, with persistent challenges in aligning capacity support to real institutional needs.
- **Transparency and accountability:** Procedural transparency is strong (compliance/reporting), but two-way accountability grounded in rights and in shared partnership results is weak; balanced, periodic partnership reviews are rare.
- **Contextual and institutional factors:** Weak internal democratization in some organizations and the financial/legal compliance challenges under occupation-related controls and political division raise due-diligence costs for international partners and incentivize a return to direct implementation or narrow delegation.

Principal recommendations include:

- **For international organizations:**
 - Align governance with field responsibility by establishing joint steering committees that are genuinely empowered to adjust activities and indicators, not merely to conduct formal oversight.
 - Embed a decision matrix (RACI) within partnership agreements, to be reviewed periodically, clarifying who decides/consults/informs.
 - Adopt flexible funding baskets and fair indirect/core cost rates that enable the local partner to exercise decision authority commensurate with its responsibilities.
 - Involve the local partner early in donor engagements to ensure upfront alignment and reduce late, unilateral adjustments.

- **For local organizations:**
 - Strengthen internal democratization, leadership rotation, and transparency to build trust, improve “fundability,” and lower due-diligence costs for international partners.
 - Develop clear institutional policies for risk management, compliance, and governance, and link them to joint MEAL systems (shared ownership of learning and evaluation) within partnerships.

- **For donors:**
 - Increase institutional/core funding (Core/ICR) as a condition for safeguarding quality, sustainability, and fair risk-sharing, and develop direct/semi-direct mechanisms to finance the institutional capacities of local partners.
 - Support joint governance frameworks (steering + RACI) as a value-adding funding component rather than a “cost” to be minimized.
 -

- **For PNGO, AIDA, and cluster coordinators:**
 - Launch a periodic measurement tool to track application of partnership and localization principles and link it to semi-annual partnership reviews.
 - Build a roster (bank) of accredited local partners meeting integrity and competence standards to facilitate early indirect financing and maximize local leadership within consortia.

3 Introduction

This study comes against the backdrop of a highly complex humanitarian and development context in Palestine, where the effects of prolonged occupation intersect with the raging crime of genocide in Gaza and Israel’s ongoing violations in the West Bank, alongside a shrinking civic space and volatility in humanitarian funding, amid growing community needs for response, protection, and development. Within this landscape, partnerships between local Palestinian civil society organizations (local) and international organizations serve as a critical lever for the quality, effectiveness, and sustainability of the response. At the same time, they face imbalances in power relations; challenges in transparency, accountability, and resource-sharing; and an urgent need to activate localization and the leadership of local actors. From this vantage point, the study offers a structured, comparative reading of the current state of partnerships, their practices, gaps, and opportunities for improvement.

The study aims to produce an up-to-date map of partnership models between local and international organizations in Palestine and to analyze their components in terms of governance and decision-making; participation and communication; localization and capacity strengthening; transparency and accountability; and resource-sharing. It also seeks to document lessons learned and good practices, and to derive practical recommendations and operational tools that can be adopted to promote a partnership model that is more equitable, effective, and sustainable—one that takes into account the specificity of the Palestinian context and its human rights and humanitarian reference frameworks.

The importance of this study stems from its role in bridging the gap between globally declared commitments—such as the Grand Bargain, the Charter for Change, and the Core Humanitarian Standard (CHS) and actual practice on the ground. It provides quantitative and qualitative evidence about what truly happens inside partnerships and presents a practical pathway to translate partnership principles (equity, transparency, accountability, complementarity, and results) into measurable, monitorable procedures and policies. It also advances the localization agenda by enhancing the role of local organizations in leading planning and decision-making, with direct implications for the quality of services and their alignment with community needs.

The study adopts a mixed-methods approach that combines dual surveys targeting both parties (local and international NGOs), in-depth interviews with stakeholders, and case studies of successful partnerships and others that faced setbacks, in addition to a critical review of the relevant literature and experiences over the past five years. This methodological blend enables a multi-dimensional understanding of dynamics and outcomes and strengthens the robustness of conclusions and the practicality of recommendations.

The study is carried out in partnership with—and under the guidance of—the Palestinian NGO Network (PNGO) and the Association of International Development Agencies (AIDA), supported by an independent consulting team responsible for methodological design, data collection, analysis, and the preparation of outputs. Carefully selected representatives of local and international organizations contributed information to ensure geographic, sectoral, and institutional-size representation. Preliminary findings were presented in a joint validation workshop, and stakeholder comments were incorporated into the final version.

In brief, the study seeks to serve as a practical tool for improving the quality of partnerships in Palestine by offering a deeper understanding of what exists and an operational vision of what should be: equitable, transparent, and accountable partnerships, governed by effective local leadership, grounded in human rights and international law, and responsive—flexibly and efficiently—to the priorities of Palestinian communities.

4 Study Objectives and Scope

This study aims to provide a structured, evidence-based understanding of partnership realities between Palestinian NGOs (local) and international organizations operating in Palestine, to analyze their dynamics, and to identify strengths and weaknesses in ways that lead to practical, applicable recommendations. It responds to an urgent need among key stakeholders—chief among them PNGO and AIDA—for knowledge tools that inform strategic decisions, improve program design, and enhance the equity and sustainability of partnerships.

4.1 Main and Specific Objectives

Overall Objective: To generate a reliable quantitative and qualitative knowledge base on partnership models between local and international organizations in Palestine, and to formulate recommendations and operational tools that contribute to building partnerships that are more equitable, effective, and sustainable, in line with humanitarian partnership principles and the standards of localization, transparency, and accountability.

Specific Objectives:

1. **Map existing partnerships:** Describe prevalent partnership models (execution/financing/strategic/consortium), pathways through which they form, the roles and responsibilities of parties, and internal decision-making mechanisms.
2. **Analyze governance and power dynamics:** Assess the extent of local organizations' participation in planning, design, and evaluation, and understand power balances and their impact on output and outcome quality.
3. **Localization and capacity strengthening:** Measure the extent to which localization components are integrated within partnerships (direct funding, local leadership, knowledge and responsibility transfer) and identify priority institutional capacity gaps.
4. **Transparency, accountability, and the sharing of resources and risks:** Review financial and programmatic transparency mechanisms, mutual accountability arrangements, and the fairness of resource distribution (including core operating costs).
5. **Document good practices and lessons learned:** Develop case studies of successful/struggling partnerships and extract success and failure factors to build practical reference points.
6. **Develop recommendations and tools:** Formulate a set of policy and procedural recommendations (measurable and monitorable) and practical tools—such as partnership checklists, role-distribution matrices, and models for joint governance and periodic partnership evaluation.

4.2 Study Boundaries (Geographic/Institutional/Temporal Scope)

Geographic Scope:

The study focuses on the occupied Palestinian territory in its entirety: the West Bank, including East Jerusalem, and the Gaza Strip. It accounts for geographic variation in the nature of partnerships and operating contexts (movement and access restrictions, funding environment, security risks) and seeks balanced representation of organizations across governorates, including rural areas and locations classified as Area C.

Institutional Scope:

- The study includes Palestinian NGOs of different sizes (large/medium/small) and sectors (protection, health, education, livelihoods, shelter, human rights/advocacy, gender, agriculture/environment, etc.).
- It includes international organizations with an active programmatic/funding presence in Palestine (long-/medium-term), representing both emergency-response-focused entities and those focused on development/resilience-building.
- It covers bilateral and multilateral partnerships, consortia, and both direct and indirect partnerships via intermediaries.

Temporal Scope:

The study examines current and recent partnerships over a five-year reference period (approximately 2020–2025), with the option to refer back to older experiences where they offer explanatory value (e.g., post-major-crisis shifts or donor changes). This timeframe allows tracking recent trends (post-pandemic dynamics, conflict/blockade shifts, changes in funding policies) and provides a comparative reading of ongoing developments.

Inclusion/Exclusion Criteria:

Inclusion: Partnerships that include actual participation by both local and international parties in any program cycle phase (needs analysis, design, implementation, monitoring/evaluation, learning).

Exclusion: Very short-term relationships. Partnerships outside the defined geographic scope or not directly linked to the Palestinian context are also excluded.

The study focuses on **the substance of partnership** (governance, decision-making, resources, accountability, localization) rather than on purely sectoral project results, while drawing on sectoral outputs insofar as they inform the partnership analysis.

4.3 Study Challenges

War conditions in Gaza and disrupted access channels

The research team operated in an unprecedented environment during the war on Gaza, with repeated disruptions to communications, electricity, and internet and daily changes in movement and access arrangements. This led to multiple last-minute cancellations or postponements of interviews. The heavy engagement of local and international organizations in emergency response reduced the time they could allocate to the study tools (in-depth interviews/surveys) and affected follow-up regularity and appointment confirmations. Consequently, longer follow-up intervals emerged between outreach and response, repeated rescheduling attempts were needed, and the sectoral and geographic balance and size of the sample were impacted.

Topic sensitivity, particularly for international organizations

The study addresses issues of power, decision-making, resource-sharing, and accountability in partnerships, highly sensitive themes, especially amid a rapidly changing war context and donors' stringent requirements and precise compliance procedures. As a result, some international organizations were hesitant to participate or to provide detailed answers on decision-making mechanisms. Others preferred to provide general answers or refer to public institutional policies without delving into actual practices at project and bilateral partnership levels. This caution limited the team's ability to compare precisely between what is declared and what is practiced and affected the depth of analysis on certain axes.

Inability to interview UN entities and government-affiliated development institutions.

Despite formal, repeated attempts, the team was unable to conduct interviews with UN institutions or development entities affiliated with foreign governments. Thus, the findings do not include the perspectives of these actors or their institutional interpretations of access, accountability, and localization policies. This absence reduces representational inclusiveness and limits the ability to read “decision-making” across all levels (donor/UN/government/international implementer/local implementer). We explicitly acknowledge this limitation in the report to avoid overgeneralizing results beyond the responding sample.

Difficulty obtaining partnership documents and agreements.

Given the sensitivity of contractual files, the team could not access partnership documents (subgrant agreements, financial annexes, decision matrices, funded capacity-building plans) for many organizations. Numerous entities refused to share documents, and others provided only verbal descriptions without supporting records. This constrained documentary verification and triangulation between interview data and contractual provisions and

weakened the ability to provide a well-documented comparative analysis of financial and governance clauses across different partnership models.

Response biases and sample size

Field constraints and institutional sensitivities led to uneven response rates across groups (local/international organizations, different sectors, geographic areas) and to a higher concentration among entities with better communication capacity during the war. This may introduce **response bias** in favor of organizations with stronger communications teams and organizational resources. Recurrent communications outages also affected sample inclusiveness, potentially limiting representation of the most affected groups.

Compressed timelines and shifting context

Rapid changes in field conditions (opening/closing crossings, escalation/ceasefire, changing safety instructions) necessitated continuous updates to the research plan and reordering of priorities, which compressed the analysis and review timeline. Remote work during portions of the period—due to security and logistical constraints—also limited opportunities for direct observation and rapid field verification of some information.

4.3.1 Impact of Constraints on Results and Mitigation Measures

- **Credibility:** Gaps in documentation were mitigated through methodological triangulation across multiple interviews, dual-party surveys, and secondary sources (official reports/coordination platforms).
- **Inclusiveness:** The sample base was expanded as much as possible, with explicit disclosure of missing perspectives (UN/government) to avoid generalizing results beyond the responding frame.
- **Ethics:** The team adhered to the **Do No Harm** principle and enforced strict protocols on identity and sensitive data management, providing safety to participants while accepting a relative narrowing of publication margins.

5 Methodology

This study employs a mixed-methods approach, combining quantitative and qualitative techniques to analyze the reality of partnerships between Palestinian and international NGOs operating in the occupied Palestinian territory, with the aim of developing partnership models that are more equitable, effective, and sustainable.

5.1 Conceptual Framework

The methodology was developed on the basis of international and national reference frameworks, most notably:

- IASC Principles of Partnership;
- Charter for Change (C4C);
- The Grand Bargain;
- The PNGO–AIDA Partnership Principles document;
- Standards for effective partnership, localization, and mutual accountability.

5.2 Data Collection Tools

The study relied on four primary tools:

- A targeted survey completed by 87 Palestinian NGOs (both PNGO members and non-members) to assess their experience with existing partnerships.
- A parallel survey completed by 77 international NGOs (AIDA members) to capture their views on partnerships and related challenges.
- In-depth key informant interviews (KIIs) with 25 selected representatives from both sides (9 interviews with international NGOs and 16 with local NGOs) to illuminate the “unseen” dynamics in these relationships.
- Case study analysis of five selected partnerships, including both successful examples and those that faced challenges.

5.3 Sampling

- Geographic (West Bank, Gaza, Jerusalem) and sectoral diversity (protection, education, health, shelter, etc.) were ensured.
- Participating organizations were selected based on the presence of an existing partnership with an international actor and their willingness to participate.
- The sample covered local organizations of various sizes (large, medium, small) and international organizations with diverse lengths and areas of engagement.

5.4 Data Analysis

- Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistical tools.
- Qualitative data (from interviews and case studies) underwent thematic analysis along key axes such as decision-making, transparency, localization, resource-sharing, and governance.

6 Context Analysis

6.1 Palestinian non-governmental organizations (NGOs)

Palestinian NGOs emerged in an exceptional context marked by prolonged occupation, the absence of national sovereignty, and the erosion of state institutions. They arose as part of the social infrastructure of popular resistance. Their earliest shoots appearing with the advent of modern society at the end of the Ottoman era and the start of the British Mandate¹ and evolved after the 1948 Nakba into one of the fundamental pillars of Palestinian resilience on both the humanitarian and development fronts.

6.1.1 Emergence and Evolution of NGOs in Palestine

The roots of Palestinian NGOs predate the 1948 Nakba, when charitable and educational initiatives appeared as instruments of self-help in the late Ottoman period under the label of “Ottoman associations.” Their role in popular organization was strengthened in the face of British colonial rule. With the 1948 Nakba and the displacement of hundreds of thousands of Palestinians, these institutions assumed a greater role in providing relief and essential services to refugees and the displaced. In the absence of a national political entity, civil society action took on a national and development character-especially after the 1967 occupation-becoming an effective instrument for bolstering Palestinian steadfastness under Israeli rule.

In the 1980s, particularly during the First Intifada (1987–1993), NGOs emerged as central players in organizing Palestinian society, providing services, psychosocial support, and helping shape national consciousness. After the 1993 Oslo Accords, the sector entered a new phase of institutional restructuring, marked by an expansion in the number of organizations, diversification of fields of work, and the issuance of the Law of Charitable Associations and Community Organizations No. (1) of 2000 to regulate their legal and administrative operations.

According to the Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics (PCBS), the number of registered and active NGOs in Palestine reached about 3,257 by 2022², including approximately 1,877 in the West Bank (including Jerusalem) and 1,380 in the Gaza Strip. Reports indicate that institutional density in Gaza is higher than in the West Bank due to deteriorating humanitarian conditions and the blockade, which has led to broader reliance on civil initiatives.

¹ Palestinian civil society work: diverse trends and numerous problems - Journal of Palestine Studies - Volume 19 - Issue 73

² Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics (PCBS), Report on Non-Governmental Organizations in Palestine, 2022.

Roughly 65% of these organizations focus on social and development services such as education, health, and relief; about 20% work in human rights and legal defense; and the remainder are distributed across cultural, environmental, and youth-related fields. According to the 2023 report of the Independent Commission for Human Rights (ICHR), nearly 70% of these organizations provide social services, 20% operate in the rights and political sphere, and the rest work in education, scientific research, and culture.

A 2021 report³ by the Palestinian NGO Network (PNGO) also noted that more than 60% of these organizations suffer from reduced funding, affecting their ability to continue operating-especially amid Israeli restrictions and attempts to delegitimize them, which culminated in 2021 with the designation of six Palestinian human rights organizations as “terrorist” by the occupying authorities.

6.1.2 The Importance of NGOs under Ongoing Israeli Occupation

In the context of continuing Israeli occupation, Palestinian NGOs are critical as:

- A primary provider of services in health, education, and humanitarian relief, especially in marginalized areas or those facing neglect or access constraints due to the occupation.
- An advocacy and rights-defense instrument, with human rights organizations leading efforts to document violations and hold the occupation accountable before international bodies.
- A mechanism for safeguarding national identity by supporting Palestinian culture and enhancing political and civic participation.
- A protection network for marginalized groups such as women, persons with disabilities, and families affected by settlement expansion and the separation wall.
- A tool for contributing to public policymaking, representing citizens’ interests before government, and organizing social accountability of officials and public institutions.

6.1.3 Challenges Facing NGOs

NGOs in Palestine face a wide range of challenges that hinder their effectiveness and limit their ability to respond to growing needs amid deteriorating political and economic conditions. In recent years, these challenges have intensified due to internal and external factors, necessitating strategic interventions to protect civic space and strengthen the independence and capacities of these institutions.

Foremost among these challenges is the intensifying Israeli assault on human rights organizations. Occupation authorities have closed the offices of several institutions and

³ PNGO, Private Sector Assessment Reports, 2021.

labeled them as terrorist-including Al-Haq, Addameer, Al Mezan, and the Bisan Center-posing a direct threat to freedom of civic action and human rights work⁴.

Conditional funding is also a persistent challenge, particularly when some donors impose restrictions that conflict with international law or national fundamentals and require political/security vetting of beneficiaries and partners. A 2023 study by the Palestinian Center for Legal Aid indicated that such conditions negatively affect the programmatic independence of local institutions and push some to adapt their programs to donor priorities rather than local needs.

The ongoing Palestinian political division since 2007 further complicates the civic operating environment, with differing laws and regulatory systems between the West Bank and Gaza affecting freedom of movement and joint coordination and weakening the unifying role of civil society at the national level⁵.

NGOs also face internal challenges related to governance, strategic planning, leadership renewal, and weak financial sustainability. Institutional review reports indicate that some organizations suffer declines in transparency and effectiveness due to the absence of accountability policies and internal controls-particularly amid shrinking external support.

Finally, a digital challenge has emerged: many NGOs struggle to keep pace with digital transformation and to secure their platforms amid growing Israeli electronic surveillance and restrictions on Palestinian content⁶.

6.2 International Organizations in Palestine

The presence of international organizations in Palestine took on an institutional character after the 1948 Nakba, in response to the humanitarian crisis resulting from the displacement of hundreds of thousands of Palestinians. It began with relief organizations, most notably the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA), established in 1949 to provide essential services to Palestinian refugees in education, health, and relief.

With the 1967 Israeli occupation, the need for international humanitarian organizations increased to provide support in the West Bank and Gaza Strip, and international NGOs (INGOs) expanded their work to include emergency response in addition to community development and human rights.

⁴ PNGO Reports, 2021; and the NGO Development Centre (NDC) Reports, 2023.

⁵ Civil Society Action Document in Palestine, NGO Development Center 2023.

⁶ PNGO: The Shrinking Civic Space Study, 2024; and Campaign Reports on Palestinian Digital Rights.

International organizations in Palestine play multiple roles, including:

- **Emergency relief:** Especially during wars on Gaza-such as the offensives of 2008, 2012, 2014, and 2021-when INGOs provided temporary shelter, food, and healthcare.
- **Sustainable development:** Through projects that support livelihoods, empower women, improve education, and manage water and natural resources.
- **International advocacy:** Some organizations perform a vital role in documenting violations against Palestinians and conveying their voices to international fora, such as Human Rights Watch, Oxfam, and Médecins Sans Frontières.
- **Civil society capacity building:** By supporting Palestinian NGOs with funding, training, and partnership.

The role of international organizations in Palestine has evolved significantly:

- In the 1990s, after the establishment of the Palestinian Authority in 1994, some INGOs moved from pure relief work to development programs and institution-building.
- During the two Intifadas (1987–1993 and 2000–2005), international organizations focused on responding to humanitarian and rights-related needs resulting from military escalation and violations.
- In the past decade, international organizations began adopting the concept of **localization** in response to the Grand Bargain and the Charter for Change and launched efforts to enhance the role of local partners.

6.2.1 Challenges Facing International Organizations

Despite their significant contributions, international organizations in Palestine face several challenges:

- **Israeli restrictions:** Constraints on staff movement, bans on entry to Gaza, and restrictions on bringing in materials and equipment. In addition, the occupying authorities have recently mandated re-registration⁷ requirements for international organizations under conditions that contravene humanitarian operating norms.
- **Attacks on the legitimacy of humanitarian action:** In recent years, some international organizations or their local partners have been designated as “terrorist organizations” by the occupation, affecting funding sources.
- **Politically conditioned funding:** Some donors impose political conditions that restrict the freedom to design projects or preclude cooperation with key Palestinian actors.

⁷ NRC: [Israel’s New INGO Registration Measures Are a Grave Threat to Humanitarian Operations and International Law](#)

6.3 Relationship with the Local Community

The relationship between international organizations and local civil society has long been a subject of debate. While INGOs are an important source of funding and expertise, some relationships have remained unbalanced, with local partners at times viewed as mere implementers rather than strategic partners. With initiatives such as the PNGO–AIDA principles document and commitments to partnership principles (e.g., equality, complementarity, accountability), new tendencies have emerged toward more balanced partnerships.

6.4 Operating Context in Gaza and the West Bank under Israeli Violations

Since the outbreak of war, the humanitarian operating environment has changed dramatically: widespread destruction of civilian infrastructure, massive displacement, disruption of supply chains, and the targeting of sites sheltering displaced persons and humanitarian workers. OCHA and UNRWA reports reflect growing access constraints, damage to UN facilities, housing displaced populations, and a rise in the number of aid workers killed to the hundreds-including hundreds of UNRWA staff alone-making this the deadliest context for aid workers in many years⁸.

In practice, aid entry depends on fluctuating crossings (Kerem Shalom and the Zikim/Erez route) and is affected by Israeli closures and strikes, producing cycles of interruption and partial resumption. OCHA reports from July–August 2025 documented periods of partial resumption of cargo collection from Zikim and Kerem Shalom, followed by closures that severely affected food coverage, especially in the north⁹.

6.4.1 Risks to Humanitarian Workers

Deadly incidents have targeted clearly marked and deconflicted teams-most notably the 1 April 2024 strike that killed seven members of the World Central Kitchen team during a marked, coordinated humanitarian mission, exposing fundamental risks in site/route notification systems and the exchange of coordinates¹⁰. OCHA has also recorded damage to UNRWA facilities functioning as emergency shelters on consecutive days, indicating that the danger extends even to registered and monitored facilities¹¹.

⁸ UN OCHA OPT: [Humanitarian Situation Update #323 | Gaza Strip](#)

⁹ UN OCHA OPT: [Gaza Humanitarian Response Update | 3 - 16 August 2025](#)

¹⁰ World Central Kitchen: [7 WCK team members killed in Gaza](#)

¹¹ UN OCHA OPT: [Humanitarian Situation Update #323 | Gaza Strip](#)

6.4.2 Shrinking Civic Space in Palestine

The West Bank and East Jerusalem have experienced cumulative waves of civic-space restrictions: Israel’s 2021 designation of six Palestinian human rights organizations as “terrorist,” followed by raids and office closures in 2022, alongside UN calls to resume funding and to respect the work of rights defenders. UN reports and human rights experts have described these measures as lacking sufficient public evidence, undermining the operational legitimacy of Palestinian organizations and unsettling their donors and international partners¹².

In 2024–2025, administrative pressure on international presence increased, with restrictions or refusals to renew visas for senior staff of UN agencies and INGOs, and the proposal/adoption of new visa and registration regimes for international organizations described as politicized and detrimental to deploying experienced personnel in the context¹³.

6.4.3 Funding in Wartime

In the current environment, donors and INGOs are driven toward rapid, tightly conditioned funding streams focused on distributions and life-saving services. This keeps core/ICR (indirect cost recovery) needs in the background, even as their costs multiply (security and safety, alternative logistics, enhanced audits, staff psychosocial support, high turnover). When explicit institutional lines and jointly governed financial flexibility are absent, risks and unfunded costs are shifted onto local actors, eroding their institutional resilience. This aligns with UN reports of supply-chain collapse in the north during crossing closures and repeated calls to enable local and municipal systems in health and food security¹⁴.

The war led to the inflation of a short-term “emergency economy” and a decline in cumulative institutional capacity, whereas the next phase requires long-term institutional investments so that local expertise does not devolve into “chronic exhaustion.”

¹² UN Press: [Outraged over Israel’s Designation of Six Civil Society Groups as Terrorists, Speakers Tell Palestinian Rights Committee Harassment against Human Rights Defenders Must End](#)

¹³ UN: [The Israeli Authorities have stopped giving visas to heads and staff of the international NGO community](#)

¹⁴ Reuters: [Aid route closure worsens shortages in famine-struck northern Gaza](#)

7 Partnership Principles between International and Local NGOs:

Partnership principles are a set of values and standards that govern the relationship between international humanitarian organizations (INGOs) and local/national NGOs (LNGOs), with the aim of achieving partnerships that are fair, effective, and sustainable.

The first major shift came with the **Global Humanitarian Platform (GHP)** in 2007, which articulated the **Five Principles of Partnership**:

1. **Equality:** Mutual respect between parties regardless of size or power. This principle builds trust between partners. It requires both sides to disclose resources, funding objectives, financial reporting, and results. However, it faces challenges in practice due to power and funding asymmetries that can lead to one-way accountability. In the Palestinian context, this is the cornerstone of effective partnership: international organizations should recognize the value and contextual knowledge of local organizations-rooted in Palestinian realities and community/occupation-related challenges-while local organizations should appreciate the technical and financial support and expertise provided by international organizations.
2. **Transparency:** Clarity in objectives, funding, and information. This principle calls for a fair distribution of authority in program planning and design. In reality, INGOs often retain final decision-making power because of their link to donors, which limits the practical impact of this principle.
3. **Results-Oriented Accountability:** A shared commitment to achieving tangible results, with two-way accountability.
4. **Results-Oriented Approach:** Acting based on capacities rather than pre-assigned or imposed roles.
5. **Complementarity:** Recognition of the value of diverse capacities and roles.

These principles laid a clear conceptual foundation for understanding the relationship between international and local organizations as equal partners, but implementation has remained limited.

In the Palestinian context, additional determinants flow from these core principles:

- **Power balance and joint decision-making:** Partnerships are expected to support the growth and sustainability of local organizations, not leave them subordinate or dependent on international funding. This underscores the importance of skills transfer and building institutional structures capable of continuity.

- **Capacity strengthening and sustainability:** The Palestinian context has particularities linked to occupation, political division, and local culture. Partnerships should reflect this understanding and avoid imposing Western models that do not fit the Palestinian environment.
- **Respect for cultural and political identity and local context:** Partnerships must be grounded in the values of neutrality, non-discrimination, and respect for human dignity. This is especially crucial in Palestine, where aid is at times used as a tool of political pressure.
- **Commitment to humanitarian principles and human rights.**

These principles have evolved over the years across several reference documents; the following are the key ones:

7.1 Charter for Change -C4C (2015–2016)

In the lead-up to the 2016 World Humanitarian Summit in Istanbul, a group of international organizations launched the **Charter for Change**, a groundbreaking initiative comprising eight core commitments aimed at redefining partnership. Key commitments include:

- Channeling 25% of humanitarian funding directly to local organizations.
- Refraining from poaching staff from local organizations.
- Recognizing local organizations as leaders, not merely contractors.
- Involving local actors from the program design stage.

The Charter was the first practical attempt to regulate the relationship within ethical, financial, and structural frameworks, opening the door to measurable commitments.

7.2 The Grand Bargain (2016)

At the same summit, dozens of states, donors, and UN agencies adopted the commitments of the **Grand Bargain**, which included:

- Recognition of the local community as a primary leader in humanitarian action.
- A call to strengthen equitable partnerships.
- Reducing intermediaries and simplifying direct funding.
- Improving transparency and accountability in partner relations.

Although not legally binding, the Grand Bargain gave strong political impetus to broaden the partnership model toward greater equity and effectiveness.

7.3 The Core Humanitarian Standard (CHS)

First issued in 2014 and most recently updated in 2024, the CHS provides a normative framework to assess partnerships from a humanitarian quality perspective, particularly through:

- Commitment 4: Coordination and working with partners to achieve shared results.
- Commitment 6: Responsible use of resources within a fair partnership.
- Commitment 9: Local leadership and sustainability of impact.

CHS is currently one of the most important tools for evaluating the effectiveness and fairness of partnerships.

7.4 PNGO–AIDA Partnership Principles (Local Framework)

Domestically, the Association of International Development Agencies (AIDA) and the Palestinian NGO Network (PNGO) issued the PNGO–AIDA Partnership Principles (2018)-an advanced local framework aligned with Palestine’s national, legal, and political context. The principles include:

- Respect for international law and Palestinian rights.
- Rejection of substitution of the local role by international actors.
- A commitment to mutual accountability.
- Enabling local organizations in planning, not only in implementation.

This document has served as a model in contexts subject to occupation or political constraints.

8 Humanitarian Partnerships in Palestine

Humanitarian organizations working in Palestine face a set of complex, intertwined challenges linked to the political, security, and funding context. Despite the presence of an active and resilient Palestinian civil society, the relationship with international organizations often remains unequal in terms of decision-making and resource distribution. This analysis outlines the main features of this context and identifies the structural challenges facing partnerships between local and international actors, in light of international and national references such as the Grand Bargain, Charter for Change, the Core Humanitarian Standard (CHS), and the PNGO–AIDA Partnership Principles document.

8.1 Overall Political and Humanitarian Context

- The occupied Palestinian territory lives under a prolonged military occupation that undermines development and leads to escalating humanitarian crises, especially in Gaza, which has been under blockade for more than 17 years.
- Humanitarian action in Palestine is characterized by a clear intertwining of political and rights dimensions, rendering it susceptible to restriction and politicization by donors and local authorities.
- Ongoing violations and movement/access restrictions impede humanitarian response and increase operational costs.

8.2 Characteristics of the Local Humanitarian Landscape

- Palestine has a strong base of local NGOs that provide quality services in protection, health, education, and psychosocial support, but they depend heavily on external funding.
- These organizations are organized within effective coordination networks such as PNGO, the Protection Cluster, and the Mental Health Network, which strengthens their collective role.
- Despite this dynamism, the participation of local organizations in setting humanitarian priorities and making decisions remains limited compared to international organizations.

Results

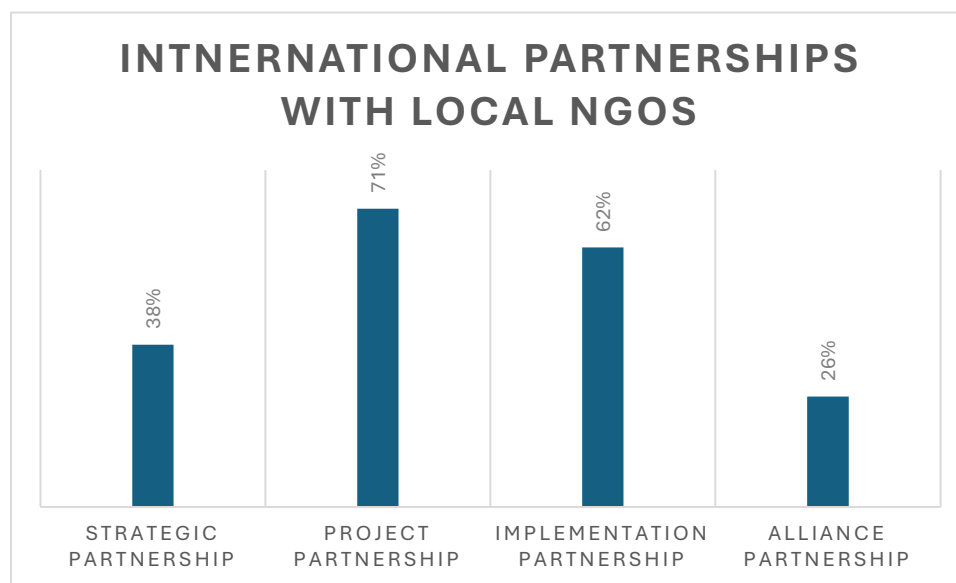
9 Study Findings

9.1 Partnership Landscape and Typologies

The survey responses from local organizations clearly show that project partnerships predominate (80%), followed by implementation/contracting partnerships (60%), while strategic partnerships (44%) and alliances/consortia (36%) appear at lower levels. This distribution confirms that most relationships are built for implementation purposes tied to short- to medium-term grant cycles, leaving narrower space for long-term institutional development and joint decision-making at the strategic level.



On the other hand, partnerships that international organizations form with local organizations display the same implementation-heavy pattern: project partnerships rank.



highest (71%), followed by implementation/contracting partnerships (62%), while strategic partnerships and alliances recede to 38% and 26%, respectively.

1) Service Contracts

This form of “partnership”-if the term applies-is often used in rapid responses and short-term assignments (such as distributions or trainings). In it, programming decisions (including intervention design, activities, target groups, and timelines) tend to lie with the international organization/donor, while the local partner’s role is concentrated on implementation and compliance.

“The needs are identified by the local partner. In our latest intervention in Gaza, we asked PNGO to define the needs and based on that we designed the intervention. But in other projects, the partner may be required only to implement and provide lessons learned—this depends on the partner’s size and capacities.”

A Programme Manager at a UN Organization

From an international perspective, this format is a quick entry point during emergencies, enabling a rapid response with minimal bureaucratic complexity. As Rasha - Gaza Partnerships Manager, Save the Children International-put it: “We use a complementary model: part of the activities is implemented through partners, and another part is implemented directly by Save the Children. We select partners through internal committees based on criteria such as specialization and location, ensure equity in funding ceilings, and plan projects jointly to ensure success.” Globally, this model is widespread in countries lacking local NGOs or where local NGOs exist but have limited capacities. International organizations therefore implement directly or bring in local partners strictly for execution. This model is viewed as counter to localization, as it

neither builds local capacities nor paves the way for local organizations to assume the same role independently in the future.

From the local perspective, service provision is often seen more as subcontracting than a partnership: local organizations receive limited funding in exchange for delivering a service to international organizations. As Abdullah Sharshara – Board Director of Ajyal Association for Creativity & Development- described it: “Sometimes we play a major role in project design, management, and evaluation, and in other partnerships our role is limited to implementation.”

This type of partnership becomes more common during crises and emergencies. Some INGOs adopt a “rapid start” mechanism via an execution contract or emergency partnership to meet urgent needs and to lower contracting risk when engaging new local partners. Subsequently, the relationship may evolve into a project-level partnership following deeper institutional assessment and a funded capacity-building plan once funding stabilizes. This balances speed with accountability/quality and later allows a more equitable redistribution of roles. A Response Director at an international organization -summarized this balance: “At times partners enter quickly, then we review and deepen governance and empowerment pathways with partners.”

This format is particularly common among grassroots organizations, which often lack funding and are thus compelled to accept such “contracts.” It also tends to surface more during emergencies and crises (e.g., the 2008/2009 offensive on Gaza and the current crime of genocide). International organizations operating in Palestine-and Gaza in particular-for the first time tend to adopt this model for several reasons, summarized as follows:

- **Risk reduction:** Avoiding partnerships with unfamiliar local organizations that might heighten risk for the INGO and constrain its ability to meet internal or donor compliance requirements. INGOs therefore work directly, under their own standards, with minimal roles for local actors confined to execution “in accordance with clear written guidelines” and with the narrowest scope. For example, the local partner collects beneficiary data while the INGO handles screening and eligibility checks; or the local partner only provides venues and material resources while the INGO conducts the activity per its standards.
- **Speeding up delivery:** Entering into genuine partnerships requires numerous steps-organizational capacity assessments (and sometimes security vetting), administrative agreements such as partnership contracts, and details like allocating budgets for capacity building or administrative costs- all of which are time-consuming. To expedite implementation, INGOs often streamline these steps and seek a partner solely for execution.
- **Avoiding political complexity:** Partnering with local organizations often compels INGOs to operate within specific frameworks and commitments, whether due to

internal policies or donor requirements. These may include anti-terrorism clauses¹⁵ (e.g., USAID/EU requirements) or conditions for security screening of beneficiaries and local staff.

Among local organizations, views vary. Some (especially grassroots, small, or newly established entities) see this type as a means to build a track record or obtain quick funding to provide essential services. Larger, older, or better-funded NGOs often view this funding as “coercive” to partnership and as an encroachment on international commitments to localization and local empowerment. As Amjad Al-Shawa (PNGO) notes, “Partnerships between international and local organizations have gone through various phases, and in some of them the relationship was, in many cases, contractual.”

2) Project-based Partnerships

This format goes beyond subcontracting to a wider relationship covering an integrated project with one or more activities-and sometimes a funded capacity-building component and joint risk/system assessments. It differs from implementation/contracting models in typically being longer in duration and broader in scope, and it explicitly or implicitly frames the relationship between the INGO and the local partner as having some degree of equivalence.

This type varies according to project nature, duration, geographic scope, and funding volume, but the prevailing form is short- to medium-term projects (roughly three months to three years). According to the surveys, this format is the most widespread and widely used among international and local organizations.

In some cases, INGOs include a funded empowerment plan (governance, finance, MEAL) as part of the partnership-typically in projects running for a year or more.

INGOs tend to view this partnership type as meeting most partnership requirements: covering administrative costs, allocating resources to local capacity building, and involving local partners in decision-making. However, it falls short of providing long-term institutional development and stable financing for local partners-a gap INGOs acknowledge they themselves cannot easily solve, given that their own funding is short- or medium-term at best.

Local organizations are generally satisfied with these partnerships yet hope to transition to strategic or at least longer-term partnerships that meet needs for core and stable funding. They also seek higher allocations for administrative cost coverage or the earmarking of a portion thereof as core funding.

¹⁵ The Palestinian Center for Policy Research and Strategic Studies – Masarat: [Towards Effective Policies to Counter Politically Conditioned Funding of Palestinian Civil Society Organizations](#)

These partnerships usually feature clear contracting mechanisms, with defined roles and expected responsibilities, agreed budgets, and a clear timeline-indicating that procedural conditions are generally transparent. Frequently, INGOs conduct some form of pre-award assessment of local partners before entering such relationships to confirm organizational capacities (using standard tools such as OCAT¹⁶ or similar), especially the ability to manage and deliver the grant financially and technically, and to verify the existence of anti-corruption policies and mechanisms.

Operationally, survey data and interviews content show that local organizations bear the greatest burden in implementation and in accountability to communities; day-to-day cooperation (meetings, information exchange, role clarification) is good. However, decision legitimacy at sensitive turning points (e.g., indicator adjustments, resource reprogramming, risk management) often remains with the INGO/donor-especially when the “rules of movement” shift (border closures, strikes, curfews, security changes). This is even clearer during repeated opening/closure cycles of aid crossings, which turn operational plans into daily crisis management with rapid decisions taken at the international level¹⁷.

Advantages of this partnership type include:

- **Providing stable funding to local NGOs:** During the partnership period, local organizations can plan activities and programs in light of secured funding. This also helps them leverage current/previous partnerships as part of their organizational CV to attract future funding.
- **Strengthening local capacities:** Where capacity-building components exist, local NGOs benefit from resources to develop internal policies and systems, improve physical resources (administrative, operational, tools), and gain indirect benefits through learning by doing alongside INGOs’ planning, implementation, and evaluation practices.
- **Engaging locals in project design:** Local partners play a notable role in needs assessment and prioritization, and in designing, implementing, and evaluating interventions-vital for localization, as design and delivery are locally driven. The degree of influence varies with power balance: stronger local partners can assert their approach; weaker (underfunded or weakly managed) ones may concede to donor/INGO conditions at the expense of localization.
- **Positioning local NGOs as credible partners:** Successfully partnering and delivering with INGOs becomes a ticket to future funding and recognition as a capable, influential partner.
- **Contributing to localization:** Recognizing local NGOs by INGOs as project partners and entering an equitable relationship signals a larger role in design and implementation suited to local context and national priorities-thereby advancing

¹⁶ [Organizational Capacity Assessment Tool](#)

¹⁷ UN OCHA OPT: [Gaza Humanitarian Response Update | 20 July - 2 August 2025](#)

localization. More experienced and/or better-funded local NGOs are better able to leverage this model to assert localization or, at least, contextualize interventions.

Limitations of this partnership type include:

- **Short funding cycles:** Projects are typically short (rarely beyond three years), perpetually pushing local NGOs into an endless funding search.
- **Core funding gap:** Project partnerships focus on a specific project, not the broader strategic outlook. Local NGOs may have ample activity funding yet be unable to cover other essential, non-project activities or basic institutional costs (admin, MEAL, etc.). This gap forces local NGOs into multiple projects and even contracting partnerships just to scrape together enough to cover essentials.
- **Limited local role:** Despite wider latitude than in service contracts, the local partner’s space remains bounded by the funding itself and donor/INGO policies. Space varies by INGO type (INGO vs UN vs government-affiliated agency). Local ability to negotiate affects this margin.
- **Compliance-driven constraints:** Project partnerships require adherence to donor/INGO standards and conditions, which can constrain autonomy and localization. Sometimes requirements are acceptable (activity types, targeting criteria); at other times, they are political or excessive, especially given Palestine’s sensitivity under occupation (e.g., security vetting, beneficiary data sharing, constraints on working with Palestinian governmental bodies-particularly in Gaza under Hamas).
- **Creating dependency and reduced independence:** The dominance of project partnerships (vs strategic ones) has made local NGOs dependent on projects for continuity. Limited donor/INGO diversity further narrows negotiating space for better terms. Larger NGOs often fare better due to diversified portfolios; grassroots/newer NGOs are most vulnerable.

“There is some dependency from certain NGOs, relying on international organizations to obtain funding.”
Amjad Shawa, Director of PNGO

3) Strategic Partnerships

A strategic partnership is not merely “grant implementation”; it is a multi-year relationship built on co-design of the agenda, balanced delegation of decision-making, funded risk-sharing, and institutional support (Core/ICR) that enables local organizations to lead portions of the program, with shared ownership of administrative costs. In this sense, strategy builds local institutional capacity and generates impact that goes beyond activity-level indicators. The relationship becomes a long-term investment that moves past “activity schedules” toward shared orientations, a larger space for local leadership, and opportunities to publicly elevate partners’ roles.

“These partnerships create opportunities to amplify impact and reach beneficiaries more deeply, expand funding scope, and exchange expertise. They also support capacity building at both the local and international levels.”

A Program Manager at an international organization

Notably, strategic partnerships were most prevalent in the early years of the Palestinian Authority in the 1990s, reflecting broad public mobilization-including funding-for governmental and civil institutions at the time. As a General Director of a local NGO, stated: “Funding in the past-up to 1994–1996-was 100% core,” meaning it was institutional funding covering basic costs rather than only project activities. Over time, this shifted with global changes shaping humanitarian financing, including widening funding gaps and Palestine’s political particularities.

Survey results show that strategic partnerships are among the least prevalent models (38%). Several factors explain this:

- **Funding scarcity:** Global shortfalls in humanitarian funding weigh heavily on INGO–local partnerships. The USAID funding cuts were a breaking point that exposed the gap between needs and available financing-causing funding cessation for many organizations/projects and shrinking both the duration and size of partnerships.
- **Donor requirements and preferences:** Donors tend to work with local (and even international) organizations for shorter periods to reduce risk and to diversify funding across more grantees. The sensitivity of humanitarian work in Palestine-given the occupation’s pursuit of INGOs and donors and its restrictive conditions-has nudged donors toward lower-risk models such as direct implementation, contracting, or project partnerships.
- **High “cost” of strategic partnership:** Not only financial cost, but also the cost of sharing risk with local partners and granting them larger roles across design, planning, implementation, and evaluation; plus direct financial commitments (e.g., contributing to administrative costs and providing core funding) to enable local partners to implement broader programmatic strategies, not scattered activities.

Strategic partnership also implies a long-term commitment to work with local partners and adopt joint policies or, at least, agreed operating mechanisms to achieve strategic objectives. In light of funding constraints, many INGOs/donors see other partnership models as an “escape” from this costly commitment.

From the local organizations’ perspective, strategic partnerships are the optimal route to a healthy relationship between INGOs and local counterparts. They liberate local NGOs from the constant scramble for funding and empower them to sustain value for communities. In practice, however, strategic partnerships are concentrated among larger local NGOs and are rarely rotated among different organizations. Larger NGOs have accumulated experience and resources to meet INGO “quality” standards for such partnerships, whereas grassroots and nascent NGOs most need this model for capacity building and institutional maturation.

From the international side, philosophies vary by organization type. International NGOs are generally more able to enter into strategic partnerships and sometimes even do so with grassroots organizations-consistent with a humanitarian philosophy that emphasizes civil society components needing such partnerships. For example, the Norwegian People’s Aid (NPA) adopts a model focusing on small/grassroots organizations to build capacities and transfer expertise.

Conversely, government-affiliated international entities and UN agencies seldom enter into such partnerships; when they do, they are mostly limited to large, lower-risk local NGOs capable of delivering “quality outputs.”

MA’AN DEVELOPMENT CENTER: A STRATEGIC PARTNERSHIP THAT ACCUMULATES RESULTS

The partnership began when the Ma’an Development Center submitted a proposal to a competitive program in the agricultural sector built on a **lean coalition model** that channeled the bulk of resources to the fields rather than to operating costs. Agreement was reached with an Australian partner (“Afida”) that uses an agile administrative model facilitating the rapid conversion of funds into direct activities, and the coalition later expanded to include “Bethlehem University” and “Asala”. The consortium received the “highest evaluation” among competing alliances and secured five years of funding with a one-year extension, providing sufficient time to generate cumulative impact that went beyond activity outputs to deeper changes in institutional practice and in behavior within the agricultural market.

From the outset, a clear governance framework was designed to distribute roles and grant partners real delegated decision-making authority. Ma’an assumed field implementation leadership and farmer empowerment; Bethlehem University handled research and development and market support; and Asala focused on the economic inclusion of women and cooperatives. A joint steering committee-comprising the partners, the donor, and the Ministry of Agriculture-was established, and regular meetings were held to resolve issues quickly and by consensus, preventing their accumulation. In practice, this design embedded a consistent mechanism for review, course correction, and learning, which translated into implementation flexibility and the partnership’s ability to adapt to changing field conditions.

The scope of work extended to both the West Bank and the Gaza Strip, with an integrated package of interventions that linked infrastructure to production and marketing: opening farm roads and improving access for equipment and to markets; rehabilitating and constructing transmission water lines; introducing aquaculture and hydroponics as solutions to intensify production and improve water-use efficiency; piloting control measures for significant pests (such as the red palm weevil); and establishing a marketing hub in Gaza to connect producers with buyers through more stable channels. In parallel, economic and rights-based empowerment channels were opened for cooperatives and women (access to chambers of commerce, business development services, and structuring relationships with the market). This linkage between “improving production factors” and “opening marketing outlets” enhanced the value added of the intervention and strengthened farmers’ resilience and capacity to continue.

The journey was not without revealing shocks. The partnership faced staff turnover and weaknesses in institutional memory, which were addressed through better documentation of operating procedures and a structured knowledge handover. Some assets in Gaza were destroyed by the Israeli occupation, resulting in the loss of critical equipment; this

necessitated maintenance and replacement plans and a reprioritization without compromising objectives. The severest test came with a temporary suspension of funding following baseless accusations after the killing of one staff member; subsequent investigations confirmed sound practice, funding was restored, and the program extended.

Throughout, the steering committee functioned as an institutional safety valve-managing risks, structuring partner communications, and demonstrating the ability to separate political pressures from the logic of program quality. At the institutional level, the partnership invested in entrenching quality and compliance systems within Ma'an and its partners: child safeguarding and PSEAH policies; an environmental policy; internal and external audits; and regular field verification visits that included structured beneficiary listening. Compliance thus shifted from a “donor requirement” to a permanent institutional value that underpinned trust and legitimacy and helped lower due-diligence costs for funders. While multi-year funding provided programmatic stability, there remained a need to increase indirect cost rates (ICR) and core funding to protect vital elements not directly charged to project activities (legal, maintenance, systems, financial audits), thereby strengthening the partnership’s sustainability and capacity to scale.

The success factors enabling the partnership’s continuity can be summarized in five pillars:

- Sufficient time and sequential learning cycles that allowed adaptation, course correction, and the building of cumulative impact.
- Specialized role-sharing that combined strong field implementation with research-marketing power and women’s/cooperative economic empowerment.
- Enabling joint governance through an active steering committee, periodic reviews, and a documentation/knowledge system that mitigated the effects of staff turnover.
- Multi-level accountability blending quality standards, beneficiary rights, and financial audit requirements-creating mutual trust and operational stability.
- The advantage of a lean-financing model that reduced intermediary administrative expenses and raised the efficiency of converting resources into outputs-paired with a standing recommendation to improve institutional (core) coverage to ensure long-term organizational resilience.

In this sequential trajectory, Ma’an’s experience demonstrates that a successful strategic partnership is not merely a funding decision, but a tightly interlinked system of adequate time, clear roles, joint decisions, and balanced accountability-enabling impact to withstand shocks and to expand from field to market, and from a single institution to the wider ecosystem.

4) Coalitions

Coalitions are formed from relationships involving more than two parties. For example, one or more international organizations partnering with one or more local partners. Usually, such relationships are confined to implementing specific projects. This configuration creates layered relationship tiers (international–international, and international–local).

This format provides access to large and complex grants, as coalitions are often formed in response to donor requirements or to strengthen the allied organizations’ chances of securing funding. This is especially visible with European Union grants and similar funding bodies that invite international organizations to partner with one or more local organizations.

According to the survey results, this type of partnership is the least prevalent compared to other forms. Nevertheless, despite its limited current spread it is not new in the Palestinian context. Particularly after the Oslo Accords and the establishment of the Palestinian Authority, international organizations regularly formed coalitions with local institutions existing at the time to support civil society as a complement to the then-nascent Palestinian Authority. These coalitions, however, have waned with political fluctuations in the Palestinian context and were negatively affected by political swings in Europe, especially the shift of some governments to the right. As Amjad Al-Shawa of the Palestinian NGO Network notes: “In the late 1990s, funding was core funding and not project-based. The subsequent evolution in Palestine shifted toward contracting initially for three to five years, then gradually year-by-year within a fixed timeframe.”

This partnership type is considered even better than strategic partnerships, as it transcends the time boundaries of strategic plans and embraces or aligns with the vision and mission of local organizations. It is among the best forms because it operates at the institutional level, not merely at the level of a strategy or a project. Funding under this model often covers part of core funding and is largely unconditional/unrestricted (or subject to acceptable conditions that do not conflict with the Palestinian context). This gives local organizations a wide margin of freedom decision-making and intervention design.

At present, however and in line with the survey results this form of partnership is almost exclusive to larger local organizations that have built strong relationships with donors and international organizations and now possess a robust “track record.” Because this partnership form requires years of relationship-building, 96% of local organizations that enjoy such partnerships have been established for more than 18 years.

9.1.1 Why Do “Implementation/Contracting” Partnerships Predominate?

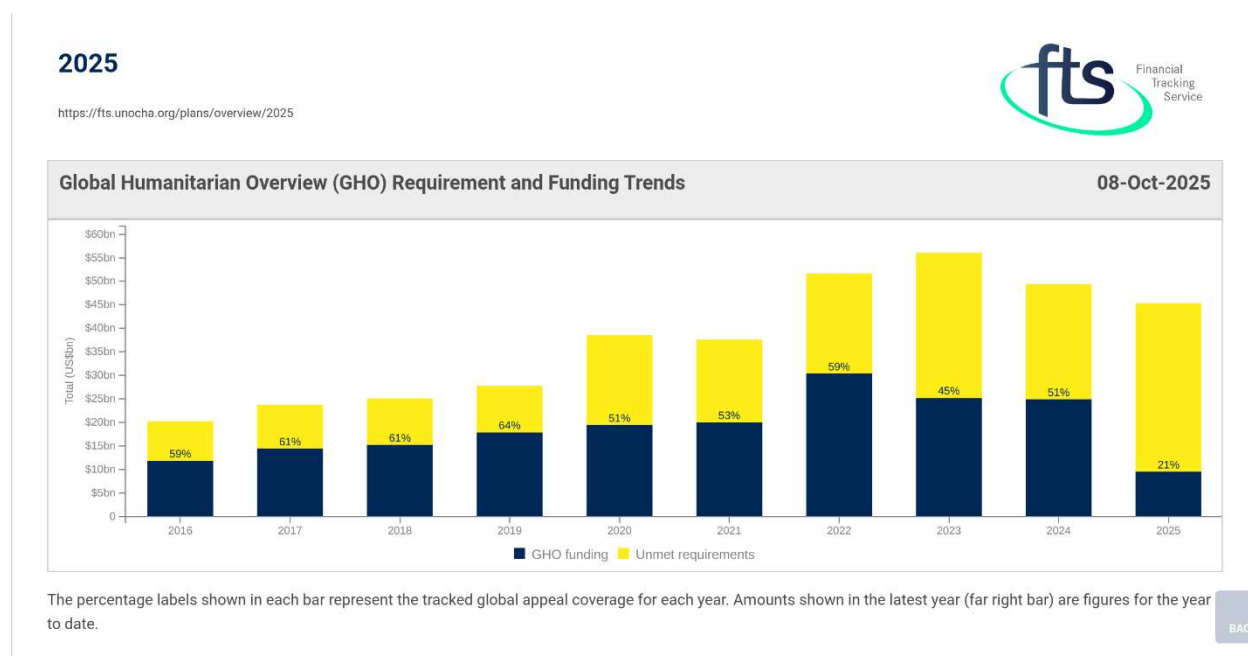


Figure-1 Funding gap over the past years

1. **Funding shortages:** Humanitarian financing has contracted sharply in recent years, notably with the cut to USAID funding which has contributed a sizable share of global financing. In 2024, reports indicated a **US\$5 billion decrease**¹⁸ in humanitarian funding. This decline coincides with growing humanitarian needs driven by disasters and wars. Palestine is no exception: only 28% of humanitarian needs were funded in 2025¹⁹.

In this environment, implementation partnerships are typically less costly than other forms because they do not cover administrative or core costs and do not require shared decision-making or risk-sharing. By contrast, other partnership types entail joint responsibility, which necessitates explicit institutional (core) funding as well as budget lines for capacity strengthening.

2. **Donor policies and short funding cycles:** Donors avoid long-term relationships with local partners due to risks that could adversely affect them and because they cannot cover such commitments over long periods. They therefore shorten the duration of grants to both international and local partners. INGOs mirror this behavior, managing risk by shortening partnership duration or narrowing their scope (turning to execution or project partnerships) with a focus on rapid, measurable

¹⁸ ALNAP: [Global Humanitarian Assistance report 2025](#)

¹⁹ OCHA Financial Tracking System: [Humanitarian Aid Contributions 2025](#)

outputs within short timeframes, coupled with high compliance oversight on spending and implementation. This pattern steers parties toward “fast execution” rather than investing in engineering long-term partnerships.

3. **Power imbalances between international and local organizations:** International organizations hold the funding key by virtue of closer proximity to donors and greater access compared to local organizations. In the Palestinian context, donors are strongly influenced by Israeli occupation pressures that create barriers to humanitarian work and hinder local organizations’ ability to contract with international counterparts (e.g., security-vetting requirements). Meanwhile, requirements stemming from Palestinian political division and the ongoing Fatah– Hamas split have eroded local organizations’ ability to operate and to forge equitable partnerships with international actors. Additional hurdles include stringent licensing to establish NGOs, the difficulty of opening bank accounts and receiving/transferring funds, and opaque procedures for granting or withholding permits to local organizations. A Director General of a local NGO summarized some of these challenges: “The fundamental challenges are those of the occupation. Today the key issue is designation, because of its implications; more importantly, the international banking mechanism, which sometimes forces you to operate in a state of instability similar to what the organization experienced decades ago.”

“There is balance, but not to the desired degree. We are still working to strengthen the principle of localization, yet we are proud to have come a long way by supporting local communities’ capacity building. Our partners’ ability to communicate and continually request changes necessarily reflects that progress.”

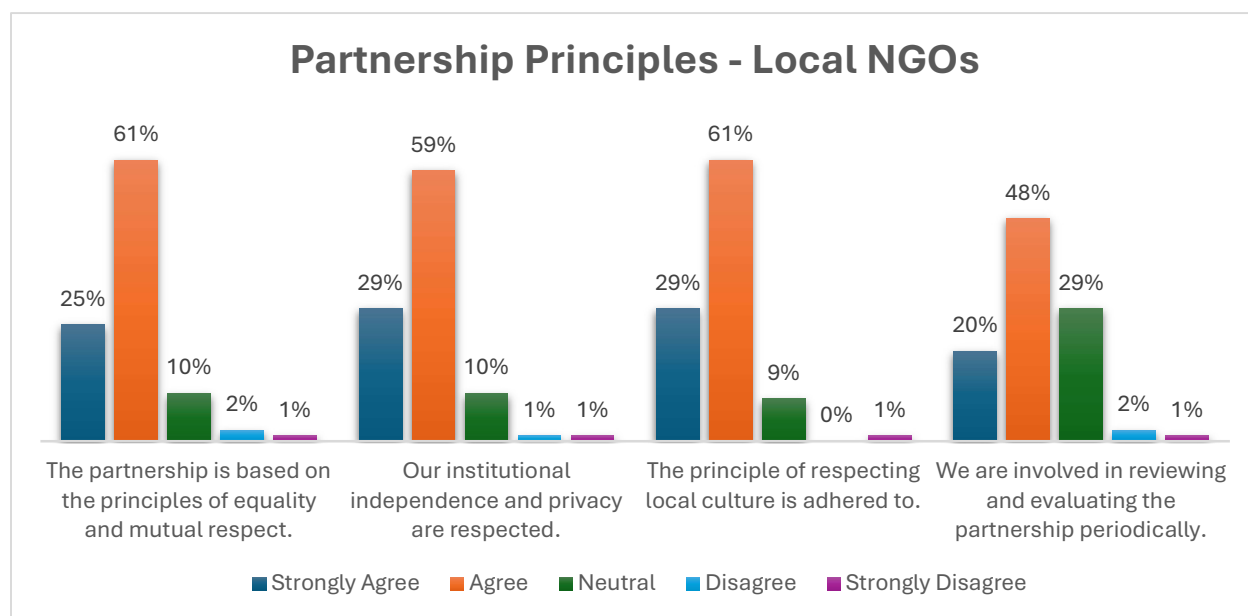
Jamil Sawalmeh, Country Director, ActionAid Palestine

During the recent Israeli war on Gaza and previously under the blockade a new dimension has further constrained local organizations’ capacities: access to the humanitarian corridor (needed to bring food and other supplies into Gaza). The Israeli authorities prevent local organizations from bringing aid into the besieged Gaza Strip while allowing only UN and international organizations to do so. This tilts the power balance toward international actors and compels local organizations to pursue partnerships even contractual ones during the war to ensure aid delivery. In practice, this has driven a major shift toward “permit-based” or distribution partnerships, in which international organizations bring aid into Gaza while local organizations act as distributors.

9.2 Partnership Principles: To What Extent Are They Applied in Practice?

Despite existing frameworks such as the Charter for Change, the Grand Bargain, and the PNGO-AIDA document, the application of partnership principles between local and international NGOs remains partial and uneven.

In theory, partnerships between local and international organizations show high commitment to partnership principles, as indicated by the survey results from both sides, with approval rates exceeding 80%. This includes respecting local culture; upholding the autonomy and specificity of the partner; and basing relationships on equality and mutual respect. However, approval drops when it comes to involving the local partner in reviewing and evaluating the partnership, with neutrality rising to 29%. Suggesting weak institutionalization in this area or a weak local role in the partnership-review process.



Both parties (international and local organizations) agreed in the surveys that adherence to partnership principles is foundational. As a Humanitarian Director in Gaza in an international organization emphasized: “Our partnership relations are governed by global principles and are aligned to the local context and its needs.” Interviews, however, told a more nuanced story. While international organizations maintain that they respect partnership principles with local counterparts and acknowledge that the latter also adhere to these principles; some local organizations see it differently. As Sami Khader, Director General of the MA'AN Development Center, put it: “There is progress in this direction (commitment to partnership principles). There are partnership, role distribution, and attention to specialization; but in some cases, there is a shortfall in transparency which needs more work. There is a gap between theory and practice and work on the ground; there are always flaws and points of contention, sometimes imposed by uncertainty about the future.” Others maintain that partnership principles remain theoretical and lack real implementation. Amjad Al-Shawa of the Palestinian NGO Network observed: “Some historic organizations like Oxfam, NRC, and NPA have a clear understanding of partnership, but others still need to understand. And some are under intense pressure given the decline in international funding for the humanitarian system and the U.S. funding cuts so there are major problems.” This underscores the gap between slogan and practice across the axes noted earlier. In partnerships where power is tilted in favor of the international side, the local side is often compelled to accept donor terms and comply with grant requirements eroding its ability to negotiate or adjust projects and interventions and undermining the essence and principles of partnership.



Interviewees also indicated that respect for local culture can clash with localization -to be discussed later- specifically with the local organization’s ability to adapt or tailor interventions to the local context. Abdullah Sharshara - Board Director of Ajyal Association for Creativity & Development noted: “Sometimes the donor’s culture is unilateral, viewing

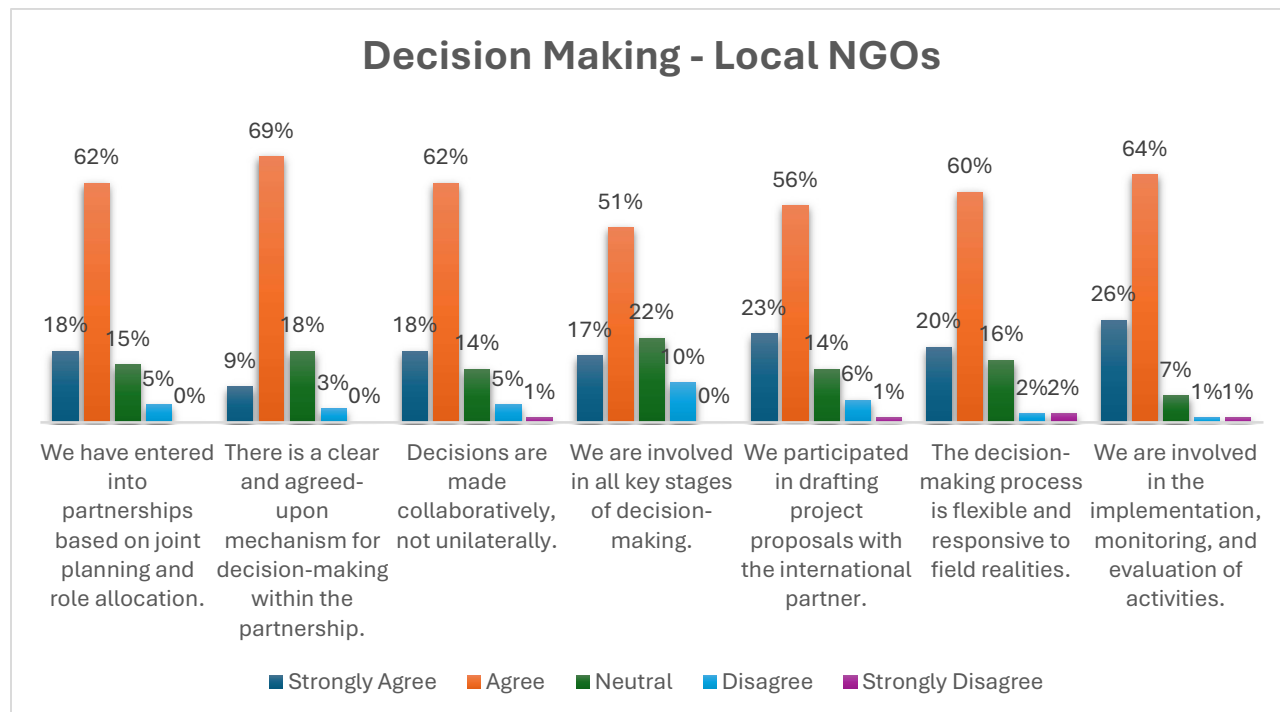
the local organization merely as an implementer. This does not depend on the donor alone, but also on the local partner.”

As the above chart shows, local and international organizations agree on the degree of one another’s commitment to partnership principles. However, the international organizations’ view is more positive regarding local organizations’ compliance (51% strong commitment), which aligns with our earlier observation that this often reflects theoretical commitment or commitment within execution boundaries.

The research team believes that the divergence between survey results and interview insights reflects the difference between theory and practice, or between expectation and reality. Organizations on both sides aspire to a partnership that respects the principles; yet this aspiration shifts under hard realities especially in Palestine, and particularly amid the current crime of genocide prompting international organizations to deviate from principles and adhere strictly to grant conditions. In this regard, local NGOs view politically conditioned funding with skepticism, regarding it as a violation of their sovereignty and, moreover, a violation of law. As Zakaria Odeh, Executive Director of the Civil Coalition for Human Rights in Jerusalem, put it: “Conditioned funding is, at its core, contrary to the constitution and the legal system governing NGOs and civil society; it is rejected. The consequences and political orientations imposed on target groups, and the assumption that some factions within the Palestinian social fabric and resistance are ‘terrorist’ this contradicts international law.”

9.3 Governance and Decision-Making

Governance within partnerships is the most reliable indicator of the power balance between partners: the stronger party tends to make decisions without involving the weaker party or involves it only superficially. By contrast, equitable partnerships as envisioned by global partnership frameworks and set out in relevant standards are built on balanced decision-making mechanisms grounded in the transparent, democratic participation of all parties in

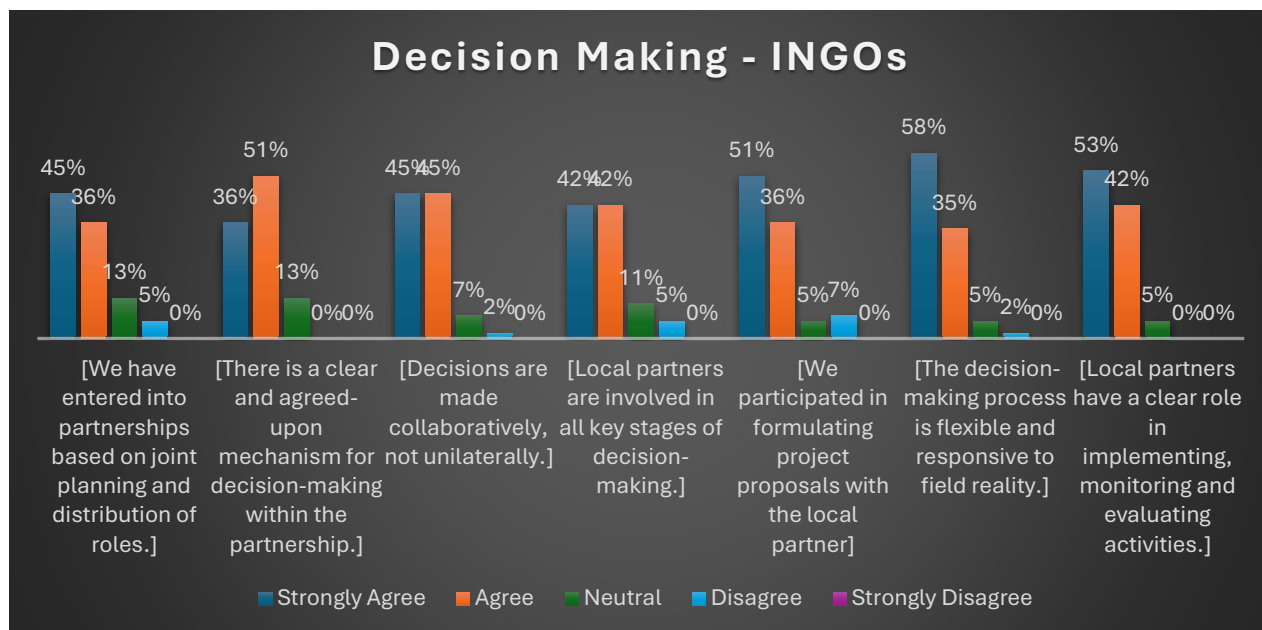


decisions that affect the partnership.

A quick look at the survey results from local and international organizations shows broad agreement in overall approval rates across the items measured, but differences in the degree of approval: local organizations tend to cluster around “agree,” whereas international organizations lean more toward “strongly agree.”

Findings on the decision-making axis align with those on partnership principles, but they also mirror the interviews in revealing divergences. While agreement rates between local and international organizations are similar across items, neutral responses differ markedly: the average neutrality rate among local organizations is roughly double ($\approx 15\%$) that of international organizations ($\approx 9\%$).

This divergence is evident in interviews. As a Humanitarian Director in Gaza in an international organization notes: “There will always be a difference in the balance of power. What matters is managing that difference consciously.” In other words, what is required is



awareness of existing asymmetries and managing them in a way that preserves the partnership and delivers its intended results.

Interviews reveal two main patterns. The first and more advanced pattern involves engaging the local partner from needs analysis and intervention design onward, with joint governance bodies (e.g., steering committees). In this context, Rasha - Gaza Partnerships Manager, Save the Children International, describes the workflow clearly: “At the activity level we start with them (local partners) from scratch... and we have a steering committee for every project.” This shift reflects movement from mere “activity implementation” to co-design, placing the local partner early in the program cycle and establishing channels for subsequent review and adjustment.

“The civil society organization must be sovereign over its own decisions.”
— **Oday Abu Karsh, Director General, REFORM**

The second pattern appears when the local partner is brought in late in the program cycle. Here, several local interviewees characterized participation as tokenistic or delayed. While some organizations gave generally positive assessments as Raffoul Rofa Adv., Director – Society of Saint Yves, “The level of transparency is good... and the level of participation in decision-making is good”. Others acknowledge a persistent gap. A Program Manager at an international organization, observed: “We set priorities and design interventions jointly, based on community needs. However, donors’ priorities and available funding can sometimes affect what can be implemented. Even so, we make sure to engage local partners from the earliest stages to ensure programs are effective and appropriate.” This second pattern is most visible in implementation partnerships, where the local partner’s role is limited to execution, with no say in needs identification or intervention design. Another view sees a degree of balance, as Abdullah Sharshara, Board Director of the Ajjal Association for

Creativity & Development, noted: “There is always a kind of balance because the donor always needs a local partner,” while also stressing the agency of local actors: “Local partners must understand that their role is not merely to implement; they have significant strengths, which is why institutions contract with them. The challenge lies in the local partner recognizing this balance, understanding its role and sources of strength, and dealing with the donor as a peer, with an independent identity and decision.”

International organizations, for their part, emphasize that needs identification comes from local partners. A Response Director at an international organization, stressed that consulting local partners is essential and occurs early: “Even before we hold our own design workshops, we first meet with local partners; the initial ideas we hear come from them.” In the same vein, a Programs Director at an international NGO, explained that leadership transfer becomes real when funding is coupled with decision authority: “Decision-making is joint... the partner identifies the need and discusses the proposal with us, and then we fund it”. A model that links flexible financing with the right to adapt based on local context.

A set of factors undermines local organizations’ ability to achieve balance in decision-making with international counterparts, notably:

- Weak funding for local organizations (both in volume and donor diversity), compelling them to accept terms set by the funding-controlling international partner.
- Weak internal decision-making mechanisms in some local organizations, sometimes concentrated in a few individuals without broader consultation.
- Limited awareness among local organizations (especially grassroots or newly established entities) of healthy partnership conditions and the obligations required of international organizations under global standards.
- Fragile political and legal standing of some local organizations (e.g., difficulty renewing registration, problems activating bank accounts, or being designated “terrorist” by the Israeli occupation), making them more vulnerable and less able to negotiate financing terms or participate meaningfully in partnership decisions.
- Donor funding constraints and conditions that narrow local organizations’ room for negotiation and maneuver, reducing their role to compliance.
- The relative strength of international organizations and their control over grants, which amplifies their decision-making power especially in implementation partnerships, where local organizations lose much of their say.

“NGOs are often reduced to individual figures, and this is one of the most significant weaknesses in NGOs.”
Uday Abu Karsh, Director General, REFORM

Where partnerships show better balance, both local and international organizations tend to employ shared decision tools such as:

- Joint committees comprising all parties to oversee the partnership and make decisions.
- Clear delineation of roles and processes for each party, with defined operating frameworks and authorities.
- Evidence-based decision-making, grounded in clear justifications and accurate information.

“In Gaza... donors did not show a willingness to adjust compliance mechanisms... and some partners withdrew, saying: what’s being asked of us is simply too much.”

A Response Director at an international organization

Greater awareness among local actors of partnership concepts and diverse experience bases strengthens their ability to participate effectively in decisions and, at times, to assert those decisions.

In sum, institutionalizing the partnership (joint committees, clear decision procedures, defined roles and authorities) is the key separator between genuine participation and tokenism. The clearer and more operational the shared governance instruments are, the closer we come to a true partnership in which all parties exert meaningful, sustained influence over program orientations and indicators.

9.3.1 Balance within Cluster Working Groups

Achieving balance in decision-making between local and international organizations requires moving beyond the binary of “local implementation international planning” to a model where authority, responsibilities, and knowledge are clearly distributed, with mutual accountability. Observers of the cluster system and its management structures will note that the decision-making balance tilts significantly toward international organizations, which nearly monopolize coordination roles shaping the decisions that flow from them. Local organizations, by contrast, are often confined to participation and attendance, contributing to coordination efforts but not steering them. Although recent years have seen some change owing in part to the localization task force involving PNGO and other civil society actors there remains substantial room for improvement.

Balance cannot be achieved if local organizations are brought in late. An ALNAP study²⁰ explicitly recommends that the international system include local organizations in decision-making, beginning with the establishment of joint steering committees at the concept stage, granting substantive veto power over options that do not fit the context, and incorporating local contextual evidence into the theory of change and risk plan. In the Palestinian context, this can be operationalized through steps such as:

²⁰ ALNAP: [Breaking Boundaries: Local And National Actors’ Engagement In The Humanitarian development-Peace Nexus 2025](#)

- Consolidating coordination networks and working groups operating under a single sector.
- Establishing locally elected leadership drawn from both local and international organizations to strengthen local leadership.
- Reviewing and discussing the structures and operating mechanisms of cluster committees and their sub-groups in light of a clear, shared understanding of localization and local leadership.

9.3.2 What Does This Mean in Practice?

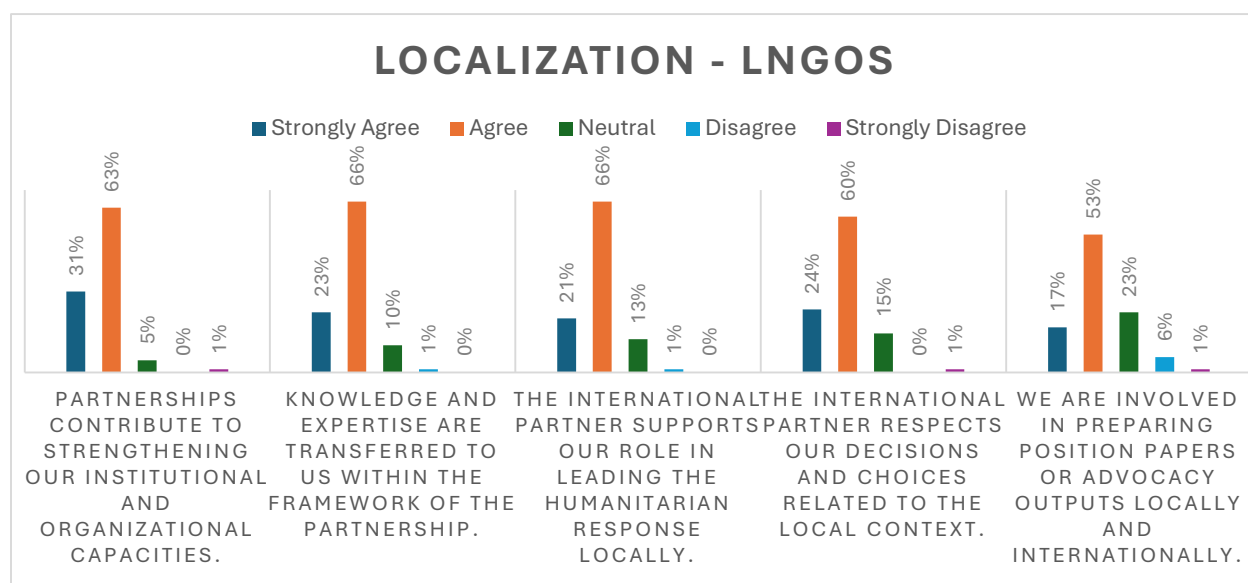
- Expand joint steering committees to include clear mandates for adjusting activities and indicators, not merely for oversight.
- Adopt flexible funding baskets within grants (with fair rates for institutional and indirect costs) to grant the local partner decision authority commensurate with its field responsibilities.
- Embed a RACI decision matrix in partnership agreements specifying who decides, who is consulted, and who is informed and review it periodically with both parties.
- Involve the local partner in early donor engagements (where feasible) to ensure upfront alignment and reduce the need for late, one-sided adjustments.

9.4 Localization

9.4.1 What Does “Localization” Mean in This Study?

Localization here is understood as a real (not rhetorical) shift in the center of gravity from “local implementation under international management” to partnerships led by local organizations in needs analysis, program design, decision-making, and resource management accompanied by structured financial investment in institutional capacities (governance, finance, MEAL, human resources) and fair risk-sharing.

9.4.2 From Consultation to Co-Ownership



Survey results show broad and regular consultation and communication between partners, with high agreement on “joint planning” and “co-drafting proposals.” In theoretical terms, this indicates strong localization. International-organization survey responses align closely with local organizations on these same axes. In the research team’s view, this convergence confirms that the prevailing and mutually acknowledged form of localization is procedural/operational in nature.

Interviews, however, indicate that the deeper localization local organizations aspire to in their partnerships is insufficiently present. The final authority over priorities and intervention pathways is not always shared to a sufficient degree. Although international organizations increasingly recognize the need to involve local

“The operational center of gravity remained with local organizations because of their ability to move under fire; however, access disruptions, ‘administrative burdens,’ and shifting mechanisms for bringing aid into Gaza constrained the impact of their interventions.”

Amjad Al-Shawa - Director, PNGO

partners from the needs-analysis stage as Rasha - Gaza Partnerships Manager, Save the Children International, affirmed: “We use a complementary model: part of the activities is implemented through partners, and another part is implemented directly by Save the Children... We select partners based on criteria of gender, specialization, and location, and we plan the project together to ensure success”. This approach raises localization at the initial design phase. Yet several local representatives spoke of a voice gap at decisive moments. As Rifaat Sabbah, Director General of the Teacher Creativity Center, put it: “Power relations are always problematic... in practice, power relations are tied to money,” meaning that influence in analysis does not automatically translate into binding decision rights unless clear joint-governance arrangements are in place. Accordingly, localization tends to occur at the operational level of activities and interventions (e.g., needs identification and contextual adaptation). A pattern visible in both surveys and interviews where international organizations grant local partners wider authority to lead needs assessments, but that authority narrows in areas such as budget allocation and programming thereafter.

Here, differences in local capacity are evident: established local NGOs can assert leadership, while grassroots organizations often cannot, due to capacity constraints and funding needs. As Sami Khader, Director General of the MA'AN Development Center -an organization with a long civic record and geographic reach across the West Bank and Gaza- explained: “Generally, in most of our partnerships as development and relief organizations, we do not accept direct implementation by international partner organizations. When we enter into a partnership, we, as a Palestinian organization present on the ground, are the implementers, while our partners’ role is limited to liaising with the funding agency and the government, in terms of preparing administrative and financial reports and monitoring project implementation.”

“Marginalizing local organizations is no longer effective because leadership is local and their development must be strengthened. This lays the foundation for a strong community capable of resilience and facing challenges.”
Jamil Sawalmeh, Country Director, ActionAid Palestine

Overall, international organizations do commit to giving local organizations the lead in needs assessments and priority setting within funded projects and grants. But this remains limited to technical aspects of interventions and does not consistently extend to other core elements of localization, such as robust capacity strengthening and the budget allocations required to sustain it.

9.4.3 Access to Funding and Institutional Financing (Core/ICR)

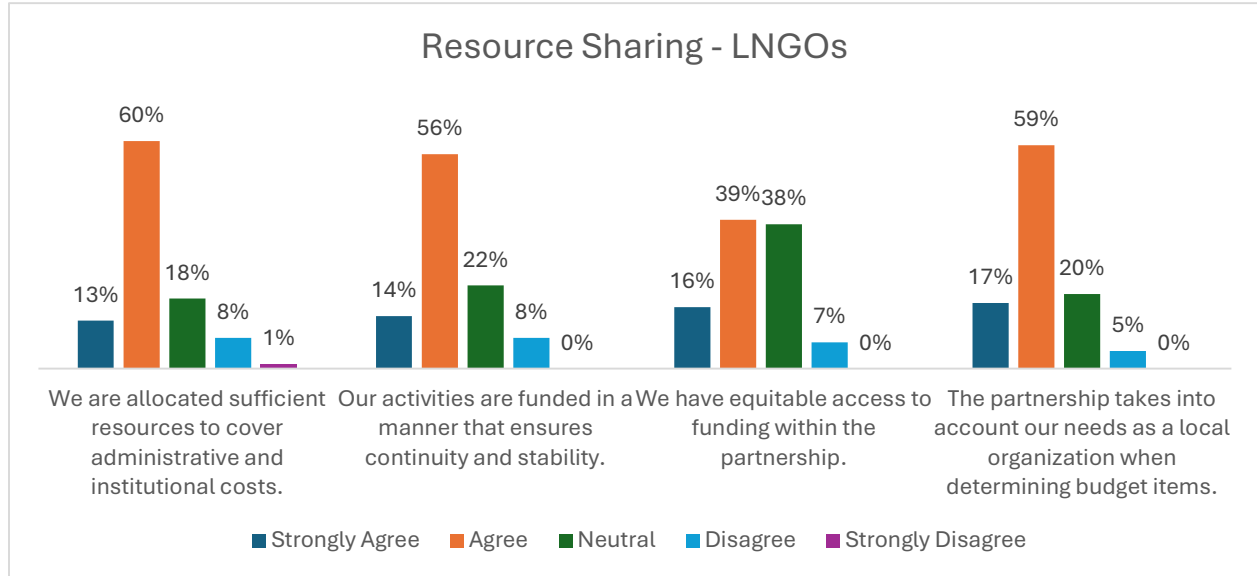
Across both surveys, partnerships fund implementation efficiently; interviews, however, make clear that funding does not sufficiently cover long-term institutional costs (core and/or fair ICR) essential to sustaining local capacities.

As one interviewee noted: “We carry the field and follow-up burden, but the rate of indirect costs is insufficient; this exhausts the organization and keeps it trapped in the grant cycle.” Rifaat Sabbah, Director General of the Teacher Creativity Center, added: “Partnership is not fair regarding the administrative burden: our budgets are limited while theirs are large.” By contrast, Sami Khader, Director General of the MA'AN Development Center, emphasized that achieving a fair share for administrative coverage requires institutional strength that compels the international partner to honor the local partner’s position: “We always strive to make our partnerships genuine and fair, not subordinate. We refuse to enter into a partnership unless the administrative costs are fairly covered between the two parties, taking into account the amount of work done.”

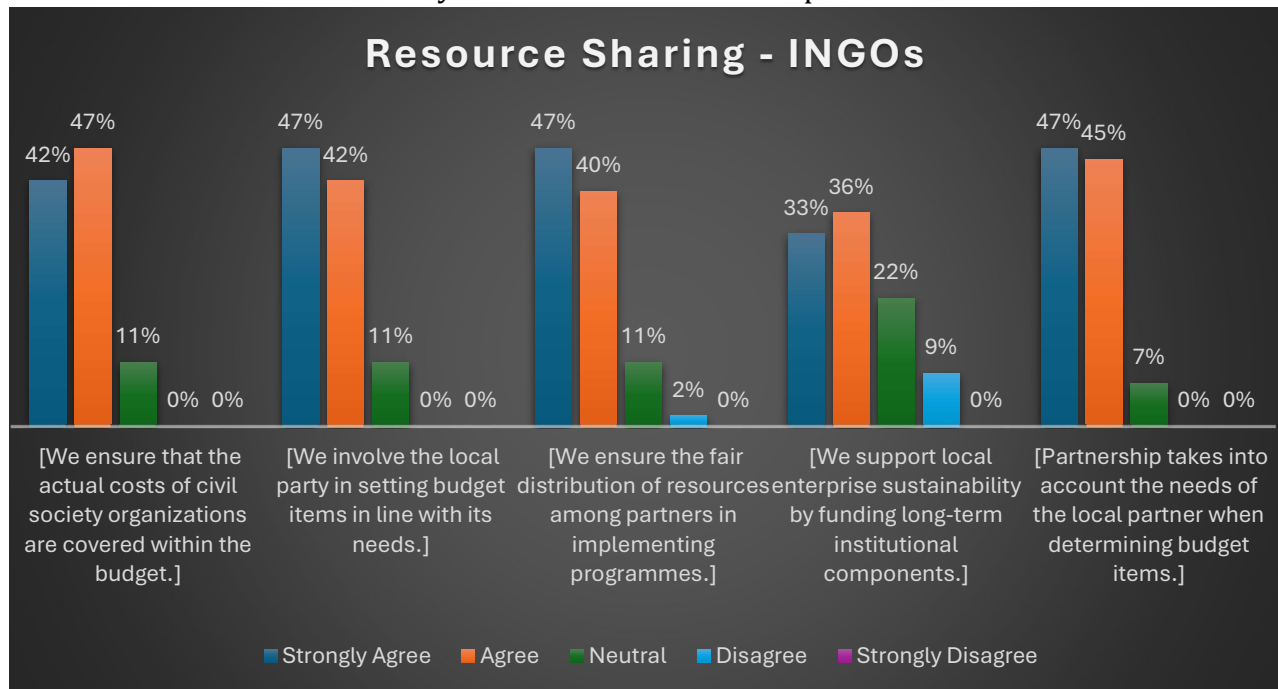
An Office Director of an international organization in Gaza stressed that the shrinking civic space raises compliance costs and risks for local actors unless these costs are funded within grants: “There is no meaning to ‘empowerment’ if it is not funded.” Insufficient institutional-cost coverage turns local partners into requirement-takers, rather than actors able to impose shared standards.

Notably, when local organizations were asked whether they have “a fair opportunity to access funding within the partnership,” neutral responses reached 38% versus 55% agreement, reflecting divergent views among local NGOs on how “fair” access to funding actually is. Interviews underline the point in discussions about indirect-cost coverage, sharing administrative costs, and equitable salary structures between local organizations and their international partners. Conversely, international organizations perceived funding fairness more positively: their survey showed 87% agreement on “ensuring the fair distribution of resources with local organizations.”

Related results show the highest neutrality among international organizations (22%) on “supporting the sustainability of local organizations through long-term institutional funding,” with a still high but comparatively lower 69% agreement suggesting a general weakness in this dimension of funding frameworks for local partners, especially concerning sustainability.



These findings reinforce interview evidence that funding is concentrated on activities, while institutional sustainability which underpins localization and



preserves local organizations’ continuity is often overlooked. Thus, shifting responsibility is not a mere declaration but a toolkit comprising: a steering committee with adjustment

authority, a flexible funding basket jointly governed, a funded capacity-building plan, and a clear timeline for role transfer (including financial and risk management).

9.4.4 Strengthening the Capacities of Local Partners

“Capacity building and institutional capacities must be top priorities for any organization’s board. To truly become an institution, it must cultivate a legal, effective, dynamic, and evolving institutional culture.”

Dr. Aref Hussein – Founder & CEO of Alnayzak Organization

In the Palestinian context, balanced partnerships cannot be achieved without clear, protected budgets for institutional capacity strengthening of local partners. Surveys and interviews converge on the view that capacity strengthening is not a secondary add-on but an operational prerequisite for sustained partnerships and genuine localization. Interviews indicate that strategic partnerships, and some project-based partnerships, do include dedicated capacity-building budgets. Needs are identified either through joint assessment or based on local requests provided they fall within the partnership’s scope or serve the project’s purpose. By contrast, capacity

strengthening is largely absent in implementation contracts, where INGOs see little value in training executing entities, deeming it out of scope.

Interviews and field observations identify several recurring challenges:

- **Insufficient capacity-building budgets:** a by-product of overall funding shortfalls. Project-core activities take priority, leaving capacity strengthening as a secondary component.
- **Short funding cycles that make capacity strengthening superficial:** short-term funding rarely allows meaningful capacity development; organizations often resort to short training or policy/manual development to maximize limited resources within tight timeframes. Larger local NGOs sometimes develop long-term capacity plans, pieced together through support from multiple donors and an adaptive strategy generally out of reach for grassroots or nascent organizations.

- **Repetition and donor-driven topics:** within project-based funding, significant portions of capacity-building efforts are repetitive, reflecting donor policies and limited room for local priority-setting. Grassroots NGOs, with high staff turnover for various reasons, often repeat the same interventions each cycle. Jamil Sawalmeh, Country Director, ActionAid Palestine, summarized: “The problem in capacity building is fragmentation and the absence of a unified vision, because each donor works in their own way. Organizations have become dependent on donor policy, and the general charter for work or partnership principles has faded.

“We have a tool for assessing the local partner and based on it we design an intervention plan with the partner, determine the partner’s area of specialization, and identify funding opportunities.”

A Program Manager at an international organization

9.4.5 Direct Implementation

Several interviews acknowledged cases where international organizations implement directly -more common in emergencies or where donor conditions require it- creating uneven competition and delaying the growth of local capacity. Interviews also noted instances where INGOs directly entered implementation in areas that could have been led by local organizations, especially in emergencies or where INGOs possess significant assets and logistics. Some INGOs justified this by time pressures and compliance or by the absence of suitable local expertise for required interventions. From a local perspective, this forfeits opportunities for learning and leadership accumulation. As one interviewee put it: “We are called in to implement when needed, but when large funding arrives, the international organization implements directly, and we lose the chance to build capacity and leadership.” Rifaat Sabbah, Director General of the Teacher Creativity Center, added: “The requirement to work through local organizations is essential; it is the basis for partnerships aimed at strengthening our institutions, not theirs. All the strength financially, programmatically, and in knowledge content should lie with local institutions.”

During the Israeli war on Gaza, many international organizations with no prior presence in the Strip began operating, some through partnerships with local organizations, others via direct implementation.

“We believe that an international organization builds capacities, gives a voice, and amplifies local voices—but we do not displace or compete with local organizations.”
Office Director of an international organization in Gaza

AGRICULTURAL RELIEF: A MODEL OF LOCAL LEADERSHIP

The partnership story began with an early realization at the Agricultural Relief (PARC) that long-term financing relationships aligned with its strategy and farmers’ needs could convert the organization’s field experience since its establishment in 1983 into wider and more sustainable impact. As its institutional presence expanded 12 branches in the West Bank and 4 in Gaza, 223 staff, and more than 2,000 volunteers the organization opened up to building a network of local and international partnerships grounded in agricultural specialization; work in rural areas and “Area C” of the West Bank; land reclamation, roads, and water lines; and, more recently, programs for youth and women’s empowerment, advanced training for agricultural engineers, and specialized agricultural financial services through a microfinance arm, “REEF,” alongside marketing products to 22 countries.

This expansion created a foundation of trust and “fundability” that made the organization an attractive partner for diverse donors. The defining milestone was a government partnership with Luxembourg, a relationship that began with a memorandum of understanding renewed every four years and that enables PARC to lead design and implementation at a level of detail exceeding 90%, within a constructive dialogue to ensure alignment with the donor’s priorities. The partnership allocated a budget of €2.6 million per four-year cycle, with audited annual technical and financial reports and an end-of-cycle evaluation followed by recommendations that are taken seriously in the subsequent cycle producing an institutional learning loop that improves programming quality year after year.

This procedural and values-based framework effective decision delegation in exchange for transparent, multi-level accountability established a rare model for relations between a government donor and a local organization that leads its sector. Substantively, the partnership (the “Land 2” project) focused on three integrated pillars: protecting natural resources and strengthening farmers’ resilience; building institutional and technical capacities of beneficiaries and associations; and integrating environmental and climate-change considerations. In practice, this translated into expanding Luxembourg-cycle programs for agricultural engineer certification with around 1,400 engineers graduating to work across the sector; supporting solar energy for associations, reducing monthly electricity bills by 600–700

shekels; targeted grants for women (17 grants of €5,000 each) to establish or expand small rural enterprises; and upgrading training centers in Jericho, Zababdeh, and Gaza. By linking human capital development, lower operating costs, and economic empowerment of local actors, the partnership generated compound effects that sustain results beyond each funding cycle.

At the ecosystem level, PARC maintained healthy diversification of relationships: close cooperation with Palestinian universities (Al-Quds, Birzeit, An-Najah) and municipal/village councils; activation of 78 community protection committees as grassroots partners; and international partnerships with organizations such as Oxfam, GIZ, and Christian Aid, as well as Arab funds and Spanish institutions amounting in one year to roughly 50 partners together with a clear policy of declining USAID funding to safeguard autonomy and value alignment. Diversification served not merely to broaden funding, but as a hedging strategy that distributes risk, shields local decision-making from reliance on a single source, and keeps the organization positioned as a partner rather than a contractor.

Because partnerships are tested under pressure, the organization also faced severe challenges including the destruction of its training center in Gaza during the last war but addressed them through a pragmatic approach: reprioritizing, mobilizing local and international networks to offset losses, and a strict commitment to continuity of essential services for farmers. While government partnerships are typically more sensitive to procedural constraints, the relationship with Luxembourg stood out for its credibility and respect for the rights of the Palestinian people, keeping interventions governed by professional standards rather than political conditionalities an attribute acknowledged by both sides and reflected in smooth correspondence and effective periodic evaluations.

The model’s success and continuity can be summarized in four interlinked pillars:

- Strategic alignment and effective delegation leads design and implementation within a clear governance and accountability framework.
- Multi-year financing ensures institutional learning and adaptation cycles and enables investment in capacities and systems, not only activities.
- Compound resilience-oriented impact that combines human capital development, reduced production costs, and the empowerment of women and grassroots associations.
- Partner diversification and risk hedging through a broad local–international network and policies of financial and values-based independence.

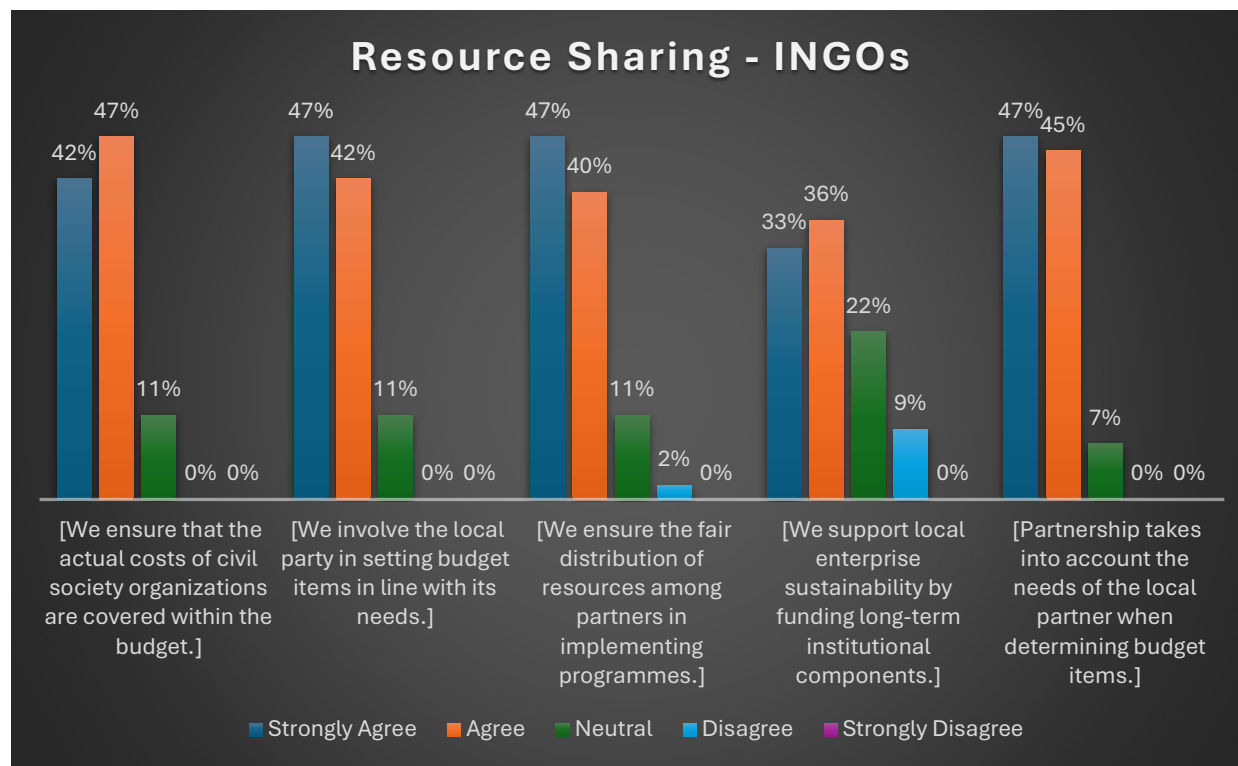
Through these elements, PARC has preserved its standing as a strategic partner, not a mere implementing arm, converting its long professional history into credible negotiating power

“Local and International NGOs partnerships in Palestine” The Land Scape



that values local knowledge and amplifies its impact on agricultural value chains and the resilience of rural communities.

9.5 Funding and Resource Sharing



9.5.1 The Big Picture- Ample Activity Funding vs. Scarcity of Core Support

Findings from the local-organization survey indicate that the prevailing funding pattern enables activity implementation but does not provide sufficient institutional (core) financing to cover indirect costs and systems building. The item “allocating sufficient resources to cover administrative and institutional costs” recorded the lowest approval level (about 12.6%), with high neutrality hinting that most local partners receive operational, project-bound funding rather than organizational sustainability funding (core salaries, systems development, governance, organization-wide MEAL). By contrast, indicators of procedural transparency (access to agreements, information-sharing) appeared strong, reflecting good contractual compliance without addressing the core-funding gap. This produces mixed perceptions among organizations regarding the fairness of funding and its distribution. As Sami Khader, Director General of the MA’AN Development Center, put it: “There are many partnerships we have gone through that were not fair, including unfair financial coverage. Sometimes we were forced to deal with that partnership reluctantly in order to avoid losing the funding allocated to the target groups, but we do our best not to compromise on the fundamental matters that enshrine fairness between the two parties and respect the role of the Palestinian institution, and we have often rejected partnerships that did not achieve the acceptable level for us.” Khader also described the abundance of activity funding during the war on Gaza: “When the war broke out, financial support for Gaza increased to cope with the

catastrophic conditions and to meet urgent humanitarian and relief needs, and to save people’s lives. The services provided, such as the distribution of drinking water, hot meals, food parcels, hygiene and dignity kits, tents, tarpaulins, clothing, mobile toilets, and other services for displaced families constitute essential priorities to preserve the lives of our people. Unfortunately, such services require provision to displaced families in light of the continuation of war, killing, and destruction”.

This pattern aligns with local interviewees’ remarks that they “carry the field burden along with a substantial share of monitoring and evaluation,” yet the indirect costs granted do not reflect actual cost, leaving them in a ‘grant treadmill’ that exhausts staff and prevents institutional accumulation.

9.5.2 Budget Allocation Mechanisms

In international–local partnerships, budget-allocation mechanisms are not merely accounting arrangements; they are the practical expression of power balance, risk-sharing, and the limits of flexibility or rigidity in funding factors that shape partnership quality and the feasibility of “localization.”

Key mechanisms commonly used to allocate budgets across partnership types include:

- **Direct vs. Indirect Costs (Overheads/ICR):** Agreements set percentages for so-called indirect costs (management, systems, governance). The Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC)²¹ has recommended including a fair share of indirect costs for local partners, establishing internal policies for their use, and moving toward “Full Indirect Cost Recovery” for local organizations, rather than channeling them exclusively to the international intermediary. This mechanism addresses a chronic gap in partnerships and directly affects local organizations’ ability to build sustainable systems.
- **Ceilings and Percentage-Based Reprogramming/Realignment:** Flexible-funding agreements permit budget reallocations within relative limits (e.g., 10–20%) without prior approval, in exchange for subsequent notification and justification. Practical flexibility is also measured by the presence of contingency lines, price-fluctuation reserves, and market-responsive pricing. These arrangements align with the “quality funding” thrust of Grand Bargain 2.0, which links flexibility with risk-sharing and accountability²².

²¹ IASC: [Provision of overheads to local and national partners 2022](#)

²² Grand Bargain: [Briefing Paper](#)

- **Collective Mechanisms (Pooled Funds):** Funds such as CBPFs/CERF allow direct allocations to national and local organizations, and local shares have increased in recent years. UN reviews note that, in 2024, country-based pooled funds allocated a growing proportion to local organizations compared with previous years, with improvements in disbursement speed and reprogramming flexibility, supporting more balanced partnerships at country level.
- **Institutional (Core) Funding:** As opposed to project-only financing, this dedicates part of the grant to systems, governance, and human resources (MEAL, finance, digitalization), not just activity delivery. The OECD-DAC Recommendation²³ on Enabling Civil Society underscores the importance of multi-year, accessible funding to enable civil society reinforcing “localization” and supporting the sustainability of partnerships.
- **Conditional/Restricted/Earmarked Funding:** Here, funds are tagged for specific activities or sectors, with conditions on target groups, delivery methods, or intervention types. Conditional funding is a tool donors use to ensure the intended purposes of grants. Briefings by ICVA, ODI, and Grand Bargain reviews have stressed that reducing conditionality is critical to achieving fairer, more localized budgets²⁴.

“For us, conditional funding falls into two levels: first, objective conditions related to financial management—this is the donor’s right and is acceptable to us as an organization. Second, any political condition that excludes any Palestinian group, regardless of its type—we reject such funding. This has happened to us in our professional journey.”

Adi Abu Karsh, Director General, REFORM

These mechanisms vary by partnership type and actors involved. For example, in implementation partnerships, budgets are allocated directly to activities (conditional funding) for the local partner in return for delivery effort, with no institutional costs covered. In strategic partnerships, all or part of the funding is typically flexible within the partner’s institutional strategy. In project-based partnerships, conditional funding predominates, with contingency lines and sometimes limited flexible components.

²³ OECD: [Enabling Civil Society 2024](#)

²⁴ Grand Bargain: [Briefing Paper](#)

Based on interviews and observations of funding practices in the Palestinian context, several patterns emerge:

- **High central management costs on the international side:** Interviews indicate that a significant portion of the budget goes to the international organization’s grant-management costs (management, compliance, coordination, visibility), while the local organization receives activity budgets with limited indirect-cost margins.
- **Flexible vs. conditional funding:** Some grants include “flexible” lines allowing reallocation in response to context raising the local partner’s capacity to make reasonable financial decisions. As Amjad Al-Shawa (PNGO) emphasized: “Longer and flexible funding is the key to transferring leadership; localization cannot live on short grants.”
- **Short funding cycles and structural impact:** Short cycles especially in Gaza and emergency settings push toward ‘rapid execution’ models (service contracts) and undermine investment in the local partner’s institutional base. Some international organizations use a staged approach: rapid entry followed by deepened partnership assessment and funded capacity plans; a balanced pathway, but one that requires a longer funding ladder to bear fruit.
- **Weak core/indirect funding:** In practice, most contracts grant locals an ICR (or “indirect expenses”) below actual need, failing to cover sustainability elements (core salaries, systems development, digital transformation, internal audit). The result is long-term erosion of local capacity, reduced implementation quality, and higher staff turnover. While international-organization survey results show strong agreement ($\approx 41.8\text{--}47.3\%$ strongly agree) that they cover true costs, involve locals in budgeting, and ensure fair distribution, long-term institutional (core) support remains the weakest ($\approx 32.7\%$ strongly agree). This means local organizational sustainability remains below what is needed compared to activity funding. Local surveys, when posed the question directly (e.g., adequacy of institutional-cost coverage), show lower satisfaction and higher neutrality, evidence of a structural gap between how internationals perceive resource fairness and how locals experience actual cost coverage.

“Up to now, local organizations face major problems due to funding shortfalls. Local organizations have varying capacities—some have good capabilities, while others suffer from administrative and logistical weaknesses.”

A Programme Manager at a UN Organization

- **A minimum allocation for local partners in the Humanitarian Fund:** Notably, under OCHA’s Humanitarian Pooled Fund in Palestine, coalitions formed between local and international organizations benefitted from PNGO’s efforts within the Localization Committee, which helped secure a minimum 40% share of the fund for local organizations an instance of good practice that strengthens local leadership and localization.

In short, current partnerships provide good implementation funding and procedural transparency, but they suffer a core-funding gap that undermines local partners’ institutional sustainability and keeps the power balance tilted. The solution is not merely technical but governance-and-finance together: higher ICR and explicit core funding, combined with flexibility managed through joint decision-making. With this package, project financing shifts from “hitting indicators” to investing in a capable local institution which is, ultimately, the true test of resource-sharing and partnership fairness.

9.6 Transparency and Accountability

9.6.1 What Do We Consider “Transparency” Within a Partnership?

- **Documentary and rules transparency:** The local partner’s access to agreements and financial annexes; documenting roles and lines of responsibility from the outset; and sharing workplans and periodic reports.
- **Budget transparency:** Access to line-item details, ICR/indirect-cost criteria, reprogramming mechanisms, and the timing of financial transfers.
- **Decision transparency:** Sharing steering-committee deliberations, meeting minutes, RACI matrices (who decides/consulted/informed), and channels for objection and dispute resolution.

9.6.2 Strong Procedural Transparency... and Weak Two-Way Accountability

Mutual transparency is foundational to any effective partnership. In reality, however, there is a clear absence of information from international organizations to local partners regarding financing, decision-making mechanisms, and performance evaluation. Conversely, local organizations are required to submit detailed reports, while the same is not consistently demanded of the international side.

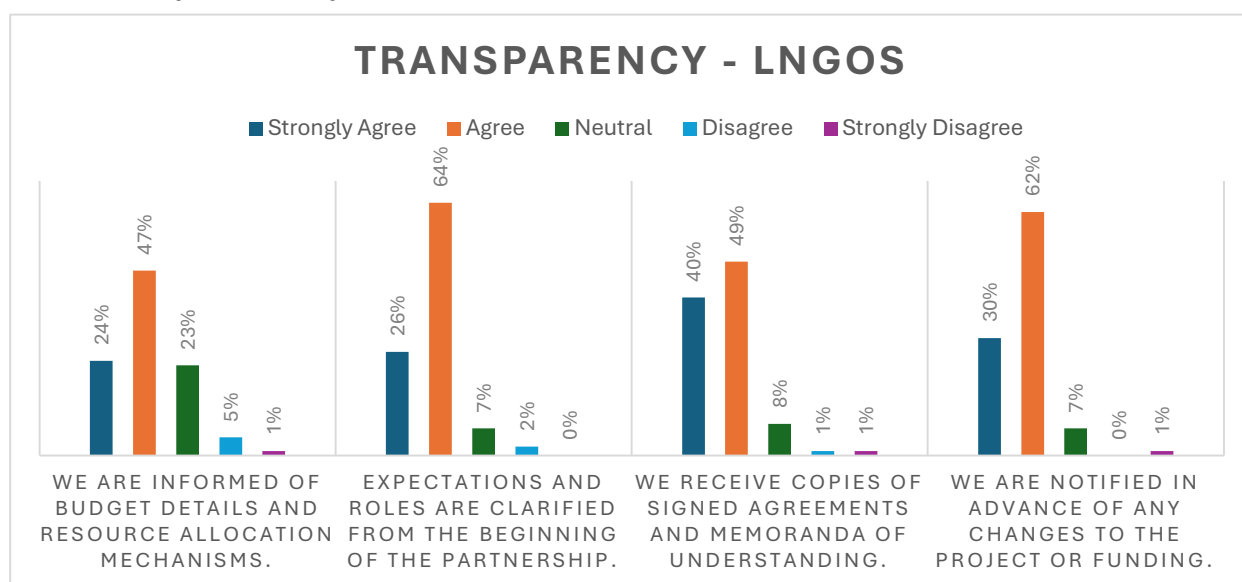
For example, an A4EP (2023) report²⁵ noted that a number of local partners do not receive copies of full project budgets nor participate in setting administrative-expense or implementation-cost percentages.

Information transparency: Locally, procedural transparency is relatively good (document-sharing/notifications of changes), but governance transparency (who makes partnership-level decisions) remains weaker. Internationally, organizations reported high agreement on document and information exchange, which they view as a strength.

“There is a need for balanced accountability between international and national/local partner organizations in humanitarian and community work to ensure the sector's sustainability in terms of identity and to meet the needs of Palestinian society.”

**Renad Qubaj, Director General,
Tamer Institute for Community
Education**

Survey results indicate that current partnerships enjoy good levels of procedural transparency (e.g., receiving copies of agreements/MoUs, clarifying roles at the outset, advance notice of changes). Confidence drops, however, around mutual accountability: items related to “the ability to hold the international partner accountable when it breaches the agreement” recorded limited strong agreement, with neutrality rising on this item. This suggests that the transparency achieved so far is closer to administrative compliance than to joint financial and programmatic governance that would allow both parties to hold each other to account for partnership conduct and outcomes, not only activity indicators. As a Director General of local NGO, observed: “In international partnerships... accountability is one-way.”

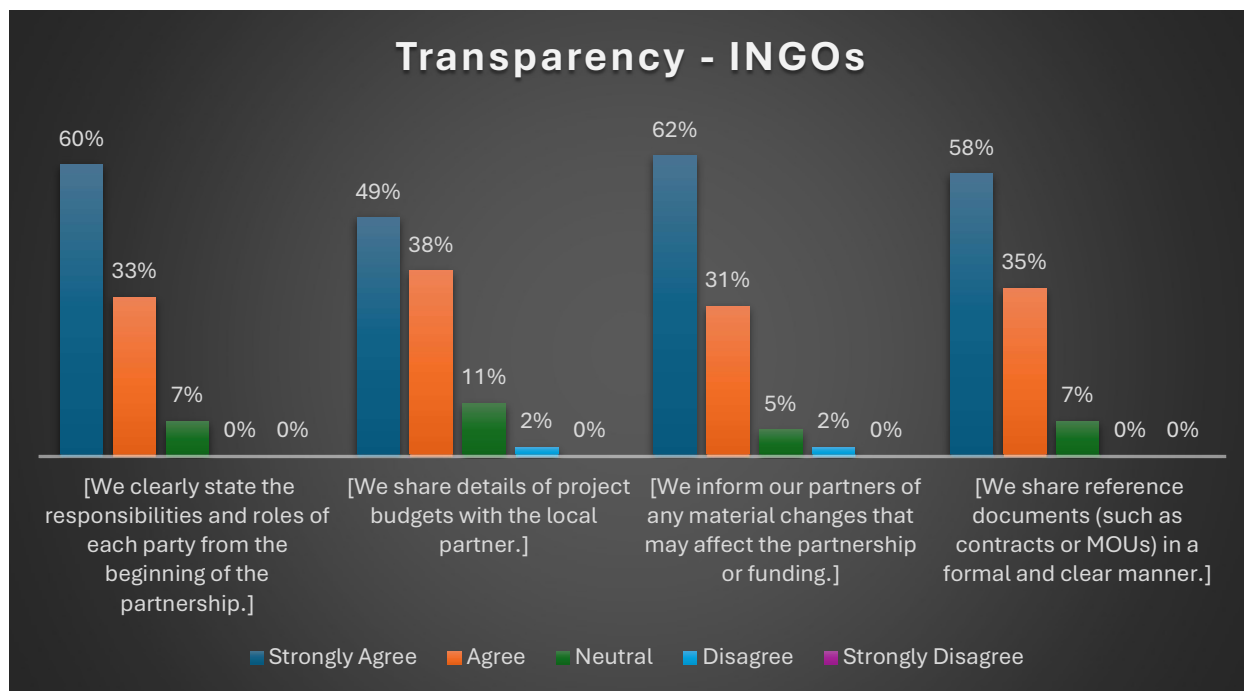


²⁵ Alliance for Empowering Partnerships (A4EP), 2023, “Reimagining the Humanitarian System.”

Overall, the survey shows improvement in documentary and operational-information transparency, but decision and budget transparency still vary across partnerships and sectors. Many local organizations perceive that critical decision points (indicator changes/reprogramming resources/risk management) often remain with the international/donor side.

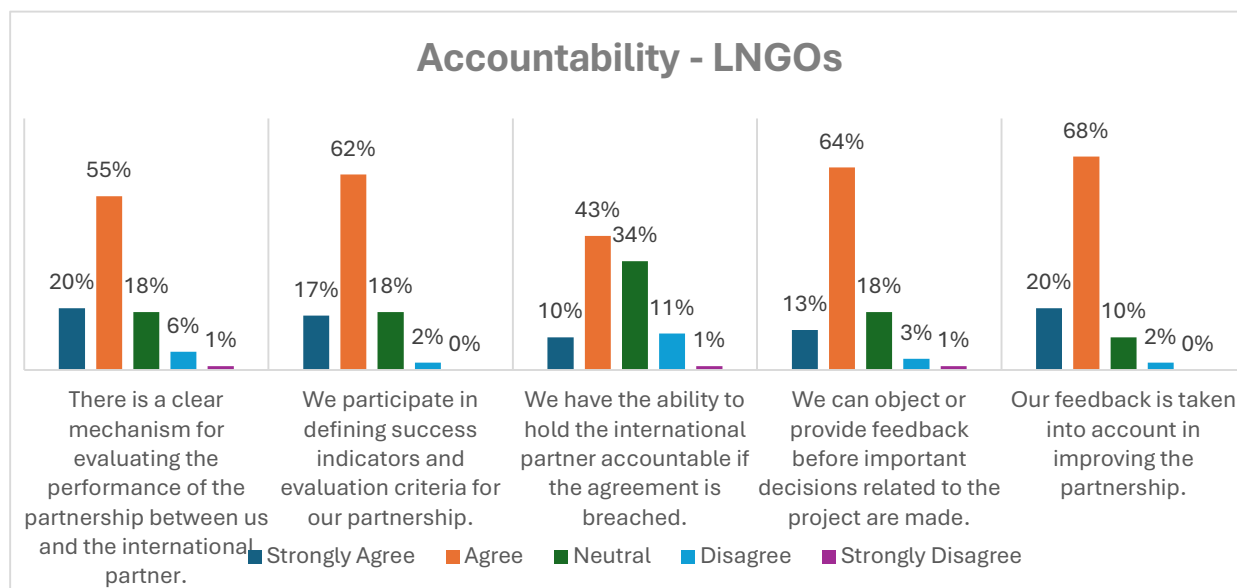
International organizations report high levels of disclosure: sharing contracts/MoUs, project financial details, and advance notice of significant changes pillars of transparency that build operational trust. Yet the question remains: does this transparency translate into shared decision influence?

From the international perspective, transparency approval is high. From the local perspective, the survey shows good levels in regular communication, updates, and feedback received, supporting a picture of information transparency through channels but not necessarily decision and budget transparency, as noted above. As Renad Qubbaj added: “During our work with international organizations on legal aspects, we encountered clauses that did not align with the organization. However, discussions, dialogues, and patience enabled us to change these clauses to conform to the organization's policies and the goals of Palestinian community work in terms of justice and transparency.” The implication is that procedural transparency is advanced and necessary, but insufficient to ensure decision transparency unless clear decision matrices and effective local representation on steering committees are in place when major course or resource changes are at stake.

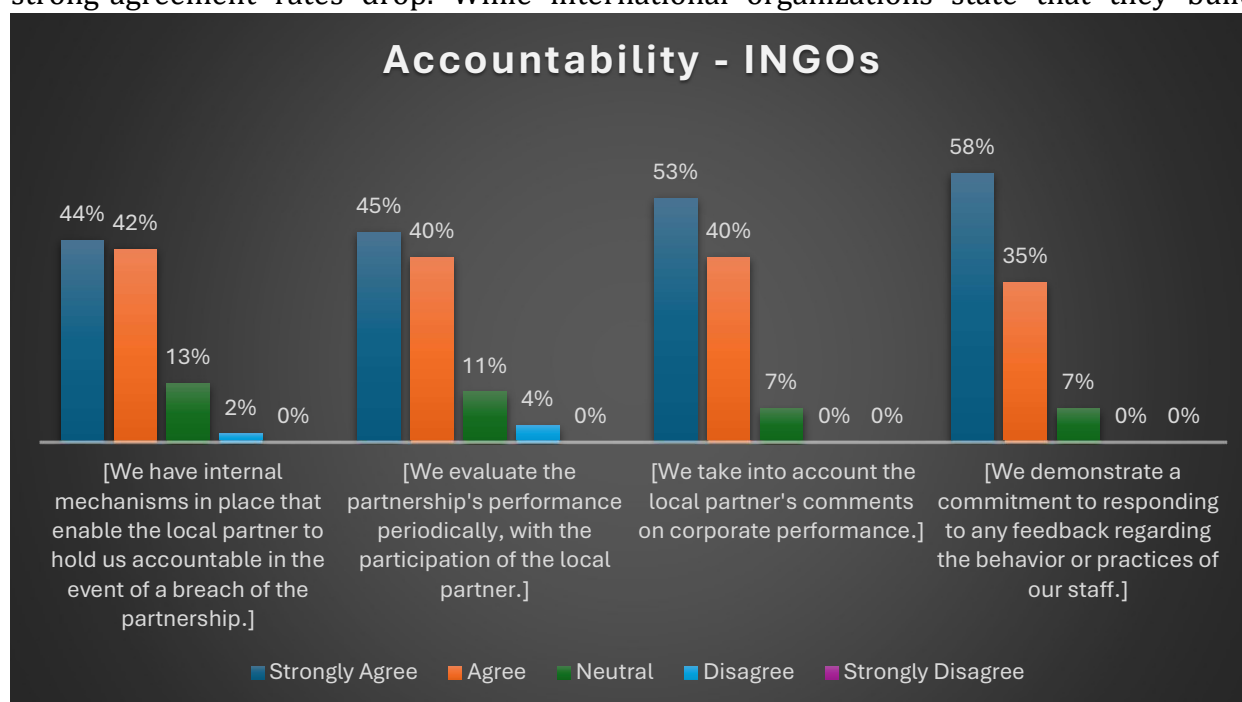


9.6.3 Financial Transparency and Accountability- Compliance or Partnership?

Survey results show good transparency in documentation and communication (access to agreements, change notifications, early role clarification). Yet holding the international partner to account remains limited (low strong agreement on “we can hold the international party accountable in case of breach”).



When moving from procedural transparency to participation in strategic decision-making, strong-agreement rates drop. While international organizations state that they build



partnerships “on parity and balance” (≈69% strongly agree), the item “we involve local organizations in all stages of decision-making” does not exceed 36.4% strongly agree, the lowest in its axis indicating that local participation is greater in operational planning and delivery than across all policy and decision junctions.

International organizations affirm joint planning and role distribution (≈45.5% strongly agree), participatory decision-making (≈45.5% strongly agree), and context-responsive flexibility (≈58.2% strongly agree), in addition to high rates for local participation in proposal drafting and activity implementation/monitoring/evaluation. This confirms that local partners’ influence is strongest at the operational loop. However, the item “a clear, agreed decision-making mechanism within the partnership” does not exceed 36.4% strongly agree; similarly, “we involve partners in all key stages of decision-making” stands at 41.8% strongly agree. These findings suggest that sensitive decisions (resource re-direction, changes to higher-level indicators, risk thresholds) are often retained at the international/donor level, while locals wield greater influence over implementation details.

On the other hand, survey results show that international organizations tend to describe their partnerships with locals as balanced, transparent, and accountable. For example, strong agreement is high on items such as “we clearly define responsibilities and roles from the outset,” “we share budget details,” and “we provide advance notice of major changes,” reaching 49–62%, with overall agreement (agree + strongly agree) exceeding 90% on most procedural-transparency items. This reflects procedural maturity on documents, roles, and information management among international actors.

The explanation: current transparency is closer to administrative compliance than to shared financial governance. To close the gap, interviews and field experience suggest:

- A semiannual Partnership Scorecard reviewing: the local partner’s spending share of the total budget, ICR evolution, funding for capacity-building, and the speed of disbursements.
- Publishing a joint financial brief within the steering committee that shows the distribution of administrative costs and is discussed periodically.
- Involving local partners in pre-grant discussions with donors where it is feasible to ensure fair design from the source.

There is no single pattern across all partnerships or partners. Some partnerships are balanced, with ample space for discussion and adjustment, while others are dominated by the international partner’s agenda. As Dr. Aref Husseini – Founder & CEO of Alnayzak Organization, noted: “With some donors we hold bi-weekly meetings; their policy is participatory not merely in implementation but in workflow. We present challenges, bring solutions, and some adjustments (including financial ones) are discussed, agreed, and elevated for approval... Other donors have political agendas that do not allow participation, coordination, or even adjustment; we have encountered such partnerships, and, in some cases, we terminated the partnership over disagreements.”

“‘Partnership’ doesn’t mean we fuse into a single body, dissolve into one another, and forget our identities. It means each party keeps its own identity and we complement one another—we do have differences—and we recognize that we are different, yet we share common values and common goals.”

Office Director of an international organization in Gaza

9.6.4 Accountability Mechanisms Between Partners: What Exists and What Is Missing?

What currently exists in a significant number of partnerships:

- Steering committees that meet periodically to review progress and sometimes to approve adjustments.
- Project-level MEAL frameworks (indicators, data-collection tools, reports) that focus largely on activity outputs and quality.
- Regular communication channels: monthly/quarterly meetings, narrative and financial reports, and change-notification letters.

From the international perspective, mechanisms exist that allow locals to hold them accountable in cases of breach; they review partnership performance periodically with local participation and take organizational feedback on board reporting strong-agreement rates around 50–58%. They also cite electronic complaints systems available to beneficiaries and partners, which has prompted many local organizations to strengthen their own complaints mechanisms.

From the local perspective, when asked, “Do you have a real ability to hold the international partner accountable if it breaches the agreement?” strong agreement drops to about 10%, and neutrality rises to nearly one-third, suggesting that downward accountability toward locals (at the project level) is stronger than mutual accountability on the partnership relationship itself. Hence the gap between international actors’ internal accountability

mechanisms and local partners’ experience of activating them on partnership conduct, not merely program procedures.

What is missing in partner-to-partner accountability:

- Accountability mechanisms for the partnership itself (not only the project): e.g., Partnership Scorecards or semiannual reviews assessing both parties’ commitments (decision-rights, resources, visibility, risk).
- An independent complaints channel for the local partner regarding partnership practices (delayed transfers, unilateral changes, ignoring technical feedback), linked to clear corrective procedures.
- Full budget transparency enabling visibility of the international organization’s administrative costs versus the local partner’s allocations, with an explicit explanation of ICR and core coverage.
- Documented decision-sharing via signed, updated RACI matrices, so that “participation” does not remain merely rhetorical.

9.6.5 Partnership Review and Evaluation

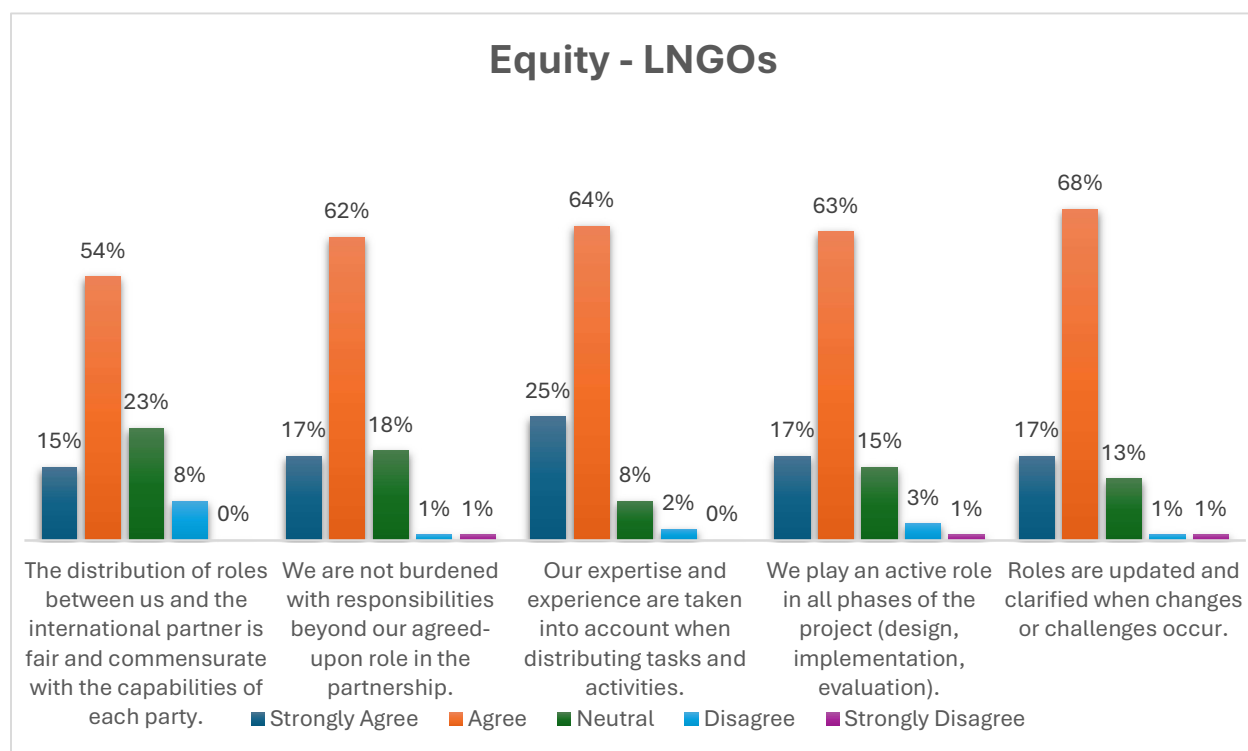
- Local perspective: This is the weakest sub-dimension; the survey shows 19.5% strong agreement a signal of weakness even if limited to “strong.” Reviews exist in some partnerships but are not systematic/mandatory or do not lead to clear course correction.
- International perspective: With 55.9% agreement, international organizations report that reviews do occur, but they do not always translate into real adjustments in resources or decision authorities.

“Regular meetings are held... at a minimum, monthly... and at least once every quarter we hold a review meeting for the project with partners... and when projects close, we hold final wrap-up meetings.”

A Program Officer, at an international organization

9.7 Equality and Trust

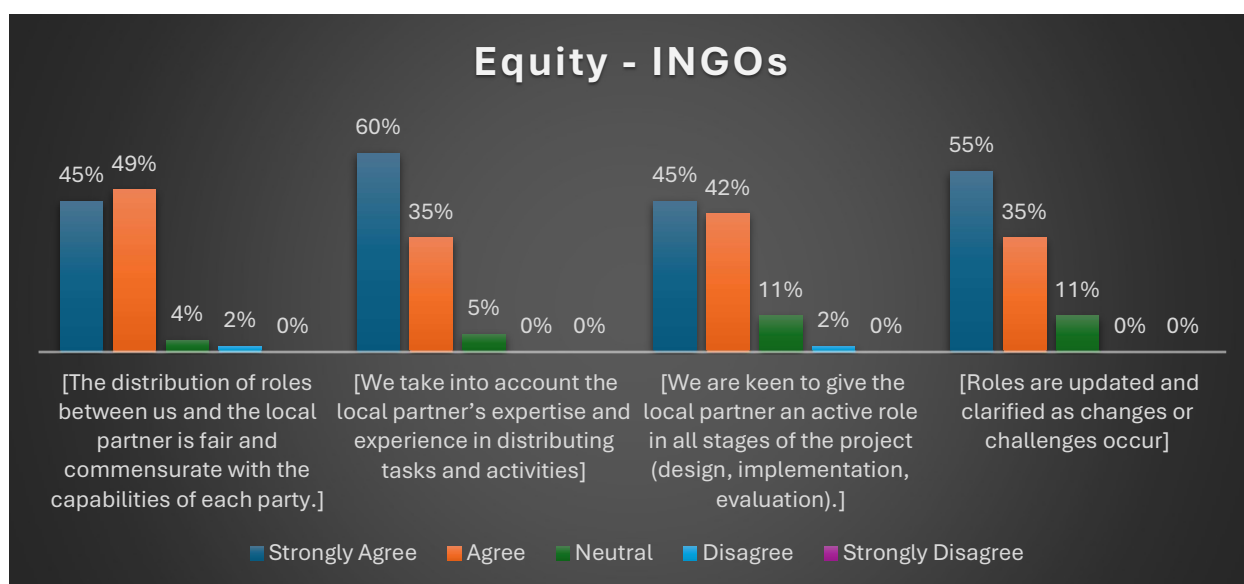
Despite reference documents such as the **Charter for Change** (2016) affirming the need for an equal partnership between local and international organizations, reality shows that many partnerships still rest on the dominance of the international side. International organizations often retain the final say in project design stages, budget distribution, and the formulation of success indicators.



Findings from **PNGO’s Grand Bargain study in Palestine (2024)**²⁶ indicate that more than 60% of local organizations complained about not being involved in the initial design stages of programs they implement in partnership with international organizations.

²⁶ PNGO Study: "The Great Deal in Palestine," 2024

The two surveys indicate that regular communication, information-sharing, and the presence of clear role frameworks are relatively high, creating an operational basis for building trust. Yet trust needs further consolidation when these rules translate into genuine participation in decision-making, fairness in resource-sharing, and mutual accountability precisely where gaps cited by both sides emerge. As an Executive Director of a local NGO, explained, “The closer the institutions are in depth, the deeper the partnership with them. But trust governs to a great extent, and so does mutual respect. From another angle, Dr. Aref Husseini – Founder & CEO of Alnayzak Organization, described how local organizations also have a role in reaching a balance of power between partners: “Power balance stems from the organization’s awareness and its ability to clarify matters and convey the message to the other party; money is a part, but it is not what makes success.”



9.7.1 Mutual Appreciation -Recognition of Local Expertise and Positive Experiences

Several representatives of international organizations highlight practices that strengthen recognition and parity: publicly acknowledging the role of the local partner, involving them early in needs identification, and establishing joint steering committees.

In the health sector, a Programs Director at an international NGO, presents a practical model that links funding to joint decision-making: “Decision-making is shared... the partner identifies the need and discusses the proposal with us, then we fund it.” When locals are granted real decision space, trust deepens and the human relationship appears as professional mutual respect.

Even at the coalition level, Raffoul Rofa Adv., Director – Society of Saint Yves, points to an experience that curbs decision centralization: “In the Jerusalem Union, decisions are made jointly.” Such mechanisms turn mutual respect from statements into governance structures that produce measurable trust (joint decisions, published minutes, ability to course-correct).

9.7.2 Public Visibility of the Local Partner and Explicit Recognition

Locally: public visibility is improving but uneven. When contractually fixed (logo/quotations/representation at events), the sense of parity rises. Internationally: international organizations regard this as standard practice, with differences across projects and donors.

As Amjad Al-Shawa noted, “Public recognition raises the social capital of the local partner and enhances community trust,” which motivates local partners to continue partnerships. Public visibility and acknowledgment of the local partner matter for several reasons:

- Recognizing the important on-the-ground role of the local partner.
- Informing donors and other international organizations of the local partners’ capacity to operate in the field leveraging future funding and potential partnerships.
- Placing the international partner in the realistic context of being a lever for humanitarian work **through** partnerships with local actors, not as a standalone implementer.
- Strengthening the local partner’s social standing in the communities where it works, thereby enhancing its current and future role.

9.7.3 Where Does Trust Fracture?

Interviews confirm that the structural power imbalance linked to funding flows, donor conditionalities, and compliance burdens remains present at the “sensitive junctions” of decision-making.

According to the surveys, and from the perspective of international organizations: there is strong agreement on procedural transparency (sharing contracts, budget details, and change notifications) and regular communication. There are also good ratings on “joint planning” and “participatory decision-making” at the operational level reflecting a belief that current practices foster trust.

From the perspective of local organizations: indicators of participation in implementation, monitoring, and evaluation are advanced, while influence declines when asked, “Do you have a clear and binding decision-making mechanism?” or “Can you hold the international party accountable in case of breach?” Here, operational trust is present, but strategic trust grounded in the ability to influence decisions and in mutual accountability remains weaker. As Rifaat Sabbah, Director General of the Teacher Creativity Center, puts it: “The problem

and challenge we face with them (international organizations) relates to their acceptance of donor conditions.”

Accordingly, we can say there is relatively strong **operational** trust (communication channels, clarity of tasks, day-to-day cooperation), contrasted with fragile **strategic** trust when it comes to final decisions on resources, indicators, and risk management.

9.7.4 Challenges that Undermine Trust

- **Direct implementation** by some international organizations in tracks that could be led by locals especially in emergencies is understood locally as “unequal competition” that delays localization and complicates trust-building. As Rifaat Sabbah, Director General of the Teacher Creativity Center, notes: “(International organizations) try to compete with us by opening their own offices and sometimes poaching our staff. Their salaries are high and ours are low; there is no balanced relationship between local institutions and these organizations.”
- **Short funding cycles** push rapid solutions (service contracts) that do not allow human/institutional accumulation, keeping the relationship at a “delivery” rather than “partnership” level.
- **Donor conditionalities and funding distribution mechanisms** may leave a large portion of administrative costs with international organizations. If not shared with local partners through fair Core/ICR, a narrative of unfairness emerges, and trust erodes even with good intentions.

Relationships between local and international partners are strong where there are joint decision-making, fair funding, and public visibility of the local role; but they falter when the logic of dominance prevails (unilateral decisions, unfair funding, direct implementation, one-way accountability). As an Executive Director of a local NGO stated: “We do not take funding from any entity that provides conditional funding. For example, we do not take from the Americans at all, nor even from entities close to them, or those who impose political conditions.” In the same vein, Khaled Quzmar, Director General of Defense for Children International, says: “Our experience with the 2021 designation process taught us that the institutions and entities that support and fund our work must believe in our mission and vision; the relationship is not solely about funding. Currently, our partnerships are with those who believe in the Palestinian people's right to self-determination and international law, and these relationships are based on partnership, not just funding.”

The experiences shared in the interviews suggest that joint governance with real powers, flexible and fair funding, and two-way accountability can transform “respect” into mutual institutional trust that underpins fairer and more sustainable partnerships.

9.8 Partnerships in the Context of the Israeli War “The Crime of Genocide”

Since the outbreak of the Israeli war and the commission of genocide in the Gaza Strip in October 2023, the humanitarian operating environment has been radically altered: Israeli targeting of civilian infrastructure, including the premises of local and international organizations; repeated displacement; supply shortages; and unprecedented rates of killings among humanitarian workers. UNRWA reports²⁷ that the number of humanitarian workers killed in Gaza reached 543, including 370 UNRWA employees, an exceptional figure in modern conflict records, reflecting the perilous environment and the failure of on-the-ground protection arrangements. OCHA²⁸ documents that shipment movement has been subject to sharp fluctuations depending on the opening/closure of crossings and evolving security patterns; between periods when loading resumed at Zikim in the north and Kerem Shalom in the south, and others when they were closed or reduced, daily planning turned into continuous crisis management that reshuffled priorities every few hours.

On top of this, some donors were influenced by Israeli propaganda, leading them to cut or freeze funding allocated to Palestine, particularly Gaza as confirmed by interview testimonies. As a director of a local NGO, stated: “After the war of genocide in Gaza, the German government decided to stop all support for Palestinian institutions, and at that time we were receiving funding from a German foundation.”

Despite the challenges, there has been relative improvement in adherence to the principle of complementarity in some initiatives, especially those built on the PNGO–AIDA common-principles document; in some cases, roles are fairly distributed based on strengths, and programs are built on a joint needs analysis. Even so, relationships remain shaped by a funding gap, the absence of independent oversight mechanisms, and excessive reliance on “implementer/funder” models instead of “partner/partner.” Power asymmetries in negotiation remain influential.

For example, in emergencies particularly after the 2021 assault on Gaza²⁹ many international organizations received funding directly without prior engagement of local actors, excluding some experienced local responders. During the latest war on Gaza, some donors cut or froze funding without consulting local partners.

As Amjad Al-Shawa (Director of PNGO – Gaza) explains: “The field center of gravity remained with local institutions by virtue of their embeddedness in communities and their ability to move under fire; but interruptions to access and communications and the repeated closure

²⁷ [UNRWA](#)

²⁸ [OCHA Palestine](#)

²⁹ Humanitarian Country Team reports in oPt, 2021–2023; “Effective Resettlement” Campaign Report – C4C, 2020.

of crossings made the impact of their interventions oscillate according to daily circumstances.”

9.8.1 The Crisis of Bringing Supplies into Gaza

OCHA data show significant volatility in truck movements and a decline in quantities entering relative to need; in many weeks, hundreds of shipments were assembled under UN Security Council Resolution 2720’s mechanism, yet they remained far below pre-war levels, while access to northern Gaza remained severely restricted even when Zikim crossing partially opened and sudden closures disrupted supply and flow to the hungriest areas³⁰. OCHA also documented prolonged closures of key crossings (Rafah/Kerem Shalom/connecting routes from the West Bank), disrupting the entry of aid and international staff and imposing additional administrative constraints on the movement of foreign humanitarian workers.

Impact on local organizations:

- **The “permission” gap:** The vast majority of Palestinian NGOs do not possess customs/border “right of entry” or permits for large consignments; practically, they must operate under the umbrella of international organizations or UN agencies that hold such “permission.” Al-Shawa describes this pattern as “compulsory partnerships”: locals implement and know the needs, but the supply gate is controlled by international actors, so priorities are hastily reshaped by what can enter, not by what field analysis dictates.
- **Prioritizing the “logistically ready” over the “most urgent”:** When entry corridors shift (opening/closure of Zikim or Kerem Shalom), immediate reprogramming is required. If the joint steering committee is not granted real authority to amend, decisions default to the party capable of bringing materials in. An Office Director of an international organization in Gaza notes: “The local partner remains an implementer as long as it has no influence or access to the humanitarian corridor.”

Impact on international organizations:

- International organizations have borne an unprecedented burden in customs clearance, border coordination, and managing legal risks, alongside heightened donor-compliance pressures. With the ferocity of the genocide and Israeli attacks, safety procedures and logistical governance increasingly dictate decisions more than socio-field analysis.

³⁰ OCHA

9.8.2 Effects of Israeli Attacks and Restrictions- The “Invisible” Cost

In parallel with Gaza, the West Bank and East Jerusalem have seen expanded military operations, arrests, road closures, and restrictions on farmers’ access by the Israeli occupation, as well as rising settler violence, with threats of forced displacement in sensitive neighborhoods like Silwan. OCHA’s periodic updates³¹ document these realities. They point to systematic patterns that weaken civil society’s ability to operate and increase the daily access and operating costs for Palestinian organizations.

At the level of civic infrastructure, legal and administrative constraints on local and international organizations have multiplied:

- The 2021 designations of six Palestinian human rights organizations created a “trust crack” for local organizations with donors, leading to funding contraction and legal complexity. UN experts condemned the designations and called for resumption of funding and for respect for the work of human rights defenders³².
- In March 2025, new registration and visa requirements for international organizations came into effect inside Israel. A coalition of 55 international organizations warned that these pose a direct threat to the humanitarian response and offer a pathway to de-register organizations on vague/politicized grounds, with potential impacts on the ability to deploy or timely renew foreign expertise³³.
- Amid the genocide committed by the Israeli occupation in the Gaza Strip where many NGOs lost premises and staff and were forced to displace repeatedly. Administrative costs for implementing partnerships soared to unprecedented levels. Many international organizations responded responsibly by increasing local partners’ administrative-cost shares and, in some cases, allocating dedicated funds to help local partners regain operating capacity.

9.8.3 What We Learned About “Partnerships Under War”

1. **“Permission partnerships” shrink the impact of local partners:** When plans are built on what can enter rather than what must enter, locals become data gatherers and activity implementers rather than decision-makers. Revisiting funding with fair administrative-cost allocations and flexible emergency lines curbs this drift and restores balance between logistical agility and the authenticity of the local partner’s role.

³¹ [OCHA Palestine](#): West Bank Humanitarian Updates

³² [OHCHR](#)

³³ [NRC](#)

2. **Risks are not only technical:** The WCK incident³⁴, attacks on UN facilities, visa tightening, and civil-society designations all redefine risk (reputation/safety/legal). Managing these risks collectively in funding and making decisions is essential to prevent offloading them solely into the local partner.
3. **Invisible operating costs** (team movement, staff protection, legal response), generated by Israeli violations and high constraints, affect institutional solidarity; local organizations' ability to endure requires strong solidarity from international organizations and donors.

9.8.4 How Context Affects Both Sides of the Partnership

- **Local organizations:**
 - **Ability to continue:** Despite bombardment and displacement, they maintained community presence, networks, and adaptive logistical know-how, playing a decisive role in distribution and community-level accountability.
 - **Limits of influence:** Lack of permission to bring in materials capped their impact and turned some partnerships into service-contract delivery rather than genuine local leadership.
 - **Institutional fatigue:** The torrent of emergency work without adequate core/ICR exhausted teams, MEAL systems, and human resources.
- **International organizations:**
 - **Burden of aid entry and compliance:** They took on major legal responsibilities and faced immense challenges arising from the genocide and Israeli restrictions on staff entry and shipment flow.
 - **Decisions under pressure:** In the rapid displacement, and “open/close” environment at crossings, some organizations centralized decisions to accelerate outputs, undermining local partners' trust unless joint decision-making is institutionalized and “above/below-the-line” transparency clarifies fair distribution of resources and responsibilities.
 - **Defending local partners:** Many international organizations have borne the burden of defending their local partners against repeated accusations and growing pressures from the Israeli occupation. This burden affects current partnerships and casts a shadow over future ones, creating additional pressures and challenges for both international and local partners. As a director of a local NGO, which faced “terrorism” accusations and closure in the West Bank explains: “Many governments continued to support us and protected us at the time of the Israeli designation, because they publicly took

³⁴ [World Central Kitchen](#)

a position and expressed solidarity with the six organizations; they were not convinced by the Israeli narrative and the reports it presented, deemed insufficient, and they continued funding and supporting these organizations. All our partners reached out to us, confirmed their support, and acknowledged

“We are very cautious about risks... we do not have flexible funding... and we are extremely careful about the amounts we transfer to a third party... and with a project implementation agreement, the responsibility for payments remains on us.”

A Program Officer, at an international organization

awareness of the policy of persecution against Palestinian civil society.”

9.9 Where Do Local and International Visions Converge and Where Do They Diverge?

Both sides converge on the importance of tying every grant to a funded capacity-building plan, publicly highlighting the local partner’s role, and balancing response speed with depth of quality. They also agree on the value of joint planning, the importance of steering committees, and the need for longer funding cycles to transfer leadership to local partners.

Gaps remain locals call for genuine participation in analysis and design and for fairness in resource-sharing, while international organizations point to constraints such as donor requirements and short funding cycles.

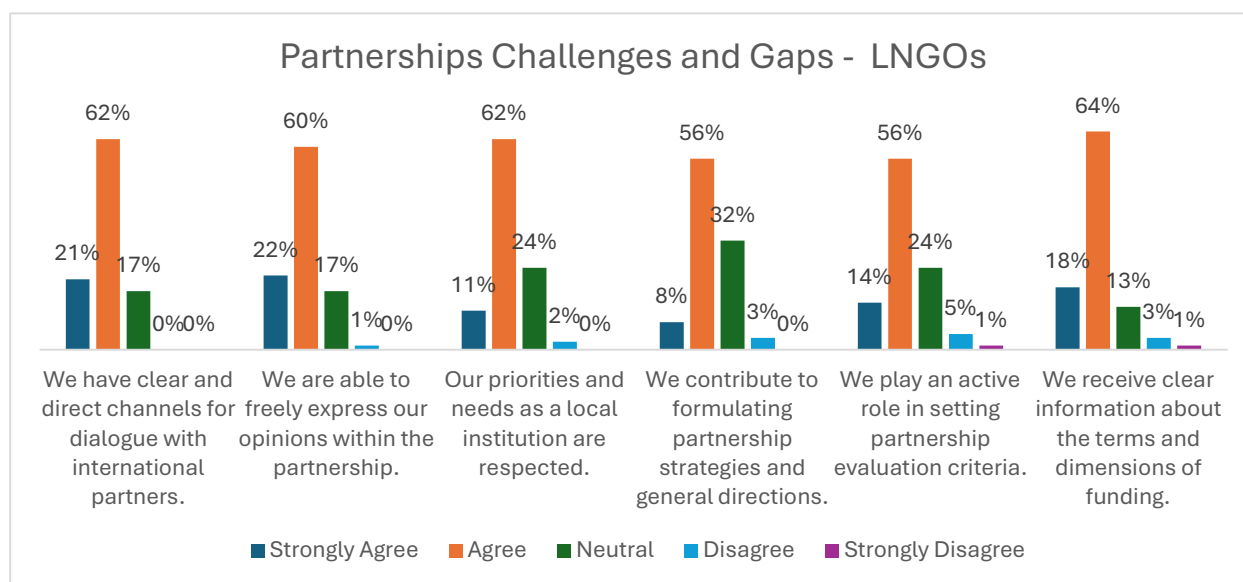
Perhaps the clearest conclusion came from Khaled Quzmar, Director General of Defense for Children International: “There is no equality in power... and funding sets the tempo,” which practically calls for clearer joint governance, budgets that cover real costs, and publicly stated two-way accountability channels.

The transparency achieved so far is important but insufficient to produce fair mutual accountability. Interviews concur that the power imbalance is real and persistent but can be consciously managed through concrete governance tools. When these are applied, transparency shifts from one-way procedural disclosure to mutual accountability that balances decision-making, improves results, and brings partnerships closer to their stated image: fair, transparent, and mutually answerable.

The parties differ over: the sufficiency of institutional funding (Core/ICR), the scope of decision space granted to locals in major changes, and over direct implementation which locals see as undermining localization unless governed by a clear transition timeline.

10 Challenges and Gaps

Survey results suggest that obtaining information about funding and its conditions, playing an active role in concluding and drafting partnerships, or having clear channels for dealing with partners are not major challenges. International organizations concur. This implies other, deeper challenges facing partnerships:



10.1 Imbalance of Power Between International and Local Partners

- Power stems primarily from funding concentrated in international organizations due to their easier direct access to donors, an advantage many local organizations lack. This traces back to donor policies themselves, which grant this advantage to international entities as an “indispensable bridge” for channeling funds to target communities at the expense of true localization as promoted by global frameworks such as the Grand Bargain and the Core Humanitarian Standard (CHS, Commitment 7).
- The specificity of the Palestinian context gives international organizations another advantage: permissioned access to resources from outside Palestine (especially into blockaded Gaza). Israeli restrictions choke local organizations’ ability to access external resources and expertise, forcing them to work under the umbrella of international actors.
- Although both sides recognize the imbalance, little is done **in practice** to offset it. Much depends on international organizations’ willingness to apply the ethics and principles of partnership and to “relinquish” part of their power to local partners.

INGO-type organizations (not governmental or UN agencies) tend, on average, to be closer to locals and more balanced in power relations.

- Consequently, unequal partnership patterns especially execution/contracting models where locals implement without a real role in design or evaluation are common, contrary to the Principles of Partnership (GHP, 2007) and CHS (Commitment 1).

10.2 Weak Funding and Donor Policies

- According to A4EP³⁵, fewer than 28% of local organizations globally received flexible funding in 2023. While exact shares for Palestine are hard to compute, interviews and prior studies confirm a major gap that keeps organizations in constant fundraising often accepting politically conditioned funding or purely execution-type partnerships devoid of genuine participation.
- Donor policies that favor funding international organizations reduce locals' chances of direct funding, and therefore their access to core funding for indirect costs.
- In addition, a number of donors attach political conditions to funding, which reduces response flexibility and undermines neutrality (Grand Bargain Annual Reports). In the Palestinian context, such politicized funding—or funding that imposes narrow conditions (such as security vetting or signing an anti-terrorism pledge)—is highly sensitive for local organizations. They view this as a violation of partnership principles and, at times, harmful to the communities they serve, not to mention the affront to dignity and the distortion of sound partnership norms. A clear example of this was given by Mr. Zakaria Odeh, Executive Director of the Coalition for Accountability and Integrity in Jerusalem, who said: “Refusing some projects because of funding conditions affected our work, our reality, and our services in one way or another, and it took us some time to recover and continue our work.” This was also affirmed by a director of a local NGO, describing what her organization faced after being accused of terrorism by the Israeli authorities: “Donors began to view the organization as linked to terrorism, and not every donor would agree to fund us. This was actually good for us because it strengthened our conviction and stance to refuse political conditions; we lost some donors because of these positions, such as the European Union.”

“Of course, conditional funding has an impact. Some donors have specific conditions, and this negatively affects activities on the ground and access, and it limits funding for many local organizations.”

A Program Manager at a UN Organization

³⁵ Alliance for Empowering Partnership ([A4EP](#))

- Even at best, humanitarian funding conditions impose short cycles that cause institutional fatigue among locals, manifested in:
 - Continuous fundraising and frequent short/contractual partnerships that cover direct activity costs while leaving indirect costs uncovered, perpetuating the cycle. Those who refuse this model face a constrained donor network.
 - Short grants hinder planning, staff retention, and long-term institutional strength, creating dependency and structural fragility.
 - Insufficient funding curtails organizational development and capacity-building, undermining continuity amid persistent Israeli violations.
 - Short-term/humanitarian grants rarely cover indirect costs adequately, forcing trade-offs between delivering activities and covering organizational overheads.
- Resource-sharing and institutional funding between locals and internationals is unequal, creating a structural gap that drains the local side. INGOs are the primary recipients and pass funds down, often retaining higher overhead while allocating only a small share to locals despite emerging donor mechanisms to mandate minimum local ICR shares.
- Registration and operating requirements bank accounts, Palestinian Authority (PA) licenses, Israeli approvals, “no-contact with Hamas” policies complicate local engagement, pushing INGOs to act as “bridges” and retain most administrative load.

10.3 Weak Governance and Absence of Joint Accountability Mechanisms

- Given their power, international organizations often dominate partnership decisions not merely activity choices. While operational decisions may be jointly managed, structural partnership decisions remain centralized internationally. Tools like steering committees and routine reviews tend to focus on operations, not on the partnership itself.
- Because of the power asymmetry, genuine mutual accountability is largely absent; in practice, accountability flows one way, contrary to CHS (Commitment 5).
- Locals routinely submit detailed reports through defined mechanisms; equivalent mechanisms for internationals are rare, often limited to verbal updates or sharing final donor reports leaving mutual accountability largely on paper.
- Locals’ ability to hold internationals to account is limited and usually confined to activities and processes, while internationals can scrutinize locals across budgets, targeting, procurement, etc.

- Clear mechanisms to review the partnership itself (not just interventions) are largely missing, and MEAL indicators rarely include partnership-behavior metrics.
- Complaint/feedback channels exist but are perceived as program-activity channels; very few address partnership-level issues (e.g., delayed tranches, unilateral changes, role shifts).

10.4 Shrinking Civic Space

- Palestine records clear declines in civil-society operating freedom due to surveillance, media attacks, and legal constraints³⁶, with Israeli assaults as the foremost driver.
- The Israeli occupation imposes severe movement and activity restrictions and labels NGOs with arbitrary security designations especially in Jerusalem and Gaza³⁷. During the genocide, repeated attacks destroyed/disabled dozens of local and international NGO premises and killed many aid workers. INGOs are not exempt: they must register with Israeli authorities to enter, leaving them vulnerable to ongoing leverage.
- Internal Palestinian division (Fatah/Hamas), institutional separation between PA in the West Bank and Gaza’s de facto authorities, and donor “no-contact” policies further strain local NGOs through security vetting, banking hurdles, licensing approvals eroding resilience.

10.5 Unequal Competition that Hinders Localization

- **Localization is not just shifting implementation**; it fundamentally concerns power, resource distribution, and decision systems.
- **Divergent understandings of localization are a core challenge**: many internationals/donors treat it as a technical efficiency approach (cost-cutting via local delivery), whereas locals see it as a transformational path for equitable resource/power distribution and genuine local leadership in defining needs and designing responses. This gap yields “proxy implementation” where priorities are externally set and success is donor-report compliance rather than community responsiveness.
- Studies and interviews agree localization cannot be achieved with short, politically conditioned funding. Problems arise at three levels:
 - Project-based dominance, with little/no support for operating or institutional development.

³⁶ PNGO- [Between Marginalization and Challenge: An Analytical Study on the Shrinking of Civic Space and its Impact on Youth and Feminist Institutions 2024](#)

³⁷ [UN OHCHR](#)

- Weak direct access to funds, with most money passing through intermediaries that retain overhead.
- Political/security conditionalities that restrict local agency.
- **International competition for talent:** higher salaries and stability draw staff from locals to INGOs, while local fiscal/administrative pressures create fewer stable workplaces and high turnover eroding human capital, management/MEAL quality, and institutional memory, and widening the skills gap.

“Short-term projects affect staff turnover at local partners, and this impacts partners’ continuity and effectiveness—as well as employees’ morale.”

A Program Manager at an international organization
- **Direct implementation by INGOs displaces locals:** Added to all this is the trend among international organizations toward “direct implementation,” which turns them into competitors to local organizations and results in the latter’s displacement. In difficult environments for local actors, direct implementation models by international organizations effectively produce a crowding-out effect: resources and personnel are attracted away, and decisions are made outside the local arena, while locals are left with partial or secondary tasks. This pattern is fueled by donors’ political conditionalities and high-cost compliance policies, coupled with immense pressure on local partners amid scarce funding and a lack of resilience enablers. The outcome is weakened competitiveness vis-vis international implementers, who can absorb administrative risks and deliver what donors perceive as faster implementation—and at times better services for beneficiaries—by virtue of superior resources compared with underfunded local partners. Such competition creates asymmetric pressure that undermines the core prospects of localization (transferring decision-making, resources, and knowledge to the local level).

10.6 Balance in Visibility and Recognition: Symbolic Gaps That Affect Trust

- In constrained civic spaces like Palestine, locals excel at contextual reading and social legitimacy, while internationals excel at global reach and donor access. INGOs should publicly recognize local roles and real contributions on the ground; failing to do so deepens the feeling of “service contracting” and undermines parity.
 - INGOs should also empower locals to lead messaging and narratives from the field, with
- “We focused on ensuring local partners are at the center of the media—meaning the community represents itself in the media.”

Jamil Sawalmeh, Country Director, ActionAid Palestine

international amplification and advocacy. When done well, trust grows as each side's added value is visible without marginalization.

10.7 Institutional Capacity Gaps

- A large number of local organizations suffer from shortages of human and technical resources in governance and management, due to the lack of strategic investment in capacity strengthening by international partners. This is unsurprising given the erosion of local organizations' resilience and the violations they face—whether by the Israeli occupation, donors, or even international partners. Under weak funding, a shrinking civic space, and competition from international organizations, local organizations cannot be expected to maintain high institutional capacities.
- Local organizations experience institutional fragility, limited experience, and scarce resources, which translate into weak internal systems and administrative/governance capacities, undermining their eligibility to engage in partnerships on an equal footing.
- Weak internal democratization in some organizations (with decision-making concentrated in the hands of a few individuals) affects transparency, accountability, and leadership rotation, and erodes international partners' confidence in the sustainability of sound institutional practice.
- Limited institutional capacities among local partners raise the cost of due diligence for international organizations, making them more inclined toward narrow, execution-only partnership models or direct implementation, rather than delegating greater decision-making power and resources, which they perceive as riskier.
- Local organizations face a double burden of financial and legal compliance requirements given the particularities of the Palestinian context—operating amid internal political division and under Israeli security and political control—factors that heighten operational uncertainty and delay implementation. This creates a trust gap regarding the ability to meet donor requirements on time and to standard, increasing the likelihood that international partners impose additional oversight arrangements or reduce the volume of direct funding to local actors.
- From the perspective of international organizations, these gaps mean higher compliance risks, longer implementation timelines, and variability in quality; consequently, some partnerships reduce delegation or heighten oversight conditions. From the perspective of local organizations, a dependency cycle is reinforced: weak capacities limit access to long-term direct funding, and the absence of funding hinders capacity strengthening—so partnerships persist in an execution-only, not leadership, form.

11 Best Practices

11.1 Joint Needs Diagnosis and Early Co-Design

Begin with jointly collecting and analyzing data; record outputs (minutes, option sets) **before** proposal writing. Institutionalize this by requiring a joint steering committee from day one plus a RACI matrix specifying who decides/consults/informs across analysis, design, and reprogramming.

11.2 Joint Governance with Real Authority (Steering + RACI)

Upgrade the steering committee from “oversight” to a decision body empowered to amend indicators, reallocate defined budget shares, and manage risks. Real amendment powers build social capital and reduce tension over “who owns the decision?”

11.3 Flexible Funding + Explicit Core Funding for the Local Partner

Combine a flexible funding basket with equitable Core that covers real institutional costs (governance, finance, MEAL, HR). Set a graduated, activity-balanced ICR share plus a Core line tied to a funded capacity plan reviewed periodically shifting the relationship from “execution contracting” to durable, decision-capable partnership.

11.4 Phased Partnership Pathway

In emergencies, start fast with a service contract/small grant, then after a short transition move to a full grant with a capacity plan and a clear timetable to transfer responsibilities (implementation/financial management/risk).

11.5 Sharing Risk...and Sharing Visibility

Adopt a risk-sharing agreement that funds compliance/safety costs instead of shifting them onto the local side; and a public-visibility policy that credits the local partner in media and documents. Mutual accountability strengthens, community trust rises, and local fundraising leverage grows.

11.6 Co-owned Learning Partnerships (MEAL Co-ownership)

Make MEAL tools co-owned, including partnership-behavior indicators (transfer speed, ICR/Core shares, amendment decisions), not activity metrics only. Use Partnership Scorecard to turn one-way accountability into two-way measurement.

11.7 Coalitions with Genuine Local Leadership/Participation

Design coalitions to guarantee local seats in decision-making (co-chairs/local secretariat) and a clear split of budgets and administrative costs. Without codified local leadership, coalitions can blur accountability; with it, they become a localization lever.

12 Capacity-Strengthening Needs for Local Organizations

In light of the study’s findings, the study team proposes an integrated training package to strengthen the capacities of local organizations so they can conclude fairer, more balanced partnerships with international organizations. The topics are sequenced to align with clear learning objectives and practical outcomes. Note that proposing these topics does not imply they are the primary cause of current partnership dynamics; rather, they help local organizations enhance their capacity and raise the quality of the partnerships they enter.

- 1. Partnership Governance, Decision Matrices (RACI), and Steering Committees:** Focus on building governance structures that entrench joint delegation and clearly define who decides/implements/is consulted/is informed, with effective Terms of Reference for steering committees and regular partnership review mechanisms.
- 2. Readiness for Donor Assessments and Due Diligence:** Develop the ability to pass pre-grant checks by diagnosing gaps in governance, internal controls, financial and HR policies, and setting time-bound capacity development plans. Outputs include a “grant readiness file” and foundational policies that meet institutional quality standards.
- 3. Donor Compliance Requirements, Risk and Integrity Management:** A practical reading of compliance requirements (governance, conflict of interest, anti-fraud, transparency), building a “compliance portfolio” and audit-ready documentation standards.
- 4. Budgeting with a Realistic Indirect Cost Recovery (ICR):** Skills to draft realistic budgets that reflect the true cost of service delivery, with tools for negotiating ICR and flexible funding baskets that cover institutional costs and capacity. Outputs include a “negotiation portfolio” and models for calculating institutional costs.
- 5. Adopting and Operationalizing the CHS as a Shared Partnership Framework:** Translate the Core Humanitarian Standard into shared indicators and learning-

oriented follow-up plans that link quality reviews to periodic partnership reviews, with defined roles for data collection, verification, and dissemination.

6. **“Local Leadership” and Localization:** Build a clear understanding of localization and how to achieve genuine local leadership on the ground. Includes how to develop agreements and program interventions with operational indicators to measure local leadership in analysis, design, decision-making, and resource management.

“Every partnership must be accompanied by an implementation plan, measurable indicators, and a mechanism for accountability.”

Dr. Aref Hussein – Founder & CEO of Alnayzak Organization

7. **Institutional Identity and “Fundability”:** Evidence-based institutional narrative, achievement portfolio, development and showcasing of internal policies, and highlighting local organizations’ achievements.
8. **Proposal Development:** Shift from an “externally designed proposal” to a participatory proposal led by the local actor and co-crafted from the earliest stages with the international partner and donor. Covers theory of change and results pathways, showcasing local added value (contextual knowledge, community access, risk management), embedding joint-governance elements in design and delivery, and showing true service cost including institutional funding and ICR.
9. **Upward & Downward Accountability Reporting:** Transform reports from formal compliance documents into tools for shared leadership and learning. Covers templates that show partnership impact on outcomes (not inputs only), differentiate upward accountability to donors from downward accountability to local partners/communities, and include rights-based indicators, quality standards (e.g., CHS), and evidence of learning and adaptation. Emphasizes data governance, sharing agreements, and recognizing local contributions to knowledge products.
10. **Needs Assessment:** Address the “imported diagnosis” gap through locally led needs-assessment tools grounded in source triangulation (secondary data, quantitative/qualitative tools, community verification). Distinguish between rapid and in-depth assessments; design concise, reliable tools (surveys, KIIs, FGDs); and embed community participation in analysis and prioritization.
11. **Participatory Intervention Design:** Move from “design **for** the community” to “design **with** the community,” with transparent representation structures, decision-role distribution, embedded protection/complaints mechanisms from the outset, and predefined course-correction scenarios for emergencies.
12. **MEAL for Programs and for the Partnership:** Build a joint MEAL framework that tracks program progress and impact, and in parallel measures the quality of the partnership itself via indicators on governance, decision balance, institutional funding, and risk sharing. Includes an indicator matrix (inputs–outputs–outcomes–impact), a Partnership Scorecard (ICR shares, jointly taken decisions, jointly approved adaptations, regular semiannual partnership reviews), and community feedback mechanisms.

13 Factors Driving Differences in Partnerships

The findings reveal clear differentiation in the partnership models local organizations enter, depending on their institutional nature and sector. Grassroots/community-based organizations exhibit structural fragility that pushes most of their relationships with internationals toward short-term “execution” with limited decision influence. By contrast, established NGOs working in core sectors health, food security, and WASH are better able to build longer, more “strategic” partnerships with more balanced sharing of decision-making, risk, and resources. This differentiation reflects not just size or experience, but structural differences in access to finance, compliance demands, donors’ risk logic, and humanitarian-context pressures on local decision-makers.

13.1 Grassroots Organizations: The Weakest Link

Grassroots groups are closely tied to vulnerable communities and have strong social access and local trust; yet this does not automatically translate into “bargaining power” in partnerships. Weak institutional capacity (governance, financial systems, risk management, safeguarding) and scarce flexible/core funding place them at a disadvantage, pushing them under need and serial crises to accept execution-type partnerships where goals, budgets, and risks are set “externally,” while their role is confined to access and rapid field delivery. Some INGOs have adjusted to include such organizations, but this remains limited.

“Small organizations aren’t able to compete in the first place.”
A Program Manager at a UN Organization

Resulting, mutually reinforcing effects:

- **Risk transfer without commensurate empowerment:** Grassroots actors carry execution risks (security, reputation, compliance) without equivalent authority/resources expanding the “responsibility without power” gap.
- **Erosion of institutional sustainability:** Lack of fair institutional funding traps organizations in short projects, delays systems development, and drives continuous staff attrition to more stable employers.
- **Role ossification:** As long as internationals need a “fast local arm,” operational success can paradoxically entrench a purely executive role unless partnership terms are reframed. Emergencies intensify the pressure to favor “immediate relief” logic over “institutional empowerment,” normalizing suboptimal partnerships.

13.2 Established NGOs in Core Sectors

Local organizations in high-priority sectors (health, food security, WASH) benefit from:

- **Centrality to humanitarian needs:** Attracts larger, multi-year funding with clear cluster systems and measurable standards/outputs.
- **Accumulated, institutionalized expertise:** Over time they build achievements, robust financial/controls, and developed internal policies lowering donors’ due-diligence costs and increasing “fundability.”
- **Stronger negotiation power:** Capacity, experienced staff, and clear systems enable better institutional funding terms.

Hence relationships shift from “activity execution” to “strategic partnership,” allowing longer cycles and integrating learning, adaptation, and capacity-building as natural components.

13.3 Why These Differences Matter

Variation in partnership quality (e.g., access to strategic partnerships) directly affects coverage equity, reach, and impact depth. Grassroots organizations often serve the least-reached; if confined to short-term execution without institutional empowerment, impact remains local and temporary, squandering their social capital. Established NGOs can deliver high-quality interventions but risk a gradual drift from their social base if compliance eclipses social accountability. The question is how to transfer the advantages of the latter to the former without losing grassroots ethos opening funding/governance windows that let grassroots actors move from execution seats to partnership seats.

13.4 Sectoral Differences and Their Impact

Sectors with high “fundability” (health, food security, WASH) enjoy steadier financing channels, enabling multi-year partnerships with learning/adaptation and capacity-building lines. Their higher measurability strengthens negotiation positions. Rights/civil society or community sectors (economic empowerment, culture) often carried by grassroots groups face tighter financial/political constraints and higher compliance sensitivity. When low sector fundability collides with heavy donor requirements, multi-year funding paths are harder and short execution partnerships become entrenched.

14 Recommendations

14.1 For International Organizations

Governance and Decision-Making

- Require a RACI matrix in every partnership agreement specifying who decides/approves/consults/informs for each juncture (needs analysis, proposal drafting, reprogramming, risk management); review semiannually.
- Upgrade steering committees into decision bodies with clear powers to amend outcome indicators and reallocate an agreed share of the budget in response to context.
- Involve the local partner in early donor meetings (where possible) to align upstream expectations with context.

Financing and Resource-Sharing

- Fair ICR + explicit Core: Set a graduated minimum ICR for local partners, tied to a funded institutional-strengthening plan (governance, finance, MEAL, HR).
- Create a jointly governed flexible basket within each grant; managed by the steering committee for rapid activity/site adaptations.
- Administrative-cost transparency: Present INGO administrative costs versus local allocations and link both to actual execution burden.

Transparency and Accountability

- A periodic Partnership Scorecard measuring partnership behavior: transfer speed, who made amendments, ICR/Core shares, local visibility.
- A partnership-level complaints channel separate from program CFMs, with SoPs and corrective actions for both parties.
- Mutual accountability compacts: Specify INGO obligations for knowledge transfer and capacity-building, alongside local obligations on transparency and governance. Include business-continuity and digital-security plans.

Participation, Communication, and Visibility

- Contractually commit to public recognition of the local partner in media, reports, and events.
- Hold participatory progress/review meetings with succinct minutes circulated to both teams.

Risk Management and Sharing

- A funded risk-sharing agreement covering compliance/safety costs no shifting risks to locals without resources to manage them.
- Joint simulations for funding/access crises and stress-testing decision channels.

Localization

- Reframe partnership models: from “proxy execution” to mutual-accountability contracts with explicit decision roles, resource-distribution criteria, partner-selection transparency, and INGO obligations for tool localization and knowledge transfer.
- Long-term, direct institutional funding for locals to cover operating costs, systems/governance development, and to offset political conditionalities.
- Planned investment in capacity and talent retention (career paths, performance systems, competitive pay bands, insurance).
- Reset direct implementation: limit to exceptional necessity/risk, with time-bound transition plans and indicators so direct action becomes a temporary lever for local capacity, not a permanent substitute.

Capacity-Building

- Multi-year Core funding for governance, finance, HR, MEAL systems.
- Phased capacity transfer: training tied to delegation and responsibility, with clear transition indicators.
- No grant without a funded capacity-building plan with measurable institutional results (policies, systems, SOPs, role-linked training).

14.2 For Local Organizations

Governance and Institutional Readiness

- Build a partnership-readiness pack: updated finance policies, signature delegations, procurement manual, MEAL framework, code of conduct aligned to CHS.
- Put RACI on the table from day one, don't wait for the international partner to propose it.

Finance and Negotiation

- Price true indirect costs in budgets; refuse formulas that depress ICR to unsustainable levels.
- Demand a standalone Core line for essential salaries/system development/audits/digital transformation.

Transparency and Accountability

- Run an internal Scorecard to track INGO obligations (tranches/amendments/visibility) and table it in semiannual reviews.
- Document correspondence and amendments as evidence for mutual accountability.

Localization and Leadership

- Claim clear decision seats on steering committees with agreed amendment authority within the flexible basket.
- Build local sectoral coalitions (networks/alliances) to raise bargaining power and reduce competition among locals.

Communication and Visibility

- A joint communications plan that highlights the local organization's name/brand and establishes quote slots in reports/media.
- Track public visibility as a Scorecard element (mentions and in what capacity).

14.3 For Donors

Funding Policies that Support Localization

- Conditions that include fair Core/ICR for local partners, with an incremental path across cycles linked to governance benchmarks.
- Require a funded institutional-empowerment plan in every grant and measure institutional results (not training alone).

Flexibility and Time Horizon

- Longer funding cycles to enable gradual leadership transfer and partnership maturation.
- Flexible emergency windows that allow maturation from rapid execution to full partnership under clear performance standards.

Transparency and Partnership-Level Accountability

- Require reporting on administrative costs and a Partnership Scorecard as part of grant reporting, not program activity alone.
- Encourage joint leadership/chairing in coalitions/clusters and award extra points to proposals with shared governance and local decision seats.

14.4 For PNGO and AIDA

Standards and Reference Memos

- Disseminate a standard partnership kit (RACI + Scorecard + MoU) as a negotiating reference for members.
- Publish minimum ICR/Core guidance by size tier for local organizations, with real-world examples.

Influence and Advocacy Platforms

- A periodic public dashboard tracking localization: direct funding shares, ICR levels, number of partnerships with delegated decision bodies, etc.
- Joint donor briefs explaining policy impacts and proposing practical alternatives (raise ICR, unify due-diligence models).

Suggested KPIs for Each Partnership

- Share of amendments decided via the joint steering committee.
- Days to transfer tranches vs target.
- Local partner’s ICR/Core share and trajectory across cycles.
- Budget share under local management vs execution burden.
- Frequency/quality of public recognition of the local partner.
- Progress on the institutional-empowerment plan (policies/systems/role-linked training).
- Scorecard results: mutual satisfaction, complaints resolved, changes enacted.

14.5 For Cluster Coordinators and UN Bodies

Local Representation and Leadership

- Formal local seats in technical working groups, with co-chairing where possible.
- A sectoral partnership-check card encouraging visible local roles and linking funding to shared governance.

Unified Response Tools

- Standard participatory needs-assessment tools requiring a lead local entity in every assessment.
- A vetted bank of local partners (integrity/competence criteria) to speed early indirect funding.

14.6 Topics for Further Research

- Impact of partnerships on grassroots organizations: how execution/project/strategic/coalition models shape legitimacy, internal governance, and institutional sustainability.
- How large NGOs adapt capacity-building under funding constraints: strategies for “right-sizing capacity” amid shrinking grants and heavier procedures.
- Structural role of umbrella networks and clusters in shaping partnerships.
- Measuring “local leadership” as a partnership outcome variable.
- Equity and fairness in partnerships: a community-level lens on distributional impacts for vulnerable groups served by grassroots organizations.
- The true cost of fair partnerships: estimating the gap between the cost of fair partnerships (governance, reviews, community participation, institutional funding) and what is actually financed.
- Phased partnership pathways for grassroots organizations: testing staged capacity-building including due diligence to enable entry into quality partnerships without disproportionate burdens.

15 Conclusion

Using a mixed-methods approach surveys, interviews, case studies, and literature review; this study presents a multifaceted picture of partnerships between Palestinian NGOs and international organizations: strong operational partnerships in communication, delivery, and compliance, countered by structural gaps in decision legitimacy, resource sharing, and institutional funding. These gaps directly affect localization, mutual trust, and sustainability of impact. Key findings:

1. Governance and Decision-Making: Broad participation in delivery... weak strategic legitimacy.

High local participation in operational planning, implementation, and M&E contrasts with opaque decision mechanisms at sensitive junctures (resource reallocation, outcome-indicator changes, risk management). Consultations are widening, but institutionalization varies, leaving final decision-weight mainly in the international/donor space.

2. Plenty of activity funding... scarcity of institutional funding.

Activity funding is relatively good, while institutional sustainability (core salaries; finance/procurement systems; MEAL; HR; governance) remains underfunded. Low ICR or absent Core lines drain local capacity and trap organizations in short grant cycles rather than enabling institutional accumulation and leadership. Document and budget transparency exist but do not always translate into shared financial governance.

3. Transparency and Accountability: Procedural progress, need for two-way accountability.

Written agreements, regular information exchange, and periodic reports bolster procedural transparency. Yet local experience shows accountability is largely one-way: locals are held to spend/output metrics more than they can hold internationals to partnership behavior (transfer speed, amendment decisions, institutional-cost coverage, public recognition). Closing the gap requires joint tools: a Partnership Scorecard, a partnership-level complaints channel, and periodic reviews obliging both sides to corrective action.

4. Localization and Capacity-Building: Operational progress... slow leadership transfer.

Local contributions to proposal design, implementation, and M&E are expanding, with positive practices (grant-linked empowerment plans; jointly governed flexibility baskets). Still, strategic leadership transfer especially on core financial decisions and risk lags, maintaining the power gap. Real localization requires a package: fair Core/ICR, written delegation of decisions, a jointly governed flexible basket, and a clear role-transfer timetable over a sufficient cycle.

5. Relationship and Mutual Trust: Rises with joint decisions and public recognition.

Trust grows where consultations translate into real amendment rights and joint decision bodies, and where internationals publicly highlight local partners in media/reporting/events. It cracks when unilateral changes occur, when direct implementation by internationals persists where locals could lead, or when local compliance/risk costs are not financed.

6. Effects of Funding Cycles and Donor Conditionalities:

Short cycles and conditions push toward “rapid execution” models and complicate direct local funding, making some INGOs act as “bridges” and keeping a larger share of administrative costs upstream.

7. Roles of Umbrella/Cluster Structures:

PNGO, AIDA, and cluster coordinators can standardize partnership tools, increase local representation in technical groups, and publish public dashboards of localization, direct funding, and shared governance.

16 Annexes

- Survey results
- Survey tool (for local and international organizations)
- List of respondent organizations
- Interview guide
- Interview schedule



PNGO

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Development Agencies



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This survey was conducted as part of “Life-Saving Multi-Purpose Cash Assistance for IDPs in Gaza and Strengthening Humanitarian Coordination and Partnerships between Local and International Aid Actors” project

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